

The Extra: Finding Space between Star-Systems

Text by Steve Klee for the exhibition

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A male figure dressed in a suit, with slicked hair, sits with his back to camera. In front of him an arrangement of mirrors splits his reflection so that he faces three versions of himself. All four figures are dramatically top-lit and stand out against an inky black background. The extra confronts these three other versions of himself.

The scenario is somehow instantly recognisable, familiar even. Everyone has seen a movie where something similar is enacted. In fact it could be argued that this form of masculine 'head-to-head' is one of the primary images of Hollywood film. The gun fight or duel is perhaps the most obvious example. However the video most resembles those scenes normally set around a card or diner table where full blown violence has yet to erupt but instead simmers below the surface.

One noteworthy example of this 'face-off' scenario in recent cinema appears in Michael Mann's *Heat*. Here Al Pacino and Robert De Niro, those heavyweight elder statesmen of contemporary cinema, are finally united on screen. Pacino's law man and De Niro's master thief vie with one another over a cup of coffee. The competition within the fiction mirrors the real life struggle for supremacy between these two great film stars. Who will deliver the best performance, which of the iconic faces will be more convincing or compelling? Ultimately both Pacino and De Niro are winners. Their positioning in the public imaginary as uniquely talented individuals, geniuses of their craft is only reinforced through their joint screen time. Would this 'clash' be such a big deal if they were not in fact titans?

The Extra produces an entirely different result. This actor is unknown, a subaltern figure within the movie star system. Selfhood is not reinforced by the encounter with his multiple reflected images. Instead, confronted by the spectral technology of identity formation, the fantasy of the unitary subject is traversed. The identity at the centre of *The Extra* is dispersed, constantly displaced between different versions of himself.

Through the ten minutes of the piece 'the man' produces a range of gestural ticks, facial expressions and emotions. Spontaneous laughter replaces a frown, only to be superseded by conniving, sideways glances. This volatility recalls that famous scene in *Goodfellas* where Joe Pesci as a psychotic gangster moves effortlessly between jovially recounting a 'funny story' to a menacing persecution of Ray Liotta's character.

However in *The Extra* this popular cultural reference is evoked for some critical work to be performed. The emotional gear-changes made by 'the man' do not increase the velocity of the scene as do Pesci's. Tension does not build in quite the same way, gestures follow one another arbitrarily. There are no obvious cause and effect relations established.

Instead these gestures follow a minimalist logic of arrangement. Like Judd or Andre Navratil composes materials, in her case an actor's expressions, using a mechanical repetitive logic of 'one thing after another'. Now one could say that this deliberate disruption of cause and effect so central to the production of narrative is a way of liberating a spectator from the illusions produced by the 'fantasy factory', a blocking of the powerful desire to identify with the ultra violence and casual misogyny represented in films like *Goodfellas*.

However I think Navratil's work is more ambiguous than this, and to draw out the nature of this ambiguity we need to trace that other star-system at work behind the videos. I have already hinted that the video might have something close to a minimal aesthetic. I now want to draw attention to another, broader context, which might be described as a minimalist philosophy of art. Under this discourse the relationship between artwork and spectator was understood as a matter of perception, an apprehending of sculptural form taking place in the here-and-now. Married to this insistence on 'present tense' was a fascination for literal reality, the material world, or in Judd's vocabulary 'specific objects'.

When these precepts were translated into artists' film and video they manifested in several ways. One consequence was the strategy of 'concrete duration', the presentation of an

unedited expanse of 'real' time. Think of all those Marina Abramovič and Bruce Nauman videos where a bodily performance is recorded from one unchanging position, the endurance of the performer requiring a similar spectatorial stamina.

Often for these filmmakers there was an implicit connection between an emphasis on 'material conditions' and objectivity, rationality, scientism, in a word truth. A naïve philosophical positivism haunts this discourse.

Now *The Extra* contains an echo of this heritage. The piece shows an extended performance unbroken by any (obvious) editing. The 'mirror device' which creates the three reflections, is not hidden. The material conditions of 'illusion' are rendered visible limiting its coercive potential. But importantly Navratil's work cannot be read as an attempt to alienate the viewer or to posit the 'material fact' of concrete duration as a corrective to the wholesale seductions of mainstream cinema. (Importantly other works, such as *Your Face Consumes My Dreams* (2006) utilise digital effects). Rather, in *The Extra* she offers a targeted critique of the excesses of the star-system with its worship of the individual 'genius'. This idolatry obfuscates those social systems on which such stars depend.

Instead of unfolding in the pure perceptual realm of the here-and-now her work seems to operate linguistically, drawing the viewer into a network of differential relations and contextual references. As we have seen 'popular culture' plays an enormous role in the work's production of meaning. This marks her distance from some stellar names and practices of 'classic' artists' film and video.

Navratil occupies a hybrid space presenting a subtle critique of mainstream cinema but also resisting the temptation to unthinkingly follow in the 'positivist' footsteps of her art video forbears.