

Donatella Valente

## Cinema, postmedia, and resolutions

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## Notes

1. Loist & de Valck 2010.
2. Cubitt 2013.
3. As a brief point for contemplation, recall the criticism leveled at the Cannes Film Festival for the lack of women directors in their competition programs over recent years. The decision-makers at Cannes ostensibly attempted to address this cultural shortcoming by announcing Jane Campion as jury president for the 2014 festival. Coincidentally, Campion is the only woman in the history of the festival to win the prestigious Palme d'Or. She is the second woman to preside as jury president in the past decade. In defense of the overall lack of gender diversity in their competition program, Cannes programmers have taken refuge under the idea that they only reflect the state of the industry. Of course, this is problematic, because to believe this claim one would have to subscribe to the notion that not only are there an incredibly scant number of women filmmakers operating in the feature film world today but also that the Cannes programmers do not have a free hand in making their selections. It would also require one to believe that Cannes is not influential enough as an institution to foment change, which is also problematic given that the festival has never shied away from the tag of being the single most important and influential exhibition outlet for international cinema.

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*Resolutions 3: Global Networks of Video* edited by Ming-Yuen S. Ma and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) and *Cinema and Postmedia: Contemporary Film Territories / Cinema e postmedia: I territorio del filmico nel contemporaneo* by Miriam De Rosa (Milano: Postmedia Press, 2013) provide two complementary perspectives on the moving image in the postmedia

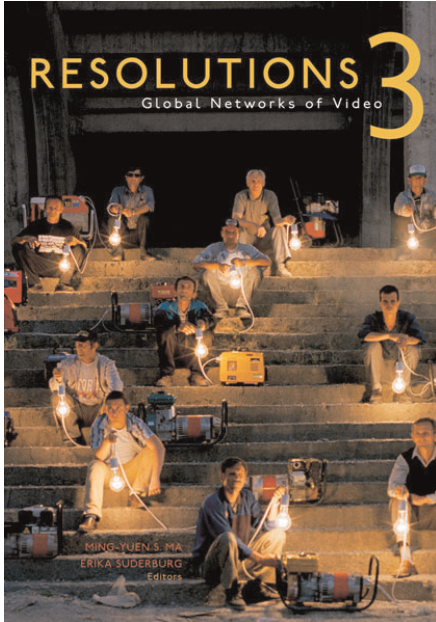
age. While the former discusses the plurality of networked practices of video production and consumption, the latter focuses on developing an aesthetic of immersive spectatorship in 'other cinema' contexts. Therefore, in commenting on moving images transitioning across diverse media, both books foster debates on what Raymond Bellour defined as 'the different nature of the experience of the moving image and the spatialisation of time'.<sup>1</sup>

The third installment of an anthology of essays, *Resolutions 3* provides a vivid and textured account of video works together with interdisciplinary approaches to video praxis and discourses from the perspective of today's global mediascape. The wide spectrum of contributions are testimonies to the eclectic practices with video, demonstrating how they appeal to peoples' visions and desires to document and navigate across the networked digital space while transcending geo-political boundaries. In their introduction to the volume the editors argue that the term 'video' has lost its medium-specific attributes in recent decades and has become a cultural interface. The book also collects evidence of the medium's 'user-friendly' material or technological specificities, allowing for the fluid production and distribution of its documentary and creative outputs across cultural and socio-political divides. *Resolutions 3* shows how global video networks can foster collaborative and participatory work, in many cases revealing an artistic and conceptual lineage rooted in early video collectives or 'radical pluralities', as Deirdre Boyle argues in 'A Brief History of American Documentary Video'.<sup>2</sup>

In her book *Video Art: A Guided Tour*, Catherine Elwes reminds us that video was born as a portable tool for social control in the early 1960s with the U.S. army deployment of video surveillance during the Vietnam War;<sup>3</sup> in the mid-1960s it became countercultural and was used to subvert mainstream media narratives such as broadcast television. It was Nam June Paik's Sony Portapak 'video vérité' strategy and guerrilla mantra 'television has been attacking us all our lives, now we can attack it back', along with Wolf Vostell's Fluxus experiments, that accounted for the medium's early socio-political and aesthetic identity, embracing technological interventions and participatory events. Thus, the interest in video that the essays in *Resolutions 3* generate lies in their exploration of the medium's social vocation while remaining sensitive to the artistic expression of under-represented ethnic and social minorities and hybrid-media communication.

The idea of an anthology of surveys on video works began with the volume *Resolution: A Critique of Video Art* in 1986 and continued with *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* in 1996, which generated further historical and conceptual reflections on earlier video practices through the latest multidisciplinary approaches of scholars, practitioners, activists, and general observers. *Resolutions 3* stems out of the wider media art forum project titled 'Resolutions 3: Video Praxis in Global Spaces', whose format also included a travelling exhibition and a three-

day symposium held in 2008. This paradigm continues the mandate of the first 'Resolution' project at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) in 1986, organised by scholars, practitioners, curators, and critics.



Thus, rising from the challenge of the study of a cultural phenomenon that the editors Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg described in 1996 as 'exploding' and 'viral', *Resolutions 3* aims to not only continue the creative format of engaging multiple platforms but also to consider a study of 'expanded video discourse', tackling both its cultural-specific and transnational horizons. Most importantly, it explores the boundaries of video ubiquity, hence it interrogates various forms of presence for video within and outside the normative cultural mediascape and its heterogeneous areas of production; it looks into its modes of delivery and projected audiences through activities in broadcasting, practical interventions, festivals, and at the crossroads with cinema, the Internet, and the museum, among others. Therefore, while providing engaging descriptions of a wide range of video artworks, the 28 essays collected in the book successfully convey the closely-knitted relationship between our contemporary cultural terrain and its hybrid art mediascape, through which various forms of individual and social activism or political strategies permeate. For this reason the book is a reminder of what Nicolas Bourriaud called 'relational art' in 1998. Video, or that metaphor for digital and streamed moving images, provides the porous texture for social encounters or the context to further develop what the French art critic identified as the 'artwork

as social interstice'.<sup>4</sup> In this sense 'relational video' becomes the interface allowing for social exchange.

The perception of video allowing for an encounter with other artworks within a globalised network may also be underpinned by the book's structure which, while providing no chronological or thematic clustering for its essays, may contribute to a non-linear or thematically open reading of its intertextualities. On the other hand, because of the number of contributions, each of which discusses more than one video work, I found each essay slightly 'lost' or disconnected from more focused discourses on 'global networks of video'. The rubrics of 'Medium Specificity, Interdisciplinarity, Institutionalisation, Reception and Distribution, and Globalisation', as discussed by the editors in their introduction, would have provided more cohesive approaches to video's contribution to and position within social, artistic, and academic discourses without necessarily compartmentalising its heterogeneous practices.

For instance, the topic of 'medium specificity', which Miriam De Rosa's book on cinema and postmedia re-configures, in *Resolutions 3* is explored through essays evoking the sensorial experience with video. Nguyen Tan Hoan references Laura Marks' 'haptic and optical' looking in his essay on gay Asian documentary and Derek A. Burrill's chapter 'Everything is Possible, But Nothing is Real', about digital tweaking in video gaming, draws on Benjamin's historical materialism and the messianic role of the media arts and the moving image within a code environment. His *Angelus Novus*' anterior future tense illuminates code reproductions or digital cloning, redefining material specificity in relation to 'the filmic image', which is 'so malleable as digital code' (p. 294). Vector representations of the database constitute another form of illustration of data through space and time, a mathematical and algorithmic territory into which Sean Cubitt ventures in his chapter 'Vector, Space, and Time'. Here a different type of Benjamin's anterior future tense is hoisted within the hidden qualities of the vector and 'vector prediction and risk management' (p. 299). In this sense both space and time are reconfigured, challenging the process of time and bringing back the spectral quality of the raw materiality of time as in the early studies of movement in pre-cinematic motion pictures.

Therefore, while the essays discuss video-textual or material aesthetics and the subject's perceptual relation to them, as well as gender-related issues or video-political activism in certain geographic territories, they also provide engaging readings in relation to other broader rubrics, therefore defining them as thematically and discursively permeable; yet, somehow, each essay seems 'eager to belong' within the wider, dispersed global network. I agree with Alexandra Juhasz's essay about blogging and 'Video Art on YouTube', in which she perceptively comments that 'not only video has been changed, today's wide range of technologies affect

our writing about video in equal measure' (p. 309). I would argue that the book's structure not only folds around its content, organically manifesting its fragmented continuity through which social, political, and aesthetic concerns are consistently interwoven, but it also reflects contemporary habits in multi-screen reading; its structure replicates a certain layered space for consumption where its video testimonies form an illuminating intertextuality. The different scenarios of socially and politically-engaged video works – streamed, exhibited, distributed, and contributed through YouTube, Vimeo, blogging, surveillance, and online media festivals – definitely provide tantalising sources for further scholarly research.

The discourse around the expanded architectures of globalised media networks hosting the moving image as envisaged by *Resolutions 3* is re-visited in De Rosa's book. She explores the aesthetics of the material specificities of the filmic in 'mediatectural environments' (p. 25) as invoked and in-formed by the spectator's itinerant and interactive approach to the moving image in their daily lives and in settings other than the conventional cinema space. From this re-configured perspective the subjective experience may connote 'the filmic' as an organic continuum throughout expanded milieus.



De Rosa develops the main notion of the 'Space-Image', which is based on the experience with the moving image in the environment from a phenomenological perspective. She then leads us through the interdisciplinary approaches informing her book, from cultural studies to media and visual culture and various discourses on

media convergence and participatory culture. However, the book really comes to life when she shares her theoretical framework in relation to specific case studies.

The first one is the David Rockwell Group's *The Hall of Fragments*, an installation of 34 monitors screening different mainstream films on each side of a corridor within a gallery space, which was part of the Venice Biennale in 2008. The cubist experience evoked through the encounter with the collage of images 'exploded' out of mainstream films onto two large convex screens consigns a specific fragmentary aesthetic to the re-imagined post-cinematic space, nevertheless perpetuating the specificity of cinema as a medium from which the image is discarded in a process similar to a *décollage*. In chapter two, when discussing the video installation, De Rosa provides an engaging and in-depth study of the notion of 'experience' formed by the subject's perceptual and cognitive opening to life and convincing arguments about 'designing' a space as the embodiment of subjective experiences.

The author engages in meditations on the aesthetics of a sculptural space in the age of itinerant spectatorship and revives connections with older motion-based media practices such as early 'live cinema', experienced as immersive in contemporary moving-image exhibitions; she also explores the 'expanded cinematic' experience displaced beyond the white cube and the black box to other anthropocentric urban spaces, from the mega screen installation in the Piazza del Duomo in central Milan to networked digital cartographies and interactive panels in the museum. As Francesco Casetti posited in his article 'The Last Supper in Piazza della Scala':

[t]o what degree can relocation, especially of cinema, be compared to other practices of subversion, which are conducted today both in 'spontaneous' urban culture and in artistic practices? In other words, can cinematic relocation simultaneously assume a 'critical valence' and broad aesthetic qualities that reinforce this 'critical valence'?<sup>5</sup>

In relation to the 2007 installation of the largest interactive screen in Europe, defined as a 'mediafaçade', *Urban Screens* in Piazza del Duomo in Milan became the 'cinematic frame' of lived filmic experiences for three years. It contributes to the broadening of the definition of 'adscape' as a 'montage of attractions'. De Rosa's invocation of a 'Space-Image', for the vivid plasticity of her rich description of space, often maps a *Matrix*-informed sci-fi environment or memories of the convex television screen as conjured by a Videodrome dystopia, which perhaps suggests the powerful impact screen media have on our lives and their physical presence, regardless of their screen size. Today's ambulatory spectatorship and multiple screen media allude to the subtle and invisible yet overbearing power of

the object; its tyranny to interact with its ubiquity enormously differs from the time when artists used to inform their space through innovative designs and the moving image. For instance, from the creative politics of newly-designed lived-in spaces and architectures as practised and taught by the Bauhaus in the 1920s, to the late 1950s with Fluxus, Happenings, or the Living Theatre in the 1960s, when participatory culture and experimentation with new media in different spaces prefigured countercultural practices devoted to the breakdown of the divides between art and life.

De Rosa postulates the contemporary subject's immersive trajectory in this manner: 'from the media-world to the filmic image that shapes our world; from the media-world to the Space-Image (SI)' (p. 102). Within this context the 'displaced mega-screen' in Milan assumes a remarkable relevance in understanding the place of postmedia and the cinematic in our lives, in how such space provides furnished windows to consume images. As 'prosumers', De Rosa argues, our life is continuously on display, especially when taking into consideration the multiplicity of mobile devices to which we are networked, reminding us of Marshall McLuhan's globally-connected mediascape. In referencing Andrew Uroskie, she argues that in the epoch of the postmedia we become a 'cinematised society' (p. 101).

As a consequence of such media mobility and itinerant spectatorship, there is a reduction in the perception of locality in favour of globality, or of a redistribution of the equilibrium of site-specificities. In this sense, the mega- or touch-screen becomes an interface between locality and globality, between medium specificity and networked space, generating cartographic and dynamic narratives and echoing historical experimental media-practices. The relationship between the local and the global is investigated through two additional case studies: *Organic City* and *Sensitive City*, which also resonate with *Resolutions 3*.

*Organic City*, initiated in 2006 and based in California, is a storytelling platform composed of a digital map of the city of Oakland that is compatible for all screen devices, mobile and otherwise, where 'producers' can upload their videos connected to particular points of the city as a form of 'video-blogging' activity. Such 'storypoints' are archived under the 'author's directory' so that there exists a database of experiences lived in specific localities yet providing a sense of the global and the networked. Usefully, De Rosa reminds us of the Nouvelle Vague and Alexandre Astruc's 'camera stylo', which today could be seen in the guise of the mobile phone. What the author also describes, subsequently, is the International Situationists' scenario: the individual who, while being either the consumer or producer of the uploaded story, contributes to redesigning the city's cartography by way of meandering and reconnecting the points scattered throughout the city,



reminiscent of the flâneur's euphoria and wanderlust through urban spaces in modernity.

Together with the phenomenological in-formation of the 'S-I', walking is suggested as a creative and performative activity. In this sense the experience of the walker in *Organic City* is based on the re-construction of space through the individual's experience with the filmic image. Walking is considered not only as the practice of founding localities, real and virtual, but also as part of the process of reshaping and refurbishing the 'S-I' – another reminder of the historic practices of redesigning cartographies through the moving image and movement, such as Land Art, as De Rosa mentions Richard Long's physical interventions in 'A Line Made by Walking' (1967). The author discusses how the energetic dynamism of 'throwing the action forward' ('un gettare avanti l'azione') (p. 160) with the moving image throughout space fills its form with materiality, hence creating organic architectures to both inhabit and edify. This could also be seen in the context of past countercultural art events informed by 'Azioni Povere', part of an Arte Povera exhibition in 1968 where artists and the public could participate in the re-in-formation of space, 'free of normal constraints' by intervening and playing with the installation objects, such as Michelangelo Pistoletto's famous 'Atlas' (an oversized ball of compressed newspapers) which he rolled throughout the city of Turin, hence enacting what De Rosa today defines as 'the space-image of performance' (p. 174).

Within such a context of borrowed functions and 'translucent' media, in *Sensitive City*, her next case study, the author attributes to the moving image the role of interfacing between spaces, the urban, and the museum. A dense repertoire of moving pictures related to urban maps, the installation aims to 'open up a dialogue with the depths of the world' (p. 135).<sup>6</sup> The walls are covered with images of reconstructed memories of Italian cities in all their details in conjunction with video-portraits of the narrators guiding the visitors along the corridors. The virtual journey around Italy is prompted by the visitor's activation of each haptic film-panel, each a memory-piece. Interconnections and networked geographies, visitors, and residents are at the centre of the installation; they are the creators of their 'Space-Image', the interface between personal and public, the macro-heterotopic space of the present where the virtual and the 'real', the interactive and the immersive, juxtapose or merge. The 'liquidity' of such a 'Space-Image' touches and surrounds the consumer's corporeality, which in turn 'plunges' into a hyper-realistic experience, particularly in the *Sensitive City* museum installation.

Therefore, what the four case studies seem to suggest is that both the architect/designer and the consumer alike concretely and perceptually re-design the static, dark, and cocoon-like cinematographic experience in the postmedia epoch – an ongoing process of redefinition and renegotiation with the filmic space within the

broader screen-scape formed of interconnected interfaces. I found the book lacking in-depth critical and historical perspectives on artists' cinema or experimental practices with the moving image to map continuities and dis-continuities, perhaps in relation to a dominant cinema model. On the whole, alongside *Resolutions 3, Cinema and Postmedia* successfully fosters scholarship on the socio-political, artistic, and cultural practices of moving image consumption and production from the perspective of a displaced or itinerant spectatorship. Both books serve well to promote further study of the relationship between earlier and current practices with 'expanded video' and 'relocated cinema' in the age of convergence culture.

## Notes

1. Quoted from Raymond Bellour's keynote lecture 'The Cinema and Other Moving Images' delivered at the NECS conference in Milan (*Creative Energies. Creative Industries*, 19-21 June 2014). A link to this conference video can be found at <http://filmstudies-forfree.blogspot.co.uk/>.
2. Boyle 2005, quoted in Ma & Suderburg 2012, p. xxix.
3. Elwes 2005, p. 5.
4. Bourriaud 1998, p. 14.
5. Casetti 2008, pp. 7-14 (p. 10).
6. Decandia 2010, quoted in De Rosa 2013, p. 135.

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