

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. ¹

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. ²

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. ³

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

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

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³ *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).⁴ 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),⁵ 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-

⁴ 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).

⁵ 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).

