

# Another World is Possible

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You're watching a film, or reading a novel. There's a moment in the story where the protagonist enters a cinema. Maybe it's a moment of escape, as she runs from a problem:

She lit a cigarette, glad of the darkness but not protected by it; and she watched the screen, but all she saw were the extraordinarily unconvincing wiggles of a girl whose name, incredibly enough, appeared to be Doris Day. She thought, irrelevantly, I should never come to movies, I can't stand them, and then she began to cry. <sup>1</sup>

Maybe he's there because he's homeless in Manhattan, drowning in anomie, and the real estate of a cinema seat is worth the price of admission:

It was past midnight and he had been sitting in the movies, in the top row of the balcony, since two o'clock in the afternoon. Twice he had been awakened by the violent accents of the Italian film, once the usher had awakened him, and twice he had been awakened by caterpillar fingers between his thighs. <sup>2</sup>

Or maybe his emotional or physical state doesn't drown out the story of the film. Maybe the character in the auditorium finds his unspoken thoughts reflected in the narrative on-screen, or even appears in it as an actor:

As he delivered his one line – 'Nom de Dieu, que j'ai soif!' – the camera shifted to show him framed in the sights of an enemy gun; blood suddenly bubbled from Eric's lips and he went sliding off the rooftop, out of sight. With Eric's death, the movie also died for them, and, luckily, very shortly, it was over. They walked out of the cool darkness into the oven of July.

'Who's going to buy me that drink?' Eric asked. He smiled a pale smile. It was something of a shock to see him, standing on the sidewalk, shorter than he had appeared in the film, in flesh and blood. <sup>3</sup>

The cinema auditorium plays an important role in Western literature, art and theatre. It represents a place of escape, a place where characters seek self-reflection and tune into their emotional lives. Deep-seated thoughts tend to rise to the surface of our consciousness when we move into the role

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Vintage International, 1992), p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 330-1.

of spectator; we are not simply fixated on an exterior image. Viewing creates multiple selves, located across the spaces of the screen, the auditorium and our interior lives. In the exhibition 'Tiny, Funny, Big and Sad', Jennifer and Kevin McCoy present works that draw on a variety of traditions within both film and art history to explore the latent creative possibilities inherent in the role of the viewer.

The *Traffic* series (2004), consisting of four works shown together in the exhibition, marks an important stage in the McCoys' exploration of spectatorship. Each of the works in the series depicts moments in the artists' lives in which their memory of a particular period is linked to watching a specific film. The artists have restaged these memories as miniature dioramas, installed on tables in the gallery space. These miniature tableaux feature landscape, architecture and human forms represented at small scale, using materials from model railroading hobby kits as well as bespoke hand-crafted elements. These sculptures are surrounded by flexible metal limbs, some supporting lighting fixtures and others supporting small video cameras. Each camera captures a live video image of its subject and sends it to a computerised video switcher. The computer stitches together an endlessly looping sequence of these camera shots according to a preset pattern programmed by the artists. This video loop is then projected on the gallery wall. Each tabletop sculpture therefore functions as an automated film set, producing a video sequence in real time.

Two narrative spaces exist within each piece: one, the viewing space, in which the McCoys depict themselves in the act of watching a movie, and two, the 'set' of the film they are watching, remade by the artists at small scale. The first work in the series, *Traffic #1: Our Second Date*, depicts two characters in a cinema auditorium with plush seating and red curtains. The female character is a brunette with shoulder-length hair, wearing the kind of classic style that suggests that it might be Jennifer – but Kevin is the clincher. With thick black-framed glasses, handlebar moustache and longish wavy hair, he has a look (at the time of writing) that's recognisable even when he's six inches tall. Appearing on the scaled-down cinema screen is a live video feed from the other narrative space of the miniature tableau: a re-creation of a scene from Jean-Luc Godard's *Week End* (1967).<sup>4</sup> As in the original film, the camera moves slowly alongside an interminable column of small-scale cars, stuck in an endlessly looping traffic jam caused by a deadly accident.

The three further works in the *Traffic* series follow this format too; each depicts the artists as they watch a film. But in these works the artists have left the allusive cinema auditorium for the hybrid spaces of television viewing. In *Traffic #2: At Home*, Jennifer and Kevin are shown in their apartment. We see a floral-print sofa, lace curtains, a vase of flowers and a 70s-style television. The artists watch the tiny screen, which shows a parade in a Western US town, with police patrol cars at the head. This is a recreation of Steven Spielberg's *The Sugarland Express* (1974),<sup>5</sup> in which a fugitive couple make a madcap dash across Texas in an attempt to rescue their biological child from his foster parents.

Drama is introduced into the series with *Traffic #3: In the Cardiac Ward*. The character of Kevin is shown here sitting upright in a hospital bed, with Jennifer seated next to him. The space is anonymous, but the title of the piece implies a personal narrative, the trauma of going to the hospital, and the boredom of staying there. Playing on a standard issue hospital TV is another short video loop, this time a recreation of *American Graffiti* (1973): roadsters and Cadillacs cruise the main drag of a 50s-

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Godard (Director), *Week End* [motion picture] (France/Italy: Comacino, Lira Films, Cinecidi, 1967). Retrieved from <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/57369> (12 September 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Richard D. Zanuck and David Brown (Producers) and Steven Spielberg (Director), *The Sugarland Express* [motion picture] (USA: Universal Pictures, 1974). Retrieved from <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/52217> (12 September 2006).

style American small town.<sup>6</sup> In the fourth piece, *Traffic #4: At the Bar*, the McCoys are shown in a wood-panelled watering hole, watching a movie on TV: a chase scene from *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967).<sup>7</sup>

Appropriately for a project called *Traffic*, each of the works in this series deals with a film scene in which cars play a central role. It's not quite as obvious how the selection of film titles might have resonated with events in Jennifer and Kevin's lives, if at all. What is the connection between *American Graffiti*, for example, and a cardiac ward? Perhaps the cruising teenagers represent a form of escape from the confinement of the hospital bed: the viewer can only guess. For their part, the McCoys give few hints to suggest that such intertextuality exists, presenting the work in purely biographical terms, leading the viewer to draw their own conclusions. On the McCoys' website, Kevin has written a caption: '[*In the Cardiac Ward*] tells the story of Jenn and I watching a scene from *American Graffiti* while I was in the hospital in 2003.'<sup>8</sup> Whilst Kevin's description does not specifically suggest a connection between this moment in the McCoys' lives, and the stop-start flow of automobile traffic, his statement does suggest that this significant moment, and the McCoys' memory of it, is now linked to watching that film.

The McCoys' self-portraits as couch-potatoes stand in absurd contrast to the illustrious stories behind the most well-known self-portraits of modern times. By taking the artist as the subject of a work, the self-portrait has often been positioned as a way for the public to access the semi-mythical world of the artist who made it. Van Gogh's missing ear, Frida Kahlo's monkey and Tracey Emin's bed all appear in such works as fetish objects that stand in for the adventures and trials of the artist: madness, new world Trotskyism, overt female sexuality. Where these artists are celebrated and remembered for bravely giving voice to untravelled boundaries of human experience, the McCoys' portraits remain expressly within the comfort zone of consumer culture. The couple live and work in New York, and their external appearances give no clue of a difference between them and the elite class of that city: they are white, heterosexual and able-bodied. In relation to the figures on their screen, the McCoys identify as 'same' rather than 'other'. If the small screen in *Traffic #4*, for example, was a half-silvered mirror, one might expect the McCoys to see a faint image of Kevin superimposed over Clyde/Warren Beatty, and a chimeric synthesis of Jennifer, Bonnie and Faye Dunaway. This synthesis of viewing subject and image on-screen parallels the artists' chosen method of representation: ready-made, mass-produced plastic figurines purchased from an ordinary hobby supply store are customised to resemble the artists more closely. The 'selves' in these portraits are both off-the-shelf and self-made.

Yet, the way the McCoys present their experiences of spectatorship leads one to assume that there is more going on than the simple synthesis of viewer and on-screen narrative. The act of viewing is not simply the reception of a message, but a complex play of experiences and factors that come together within the viewer to construct a conversation around a given scenario.

Alone in a crowd is never so intense as at the movies, and never so open to sudden dislocation. It is the complex play between me, you, them, the film, the cinema building and the world outside that enables us, on occasion, to experience reality more completely, and as in dreams to see in the dark.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Ford Coppola (Producer) and George Lucas (Director), *American Graffiti* [motion picture] (USA: Universal Pictures, 1973). Retrieved from <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/44298> (11 September 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Warren Beatty (Producer) and Arthur Penn (Director), *Bonnie & Clyde* [motion picture] (USA: Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1967). Retrieved from <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/27201> (12 September 2006).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mccoyspace/sets/124344> (retrieved 4 September 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Ian Breakwell and Paul Hammond (ed.), *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinemagoing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990).



The Constant World

The McCoys' reconstructions of the act of viewing synthesise events on the screen, their immediate surroundings, their companions, the wider context of their personal lives, maybe even what they had for dinner. For the Jennifer we see in *Our Second Date*, *Week End* isn't simply a monument carved in celluloid, it's also a blossoming romance, a memory of Kevin in his twenties, studying abroad, a Parisian fleapit, a baguette and a glass of red wine. For the Kevin of *In the Cardiac Ward*, *American Graffiti* is uncertain diagnosis, hospital-ward food, a new prescription, and intimacy in a moment of fear. Through this confluence of perceptions, the viewer, as much as the film-maker, produces the meaning of a movie. In *Traffic*, the spectator is a productive role, and viewing is an artist's act.

*Traffic* reflects not only on the McCoys' roles as artists/viewers, but also implicates the viewer in the gallery. Like a Hollywood sound stage, the illusion of the miniature film sets in *Traffic* have marked boundaries. The mobile viewer can see lighting fixtures, the edge of the set and the back of the stage flats. The fixed point of view of the cameras, however, places this apparatus beyond the edge of the frame, leaving the artifice intact, except for one element: the viewer in the gallery. Upon taking a closer look at the sculptural element of the piece, one might see oneself appear (fleeting, badly lit and out of focus) in the background of a video image on the screen. This accidental cameo confirms the 'liveness' of the piece, connecting the image on the screen directly to the reality before us, rather than to an abstract, pre-recorded space generated by a computer or Hollywood film set. The image and its physical referent are reunified.

The appearance of one's own image on-screen does more than simply confirm the liveness of the piece. It transforms the work from the artists' self-portrait into a viewer's self-portrait, transforms immediate experience into mediated experience, transforms action into acting. *Traffic* induces the condition of 'doubling', a word used by curator Sarah Cook to explain certain effects of media technologies on the reception of artwork. She proposes that technology doubles one's existence, making one stand outside of oneself, outside of events as they happen.<sup>10</sup> Picture yourself making a home video, for example, of a holiday. While watching a sunset, you focus on an LCD screen, adjusting the camera's settings. Perhaps you keep up a running commentary, communicating with friends back home rather than those immediately around you: 'and here's so-and-so, drinking her cocktail, and this is the view out the window, and this is the sunset'. You move into a mental space between the events as they are happening and events as they will be narrated to viewers in the future. Doubling creates the distance between the self in the moment and the self on-screen. This distance is invoked in the *Traffic* series by capturing live video images of viewers in the gallery, turning the curious onlooker into an unwitting on-screen subject. Whilst the video represents miniatures as if they are life-size, it depicts the human visitor to the gallery at a Brobdingnagian scale, rendering the viewer's own image oddly unfamiliar.

Dan Graham's *Time Delay Room* (1974), an important precedent for the McCoys' use of live video in the gallery, is even more explicit in its attempt to create a distance between the viewer and their own image. In this work, the viewer enters a booth in which two video displays are installed. The displays show CCTV-like images of similarly nondescript spaces. Within moments of entering the booth, the visitor's own image appears on one of the screens. A live video camera is trained on the booth, electronically delayed for 8 seconds (the outer limit of human short-term memory), and then displayed on the TV screen. The viewer is confronted with a portrait of themselves that has the immediacy of a live image, but which has the unfamiliarity of an image from the past.

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Cook, 'Curating Real-Time Presence in a Gallery Context', VIVID, Birmingham, 30 January 2005.

*Time Delay Room*, like the *Traffic* series, invites viewers to be makers, not just consumers, of images: each viewer is also an artist. The McCoys' work explores the concomitant idea of the artist-as-viewer. The artist's role is not just to make images, but also to consume them. This is evident in their tour-de-force of obsessive viewing, *Every Shot, Every Episode* (2001). The piece was inspired by Kevin's childhood babysitter, 'who taped *Starsky & Hutch* television shows with an audio tape recorder while describing the visual events as she watched.'<sup>11</sup> For their re-working of this impulse to narrate-while-viewing, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy put together a collection of 20 episodes of the *Starsky & Hutch* TV series.<sup>12</sup> The McCoys broke the series up into 10,000 individual shots, assigning keywords that described characteristics, actions, people or objects within the image: suburbs, clocks, stairways, brown, sports facilities, female cops. Individual shots relating to each category were compiled onto discs, each one carefully labelled. For example, visitors to the gallery could select a video CD, and view on a monitor, in quick succession, every image of a female cop from *Starsky & Hutch*. The result is a dynamic re-reading of *Starsky & Hutch* that excavates hidden associations, creates new visual rhythms, and highlights implicit ideologies.

As our aforementioned holiday video-maker is bound to discover, the world cannot be perfectly narrated. The narration of an event introduces error, interpretation and noise; each narration conjures up a parallel vision of the world. If the experiment of *Every Shot, Every Episode* were to be repeated, different results would be obtained each time. As Albert Einstein is alleged to have remarked, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. In Einstein's universe, mathematical formulae predict the movement of atoms and objects to an extraordinarily precise degree. In the McCoys' universe, by contrast, experiments are conducted in the hope of new failures; results can never be exactly recreated from moment to moment or from viewer to viewer.

At the time of writing, the McCoys are producing a new installation that conjures a failed vision of another possible universe. *The Constant World* (2007) is a hanging sculpture based in part on the work of another model-making artist, Constant Nieuwenhuys. Between 1956 and 1974, Constant created a series of drawings and models for a visionary city called *New Babylon*. *New Babylon* proposed a 'camp for nomads on a planetary scale',<sup>13</sup> a space where people move freely between temporary habitats that would adapt to meet their physical and emotional needs. The press of a button could change the texture, material, temperature or colour of a room, simply to suit one's mood. The McCoys' new project uses a cityscape modelled after *New Babylon* as the backdrop for a story based on Jean-Luc Godard's sci-fi film noir *Alphaville* (1965).<sup>14</sup> Using a technique similar to the *Traffic* works, the McCoys create an on-screen narrative that inter-cuts these bygone visions of the future with texts emblazoned across the screen. The texts act as marketing slogans that lure visitors to this inaccessible terrain.

Constant's dream of an environment that could be altered at the press of a button has never really come true – except in the world of the screen. With network technology, on-screen social spaces now offer some of the interactive promise of *New Babylon*. Online games and social networking

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.mccoyspace.com/ese.html> (retrieved 12 September 2006).

<sup>12</sup> The original series ran from 1975–79, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0072567/> (retrieved 6 September 2006).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.notbored.org/new-babylon.html> (retrieved 27 October 2006).

<sup>14</sup> André Michelin (Producer) and Jean-Luc Godard (Director), *Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* [motion picture] (France/Italy: Chaumiane Productions, Filmstudio, 1965). Retrieved from <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/131840> (30 October 2006).

sites allow users to create their own fully personalised and environments, creating spaces that are audiovisual expressions of a user's identity. Image, sound and text may be changed at the press of a button to reflect changes in taste and mood. As in *New Babylon*, creative expression is a fundamental part of social interaction, and all members of the community are both creators and consumers of culture. For some users, this may mean creating extravagant page designs with custom-made animations, dance tracks that play in the background, videos that play on a loop. Not everyone goes to such extremes, but there is one act of self-expression that figures into nearly every form of online community: list-making. When creating their online 'profile', users of social networking sites are asked to list their favourite movies, music and TV shows. Drawing up such a list is an enormously difficult task. If you're trying to express a belonging to a group, and attract and impress others online, *what* you like is more important than what you *are* like. One of my friends on a social networking site assembled the following list of favourites:

les amants du pont neuf, dr.zhivago, time bandits, the knack, smashing time, music of chance, petulia, run lola run, mystery train, a bout de souffle, stroszek, aguirre: the wrath of god, manhattan [sic]. 15

This list runs the gamut from cult to classic, new wave to indie, suggesting cultural savvy and a certain kind of hipness. In this context, the title of a film is a building block to be used in the construction of an online identity.

The work of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy consistently refers to the viewer as a producer of meaning, an idea that has contemporary significance and historical roots. At least as far back as 1934, cinemagoers have been aware that a less than artful film could still resonate unexpectedly with a viewer in a certain context, and yield unexpected rewards through creative readings. When the original *King Kong* (1933) came out, Jean Ferry wrote that he had 'definitely given up the idea of seeing a poetic film' until he saw the blockbuster tale of the giant ape.

What gives this film value in my eyes is not at all the work of the producers and directors ... but what flows naturally from the involuntary liberation of elements in themselves heavy with oneiric power. 16

Kong strikes a chord with Ferry in the form of a childhood fear of apes. The poetry of the film lies in the deep-seated associations Ferry conjures within it, much as *American Graffiti* is connected to the cardiac ward, and *Starsky & Hutch* to Kevin's childhood babysitter. In the words of Surrealist writer Georges Legrand, 'Nobody sees the same film.'<sup>17</sup> He could equally have said, 'Nobody sees the same film twice.' This is the theory of Cinematic Relativity. You, the viewer: you can only ever achieve a particular glimpse of an image on-screen, from a particular vantage point, at a particular moment in time. The moment passes as quickly as it arrives. It will never come again. You, the viewer: each image on the screen allows you to conjure a new possibility and an alternate world. Remember this. Another world is possible.

<sup>15</sup> <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=61662025> (retrieved 13 October 2006).

<sup>16</sup> First published as Jean Levy, 'King-Kong', *Minotaure* (Paris, 1934) 5: 5. Reprinted in Paul Hammond (ed.), *The Shadow & Its Shadow: Surrealist writings on the cinema* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), p. 162.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Paul Hammond, *The Shadow & Its Shadow: Surrealist writings on the cinema* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), p. 29.