

Sarah Atkinson

# Synchronic Simulacinematics

## The Live Performance of Film Production

When I think back, the notion of a *simulacinematic* space was first invoked in my own mind by an unpleasant memory I had whilst visiting Universal Studios Hollywood in 2000 where I experienced the *Backdraft* theme park attraction. *Backdraft*, a 1991 film directed by Ron Howard, starring William Baldwin and Kurt Russell, focused on fire fighters and their dangerous encounters with extreme conflagrations. The theme park attraction simulated the most dramatic conditions of the film replete with flames, smoke and danger. The *Backdraft* attraction follows a lineage of theme park attractions that involve inferno-like conditions – for example “Fighting the Flames” was one such attraction at Dreamland in Coney Island in the early 20th century.<sup>1</sup> The main *Backdraft* experience took place upon a 500,000 cubic foot soundstage, dressed as the empty warehouse simulating the climactic moment of the film. As the director yells *Action* a fire is seen to start in an office at the other side of the warehouse. When searching for documentation relating to the *Backdraft* attraction, I found this quote from the director Ron Howard:

*The screenwriter, Gregory Widen, was a former fireman and he made it very clear that in our movie the firefighters had to be right there in the middle of those blazing infernos. But I knew that getting these shots would be very hazardous for the actors and the entire film crew. Everyday, they found themselves in the middle of flame, smoke, flying ash and toppling scenery.<sup>2</sup>*

This quote is indicative of the frequency, during interviews, where film industry practitioners seek to call our attention to the drama of the film’s making, and thus, by extension, how materials and attractions, such as *Backdraft* not only seek to position audience members in the fictional world of the film, but into the subjectivity of one of the film’s makers – to vicariously experience the drama of the film’s production.

I stood there in abject terror throughout, shuffling myself toward the exit door, as most of the other thrill-seekers shouted and cheered in appreciation, I experienced a visceral sense of panic, what if this is real? – no one will know or realize. Unbeknown to me at the time of that experience, but on recent research, I discovered that on 24 September 1992, a fire had broken out in the air conditioning ducts above

1 Andrea Stulman Dennett, Nina Warnke, Disaster Spectacles at the Turn of the Century, in: *Film History* 4.2 (1990), pp. 101–111.

2 Ron Howard, Scene by Scene Walkthrough. Scene 1, <http://thestudiotour.com/wp/studios/universal-studios-hollywood/theme-park/past-attractions/backdraft/> (accessed January 23, 2018).

the attraction. Around 500 people were in the attraction at the time, and to quote a news article – “No members of the public panicked as they thought the black smoke was part of the presentation.”<sup>3</sup> So my unease was entirely founded!

This particular experience is not just of interest to me, because of its conflation of the filmic text and the conditions of its making (the presence of a director’s voice, and the acknowledgement by the director of the same sense felt on set), but because of the experiential affective space that is occupied by the audience. It is a space that is routinely inhabited by performing artists, actors, film production personnel (as the example of Backdraft illuminates) – it is the assimilation by the audience into a simulacinematic space which is the central concern of this essay.

Simulacinema is a portmanteau term – a combination of the words *simulation* and *cinema* – which I am using to account for a phenomenon in which an audience simultaneously experiences both the space of the filmic diegesis and/or the cinematic spectacle, and the attendant, but crucially, *simulated* space of its production. Simulacinematic spaces are characterized by the uncanny sense of inhabiting two conflicting ontological spaces (fiction and reality) whilst also embodying two diametrically opposed subjectivities (observer and participant). Simulacinematics refers to the aesthetic and affective qualities of these spaces that merge film style and visual cinematic codes with production aesthetics, as well as the live and the mediated elements of their experience. The making and reception of a film tend to be chronologically displaced moments – but within simulacinematic phenomena, by contrast, the two moments are

folded together into simultaneous experiences in which the two temporalities converge in an experiential modality.<sup>4</sup>

Simulacinema is becoming an increasingly frequent phenomena as a result of digital technologies and their use and application in cinema spectatorship, as well as a result of the evolution of cinematic commodification – the expansion of the cinematic text across different forms and platforms – coupled with the commodification of cinematic *experience*. Where Thomas Elsaesser has previously made a distinction “between ‘cinema’ (event and experience) and ‘film’ (text and work)”,<sup>5</sup> I would introduce a third axis – that of filmmaking (process). In simulacinema, I would contend that the dividing line has become increasingly blurred between these three – text, experience and process.

Simulacinemic phenomena, which are characterized by both aesthetic and affective qualities, have manifested in a number of different forms and contexts whereby the ontologies of cinematic production and reception are experienced by the audience. Instances of simulacinema have occurred on the set of film locations in major cities, within immersive theatrical cinema experiences (such as Secret Cinema) and on-stage theatrical performances that blend stage and screen techniques and aesthetics.

4 I here build on Guy Debord’s concept of the spectacle, Jean Baudrillard’s notion of simulacra and the work of Tom Gunning, in examining the history of fairground and cinematic trajectories of showcasing of technological apparatus from the birth of cinema. See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black & Red, 1970; Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994; Tom Gunning, *The Cinema of Attraction. Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde*, in: Thomas Elsaesser, Adam Barker (eds.), *Early Cinema. Space, Frame, Narrative*, London: British Film Institute, 1990, pp. 56–62.

5 Thomas Elsaesser, *Digital Cinema. Convergence or Contradiction?*, in: C. Vernallis, A. Herzog, J. Richardson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 13–44, p. 25.

3 Backdraft On Fire, <http://thestudiotour.com/wp/studios/universal-studios-hollywood/theme-park/past-attractions/backdraft/> (accessed January 23, 2018).

Within simulacinematic phenomena, I have identified three different types of subjectivities or experiential modalities relating to temporalities – future, retrospective and present, I refer to these as: Prochronistic, Parachronistic and Synchronic. The first two types relate specifically to the marketization of cinematic experience, and are symptomatic of the confluence between audience and fan practices and their exploitation by film marketers and the film industry. The simulacinematic in these two cases emerges as a symptom and as effect of these two phenomena, as opposed to a deliberate intervention or strategy on the part of the filmmakers or distributors. I position this in the wider trend towards the exploitation of the economy of film production (what John Caldwell has referred to as the *Para-Industry*) where making-of content becomes the marketing material.<sup>6</sup> The *synchronic* manifestations, which are the central concern of this essay, are at the very creative edges and manifest as a deliberate experimentation in the mediation and manufacture of screen-based texts. In all three instances we are able to examine what happens in the conflation between the live and the mediated, what happens between the screen and the physical space – and in each instance there is a different relation. As I will go on to examine, in prochronistic moments, the *peripheral* screen practices and engagements of the audience characterize these moments, in parachronistic, the cinema screen is *embedded* in the experience, the screen is *centralized* in synchronic simulacinema.

I will firstly outline the key principles and characteristics of both prochronistic and parachronistic phenomena before examining synchronic simulacinema in more detail.

Prochronistic simulacinematic moments are created and experienced during the production of the film. I point to examples of the manifestation of prochronistic simulacinema, *Transformers 4: Age of Extinction* (2014) and *Suicide Squad* (2016).<sup>7</sup> These are films that were both filmed in various cities across the world. In the case of *Transformers 4*, multiple locations were used in the USA, Hong Kong and in mainland China. *Suicide Squad* was filmed at various locations across Canada (in particular in downtown Toronto) and Chicago. In both cases, spectacular car-chase sequences, crashes, explosions and destruction were filmed in the inner-city locations. Audience members were given a glimpse of the stunts and effects that were to come in the final films, and in close enough proximity to capture these moments on their portable devices and then to distribute them across various social media channels.<sup>8</sup> Given the context of the co-production between China and America, particularly in relation to *Transformers 4*, these highly public choices of location appear deliberate. In the case of *Suicide Squad*, the sets were left in-situ on the streets of Toronto, after filming had completed, as on-street installations which audience members could visit and be photographed against.<sup>9</sup> Here, there is a complete collapse between production, promotion and reception. Audience members are present at the time of the spectacle whilst are also witness to the point of its capture. They are immersed in the milieu of the fictional space at the same time at the point of its making. And this is the key principle of simulacinematic

<sup>6</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Para-Industry*, Shadow Academy, in: *Cultural Studies* 28.4, 2014, pp. 720–740.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Bay, *Transformers 4: Age of Extinction*, USA/China 2014; David Ayer, *Suicide Squad*, USA 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin B. Lee, *Transformers: The Premake*, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/94101046> (accessed February 20, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Aynne Kokas, *Hollywood made in China*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.

phenomena – the simultaneous presence of the audience in both the manufacture and the experience of the cinematic spectacle. As Stephen Heath stated in 1980: “Resting on an industrialisable technological base, cinema, different to theatre, offers the *possibility of an industry of spectacle*.”<sup>10</sup> This notion of the industry being a spectacle in and of itself is bound up within the aesthetic and affective pleasures of the film theme park, which I alluded to in the introduction to this chapter. James Moran also alludes to this sensation at Universal Studios written in 1994:

*Universal’s blockbusters spill over the screens as interactive spectacles, which in turn sprawl onto the studio lots where they were originally spawned in a cycle that increasingly blurs production and exhibition, ‘reality’ and representation, ‘art’ and entertainment.*<sup>11</sup>

It is through the presence of digital technologies that these lines are not only being blurred, but they collapse entirely. In prochronistic moments this occurs through the unification of the screen and the space of production through the presence of audience members’ screen capture equipment. The use of mobile phones and recording devices pre-mediate the onscreen action in these moments. In parachronistic moments the cinema screen acts as the linking screen interface between the action taking place around it.

Parachronistic moments are created long *after* production has taken place – during the formal reception phase of a film. Such instances emerge under a different commercial (pre-promotional) imperative to the former category. They have predominantly emerged in contexts of the generation of (3rd party) retrospective revenue, through the screening of old, cult films. These instances can be aligned to the film theme park modality, where films, and their making, are repackaged and re-experienced for audience’s years after their release – i. e. the *Jaws* exhibit at Universal Studios.

UK-based organization Secret Cinema deliver immersive experiences around a film screening through a recreation and reinterpretation of the fictional world of the film. On the surface, these productions encourage and engender a variety of fan practices such as singing, dancing, cos-playing and quoting-along to the film being screened. Furthermore, and as a by-product, these productions, in their elaborate restaging of a cinematic fictional universe, invariably mobilizes the mechanics of the film production industry machine, through the hiring of film production personnel (set builders, sound designers, actors and stunt performers), and through working with film distributors to secure licenses for screenings and in some cases new releases. In an article on Secret Cinema’s instantiation of *Back to the Future*, we drew out the significance of the emulation of the filmic world and how an aesthetics of production was embedded within the experience:

*As with the Back to the Future event, it became apparent very early on in the experience that as an audience member you are not actually immersed in the world of Hill Valley, you are immersed in the world of its making – such was the presence of the physical*

10 Stephen Heath, The Cinematic Apparatus. Technology as Historical and Cultural Form, in: Teresa De Lauretis, Stephen Heath (eds.), *The Cinematic Apparatus*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980, pp. 1–13, p. 7 [emphasis added by the author].

11 James Moran, Reading and Riding the Cinema of Attractions at Universal Studios, in: *Spectator* 14.1 (1994), pp. 78–91, p. 79.

*evidence of its construction (scaffolding, light rigs and scenery), populated by stunt vehicles, production and security personnel.*<sup>12</sup>

Parachronistic simulacineumatic moments therefore become characterized by these unintentional, accidental instances of staging filmmaking aesthetics. The presence of the screen calls to attention the audience's awareness of the construction and the artifice of film – as it arguably happens in all simulacineumatic moments. In these cases, the screen is embedded into the experience itself (the screen is literally framed within the experiential space – in the screening of *Back to the Future*, the screen is centralized in the Hill Valley town hall façade; in *Moulin Rouge*, the screen is framed by the stage of the famous Parisian night club).

The reception of a filmic text is bound up in the appreciation of its making, so much so, that the two conflate. As with the former category – this is not necessarily a conscious decision undertaken on the part of the creators but rather a symptom of the always-intertwined nature of film production and film reception, as well as dual audience and fan pleasures of meta-filmic awareness.

The most sophisticated and complex form of simulacineum and the most conscious form through artistic intentionality (I have argued that the other forms are unconscious/unintentional on the part of the creators) is synchronic simulacineum. These are moments created during production – designed to be appreciated in synchronicity with the

output of the finished text. Synchronic simulacineumatics are highly reflexive and afford a critical edge to understanding this phenomena of dual audience pleasures. In this manifestation of simulacineum we witness a celebration of the cinematic apparatus and the visual spectacle that this creates. It is a complex space where theatre and cinema coalesce and the cinematic production process is itself conceptualized as a form of live theatre. In synchronic simulacineumatic case studies, the screen is absolutely central to the concurrent creation of an image for the screen. The creative actions of film production and practice come into focus and transform themselves into theatre-show.

I am putting forward two case studies where the act of production becomes the act of performance and there is a simultaneous collapse of production, performance, capture, transmission and reception. The first is a strand of work by theatre director Katie Mitchell – and its evolution over three productions – *Waves* (2006), ... *some trace of her* (2008), and *Forbidden Zone* (2014).<sup>13</sup> The second is Kid Koala's *Nufonia Must Fall Live* (2014).<sup>14</sup> The analysis of these two different examples has been undertaken through the study of their associated documentary videos in order to examine both the form and techniques of the pieces, as well as the discourse of their description. The documentation and framing of these two examples are key to conveying their simulacineumatic qualities, and themselves become part of the economy of film and theatre production. It is the simultaneity of screen

12 Sarah Atkinson, H. W. Kennedy, From Conflict to Revolution. The Secret Aesthetic and Narrative Spatialisation in Immersive Cinema Experience Design, in: *Participations. Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 13.1 (2016), pp. 252–279, p. 274. See Sarah Atkinson, H. W. Kennedy, 'Tell no one': Cinema as Game-space. Audience Participation, Performance and Play, in: *G[A|M]E. The Italian Journal of Game Studies* 4 (2015), [https://gamejournal.it/atkinson\\_kennedy/](https://gamejournal.it/atkinson_kennedy/) (accessed August 20, 2017).

13 Katie Mitchell, *Waves*, London: National Theatre 2006; Katie Mitchell, ... *some trace of her*, London: National Theatre 2008; Katie Mitchell, *Forbidden Zone*, London: 59 Productions 2014.

14 K. K. Barrett, Kid Koala (Erik San), *Nufonia Must Fall*, Montreal: Envision Management & Production 2016, Live Performances, Ann Arbor Center, March 11–12, 2016; K. K. Barrett, *KID KOALA, NUFONIA MUST FALL LIVE!* [Official Trailer], 2016, [https://youtube.com/watch?v=s\\_DhuuHt76M](https://youtube.com/watch?v=s_DhuuHt76M) (accessed August 20, 2017).

space and physical space showing the same events that is the principle difference to the previous instances of simulacinema that I have described.

The two case studies are drawn from a number of notable examples of projects, which have sometimes been referred to as “Live Cinema”.<sup>15</sup> These include works by Film Live in Italy, a group of artists whose practice is to make and broadcast films live – “a movie that is filmed at the same time that it is screened”.<sup>16</sup> Francis Ford Coppola has also worked in a similar mode with his project *Distant Vision*, which he also refers to as “live cinema” where a film was shot and broadcast live to screenings rooms on 22 July 2016 after 26 days of rehearsal.<sup>17</sup> Coppola positions live cinema in contradistinction to live multi-camera broadcast, associated with the televisual:

*I felt the need to experiment in order to learn the actual methodology of live cinema, which is a hybrid of theater, film and television. The shot is the basic element, as in film; the live performance is from theater; and the advanced television technology to enable it is borrowed from TV sports.*<sup>18</sup>

59 Productions and Katie Mitchell refer to the third and final piece *Forbidden Zone* production as live cinema – a theatre

production which is simultaneously being performed, filmed, projected and observed live on a screen above the stage, underneath which audience members are able to see the inner workings of the film set in which the on-screen action is being shot. Production crew, i. e. camera operators and sound recordists, negotiate the film set in full view of the audience as they frame the action and capture the performance. This viewing mode, in which the audience can constantly switch between the registers of fictionality and its construction invokes a metafictional experience and awareness, which can on the one hand create as Patricia Waugh states a “fiction that both creates an illusion and lays bare that illusion”<sup>19</sup> or as Thomas Elsaesser has noted: “the production process can take on a textual form”.<sup>20</sup> There is a key distinction to be made here between *live cinema* and *simulacinema*. Synchronic simulacinema occurs when audiences have access and are witness to both the on and off screen spaces, and not just the on screen-output as is the case in the Coppola example. In synchronic simulacinema, the audience can take an active role in what they choose to focus their attention upon; they take the vantage point of a director who watches both the monitor of the camera output on set and the production itself. The distinction is that the director has the active power to make choices about where the camera directs its lens, whereas the audience are passive in this regard.

The format of *Forbidden Zone* is based on Mitchell’s earlier productions *Waves* and ... *some trace of her*, which at that point were referred to as a *multi media* productions.

15 Sarah Atkinson, H. W. Kennedy (eds.), *Live Cinema. Cultures, Economies, Aesthetics*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017.

16 <http://film-live.org> (accessed January 18, 2018).

17 Bill Desowitz, Francis Ford Coppola Completes ‘Distant Vision’ Live Cinema Workshop at UCLA, <http://indiewire.com/2016/07/francis-ford-coppola-completes-distant-vision-live-cinema-workshop-at-ucla-1201709229/> (accessed August 15, 2017).

18 Dave McNary, Variety Francis Ford Coppola Starts Experimental ‘Live Cinema’ Project at UCLA, <http://variety.com/2016/film/news/francis-ford-coppola-experimental-live-cinema-ucla-1201820998/> (accessed August 15, 2017).

19 Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London: Routledge, 1984, p. 6.

20 Thomas Elsaesser, Fantasy Island. Dream Logic as Production Logic, in: Thomas Elsaesser, Kay Hoffman (eds.), *Cinema Futures. Cain, Abel or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998, pp. 143–157, p. 143.

*Waves* was a work devised from the fragmented text of Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Waves* (1931). ...*some trace of her* is inspired by Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1868–1869). Both later productions include the visual production of live sound effects and real-time video captured and projected on-stage.<sup>21</sup> For the purposes of this essay I am focusing upon the principles, techniques and aesthetics that are deployed in Mitchell's productions in relation to the staging of production aesthetics and mechanics. I posit that these are not transparent filmic productions-techniques but artistic techniques.

Within all three Mitchell productions, the performative aspects of film production are staged through the use of real-time production aesthetics. These provide a simulational tendency themselves as on the set of *actual* film productions action is fragmented across scenes and takes, action is cut for cameras, lights and production personnel to re-set. Classical narrative film production is a mode that has persisted since its establishment in the 1890s – very often dictated by the economics of production and the availability of locations and performers. Mitchell describes this approach as “fragmenting the stage picture, combining video output with the live construction of it”, whilst Ben Whishaw who plays the character of Myschkin in ...*some trace of her* explains it as “the juxtaposition of image and the artificialness of the way that image is made”.<sup>22</sup> Whishaw goes onto describe how another performer plays his hands, how another

speaks his thoughts and how he “just provides his face”.<sup>23</sup> This proves consistent with traditional filmmaking conventions in what could be referred to as the “cinefication” of the theatre.<sup>24</sup> In these examples, we see how theatre explores and reveals, whilst cinema and film continue to conceal. These techniques raise questions around whether what is being produced is for screen or stage *consumption*, or in this case, the in-between – the simulacinemantic space. In the most advanced and technically sophisticated iteration of the simulacinemantic aesthetic in *Forbidden Zone*, it is the digital which is foregrounded in both form and content. Digital technologies make possible the live and simultaneous capture and broadcast of image and sound, whilst digital aesthetics are laid bare in its presentation. In Mitchell's earlier works, it is the analogue, the craft-based, the *hand-made* (foley production techniques) that are experimented with. Mitchell describes the approach to the live creation of sound effects through foley as the theatricalization of sound “where the image you see on screen is matched with something entirely different, the realization in the performance and then the audiences as they watched this creation live”.<sup>25</sup> There is an example where a performer taps a piece of chalk on a blackboard in order to create the sound of fingers tapping keys on a typewriter. Here we witness the sound being created for the film soundtrack, the film audience. Performing it in this way creates an audio/visual disjuncture, whilst also invoking the loss of the real, the absence of the authentic.

21 For in-depth analyses of *Waves* see Louise LePage, Posthuman Perspectives and Postdramatic Theatre. The Theory and Practice of Hybrid Ontology in Katie Mitchell's *The Waves*, in: *Cultura, lenguaje y representación. revista de estudios culturales de la Universitat Jaume I* 6 (2008), pp. 137–149; Janis Jefferies, ‘... some trace of her’. Katie Mitchell's *Waves* in Multimedia Performance, in: *Women. A Cultural Review* 22.4 (2011), pp. 400–410.

22 National Theatre Discover, *Katie Mitchell on directing multimedia productions*, 2011, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=rAij9r9RvF0&t=2s> (accessed August 20, 2017).

23 National Theatre Discover, *Ben Whishaw on Acting in a multimedia production*, 2011, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=5hK0y8tN29w> (accessed August 20, 2017).

24 Vsevolod Meyerhold, The reconstruction of the theatre, in: Edward Braun (ed.), *Meyerhold on Theatre*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 253–273.

25 National Theatre Discover, *Sound design for ‘...some trace of her’*, 2011, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=THpcmuKNumY> (accessed August 20, 2017).





1 *Forbidden Zone*. The camera operator captures the performer looking in the mirror in the set in the bottom left.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the overall formal quality of Mitchell's stage production creates a visual multi-screen *picture-in-picture* effect, invoking a digital aesthetic (a trope in various multi-screened films that proliferated in the early 2000s with the advent of digital editing, and an aesthetic of digital postproduction edit interfaces). The viewer is positioned as voyeur and is witness to the various screened vignettes, reminiscent of the aesthetic of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954).

A principle characteristic of synchronic simulacinema is that the productions are experienced in real-time – the seduction of this aesthetic prevails in one-take cinema.<sup>26</sup> Time on stage unfolds at the same time as time on screen, and it is the complexities and complications of this audiovisual achievement that are laid bare in the production. The fluid on-screen action and the flowing movement of the characters is juxtaposed and contradicted by the on-stage presence of the fragmented set and the urgent choreography of the production personnel as they negotiate the presence of the apparatus – the cabling, lights, set etc. This invokes the labour in the viewer who also has to visually negotiate and cohere the audio/visual complexity – this affective labour is a key trait of simulacinema: while time is parallel in the theatre-space and screen-space, dimensionality or space is not.

The accompanying documentary by 59 Productions presents the drama of the production and the high stakes that at any moment – anything can go wrong, all at once deliberately inhabiting, celebrating and performing “the commercial drama of a movie’s source”.<sup>27</sup> This sense of liveness is intrinsic to the synchronic simulacinematic. The presence of the spectator at the moment of capture is central to the experience, whilst the live is also a marketing and promotional tool, serving to historicize these instances as *on-off*, *unique* and *ground-breaking*. Similarly, in the next case study under consideration, *Nufonia Must Fall Live*, the director K. K. Barrett emphasizes the importance of liveness:

26 See Sarah Atkinson, “You sure that’s a film, man?” Audience anticipation, expectation and engagement in *Lost in London LIVE*, in: *Participations. Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 14.2 (2017), pp. 697–713.

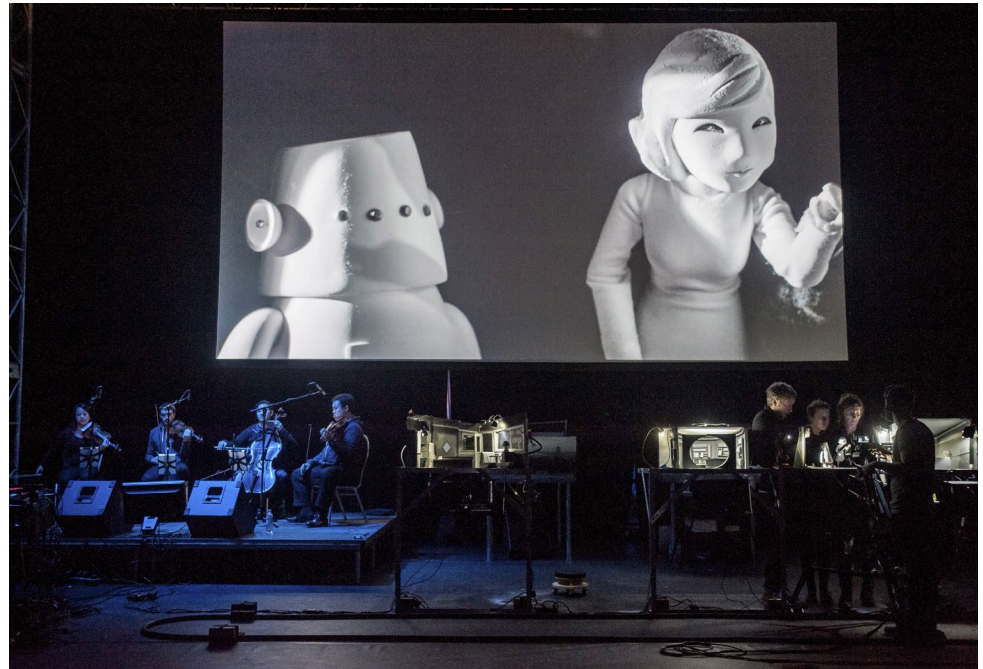
27 Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls. Movies and Culture after Vietnam*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991, p. 118.



*[I]n this world of being able to get anything on-demand, you have to come to the theatre currently to see this show, that's what makes it special [...] it's going to evaporate after this until its next performance.<sup>28</sup>*

*Nufonia Must Fall Live* was a simultaneous stage and screen performance described as a *live silent film* conceived by Eric San, better known as Kid Koala adapted from his silent comic book of the same name. In the 60-minute performance piece, the on-screen animation was performed live through puppetry which the audience could watch on the screen above the stage and below the screen (fig. 2). The stage consisted of 12 different model sets lit with LED, which were animated by puppets and puppeteers, all visible to the audience, along with a camera operator, sound engineer and video editor. The performance was accompanied by a string quartet and Koala's own scratch DJ music. San describes it as

*the most complicated show that I've ever been a part of, it's like this eight-ring circus, amazing energy and chaos on stage; but what we hope about this eight-ring circus is this fluid, unified feeling that we create on screen and for the people in the audience just to drift away with that story; but then they can have that picture-in-picture vibe where they can look down and see how it's all happening in real time.<sup>29</sup>*



2 *Nufonia Must Fall Live*. The three puppeteers to the right of the stage are visibly manipulating the puppets within the set that we see on the screen above the stage. The four musicians on the left play the accompanying soundtrack.

Here San alludes to a similar effect created in Mitchell's work using the language of new digital media – *real-time* and *picture-in-picture*. The unification which San seeks to achieve between the performance and its making on the surface appears to be highly challenging since animation production is the antithesis of live viewing – it requires extensive and timely production work. The meticulousness and effort of stop-frame animation processes is very often celebrated and foregrounded in industry discourses (i. e. Aardman animation feature films reportedly take eighteen

28 Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, *Nufonia Must Fall: A Making of the Stage Production*, 2014, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=K01BWCWk6ek> (accessed February 4, 2018).

29 The Creators Project, *Puppets, Turntables, And A String Quartet* | K.K. Barrett & Kid Koala's "Nufonia Must Fall Live", 2014, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=HFOImWFUL7k> (accessed August 20, 2017).

months to shoot with 25 to 30 animators working across 25 sets at once).<sup>30</sup>

In *Nufonia Must Fall Live*, it is a theatrical form of animation – live puppetry – that is produced and staged. As such, the performance follows two different cultural trajectories, the first being that of the fairground and the showcasing of film apparatus and the second that of the making-of and behind the scenes, the fascination with the process and *magic* of filmmaking which is as old as the history of cinema itself.

Firstly, San alludes to the spectacle of the moving image through his reference to the circus. The simultaneous viewing of the illusion and its source has its trajectory in cine-fairground attractions as Gunning states “the earliest years of exhibition the cinema itself was an attraction”,<sup>31</sup> using the term “attraction” to emphasize “that of exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption”.<sup>32</sup> Film has always showcased its techniques and artistry since its early history and has always delighted through this. Today’s viewer knows how film is made and thus takes pleasure in film-production being made into its own form of spectacle, thus becoming an image for a screen without being presented on a screen. With the zoetrope for example, the audience first see the mechanics and the machinery kick into action before looking deeper and immersing themselves in the illusion within. It is here that we see a return to fairground practices of cinema exhibition, where the technology is revealed and showcased before the illusion itself.

Secondly, the revealing of the secrets of animation production has its historical antecedents at the turn of the 20th century where craft-based techniques and the human labour behind the production were revealed in early proto-making-of documentaries.<sup>33</sup>

Through this study, the emergent functions, leitmotifs and aesthetics of simulacinema phenomena have emerged through a fusion of forms that merge the live with the mediated, the screen with the stage, and – through the mobilization of film production machinery – its production mechanics, processes and techniques. The creation of the screen image is central: in parachronistic simulacinema, the screen image is cohered by the spectators, in prochronistic the screen image is recreated by performers and scenography, and in simulacinema the screen image is subject to live creation.

In Mitchell’s work, attention is deliberately placed on the artifice of film-based production; the inauthentic artifice of the construction of the screen image is highlighted. In *Nufonia Must Fall Live*, it is the spectacle of screen-image creation that is foregrounded – the production is a performance and the artform and craft of animation production is celebrated.

Simulacinema is a concept which most usefully helps to extend understandings of the complexities of audience viewing pleasures; the evolution of creative practice in performance and the complexities of the commodified ecosystem of film and cinema including its intrinsic and endemic

30 Kate Abbott, Nick Park, Peter Lord, How we made Wallace and Gromit, in: *The Guardian*, March 3, 2014, <https://theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/mar/03/how-we-made-wallace-and-gromit> (accessed January 18, 2018).

31 Gunning 1990 (as. fn. 3), p. 58.

32 Ibid., p. 59.

33 Examples include Wallace Carlson, *How Animated Cartoons Are Made*, USA 1919; *How Walt Disney Cartoons Are Made*, USA 1939; Dave Fleischer, *How the Fleischer Studios, Miami, Florida, made 'Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp'*, USA 1939; Alfred L. Werker, *The Reluctant Dragon*, USA 1941. See a detailed study in Sarah Atkinson, *From Film Practice to Data Process. Production Aesthetics and Representational Practices of a Film Industry in Transition*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

politics. The synchronic simulac cinematic examples are suggestive of a politicization of production through the performance of labour and the simultaneous “pseudo visible, hyper invisible” economy of film production.<sup>34</sup>

There is significant labour required of the audience to comprehend and to process these complex experiences. Simulacinema is affectively taxing, and laborious, the viewer has to always shift in focus between two realities to grasp the overall production.

As cinema and theatre continue to evolve, merge and converge, the continued dissimulation of simulations becomes an increasingly complex, yet important task, particularly in relation to the decoding of mediations of film production so that we may evolve critical understandings of the emergent and seductive economy of *live* within the contemporary film and cinema ecology.

## Figures

- 1 Katie Mitchell, *The Forbidden Zone*, Photo: Stephen Cumiskey.
- 2 Kid Koala, *Nufonia Must Fall Live*, Festival Noorderzon, Photo: Pierre Borasci.

34 Sarah Atkinson, *From Film Practise to Data Process: Production Aesthetics and Representational Practices of a Film Industry in Transition*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp. 161–168.