BROKEN SCREEN: DOUG AITKEN’S ELECTRIC EARTH AND THE INNER WORKINGS OF A SINGLE MOMENT

Charles Green


Over time from the 1960s, audience tolerance for disrupted narration has increased in proportion to the penetration of new media’s database and digital effect paradigms into cinematic representation: the concept of neo-baroque cinema and the idea of the Cinema Effect have been formulated in response to this. (1) Trying to “understand” broken narratives—the world of Lev Manovich’s database aesthetic—through character motivation, residually insisting on naive cinematic realism, has always seemed excessively willful. Los Angeles video artist Doug Aitken comments thus: “Nonlinear structures allow one to explore time—opening it up, pulling it back, and revealing the inner workings of a single moment.” This essay is going to explore these workings.

The French actress heroine and the Japanese architect hero of Alain Resnais’s Hiroshima mon amour (1959) spend a large part of the movie experiencing different levels of the past as if they were no longer connected to them. Resnais’ French actress (played by Emmanuelle Riva, who reappeared in Krzysztof Kieslowski’s Three Colors: Blue (1993) at the end of her career, decades later, as an old woman sick with dementia and bereft of memories, the exact and deliberate, I am sure, opposite pathology of her earlier role), adrift in Hiroshima for a film shoot, is beset by flashbacks, but her memories remain of ambiguous provenance and status.

In the opening scenes of Hiroshima mon amour, Resnais provides a model of consciousness and recollection in the process of a recitation of facts about Hiroshima as the camera moves restlessly around. Hiroshima is constituted as an archive composed of collectively remembered and reviewed facts, exhibits, photographs and figures, following the camera along its famous, long tracking shots, most memorably in the Hiroshima Museum and on the two lovers’ endless walks, during which they lose and find each other. Resnais’s Japanese man and French woman become iconic presences by virtue of their disconnection from their environment (in the face of their obdurate self-absorption, as transparent as a rear-projection screen), their inexplicable motivations and stasis. The protagonists strike semi-frozen gestures against spectralized environments and moved into space in studied perambulations. They are silhouetted in semi-frozen gestures against spectralized
nocturnal environments, and propel themselves out of bars into space in continual perambulation. They convert themselves into exponents of Aby Warburg’s notorious pathos formula, projections over an apparently neutral object, the dark city.

Doug Aitken is deeply familiar with 1960s and 1970s art cinema and with Resnais’s film, along with those decades’ experimentation with proto-data-base related, non-linear narrative structures. Aitken makes environmental, multiscreen video projections of great scale and elegance, split-narrative videos in which his young characters' perambulations blur in portrayals of shifting time related to previous mainstream cinema. The plots of these fragmented, electrifying works are usually elliptical, slickly edited journeys through ghostly urban landscapes or strange wilderness regions. The most compelling aspect of his productions is not non-linearity per se (though the term is, as is evident in his book, Broken Screen, of great concern to him as much as new media theorists) so much as the means by which his generically portrayed figures are inhabited by art and cinema history.

This essay takes up the way in which a broken cross-decades’ continuity, based on duration, distance, phased appearance, disappearance and perambulation, is manifest in Aitken’s videos Electric Earth (1999) and Interiors (2002), which both also draw on the model of travel-documentary film. Let’s start with the latter form. The semi-transparent, scrim-framed environments show the influence of multi-screen world exposition technology, and of Cinerama docu-feature films, which were the 1960s progenitors of the contemporary IMAX genre both in terms of technology and also in terms of their hybridity of genre and narrative. This narrative structure does not move beyond the simplest plots nor is there any substantial character development. Aitken’s figures are types.

In Electric Earth, nothing much happens except that a young black man (Giggy Johnson) alone in a hotel room gets up from his bed and walks through the deserted streets of Los Angeles at night. Plot is, for the most part, very difficult to pin down underneath a welter of detail—so much so that the pivotal aspect is the surface of the matrix that unfolded. Interviewed about Electric Earth, Aitken noted, ‘I wanted to see if I could create an organic structure—like a strand of DNA, where every bit of information, every chromosome, is critical—through accumulations of small events and actions.” (2) He is saying that a matrix of elements are marked by repeated gestures—watermarks underneath the semiotic code.

How to understand this William Gibson-like idea? Writer Frances Richard has stated with great sensitivity that contemporary painter Matthew Ritchie’s works are “multidimensional or exploded facets of a single (impossible) master image, a unified field that needs no distinctions between seen objects and conceptually unbounded themes.” (3) Aitken’s work can be understood in the same way. There isn’t
a punch line, his wandering city-dweller does not arrive anywhere. The narrative structure does not move beyond the simplest plots nor is there any character development.

It is important to remember the disjunctions between science, technology and ecology from the late 1960s on, and to understand the degree to which this period now fascinates artists such as Aitken, or Los Angeles artist Sam Durant’s ironic models of Smithson’s works, or Tacita Dean’s saturated-saturated film-strip documentation of 1960s architecture and entropic disintegration, including of Smithson’s Spiral Jetty. (4) Nor should younger artists’ familiarity with the cinema and art of this period be underestimated. At that time, critic Jack Burnham wrote many articles, including “Real Time Systems” for Artforum magazine, in which he compared the role of the artist to a software designer. (5) Burnham also referred to “list structures,” which we would link to the Atlas’s enumeration of dynamograms:

Pioneered between 1962 and 1965 in the writings of Donald Judd, it resembles what a computer programmer would call an entity’s “list structure,” or all the enumerated properties needed to physically rebuild an object. … A web of sensorial descriptions is spun around the central images of a plot. The point is not to internalize scrutiny in the Freudian sense, but to infer the essence of a situation through detailed examination of surface effects. (6)

At the start of Electric Earth, Aitken’s young man is a doppelganger, inhabited by a host of wanderers in art and film before him. So we must remember that Aitken is an art-house cinephile. His connections to art-house are deliberate. Again recall Alain Resnais’s un-named French actress (Emanuelle Riva) wandering around Hiroshima during the space of a night, alone or trailed by her Japanese lover, for most of Hiroshima mon amour, having announced that she loves cities that never sleep and where things are always open.

It might be argued that such representation of created memory results in works that simply shared a memory style, resembling each other rather than producing any insight into memory. Catharsis is not the object. The addictive object is recollection. The point is to have something to remember each other by in order to overcome forgetting. Shared traumatic memories in this case were alternately a painful attempt to fix in memory—to make sense of—this brief affair, an anterior effort to construct memory for two through intense sensory, here sexual, identification. The flashbacks in the film are experienced primarily and initially as profoundly mysterious disruptions, as a shock, as a trigger, on account of their short duration and, quite definitely, their uncanny inconsistency with the preceding and succeeding shots. Only upon re-viewing the film could they be interpreted as flashbacks of momentary duration. Their power has little to do with the gradual integration of the flashbacks into a chronological pre-history of the woman’s life, just as comprehension definitely assisted neither of the lovers whom Resnais portrayed.
Aitken’s young man and Resnais’s woman are surrounded by graphic signs—they are *submerged* in neon, billboards, street-signs—and by night, in their constant movement and statuesque repose the two *look* like signs. Startling physiques and hyperactive, jumpy movements or stillness, they *acknowledge* that they are driven or possessed. Aitken’s Giggy Johnson declares exactly this at the start of *Electric earth*, and as an expert dancer in real life, he moves with the perfect coordination of a jangling marionette puppet and motions as if signing in a precise language. His precursor is Resnais’s walking Frenchwoman possessed by the memory of her dead German lover (talking to him throughout the film; it takes a while to realize this) and by her provincial home, the small city of Nevers. Just as Giggy Johnson looks backwards to Emmanuelle Riva, so she herself is inhabited by a succession of isolated flâneurs from both cinema and art, not least the wandering heroine-murderer of Louis Malle’s even slightly earlier first feature, *Ascenseur pour l’Echafaud* (1957) and Agnès Varda’s slightly later first feature, *Cleo de 5 à 7* (1961); half the actresses in Paris seem to have been pounding the nocturnal purgatory of Paris’s streets. More important still, both Johnson and Riva are *graphic* presences, like Muybridge’s time-delay subjects. This insistent, graphic presence attracts and traps, according to the formula of pathos.

In 2004, Aitken co-curated an exhibition, “Hard Light,” at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center (New York), in which he juxtaposed the work just mentioned, Marker’s *La jetée*, with his own large video installation, *Interiors* (2002), a minimalist sculpture made of fine silk scrim stretched over a steel frame, over which four separate stories unfolded in very different locations around the globe, woven together by sound and rhythm. *Interiors* juxtaposes disconnected scenes shot in an eerie white helicopter factory, an American ghetto, the streets of Tokyo, and a downtown American city, following several anonymous people on their peregrinations. Low-key and pensive in mood compared with *Electric Earth*, *Interiors* expands the isolated frontal objectivity of that film’s documentary form into a much more subjective and enveloping environmental experience that is also strategically stuttered, looped and fragmented.

*Interiors* and the other works in Aitken’s co-curated exhibition, “Hard Light,” had been linked by the trope of sharp, clearly defined “hard light” images. This bright, shiny light promotes, Aitken argued, fragmented, broken, ambient narratives and, by implication, devalued coherence, unity and narrative seamlessness. (7) Hard light comes with sharp edges, and therefore also with the interstices we’ve already emphasized. Hard light implies the entropic devolution of story into archive, into database fragmentation, and thence into a very different model of cinematic organization.
This broken narrative cannot be emphasized too much. If Aitken’s films are metaphoric and metonymic networks of images mimicking the fragmented but meaningful operation of unconscious memory, Aitken himself was so concerned to emphasize precisely this hyperactive non-linearity that he interviewed other artists and film directors on the subject, publishing the resulting collage of voices as an article in *Artforum*, “Broken Screen,” and then a book, *Broken Screen* (8)

Broken image networks produce the illusion that the workings of unconscious memory govern the world. This does not mean that the surrealist visual unconscious actually governs the world but that unconscious memory collects pathos; the ancient genealogy of gestures animates his figures, whether a father and his tiny child, or a hyper-active young man roaming the perimeter of LAX, or a young man tap-dancing in a deserted factory. To rephrase this: gestures are watermarked by their predecessors. A single image derives from virtual recollection of a panorama of art works, but is not identical with the Atlas of gesture archetypes.

So, a work of art is like a still, ceremonial image. In ceremonial images, people do not blink, nor do they have an autonomous existence; they are recalled as formulae rather than people. This accounts for the shock and surprise of the moment late in Chris Marker’s great early work, *La jetée* (1962) when the woman that the hero had fallen in love with during his time travel blinks. Up to this moment, the film is all stills and slow dissolves, like an animation. *La jetée* had been created from still photographs and this choice clearly was no accident, by which is meant that Marker composed his film from stills for a reason: not from economy or incompetence, nor even from minimalist austerity. We know that Aitken is a virtuoso film technician. We know that *La jetée* inhabits *Spiral Jetty* and, later, Aitken’s *Interiors* (2002) in several ways.

The great modernist photographer, Brassai, noted the dynamic importance and significance of repeated poses. He isolated this as an “eminently photographic” quality, noting Proust’s recurring descriptions of silhouetted images in his odd small book, *Proust in the power of photography*. Brassai wrote, “Proust’s models pass by, appear in silhouette, projected in appropriate settings against judiciously chosen backgrounds.” (9) Brassaï emphasized the importance of considered gesture, and his own, precisely composed photographs demonstrated this “ceremonial image.”

All this suggests, of course, Aby Warburg’s iconological account of the survival of specific gestures in art history, which is much more dramatic than the more familiar iconographic explanations familiar from his great students, from Gombrich or Panofsky, that style and images were transmitted through studio lineages and borrowings. Benjamin also linked the auratic charge to distance, observing: “The essentially distant is the inapproachable; inapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the ceremonial image.” (10) The cinematic equivalent of Benjamin’s ceremonial
images can be identified in late modernist films and installation videos: in distant, still tableaux of figures nested within an environment within which things move.

*Electric Earth*’s cinematic experience is, in turn, dependent on a panoramic and environmental installation. So far, the role of narrative has been pretty much left aside, except to point out the irrelevance of cathartic resolution. In this, Aitken can be compared with his contemporary, the Finnish video artist, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, and her work, *The House* (2002). The first issue is literary. Mieke Bal, in her superb essay on Eija-Liisa Ahtila, which I will here draw upon, observes that when you see a toy car ride on a living room wall, a cow walk into an ordinary house, and a woman fly across treetops, it is easy to think of fairy-tales. (11) But fairy tales harbor more than lightness, and the narrator and central character of *Electric Earth* is an adult man. For all this, it would be a mistake simply to pathologize the lone young man and to see *Electric Earth* as the exposition of the man’s symptoms because art is not therapy. Bal points out in the same way that it is much too easy to look at *The House* as an account of psychosis. Standing in between a video installation’s screens places the viewer initially “inside” a character’s head. The hyper-linearity and sharp edges of *Electric Earth* have everything, like Ahtila’s *The House*, to do with the progressive experience of video installation similar to that which Mieke Bal identifies, in which the literary aspect of classic cinema is diminished. Empathy for the character is the least important emotion in the face of a struggle to work out a point of view in a unified field of superficially incoherent surface incident. This is continually defeated for, like Ahtila’s young woman and Resnais’s Riva, Aitken’s Giggy Johnson is suspended.

This suspension is dependent on a cinematic experience, which is specific to a panoramic, environmental installation and a quasi-documentary film genre, and which is very different to the identifications of classical narrative cinema. The peripheral vision associated with separate walls of semi-transparent screens result in the decorporealization, rather than embodiment, of the viewing subject. Writers often assume that the intensely affective sensations of embodiment associated with many contemporary video installations automatically confirm the most familiar mode of embodiment, that of inhabiting the body. This is lazy thinking, for there are other embodiment experiences that more appropriately describe the carefully choreographed, multimedia experiences of works like Aitken’s *Electric Earth*. These include the experiences of spectralization, autoscopic or decorporealization—of being turned into ghosts, of being invisible and flying, by autoscopic: “The subject’s ego is no longer centered in its own body, and the body feels as if it has been taken over or controlled by outside forces.” (12) Here, Elizabeth Grosz is describing a world inhabited by ghosts and spectralized subjects who can walk through walls, more or less as we also do when we move through the shimmering, semi-opaque, scrim-screened space of Aitken’s *Electric Earth*. Further, ghosts and doubles can move through time irregularly, and fly. They dance, like Aitken’s Giggy Johnson in *Electric Earth*. Hard light, shiny brilliance, and intense kinetic motion navigate across the semi-transparent planes. This is not the same as eliminating individual difference, for flight, transparency and travel imply translation, not loss, and commensurability, not incompatibility.
It is possible to read many things into Electric Earth—for example, that the artist has a strong but inchoate commitment to the social and cultural issues of our time, particularly to the tension between individual and social power—but there is definitely no need to pin these down. But is this (and Aitken’s videos) a political formalism? First, it is necessary to define the formalism a little closer.

By now it should be clear that Aitken was deeply interested in the language of cinema, paying separate attention to three levels of cinematic frame that correspond in turn to the three types of cinema that have been so far distinguished. First, his images are pictorially composed in precise, semi-static tableaux. Second, figures and objects in these tableaux slowly move like ceremonial images (ceremonial in the precise sense identified by Walter Benjamin) rather than like unfolding narratives. Finally, the work is encountered at whatever narrative point—middle, end, beginning—the installation space is entered, for it contains three apparently linked episodes unfold across three shimmering screens in a curtained, constructed space in relation to which viewers choreograph themselves during continuous, looped screenings. Aitken describes his rhythmic editing and dynamic, staccato sound track in the following way:

In some respects, it’s a kind of exploration of chaos theory, where you have these people moving through situations that are very random, where they’re bombarded by different things from their environment, and then the piece reaches a point where, suddenly, all the stories link up very tightly and very quickly and create this unified composition. And the piece becomes denser and tighter and accelerates more and more until a point where it just snaps. (13)

To extrapolate, the philosophical antecedent of Electric Earth and Interiors, via Godard and Smithson, is Proust, whose reinvention of the modernist novel (a form already then as anachronistic as Kentridge’s animation method) resulted in art ruled by sequences of memory images and madeleines rather than by dance or freeways. As Barthes acutely observed, Proust’s work was neither essay nor novel, but a third form:

The structure of this work will be, strictly speaking, rhapsodic, i.e. (etymologically) sewn; moreover, this is a Proustian metaphor: the work is produced like a gown; the rhapsodic text implies an original art, like that of the couturière: pieces, fragments are subject to certain correspondences, arrangements, reappearances. (14)

Mieke Bal framed the same observation slightly differently: she explained that Proust’s innovation was his montage and his cinematographic focus. She noted his serialization, “by means of a progressive adjustment of the same image, also functions syntagmatically in the production of consecutive images, each of which announces the next.” (15) Aitken’s serialization and
repetition—the choppy, rhythmic editing of *Interiors* and the migration of characters from screen to screen—implied something quite different to the speed that this might have implied: progressive adjustments, continual disclosure, a flatness reminiscent of Godard’s insistence on flat characters, and a disinterest in personal revelation in favor of an ethnography of types and gestures.

The integrity of all academic “disciplines” in the humanities has been imperiled by interdisciplinarity, but artists and filmmakers have been to a remarkable extent quarantined by the protocols and conventions of their respective industries and the particular demands of their media. At the same time, they work in very eclectic ways, boasting they are disrespectful of boundaries and endorsing the popularized (Kantian) view that artists are uniquely responsive to inward disposition and feeling, and are indicators of cultural change. But not surprisingly, there has been a long history of crossover between art and cinema, and the incidence has dramatically increased over the past fifteen years. Art and cinema long for the effects of sensation, immediacy and even bodily transcendence that each medium itself has not independently achieved. This essay has shown the mutual plundering of visual treasures that this longing for a Memory Effect, an organization of recollection, prompted.

Charles Green is an artist and Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Melbourne.

2. Doug Aitken, quoted in S. Anton, “Doug Aitken talks about *Electric Earth*,” *Artforum*, vol. 38, no. 9, May 2000, 161. The artist also refers to *Electric Earth* as an “expansion narrative”.
4. This impact, rather than the relationship between the archive and art, is the proper subject of Hal Foster’s useful essay, “An Archival Impulse,” *October*, no. 110 (Fall 2004), 3–22.
8. Doug Aitken, “Broken Screen: A Project by Doug Aitken,” (with introduction by *Artforum* editor Tim Griffin) *Artforum*, vol. 43, no. 3 (November 2004), 194-201; artist Ugo Rondinone is quoted as follows: “For 20 years we haven’t had a language for art because language has not developed as much as the visual.” Aitken includes his own comment: “Nonlinear structures allow one to explore time—opening it up, pulling it back, and revealing the inner workings of a single moment.”


14. Roland Barthes, “Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 281. For a famous example of Proust’s metaphor of stitching, see Marcel Proust, *Time Regained* (1927), trans. Andreas Mayor (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), 454, where he writes: ‘These ‘paperies’, as Françoise called the pages of my writing, it was my habit to stick together with paste, and sometimes in this process they became torn. But Françoise then would be able to come to my help, by consolidating them just as she stitched patches onto the worn parts of her dresses or as, on the kitchen window, while waiting for the glazier as I was waiting for the printer, she used to paste a piece of newspaper where the glass had been broken.”


Relevant works:


Author/s:
Green, Associate Professor Charles

Title:
Broken Screen: Doug Aitken’s Electric Earth and the inner workings of a single moment

Date:
2007

Citation:
Green, Associate Professor Charles (2007) Broken Screen: Doug Aitken’s Electric Earth and the inner workings of a single moment.

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34696

File Description:
Broken Screen: Doug Aitken’s Electric Earth and the inner workings of a single moment

Terms and Conditions:
Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.