

PUBLICATION: Art Monthly **VOLUME/ISSUE:** No. 336 **PUBLICATION DATE:** May 2010

PhotoFilm: Stillness and Movement

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I signed up for this symposium with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension as the intellectual heavyweights gathered once again to ponder the blurring of boundaries between the still and moving image since digitalisation. This subject has been visited several times, most notably six years ago at the foundational conference 'Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image'. Yet the pull of such a formidable panel outweighed any misgivings about further repetition. So there I was full of expectation in a packed auditorium with some of the most influential time-based theorists. In the opening address Sigune Hamann, who devised the Tate symposium, explained that the event would concentrate on how we conceive and experience time and movement. This was a refreshing focus on the way the image is experienced phenomenologically, rather than the heavily trodden path of structuralist analysis of the image. Soon enough, however, I realised that my initial concerns were shared by Laura Mulvey, who began her talk by saying that she felt she had 'nothing left to say' after her influential 2004 paper 'The Possessive Spectator'. Raymond Bellour and David Company delivered papers that both drew from their own previous research and intertextually referenced that of the other speakers.

David Claerbout gave us a preview of work-in-progress: *The American Room*. This moving-image work is constructed from more than 50,000 photographic portrait shots. The stills are assembled to create an audience at a piano concerto in a wood-panelled room dominated by a US flag. The moving image effect comes from a steady cam, which roams the room among the static subjects. This is emphasised by the sound, a piano rendition of the national anthem, which follows the camera, changing sound levels as it moves in and out of the space. Claerbout suggested that, in this fictionalised space, where the characters never breathe, it is the sound that connotes presence. He proposed this work as a critique of the 9/11 remembrance rituals, which he suggested have now become associated with acts of nationalism. The viewers, like the audience in the work, are reflexively implicated. In this piece, Claerbout explores the polarity between conflict and reconciliation.

The highlight was the Q&A at the end of the morning, where the panellists engaged in a spot of captivating intellectual jousting. The chair, David Cross, provocatively demanded an ethical, social and political dimension to the debate beyond a formal understanding of time-based work. This was the cue for Company to extract himself from the other panellists, stating that he offered a cultural rather than an ontological reading of the image. Mulvey also protested that her analysis of a slowed-down and repeated close-up clip of Marilyn Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is approached via the body and its cultural implications rather than the materiality of the image.

So, as the panel members appeared to be disassociating themselves from an ontological materialist reading of time-based work, Mulvey reintroduced materiality as an after-thought. She recalled that she forgot to mention in her talk that, while the image can be frozen, sound cannot. This insightful pragmatic observation was quickly picked up by Bellour, who believes that this is why film analysis has not focused on sound. Company, on the other hand, reflected that cinema throws up the muteness of the image, while Claerbout considered how the image allows for a pause, as supposed to sound, which resists this in its desire to continue. This improvised address on the materiality of sound offered a welcome digression.

Ian Christie's lecture stood out. It was rigorously crafted, offering a seamless historical trajectory full of delightful moments and innovative material, especially the rarely screened 1925 film *Kipho* by Julius Pinschewer and Guido Seeber. Dieter Daniels eloquently explored the historic blurring of boundaries between the still and the moving image, while Bellour concluded the talks by insightfully analyzing two extracts from *Line of Face*, 1991, by James Coleman.

In the afternoon the Q&A chair, Maxa Zoller, drew attention to a memorable moment from Leslie Thornton's video piece *Photography is Easy*, 2005, shown earlier, where the artist follows an insect in the desert. This image is synced to the sound of her panting and whooping as she attempts to shoot the insect. This footage is then followed by a rapid sequence of multiple photos, recalling Company's earlier comment on the surplus of images produced since the 1920s, which raises questions about who will be marshaling or curating them. The ensuing debate initiated by Zoller concerned medium-specificity and perception. She asked: 'Is stillness also not always moving?' Christie suggested that the idea of medium specificity is outdated and has become a kind of fetish. Bellour moved on to our perception of images, arguing that they are established according to a binary configuration of inside/outside. The inside constitutes the mental, remembered image. This, he argued, has been understood to be made up from stills., not moving elements. While a theoretical connection can be made between the two, he stated that there was no real connection. In response, Christie suggested that more research needed to be undertaken to establish if memory traces were in fact more like still or moving images and how we perceive time. Throughout the day, this fascinating symposium saw a tension between the materialist and the phenomenological reading of the still and the moving image. But ultimately, as Bellour stated, the current increased level of instability and multiplication of the image through digitization means that 'no general theory is possible' on stillness and movement. Company agreed, adding, 'there is on one claim about temporality of form; temporal forms come about for historic reasons'. Christie concluded by praising 'Bellour's elegant coda' that there can be no general theory on stillness and movement unless we look at the structure of perception of the image and sound. This is new ground and, as some of the panelists suggested, it may be time to call in the expertise of the neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists to contribute to this emerging interdisciplinary debate on the fundamental perception of still and moving images.

The symposium was held at Tate Modern in association with PhotoFilm (a series of screenings curated by Gustáv Håmos, Katja Pratschke and Thomals Tode) on 5 March.