David Haxton,
*Still frame no.
5.46.02, from
"Painting Room
Lights"* (1981).
Courtesy of the
artist.

Between canvas and celluloid: Painted films and filmed paintings

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how artists' attempts to inject a time element to painting through cinematic means expanded the aesthetic and affective possibilities of both mediums. These approaches include 'painted films' wherein the artist applies paint directly onto the celluloid in an exploration of an alternative material support for painting, as well as 'filmed paintings', films that display the act of a painting being made. The article surveys the historical development of these intermedial concepts and methods before offering close readings of films by José Antonio Sistiaga, Francis Lee, David Haxton, in order to demonstrate how these works simultaneously complicate the notion of medium specificity as they present new modes of, and encounters with, painting.

In 2014, recalling the creation of his feature-length hand-painted film … *ere erera baleibu icik subua aruaren …* (1968–1970), a work made entirely without recourse to photography, Basque artist José Antonio Sistiaga said, 'I've often been asked whether I'm a painter or a film-maker, but I've never asked myself that question'. He pointed to a canvas hanging in his studio in San Sebastián and added, 'When I paint here, I'm a painter'. He then gestured to a table, upon which were arranged the original pieces of film that comprised … *ere erera* …., and concluded 'And when I paint there, I'm a film-maker' (quoted in Zinman 2014).

Sistiaga has fielded this query regarding his categorization as an artist many times, which speaks to the institutional, historical and aesthetic challenges to convention

raised by practitioners working between media forms. Sistiaga, along with Francis Lee and David Haxton, create paintings that *move*, and I shall discuss them through the two related approaches to injecting time into painting by cinematic means that I have identified: 'painted films', where the artist paints directly onto the celluloid, and 'filmed paintings', works that depict the act of a painting. Painted films eschew photography in order to rethink the material components of cinema, while filmed paintings make explicit use of the photographic potential of film to show painterly qualities and processes that might otherwise remain unseen. While the visual results of painted films and filmed paintings can be quite different, they both exist between canvas and celluloid, together challenging our conception of what constitutes both painting and the moving image.

These filmic modes, which at times intertwine, each document the act of painting and yet they stand as artworks that can only exist as moving images. In other words, the final work of art, in both cases, is not a single still image, but what should be understood as a painting in time. This is a painting always in the process of changing, even as it retains its identity as a single work. These motion paintings grant the viewer access to new understandings of paint and its applications that are rarely revealed to us in a museum or gallery space, while extending our ideas about how cinema makes meaning. The films are not merely representations of paintings, but rather are *new kinds* of painting that expand the parameters of painting and cinema alike, providing us with new ways to think about, exhibit and experience visual media. In my discussion of specific works by Lee, Haxton and Sistiaga, I propose that these works allow us to articulate a new conception of intermedial practice, one in which the notion of art that exists between established media forms is extended to account not only for the techniques and materials that bridge various art practices, but also for the construct of time that binds together painted films and filmed paintings.

When Fluxus artist Dick Higgins coined the term 'intermedia', in 1966, he sought to describe the proliferation of works that existed between established artistic practices of the day. According to Higgins, formal art historical classifications had 'become merely puristic points of reference' ([1966] 1996: 728–29), born out of a desire to preserve the imagined or perceived integrity of particular artistic mediums. Higgins's conception of intermedia is not the totalizing synthesis of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but rather a means of describing works that exist between accepted artistic practices. Higgins hoped that new aesthetic techniques and technologies would foster radical and immediate forms of communication that would promote sociality and understanding. Extending Higgins's conceptualization, I characterize intermedial works as hybrids marked by the aesthetic and philosophical tensions that result from the juxtaposition of their various techniques and materials, or by the recontextualizing of one medium among other media.

More recently, with regard to the moving image, the idea of medium specificity, or the notion that the proper use of a medium relies on an artist's ability to manipulate its unique material elements, has been the subject of intense and renewed scrutiny. Several scholars have outlined analytical problems with respect to the concept of film as a medium, both in terms of changing technologies and in terms of artistic practice (Walley 2003; Rodowick 2007; Carroll 2003; Gaut 2010; Gunning 2007; Belton 2002). Other scholars, most notably Yvonne Spielmann, have taken up the question of intermedia with regard to cinema's digital turn. Spielmann argues that 'intermedia describes a formal category of change' brought about 'by collision but also by the exchange and transformation of elements that come from different media' (2001: 59). Where Spielmann argues that the tendency in intermedia images in digital cinema leans towards emphasizing the spatial aspects in the image, analogue cinema's intermediality, as I will demonstrate, was first and foremost concerned with imparting a temporal element to painting.

<p style="text-align:center">⋆⋆⋆</p>

Painted films and filmed paintings arose out of a frustration with the perceived limitations of static easel painting. By the start of the twentieth century, Cézanne had successfully upended 400 years of Renaissance perspective by flattening the picture plane. Seurat's pointillism 'succeeded in painting the vibrations of the air' (Bendazzi 1994: 12) and the Futurists were prizing the depiction of speed and movement above all other aesthetic principles. Buttressing these new art practices were contemporaneous art historian Bernard Berenson's writings on perspective in Italian Trecento painting, which proposed the idea of 'form as the principal source of aesthetic enjoyment' in the works of the Florentine masters, thereby elevating the surface play of colour, tone and shape to a primary concern in painting. In addition, Berenson argued for an aesthetic based on a painter's ability to grant 'tactile values to retinal impressions' – a synaesthetic conflation of sight and touch (1906: 4). Berenson expanded his ideas regarding 'tactile values' to include the impression of movement as one of the greatest attributes of painting (Ladis and Maginnis 1997: 61). Painted films and filmed paintings individually sought to bring these formal, physical and synaesthetic qualities together through paintings in time.

The efforts of early film-painters were also undergirded by spiritual beliefs that linked the mind with the cosmos, and thoughts with images. The Futurist Arnaldo Ginanni Corradini, known as Arnaldo Ginna, had been working on a series of such paintings depicting states of the soul, including *Nuerasthenia* (1908), a completely abstract composition that embodies its title's nervous condition in a storm of thin blue and yellow brushstrokes against a white field. Ginna was influenced by Theosophy, the religious philosophy that attempted to bridge major belief systems and science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was particularly interested in the Theosophist paintings of 'thought-forms' by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater, as well as the Theosophical Society lectures that he and his brother Bruno Corra had attended in Florence and Bologna (Moritz 1986: 300). Besant and Leadbeater's paintings included images of proto-psychedelic clouds of colour emerging from churches – intermedial representations of the music of Gounod and Mendelssohn. They also made minimalist compositions of misty fuchsia orbs on black backgrounds describing 'vague pure affection', and wavy geometric spirals standing in for 'the intention to know' (Besant and Leadbeater 1901: 51). Visual music historian William Moritz notes that Ginna and Corra were also intrigued by Theosophist architect Claude Bragdon's theories of n-dimensional space,[1] and that they attempted to apply these ideas – articulated in Corra's 1912 essay 'Chromatic Music' – in the construction of a colour organ, an instrument that could 'play' the 28 coloured electric lights (four for each hue in the spectrum) connected to its keys ([1912] 1973). Unsatisfied by the results of the colour sonatas that they wrote for the device, the duo began collaborating on a number of films in which they painted directly on to the filmstrip, and these, I argue, establish the painted film, at its inception, as a site for intermedial exploration.

Ginna had elaborated an idea of a 'chromatic chord' in his writings on abstract painting, and the brothers' first effort at direct film-making came in October 1911 with *A Chord of Colour*, an attempt to animate a Divisionist painting by Giovanni Segantini of an Alpine landscape.[2] They made three other films that month: *Study of the Effects of Four Colours*, *Song of Songs*, inspired by Mendelssohn, and *Flowers*, taken from Mallarmé's poem of the same name. The brothers made an additional five films the following year. As Ginna explained in 1968, 'while the first film was the development of a colour chord, the second studied the effects among complementary colours (red-green, blue-yellow) and the last two were chromatic renderings of music and poetry' (Bendazzi 1994: 13). The high-modernist trope of medium specificity is notably nowhere to be found here, at the birth of film-painting. Rather than try to exploit the unique properties of the cinematograph in order to distinguish it from other art forms, Ginna and Corra employed it explicitly in order to draw out correspondences between painting, language, music and film.

1. Architect Claude Bragdon constructed a theory of spatial mathematics abstracted from what he believed were innate and primordial ornamental patterns of geometry. These patterns could be used to explain the order of both the micro- and the macroscopic world. Bragdon referred to this concept as n-dimensional, or higher space, and his once cosmically-tinged theories have been borne out by contemporary mathematicians and physicists as having basis in fact. See Jonathan Massey (2009), *Crystal And Arabesque: Claude Bragdon, Ornament, And Modern Architecture*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, p. 148. See also Linda Dalrymple Henderson (2013), *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, rev. ed., Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

2. Divisionism was a post-Impressionist painting style characterized by the pictorial arrangement of coloured dots into recognizable forms, such as figures and landscapes, and was informed by the colour theories of Charles Blanc, Michel Eugène Chevreul and Ogden Rood.

3. Maximilien Gauthier writes that Survage's intention was not to develop an analogy to music via film, but to use film to establish painting as music's affective equal, and as such 'deserves the credit for being the first artist to reach the conclusion that the spectacle of a cadenced development of lines and volumes – associated with colours that were themselves arranged in a free yet balanced orchestration – possessed the same power to move us as the auditory properties of a musical work'. Quoted in Frank Popper, (1968), *Origins and Development of Kinetic Art*, Stephen Bann (trans.), Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, p. 158.

4. Kandinsky's book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) had a profound effect on both the development of abstract painting and painted film. Kandinsky's colour theory holds intermedial implications. He argued that colour related to a series of finely tuned emotional vibrations, trumpeting a principle of 'internal necessity' that gives rise to true artistic expression. Survage's use of musical terms above to describe his vision undoubtedly stems from Kandinsky's similar employment of musical language ('harmony', 'key') to articulate both colour combinations and the soul. See Wassily Kandinsky (1977), *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, M.T.H. Sadler (trans.), New York: Dover.

Ginna and Corra's efforts at combining the arts and senses on film were either lost or destroyed, so the public debut of painted cinema would be delayed by several years. Finnish-Russian painter Léopold Survage, who had similar ambitions to those of the Futurists, also sought to make a 'moving painting' by animating a sequence of abstract compositions. Survage painted more than 100 watercolours for his *Rythmes colorés* (1912–1914). Although it was never realized as a film, due both to the onset of World War I and to the absence of a colour film process that could accurately replicate Survage's delicate handling of hue, he stands, as animation historian Cecile Starr has asserted, as 'the first to attempt an abstract cinema' (Russett and Starr 1976: 35).

Survage further distinguished himself from the fraternal Futurist duo by writing in Apollinaire's magazine *Soirées de Paris* that his 'coloured rhythm' would constitute a separate art form and would not stand as 'an illustration or interpretation of a musical work' (Dann 1998: 14). Wulf Herzogenrath describes *Rythmes colorés* as 'painted in 13 strong, darkly glowing colours, several sequences show a journey through the universe, staggered depths in space, twisted, curved paths of light which meet, rebound off one another and separate again' (Herzogenrath 1979: 24). While *Rythmes colorés* were individual paintings, they were conceived as a sequence, an abstract painting in time. In *Soirées de Paris*, Survage explained his goal:

> I will animate my painting, I will give it movement, I will introduce rhythm into the concrete action of my abstract painting, born of my interior life; my instrument will be the cinematographic film, this true symbol of accumulated movement. It will execute the 'scores' of my vision, corresponding to my state of my mind in its successive phases.
>
> I am creator of a new visual art in time, that of coloured rhythm and of rhythmic colour. (Russett and Starr 1976: 36)

Note that even though Survage seeks to liberate painting by creating 'a new visual art in time', one different from music, conventional painting or other forms of film, his language still rests on musical analogies and cannot be separated completely from other media.[3] In addition, Survage's vision of a moving visual art 'born of his inner life' is an unmistakable echo of Wassily Kandinsky's writing on abstraction.[4]

Orphist painter Sonia Delaunay and the Scottish Vorticist Duncan Grant undertook projects related to those of Survage. Delaunay's illustration of poet Blaise Cendrars's *La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (1913) was printed as a collaborative book, with Delaunay's lively painted abstractions running alongside the story's text, to which the artist added splashes of colour. The composition unfolded into a single seven-foot-long combination of word and image. Cendrars's text recounts two long train trips and skips backward and forward in time (Eskilson 2007: 149–50). Delaunay's abstract colour and forms act as visual counterpoint, featuring circular forms that speak to the non-linear quality of the narrative. The book thus represents a notable attempt to impart an element of time via a scroll-like composition, anticipating the work of scroll painters-turned animators Hans Richter (*Rhythmus 21*, 1921) and Viking Eggeling (*Symphonie Diagonal*, 1924). In 1914, Grant constructed a device that mechanically advanced a painted scroll, the whole of which was obscured from the viewer's perspective save for a small, cut-out square. This window acted as the screen for his moving painting of geometric forms. Grant's *Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound* was, as the title indicates, to be accompanied by music (Weibel 2006: 16).

Having declared in 1918 that 'It makes no sense to paint any more. This painting must be set in motion', Walther Ruttmann utilized a paint-on-glass method to create his *Lichtspiel: Opus I*, the first abstract film screened for the public in 1921. Filmed frame-by-frame, *Opus I* borrowed its sense of temporal elasticity from music and its

imagery from abstract painting. Darting crescents, swelling triangles and sweeping circular forms danced across the screen without a narrative or plot to guide viewers. Ruttmann wanted to make a new art form that would spur the development of a new kind of artist, one who would 'occupy a middle-ground between painting and music' ([1919] 1989: 102–03). This new art, then, was not painting, nor was it film, nor music. It was a hybrid form with its own potentials and material properties. These new works were abstractions in time, mechanical paintings made possible by the workings of the cinematic apparatus.

Although the efforts of the German avant-garde helped spur the production of many painted films, such as those made in the 1930s and 1940s by Len Lye, Norman McLaren and Harry Smith, Ruttmann's model of filmed painting would take longer to find followers. One such was Francis Lee's anti-war film *1941* (1941), a work that has been largely ignored by film histories but that provides a crucial early example of a filmed painting, albeit one that is significantly different from Ruttmann's in both technique and tone. Categorized as unfit for service in World War II, Lee enlisted as a United States Army photographer, and he documented the invasion of Normandy. In *1941*, the artist sets up the camera in front of a blank canvas, but its edges cannot be seen. Our entire field of vision is the surface of what is being painted.

An egg appears. It is smashed by a hammer, leaving a splatter of red paint. Blue-black paint pours from the top of the frame, forming a river coursing through a field of white and red. At times, Lee cuts discontinuously between frames so that we see paint appear as if by magic. At others, he makes use of following shots that travel along paint that is eddying, dripping or running. Milky white slowly mingles and pools within a pond of dark blue, a flow of red vascularly bisects a visibly damp blue and white assemblage. The viewer becomes increasingly aware of the physical qualities of the paint – its thickness, its colour, its application. As in so many works of abstract art, the film's title is a crucial entry point for our reading. *1941* refers to the battlefields of Europe, the splash of red standing in for blood. Lee's use of red, and later, white and blue, a reference perhaps, to the colours of the US flag, eventually gives way to blacks and greys as he intercuts images of light bulbs on fire, their globes broken and hollowed out, their power extinguished, seemingly violated. These scenes of everyday objects in the act of being destroyed function as a metaphor for the light leaving soldiers' eyes (the bulbs), for the fragility of life (the eggs) and for the American lives that were reduced to smoke, ember and ash (the dulling of the colour palette). The film also predates Pollock's use of poured and drip painting by six years, thus placing cinema as one of the unacknowledged launching pads of Abstract Expressionism.

In Lee's filmed painting, the artist's hand is obscured, and the traditional tools associated with classical painting – brushes, palette, knife – are abandoned in order to present a kind of painting in which the application and behaviour of the paint is seen as more important than any completed composition. Paint here acts as both an indication of the process by which Lee arrived at this imagery, and as an abstraction of the carnage he witnessed. This combination of painting and film is made possible by the documentary capacity of cinema. Painting here is fragmented in the process of becoming a composition that can only be understood through exposure to the entire duration of a film, not as the end product or the last 'resolved' image we see on-screen. The film grants us access to an aspect of painting denied to us in a museum or gallery setting – when the paint is still wet, when the image is not yet complete. This cinematic painting, in other words, exists only as a film. To see it as a static work of art would be to deny its specificity, its characteristics of movement, sustained attention and dynamic transformation.

Contra Ruttmann, Lee offers an example that demonstrates the range of filmed paintings. The use of film to document painting may also take the conventional form of depicting an artist painting in her studio, as in Mary Lance's *Agnes Martin: With*

My Back to the World (2002), or Peter Greenaway's murder-mystery exegesis of *The Night Watch* in *Rembrandt's J'Accuse …!* (2008). In addition, filmed paintings may adopt a more experimental approach; for his famous *Jackson Pollock* (1951), film-maker Hans Namuth positions his camera under the glass the artist is painting on in order to demonstrate how an artist applies paint, how a composition is created, the use of negative space and how a composition changes over time. Animator Oskar Fischinger shot planes of painted Plexiglas frame-by-frame in his *Motion Painting No. 1* (1951), while David Haxton's minimalist *Painting Room Lights* (1981), discussed below, does what the title says in order to explore the relation between representing two- and three-dimensional space in painting and film in an unbroken, nearly nine-minute shot. In Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Mystère Picasso* (1956), translucent paper and newly developed inks that bleed through the paper's surface without running fill the space of the film frame. Onto this 'canvas' emerge Picasso's strokes in real time, thus establishing a direct correlation between the painter's canvas stretchers and the cinematic frame.[5]

If Lee's *1941* mobilizes painting as a mode of poetic, metaphorical expression, American photographer and film-maker David Haxton's *Painting Room Lights* (1981) offers a sly didacticism that reveals the interconnected relationships of painting to cinema, sculpture and performance. Indeed, *Painting Room Lights* is a kind of filmed painting that also doubles as a treatise on cinematic illusion. The film begins with an unmarked white surface. A hand appears screen right and paints a black diagonal line starting at the upper left of the screen. A landscape is created with a few brush-strokes – a pyramid, and part of a second pyramid, with a rectangular volume in the foreground. A light is turned on, revealing a deep-space photographic composition of an artist in a studio, which is visible through the landscape. The viewer quickly discerns that the image is presented in negative. The colours red, white and black are in actuality produced by the green lights illuminating the space. The back wall of the studio has a large semicircular window. A stepladder is visible near the window. The 'landscape' is exposed as a dense matrix of thin ropes near to the camera (the areas where the ropes intersect or fray become apparent as they are physically painted by the performer).

The artist climbs the ladder and begins to paint the two vertical forms nearer to the back wall. These objects, it turns out, are the titular lights in the room. The lights become thinner as the backs and sides are covered in paint, and the light in the room changes. The effect on-screen is the gradual emptying out of red into white. The painter himself seems to disappear as his ghostly form darts in front of the light on the screen right. The composition now appears as it did at the start of the film, though the 'land-scape' is now punctuated by the two vertical lights, which appear as straight lines. The painter then reappears screen right, much closer to the camera. He seems to reach through the composition to add more lines in the middle ground of the landscape. His additional painted lines resolve as a room in one-point perspective, transforming the landscape in to a kind of cross-section of a house. Just as quickly he brandishes a pair of scissors and cuts the lines that formed the initial landscape, leaving the outline of a room with windows against the back wall (this is not the same as the 'real' wall of the studio that was shown earlier in the film). The performer turns on two more vertical lights, hidden until this moment, in the foreground of the composition. They glow pinkish red, and he begins painting these as well. As a result, the room once more resolves to white. He cuts the lines of the painted room, leaving the skeletal form of the four room lights. The two lights in the foreground are now thick red smears. The ones in the back are green/black strips, with red tips on the bottom, their reflection on the floor. The picture shimmers sporadically as the almost completely invisible painter moves through the space. An incursion of red bursts through the frame, and the 'real' studio space is made visible again as the performer rips paper away from the window

5. Another example is Jules Engel's filmic portrait of Paul Jenkins, in which the camera focuses tightly on the painter's performative swirling and shaping of eddying acrylics as they drip across his tilted papers and canvases in *The Ivory Knife* (1965).

on the back wall. The negative image makes the paper look white, so that what remains after the paper is removed is blackness. This blackness is, in reality, daylight pouring into the space. The artist exits screen right, and the final image is the black space, dimly punctuated by the painted lights.

Eschewing both the animated style of *Opus I* or the jarring editing patterns of *1941*, the entirety of *Painting Room Lights* is an unbroken shot presented as a single image that unfolds in time. The film presents a number of binaries and reversals related to film and painting that can only be exhibited or resolved by their combination. The film creates many of its effects by being presented as a photographic negative, a literal reversal of the image of reality being presented. Painting over the lights paradoxically brightens the room. Daylight becomes darkness, providing the film with its own fade to black. The viewer cannot trust her own eyes. What seems to be paint on paper turns out to be paint on ropes in space. Haxton directs our vision through his manipulation of painterly and cinematic space, though only the affordances of film allow Haxton to pull off his magic tricks of light. By painting the lines hung in the studio, Haxton first demonstrates how painting creates the illusion of space in three dimensions. When the viewer later realizes that what she is seeing is not, in fact, a painting on flat surface, but rather a sculptural installation of ropes in three-dimensional space, she becomes aware of cinema's capacity to flatten the space in order for it to appear as a two-dimensional image. *Painting Room Lights* is a brief performance in time that required months of preparation on Haxton's part.

This intermedial work could not exist outside of its cinematic properties, yet its effects could not be realized without the making and unmaking of its sculptural properties or the physical act of painting in real time. This artwork operates as a series of nested pieces comprising a whole. The changing nature of the composition could not be achieved solely in performance, as the layers of illusion – the hung ropes, the depth of space – would be too readily apparent without the employment of the negative image. Nevertheless, Haxton insists on the bodily presence of the artist, who affects the changes in the image. The early arrival of the hand shows painting in action. The later framing of the body is critical: at first small within the cavernous space of the studio and later close to the camera, before the artist is seemingly erased by the effects of his own work. Haxton's interest in illusion and his use of the tableau refer back to cinema's origins, and particularly the ludic special effects of Méliès. Here, Haxton provides his own handmade effects, eschewing film editing for the literal cutting of the image in real time. As he snips the ropes he has painted, the image changes; the cuts provide a change of scene, from house to studio, a reversal of outside to inside, even as the space remains the same. Haxton also gives us a play of figuration and varying degrees of abstraction – from the minimal landscape to the identifiably human body of the performer, whose features remain obscured, to the film's final move into complete opacity.

Painter, film-maker and scholar Robert Bruce Rogers, who created several animated films of visual music, including the etched, drawn and painted-on films *Toccata Manhatta* and *Round Trip in Modern Art* (both 1948), provides one of the earliest, and only attempts to theorize time-based paintings. In a 1952 essay in the *Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, he presents his understanding of what he terms 'motion paintings':

> A motion painting may be described as the expression of an artist's intention in the form of an organized 'river' of light and form – more or less abstract, more or less independent of or integrated with other elements and arts. The relative values and qualities of a motion composition, as a work of art in its own right, are determined by the type of its organization, type of impact in creatively plastic terms, response-capacity of the audience and, above all, by the stamina of the work in the tests of time. (Rogers 1952: 375)

Rogers builds upon French art historian Élie Faure's term 'cineplastics', coined in 1918, to describe the intermedial shift from painting to cinema. Faure identified it with an intellectual current that sought better ways of depicting motion, progressing from canvas to screen. For Rogers, this form of painting was a direct expression of motion delivered in an 'organized' continuity, with the implication that the resultant patterns of 'light and form' are not haphazard or random but intentional, and provide some measure of utility or meaning (1952: 376).

This position is confirmed in Rogers's writing about his own work. Rogers asserted that in motion painting, the visual assumes primacy over narrative, the programmatic and the representational. Even if a static abstract painting presents a number of different points of attention for the viewer, the picture always remains constant and can be contemplated as a single image. In contrast, the ever-changing nature of the abstract film, which might present as many as 24 distinct images a second, renders such sustained engagement impossible. An impression may linger in the viewer's mind, but the specificity of the exact compositions is fleeting. Rogers believed this quality to be a virtue, and he contended that a motion painting could be re-viewed in the manner of a piece of music being listened to repeatedly. Rogers claimed that such re-viewing holds the possibility of 'increasing enjoyment or value on such repeated occasions. It is, in fact, precisely the increase of plastically expressive content and the corresponding reduction of habitual narrative or decorative thinking in the film medium, which brings about this quality of durability' (Rogers 1952: 379–80).[6]

Rogers's ideas about the 'value' of his own motion paintings refer back to Ruttmann's *Opus I*, as well as to Lee's *1941*. These are films that expand upon repeated viewings and bring emphasis, by virtue of their chiastic displays, to the medium of film itself. Though art historian E. H. Gombrich was sceptical about abstract art, he argued in 1958 that painterly abstraction might reach its potential through film:

> Abstract art to me are like works of colour music but my reactions to the best abstract canvases fade into the sphere of the merely decorative when compared to great music because they lack the dimension of time. This dimension of time may develop in the medium of film. There may be films in which shapes undergo destinies comparable to the themes of a symphony; rearing up here into unexpected brightness, shrinking there into gloom. Such an art might even gradually build up a framework of conventions like the one which made Western music possible; that system of expectations within which the musician creates, even when he defies it. (1958: 148)

Of course, abstract art has flourished within culture and the marketplace, whereas abstract film remains marginalized in the study, production and reception of cinema. Even more than is the case with abstract paintings, painted films and filmed paintings throw up several impediments to interpretation, precisely due to their temporal element. These films carry temporal ambiguity – one cannot necessarily remember what has come before, or conceive of or anticipate what will happen next. Abstractions in time are not causal, measurable or necessarily sequential. There is thus some degree to which the abstract cinematic image remains unstable, and perhaps even unsolvable.

What is to be made of such ambiguity? José Antonio Sistiaga's … *era erera baleibu izik subua aruaren* … (1968–1970), is a painted film that productively complicates cinematic and painterly perception while offering several interpretive paths towards understanding moving image abstraction. While Sistiaga is certainly not alone in making paint-on-film works – his pursuits are shared by a host of avant-garde film-makers, past and present, including Stan Brakhage, Jennifer Reeves, Steven Woloshen, Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Harry Smith, Jennifer West, among many

6. Rogers also develops his thinking along Greenbergian lines, arguing that rather than providing a window on the world or a space for illusion, cineplastics considers how 'the entire picture plane is regarded as an effective object' (Rogers 1952: 380).

others – he is the only artist to create a feature-length painted film. Working twelve to seventeen hours a day, he completed the work in 1970, when it had its debut in Madrid. Comprised of 108,000 hand-painted frames left to dry in the heat of the Ibiza sun, Sistiaga's 75-minute, 35mm film was inspired by his viewings of Norman McLaren's handmade animations. Like McLaren, Sistiaga painted directly onto transparent film, using brushes, felt-tip pens, India ink, sand and soap bubbles. Some sequences are composed frame-by-frame, while others are painted across frame lines. In its hail-storm of painted imagery – nearly each frame courses with furious constellations of dots or tidal washes of colour – Sistiaga seems to be literalizing early film theorist Ricciotto Canudo's claim that the cinema is 'plastic art in motion' (Merjian 2003: 17).

Made without photography, Sistiaga's depiction of inner and outer space challenges the claim of cinema's putative indexical relationship to reality, its analogic tether to the world. Here, rather than acting as a representation of the world, the index becomes the sun, salt and soap that leaves its trace on the film, as well as a precise account of the artist's hand, his application of paint within and across the framelines.

Just as his composition across framelines frustrates the conventional utility of the separation between frames, which allows the human eye to rest and make sense of what has been and is being seen, Sistiaga more generally recasts principles of paint-erly composition through his continually-evolving use of negative space, colour rela-tionships, depth and highly complex figure/background relations. Composition here cannot be understood on the level of a shot or sequence, as in a conventional photo-graphic film. Nor can it be understood in terms of a still image. For Sistiaga, composi-tion is not merely the arrangement of image and colour in space or on a surface; rather, it is the arrangement of those elements over time. The composition, then, is a series of painted frames that retain their unique characteristics even as they are transformed by the cinematic apparatus into single work of perpetual transformation that takes over an hour to complete.

Sistiaga's welter of shifting, pulsating colours commingles representations of interi-ority and exteriority, and is at once a depiction of a cosmic circulatory system as well as the firing synapses of a galactic mind. The film is also rife with metaphoric tenden-cies, as hints of landscape and natural phenomena (the flow of electrons, snowstorms) enter and leave the frame. Sistiaga's play of colours over a near-constant white back-ground can also be understood as a literal attempt to inscribe his life force against the ever-present void of death – a paradoxical attempt, via the bodily, handmade referent, to transcend the corporeal and time.

The film is intentionally silent, although the film-maker contends that it represents a kind of music. Made in the waning years of Franco's rule, Sistiaga's film is also a *cri de coeur*, a score-settling, silent scream of protest:

> Firstly, I felt the need to revenge myself on everyone, all the organizations and people who had thrown obstacles into the path of creation; I wanted to take revenge for their lack of sensitivity and love, for their cowardice and terror of everything that is not a consumer product or does not promise immediate ma-terial or political gain, everything that escapes their control of the economy. I felt profoundly oppressed. I had no economic resources. I felt desperate, after a long battle in the field of teaching, trying to apply, through practice, other, more human and creative educational approaches. (Riera 2007: 63–65)

Sistiaga's abstractions, then, resulted from his frustrations with the limitations of polit-ical rhetoric and were born of penury. Far more than a merely beautiful *mélange* of colour and form, the film stands, somewhat shockingly, as a protest film that cannot articulate its rage through language or even music. It is important to remember the political conditions under which the film was made. Basque nationalists had been

engaged in a prolonged and violent struggle with Francoists. 1968, the year Sistiaga started working on the film, marked the first confirmed assassinations by the separatist group ETA, and the public use of Basque language was highly restricted. Sistiaga's work was subject to censorship. His use of abstraction, then, can be understood not only as an aesthetic strategy, but also as a necessary political strategy for avoiding interference in his art. Similarly, the film's title was a deliberate nose-thumbing at the Spanish authorities, who demanded a Spanish translation of any Basque film. Sistiaga responded by giving them a title that could not be subsumed into Spanish, stubbornly retaining the film's independence and identity as a Basque signifier.

As indicated by the insufficiency of any description of the film to relate the experience of actually seeing it, … *ere erera* … presents a phenomenological challenge: We are confronted by a filmic space, an ongoing event of movement and colour, which is almost too much to take in, too much to process. Sistiaga uses cinematic spectacle to overwhelm the viewer's senses. He brings elements of the natural world, forever in flux, indoors into the space of the theatre – abstracted, reordered and subject to a Cageian indeterminacy of choice and chance.

This does not mean, however, that the film cannot be understood. It may resist or frustrate certain interpretive schema, but the film's ambiguity can also be recuperated, in part, by recourse to the concept of sensation. In an essay published in December 1965, Timothy Leary laid out an argument regarding the capabilities of psychedelic drugs to foster new forms of non-verbal communication and artistic expression. He theorized a new transcendental media form, Tranart, that would 'keep up with the speed and breadth of the direct sensation'. Leary's concept anticipates contemporary discussions of affect, Deleuzian sensation and the archive, sketching out the ways art could reach the viewer pre-consciously, through 'attempts to get back to the cortical flash'. He found antecedents for Tranart in abstract painting, the physical structure of the eye's retina and in the detailed patterning of oriental rugs. Tranart, he argued, would make use of vast libraries comprised of both Direct Process Images, or images that captured the experience of living energy, and that were 'flowing, unstructured, unidentifiable', as well as Learned Form Images, or images that were familiar and 'artifactual' (Leary 1965: 431–60). The idea of images carrying energy indicates an art that exceeds visuality and extends to a Bergsonian *élan vital*. Even that now-hoary phrase, 'blowing minds', a favourite of Leary's, speaks to a desire to short-circuit the brain's apperceptive faculties in favour of a directly experienced burst of sensation that exceeds the mind's capacity for comprehension. For Deleuze, who discusses the phenomenon in relation to the paintings of Francis Bacon, sensation is an affective experience prior to apperception, in which the viewer encounters the visual event through a bodily-felt shock. Abstraction is a condition that can produce sensation – familiarity breeds recognition, which mutes sensation. The image that is too easily recognized, in other words, cannot produce the kind of corporeal reaction to the visual. By that same token, some bodies are inured to the sensation of abstraction, and find themselves numbed, rather than shocked, by its effects (and affects).

In his turn to film, Sistiaga was similarly seeking to produce sensation. Shortly after he began work on the film, he took what he had made so far and persuaded the theatre in the town of Fuenterrabía to project the results. He was trying to develop what he calls a 'vibration effect' through paint-on-film methods (Zinman 2014). For Sistiaga, who, for the record, has never taken LSD, this vibration effect is an envisioning of cosmic energy, a music of the spheres made not only visible, but palpable as well. It was the cinematic dispositif that could develop and expand this mode of sensation. Sistiaga's painting on film emphasized changes in the image, thereby accelerating painterly gesture. The length of the work, facilitated by the properties of the moving image, presents abstraction not merely in terms of time, but specifically in terms of duration, a continual experience of painting. Finally, the scale of the film is significant, too; a

projected film image is much larger than even the most heroically scaled Abstract Expressionist canvas. By using the material properties of film, Sistiaga produces an encounter with painting, in terms of time, size and variation, unlike any other.

Can this affective register be sustained? What might initially register as shock or even wonder at the spectacle of the film, depending on the condition of the individual viewer, may give way to a variety of separate or intertwined perceiving states, from anxiety to boredom to meditation. As art historian T. J. Clark has pointed out, some abstract works nullify meaning, a condition that can give rise to the experience of a self-aware viewing subject finding himself or herself confronted by a work that he or she cannot understand (Clark 2001: 339). This may result in the viewer developing a heightened awareness of herself or she may cease to engage with the film altogether. It seems necessary to note, however, that these reactions are not the same ones engendered by the kinds of information overload experienced within our contemporary media environment. There is no 'news' here, no algorithmically determined advertising, nothing to miss out on or to block. It is rather a durational experience of abstraction that is quite unlike the vast majority of our mass media consumption.

A work that seems to cancel out meaning is not the same as a work that is meaningless. The use-value of a meaning-cancelling abstraction may reside not only in the viewer's increasing awareness of his own perceptual apparatus – that is to say, his additional cognizance of participating in the act of looking – but also may result in the viewer's critical faculties being overwhelmed, producing new forms of sensual confusion, delight, terror or knowledge.

In his famous essay 'Painting and cinema' (1950), film theorist André Bazin wrote that cinema freed the arts from their 'convulsive catalepsy' – the frozen stillness of implied movement. Bazin argued that whereas the fixed frame of painting produces an inward contemplation of the static image, film implies an infinite space beyond the frame, which lends cinema an outward trajectory (Bazin [1967] 2005: 164–69). Sistiaga's extreme respatializing and temporalizing of painting lends cinema's centrifugal force to painting, animating the artwork and renewing our engagement with the material in a way neither film nor painting, alone, had ever done before.

Art historian Michael Fried offers another perspective as he describes how the 'all-over' drip-applied action paintings of Jackson Pollock produce not a single focal point but rather 'momentary points of focus for one's attention' that shift over time. Fried extends this idea of a viewing condition that is at once immersive and yet is subject to shifts in attention by suggesting a mode of abstraction that gives rise to 'a new kind of space' in which 'conditions of seeing prevail rather than one in which objects exist' (Fried 1998: 223–225).[7] In Sistiaga's film, the 'conditions of seeing', as Fried might term it, take priority as the rush of painted imagery vitiates the possibility of discerning a discrete image, thus providing a new model for seeing cinematically. These conditions may be different from the ones most viewers associate with moving images, but they are not without their distinct sensory pleasures. As Tom Gunning says, we 'do not just *see* motion […] we *feel* it in our guts or throughout our bodies' (Gunning 2007: 39). The motion we see, and feel in Sistiaga's film may be a way of fulfilling Cézanne's desire to paint 'sensations', beyond rationality (Deleuze [1981] 2003 42).

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead 'rejected the concept of the thing, of the exterior object, in favour of the idea of the event' (quoted in Sitney 1977: 1–2), and this notion of abstraction as 'event' has been taken up by theorists and practitioners as diverse as film scholar P. Adams Sitney and painter Robert Motherwell. Of course, the notion of abstraction as an 'event' also brings to mind art critic Harold Rosenberg's theory of Abstract Expressionist painting as the space of an 'event' rather than 'a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or express an object, actual or imagined' (Rosenberg 1952: 22). Motherwell added his own slant to Whitehead's concept of the duality of abstraction, arguing that abstraction simultaneously serves as a rejection of

7. Anton Ehrenzweig similarly examines work that refuses centered vision and overturns the rationality of Gestalt theory in favour of a 'diffuse, scattered kind of attention'. He terms this process 'low-level vision' or 'dedifferentiation', and explains that the overwhelmed perceptual apparatus turns to the unconscious mind in order to fuse imagery into an understandable whole. See (1967), *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press.

and an attempt to be one with a universe from which one feels separate. According to Motherwell, abstract art came into existence not merely as a response to photography's purported technologically superior ability to represent the world, but also, and more importantly, as a means of constructing an experiential, sensuous bridge between the individual and the world. Abstraction arrived 'as the consequence of a most profound, relentless, unquenchable need. The need is for felt experience – intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic' (Motherwell 1951: 12). In his own art, Motherwell sought to provide affective textures through automatic compositions that combined negative space with gestural marks that bring to mind organic and inorganic forms. With its emphasis on bodily-perceived 'vibration', Sistiaga's film answers Motherwell's call for 'felt experience' as it negotiates a rejection of and reconciliation with the world and with being, an aim encapsulated by its maker's understanding of the work as an opportunity to 'take the rationalist blindfold off and enjoy the unknown with serenity' (Janés 1996: 173).

Carolee Schneemann, who works in film, performance and painting, argues that 'the senses crave sources of maximum information', adding:

> I have the sense that in learning, our best developments grow from works which initially strike us as 'too much'; those which are intriguing, demanding, that lead us to experiences, which we feel we cannot encompass, but which simultaneously provoke and encourage our efforts. (1979: 9–11)

Applying Schneemann's thoughts to the discussion of Sistiaga's film, the 'too much' of his unyielding storm of moving abstraction is not a pulling away from, but rather a movement *towards* reality, a recalibration of our relation to the world via our stimulated senses. The viewer does not have a choice: however, she responds to what she has just seen, she will have to re-enter the world after the film ends. Through this durational experience of abstraction, the viewer has seen images that do not readily correspond to what she sees in her everyday reality. The shift from Sistiaga's abstractions back to the world may result, however briefly, in her seeing, but also perceiving, and, as Schneemann suggestions, questioning the world in a different way. Considering the conditions under which Sistiaga's film was made, that perception may have not only aesthetic ramifications, but political and social ones as well. Here we see the linkage to perceptual stimulation that may reach beyond our ability to apperceive what is experienced. We may emerge from the overwhelming experience changed, even if we cannot pinpoint the exact nature of that change. Ultimately, the film presents motion painting as a means of renewal: for the film-maker/painter, a renewal of self, for the viewer, a renewal of vision, answering Sistiaga's call to see the world anew, to reorient and reopen all of our senses to the world at large.

Cinema has never been entirely constrained by its practices nor are its boundaries as a medium concretized. Painted films and filmed paintings, which occur between, while making use of, diverse media and mediums, provide reference points for rethinking the moving image in this more expansive capacity. They suggest, moreover, how time, as an idea and as a material affordance of the cinema, was a key instigator in developing intermedial artworks designed to invigorate and expand the possibilities of painting. In turn, painted films and filmed paintings also present myriad possibilities for thinking about cinema: as a cinema without photography, a cinema whose dominant mode is affective, a cinema that reveals painting as a process while utilizing that becoming as its imagistic wellspring.

Today, the moving image's digital modes increasingly collide not with painting, but rather with technologies of architecture and video games in order to spatially extend film's properties of representation into bodily experiences occurring in three dimensions. Such emergent technologies capable of producing immersive virtual

and augmented realities promise an expanded sensory engagement with the visual through touch and interactive gesture. Though their earliest applications will likely be machining, design-based and pornographic, it is not beyond the realm of the imagination to conceive of a collaboratively constructed moving painting occurring in three dimensions. Such a frameless abstraction in time and space would once again allow us to re-envision and rethink the boundaries of painting and cinema, thereby opening our eyes-as well as our minds and bodies-to new ways of seeing.

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Architecture and the Virtual

Marta Jecu

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