Framing Forces: Models of Cinema Expressed by Films that Frame Painting

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Biography

Simon Payne is an experimental filmmaker. His work has shown in a numerous film festivals, cinemas and galleries, including: Anthology Film Archives, New York; Rotterdam International Film Festival; European Media Arts Festival, Osnabrück; London and Edinburgh Film Festivals; Serpentine Gallery; Tate Modern and Tate Britain. In 2008 he curated a series of film programmes entitled *Colour Field Films and Videos* for Tate Modern. In 2013/14 he was co-curator of *Assembly: A Survey of Recent Artists' Films and Videos Made in Britain* at Tate Britain. His videos are distributed by the artists' film and video organisation LUX. Simon Payne is Senior Lecturer in Film and Media Studies at Anglia Ruskin University.

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Abstract

This essay looks at ways in which a number of films have employed painting in order to substantiate the aesthetics of cinema that they envisage. The focus of the essay specifically concerns the differences between centrifugal and centripetal forces at the edges of paintings and the limits of the film frame. Beginning with examples from narrative cinema, the essay turns to look at crossovers between the aesthetics of painting and cinema in the context of experimental film, from early exponents of abstract cinema in the 1920s through to more recent examples.

Keywords

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This essay looks at a number of films that employ paintings to substantiate the aesthetics of cinema that each of them envisages differently. It begins with two examples that span narrative cinema: Alfred Hitchcock's first sound picture *Blackmail* (1929) and *Vincent and Theo* (1990) by the director Robert Altman. Paintings are significant props in these films: in *Blackmail* an easel painting plays a key witness to the murder that the plot revolves around, while Altman's film is a biopic of van Gogh. Taking up a characterization of the difference between cinema and painting that derives from André Bazin (1967) and Stanley Cavell (1971) my interest concerns a tension, when films frame paintings, between cinema's capacity for representing the world at large, and painting's demarcation of a world by way of its definite edges. In contrast to the fixed surface area of a painting, Bazin and Cavell imply that the cinematic image derives its power from the implication that the camera could, at any moment, pan, tilt or track back to include a wider picture of the world that it represents. This characterisation is particularly pertinent to realist narrative cinema, but it is not anathema to other modes of filmmaking, including visionary, experimental films such as Marie Menken's little seen *Mood Mondrian* (1958) and Nicky Hamlyn's recent *Correspondences* (2011). The abstract films of Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, progenitors of avant-garde film in the 1920s, propose a different model of cinema altogether, where film and painting come together.

My references here are largely historical, but looking backwards with open eyes can always shed light on the present. Underlying my discussion of the way that films have framed paintings is a concern for thinking about the way that the frame of the digital screen refers to the world – a concern that informs my own practice. Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the digital screen is its capacity for incorporating other media. In this regard Richter and Eggeling's films are particularly pertinent. They are practically self-proclaimed mixed media works, and could be construed as examples of digital cinema avant la lettre, for reasons I go into below, but all of the films that I discuss below conceive of one medium (cinema) with recourse to another (painting) which they either encompass or frame.

The first example that I want to look at is a key scene from the film *Blackmail* (1929) directed by Alfred Hitchcock, which involves a painting of a jester. The central character of the film, Alice (Anny Ondra), having become bored by her policeman fiancée (John Longden), skips off with a dandy-artist (Cyril Ritchard) who takes her to his garret. As Alice peruses his studio, she is confronted by a painting of a laughing jester, which is standing on an easel. She thinks it an accomplished painting, but the jester's pointing finger and silent laugh are decidedly mocking; all the more so after witnessing Alice murder the artist with a bread knife when he assaults her. Directly after the crime, the scene alternates between close-ups that show Alice's look of horror (shot from the point-of-view of the painting) and the jester's grim, grinning face that returns her gaze (shot from Alice's point-of-view). In this play of looks the painting becomes a character, a recurrent theme in Hitchcock's films. *Vertigo* (1958) is the most famous example, but the overt nature of this particular scene in *Blackmail*, in which we are invited to identify with the jester's perspective, is perhaps the most pointed example in Hitchcock's oeuvre. The final shots of the scene show Alice raising her knife (to the camera) and then slashing the painting (in a reverse-shot). In

this instant the canvas is made a metaphor for the screen, while the attack of the painting represents a damning indictment of the spectator's bourgeois prurience.

In contrast to *Blackmail*, which is a direct and acerbic formulation on scopophilia, Robert Altman's more recent film, *Vincent and Theo* (1990), is characterised by scenes in which actions and events seem to unfold, in front of the camera, naturalistically and at a distance. Correspondingly, van Gogh's paintings are only ever seen in long or mid-shots, in the context of a mise-en-scène that represents the wider world. Various scenes show Vincent (Tim Roth) at his easel en plein air, for example, and the first episode of the film opens with television footage of the Christie's auction in 1987 at which the *Sunflowers* sold for £22½ million. In this respect, the film distances the viewer from the paintings that it presents. A notable exception is the scene that depicts Vincent's visit to Hendrik Willem Mesdag's *Panorama of Schevenigen*, with his mistress Sien Hoornik (Jip Wijngaarden) and her young daughter Marie (Anne Canovas). The scene starts with a pan across the seaside town of Schevenigen and its coastline. The panorama fills the frame, so that we experience its beguiling illusion almost as the characters in the film do. 'It's so real,' Sien exclaims, which is just what the viewer was surely thinking. In a further testament to its convincing illusion, the reverse sweep of the panorama terminates with Marie vaulting the barrier, between the public and the painting, and hitching up her dress to piss in the surrounding sand as freely as she would if she was really at the beach.

When the film frame enters into the space of a painting the latter loses its borders. In *Blackmail*, this allows Hitchcock to implicate the viewer, psychologically, as the dumb witness of a traumatic event. Our momentary disorientation in front of the panorama in *Vincent and Theo* signals a different conception of cinema. The exploratory camerawork clearly aspires to the model of the panorama that it depicts. Another key difference between these two scenes is the fact that Hitchcock was working on a set with props – even his actors are treated rather like props – whereas Altman was shooting on location in front of the original *Panorama of Schevenigen*, which is still on display today.

A significant statement about cinema is being proposed when it encroaches upon, or encompasses, painting: the potential of one mode of representation is being tested against the limitations of the other. Other films could be called upon to illustrate this and the reader may have other examples come to mind. The logic of the examples that I've chosen here is that they point to two ends of a spectrum that can be schematised as a formalist (Hitchcock) or realist (Altman) approach to narrative cinema.

In the essay 'Painting and Cinema' the film theorist André Bazin (n.d., p.166) distinguishes between the forces at play at the edges of the film image in contrast to the orienting frame of a painting:

> The outer edges of the screen are not, as the technical jargon would seem to imply, the frame of the film image. They are the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality. The picture frame polarizes spaces inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe. A frame is centripetal, the screen centrifugal.

Opposing forces meet when films frame paintings it would seem, and in tandem with conflict at the edge of the image, the scale of a painting is obscured, the surface is made flat, and colour is only ever an approximation. But contrary to the suggestion that film necessarily does a disservice to painting, Bazin doesn't conceive of painting and cinema as mutually exclusive. Instead, he proposes that cinema can open paintings up to new means of examination and display. In keeping with my mention of Altman's *Vincent and Theo*, a key film for Bazin was *Van Gogh* (1948) by Alain Resnais, R. Hessens and Gaston Diehl. The film tells the tale of van Gogh's life through narration that accompanies shots that track the surface of his paintings, picking out details and motifs that illustrate his art and biography. The material surface of the paintings are abstracted - not least of all because the film is in black and white - but Resnais' treatment of the paintings is, for Bazin (p.169), less a transformation than a revelation: 'Did we really know before we saw Resnais' film, what van Gogh looked like stripped of his yellows?' In contrast to claims for the uniqueness or specificity of cinema's aesthetics, Bazin believed that the potential of the medium corresponded with the regard that a film director held for the world, and its artefacts, as they might be disclosed before the camera.

A distinction between centripetal and centrifugal forces also figures in the context of Rosalind Krauss' essay 'Grids' (1979), which analyses the tensions underpinning the mythic status of the grid as the emblem of modernist painting. For Krauss (p. 19) the centrifugal grid 'operates from the work of art outward, compelling our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame', while the centripetal grid works from 'the outer limits of the aesthetic object inwards,' separating 'the work of art from the world.' Though the essay doesn't refer to cinema directly, the evocation of filmic aesthetics is striking. In characterising the nature of the grid at one of its extremes, Krauss (p.21) suggests that 'beyond-the frame examples often entail the dematerialization of the surface, the dispersal of matter into perceptual flicker or implied motion.' What could be more redolent of the movies, or the flicks, than implied motion and perceptual flicker? Alongside her characterisation of grids at the other extreme - 'within-the-frame grids are generally more materialist in character,' (p. 21) – Krauss also refers to the tensions between centrifugal and centripetal forces in certain artworks, which she classifies as schizophrenic. Such a tension calls to mind cinema again, albeit a particular branch of cinema: several 'structural' films by Kurt Kren, Peter Gidal, Malcolm Le Grice, Paul Sharits and Michael Snow, amongst others, turn on tensions between the material qualities of a projected film print - the visibility of the film's grain or its splice marks for example - and the temporal nature of cinema that makes one's sense of material presence a momentary experience.

In their different ways, the accounts of centripetal and centrifugal forces in Bazin and Krauss argue for a relationship to the world that is expanded or opened up. The target for Krauss (p.9) is the grid that signals modernism's 'will to silence' and its being cut off from the world through its 'hostility to language, narrative and discourse.' In Bazin's philosophy of cinema, the issue of framing is to do with the breadth of what filmmaking is able to encompass, and reveal, in its capacity to represent the world in images that bear its likeness. Bazin's references to painting don't stray into abstraction, and Krauss's 'Grids' doesn't mention cinema, but film and modernist painting are butted up provocatively in Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed* (1971), where an ontology cinema that follows from Bazin is directly compared with the conditions of modernist painting that Krauss critiques. For Cavell, the defining

characteristic of cinema - its 'automatism' - is the technological capacity to reproduce a recognisable image of the world, whereas the defining condition of modernist painting is its internal orientation and self-sufficiency.

In contrast to *Blackmail* and *Vincent and Theo*, where different models of cinema are allegorised in key scenes that combine images of paintings with characters' transgressions, several avant-garde films make painting's aesthetics the primary object of vision. The abstract films of the 1920s by Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling are classic examples. The form-language of Richter's *Rhythm 21* (1921) was elaborated by way of scroll paintings and time-based graphic scores, but its basic components – white squares and rectangles on black, and vice versa - derive from the grids associated with the paintings of Malevich, Mondrian and van Doesburg. In his own account, Richter (in Grey, 1971, p.131) attempts to distance the language of *Rhythm 21* from that of his contemporaries' paintings, arguing that the film concerns movement rather than form. 'They look like rectangles and squares,' he admits, but only because 'you have to limit the movement of the space somehow, otherwise you always come out with the black or white canvas – the film projection canvas.' As this statement suggests, Richter could only go so far in describing his film without recourse to painting. A subsequent film, *Rhythm 23* (1923), adds thin diagonal forms to the mix, bridging the planar, geometric language of *Rhythm 21* and the work of Richter's collaborator Viking Eggeling, whose *Diagonal Symphony* (1924) is far more linear, arithmetic and what we might now call 'vector-based'.

In the essay 'Film as Pure Form' Theo van Doesburg (1929, p.8) refers to the 'form film', and Richter and Eggeling's work in particular, as a 'new type of art, an art in which the "one thing after another" of music and the "one thing next to another" of painting are brought together in one'. But he is also critical of the films of artists who have come to cinema by way of painting, suggesting that the 'abstract film was based on the erroneous idea that the projection surface was equivalent to the picture surface of traditional painting' (van Doesburg 1929, p. 8). As early as 1923, in statements that are prescient of certain works of 'expanded cinema' in the 1960s and '70s, van Doesburg (cited in Fabre and Wintgens Hötte, 2009, p.161) was proclaiming that it was 'light and not the surface which is the means of expression'. According to van Doesburg's criteria, Richter and Eggeling's films were too two-dimensional. This criticism of Richter and Eggeling's films in fact followed the logic of van Doesburg's critique of Mondrian's 'neoplasticism', a term that also applied to his own paintings until around 1924 (Baljeu, 1974, p. 66). In van Doesburg's 'counter-compositions' the newly added oblique orientation of his grids provided another dimension to the limited field that neoplasticism had hitherto dealt with. Similarly, the abstract film also required another dimension to achieve it's fullest potential as 'pure form'.

To return to Krauss (1979, p. 12) momentarily, it's worth adding that her analysis of the centripetal or centrifugal orientation of the grid is to do with tracing ambiguities regarding its 'connection to matter on the one hand and spirit on the other', which, she suggests, modernism represses. The version of modernism that van Doesburg's art represents is a counter-example, in so far as the grids that he deploys across painting, architecture, design and typography are aligned with references to matter and spirit alike. The summation of van Doesburg's vision, which he called Elementarism, was the synthesis of a 'universal method of plastic expression and production' aimed at 'liberation and the ascent to a higher level of human spiritual activity' (van Doesburg,

1926, p.159). Richter and Eggeling had similar aspirations: for one thing they jointly penned a manifesto concerning the 'universal language' of their films. Attending to their formal aesthetics alone, the films might well be classified as centripetal: everything is orientated inwards, and they make no appeal to off-screen space - the world as it would be revealed were the camera to pan or tilt – in the way that cinema ordinarily does. But quite apart from being cut off from the world, *Rhythm 21* and *Diagonal Symphony* were significant elements in a heady nexus of ideas, spanning Dada, Constructivism and De Stijl, that sought to reimagine the world.

In contrast to van Doesburg's counter-compositions, in which the diagonal is a vector pointing beyond the edges of the canvas, in a gesture towards movement, time and additional dimensions, Mondrian's grids state a commitment to painting as a distinct and separate art form. A number of Mondrian's paintings signal shifting planes in depth, many induce an optical shimmer at the junction horizontals and vertical lines, and some even provoke illusions of movement: the vertical lines in Tate Modern's *Composition with Yellow, Blue and Red* (1937-42) seem to separate or converge as you walk towards and away from the canvas. But the paintings themselves are self-contained. Mondrian's late, iconic painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943) is the subject of Marie Menken's film *Mood Mondrian* (1958). The painting's containment is key in considering the unique model of cinema that Menken's film proposes.

In general Menken's films are characterised by the darting handheld movements of her camera and quick-fire, in-camera editing, which communicate a hyper-responsive and energetic mode of looking. In each of her films there is a sense that she comes to her subject in an improvisatory manner by way of the camera. The weight of the camera in her hands, the way in which she holds and moves with it, and the frequency with which she triggers single frames, are all of a piece with the images that she produces. At the same time, the camerawork is also a response to the objects and places she films: in *Visual Variations on Noguchi* (1945) for example, the camera is led by the contours of Isamu Noguchi's sculptures; in *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (1958-61), shot in the Alhambra, the camera traces the ornate moorish arches and calligraphic stone carvings, and circles beneath cupolas with star-shaped windows. Menken's camera also animates its subject, notably in her film *Go! Go! Go!* (1962-64) where single-frame ('stop-motion') shooting, shot from a travelling car, and various positions on high, animates the architecture, inhabitants and transport routes through, to and from New York City. Properly speaking, there is a dialectical relationship between the action of the camera and its subject, but the stress falls differently in each film.

The ready-made visual array of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* set very specific co-ordinates and confines for Menken, suggesting distinct paths for the camera's animation, directing an otherwise intuitive approach. The film is true to the painting. It's all there, in two or three wide shots that show the canvas in its entirety, but the painting also motivates a unique mode of interpretation.

The overall grid of coloured squares and checkered lines in Mondrian's painting prompts visual rhythmic relationships as the eye recurrently scans from one block to another; and this is what impels Menken's camera as it darts from one point to another, using the painting as a graphic score. *Mood Mondrian* is the temporal rhythm of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* envisaged in time, with the staccato pulse of 24 frames a

second picking up quasi-musical motifs latent in the painting. The five-minute film begins with short shots that cut to different points on the canvas interspersed with horizontal and vertical tracking movements; the handheld camera a counterpoint to Mondrian's stable grid. Swinging camera movements between coloured squares of a similar size are a regular refrain, alternating with held shots and then more complex variations, including zigzags. At two or three points in the film, the camerawork turns into freeform sweeps that whip across the canvas and render Mondrian's squares as off-kilter streaks; neoplasticism thus becomes action painting.

P. Adams Sitney (2008, p.44) suggests that *Mood Mondrian* is one of Menken's lesser films, but he also recognises its daring in taking the Mondrian painting as its subject. *Broadway Boogie Woogie* enforced limitations on a mode of filmmaking that was usually untethered and spatial, but it was not an inappropriate choice of subject. Besides the association between the painting's visual rhythm and film's temporal metre of 24 frames per second, the smaller squares in the checkered lines suggest individual film frames. (Now they might suggest pixels). Several passages of the film go over these lines repeatedly, claiming Mondrian's painting as thoroughly proto-cinematic: top to bottom and left to right swipes, along the checkered lines, suggest the motion of a filmstrip as if reeling through the screen and off the canvas. At other points, larger coloured rectangles echo the edges of the screen. For much of the film, the painting is only just in focus, but then come extreme close-ups of the grid that show the detail of brushstrokes and the slightly cracked surface of the canvas in crisp focus. In these instances Menken is used film in its capacity for revelation, in a mode that is similar to the use of the close-ups in Resnais' film on van Gogh.

By comparison with the subjects that Menken adopted for her other films, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* provided her with an extraordinarily reduced palette. In a way, the limitations of the painting offer a test case, revealing what was possible when the subject in front of Menken's camera was pared down to this degree. By the same token, the limitations of the painting also signal what the task of filmmaking was when her camera was turned towards the wider world.

Mood Mondrian is an interpretation of its subject matter, via a set of personal automatisms that are akin to those of an improvising musician. In contrast, Nicky Hamlyn's film *Correspondences* (2011), which features four paintings of the same name by Angela Allen, is more an outcome of translation and synthesis. In a recent discussion between the filmmaker and painter, Hamlyn (2011: 37) wonders whether it would be best to characterise *Correspondences* as a film 'of' the paintings; a film made 'from' the paintings; or a film made 'with' the paintings. Whereas *Mood Mondrian* is a film 'of' Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, it seems more appropriate to say that Hamlyn's film was made 'from' or 'with' Allen's paintings: 'from' because of the process of translation; and 'with' because he started making the film during the period that the paintings were being made, but also because of what he does with them.

There are four paintings in Allen's *Correspondence* series. Each painting is 422mm square and contains a grid of 14 x 14 squares, demarcated by thin dark lines. Each square has a base colour and across each square lie thin horizontal, slightly lilting grey lines. In some squares there are thicker single or double bands of complementary colour at a diagonal. Given the discussions between painter and filmmaker along the

way, it's no surprise that the structure of the paintings has numerous parallels with the language of the film (and vice versa). In the first instance, the painting's squares have an affinity with film frames, and they also suggest every shot's framing. With this correspondence between the grid of the painting and the shooting structure of the film, there is also an analogy between the optical effects of the painting and the play of flickering patterns that are produced by the film.

The first section of the film involves alternating frames of an empty cell that has been lit from different directions, so that the contours of the brushstrokes in the white undercoat are set in relief. Several more sections of alternating images follow, with the sections of the blue/orange, black/white, red/green and yellow/purple paintings being woven and mixed. The technique of weaving frames highlights the weave of the thin painted lines and the canvas beneath, and also produces far more colours than are ostensibly there. (Here the paintings and film call to mind the colour theory in Michel Eugène's Chevreul's *Principles and Harmony and Contrast of Colours* [1839], which was informed by research into colour perception associated with the use of dyes in tapestry weaving). Various other patterns of filming occur, involving alternating frames, shifting camera placements and vertical tracking, all of which are investigative and experimental without being programmatic. At nine minutes into the film there is a full transcription of each painting. Starting in the top left-hand corner of the canvas, the camera allocates a few frames to each square of the paintings' grids in turn, ending in the bottom right-hand corner. At the conclusion of the film the canvases are shown in their entirety, but only in the weave of alternating single frames. In addition to a shift in the registration of the paintings in front of the camera, which makes for darting dashes of colour, changing light levels across their surfaces adds another more subtle level of shimmer.

Broadly speaking, the film depicts the paintings in two different ways: in sections and composite sequences. The film is utterly faithful to its subject, but in the translation of the paintings via single frame sequences, it also produces a unique visual experience that comes from a synthesis of the paintings. On a number of occasions the film has been shown alongside the paintings - most recently in the exhibition 'Film in Space' at the Camden Arts Centre (December, 2012 – February, 2013) - and this is the best way to get a sense of what the films add to the paintings. The film's translation and transformation of the specific internal logic of the paintings is only really possible when the paintings are nearby for reference. In contrast to *Correspondences*, most of Hamlyn's other films, dating back to the mid 1970s, focus on ways of seeing and representing the play of light on everyday, overlooked objects and surfaces, and in this regard his other films are self-sufficient.

My interest in the films that I've discussed above is not only to do with the way that they represent or engage with the aesthetics of painting. A broader observation is that the way in which filmmakers have approached the bounded parts of the world that constitute paintings, and the visual language of painting, is a testament to the different models of cinema that they each propose. The spectrum of cinema that I've surveyed has two opposing poles, which can be summarised as follows. In some of the films that I've described, paintings feature as specific objects in the world and are depicted as such: usually we see the edge of the canvas or its frame, and the painting is situated in a wider context, whether fictional or documentary. Other films, especially those of Richter and Eggeling, have sought to integrate the aesthetics of (abstract) painting as

a complementary visual language. At one pole of this spectrum, films frame paintings in a manner that assert an aesthetics of cinema in terms of representation. At the other pole, cinema is construed as a cumulative medium in the pursuit of new means of visualisation and display.

While the edges of the film screen and the edges of a painting might be characterised as centrifugal and centripetal in turn, the frame of digital screen relates to the world through a combination of forces. When unmasked, a projected film image has a feathered edge, which is produced by the soft-focused shadow of the projector's aperture plate. The blurred borders of the film image are practically an index of centrifugal, off-screen space. In contrast, the edge of the digital image might well be construed as centripetal, especially outside of the context of cinema: the edges of the screen on which I'm typing, for example, are always in view. Whether projected or viewed on a monitor, the digital image has a hard-edged boundary, enclosing a finite picture plane in a fixed grid of pixels. Van Doesburg (cited in Fabre and Wintgens Hötte, 2009: 161) could only dream of such precision:

> When film technology is completely set up for the dynamic-plastic, fine artists will 'write' their compositions for film, the colour or formal relationships will be indicated by precise numbers whereupon their designs will be expressed in the most exact, most perfect way by mechanical means and through electric current.

In many respects the aesthetics of abstract film, à la Richter and Eggeling, have come to fruition with digital technology, as the van Doesburg quote suggests. Screen space and colour are now plotted and choreographed in relation to precise references and co-ordinates. But the logic of digital technology is also a realisation of Elementarism, in so far as the visualisation of design, architecture, cinema and more, have been brought together through the underlying form-language of digital code. And it is the multi-media capacity of the digital screen that is key to understanding its difference to the film screen and cinema as was. Digital technologies have encompassed the aesthetics of film and cinema in toto, in its realist, centrifugal reach as much as any other. The difference between the film screen and the digital screen, with regard to framing, is that its technology was not determined by the aesthetics of film, and photography, with respect to representing the world though imagery that reproduces its likeness. The technology of the digital screen was determined instead by requirements in the display of coded information. In contrast to the film screen, the centrifugal force of the digital screen is tied up in the network of endless links made visible in multiple overlapping windows, as much as any instance of verisimilitude.

In the discussion of films that I've covered in this essay, I've made pains to suggest that it is not film technology per se that determines the aesthetics of cinema, but that each work in question proposes a different model of cinema, albeit along a spectrum between two poles. This line of defence would have been even more pronounced in the context of a discussion of work made with digital means: digital technology, in the abstract, doesn't determine a medium at all. At the same time, the characterisation of the digital image as centripetal, centrifugal, or both, does provide a framework for how one might think of certain works and the way they engage with the world. Attending to the digital screen as a centripetal frame, one is drawn to the internal logic of a work's composition; attending to the digital screen as centrifugal, one is

drawn to consider a work's association with other media, which is where, in so far as my own work in concerned, painting and cinema come in.

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