

# Reimagining cinema: searching for an aesthetic of interaction design through cinema

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we will present new ways to make, design and experience cinema. We will argue that design, including the new methodologies used in interaction design, can be at the source of experiencing film and does also constitute a new aesthetic in design. While aesthetic in design is already well framed, it's not the case in interaction design. Interaction requires time and presence (of human, object, ...) to happen and therefore requires a different approach to aesthetic. Looking at cinema allows us to attempt a definition of an aesthetic of reimagination.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Design, Interaction Design, Aesthetics, Reimagine

## 1. Introduction

There have been very little studies on the subject of the interrelated disciplines of 'design' and 'cinema'. Both authors of this paper have their first background in cinema then in design and both have been teaching interaction design for several years. This paper aims to explore the relationship between design and cinema and eventually attempts to find ways to use design *through* cinema rather than *for* cinema. Reimagining is reinterpreting imaginatively according to the Oxford dictionary (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). To interpret is to explain, clarify or decode the meaning of something the same dictionary tells us. By trying to decode cinema, we are attempting to decode an art but also its materiality. By doing so, we hope to create a new methodology to converse between the two disciplines by means of understanding their common aesthetic.

The relationship between art and cinema has a long history. Many artists of the 50's and 60's have been interested in cinema as a visual aesthetic but Christine Van Aasche warns us that a film has its own language, with a foundation in script writing, a style and a series of codes. Those artists were only interested in the idea of cinema so they thought they could easily transfer from one system of codes to another, she continues (Van Aasche, 2010, p6). Artists belonging to the Expanded Cinema movement challenged those codes but we believe that they were more interested in developing their own artistic language than engaging in a meaningful dialogue with cinema.

The influences of and upon the work of Alfred Hitchcock is an interesting case in point, inspired by a multitude of artists and movements in his work (Cogeval & Paini, 2000) while serving as the inspiration for a plethora of contemporary artist (Annette Messager's *Chimere*, Judith Barry's *Shadow of the City...* Vamp Ry, Douglas Gordon's *24 hours Psycho*, Pierre Huygue's *Remake* and the recent *PsychoBarn* by Cornelia Parker). Among the artists who used cinema as their subject, we are particularly interested in Pierre Huygue and his installation *The Third Memory* (1999). The source of the story stems from the attempted robbery of the Chase Manhattan bank in New York by John Wojtowicz who needed the money to pay for his boyfriend's transgender surgery. The extraordinary story and its high profile caught the eye of Hollywood resulting in the award-winning film *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) starring Al Pacino. Wojtowicz was in prison at the time of the film's release and though appreciating the movie's cinematic craft, felt that the story was not a true portrayal of reality (Wojtowicz, 1977). Huyghe provided Wojtowicz with the opportunity to 'retell the retelling' in a re-enactment allowing the robber to not only act but also direct the action. In re-presenting the story, Huyghe rebuilt the bank as an installation which he then filmed, using this new footage alongside shots from the Hollywood film as source material.

*The Third Memory* is a film about a film about a real event, utilising an installation as a narrative agent. However, in this paper, it is not the movie itself that we find interesting but the process of production, and how it can be situated for its critical aspect. In making a fiction based on a true story, the author builds a cinematic reality with the intention of touching the audience emotionally. To do so, there is often a necessity to dramatize certain elements to fit into the language of cinema. By asking the robber to direct the re-enactment, to engage in a visual conversation with the original set and film by way of a split screen, Pierre Huyghe tells us there are a multitude of compromises in the journey between reality and realism. As Guy Debord states, 'everything directly lived has receded into representation' (Guy Debord, 2010, p2). Pierre Huyghe seems to apply Debord's concept of the spectacle by trying to turn a good film but skewed representation—Sydney Lumet's production—into a critique of the spectacle. At the end, a movie is not only entertainment but can also reveal certain truths about our culture and challenge our societal beliefs. For Christine Van Aasche, 'artists are interested in [cinema] for its process, its editing, its narrative. Like painting, writing, or photography, cinema has become a raw material' (Van Aasche, 2010, p6).

## 2. Designing for cinema

The role of design in cinema is less critical as it is often viewed as a mere dependency. Although there are Oscars for the best costume or production design, this is seen as the output of skilled workers or artisans. Anne Atkins, a graphic designer working for cinema, describes her job as 'all the stuff that everybody sees and nobody cares about' (Atkins, 2015, para 3). Similarly, title sequence design was often considered a rudimentary graphic accompaniment until people like Saul Bass saw its potential. *Goodfellas* author Nicholas Pileggi reflects: 'You write a book of 300 to 400 pages and then you boil it down to a script of maybe 100 to 150 pages. Eventually you have the pleasure of seeing that the Besses (Saul and Elaine) have knocked you right out of the ballpark. They have boiled it down to four minutes flat' (Bass & Kirkham, 2011). People like Bass have turned the acknowledgement into an ability to engage the audience from the first frame by using a defined style and strong sense of narrative. While there is still no Oscar for title design this example serves well as an expression of the discipline of design moving from a practice into research. Daniel Fallman elucidates this further when he splits design research into design practice '*the commercial aspect*', design studies '*the academic discipline*' and design exploration '*towards art*' (Fallman, 2008). The Bass' were commercial, certainly, but their aims was to break the barriers between design and art,

their ability of synthesis goes beyond the representation. This ability of synthesis or convergence is of particular interest to us but it is often stronger accompanied with a phase of divergence. For example, the work of designers Adam Frost and Zhenia Vasiliev (Frost and Vasiliev, 2013) on Hitchcock's obsessions. Examining the currency of 'dying falls' in the director's work, we learn that Mr Caypor in *Secret Agent* (1936) plummets 500m compared to 50m by Judy/Madeleine in *Vertigo* (1958). They are not only beautiful representations but also give us a unique insight into Hitchcock's world.

It is no coincidence that we have returned to Hitchcock here, to re-evaluate the relationship between cinema and the audience through other means. Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) is a cinema classic hybrid. Hitchcock's desire was to create the film through one continuous shot, as if watching a single act play. Consisting of 10 takes, technologically restricted to a maximum of 10 minutes, the entire set of *Rope* had to be designed and constructed as one large, interactive sound stage, requiring carefully choreographed units of camera operators, props, lighting and sound technicians, working around the actors as the walls and props dismantled then seamlessly reconfigured. While *Rope* is unquestionably a Hollywood movie, Hitchcock sets out, in part, to explore the possibilities of form. This approach prefigures what we are looking for, a design that uses cinema for his metanarrative, we call it designing through cinema.

### 3. Designing through cinema

Until now, cinema has used design for its own purpose, enhancing the production value but not necessarily creating any content. We would like to introduce the idea of designing *through* cinema by considering cinema not as an end but as a metanarrative or a material. By cinema, we are no longer referring to film but to the system of creation. In order to go further, we need to develop a functional definition that presents the many facets of cinema. Since the Lumière brothers were inventors, it makes sense to start with cinema as (1) a technology. Their *cinématographe* was unique because it could be used to capture and project, from the very outset designed to engage a mass audience. The first projection was in public, in the Grand Café in Paris, an environment already alluding to the type of space and audience that would quickly evolve into the picture palaces of Cinema's golden age. This leads us to consider cinema as (2) a physical location (the movie theatre). But this was different across the Atlantic, when Thomas Edison invented the Kinetoscope, it was designed specifically for individual use. Edison's cinema, consisting of very short pieces, was to be consumed at circuses, vaudeville or fairgrounds alongside other novelties. It's not just a space but (3) a place (cultural connotation). Further, we can also see cinema as (4) an industry. The French director, Georges Méliès, was one of the first to invest in a studio with the specific focus of not only making films but also creating production teams, a hierarchy and an industrial sociology of cinema as a labour and an organisation (Rot and Verdalle, 2013). Finally, cinema is (5) an art with a specific aesthetic. The word cinematic, now applicable to so many contemporary art forms comes from cinema. One of the latest and most obvious inheritors of the term being games design which has largely used this aesthetic and even re-exported it through productions such as *Assassin's Creed* (2007); a cinematic video game that is now a cinema release which draws heavily from the aesthetics of games culture. In this paper, we will pick a few of these directions as some have matured well and we will mention others as they are showing hope for future progress.

Nevertheless, to design through cinema requires a clear methodology. Richard Buchanan has developed the concept of the four orders of design to describe its development and set a direction for the future of design. To Buchanan, the first order of design is communication with symbols and signs (graphic design, visual communication) then the design of artefacts (industrial design, product

design). These are the modes of communication and production as Buchanan would call them. Buchanan adds a third order, the design of activities and processes, which is about how people relate to one another and the agency in between. Finally, the fourth order is the design of environments and systems within which all the other orders of design exist. Interaction design is often seen as the third order as it is about designing the activities, the processes and ‘those relationships or the things that support them’ (Buchanan, 2014). The fourth order, is less specific to an area of design, it’s about ‘understanding how these systems work, what core idea hold them together, what ideas and values’ (Buchanan, 2014). While only skimming the meaning of the fourth order, Buchanan also mentions ‘a formative age’ (Buchanan, 2014) which is an opportunity to try things and identify the subject of larger, systemic, interaction. We believe that this framework gives us a chance to see cinema not as a discipline but as a system of interactions.

While design is our starting point, this research is particularly geared towards the emerging discipline of interaction design. Daniel Fallman defines interaction design as the holistic view of the relationship between the designed artifacts, those exposed to these artifacts and the social cultural and business context in which the meeting takes place (Fallman, 2008). Our approach is clearly set within design exploration. We are particularly interested in Fallman’s idea of transcendence and the possibilities outside the current paradigm (Fallman, 2008). However, the object of our study is not an artifact but a complex system made of the multiple interactions between the users and the makers, or between the makers. Design is a statement of what is possible (Fallman, 2008) and we believe that design can go beyond the object hence we believe Buchanan’s fourth order is the most appropriate methodology to explore.

In a paper on interactions and systems, Usman Haque’s declares that: ‘interaction concerns transactions of information between two systems (for example between two people, between two machines, or between a person and a machine)’ (Haque, 2009). As an architect, Haque has had a strong interest in cybernetics and has often showed his concern about creating interactions that would go beyond a mere reaction. To him, conversation is a better type of interaction as it is a chance to discover new unexpected information. To us, it’s an opportunity to create a more meaningful interaction. Interacting with a myth rather than a story. He argues that it’s ‘the conversations that makes us “human”’ (Haque, 2009) with which we agree entirely. In this instance, we see this conversation happening between the audience and cinema. It’s a participative, culturally engaged and sometimes critical approach to cinema. Joel de Rosnay, a French futurist, invented the term *macroscope*, a cybernetic tool that takes inspiration from the microscope (to see the small) or the telescope (to see far), the macroscope is to be used to see the complex. In our case, interaction design, is a macroscope.

## 4. In search for an aesthetic

Philosophical aesthetics provides a neutral ground between the two disciplines. While both subjects have inherited a strong visual aesthetic through art, this would be too extensive to recount in this paper. Richard Buchanan frequently mentions John Dewey as a foundation for interaction design (Buchanan, 2014). In his seminal book *Art as an Experience*, Dewey argues that we must begin with the aesthetic “in the raw” in order to understand the aesthetic “refined” (Dewey, 2009, 4-5). The raw being nature, the environment and the refined, art. Dewey is known for his pragmatic approach to aesthetics and particularly for the concept of aesthetic experience. Richard Shusterman completes the thoughts of Dewey as a fellow pragmatist: ‘What standardly characterizes aesthetic experience and artistic objects is the presence of form. But form, even in painting and sculpture, is not static spatial relations but the dynamic interaction of elements displaying the kind of “cumulation, tension,

conservation, anticipation, and fulfilment” which together with emotional intensity, are defining features of an aesthetic experience.’ (Shusterman, 2000 and Dewey as cited in Shusterman, 2000). Through this definition, we understand Buchanan’s interest in Dewey’s work, the cumulation, tension, conservation, anticipation, and fulfilment can be seen as the steps required to understand an interactive conversation.

Bordwell & Thompson describe Film as an art with its own language and aesthetic. They have looked at the significance of Film Form and describe it as a system. Perception, they say, is an activity as it makes the spectator an active participant in the film process – a process, which starts for the moment they walk into the physical world of the cinema. This is something we mentioned earlier, through our definition of cinema, experiencing a film starts by the physical location (movie theatre) or a place (a circus, a drive in, a pop-up cinema). Bordwell & Thompson discuss further the artwork cues as not random but organised within a system, also referred as the film form (Bordwell & Thompson, 2016). We would like to go further by considering the subject of cinema as a greater system where film occupies only one space alongside the narrative and the stylistic are subsystems. This idea of a system can be extended from the film as a unit of cinema as an ensemble that includes location, culture, technology and industry. This is the system in its entirety, these are also our entry points to understand the potential of cinema as a material for design.

Bordwell & Thompson mention that ‘without the spectator engaging with film [...], it resembles an artifact, an object.’ (Bordwell & Thompson, 2016). While we agree, we don’t think that it is the unique feature of film alone. In his paper “What is interactivity?”, Aaron Smuts concludes with a reference to the *Principles of Art* by R.G. Collingwood: ‘the audience is not collaborating, it is only overhearing’ adding further ‘the audience’s function is merely receptive and not concreative’. To Smutt, Collingwood is ‘diagnosing what he sees as a source of limitation on the expressive potential of mechanically reproduced art’ (Smutt, 2009). The term concreative is little used beyond Collingwood but, in our opinion, offers a good contribution to the subject of interaction. Smutt looks at interactivity as a performative art and defines concreative in this way: ‘potential to allow the audience to partially create the production’ and let ‘the actors respond to the audience reaction’. A true conversation through the medium of art.

Huyghe’s installation *The Third Memory* (1999) has given us a foundation to explore the subject of designing through cinema. Jean-Charles Massera, who co-wrote the book on *the Third Memory*, mentions an aesthetic of re-appropriation (Massera, 2010, p17). Marcel Duchamp was the first advocate appropriation in art by denying the very notion of ‘originality’. Hijacking (*détournement*) is another approach brought by the Situationist international group. These techniques have helped us define methods though not as critical as Pierre Huyghe’s. We will now look at a series of case studies, so we can explore the validity of our theories.

## 5. Case studies

In order for Design to enter a conversation with Cinema through an interaction, we see three possible approaches. The first is the translation, the second is adaptation and the third is re-imagining. For each technique, we have identified one or two key projects. Using this approach, allows us to take some distance from the usual design methodologies of hijacking, remixing and relabelling so we can look at new methodologies used in film.

Translation is the most immediate, you take a movie or a scene as the material and you translate it into an experience, hoping to enhance the interaction. In *Ogling at Hitchcock’s Rear Window* (Deguenne, 2010), the author took the sequence from *Rear Window* (1954) where Lisa Fremont

(Grace Kelly) crosses the court, climbs into the neighbour's house and searches for proof of a crime. The entire scene is shot traditionally – shot / reverse shot –, so when we see Lisa Fremont progressing in one shot, we see L.B Jefferies (James Stewart) looking at her in the reverse shot (Figure 1). Thibaut Deguene recreated the scene on two opposing screens, allowing the audience to stand in-between. This approach relies mainly upon translating the experience from the screen to a space. The author changes the habit of the audience by putting them between the two screens but without the high level of interaction. Nevertheless, watching a film about a watcher watching, now requires the viewer to actively engage with the process and not just watch.



Figure 1. A spectator looks at James Stewart in *Ogling at Hitchcock's Rear Window* (2010)

We do not take translation in its pure sense, we have adopted the definition of Baule and Carrati (2007) in *Towards Translation Design* where translation is presented as 'a transformative design activity aimed at reformulating, translating or, more often, transmuting contents [...]. The goal is to generate new expressive interpretations, simplifications or expansions of the source [...]'. Whether it's a technique such as the shot/reverse shot or a famous moment from cinema history, translating allows the audience to focus or experience that moment differently. As mentioned earlier, the level of technical interaction doesn't have to be high but it should enhance the cultural interaction.

While the process of translation is often quite literal, the adaptation is about changing to make fit, suit new conditions, trying to engage the audience further. There is an established academic practice around adaptation which we hope to engage with in the future. It requires understanding the essence of the original work and then proceeds with the subtraction or addition of necessary elements to let it live in the world of design as a standalone entity and not merely as a reference. Noam Toran gives us some good examples of adaptations. When he makes the McGuffin visible, he decides to reveal something to the audience that was a motivation in the film but requires no or little visibility in the film. Adversely, the design requires full visibility. In the *Object for Lonely Men* (2001), Noam Toran re-imagines himself as Jean Paul Belmondo's character Michel Poiccard, from Godard's *A Bout De Souffle* (1960) a film steeped in intertextual signifiers. While Toran has kept some of the overt references to the movie, he created an object that allows him to interact with specific shots or scenes, but which also raises questions as how we interact with it. By making a film about a film, he

doesn't resolve the immediate interaction with the subject but shows a path for a personal interaction, between the fan, the character and eventually the actor.

The idea of reimagining requires an ability to decode film and its aura. We have found inspiration in theories such as Walter Murch's *Blink of an Eye*, Edgar Morin's *Les Stars* and Lev Kulechov's experiments around editing in the early 1920's (Prince and Hensley, 1992). Re-imagination also brings us back to *The Third Memory* (1999) by Pierre Huyghe. In Huyghe's reimagining, cinema loses its strict entertainment value in favour of a critical reflection on the production of culture. By rebuilding the bank (and showing us the set), Huyghe deconstructs the language of cinema in front of our eyes. By letting the protagonist take control of the actors (with a gun in his hands), he makes the power imbued in the set transparent. Huyghe uses the language of cinema to talk about cinema. Furthermore, the piece is designed to work in a gallery space forcing viewers to reassess their traditional relationship with narrative cinema.

Romain Meunier is a French interaction designer living in London, he made an interactive prototype where the audience can free a wannabe film actress in order to realise her dream (Figure 2). The title, *Starlette* (2012), is not arbitrary in that it refers to the 1950's phenomena when, it was quite common for a future actress to attend a film festival such as Cannes and by displaying her charm and beauty, the camera would seek her out, thereby launching a possibly lucrative movie career. Brigitte Bardot being the most notable example in 1953. His work starts with the sound of knocking coming from a photo frame on the wall, in which we discover a live character demanding her freedom. As the user lifts the frame the character is freed, falls onto the furniture and runs towards the television set (Figure 3). Once inside she begins to interact with the opening credits of Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980). After some time, the user gets annoyed and uses a remote control to return the character back into the photo frame.



Figure 2. the starlet is freed, falls onto the furniture and runs towards the television set in *Starlette* (2012)

Huygue's work takes a story and retells it in order to give voice to the subject, in this case Wojtowicz, so subverting the original filmic text and the traditional Hollywood star system and narrative structure but which is nevertheless beholden to it all the same. Conversely Romain Meunier gives greater emphasis to the reception of the work and the position taken by the audience/user situated within it, resulting in little wiggle room being afforded to the passive viewer as interaction is required.

Meunier's *Subtract* (2012) then takes us a step further in that, by using a green screen board, it subverts the usually passive role of the spectator, instead casting them in a scenario, whereupon they watch themselves being watched, performing, in an environment that is both set and location. By placing the green-screen board in front of themselves users/spectators subtract the part of their body covered by the board only for it to be replaced by the same body part from the opposite sex, but naked. The subsequent installation situates users as both voyeur and exhibitionist, spectator and spectacle, as their self-exploration is also viewed by the surrounding audience and would be participants.

With a tinge of irony Meunier's installation and others mentioned in this paper also invoke the incipient days of cinema/moving image, before movie theatres became the *modus operandi*, establishing bums on seats as the viewing norm. Harking back to vaudeville, circus tents and penny arcades interactive installations are frequently located in 'grouped isolation' often resting side by side at exhibitions or galleries where visitors flit from piece to piece. Using design to collapse the boundaries between film, theatre and installation our concept of cinema and how we engage it is simply re-imagined.

## 6. Conclusion

Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948) was a concrete attempt by a filmmaker to reimagine cinema within cinema, maintaining its illusion, style, writing and code while attempting to utilise the process of production as a narrative device. Conversely Lars Von Trier, the director responsible for the Dogma manifesto, decided to forego his usual levels of control, allowing the camera to randomly frame *The Boss of It All* (2008). The actors while extremely frustrated during the shooting, were also surprised by the result (Lars Von Trier, 2008). Michel Gondry, a director who entered mainstream cinema via his innovative approach to music videos, along with collaborator Pierre Bismuth recreated their film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) as an installation, *The All Seeing Eye* (Patrick, 2008), at the BFI in London, a work designed to traverse the boundaries between cinema and gallery through an adjoining narrative. Unlike Gondry and Bismuth, Pierre Huyghe employs the use of an installation not as an extension of or accompaniment to an existing narrative, but as an act of criticism, asking the audience to engage the work analytically, viewing cinema from a more critical angle. It's the aesthetic of re-appropriation. But between the materiality and the criticality, we believe that there is enough in common to connect cinema and design. While they both share a common visual aesthetic history, looking at cinema from a design viewpoint has allowed us to deconstruct cinema helping us understand it as a system and its impact as a cultural phenomenon.

The aesthetic of interaction, designing through (*reimagining*) cinema, needs to work across several factors; 'user experience' (nostalgia, friction, memory, culture), 'interactivity' (responsiveness and control), eventually 'criticality' (that reveals something about cinema) which constitutes the *aesthetic of reimagination*.

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