cinema book club 3

gathering 3: placemaking
millennium film workshop, 09.10.23
select discussion materials

Charles de Agustin, *Mission Drift*, 2023 – contact charlesdeagustin@me.com for a link

Jordan Lord, *Shared Resources*, 2021

The art world sells us a dream: that art is a public service and an unquestionably human good. But this public service must always be privately held and stewarded. Only individual artists with the purest creative intention thrive under this stewardship. This kind of artist is against: collective bargaining, comradeship, political protest, art as propaganda. They are for: ambivalence, aesthetic pleasure, individual exploration, *feeling*. In the cultural arena, the elites invest in making us believe the latter is where true beauty lies. Their intention is to make it harder and harder for us to understand how exactly this world works. An obedient art worker: never shares contracts, asks about pay, or working conditions – never enquires into the galleries' stance on Palestine or points out the connections between its funders and ongoing violence.

- Lola Olufemi, "Structurally Fucked" Industra Report, 2023

The museum as a spatial configuration of inhabited meanings adapts only very gradually to change. Timing is a curatorial unit, place is clearly demarcated, artworks are hung according to norms, lighting and air humidity are coordinated with conservation requirements. Visitors readily accept this monitoring environment, which anchors and regulates their perception. If a video is projected, there may be the opportunity to lie on a carpeted floor, slump on a mattress, or find a stool to sit on. Hours can be spent in this way because new media are recognized as requiring a longer period of intake than a painting, photograph, sculpture, or set of artifacts. Robert Harbison noted in 1977, at a time when video works began entering the museum, that the "immersion in the object that stops time is achieved by treating it as an existence to be lived in rather than something to be stopped in front of or looked at, and one can almost tell from people's movements whether they have entered a painting or are only staring at it.
The bias against the body of the spectator dates back to the European Renaissance, when architects and designers saw the gallery as a "fixed theater of spectatorship" intended "to regulate strictly the viewer's range of motion and object of focus." As museum spaces gradually evolved over the course of the eighteenth century from private house museums into public institutions, those "unruly social bodies" who once engaged in "flirting, playing, eating, drinking, talking, laughing, and napping" on ottomans, benches, or at tables, were gradually evicted. By the early twentieth century, the curatorial trope became one of "disembodied opticality," whereby seating no longer featured beyond a short stop-off point along the scenographic route through the museum. Indeed, with the advent of the white cube environment, the fear of a "reembodiment of the spectator" works to rid rooms entirely of any means of repose or study, leaving only banal exit signs to indicate the "intrusive" presence of human biology. As Diana Fuss and Joel Sanders explain, "art's visual consumption owes much to the flow-management philosophy of department stores, which rarely provides seating in the main shopping areas. A seated patron, after all, is not likely to be a consuming patron; consumer culture requires bodies on the move, not bodies in repose. Simply put, the bench is anathema to the capitalist space of the modern museum."

- Deliss, C., & Holt, N. (2020). Clémentine deliss : The metabolic museum. Hatje Cantz Verlag.

cinema book club 2

gathering 2: film in nature
millennium film workshop, 04.16.23

1.

The concept [of disinterestedness] was given its classic formulation in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, in which nature was taken as an exemplary object of aesthetic experience. Kant argued that natural beauty was superior to that of art and that it complemented the best habits of mind. It is no accident that the development of the concept of disinterestedness and the acceptance of nature as an ideal object of aesthetic appreciation went hand in hand. The clarification of the notion of the aesthetic in terms of the concept of disinterestedness disassociated the aesthetic appreciation of nature from the appreciator's particular personal, religious, economic, or utilitarian interests, any of which could impede aesthetic experience.

The theory of disinterestedness also provided groundwork for understanding the aesthetic dimensions of nature in terms of three distinct conceptualizations. The first involved the idea of the *beautiful*, which readily applies to tamed and cultivated gardens and landscapes. The second centered on the idea of the *sublime*. In the experience of the sublime, the more threatening and terrifying of nature's manifestations, such as mountains and wilderness, when viewed with disinterestedness, can be aesthetically appreciated, rather than simply feared or despised. These two notions were importantly elaborated by Edmund Burke and Kant. However, concerning the appreciation of nature, a third concept was to become more significant than that of either the beautiful or the sublime: the notion of the *picturesque*. Thus, by the end of the eighteenth century, there were three clearly distinct ideas each focusing on different aspects of nature's diverse and often contrasting moods.

One historian of the picturesque tradition argues that in "eighteenth-century English theory, the boundaries between aesthetic categories are relatively clear and stable". The differences can be summarized as follows: objects experienced as beautiful tend to be small and smooth, but subtly varied, delicate, and "fair" in color, while those experienced as sublime, by contrast, are powerful, vast, intense, terrifying, and "definitionless". Picturesque items are typically in the middle ground between those experienced as either sublime or beautiful, being complex and eccentric, varied and irregular, rich and forceful, and vibrant with energy. It is not surprising that of these three notions, the idea of the picturesque, rather that of the beautiful or the sublime, achieved the greatest prominence concerning the aesthetic experience of nature. Not only does it occupy the extensive middle ground of the complex, irregular, forceful, and vibrant, all of which abound in the natural world, it also reinforced various long-standing connections between the aesthetic appreciation of nature and the treatment of nature in art. The term "picturesque" literally means "picture-like" and the theory of the picturesque advocates aesthetic appreciation in which the natural world is experienced as if divided into art-like scenes, which ideally resemble works of arts, especially landscape painting, in both subject matter and composition.

*** Reference mentioned: *The sign of four – Conan Doyle*

2.

For some years it was a cliche in film studies that beautiful imagery was an easy way out for a filmmaker: anyone could aim a camera at something beautiful and expose a shot. One can only wonder why, if cinematic beauty is so easy, there's not more of it! Perhaps the real objection has always had more to do with audiences than with filmmakers: presenting beautiful imagery to audiences may have seemed too non-confrontational. For filmmakers interested in using cinema to do political work, beautiful films-especially in the more traditional, conventional senses of "beauty" -may have seemed to reconfirm the complacency of the audience and to reconfirm the status quo. Of course, this continues to seem true to many with a serious interest in moving-image art, as Leighton Pierce suggested in my recent (as yet unpublished) interview with him:

> *I've often felt the need to apologize for liking to make beautiful things. Some of my students say, "You know, you should never admit that you're trying to make a beautiful film, because beauty robs you of thought" [And I say,"Well, actually, that's the whole idea! I want you to blank out thought, at least until you really look and listen."]* A film can seem unpolitical because it's beautiful, to be just about wallowing in "Beauty" and escaping real life, which is, sometimes, part of my goal-to make a space where you can really transform and go somewhere else-but hopefully there's a lingering effect that's not just escapism and that in the long run has a political impact.*

*** A few topics discussed: *the difference in what is in-style, aesthetic-wise: since we're so used to grimy, harsh images as "subversive", perhaps beautiful images nowadays are even more subversive comparatively; accessibility; consumption/creation/labor.*

3.

The center of the film's fantasy space is, of course, the forest that stands in uncanny opposition to the civilization of Tatara. In terms of Freud's definition of the uncanny as something that is both unfamiliar yet eerily familiar (*unheimlich* in the original German), the forest fits appropriately. For Miyazaki, the great forest exists as a buried archetypal memory. According to critic Komatsu Kazuhiko, Princess Mononoke's forest is based on Miyazaki's reading in historical ecology, in particular the writings of Nakao Sasuke, who wrote about the origins of

agriculture in Japan. For Miyazaki, reading these works was almost a spiritual revelation. As Miyazaki himself puts it,

> Upon reading [Nakao], I felt my eyes being drawn to a distant height. A wind blew over me. The framework of the nation state [kokka] the wall emblemized by the word “racial people” [minzoku], the heavy weight of history, all fled away from me and the breath of life from the evergreen forests flowed into me. Everything was woven together in this book—the forests of the Meiji shrine where I liked to stroll, theories about farming in Shinshu during the Jomon period, the tales of everyday life in Yamanashi that my story telling mother liked to relate—and it taught me what I was the descendant of.

It is Miyazaki’s notion that he and presumably other Japanese are the spiritual descendants of the “glossy leafed forests” that Nakao theorizes once covered Japan before the country became dominated by rice culture. Once rice paddy culture arrived, wet rice cultivation began to destroy the wilder kind of nature, and by the twentieth century it had almost completely disappeared from contemporary Japan. Miyazaki believes that these vanished forests still exert a spiritual pull on the average urban dweller, and it was this that he attempted to dramatize in his creation of the forest of the shishigami. He explains “If you opened a map of Japan and asked where is the forest of the shishigami that Ashitaka went to, I couldn’t tell you, but I do believe that somehow traces of that kind of place still exist inside one’s soul.

In this interpretation, the forest of the shishigami is a place of magical and spiritual renewal. Its construction draws together Nakao’s historical research, archetypal Shinto beliefs, and Miyazaki’s own imagination. The forest’s magical qualities come across expressively in the film’s brilliant animation and exceptional use of color. In contrast to the pastel palette of many of the director’s films, Princess Mononoke’s forest is designed in deep greens and browns, with the occasional radiant shafts of light penetrating the depths of quiet forest pools. Night scenes are even more remarkable, especially the moonlit vision of the shishigami as it metamorphoses into the detarabochi, an immense phantom of the night that is its alter ego. These scenes might suggest that the forest in Princess Mononoke is a classic example of the traditional Japanese valorization of nature. Indeed, in its depth, power, and beauty the forest does suggest some of the spirit of premodern Japanese poetry, particularly the lengthy Shinto-inspired celebrations of nature in the tenth-century poetry collection, the Manyoshu. It is crucial to point out, however, that Miyazaki radically defamiliarizes any conventional stereotyping. Despite its beauty, the forest has little in common with the traditional Japanese landscaping that reached its apogee during the Muromachi period. Influenced by the Zen priesthood, the Muromachi landscape was an enclosed one, the carefully cultivated and safe framework of the Zen garden. In significant contrast, the forest of the shishigami is a wild and threatening place, consistently avoided by the human characters in the film. Rather than a refuge it is a locus of revenge.

References mentioned: Pom Poko, Uncle Boonmee who Can Recall his Past Lives

4.

In Mothlight, something is cast apart from dead moths/nature and becomes a new part functioning on the screen. This occurrence in Mothlight is vastly similar to what Jacques Lacan calls the “lamella,” the mythic feature which is separated from and yet survives without its origin body. By combining this idea of the lamella – which Lacan uses to describe the libido – with André Bazin’s notions about the photographic/cinematic image as index, I argue that the cinema functions in the same way as the lamella/libido and can be seen as an organ of a body or, to use Lacan’s own words, “an instrument of an organism” (Lacan, “Position” 719). (...)

In Mothlight, the moth wings are viewed along with other pieces of nature (grass, leaves, dirt, and so on). But we do not see a full moth in the film. The wings were taken from dead moths and incorporated into the film with great care and precision. The wings, once parts of living creatures, have become motionless and lifeless by themselves as separated objects. An aspect or a part of a body which, without that origin body, no longer functions because it is separated from that which gave it life. This is also true for the bits of grass and leaves that are present as well in the film along with the moth wings. The pieces of foliage are also, like the moth wings, robbed of life since they are cut from the roots that once gave life to them. Through film, however, these parts remain bodiless, yet function on the screen before our eyes. The film grants these parts movement and allows the audience to witness a creature come to life through the film’s projection. All these fragments of nature have found new life through the medium of the moving image; and this is something that Brakhage has noted as well:

> I tenderly picked [the moth wings] out and I started pasting them onto a strip of film, to try to … give them life again, to animate them again, to put them into some sort of life through the motion picture machine. (Brakhage, “Brakhage on Brakhage”, emphasis added)

(...) The moth wings and bits of nature are parts that have been separated from their source bodies and are now functioning inside the cinematic real/reel. This simplified form of life, through the magic of the moving image, has achieved movement, and arguably life, without the origin body. The magically autonomized parts have transcended corporeal existence to “run around” (Lacan, “From Love” 197) in the moving image itself – which becomes their new reality.

[was not discussed in the session due to time]

5.

My first narrative films were guided by the necessity of connecting gardens that evoke an exotic, tropical elsewhere with the actual archives of colonial history and Indigenous genocide. For example, Journey to a Land Otherwise Known associates an equatorial greenhouse in Lille, France, with fragments of well-known texts by travellers, scientists, conquistadors, and missionaries who first described the erroneously named “New World” to European audiences – and contributed to a racist imaginary still present in our societies today. Analysing these films and documents left me with a paradoxical conclusion. On the one hand, if one considers ethnography as an ensemble of narratives rooted in colonialism, it can be understood as a kind of fiction-making. On the other, some of the most interesting contemporary practices of ethnography have embraced a decolonial turn, sometimes by integrating the language of fiction into themselves.

The term “ethnographic fiction” seemed right to describe this duality. Associating those two words immediately pushed my research into the field of visual anthropology, in the tradition of Jean Rouch’s “ethnofictions”. Although Rouch’s work was extremely important for me – especially his notions of ciné-transe and “shared anthropology” – I didn’t want to limit my research to his legacy. On the contrary, I looked at practices that link ethnography and fiction before and after him, which come from different perspectives outside of Europe and North America and from women and non-binary voices.

References mentioned: Werner Herzog’s *Fata Morgana* + *Burden of Dreams*, Suneil Sanzgiri’s *At Home*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, Ousmane Sembène’s *Black Girl*, Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*, Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*

1. Gorodeisky, Keren, "19th Century Romantic Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/aesthetics-19th-romantic/>.

2. MACDONALD, SCOTT. “Toward an Eco-Cinema.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11, no. 2 (2004): 107–32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44086296.

3. Napier, Susan J. "Princess Mononoke: Fantasy, the Feminine, and the Myth of “Progress”." In *Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: experiencing contemporary Japanese animation*, pp. 175-192. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2001.

4. Hendricks, Jon. "Ontology of the Cinematic Lamella." *Film Matters* 6, no. 1 (2015): 12-15.

5. Laura Huertas Millán: Interview by Louis Rogers for TANK Magazine

cinema book club 1:

cinema of the Everyday

millennium film workshop, 3/5/2023

1.
Mekas captures scenes from his daily life, which he called “glimpses”, a term expressing essence, momentariness. and incompleteness. The diary films unfold in an improvisational, collagelike fashion and juxtaposes disparate times, places, and subjects. Title cards orient the viewer, descriptively or poetically setting and summarizing scenes, while Mekas’s voice-over narration created a dialogue between artist and audience. In his diary films, Mekas eschews hierarchy and linearity, presenting a churning whirlpool of time past and present; places urban and pastoral; moments quotidian and watershed; family members, cultural icons, and public figures. The seamless collision of the very small with the larger-than-life suggests a radical interconnectedness that allows every person to leave their mark on history.

2.
I think of volatile, mobile, eclectic, counterculture formations, including cooperatives like Ant Farm and their crazy-quilt participants and diverse projects, the intersection of political allegiances-from civil rights to Vietnam to ecology to women to freedom of speech, the connections sought between the local and the global, networking together and imagined as linked in the future by electronic technologies of immediacy. (The 1960s concept of the global and the local, which gained currency through McLuhan and video visionaries, is again in style; this strategy of radical action has been recently rediscovered by Stuart Hall, Donna Haraway, and de Lauretis, however, as a new tactic.) If the international "middle" (like women, blacks, youth, local actions, and wars of liberation) could connect in a new constellation of multiplicity, the structures of power with clear boundaries (and what Deleuze and Guattari call "faciality," which I will not develop) of beginnings and endings could be bypassed. The cross-country traversal of the United States by mutual actions like civil rights and end the war movements are examples of geographical decentering. Like politics, art also involved a nomadic entering and leaving by traveling filmmakers.

3.
In a "talk" with Louis Marcorelles, a French critic: "I personally feel that cinema should be highly socially responsible, in the Brechtian line. Cinema has to be located in a given time ... a given purpose." Mekas: "But that's what we are doing. In Brazil they have hunger problems. But here we have hunger of the soul. ... If you'd think deeper about the underground cinema you'd find that it reflects the American man as deeply as the Brazilian cinema reflects the Brazilian man." Marcorelles: "I feel that the underground cinema is completely divorced from America." Mekas: " ... For the essence of the American man was beginning to die, he was becoming like a machine and like money."

4.
Rather than nuclear wars, there will be trade wars. We need to remember that fearing a nuclear war, while fighting wars of containment around the globe, had little to do with pleasure; and that tactics of opposition also instantiated hierarchy, and exclusion.

This dispersion of economic power among several nations is accompanied by what I have called franchise culture, a culture of international monopolies leased as the local, resulting in a national and international sameness, sold, however, as difference-the small large model of the world. For example, choosing a video recorder among the literally hundreds of models is a salted plum experience of trying to discern quality and difference, only to learn that the product name, the trademark guarantee, means nothing. Whether American or Japanese, most models are now made by the same companies, with, presumably, the same components. We frantically choose between McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's, sold as different yet relentlessly the same. Maintaining the contradictions of difference may be a critical task as it continues to be for feminism. I suspect that cultural difference will be as central to rethinking Western postmodernism as sexual difference was to redefining classical film theory.

5.
Margulies has described what she calls Akerman's "hyperrealist everyday", in which the filmmaker gives priority to details of daily life that are elided by most forms of cinematic representation:

> The label 'Nothing happens,' often applied to Akerman's work, is key in defining that work's specificity - its equation of extension and intensity, of description and drama… The inclusion of… 'images between images' begets a spatio-temporal, as well as moral expansion of cinema. The interest in extending the representation of reality reflects a desire to restore a phenomenological integrity to reality."

This essay deals precisely with that "spatio-temporal… expansion of cinema" in relation to the use of space and architecture in *News from Home*, which maintains a focus on the seemingly dreary details of everyday life, as Akerman demonstrates by constructing her own autobiography from written and spoken accounts of her mother's daily life. And just as she acknowledges her personal debt to and engagement in, even if vicariously, the realities of her mother's life as they are communicated through her letters, so she acknowledges her debt to and participation in the mundane realities of the city in which she now lives, realities communicated through the sounds and textures of the city spaces, through her own footsteps and those of others in the streets. The construction of the self becomes a spatial issue; gender relations are written onto the body of the city, shaping it and shaped by it. Through forms of architecture and urban planning, and through forms of *being in* architecture and urban spaces, subjects of the city write and are themselves written in spatial, corporeal terms. Here, living in the city becomes a form of autobiography, in which the subject is acknowledged as grounded in the human body and its resonance with the body of the city.

6.
Akerman never loses sight of the subject as it lives in real spaces. She examines the act of writing, of articulating a female subject position, in both linguistic and spatial terms. The autobiographical project becomes, in this film, at once spoken, written and inhabited. Her camera embarks on a fantastic voyage wherein the bodies of her human subjects, like her own body, unseen behind the camera, seem in tune with the larger rhythms of the body that is the metropolis itself. Conversely, perhaps, it is the rhythms of the dwellers of the labyrinthine city that lend to the streets their murmur and incessant hum. Akerman lets the street speak of its subjects, herself included. Sounds of passing cars, horns and rumbling subways swell on the soundtrack as if in answer to her mother's words, speaking for Akerman herself and her fellow New Yorkers.

Resources mentioned in the 60s avant-garde discussion:

Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto

"Avant-Garde is dead, long live the avant-garde" protest letter (against the International Experimental Film Congress in Toronto, signed by 76 filmmakers from the US and Canada in 1989).
Mekas Doc at NYCDOC
Instructional Photography
(Carceral) capitalism as the annihilation of space by time (referenced by Sebas): final chapter from Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (included in email)

Resources mentioned in Chantal Akerman discussion:

Blue Diary, Jenni Olson:
Our horizon, Charlotte Cayeux: (teaser)
Chantal Akerman's book "My Mother Laughs"
Hilma Af Klint (Zeina's example on an artist that demanded her works be kept secret 20 years after her death)

Films mentioned:

Chantal Akerman's News From Home
Peng Zuqiang's keep in touch

Reading Sources:

1. Curatorial text for the exhibition "Jonas Mekas: The Camera Was Always Running" at the Jewish Museum (Feb 18 - June 5, 2022), written by Kelly Taxter, guest curator.

2. From chapter "The Avant-Garde, the Everyday and the Underground" (p.188-213) in *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, & Feminism* by Patricia Mellencamp

3. From chapter "The Avant-Garde, the Everyday and the Underground" (p.188-213) in I*ndiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, & Feminism* by Patricia Mellencamp

4. From chapter "The Avant-Garde, the Everyday and the Underground" (p.188-213) in *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, & Feminism* by Patricia Mellencamp

5. From chapter "The feminine side of New York: travelogue, autobiography and architecture in News from Home" (p.41-58) by Jennifer M. Barker in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*

6. From chapter “The feminine side of New York: travelogue, autobiography and architecture in News from Home” (p.41-58) by Jennifer M. Barker in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*

7. You can find Margulies’ essay on Akerman as well as other filmmakers of the everyday (and other writings on the Everyday in contemporary art) in the book “The Everyday” (edited by Stephen Johnstone), part of the series *Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art*.