Event

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PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in the School for the Contemporary Arts

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
September 2002

APPROVAL

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Degree: Master of Fine Arts

Title of Thesis: Event

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ABSTRACT

Event is a digital video projected onto a screen in a gallery. The walls are painted dark grey, no natural light enters the room and the screen resembles that of a movie theatre - a white expanse framed vertically by deep red curtains. *Event* is a two-minute musical tragedy that plays continuously and references the genre of the popular musical. The Western Front gallery exhibited *Event* from June 1st through the 29th, 2002.

I am concerned with finding ways to make art engaging, even visually pleasing, while also ensuring that it is thought provoking. Film reference is significant to these concerns, since so much film theory deals specifically with reception. The question that I found myself asking throughout the production of *Event* was: "What does it mean to be lost in a film?" Contrary to popular criticisms, (i.e suture as a mechanism for maintaining hegemony), it seems to me that the moment when we surrender our senses and lose ourselves in a film is the same moment that we are most involved in the active making of the film's story. As a culmination of my query about the construction of the viewing position within film, *Event* articulates a tension between my interest in contemporary popular cinema and my visual art practice within Canadian artist-run centre culture.

The primary focus of this paper is an exploration of how film language and convention can be used by visual artists to promote the notion of the dynamic spectator. Following a critical introduction on this subject, I will outline the theoretical and pragmatic considerations of the production and presentation of *Event*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Judy Radul for her invaluable and persistent input and encouragement throughout the development of this project. I would also like to thank Chris Welsby and George Rosenberg for their feedback and support, Brett Enemark for sharing some excellent critical tools, Iris Wight for her unyielding support and encouragement and, finally, Mikil Rullman for his extensive contributions to this project and whose love and tenacity are always a source of inspiration.

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Specular convergence: cinema & contemporary visual art

Cinema has a nearly ubiquitous presence within cultural production and consumption.[1] Accordingly, film, video and cinematic references have become prevalent within many contemporary visual art practices, and yet, it is reductive to conclude that artists use film simply because of cinema's omnipresence. I would like to posit that film is a likely medium for use by visual artists because of how cinema implicates the viewer. The spectoral position of film animates the formation of subjectivity and desire, making the experience of film close to basic human and cultural constructions of identity and difference.

Within this paper, I will make a basic outline of the cinematic apparatus and theories derived from film and cultural studies about the nature of the spectator, subjectivity and identification. I will survey the work of three contemporary visual artists using film towards a conclusion about pleasure and the 'positive popular.'[2]

Defining cinema

Most basically, popular cinema can be defined as the cycle of production, distribution, exhibition and reception of films.[3] Cinema is an industry, not the discrete occurrence of going to a film. Its codes are established and interdependent. The phase of this cycle that is of particular importance to this paper is reception. For, as cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner writes in *Film as Social Practice*, "Audiences make films mean; they don't merely recognize the meanings already secreted in them" (144). Reception is where identification occurs and the subject of the film is most realized. I think that reception theory offers the strongest insights to understanding the popular presence of film and how it can be utilized in the visual arts.

From a sociological standpoint it has been argued "that the intensity of the image/sound [film] message, the comfort of the viewer, and the heightened sense of occasion, all make the viewer more susceptible to the power of the [ideological] message" (Turner 128). While a certain degree of, as Stuart Hall calls it "preferred readings"[4] (Turner 144) are implicit within classical narrative

[1] This discussion is limited to cultural production and consumption within the Western contexts of mostly North American art and cultural discourse.
[2] The 'positive popular' will be some imaginings about the potency of popular film within visual art practices.
[3] Thanks to Brett Enemark for this.
[4] Preferred readings are the dominant or most likely interpretations of a film or text.

films, these readings are not absolute. It is this gap between oft-hegemonic social statements in films, and alternative interpretations that is a focus of this paper. Understanding individual responses to films – however subtle they may be – will hopefully shed insight about how we look and what we see.

Psychoanalysis & film studies, the spectator & suture

As the industries of cinema and television[5] continue to develop, so, too do the visual codes learned about *reading* a moving picture. Audiences of all types of films and television programs bear with them learned abilities to decipher the pictures before them. Within film studies, much emphasis has been placed on understanding film as a *language* to be deciphered. Semiotics, psychoanalysis, and more recently, cultural studies have figured prominently in this inquiry. The common ground of these various disciplines is in recognizing film as a theoretical site for understanding viewing experience and the formation of identity.

While theorists began to speculate on the effects of film in relation to a person's psyche as early as the 1920's, more widespread theories about the specific role of film spectatorship did not emerge until the 1970's. The first wave of theorists including J.L. Baudry and Christian Metz worked from a psychoanalytic framework. While Metz elaborated on Baudry's earlier cinematic theories, they both "focused on cinema's ability to embody psychic desire" (Hayward 332). The primarily unconscious desire referred to here occurs in cinema because of the way that cinema seamlessly assumes to give a viewer a unitary and voyeuristic vision of the actions on-screen. This seamlessness is enhanced by the way that cinema offers the viewer more information about what is occurring in the story, than to the characters represented on screen. (Suture is the film theory term used to describe seamlessness and its transparent ideological function.) The assumption here is that the viewer, sitting in the dark and faced with the expanse of the screen, is unaware of the formal construction of the film. As a result, the viewer is not conscious of the machinic transference from events on-screen to the psychic unconscious. The assumption here is that the viewer is experiencing the film intimately, with a nearly primary and non-critical vision. This sight that lacks the ability to *see*, is what is assumed to enable the constant re-visiting of the Oedipal trajectory within films. To summarize, the Oedipal trajectory is the Freudian concept for

[5] While I've included television into this argument, I am considering it to be within the realm of cinema because of the way that the legibility of televised images corresponds to the way we respond to films. In other words, events on television are understood because of narrative and formal innovations developed by cinema.

understanding the "normative" sexualization of a male child wherein the male child must identify with the father in order to avoid the threat of castration by the (m)other[6]. Freud used this theory to describe the heterosexual development of a male child, whose final step in obtaining mature sexuality is to find himself another object/(m)other to define himself against. It is the ideology of the Oedipal trajectory that Metz and Baudry saw as the primary force behind narrative cinema; what the viewer experiences in cinema over and over again[7] is a reasserting of the Oedipal gender/identity structure to an 'unassuming' audience. A recognizable lack in Metz and Baudry's work was an analysis of a female viewing position. Laura Mulvey in her pinnacle feminist film essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* began to tackle this topic by examining how narrative cinema assumes a primarily masculine gaze. The essay considered the female perspective as bound to a polemical identification with either the masculine role, or the objectified/fetishized feminine image. Mulvey's critique of film initiated dialogue about ways to view cinema outside of the Oedipal/masculine gaze. In recent trends, spectatorship is often being studied in terms of "historically shifting groups" (Hayward 337) and of inter-textuality. Turner defines inter-textuality as "the complex relationships between texts and the social conditions of their production and consumption" (146). Thus, the simple conclusion that the viewer is active rather than passive is perhaps a restrictive and reductive dichotomy. In fact, the spectoral position is complex: audience reception is fluid, interstitial, varied and always situated within a specific historical moment.

Identification and idealization

Laura Mulvey explores two aspects of identification in film:

> [There are] two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking in the conventional cinematic situation. The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen (18).

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[6] Mother is other, is she who lacks the phallus and thus represents castration. This lack is realized in what Lacan termed "The Mirror Stage" wherein the boy child narcissistically recognizes himself in the mirror as separate from his mother and instantly defines her in terms of her lack of a phallus. This realization propels the boy child to identify with the father, whom he is in distinct competition with over the m/other. The boy child must struggle to possess his primary object, the (m)other, until he reaches manhood and can obtain his own (m)other (a.k.a. wife).

[7] The most common Oedipal conclusion to narrative films are situations wherein a male hero's strength/virility/character is challenged and the resolution of his conflict necessarily coincides with his legitimate coupling with a virtuous/pure woman.

Identification with an image on screen is like looking in a mirror: we define ourselves against what we see 'over there.' Scopophilia and narcissism formulate a complex tension between projection and introjection, between viewer and the on-screen subject. But what is it about the pleasure that we experience through the intersection of scopophilia and narcissistic identification? In *The Threshold of the Visible World*, psychoanalytic theorist Kaja Silverman examines identification as a function of idealization. Using film to elucidate her arguments, she writes:

> We... need aesthetic works which will make it possible for us to idealize, and, so, to identify with bodies we would otherwise repudiate...we cannot idealize something without at the same time identifying with it... We have consistently argued against idealization, that psychic activity at the heart of love, rather than imagining new uses to which it might be put (2).

Silverman's use of idealization is somewhat shocking. Instead of talking about identification in the negative terms of narcissism or scopophilia, she uses 'love.' For her, love is simultaneously and paradoxically at the heart of determining both selfhood and otherness. Pleasure is derived from looking because looking affirms the self. Love is the machine that propels identification - it is a complex psychic process, not a detached objective state. I would like to suggest that identification is a very rich emotional and visual endeavour - something that film achieves at its most engrossing moments. Being wisked away by emotive lavishness, elaborate musical numbers or intensely rhythmic action sequences can be thought of as a playground of identification. It is this liminal ground between narcissism and scopophilic looking that is active, holistic and which acts out Silverman's *love*.

contemporary visual artists using film

When artists choose to use or reference film there is often an effort to vary the usual experiences of watching film or television. Jaap Guildemond discusses this point in his 1999 catalogue essay from *Cinéma Cinéma - Contemporary Art and the Cinematic Experience*: "These artists are looking for methods to involve the viewer in their projects and, at the same time, are trying to create enough distance from the work to allow the viewer to recognize his own position, in both a physical and an intellectual sense" (17-18). While intent on raising the viewer's self-consciousness of the viewing process artists use film because of the nearly-instantaneous legibility of works made using cinematic styles. The work of three visual artists from the exhibition *Cinéma Cinéma*, Mark Lewis, Fiona Banner and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, will be surveyed to show how the construction of viewing experience is seminal to each of their projects.

Mark LEWIS

Canadian born, London-based artist Mark Lewis has been making films within a visual art context for nearly ten years. Lewis doesn't simply refer to film by using video, but often shoots using widescreen 35mm film and a standard film crew. His films are most often parodies of popular genres and are screened as a continuous loop in traditional gallery spaces. *A Sense of the End*, 1996, is a 16mm short film series of imaginary conclusions to films that have never been made. Each "film" is dramatic, often dealing with issues of death and loss. While technically incomplete, the missing narratives of these films seem somehow familiar. In an interview for the *Cinéma Cinéma* show, Lewis remarked that he intends for the films to have a "de-familiarizing effect... like the feeling of *dejà vu*" (104). Lewis employed a similar strategy in his 1999 work *After (Made for TV)*. Here, he wrote and directed a film in the style of the saccharine and emotional genre of the TV Movie. When editing, he removed all the primary action. What remains is a film that tells his story using only scenes that take place right after something has happened. Again, Lewis' 'de-familiarizing' effect takes hold. What is important to note is the generic quality of both of these 'films.' It is the generic quality of these works that allow them to be *read* – the narrative succeeds in both telling a story and enabling a question to emerge about the nature of telling stories. As Lewis remarks,

> ... the fact that cinema has this parasitic relationship to older forms does not mean that it is uncreative. In fact, I would say that I am looking for and identifying precisely those inventions that happen despite and, importantly, because of film's parasitic relationship to traditional forms (103).

Hence, it is the insidiously generic and familiar quality of film that enables the viewer to *read* the film and also to question how they *read* these common filmic *texts*. As Dan Harries points out in his book *Film Parody*, "many parodies today do not ridicule the backgrounded text but use them as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny" (124). Lewis' films leave his viewers with questions about how cinema and television is received. It is also important that Lewis is often not choosing to show his films in theatres, but in galleries where the works can be repeated and viewers can choose how long to spend watching. While not a central theme of Lewis' work, the simple fact that the films loop within the gallery exhibition enables prolonged and comparative consideration. In Lewis' words,

> To propose that mobility – the invitation to be free to enter or leave without ceremony or occasion, against the body's desire to rest and the mind's habit of getting lost – in narrative forms of film is a dialectic that focuses the work quite properly in the question of aesthetic judgement (102).

Lewis' work thus posits a polemical situation for his viewers. A tension occurs between the spaces of filmic convention and aesthetic critique.

Fiona BANNER

Brittish visual artist Fiona Banner's text-based feature films evidence and complicate the processes of representation in popular media. In her 1996, *Apocalypse Now*, from a series called *The Nam*,[8] a hand-written, 21-foot long piece of paper bears the entire transcribed text from the popular 1979 film by Francis Ford Coppola. The tightly written and volumnous text inhibits a linear reading of the work. Instead, a personally selective reading occurs, allowing the viewer to experience the film according to sections that grab their attention – a highly individualistic and specific way of "viewing" a film. As Guldemond comments about Banner's work: " Not a passive bystander, the viewer actually participates in the creation of the film... Her text-filled movies make the viewer conscious of the fact that every image, both real and fictional, is, by definition, always a subjective interpretation" (11). Banner's film-texts reveal what the viewer brings to the work, situating their reception within a specific place and time. Her works achieve this because of the extensive popularity of the films with which she chooses to work. In a series of four large paintings re-presenting Bob Dylan's song *You Got a Lot of Nerve*, Banner is again drawing from the popular awareness of Dylan and his musical genre. She comments on this work: "It's my memory of the song, which is really quite different from the song but quite similar as well. It's how I thought the song went. I always really liked the fact that I knew that song word-for-word but, in fact, I don't" (41). Banner's own response to this series of paintings encapsulates how her viewers might take the same possession over what the song represents and in turn, how they *make* the *meaning* of the song/text. The paradoxical stardom of Bob Dylan - the fact that his music and his persona are symbols of popular and contemporary disenfranchisement – is what engages Banner's viewers. The same is true for her series *The Nam* because the Vietnam War was such a momentous, contentious and internationally significant occurrence. Performance theorist Marvin Carlson is interested in practices such as Banner's. In his critical introduction to performance theory Carlson writes, "...postmodern performance provides resistance precisely not by offering "messages," positive or negative, that fit comfortably into popular representations of political thought, but by challenging the processes of representation itself" (142). Banner's strategy begins at the level of representation - she brings attention to the way a story or theme is told and received. This tactic of evidencing the interstice between representation and response/reception is at the core of the work by Banner as well as others included in this section.

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[8] *The Nam* featured the transcription of the text from six Vietnam War films: *Apocalypse Now, Born On The Fourth of July, The Deer Hunter, Full Metal Jacket, Hamburger Hill* and *Platoon.*

Eija-Liisa AHTILA

Finnish visual artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila makes short films that are elaborate character or relationship studies intended to evidence the slippery ground of subjectivity. In a summary from the Paolo Curti & Co. gallery in Milan, Ahtila's work deals with "themes surrounding individual identity and the limit of the self and body in relation to the other" (1). She attacks these themes by presenting multiple characters, multiple narratives or commentaries, often presenting these simultaneously using voice-over or more recently split-screen or multi-screen projections. In her 1999 film *Consolation Service*, a story is told about the demise of a young couple's relationship. Two side-by-side projections tell their struggle, the contrast resulting in the oscillation between fantasy and pseudo-documentary depictions of the troubled marriage. The result is a narrative complete with conflicting angles and missing pages. Tiina Erkintalo writes on Ahtila's work in the *Cinéma Cinéma* catalogue: "Using mulitple characters, Ahtila provides the viewer with many alternate aspects, and thus narratives, from which they can freely choose and construct stories to their own taste" (32). Thus her work draws from the dramatic narrative convention of classic cinema, adds to it and complicates it. Ahtila's background is steeped in film production though her work often appears in galleries as well as art-house cinemas. Again, work such as Ahtila's focuses on ways to evidence the subjective and multifarious experience of watching a films.

The work of these three artists is thematically unique yet they are all interested in exploring concepts of subjectivity and identity within popular film. Visual artist Pierre Bismuth comments on this phenomenon:

> There is at present a whole generation of artists who are attracted by the film industry. It is more of an interest in modes of distribution than in modes of production... Perhaps this represents a kind of nostalgia for a highly accessible art form that has no need to justify its existence or, quite simply, for an art form that still has an audience (55).

I sympathize with the notion that visual artists lack audiences (or audience understanding) because their work is disconnected from society.[9] According to Marvin Carlson,

> Umberto Eco suggested a similar double-coding in postmodern literature, which mixed contemporary experiment with an ironic and self-conscious utilization of traditional forms, allowing... an appeal to both popular and specialized audiences... This approach to postmodernism focussed upon the tendency of the modernist project in all of the arts to become increasingly an art for artists and critics – highly abstract and technical – and saw

[9] This disconnection is most likely due to the distant presence of many contemporary art galleries, and that galleries often show artwork that is only accessible (i.e. readable) to people that are steeped in academic art history and theory.

> postmodernism, at least in part, as a reaction restoring art to a broader public without sacrificing its aesthetic richness or complexity (131).

While it is a vast generalization, artists who reference popular culture struggle with how to make relevant symbols and how to justify their practice within certain cultural contexts. They use references as an entry point for audiences while also trying to make more challenging and/or experimental artwork. Indeed, as Bismuth points out, "To put the question of value, quality, function, significance, efficacy, and other vital matters solely in terms of mass reception and quick comprehension is very dangerous" (55).

conclusion: pleasure & 'positive popular'

> "Pop excursions are important because they can open up creative and critical responses to popular culture" (Laba 5).

The 'positivity of pop'[10] is that it offers artists a wide grammar to respond to and interact with their contemporary worlds. The 'pleasure of pop' is the sense of continuity, familiarity and escape that it offers. In an essay on the master of the Hollywood musical Vincente Minnelli, Thomas Elsaesser wrote:

> the fundamental reason why audience-identification and immediate emotional participation are at all possible, lies in Hollywood's rigorous application of the *pleasure principle* – understood almost in its Freudian sense, as the structure that governs the articulation of psychic and emotional energy (13).

According to Freud, the 'pleasure principle' tells us to do what feels good, but it is suppressed by the 'reality principle' (reality is all work and no play). Pleasure is expressed only through a process of sublimation. The implication here is that base human impulses[11] may be sublimated into higher cultural activities. These two concepts are used to describe the experience of watching film because cinema engages primary emotional experiences that we would not necessarily have in our day-to-day lives.[12] In other words, watching a film can release us from the need for sublimating our pleasures – getting lost in a film is a *safe* way to experience and express primary emotions that might otherwise be repressed or sublimated. As mentioned earlier in the paper, this moment is often criticized because of the way that ideology can seemingly slip by seamlessly

[10] "Pop" is referring to popular cultural forms including film, television, advertising and print media. "Pop is a universe of "anything and everything," and incomprehensible not because it is conceptually challenging (like a universe), but because its geography stretches across so much cultural space" (Laba 2).

[11] An example of a basic human impulse is the drive for sexual pleasure.

[12] This is related to scopophilia as pleasure is gained from voyeuristic looking. As a film voyeur, one gets to experience actions on-screen without having to be responsible for them or associated with them.

during these pleasurable moments of watching. While this may be the case sometimes, why can't films that make us *feel* good, also be good for us?

Contemporary mass media theorist Ien Ang articulates the importance of popular culture and popular pleasure:

> [The popular aesthetic] is based on an affirmation of the continuity of cultural forms and daily life, and on a deep-rooted desire for participation, and on emotional involvement. In other words, what matters for the popular aesthetic is the recognition of pleasure, and that pleasure is a personal thing (420).

Ang's outline of the importance of pleasure in popular discourse is antithetical to the idea that radical change is needed within popular media. Instead, he embraces popular art, which is comfortable, easily palatable and even repeatable. He suggests that the use of recognizable codes of popular film production acknowledge the viewer by offering them a chance to access 'pleasure,' especially pleasure through suture. For Ang, popular 'momentum'[13] occurs because of personal interpretations of film. For example, as a viewer, I have gained a heightened sense of physical strength and mental dexterity through watching characters such as the heroic space-mission captain Ellen Ripley,[14] or by watching athletes compete on televised sports programs. The point at which I both lose myself to these images and gain something from these images is when something spectacular occurs. This may be through viewing some act of fantastical courage, or through witnessing the force of a runner's unrelenting thrust towards a finish line. The importance of these images is that I as a viewer leave with an experience of velocity that I then may take into the world with me.[15] The points from Ang's statement that are important for visual artists to consider are the continuity of current cultural structures, the chance to participate, to reflect day-to-day life and the opportunity for emotion to figure prominently in the experience of media. This final point is what I have been attempting to express in this paper, for emotion is the utility of film. As Ethan Coen said regarding feature films: "[The Audience is] not there to get information: they're there to feel it" (Levine 27). So, it is through emotion and sensation that viewers respond to visual media, not through the direct information that it offers. This is certainly in opposition to many contemporary art strategies that rely on didactic statements, academic discourse or eccentric experimentation. Even so, it is difficult to conclude that the emotional

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[13] Momentum is a desirable quality because it is dynamic and responsive, not disengaged.

[14] Ellen Ripley was played by Sigourney Weaver in the 1986 sci-fi/action film *Aliens*.

[15] Of course this begs the question "what of the violence that so much cinema offers up?" The vast majority of horrific or extreme representations function as cathartic experiences, appealing to base human nature as a vicarious *thrill* experienced in the safety of the theatre or of one's own home. However, this is not a

effects of popular cinema and television are so striking that they can be considered 'positive.' As Laba deduces,

> Even the cultural populist wrestles with the anxiety that much of what we understand as "pop" in culture constitutes the detritus, the ephemera, a repository of the trivialities of society in all of its contemporary moments... what they are considering, describing, and analysing in the spaces and experiences of the popular is at the very least deeply and irrevocably contradictory (Laba 1).

For, ideological positions often go unchallenged within the popular realm. Yet the pleasure of pop - the 'positive popular' - is important because visual artists working with pop references can articulate the tensions between ideology, suture and popular pleasures within the distinct and critical space of the gallery. In this way, the following analysis of my graduating project *Event* is an example of my own thesis.

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justification of all violence in popular media, which has proven in many instances to be socially detrimental.

Background – description of my practice

Formally, my art practice has ranged from modern dance to performance art, from mixed-media installation to basic video production. The work is most often performative and conceptual. A common goal of mine is to evoke active rather than passive consumption of the images, objects or actions that I present. A good deal of ethical consideration goes into my work – projects are initiated because of a longing to ameliorate a situation, theme or image. I have earnestly invested in the role of the viewer, especially within the contentious and often insulting realm of popular culture as a way to infuse 'hope' in the public sphere, and offset what I have experienced to be an over-academicization of contemporary art. As a result, an uncomfortable gap exists in my work between my use of popular cultural artifacts (the things that interest me and that I consume) and the analytical and differentiated art context in which it has been received. I embrace a seemingly postmodern consciousness of everything and nothing in particular.[16] This means that I welcome a fragmented and general consciousness rather than one that is necessarily specific and cultured. I have also spent much of my time in graduate school studying the works of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. I went into the program believing that Deleuze's theories of liminal and multifarious subjectivity, and difference through repetition would bring me to a richer understanding of my 'pop' preoccupation. While I have slowly strayed from Deleuze towards the more straightforward analyses offered by recent film theorists, I will outline some of my Deleuzian process below. Before launching into this in relation to *Event*, the following is a brief description of works that I have undertaken in the past two years while at Simon Fraser University.

Enchantment with Broadway musicals, popular love songs and most recently, romantic (and reflexive) Hollywood films such as Baz Luhrman's 2001 *Moulin Rouge!*, have informed and formed much of my recent practice. In a project completed for the September 2001 Western Front show *Pop Song Covers*, two separate videos of sunsets were accompanied by fragments of popular songs: *I Will Always Love You* by pop diva Whitney Houston, and another by the lively fifties' country performer Buck Owens titled *Under Your Spell Again*. While from vastly different genres of music, both songs can be categorized as 'pop.' By using two songs with distinct cultural differences, I was aligning myself with what I previously called the postmodern consciousness of

[16] Thanks to Judy Radul for coalescing this notion.

everything and nothing in particular.[17] These videos are also reminiscent of Fiona Banner's knowledge of the Bob Dylan song: "I always really liked the fact that I knew that song word-for-word but, in fact, I don't" (41). Both *Pop Song Covers* videos summoned languorous preoccupation with cliché romantic symbols (the sunset, the pop love song) while using repetition and slowed time to humourously draw attention to these fixations. The fact that the songs came from different genres of music did not seem to affect the reception of the work. Similarly, in my first year MFA project, *sight/site*, I videotaped an actress repeatedly laughing then crying hysterically. The aim of this video was to conjure the stereotypical emotions of classical drama (elation vs. despair) and of feminine hysteria. The sunset videos and the dramatic performance of the laughing and crying woman were intended to be visual spectacles[18] as well as events determined to elucidate alternate perspectives on these very familiar acts and images. In other words, the videos' continual repetition[19] invites an alteration of perception as new discoveries are made about the video. My aim was to present discrete images that possess commonly accepted meanings, and to subtly shift the focus on these images so as to allow the viewer to question their reading of the images over time.[20] My strategy then, is somewhat paradoxical: I want to draw attention to the possibility of alternate and/or multiple readings of these stereotypical images while maintaining the surficial look and lure of popular television and film. It is important to note that I do not want to make work that necessarily repels my viewer. Much visual art and film work of the past few decades has made the viewing experience difficult in an effort to force a critical consideration of the work. For example, French New Wave filmmakers avoided accepted formal

[17] This kind of mixing is not uncommon – everything from dubbing and mixing to simply cross-genre music is the norm in contemporary pop and 'alternative' music classifications. Television programs and movies also frequently work across genres.

[18] By spectacle I mean an action intended to provoke immediate fascination without regard for a critical distance that comes from a removed or secondary judgement of the images.

[19] Repetition is often an incidental occurrence when time-based art is exhibited in galleries. However, repetition is also a strategy and an occurrence that differentiates films shown in a gallery from films shown in a cinema. In a gallery, the viewer is mobile and they often choose how long they will watch the film or video being shown. Whereas in cinema, one typically remains sitting in a sear for the entire duration of *one* film. Another difference is that cinema is typically understood as an entertainment industry (denoting the activity of sitting passively watching another perform). On the other hand, viewers in galleries survey artworks with a judgmental eye. Therefore, repetitive images in galleries necessarily invite consideration.

[20] Admittedly, I'm not sure if the works achieved this – mostly due to the fact that the technical qualities of the works did not allow the works to directly sit in the place of industry-standard film or television, and the performances were more flat than elated.

film techniques, often refusing the palatable functions of film such as diegetic sound, narrative continuity, comfortable pacing and pleasant or seemingly apolitical subject matter.[21] In response to these tactics, I tend to favour images that are pleasurable, acceptable and/or familiar – images that can immediately engage a viewer. My hope, if at all possible, would be to subvert the negative connotations of the rapturous moment that one becomes lost in a film to make it an experience that could be both critically and emotionally engaging.

And now, *Event*...

[21] It is worth noting that some of the deliberately shocking or uncomfortable tactics of these same filmmakers have been co-opted and accepted as the norm by society these days. I'm thinking specifically of Goddard's use of jump cuts that almost every editor uses to some extent now. Also, the influence of music videos and commercials have expanded the acceptability in terms of "realistic" representations in popular cinema. Cinema is a constructed reality that is highly stylized and constantly changing. (Thanks to Mikil Rullman for these insights.)

Event - formal description

Event is a looping two-minute musical tragedy. There are two performers: a woman who sings and a man that is thoroughly silent and attentive. The action takes place on a sidewalk in a downtown location (Georgia and Granville streets in Vancouver). The screen starts in black and the sound of a car crash is heard followed by some shouting and general urban disarray. Startled, the man turns around and runs towards something. From the ground the woman looks up at the man who helps her stand. Their eyes meet and she breaks into song:

Can yours be the face of a sudden love?
All time flies away,
Leaves me all astray.

My love I'm lost in your eyes.
My heart must confide,
You're waking a song inside.

How did we get here?
Are we really here anyway?

I feel your love, it's gentle and warm.
It's like brand new sight:
I know everything's gonna be all right.

The end was near and darker than any night.
But your spirit was close to mine,
And I walked into a light sublime.

How did we get here?
Are we alone here?
Are we really here anyway?

As she sings their bodies shift and linger close to one another. At each point when the woman sings the lines *Are we really here anyway*, she looks directly at the camera with a questioning expression on her face. As if in a sudden existential haze the woman sings the last line and turns away from the man towards the street corner. He slumps and walks away. The screen once again fades to black and the sound of the car crash continues their dissonant meeting and separation.

Event was shot on digital video using a digital green screen. This is a technique whereby the actors are recorded in a studio in front of a vibrant green painted wall or stretched fabric. Using digital editing software, the green screen behind the wall is replaced with a background that was shot separately. I chose to use green screen for *Event* because of the way that it draws attention to

the artificial nature of the construction of films. When you see a film that has used green screen, the actors or the subject of the camera are separated from their background setting. While we often accept the plausibility of green-screen images within the context of classical film narratives, I have used it to make the world of the two actors' very separate and unreal in comparison to the background surrounding them.

The actors were dressed in vibrant colours and make-up - the woman adorned in glossy pinks, with a sickly sweet pink flower on the lapel of her jacket. The man was in a crisp and bright blue dress shirt. While the background showed it to be a sunny day, the actors were rather underdressed in comparison to the people captured in the background who mostly sported wind-breakers and long coats. This noticeable difference between the actors and the background people enhanced the feeling that they were in a separate space or time than everyone else. I wanted the actors to appear to be in their own oddly vivid world.

The woman's song has a very monotonous quality and the lyrics are often questioning the reality of their experience. It is as if she is not really feeling the excitement of sudden love, but the shock of entering uncertainty about her existence. The silence of the man adds to this uneasiness. It is as if he hasn't really been allowed access to the entire scenario: like a viewer, he must remain focussed on the woman without the opportunity to respond or become involved. The viewer never sees an accident occur and never knows what sort of traumatic experience has happened to the characters. The only information the viewers have about this incident is the sound of the crashing car. The combination of the monotone and existential quality of the song, the fact that the song doesn't go through a complete arc,[22] and the unreality propelled by the green screen, all give *Event* the appearance of a musical[23] without actually living up to the expectations of the musical swell. In addition, the fact that *Event* does not have the casement of a conventional narrative film makes it lack a foundation that could warrant the outbreak into a musical moment.

[22] The song is short by about two phrases and lacks a bridge or interlude that would typically swell emotions.
[23] The musical will be described in more detail later in the paper.

Event – strata of theories and intentions

Gilles DELEUZE: event

With a novice's enchantment with Deleuze via art-school readings, I wrote a paper in my fourth semester at SFU titled *What is an Event?* after the chapter of the same name in Deleuze's book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. After two years in the MFA program, my understanding of Deleuze has remained rudimentary – the layers of philosophical and historical inquiry necessary to properly contextualize his work are beyond what I have set out to achieve. Despite this, Deleuze's concept of event has figured prominently in my studies and art practice over the past two years. Following is a summary of my interpretation of this concept and how it has figured in the production of *Event*.

The draw of Deleuze is his fluid and rhizomatic[24] vocabulary, which seems an appropriate companion to a postmodern art culture that strives to defy essentialist determinations. In my estimation, his work is paradoxical: while he emphasizes theories and language of multiplicity, he is ultimately trying to reconcile the singular subject.[25] For him, subjectivity is continuity of new experience, new life, but cannot be conceived of in limiting terms. He writes, "... the individual is creativity, the formation of the New" (77).

For Deleuze, 'event' is useful in describing a distinct experience that is not bound by a unity of time and space. Event is like a medial ground of perception that both separates and relates an individual to their surrounding world. Deleuze writes, "Events in their turn are types of relations; they are relations to existence and to time...[the] subject is forever an event marked by a verb, or a relation marked by a presupposition: I am writing" (52). From this, event can be seen as a simultaneous action and reception to external stimuli, all located in a particular moment of a singular subject. It is this focus on a non-limiting and active singularity in time that resonates with my own belief in the potential for dynamic reception of art work. It furthermore feeds the possibility for even the most repetitive images to transcend stereotypical associations. Thus, 'event' as a concept is useful in describing how something becomes meaningful (i.e. useful,

[24] Principally, a rhizome is a complex structure that cannot be reduced to any one essence. It can be defined as a transitory meshing of networks, connecting, forming and changing itself as a discrete mass with equally important discrete soluble units.

[25] Deleuze's subject is not a totalized one. It does not default to systems of judgement based on a God or other hierarchies. It is a sense of 'oneness' whose sole purpose is to evoke multiplicities; a singular focus that yields a variety of perspectives. It exists as a nomadic flow changing through time.

significant), without reducing this meaning to an immutable formation locked in one historical understanding. I believe that his open-ended rendering of subjectivity from the concept of event is important to this particular cultural moment, wherein totalizing modernist, (not to mention capitalistic), assumptions still often lurk beneath the surface of our generally differentiated and 'aware' postmodern culture. Thus, my interest in event is in conceptualizing a singular and popular subject that is familiar yet undetermined, one yet many.

A common definition of event would be an occurrence, especially an occurrence with significance. According to Deleuze, event is a continual becoming, a continual knowing – it can be something new each moment. The awareness afforded by event differs from that of the spectacle, wherein there is more immediate fascination without regard for secondary or self-conscious judgment. While event is also immediate, it is something charged with the energy to propel itself along – like being engaged by an image and being aware of being engaged by it all at once. In *Event,* I attempted to imbue the female with these characteristics of event. She is a liminal being – neither directly influenced by the world around her, nor totally divorced from it. As the subject of the video, she encapsulates the queries that I have about the relationship of individuals to popular images in their world. My engagement with this term is arguably idealistic and abstract, however it is what began my process with *Event.*

MUSICALS

The musical is a genre of film that gregariously performs stereotypical characterizations, be they of gender, race, class, sexuality, et cetera. As Arbuthnot and Seneca write in their feminist interpretation of Howard Hawks' 1953 film musical *Gentlemen Prefer* Blondes,

> A typical characteristic of [the] movie musical genre is that there are two leads, a man and a woman, who sing and dance together, and eventually become romantically involved; that they sing and dance together so fluidly is a metaphor for the perfection of their relationship (122).

I chose to make *Event* a musical because of that genre's tendency for lavish and excessive caricatures of 'real' relationships and the critical gap this creates between their subject matter and the reception of the subject. When watching a musical, the absolute unreality of the emotions represented is obvious. However, the musical event in a film is still overwhelming, rapturous and pleasurable. As Elsaesser writes about the musical, "... it [the musical sequence] is the exaltation of the artifice as the vehicle of an authentic psychic and emotional reality" (16). Thus, the musical can activate an emotional experience that is relevant to actual experiences outside of representation. Part of my concern in making *Event* was to find a way to frame that moment of

getting lost in a film as a productive and potentially critically engaging experience. Richard Dyer echoes this sentiment: "Two of the taken-for-granted descriptions of entertainment, as 'escape' and as 'wish-fulfilment', point to its central thrust, namely, utopianism. Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide" (273). This 'something better' to escape to, or get lost in is usually critiqued by theorists of suture and "over-identification" (Doanne 47), who plead that these kinds of representations seamlessly allow ideology to be expressed, reinforcing hegemony to a placated audience. Granted, there is validity in this argument – to live a life devoid of experiences or opinions outside of the frame of reference of popular film or culture would be devastating. Yet, the musical is effective in eliciting active participation with the reception of images because "... the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies... It thus works at the level of sensibility" (Dyer 273). The connection of the visual to the tactile is the power of cinema, and especially the power of the musical. Perhaps musicals can even offer 'awareness' to its viewers through viscerally charged experience. What I am positing is that the potentially radical element to the musical is its ability to transmit knowledge on a personally visceral rather than necessarily psychic level. This conceptualization of cinematic experience resists the implication that viewers are somehow disconnected and quiescent when watching films, for they are *always* with/in their bodies.

the SONG, voice and female subjectivity

The song within the musical is an emotional and often fantastic crescendo that highlights the most illicit sub-texts. As Turim deduces in her feminist critique *Gentlemen Consume Blondes*, "The songs function as structural high points, intense, privileged moments of the film's expressivity" (103). In the oscillation between narrative and song, a considerable rhythm is established that urges the viewer to further participate in the unfolding of events on screen. Turim further describes this process:

> The film as machine to entertain needs this pattern of dispersion; it is dependent on recurrent stimulation, not only on the sways, rhythms, and beats, but also on the very fact of creating moments when the spectator is encouraged to partake of the forbidden vision, to watch with prurient pleasure (104).

Turim's description of film as entertainment follows a lineage of critiques ranging from Metz to Mulvey that discuss privileged vision as what gives the viewers both the power to look and the pleasure of looking. As discussed earlier, critiques such as Mulvey's outlined how the construction of the subject within cinema favours a male gaze (i.e. his language and discourse),

and brought attention to the absence of a place for women as either active subject or viewer. Accordingly, "The spectator's pleasure is thus produced through the framing/negation of the female gaze" (Doane 53). In opposition, Kaja Silverman discusses the position of woman in terms of her involvement in cinema rather than her objectification. For Silverman,

> Woman is often obliged to "live" hers [representation] much more fully than is her male counterpart, who is within many discourses and material practices aligned with the camera/gaze. Consequently, within certain cultural contexts the female subject might be said to signify not only "lack," but "spectacle" (147).

This sense of woman *as* spectacle was important to me while in production with *Event*. It is the woman's voice that we hear, her questioning, her reconciliation with love and a nearly traumatic occurrence. Her song was intended to blankly state all that is usually left unsaid. The moment that the man and woman meet in *Event* is *that* moment when all words melt away and the viewer instantly recognizes their love. Yet, in *Event*, her song is monotonous. Lyrics such as *My love I'm lost in your eyes* nearly over-state what is happening between them, making the delivery overtly artificial and awkward. This is a scene that the viewer should recognize at once as an instant and fateful bond, yet it is her delivery of the song that disables this reading. Furthermore, the man is forever silent, never participating in the development of a relationship, never asserting his desires, and never having the chance to consummate their relationship. As Doane writes in her essay *The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space*, "The voice is even more powerful in silence. The solution, then, is not to banish the [male] voice but to construct *another* politics" (172). The 'other' politics that I was searching for in *Event* was that of giving voice to the female subject. The woman in *Event* is the only active subject – we only ever hear her voice and experience the images according to her perspective. Arbuthnot and Seneca point out the problems inherent in making work that shifts away from the male gaze incited by classical Hollywood cinema: "We understand the impulse to destroy the male objectification of women. But the ways in which some feminist filmakers do so – by destroying the narrative and the possibility of viewer identification with characters – destroy both the male viewer's pleasure and our pleasure." (115) Thus, the musical was the intended lure of *Event*, and the song was one of the elements with which I sought to subvert the male gaze without ruining all chances for identification with the film.

Another tactic that I drew upon was Mary Ann Doane's notion of 'masquerade.' Doane contends that "The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance" (49). Doane concludes that drawing attention to the artifice of performing femininity enables critical thinking about the stereotypes of femininity. Thus, the character of the woman in *Event*, is excessively pretty in

pink: by wearing too much gloss and a large pink flower, the notably over-manicured aspects of her attire is intended to make the viewer question her representation. While the woman in *Event* 'looks' overtly feminine, her actions are not correspondingly responsive. Instead she is pensive and holds back a sense of passion. Furthermore, there are several instances in the video where the woman addresses the camera. In these moments it is as if she is addressing the supposedly voyeuristic viewer and the safe distance between viewer and viewed is ruptured. Arbuthnot and Seneca discuss how a similar strategy is employed in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, "[Marilyn] Monroe and [Jane] Russell are spectacles for male attention. However, Monroe and Russell refuse to signal submission by averting their eyes; rather, they return the look" (116). The woman in *Event* similarly holds her gaze – she looks back at the viewer and sustains several glances in the man's eyes. She is intended to be 'non-consumable' – offered up for consideration only.

after *Event*

Upon consideration, *Event* does not function like a joyful abandon into the musical experience of near tragedy and serendipitous love; the relationship between the man and woman is never consummated. In fact, they don't even speak to/with each other. Instead it is a questioning. Like the words in the song: *What are we doing here?*, I think about *Event* more and more as a questioning of the role of the artist to effectively engage filmic emotional qualities.[26] The space of the gallery is mostly for critique, not soulful reverie or entertainment-induced abandon. Therefore, *Event* 'works' in the gallery space to promote some sort of critical thinking, however, the references to musical abandonment are left dangling. The song, in its monotonous repetition, and the two actors' eerily contained affectations towards one another, leaves one with the sense that they will never find love, never be saved. Within the continuous loop, everyone - the man, woman, and the viewer – is kept 'out of the [*Event*] loop.' Thus, as a musical extravaganza, *Event* fails to deliver spectacle, and repetitively yields a paltry attempt at realizing that moment of musical bliss.

However, the repetitive loop works against any definite or singular response to the video because as people continue to watch, they have more time to consider the images and can change their opinion of the work over time. In one instance, a group of people came into the gallery when I was sitting in the back. They watched one evolution. As the video began to repeat, they snickered a little. Then, when they had finally seen two full-rotations and were in the position of watching it again, they burst out laughing. It was ludicrous to them that they should have to experience this representation of near-tragedy and sudden love in such a short space of time. Questions abounded about what was occurring and they chatted and joked about the possible things that were happening: they became self-evident makers of meaning of this work. Turner describes a similar experience of audiences watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show:*

> The ritual quality in film viewing is generally exposed when audiences see the same film repeatedly – a practice which is relatively common despite theoretical assumptions that a film is made to be understood at one viewing... For the return audience, the sense of power and familiarity is strong; no longer do they wait for the narrative to unfold but they confidently collaborate in its gradual development... 'Here it comes, watch this bit!' (116).

[26] As noted earlier in the paper, it is film's ability to take over the senses, to refer to basic types of identification that make it a pleasurable and potent medium for artists to use.

Thus, after watching a film or video more than once, the viewer takes on a kind of ownership of the events that unfold on screen. Despite this, *Event* is a rather marginal musical. Yet, however marginal, it succeeded in at least partially fulfilling two of my goals. These are namely to provoke prolonged consideration of the image and to create a representation of woman as an active subject rather than passive object. The goal that remains uncertain is how to sustain the same kind of perceptual awareness while making a film, especially a musical, that is pleasing, even exhilarating to watch. I'm not sure that such an idealistic project is possible: the film industry remains impervious and the gallery system's temperate critical awareness shies away from munificent spectacular pleasures.

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APPENDIX I: ***Event***
Exhibition Video Cassette (see accompanying)
Format: VHS
Running Time: 4 minutes (originally exhibited in a continual loop)

Appendix II: ***Event***
Exhibition poster