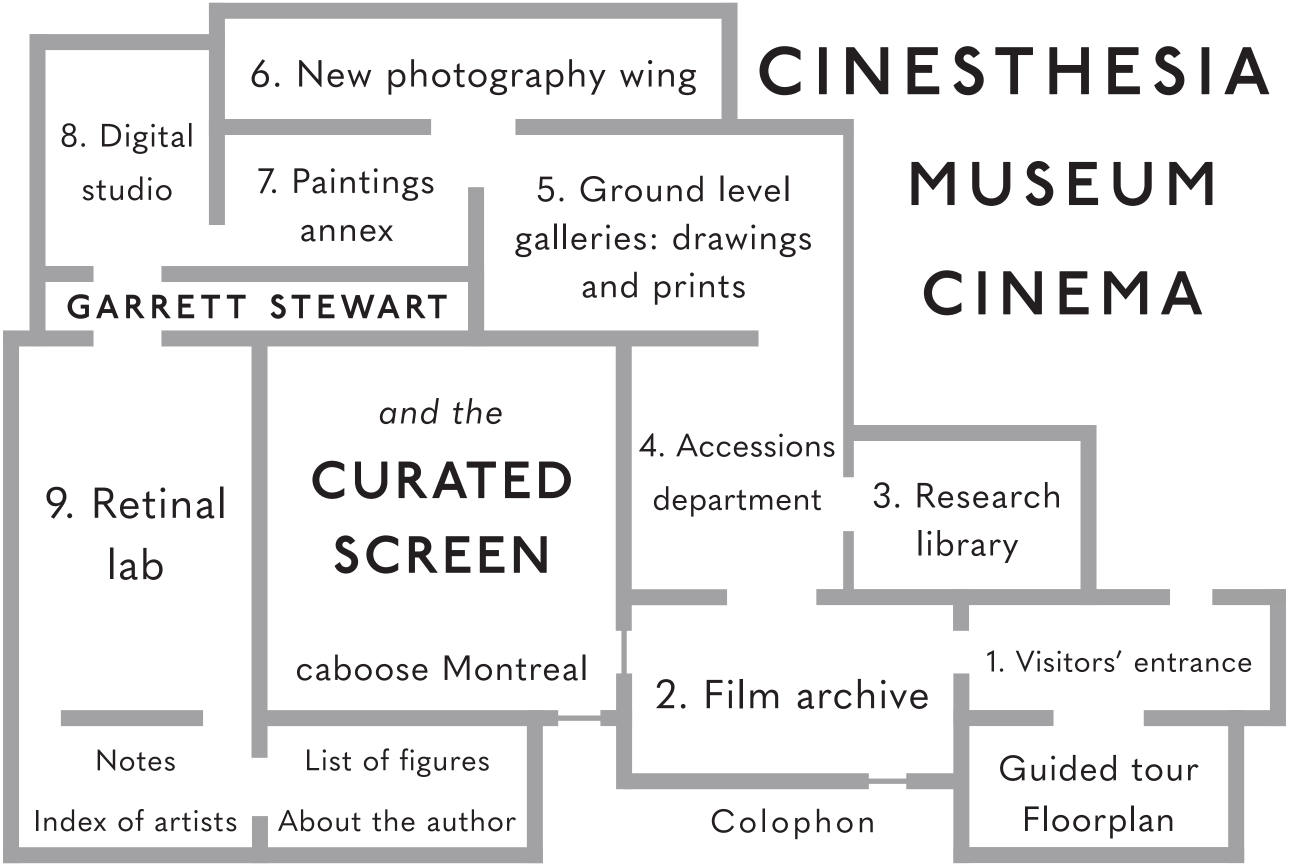
CINESTHESIA

MUSEUM CINEMA

GARRETT STEWART

CINESTHESIA



CINESTHESIA MUSEUM CINEMA

and the

CURATED SCREEN

GARRETT STEWART

caboose Montreal

Guided tour
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PICTURE
START

CINESTHESIA

MUSEUM

CINEMA

Guided tour
Floorplan

Movies used to flicker as well as glimmer; now they simply shimmer. The slivered cells of the beamed celluloid reel, operable long after the early days of silver nitrate, have been replaced since by the lightning-speed pixel grid—allowing, among other transformations, for the move from communal projection to private monitor. Through the bitmap arrays of computerised imaging, the scaled optics of traditional resolution have been overtaken by the electronics of high definition. But well before this epochal shift, in substrate if not altogether in 'medium', another sea change—the one on which this book concentrates: from allotted 'show times' to continuous imaging in the yet more public space of museum rather than movie theatre. As a function of celluloid transparencies in serial visual ignition, the medium that began as the most 'plastic' of arts, in the material sense, has been assimilated to the institutional sense instead: aesthetically 'reframed' in display space next to works in oil or bronze-cast clay, charcoal or the actual plastic of polyurethane.

That's the topic of these pages. With the movie house no longer providing screen imaging's essential (or at least not its inevitable) home, gallery catalogues—and on-the-wall placard excerpts—have, within their own sphere, replaced weekly newspaper reviews as a primary arbiter of response in the matter of screen 'acquisitions' rather than 'releases'. Marquees have been reduced in scale to descriptive wall text—even while expanded many times over in explanatory content. That is part of the way in which the moving image, along with its new museum peers in other media, has been rethought by art's increasing emphasis on concept over percept. For such a huge subject, mine may seem an unexpectedly short book—even as its brevity does in its own way befit the stamina and attention span of most museum goers, including those entering upon the imaginary gallery compendium here stepped through. I think of poet Marianne Moore's vision of 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'. Same here: one overarching and segmented international exhibition space structured by poetic licence, but with many very real aesthetic objects documented on (or, via recessed monitors, often *in*) its walls. Short on elaboration in some summary cases, perhaps, but long in the evolution contemplated by sampling in its ekphrastic (rather than on-site) 'exposition', what follows is a successive discourse not, in this respect, entirely foreign to the increasing wordiness of curatorial captions at actual exhibitions.

Comprehensiveness is not the object here, but rather the serious comprehension of instances as museal objects. This not a history of the film loop as interloper upon the bastions of high art and its plastic fixities, nor a theory of mass media etherising its popular appeal to win aesthetic credence in such a colonising inroad, nor an elegy for celluloid and its machines either buried with ceremony in the museum or entombed in video transfer. There are versions of all such stories, and more, at essay or book length. This isn't a survey, then, so much as a diary of prolonged return visits, less an overview than an exercise in close looking: comparative excavations of the visible. It asks what we view differently in engaging with *moving* 'pictures at an exhibition' in just such an exhibition context, not as discrete screenings or scheduled broadcasts but as motorised images—or imagings (the verbal and durational gerund gets it better)—when *under inspection* rather than just seen. Asks—and looks for answers where alone they can be found: in-frame, though no longer in the fixed sense of such a gallery mounting, gilt or otherwise.[1]

Inquiry can begin with a question less obvious than it sounds. How is it—by what aesthetic criteria—that we, in ticketed public space, go to see film without going to the movies? What happens, that is, when screening times are replaced by the intermittent and elective time of transient viewing in sectored zones of a gallery layout? What new (audio-) visual parameters, in other words, are set in place when moving-image work finds itself welcomed into the environs of the proverbial 'fine' (or again, plastic) arts? The issue isn't film *at* the museum (Dziga Vertov, Maya Deren, Andy Warhol, etc.)—catch as catch can from one weekly 'art film' or 'experimental cinema' roster to another in its dedicated downstairs screening room—but film *in* the museum, incorporated into an entire aesthetic context and its display rooms: a conceptual and spatial realm subtly reoriented in the process. How so, this reorientation—in art-historical terms? And with what blowback for the privilege of cinema as mass media institution when its filmic (or digital) material is differently institutionalised in this way?

To be sure, discourses of cinephilia—both old and new—have displayed a certain anxiety about opening film up and out to the unprogrammed sectors of museum presentation, a space too dispersed and variable to ensure an invested looking. The museumised 'movie', with a spectator ambulatory rather than passive, demands a form of attention quite different from that of either the theatrically-projected narrative film or the portable formats of its streamed versions. Well before digital, let alone mobile, access, yet breaking with the modes of intimacy and absorption associated with the prototypical movie-viewing experience, galleries had *gone public* with the extracted, looped or otherwise installed moving image, in everything from its typical 16mm experimental format through analogue and digital video to the latest incorporation of participatory virtual reality, at which we will arrive in the final gallery as 'Retinal Lab'. When kinetic imaging enters the museum, it becomes one of 'the media' in a new way: a time-based artefact under figurative 'reframing' among and between other sampled modes of picture making, its materiality investigated as formal image rather than lensed view, *objet* rather than *dispositif*. With what fallout, then, either for film art or for aesthetics at large?

These are the questions that first spurred, then continued to sponsor, this study, which came to seem less like a traditional monograph than a cross-mapped set of reconsidered screen experiments housed together in the mental space of comparison. In imagining how to categorise the multifarious evidence I had at hand, and kept finding, I felt I was having something of the trouble museum directors might in the disposition of a large-scale retrospective exhibition. The results deserved less a traditional table of contents than a museum-like floor plan: marking off variable partitions in the exhibition sectors of a selective guided tour. By way of initial signposting in shifting from one moving image to the next, each seemed useful to note—in its resistance to easy aesthetic assimilation—by the tension (often contradiction) it poses to specular expectation in a gallery setting: a tension, or byplay, repeatedly tagged in what follows, in CAPS, across the variable hurdle, one-way mirror, or dialectical interface of typography's upright stanchion in the differential | keystroke.

CONTRA | DISTINCTIONS . . . Conceptual dualities of this sort escalate—and complicate each other—as we move from one moving-image artefact to another along the floor plan of this book. Each specification triggers another question—and often begs it. Until a certain higher-level resolution—logical rather than ocular—may, in its conceptual merger, seem to operate *contra distinction* altogether. In any case, questions build momentum almost as soon as articulated. What, besides exhibition format, may be taken as *definitively* different between movies released and films curated? Between big-screen presentation—with raked and sometimes reserved seating, Dolby surround sound, feature-length scheduling, seamless pixel imaging—and its museum counterpart in unfurnished cubes both black and white, often with headphones for private audio plug-in?

The questions are eminently historical. Even the first two words in the subtitle of this volume, 'Museum Cinema', might once have seemed an oxymoron if taken as a linkage of generalised place names. In any such transplanted manifestation of 'cinema', it is the 'museum' qualifier that *categorically modifies* (both experientially as well as grammatically) the film experience. Theatrical cinema as a group event (mainstream or avant-garde) is transformed not simply by dint of venue, but by the cultural valences—as well specific ocular layout—of gallery display. At the very least, my full subtitle is meant to conjure the need for some kind of definitional wedge driven between image system and viewing situation, technology and exhibition, under the aegis of museum culture. Then, too, even before the phrase 'museum cinema' may have raised its latent contradiction-in-terms (rather than the very different 'cinema museum', anywhere from Frankfurt to Los Angeles), there is already the deliberate lexical pastiche of this volume's portmanteau main title to contend with, on its own contending terms. Sanctioned by museum display, technical kinetics fuses with aesthetics in the eye of the availed beholder.

In presentation alongside the stabilities of drawing, painting, sculpture, collage and the rest, cinema as aesthetic protocol migrates from theatre screen to museum wall by negotiating not so much a direct transit as an antithesis, or at least an exposed dichotomy: IMAGING | IMAGE—the difference, one might say, between picturing a space or action over time and offering a fixed picture. En route to some brief autobiographical remarks looking back, through the tunnel vision of a quite personal lens, on the cinematic touchstone—in local theatre space—for such emphatic museum *departures*, rather than mere transplants, it seems fair to insist on one thing first off. The crucial difference between a theatrical screening and a 'wall piece' is not that between movies and video, for instance, but between foregrounded aspects of motion capture: italicised in their museum display, while otherwise taken for granted in everyday movie going (or now screen watching).

CINE | VIDE . . . One way to tag the differential hurdle involved, its barrier not so much to be leapt as contemplated: the image cinematic versus visualised, where picturing oscillates between technology and perception, apparatus and apparition. Each interrogates the other regarding the nature of regard itself in the register of illusory action (objects or bodies in undergone optic change) versus real motion (images in flux). To anticipate once again the coming pattern of spot-lit dichotomies: call it the MOVEMENT | MOTION crux, distinguishing pictured movement from the mere moving of picture cells, the sheer funnelling of frames. In this respect, for instance, picture (I use the word advisedly) some remastered and miniaturised 16mm close-up of an airplane propeller. Not as a science exhibit, but as a meta-cinematic trope: its image recovering by metonymy, together with a percussive score behind it, the flicker effect of synchronised sound film. In the realm of the gallery meta-film, any such visible effect of a rotary motor projection—glimpsed as figuring its own associated, almost immanent, cause—is likely to be emphasised as such, as pure instrumentation: not just backlit but highlighted in its specular mechanism. We go to the gallery, rather than 'the movies', to study the plasticity of motion.

But real examples can be immeasurably more suggestive. My own dichotomised vocabulary aside, the first foray into museum precincts for the film image was, in effect, similarly terminological. Movies were redefined—realigned, in fact, as graphic cousins of dance and music—in their categorisation as 'time-based media'. The floodgates of invention, or more to the point aesthetic valuation, were in this way suddenly thrown open, with more recent developments only extending the trajectory of such an anti-spectacle bias in favour of technical mediation. According to this paradigm, the temporality of generation is of more interest than the narrative time of pictured event. Two contemporary filmmakers (or film un-makers) have, two decades apart, met with critical renown, as well as considerable public fascination, in their museum-aimed cinematic decompositions—and precisely on the score of '(the) screening (of) time': now disintegrated by hypertrophic montage in the very different cases of Douglas Gordon's and Christian Marclay's twenty-four-hour time-tampered screen 'texts', now simultaneous, by illegible overlay, in another prolonged time-based work by the latter. This trio—and triangulation—of examples should consolidate an up-to-the minute point of departure as we embark on the (often retrospective) tour ahead.

VIEWING | TIME . . . Even before museum popularity rose to the point where the 'timed entrance' phenomenon has devised its own way of channelling attendance, Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) seemed to travesty the notion of viewing time, defying anything like sustained attention in its partly overnight progress. And as far as possible from the SHOW | TIME of theatrical scheduling, the cinematic retardation perpetrated by Gordon—or call it his photogrammic inflation—achieves its results by multiplying the screen time of Alfred Hitchcock's feature film a dozen-fold, slowing the frame rate to two rather than twenty-four frames per second—and thereby dragging the thriller action back towards the status, and stasis, of photographic wall art. It is as if the image chain of photogram succession were yearning towards filmic event but choked off in minimal and dilatory shifts of frame, motion not just dismembered for analysis but serially amputated from all manifest narrative advance. In this wrench to the defining spatio-temporality of cinema, what seems disclosed is time itself, pure exposure time—slowed below the threshold of action, however, and laid bare as abstract ocular succession. Executed upon a thriller classic like *Psycho* (1960), image sequence becomes, we might say, mutilating Proust as well, a dismembrance of things past.

TIME | PIECES . . . In a work distinctly more crowd pleasing, such 'viewers' become actual mesmerised 'audiences' in attendance at Marclay's *The Clock* (2010)—also running continuously for the same twenty-four hours as Gordon's *Psycho*, though often with controlled admission to spaces with limited seating. Marclay's work inverts the granular analytic of Gordon's film to a hypermontage instead. It does so, across a vast narrative data bank, by cutting from one film to the next whenever a piece of dialogue or a wristwatch glimpsed within the narrative space, and more commonly desk or wall clock, registers the numeric index of real extra-narrative time (the coterminous time of gallery display), with shots so carefully synchronised that they often jump cut on the abrupt advance of the minute hand. As with Gordon's *Psycho*, Marclay's reduction of narrative to mere temporal process serves to implode the distinction, famously promulgated by philosopher Gilles Deleuze, between the movement-image and the time-image,[2] with motion in *The Clock* narrowed to mere temporal calibration. In this way, under the titular spell of Marclay's grammatically singular assemblage, separate instances of each clockwork mechanism within the screen frame offer a synecdochic comment on the film itself as an eponymous machine of raw synchronicity, where narrative duration is splintered and re-spliced, inverted in its usual dominance over screening time, levelled to equivalence with an exorbitant, round-the-clock display.

OVER | KILL . . . Nearly a decade later, an arresting gallery venture by Marclay offers an inversion of this inversion. Where he had once intercut, as if on an accelerated treadmill, a corpus of work, including many Hitchcock thrillers, one of which Gordon had slowed to a snail's pace, Marclay has since reversed emphasis and let the normal screening time of narrative operate its own effacement of plot. In his latest impacted composition, the constraint aesthetic of the pastiche has give way to a quite differently constrained palimpsest, occluding the very images it accumulates. In this 2019 work premiered at the Venice Biennale, *48 War Movies* produces a vertigo effect: a kind of stabilised track-zoom gestalt, though with no supervening camera movement outside the overlain commercial narratives. The full screen version of one arbitrarily chosen war film, once overprinted with the slightly smaller dimensions (though identical format) of the next, and so on, all in colour Blu-Ray release in the same aspect ratio, develops a nested layering that seems ultimately to recess rather than accrete the last of the laminates. That final kinetic rectangle—smallest in scale, and thus dropping away from its otherwise foregrounded claims on the eye—is the only full-frame war film we glimpse, yet it is functionally invisible in its tiny lozenge of blur.

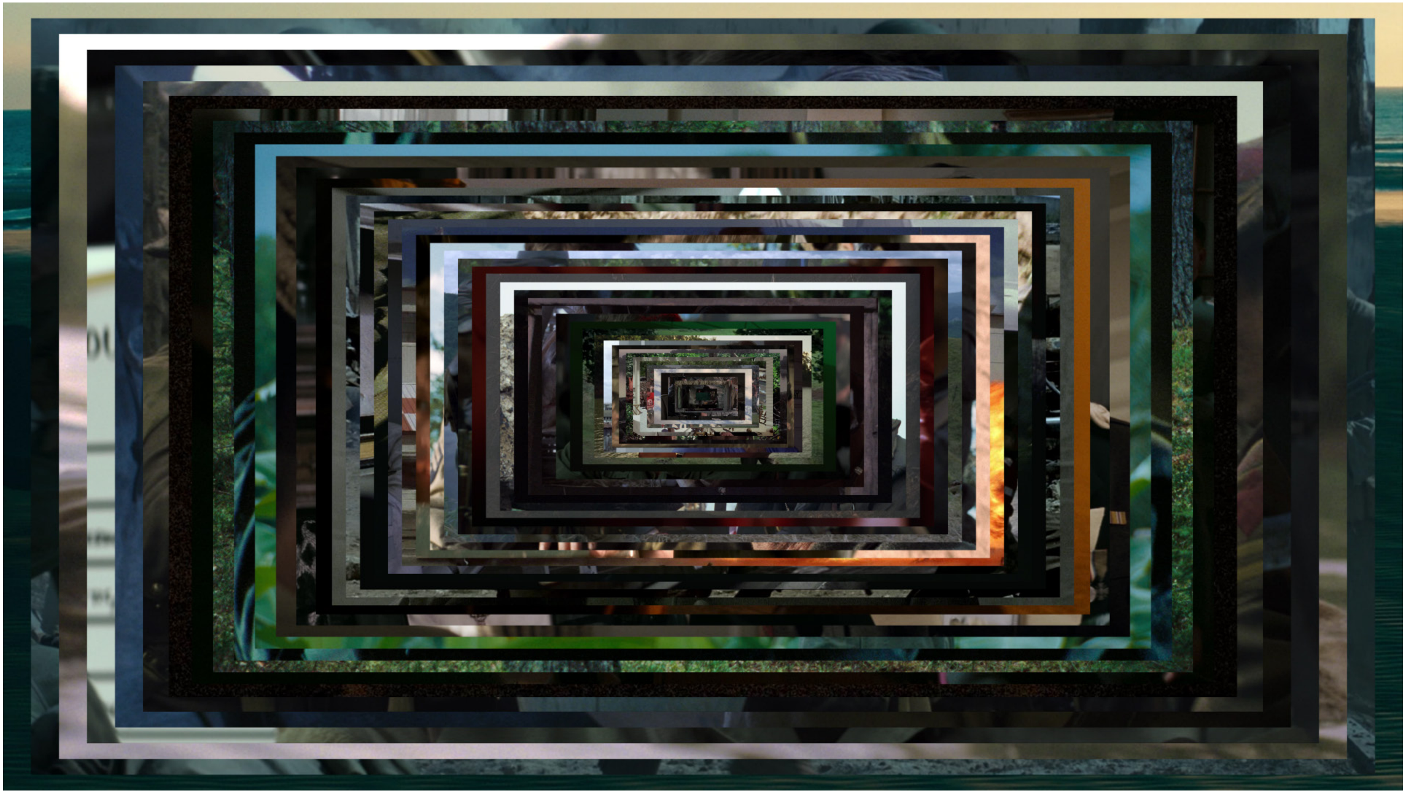

Fig. 1. Christian Marclay, *48 War Movies* (2019). Still image from a single-channel video installation, colour and stereo sound, continuous loop, dimensions variable. Edition of 5.
© Christian Marclay. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

The result is a mise en abyme of choreographed violence, with all diegetically rendered motion discernible only in rectangular bands around the edges of the next enframed (superimposed) scene, terraced in an abyss of iteration like the eternal recurrence of war itself. Here clustered popular entertainments in the spectacle of violence, culled from the archive of theatrical exhibition, enter the gallery not one at a time, but all at once. Thus bombarding each other's optical planes, Marclay's war movies capture only the ambient noise and threatening motility of the mayhem their genre is named for, not its individual motives, plot agents or dramatic vistas. In the process—and chaos—of recession, each of the four dozen titles plays itself out at different lengths, the palimpsest thus disintegrating, fraying in layers, near the end of its formulaic second hour.

All told, and with no separate tales visible, the very category of 'war film', reduced to image trace rather than tracked narrative, suffers abject defeat at the hands of its own collective status. Its instances manifested as four dozen screen treatments in mutual eradication, the resulting cacophony of images is a kind of genrecide. Vying for distinction, the individual screen narratives lose their power in the impacted and cramped visual field. Video overprinting undermines any dramatic representation. All sound and fury without focus or direction, the thick of battle emerges—or is submerged—as merely a dense laminate of image. The very 'theatre of war' is rendered dysfunctional. Such is, of course, the optical rewrite so common in the museum reuse of big screen spectacle, where some tacit antithesis feels lifted to view: here the distinction between widescreen breadth of image plane and something like a flattened ethic of depth. It may look, at first glance, like imagery has penetrated to some elusive core—when it is only slapping on more of the same at gradually reduced scale, more of its proliferating war pic representations.

The 3D illusionism of Renaissance perspectival formats so directly inherited by cinema (with their own incidental debts to ballistic geometry)—whereby the optical vanishing point drops away behind the image, whose angles converge to turn planes into space—may be thought radically reversed here. What results is a trompe l'oeil telescoping of overlain rectangles into a stair-stepped illegible access to some putative—yet punningly 'superficial'—stratum beneath. Beyond the optical violence and disorientation provoked in this way, all the while making war on the motorised panoramas of violence itself, few ingenuities of conceptual video, apart from their immediate thematic charge, could point up more dramatically the serial consumption of commercial cinema by contrast with this travestied gallery 'digest'. File, alternately, under WARRING | PICTURES.

Further, for all Marclay's conceptual originality and technical finesse in this 'single-channel video', battles not dissimilar are waged across many of the works to come, pivoted around inferred binary options either abrogated or exacerbated. And not always obvious to sheer visual response. What you see isn't all you get. Percept again requires conceptual discourse in order to 'get the picture'. Almost literalised by overlay in Marclay, opacity is regularly a sales pitch for the catalogue essay. Or at least a call for paragraphs of exegesis—where explication is by nature complication—in pages like this. But we should first back up for a wider (and longer) view before zeroing in again on contemporaneous installations. One way to be 'ushered' into the contest of modalities within time-based media is through the coming foyer of exhibition history in the dissemination of commercial screen narrative—including my own teenage labours in the cinematic service industry when read into evidence as a routine (which is the whole point) example. From this glimpse into the original precincts of cinema space in relation to distribution practice—or, in other words, by stepping off film's *premises* as a site of exhibition before a captioned gallery object—we can move forward more securely, and swiftly, across the evolution of cinematic display on the way to its museal reconception, as sampled in the works housed in the coming galleries alongside 'blockbusters' such as *The Clock*.

Garrett Stewart is the James O. Freedman Professor of Letters at the University of Iowa and a member, since 2010, of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Along with many books on cinema as well as prose fiction, he has published extensively on art history, most recently *Transmedium: Conceptualism 2.0 and the New Object Art* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), a study that converges with *Cinemachines: An Essay on Media and Method* (Chicago, 2020) in prompting his current treatment of moving images in museum culture.

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THEORY AND PRACTICE

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FORTHCOMING

Pier Paolo Pasolini *Other People's Films*

CINESTHESIA ▣ GARRETT STEWART

FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES ▣ ART HISTORY & MUSEUM STUDIES

A characteristically dazzling, intellectually inventive, almost preternaturally informed *tour d'horizon* and analysis of the interplay between spaces of exhibition and recent (and not so recent) developments in video, film, medial manifestations of all sorts.
— Michael Fried, author of *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*

Garrett Stewart, well known for his theoretically-nuanced work on transmedial relations, takes the reader on a 'tour' of a placeless global museum whose galleries display time-based images. Brilliant, always witty, Stewart examines works such as William Kentridge's animated books, Tacita Dean's conceptual art, pieces from the Whitney's 'Immersive Cinema and Art' show and Virtual Reality 'events'. With McLuhan, he often finds that the content of a new medium is the form of the old one.
— Brigitte Peucker, Yale University, author of *Aesthetic Spaces: The Place of Art in Film*

How is it—by what aesthetic criteria—that we, in ticketed public space, go to see film without going to the movies? What happens, that is, when screening times are replaced by the intermittent and elective time of transient viewing in sectored zones of a gallery layout? What new (audio-) visual parameters, in other words, are set in place when moving-image work finds itself welcomed into the environs of the proverbial 'fine' (or again, plastic) arts? — Garrett Stewart

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