

LIFE IN FILM: MARK AERIAL WALLER

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In an ongoing series, frieze asks artists and filmmakers to list movies that have influenced their practice.

I see my video practice as a conduit flowing from the viewers in the gallery, plunging down a hole to the crypt/archive, and out to the production process and its economics, politics and historical context, before finally spilling out onto the set, the street and the material reality that once was. Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is the one film that manages to implicitly navigate this journey, whilst miraculously keeping itself popular. Filmed in black and white at a time when other films were embracing colour, it's set in a period when silent films were overshadowed by sound. The archive is a decrepit set; an ageing Gloria Swanson, singlehandedly destroying cinema's illusion of eternal youth, plays the lead role. The dead protagonist, who was killed because he did not fit into Swanson's psychological narrative, as if attempting some kind of two-way communication across time, Swanson speaks directly to the audience.

Directed by her butler, the once-great director Erich von Stroheim, she observes: 'It's just us, the cameras, and those wonderful people out there in the dark!'

At the end of *Sunset Boulevard* lies *Sunset Beach*. As well as making my own video work, in 2001 I set up an experimental platform in London - a micro-salon of sorts - for the re-evaluation of cinema, called 'The Wayward Canon'. The project came about after I spent a series of mid-afternoons watching the television soap opera *Sunset Beach* (1997-9) in which repetitions, time dilations and storylines derived from Greek mythology were

transposed to west coast America. It was as if ideas from experimental cinema, such as in the work of Morgan Fisher or George Landow / Owen Land, had found themselves in a daytime soap. Some of the cast went on to act in David Lynch movies and appeared to take some of the structural concepts with them. I remember the streets around Ladbrooke Grove in West London thinning out when *Sunset Beach* was on; I actually overheard people saying they had to get home to watch it.

Marcel Carné worked in the Vichy zone of occupied France during World War II, making films that subverted Joseph Goebbels' cultural plans, only to have his work dismissed by the *Nouvelle Vogue* directors in the 1960s. *Le Jour se Lève* (The Day Awakes, 1939) became an important influence on the thinking behind my recent video/sculptural piece *Phantom Avantgarde* (2010). There is an incredible scene in *Le Jour se Lève* where the protagonist sits in his L-shaped bedsit, under siege, watching bullets whistle past his ears. There is a window at the top of the L-shape and he is sitting at the base, on the right hand tip of the L, protected by the architecture, placidly smoking a cigarette. The film activates this architecture of deprivation to become a spot of resistance from some kind of unnecessary assault. The bullets become viewing trajectories; the space appears defined by them while the peace of the smoking protagonist creates something akin to the perception of physical space. It's as if you can feel the room and what it has to offer.

With *Orphée* (Orpheus, 1950) Jean Cocteau made a deliberately anachronistic gesture by transposing a Greek myth into Left Bank existential Paris. The story moves through to the medium of film itself to the original negative, to behind the scenes and into death. *Orphée* topples the dominoes of moving image history. It explores ideas around being in front or behind represented reality, encrypted codes, links back from the Symbolist code poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé before moving forward to post-conceptual video art.

During my late teens I worked at the London Filmmakers' Co-op as a projectionist, where I watched hundreds of avant-garde and experimental films, both as an image on screen and as physical film going through the gate of the projector. It seemed funny to me at the time that Structuralist filmmakers thought it important to draw attention to the act of projection as a political gesture. There I was, one of few people working in the room, watching sprocket holes and checking holes, never finding that joy of enlightenment of technological transparency! Then one day I projected Morgan Fisher's *Projection Instructions* (1976) and it turned me into a performer through the orders I obeyed that

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issued from texts that I had to project onto the screen. The conduit back from the screen into the production process, or at least the exhibition process made me think. It also inverted my situation from looking at the back of audience heads, to being looked at by the audience. They all gazed rather seriously at me, but there was an inherent humour in the work; *Projection Instructions* demanded the projectionist to put the film out of focus, even to switch it off at one point. At this point viewing film became thrillingly a space of fiction; it could set up a fiction around itself, for the room and the audience to be implicated within it.

An important film that exists only in fiction is the one in David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* (1996); an experimental movie that can make people lose their minds by invoking too much laughter. There is something similar off-screen in Sigmar Polke's painting *The Higher Powers Command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black!* (1969). Polke indicates a shift away from the art object or screen to something outside, which then has an effect back on the artist. This also happens in Jacques Monory's painting *Meutre no 10* (1968) where the dimension of paint on canvas is interrupted by bullet-riddled mirror, in which we are reflected, simultaneously losing and gaining self-awareness. The important thing here is that the accepted mode of the object, to be looked at, shifts into existence in itself. The object, or film, is made within a cosmology, a set of beliefs, which could be a fictional scenario that allows the artwork to find for itself a position separate from its creator, such as in the works of Owen Land/ George Landow and Kenneth Anger, where the films seem to creep around by themselves.

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