

A Visual Particle Accelerator: Moving Images, Spaces and Attention

MARC GLÖDE

I.

Over the last 20 years it has been one of the most prominent arguments that our ways of perception and attention changed considerably through an increasing amount of information and images. Specifically the continuous growth of the digital-visual worlds has fostered new thoughts on the impact of data or images and how people deal with it. While this aspect on one hand finds interesting resonances in the shift from the nineteenth to the twentieth century¹—the time period that dealt repeatedly with issues concerning the ways of perception and the period that brought to life the moving image—it is on the other hand quite specific in today's dynamics, and of course very different concerning the involved media and intensity: it is hard to compare the irritation that the montage of a film in the 1920s created with the world of music video clips of today. But it is interesting to acknowledge that in this development, it is the idea of 'attention' that (again) has become one important topic in a lot of debates and publications. In a constantly growing and emotionally as well as spatially moving stream of data it is of

high importance to understand where one's attention is actively pointed towards or passively attracted by. Furthermore, and with a clear understanding of these two modes of attention, it actually has to be diagnosed that 'attention' has become a key value in our society, almost comparable to money.

The density of this stream of images we find in music videos, video games, films or internet streams has created a reality that continuously sets tasks for our apparatus of perception: it is a mode or feeling of being thrown into a visual particle accelerator. Split screen, multiple sound layers and multiple text information come along with images and it is not self-evident that this audiovisual attack, something that is called augmented reality in other fields, can be accurately digested. And it is remarkable that specifically the question of augmented reality, the way of training perception, and attentiveness are key fields of research for the economy, PR-companies, science and most of all the army.² Here, apart from aspects to make the body function better (efficiency), the main interests seem to be a new economy of attention or, by

embedding additional information into images, the maximization of utilization. This tendency does not just result in a continuous exploration of the limitations that human perception undoubtedly has, it also leads to new fields of interest concerning the image and its form. Aspects like color, sound or haptic vibration became rediscovered potentials for further dynamics. But there should be no doubt about the reason for this interest of the industrial and commercial world: even if it looks like new inspiring forms (that are often inspired or are used by artists in different dynamics) the goal of these forms is to playfully maximize layers of information in images and to bend and expand the capacities of decoding this information.

II.

Against the background of this development various questions concerning how we deal and relate to images or visual data arise. Questions like: How do we create a way of orientation? How do we relate to an idea of images? How do we alternatively use them? Or: how can we reflect our own modes of functioning through and with images/data in a constantly changing and increasingly image-based environment? These questions have been crucial not just in relation to commercial development, but are generally at stake, as we can see in recent theoretical debates (like the discussion regarding the so called 'pictorial turn') in artistic practices. Especially artists that work with video and film installations seem to be perpetually addressing these kind of questions. This is because apart from unveiling the new status of the image and the importance of the new source attention they are largely confronted with another question and can't overlook an additional force in this discourse that has a huge impact on our ways of thinking with and about images: that force is space. But what seems so self-evident and almost not worth mentioning has a complex underpinning. The complexity of the relation between moving image and space becomes clear when you walk through any film or video installation: there is the aspect of the space represented in an image, the space of the *cadraje*, the space of the projection and furthermore the architectural space of the projection and its relation to concepts like interior, exterior or public and private space.

As early as 1982, in his essay on the question of 'Other Spaces', Michel Foucault remarked on the trend whereby the *topos* of space had become one of the fundamental thought categories of the pres-

ent moment and was increasingly determining philosophical/aesthetic discourse.³ Since then the discussions surrounding the category of space and its impact (on images) has constantly increased: one of the negative side effects of this development was the consequence that space and the understanding of what space is was fluctuating all the more rapidly between general quotidian banalities and arcane micro-concepts. In light of this development it seems paramount to remember, that the arts since the 1960s repeatedly refined the engagement with space and the conditions of its production. Questions of space came into view that focused on the form inherent to the artwork, as did questions that emphasized the reference to the site of presentation. In 1967 Robert Smithson, for example, addressed the question of the architectural organizing structure of the museum⁴ and went on to discuss the fundamental question 'What is a Museum?' with Alan Kaprow.⁵ These critical approaches, according to which the museum and its form is demonstrably more of a grave than a structure conducive to a discourse of space, would be expanded in the course of the 1970s and 80s, particularly with regard to social and political processes, by artists such as Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, Gregg Bordowitz, and Andrea Fraser.⁶ While aspects such as processes of free-market economics and group dynamics entered the foreground, the question of the concrete spatial conditions of the museum, the museum as apparatus, to a certain extent fell from view. However, particularly in connection with the sharply increasing presence, since the 1990s, of films, videos and film installations in museums, the topic of space would go on to demand renewed attention.

III.

In the arts, there was an intensified interest in the discussion that had been conducted under the heading of *apparatus critique* since the 1960s, surrounding the film's dispositive structure. In the course of this intensified discussion, the immersive spatial strategy of film in the cinema theater was subject to a particularly strong criticism.⁷ It was demanded that the normally concealed operations of the spatial machinery of the cinema be exposed, for example by interrupting the flow of film or even partially exhibiting the projection machinery. In this way, it was made clear that the spatial dimension of film signifies not only a reflection on pictorial space or the cinema, but also a critical reflection

on the relationship between subject and world as mediated by images. It seemed entirely appropriate to look at these theoretical engagements with the cinematic dispositif directly against the background of the museum's new 'culture of spectacle', and thus to raise the question, again, of the possibility or even the necessity of an apparatus critique of the museum. Thus Andrea Fraser, for example, in her article on the development of *institutional critique*, recently returned to the concept of apparatus in order to direct attention not only to the aspect of socio-political structures, but above all to their interaction with the apparative dimension.⁸

A second aspect that can be ascertained in the context of the readdressing of the question of space in the museum is just as closely connected to the emergence of the question of a critique of apparatus. With the increasing presence of films in the museum and the demand for a critical method for observing this tendency, the theory developing in parallel becomes clearer than ever before, at the same time as does the historical dimension of a previously firmly divided history of the cinema and the museum as institutions. In its early phase, film as a time-based medium was already excluded from the museum and its contemplative spatial practice. Various museums such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Centre Pompidou in Paris, in fact, maintained film archives all along, but the integration of film into the museum situation never really took hold. On the contrary, while museum cinemas often presented prominent, classically narrative film, it was the cinemathèque, the film co-op or experimental film festivals such as Oberhausen or Knokke-Heist that particularly embraced experimental film.

Only in the late 1960s and 1970s, as experimental film positions grew increasingly pronounced, would this medium, as well as video art—and the thematization of the category of space proper to both media—find its way into the museum in a rudimentary fashion.⁹ Dan Graham was one of the artists who took note of this new development very early on and applied himself consistently to the associated question of the role of film in relation to the museum. In various projects¹⁰ and theoretical writings, he clearly underlined both the architectural and the political-social differences between institutions such as the cinema, the museum and the theater.¹¹ These very differences discussed by Graham emerged as progressive factors with regard to a preoccupation with questions of space

between the institutions, and would soon come to reinforce the initially hesitant movement of film out of the cinema and into the museum.

IV.

While cinema was constantly being subjected to an apparative analysis from the side of experimental film and film criticism, precisely because of its architectural standards and the perception of film that they directed, it seemed to the experimental film positions that an entirely new spatial freedom was being offered in that other space, the museum. In her treatment of the aesthetic of the installation, Juliane Rebentisch demonstrated how, through the break with classic cinema architecture and in connection with the new possibilities of electronic images, the spatial presentation format of film could be radically modified.¹² In this way, Rebentisch aligned herself with Gilles Deleuze, who also stressed—with regard to the electronic image—that the organization of space with the proliferating new format now '[loses] its privileged direction—first and foremost, the privilege of the vertical, to which the projection screen continues to be a testament—in favor of an undirected space, which relentlessly transforms its angles and coordinates and transposes its verticals and horizontals.'¹³ The potential of the moving image appears everywhere, distributed via monitors and projection screens, onto the floor or ceiling, and no longer has to be perceived by a frontally oriented, seated audience. Instead, it is increasingly necessary to walk through the installations, and to enter into the relationship of space, pictorial space and viewer while in motion. It becomes apparent that this transformation was not only essential with regard to film, but also signified a gain for thought in the indicated categories of space, pictorial space and viewer. It was now possible to recognize an interdependency that in the past had not often revealed itself: not only does it appear that space is determined by the gaze of the viewer, but space likewise appears as the determiner of the gaze, and thus exposes what Martin Seel, in the context of his investigation of possible other ways of looking at the world, revealed as a constant oscillation between determining and self-determining.¹⁴ In this way, filmic space nearly becomes an active entity that no longer only reflects what is cast onto it by the human spectator. Instead, space becomes an *agens*, an agent.¹⁵ That a world that confronts the subject would be equipped with such potential, however, shakes the foundations of our accus-

tomed modes of thinking. And it is interesting to observe that although this idea is actually connected with the transformation that has developed particularly rapidly in the course of the twentieth century, from thinking in terms of statically absolute spaces and bodies to thinking in terms of dynamically relational spaces,¹⁶ this idea nevertheless continues to be deeply unsettling.

In addition to the possibility for another way of thinking about space that arose with the shift from film to filmic installations, for Boris Groys, this moment would simply represent the first really analytical access to the medium of film. While for him, the immobility of the spectator in the cinema also perforce led to a mental passivity, in Groys's view, it was in the format of the installation that film was finally able to rise to its intellectual potential.¹⁷ That this positivistic perspective on a new development was not only unjust to experimental film in the theater, but was not unproblematic with regard to the new development itself, would soon become evident. One major reason for this was the sharply increasing number of film installations, and the consequence that precisely because of these installations and their open form, the impression was often created of a gratuitous availability of images. It is interesting that the architecture of the museum thereby visibly functioned as the cutter of a film: it spliced individual works and streams of images all the more densely into one another, so that at times these could hardly be distinguished anymore. The result was entirely contrary to the Groysian expectation of peripatetic analysis. Instead, the experience thus generated was often more like intoxication through images.

But even specifically in light of this development, it is necessary not to revert to the answering schemes that present themselves and once again position the black box inside the museum. Instead, it is necessary, as Ian White formulated in his essay 'Kinomuseum',¹⁸ to continue to pose the question of the institutional conditions of the cinema, the museum or the stream of media architectures, and thus above all to consistently re-engage with the question of the potentials of spatiality, in an open play of apparatus and subject. What arises includes the demand made by Felix Guattari for a re-consideration—now long overdue—of the concept of the machine. In order to 'emerge from the fascination with technology and the debasing form that it sometimes assumes, we actually need to conceive of the machine in a new way, to conceptualize it differently, and proceed from the basis of the *being of the machine* as something that stands at the crossroads of *being in its activity*, its character of nothingness, and the subject, the subjective individuation or the collective subjectivity.'¹⁹

MARC GLÔDE is a curator and art critic. He received his PhD in film studies from the Free University, Berlin and is active in a wide range of projects such as: Art Basel Film, the Wild Walls Film Festival (Berlin, Los Angeles, London, New York), Experimenta in Mumbai and Bangalore, India, and numerous international exhibitions in contemporary art such as *STILL/MOVING/STILL* in Knokke/Belgium (2009). He is widely published within the field and is a contributor for *Art in America* and *X-TRA* magazine. He currently lives and works in Berlin, Germany.

NOTES

- 1/ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Massachusetts: 1992).
- 2/ See: <http://www.se.rit.edu/~jrv/research/ar/> (19.05.2009).
- 3/ Michel Foucault, 'Andere Räume', in: *Aisthesis: Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik*, ed. Gente Barck and Richter Paris (Leipzig: 1993), pp. 34–46.
- 4/ Robert Smithson, 'Some Void Thoughts on Museums', in: *Robert Smithson—The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: 1996), p. 41–42.
- 5/ Robert Smithson and Allan Kaprow, 'What is a Museum?', *ibid.* p. 43–51.
- 6/ These artists and their critiques, despite their positions being very different not only chronologically but also in terms of content, are nowadays consolidated with the term 'institutional critique'. See the profound overview of John C. Welchmann, *Institutional Critique and After* (Zurich: 2006).
- 7/ On apparatus critique, see: Hartmut Winkler, *Der filmische Raum und der Zuschauer: 'Apparatus'–Semantik–Ideology* (Heidelberg: 1992).
- 8/ Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of the Institutions to the Institution of Critique', in: John C. Welchman, as above, pp. 123–135.
- 9/ Cf. Peter Weibel, 'Das Museum der zeitbasierten Künste: Musik und Museum–Film und Museum', press release ZKM Karlsruhe 6/2006: [http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/stories/storyReader\\$5222](http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/stories/storyReader$5222)
- 10/ See 'Dan Graham: Cinema', in: *Rock my religion: writings and art projects 1965–1990*, ed. Dan Graham and Brian Wallis (Massachusetts: 1993), 168–169; 'Interior Design for Space Showing Videotapes', *ibid.*, pp. 222–223.
- 11/ Dan Graham, 'Theater/Cinema/Power', *ibid.*, 170–189; 'Art in Relation to Architecture / Architecture in Relation to Art', *ibid.*, pp. 224–241.
- 12/ Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation* (Frankfurt a.M.: 2003), particularly pp. 179–207.
- 13/ Gilles Deleuze, *Das Zeit-Bild. Kino 2* (Frankfurt a.M.: 1997), p. 339f.
- 14/ Martin Seel, *Sich bestimmen lassen* (Frankfurt a.M.: 2002).
- 15/ The question posed by W.J.T. Mitchell, 'What Do Pictures Want?', can be understood as entirely corresponding to this idea of the gazing space. See: W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: 2005).
- 16/ On the transformation of thought about space, see: Martina Löw, *Raumsoziologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: 2001).
- 17/ Boris Groys, '...In der Autonomie des Betrachters: Zur Ästhetik der Filminstallation', in: *Schnitt 22* (2001), pp. 10–14.
- 18/ Ian White, 'Kinomuseum', in: Mike Sperlinger and Ian White, *Kinomuseum: Towards an Artists' Cinema* (Köln: 2008), pp. 13–26.
- 19/ Félix Guattari, 'Über Maschinen', in: *Ästhetik und Maschinismus*, eds. Schmidgen and Henning (Berlin: 1995), pp. 115–132, here p. 116.