

## The Undisposed Viewer

### Irish Artists' Moving Images and CINEMA

*This essay was written for Catalytic Intersections (Developing a framework for exploring artists' moving images) the Irish Artists' Film Index Symposium 2021. The symposium took place at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, on the 28th of October. The text is also included in the accompanying publication launched on the day, Catalytic Intersections, Exploring the Index, Vol 1. The version below is slightly different from both the delivered and printed paper.*

When first approached by the founder of the Irish Artists' Film Index (formerly the MExIndex), Fifi Smith, to discuss this Symposium, I readily agreed that artists' moving images were in need of a more critical framework. I had in mind such sweeping comment, made back in 2012 by then director of The National Gallery, London, Nicholas Penny, about video art merely being “an incompetent form of film, made with the excuse that it is untainted by the professionalism associated with the entertainment industry.” In the same interview Penny also lamented the lack of critical debate about contemporary art.[1] If this broad generalisation was obviously provocative and grossly exaggerated, something lingered about the need for more rigorous critical engagement with moving images. Thus Smith's invitation to discuss their intersections with other art forms felt both relevant and exciting.

In committing to look into the crossovers between artists' moving images and cinema, I thought that the latter would offer me some *terra firma* from which to engage with the protean multiplicity of the former. But like a too often repeated word loses its meaning, the more I looked at what might constitute cinema's attributes, the less I discerned their singularity. The ready-made images conjured up by the name alone just dissolved upon scrutiny: it certainly could not be narrowed down to a particular narrative form, nor to a specific mode of production, not even to a given length without transforming the definition into a caricature. So it was with a certain relief that I happened upon French film theorist Raymond Bellour's provocatively circumscribed definition of cinema.

I should point out that Bellour has written extensively about all types of moving images over many years and all kinds of presentations of films of cinema. But in the introduction to his 2011 book, *La querelle des dispositifs*,<sup>[2]</sup> he reacted to what he saw as the slow dilution of cinema into galleries and museums on the one hand and the multiplication of supports on the other, and felt the need to make a stand for a specific form of viewing experience. He posited that the more or less collective viewing of a film projected in a theatre, in the dark, during a prescribed time, alone deserved to be called cinema. These conditions alone enabling the unique experience of perception and memory that defines the cinema spectator.

This definition of cinema through the experience of the spectator resulting from a very specific set-up, allowed me to engage with my subject in avoiding possible ontological quagmires. It also resonated strongly with the situation at the time of writing of having encountered films, moving images of any definition and art exhibitions almost exclusively on a screen at home for the best part of a year and a half. To place the emphasis on how we bodily experience moving images felt uniquely relevant after the lockdown and the successive pandemic restrictions.

So what constitutes the cinema experience will be my point of reference in looking at that generated by artists' moving images in the gallery space. Bellour insists that the cinema experience is bound to this accepted submission of the spectator to the time of the screening, the time of the film. Cinema is a singular *dispositif* that recreates the same conditions for the spectators over and over again. Conditions famously described by Robert Smithson as:

“Going to the cinema results in an immobilization of the body. Not much gets in the way of one's perception. All one can do is look and listen. One forgets where one is sitting. The luminous screen spreads a murky light throughout the darkness... Impassive, mute, still the viewer sits. The outside world fades as the eyes probe the screen. Does it matter what film one is watching?”<sup>[3]</sup>

Because the conditions repeat themselves, all instances merge into each other. Bellour then contrasts the installation as specific to “each occasion, to the extent that it induces an experience that is invariably unexpected, comparable to no other, thereby giving rise to new forms of behaviour.”[4]

Thus I am proposing to discuss a series of works by artists working with moving images in Ireland through their specific viewing disposition in the locations I personally encountered them, and how these affected my experience and the content of the work. Most of the moving images I chose to discuss can be, and in some cases have been, shown in a theatrical setting. The underlying question throughout this series of descriptions is then how different a work they are or would be in such a case.



The first work I would like to discuss is James Coleman's *Charon (MIT Project)* 1989 as installed in the Royal Hibernian Academy in 2009. While not strictly speaking 'moving' images it felt fitting to begin there in part because of the influence of Coleman on contemporary artists. But perhaps more to the point in the context of this paper, because there are few artworks that have made such an impact on me.

Coleman is well known for being very specific about how his work is shown, which has the advantage that every time we see it, we know it will be in optimal conditions, with the downside that we seldom get this experience. So I have seen *Charon* only this once, as part of the Coleman exhibition across three institutions in Dublin. It was shown in the largest of the first-floor galleries of the RHA, and as it happened it was my first visit to the building since its refurbishment and I was already rather disorientated.

The whole gallery was in darkness with the slide projector as the only source of light and its booth the only disruption to the open space. The images were projected on the wall furthest from the landing door, beyond a vast expanse of carpeted floor. I've heard it said that Coleman personally tested a great many carpets before making his choice, an anecdote that is telling of his attention to every aspect of the installation but also of the importance of the carpet. It would have a significant impact on the sound obviously, but in a space that foregoes any forms of sitting, the carpet will also shape the physical experience of being in the room, whether we choose to walk around, stand still or sit down. And the set-up does invite all three forms of disposition, usually in that order. Entering the large, cavernous gallery space, it's hard to know where and how to position ourselves, and the space encourages exploration since nothing impedes our motion. The audiovisual set-up is not only meticulous but absorbing and we want to take it all in. The audio narrative is punctuated by the characteristic clacking sound of the changing slides. One moment in particular stayed with me all these years: a witness to a murder makes a statement to the police, the image is a portrait of a man in front of a white background. We hear the sound of the changing slide, but it's the same image that appears each time. Yet as the narrative proceeds – the witness may well in fact be the murderer – we start fancying that the image has changed, ever so slightly, that this face

is showing signs of evil perhaps. Our shifting point of view is dramatized by our uncertainly shifting position on the carpeted floor. *Charon* gives us images and narratives we think we know, only to pull the rug (or the carpet rather) from under our feet.



Photo credit: Ros Kavanagh

In 2017, I went to Drogheda to see the second iteration of Susan MacWilliam's touring exhibition *Modern Experiments* at the Highlanes Gallery. The municipal gallery is situated in a former Franciscan church, with the main exhibition space dominated by the

remaining altar. There, MacWilliam installed *Faint*, a short video work from 1999 showing a young woman in a vintage purple dress fainting in a garden. She is filmed falling down repetitively, her body folding in upon itself and then laying on the grass in different locations while birds are heard singing on the soundtrack.

MacWilliam first presented *Faint* in her solo show of the same name at the Old Museum Arts Centre in Belfast in 1999. On this occasion *Faint* was projected into an ornate frame (sculpted from expanding foam) on one wall, while two slide projectors projected stills from the video into additional frames on the adjoining walls. On another occasion, it was a lone monitor in a courtyard in Rome, and for the first installation of Modern Experiment at the F.E. McWilliam Gallery in Banbridge, it was played over five monitors placed on the gallery floor.

For the Highlands Gallery's altar, *Faint* was shown over 19 monitors of various sizes with the audio emitting from each monitor relaying bird song across the space. The way the monitors were placed, they could bring to mind devotional candles, illuminating the altar with hues of green and purple.

About the installation of the work, MacWilliam writes that she was thinking "about the religious aspects of the altar, and how the woman in *Faint* is repeating an act of 'refusal'". The setting connected the work to "religious control of the female body, and so the presentation of *Faint* in this context is perhaps a refusal of that imposition."<sup>[5]</sup>

Bringing a fainting female body to the altar also conjures up other fainting bodies: the images of saints in ecstasy, most famously perhaps Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Ecstasy of St Teresa (1647-1652) in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. In this baroque sculpture, the collapsing body of the saint seems to be upheld by the heavy folds of her robe. Following MacWilliam's proposition of the faint as a form of resistance, might we entertain the possibility that Teresa of Avila was using her ecstatic body to bypass the (male) authority of the church? She was after all not just an ecstatic saint but also a leading figure in the reformation of the carmelite order.



Photo credit: Denis Mortell

It is hard to imagine how Jaki Irvine's *If the Ground Should Open*, 2016, could be shown in a cinema, but this installation made such a remarkable and conceptually explicit use of the visitor's movements throughout the gallery space that it felt important to include it. The work was commissioned as part of the 1916 Easter Rising centenary IMMA programme. It's a complex video and audio installation that was set up throughout the Courtyard Galleries, East ground. The work has been shown elsewhere since, but it felt like it had been conceived for this particular gallery, with its narrow and linear succession of rooms. These are not easy to bring together, but for *If the Ground should Open* they were –quite literally– orchestrated into a multi parts score.

As we move from one room to the next we form our own partition through the successive pre-eminence we give each monitor with its distinctive audio and visual elements in turn. Every single positioning within the galleries creates its own distinctive arrangement, but we can never grasp the whole at once. The artist explained that she was thinking about how the witness statements from 1916 which inspired the work were each only presenting a partial picture of what was happening and how in offering their different viewpoints they undermined the authority of the accepted singular narrative of the events.

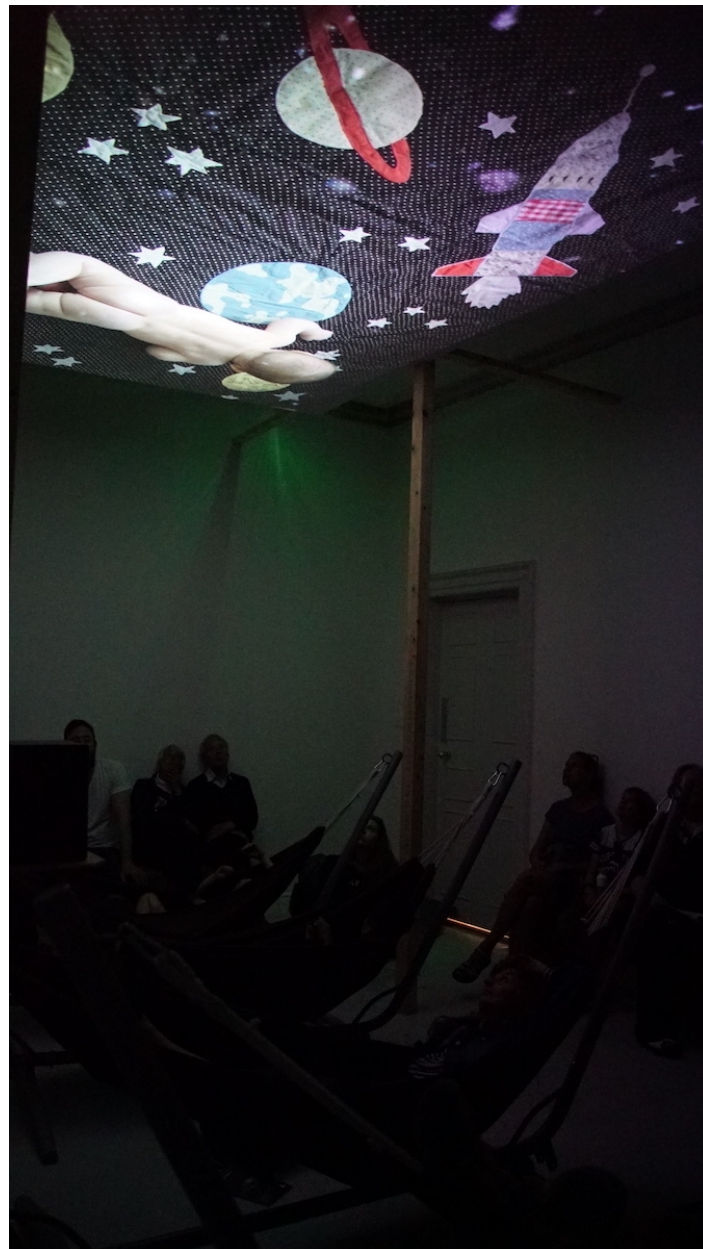




Photo Credit: Tom Flanagan

Shown during the 2019 Galway International Arts festival, Treasa O'Brien's *Memoirs of a Spacemother: an Astropoetic Sci Fi Essay* was made during a residency at the Galway Arts Centre in collaboration with NUIG Astronomy department. The film combines footage of a newborn baby playing and being breastfed made by the artist after giving birth and images of the cosmos from NASA's Hubble Space telescope. A science fiction essay, inspired by such writers as Octavia Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin or the philosophy of Donna Haraway, it tells of the planet Ceres and how it was colonised by exiled mothers. Its physical reality has been shaped by the affects of motherhood: for instance of sleep we are told "On planet Ceres sleep happens in short bursts, and there are many moments of sleep and lucid dreaming where one is unsure if one is awake or asleep."

Installed on the first-floor gallery of the Galway Arts Centre, the film was projected on a raised screen-ceiling in a darkened room, a row of hammocks inviting viewers to make themselves comfortable. O'Brien said she often laid in a hammock while breastfeeding, and we are thus gently rocked while gazing up at these images of a cosmic newborn, thinking of stargazing and breastfeeding at once. The set-up also drew attention to the action of sitting in a hammock – in itself its own little choreography in the gallery during the busy arts festival period with some inevitable mishaps – and how it demands an initial act of trust in surrendering control of our body to the sagging fabric. An act of trust that can resonate with that of the newborn's lack of control over their environment but also to that of abandoning ourselves to speculative fiction.



Photo credit: Mike Hannon Media

At Terminal Convention, which took place at Cork's decommissioned terminal in 2011, one of the most memorable works was Martin Healy's *Last Man*. Although it was screened in the conventional way films are in galleries (on a loop in a darkened space with some chairs to sit on), what was unusual was how the images on screen mirrored the viewer's experience in this particular setting. *Last Man* was specially commissioned for the event and shot on site. It follows a fictional janitor desultorily doing his work in the deserted airport, not unlike us.

The effect was certainly enhanced for those coming to the opening days of the event. We arrived in the morning for the press open day and wandered around the site until the official opening in the evening. We were back in the building after a night spent at a convenient nearby hotel the following morning for a symposium. So for two full days we

were somewhat stranded in this decommissioned terminal with its end of time atmosphere. We felt somewhat suspended in time like the dust in Healy's images; watching *Last Man* felt a little like watching ourselves among the leftovers of a cancelled future.



My last and most recent example is Aoibheann Greenan's *Dingbox*, which was made in 2020 and screened by aemi on their digital platform in 2021. Thus presented in the placeless and bodiless digital realm it could seem at odds with the previous works discussed. But Greenan's video inscribes itself within its context in such a way that it could be said to be site-specific.

The video opens on an indeterminate black screen which acquires a very physical dimension when a cardboard box is pushed up into view. Two gloved hands will proceed

to the unpacking of a box. A wonderfully handmade and digitally enhanced contraption that keeps on opening, unfolding new dimensions. It is accompanied by a soundtrack that begins on the precise sounds of the unpacking – cardboard friction, blade cutting tape – to slowly expand into what comes to feel like cosmic space.

Greenan mentioned that she had a single viewer on a laptop or a phone at home in mind, and that she played with the internet culture tropes of unboxing and ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response – I looked it up) videos.[6] To this, the 2020-21 context of repeated lockdowns and various shades of confinement which for many of us has meant that we have spent a lot more time at home paying attention to small things, and more time in front of our screens as they became our unique mean of communication. Lastly, the arrival of a package was perhaps the highlight of our day turning us all into unboxing enthusiasts.

At the end of *Dingbox*, as we follow the forward movement of the camera plunging into the void that lays beyond the small stage formed by the mouth of a cardboard monster, just before the loop starts again, it is ourselves we see staring back from the darkness of the screen.

Through this brief round-up of moving images installed in galleries in Ireland, one thing strikes me is the difference of approaches in how artists install their work: there are artists, like Coleman, who seek to control precisely the viewing arrangements and thus reproduce the singularity of the effect each time; and others, like MacWilliam, who reinvent the work every time it is shown in taking in the specificity of the site and thus offering new ways to engage with the content. Both offer very exciting experiences for the viewer but imply very different conceptual trajectories.

The uniqueness of each of these experiences brings up a major difference between a cinema and gallery viewing: we do not, or rarely, travel to go to the cinema whereas, as the examples discussed here show, I did at times make considerable efforts to go and see these works. Just as we would go to see a specific painting: these works demand

that we go to them and in return they give us an experience that can only be reproduced with great efforts if at all. Conversely, we, at times, feel cheated by shoddy viewing conditions in a way we would not in a cinema.

There are of course many reasons to show moving images in a gallery or a museum and not all to do with marking a distinction to what a cinema experience might be. The gallery has often offered an experimental space for film and documentary filmmakers which could not be found in the conservative audiovisual industry. The capacity to freely walk in and out of a projection as well as to display different artworks next to each other can also be enough of a compensation to the loss of quality in a screening. In 2013, in response to Patrick Jolley's retrospective *All That Fall* at the Limerick City Gallery of Art, I wrote:

“...in spite of more modest technical capacities, the gallery space offers the visitor the possibility not only to view and compare several of his films at once, but also to weave together the photographic and the cinematic side of his work. It allows us to make our own associations and provides insights into the artist's working process. The photographs can point to climactic moments that will become key scenes in a film... the juxtaposition can also suggest very different readings...”[7]

However, the works discussed in this paper deliberately made use of viewing conditions distinct from those of cinema and I focused on how these conditions affected our perception and our memory; how our mobile bodies responding to our physical surroundings acted upon our reception of moving images; and how artists can make a creative and critical use of these viewing conditions to shape our reception of the content of the work. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the undermining of authority forms a recurring theme through many of the artworks discussed. In destabilising the single viewpoint that the filmmaker can impose on the spectator of cinema and freeing the viewer from the imposed time of a screening, the very notion of authority is being challenged. Coleman in questioning the reliability of the photographic image, Irvine in multiplying viewpoints that do not necessarily fit into the accepted version of historical

events, MacWilliam in re-casting what could be seen as submission or weakness as resistance and resilience, or O'Brien in blurring the distinction – and the implied hierarchy – between acts of motherly care and astronomical abstraction. As for Healy's focus on a janitor as the last man, this took a decidedly added significance after our collective re-evaluation of what constitutes essential and non-essential work over the past couple of years.

In Greek mythology, Charon is the ferryman that guides the newly deceased across the river Styx into the world of the dead. In the case of Coleman's work, I always thought of it as taking us from the still to the moving image, or maybe the other way around: against the flow of the moving images, the clacking sound of the slide projector. But the mythological figure brings to mind another form of crossing as I wonder, like many others, where we stand now and who is to guide us between dimensions: how much of the real is digital and vice versa. When I recently came across the term 'offline event' I really felt we had stepped into the mirror. Was what most people call reality, that dimension where the ground extends, the energy is produced and the water extracted to enable the data centres and the fibre optics cables of our digital dimension to function, reduced to a subordinated appendage to the online realm? Yet, as Bruno Latour enjoins us in *Down to Earth*, we more than ever need to take stock of where we stand, to define our dwelling place as a terrestrial. This necessitates paying attention and there art has always helped us to heightened the intensity of our attention, to slow our pace and take in the particular rhythm of a painting or the subtle specificities of an installation forming a unique experience in time and space. Occasionally Charon did ferry people back from the world of the dead to the world of the living. There is hope in that.

Michaële Cutaya 2021

- [1] Ben Luke, 'Present Imperfect', Interview with Nicholas Penny, The Art Newspaper, 9 October 2012, p.7.
- [2] Raymond Bellour, *La Querelle des Dispositifs, Cinéma – installations, expositions*, P.O.L, 2012
- [3] Robert Smithson, 'A Cinematic Atopia', Artforum, September 1971. <https://www.artforum.com/print/197107/a-cinematic-atopia-37059>
- [4] Raymon Bellour, 'The Quarrel of the *Dispositifs*: Reprise', Senses of Cinema, March 2018 <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2018/cinema-and-the-museum/the-quarrel-of-the-dispositifs/>
- [5] personal email dated 24 August 2021
- [6] *On Dingbox: Andros Zins-Browne in conversation with Aoibheann Greenan* <https://www.aoibheanngreenan.com/dingbox>
- [7] Essay commissioned by LCGA, unpublished.
- [8] Bruno Latour, *Down To Earth, Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. C. Porter, Polity, 2018.

Work discussed:

James Coleman, *Charon (MIT Project)* 1989 at the RHA, Dublin, 2009.

Susan MacWilliams, *Faint*, 1999, Colour, Stereo, 3mins 40secs, at the Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, 2017.

Jaki Irvine, *If the Ground Should Open*, 2016, IMMA, Dublin 2016-2017.

8 channel HD video, 48 min, IMMA Collection: purchase 2016, commissioned by IMMA as part of the 1916 programme, December 2016.

Treasa O'Brien, *Memoirs of a Spacemother: an Astropoetic Sci Fi Essay*, 2019, HDV, 8 minutes, Galway Arts Centre, 2019.

Martin Healy *Last Man*, 2011 Terminal Convention Cork Airport 2011 HD video, 8.23 minutes.

*Last Man* was Commissioned by the National Sculpture Factory (Cork)/ Static (Liverpool) for Terminal Convention, Cork, 2011.

Aoibheann Greenan, *Dingbox*, 2020, 5 mins 9 secs looped, Sound by Dominic Kennedy screened on aemi platform april-june 2021.

