The fleeting quality of the instant epitomizes modernity, as defined in Charles Baudelaire's famous dictum: “By ‘modernity’ I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.” A peculiar temporality follows from this: ephemeral sensations of the moment instantiating, against their transitory nature, the stasis of eternal time, e.g. the passer-by that attracts Baudelaire at a glance comes to represent a timeless female beauty. This allusion easily transfers to modernist painting where the instantaneous is presented as a material fact that “poses a permanent beauty.” For Stanley Cavell, 

[acceptance of such objects achieves the absolute acceptance of the moment, by defeating the sway of the momentous. [...] Nothing is of greater moment than the knowledge that the choice of one moment excludes another, that no moment makes up for another, that the significance of one moment is the cost of what it forgoes.]

Cinema might be said to perform the opposite trajectory, being comprised of a succession of moments or instants that replace one another, disappearing into oblivion with mere traces lingering distorted in memory. Walter Benjamin described cinema’s presentation of a succession of moments as instigating an optical unconscious, which externalizes the displacements and condensations of the Freudian psyche in real time. He compared the cameraman’s eye to the hands of a surgeon who cuts into the body, the cuts, or montage, impinging directly on the spectator’s sensorium as a series of instantaneous shocks.

Benjamin was in two minds about this. On the one hand, he celebrated the dissolution of social privilege attributed to auratic art, but, on the other hand, he bemoaned the atrophy of experience by mechanization whereby “film rehearses in the realm of reception what the conveyor belt imposes upon human beings in the realm of production.” Rather than registering the instant as an embodied, albeit unquantifiable, unit of time, cinema promulgated an automated embodiment that disposed of time in the historical sense, generating instead a temporality of a permanent mechanized present. However, in recent film theory, Benjamin’s allusion to the tactility of filmic instants, i.e. montage, has been suggestive of how the liquidity of the contemporary instant might be re-embodied and generate a multi-dimensional temporality. In this essay, I shall explore how the cinematic instant might be registered as continuously embodied rather than vanishing into the ether of the past.
as one moment/shot/scene replaces another. I shall explore this in relation to the contemporary phenomenon of gallery film and video installation, a site of projection where many of cinema's earlier preoccupations about motion and stasis have absconded, transformed but nonetheless operative. What I shall proffer is a notion of the instant that is not at odds with an accumulation of the past, an instant other than that of immediate gratification and sensations that proliferate and vanish without a trace in the mediascape of consumer culture.

First I want to draw some historical lineage (and difference) between the contemporary instants that flow as bytes and bits and the instant in cinematic modernity. While in the latter materiality was still productive and the instant was seen as a temporal unit linked to the unsettling effects of social upheaval, both are linked in their emphasis on form and/or medium as a means of communication modeled on language. For example, in the modernist cinema of Sergei Eisenstein, the accelerations of montage, albeit tied to revolutionary consciousness and social change, were bound up with changing minds, almost like propaganda. Eisenstein used the instants of montage to produce shocks and lightning effects on the viewer in the production of syntactical meaning. “[I]n my view montage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another.” For Eisenstein, two juxtaposed shots, e.g. a shot of an eye followed by a shot of water, explode into a concept, e.g. crying. Cinema operates like language, only properly occurring when two shots, which he referred to as “cells,” receive an animating principle of montage, which the mind leaps to comprehend, joining these attractions through similarity or contrast, to create a higher significance. However, Eisenstein is not far removed from Benjamin in his belief that the audience also relates to images in a mimetic physiological, sensational manner. Eisenstein wanted to control the outcome of these shocks and sensations, so that new links could be forged in the minds of viewers. He saw film as a kind of propaganda, believing that changing perception can change behavior. In the haymaking sequence in *The General Line* (1927), Eisenstein used what he referred to as overtional, rhythmic montage to deliberately affect the bodies of the audience. He supposedly laughed when he “watched the more impressionable section of the audience as they rocked slowly from side to side with the increasing acceleration or when the shots got shorter.” The irony is that while for Eisenstein these montage dynamics are tied to inculcating a revolutionary class-consciousness, in the contemporary world of visual culture, they are tied to inciting desire for commodities. Not only that, they serve a consumerist ethos of disposable bodies and signs in television advertising and other commercial media channels such as MTV. And while our sensoriums may have become numbed somewhat to the physiological shocks of fast-cut imagery, it none the less affects us at what Eisenstein might call the “intellectual” level, seduced as we are into identifying with the products and desires communicated by these frenetic collisions and replications of images. Currently, the invisible intervals or cuts between images (which a later modernism, i.e. 1970s avant-garde film practices, would want to expose), are even less visible than they used to be. Our ability to process these instants without materially registering them (this would slow them down) forecloses on spaces of reflection emerging within moving image-repertoires.

And even this picture is changing. Combined with an ever-increasing ability to consume and process images in an accelerated manner, in digital media the production of a continuous field of cuts has overridden the shock/critical reflection aspect of montage. The model of the interface offers us the notion of the availability of all shots at once. Instead of the temporality of montage, which is predicated

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Fig. 1. Tacita Dean, *Michael Hamburger* (2007). 16mm colour anamorphic, optical sound, 28 minutes.
on intervals, the contemporary mediascape is increasingly dominated by what Lev Manovich refers to as spatial montage narrative. In this, the viewer becomes like an editor “bringing to the forefront, one by one, numerous layers of looped actions that seem to be taking place all at once, a multitude of separate but co-existing realities.” Instead of succession, we have simultaneity. In the face of this imagistic spatial continuum characterised by layers, which foreclose the gaps in understanding crucial for historical consciousness, the impending obsolescence of the film medium is becoming a locus for contemporary artists and filmmakers to explore a temporal dynamic that might offer spaces for reflection.

Before going on to discuss two artists’ films, which for me exemplify current divergent positions vis-a-vis the instant and its potential for maintenance (in Maurice Blanchot’s sense of maintaining the now), I want to resituate an earlier dichotomy between the registration of the cinematic instant in temporal disjunction and its occlusion in spatial continuity. In the 1970s, avant-garde film theory and practice was positioned in opposition to mainstream or Hollywood cinema. This opposition rested on the instant of the cut. As the material base of the film medium, the cut was seen by the avant-garde as being “overridden by interests of consequentiality, continuity, and coherence” in Hollywood narrative cinema. In the latter, the instant passes without registration, but its vanishing is redeemed by narrative continuity, which was seen by the avant-garde as reproducing ideological positions of the status quo. Avant-garde practitioners used various material strategies to induce spectators to register the instant of the cut as a disruption, both in the medium and consequently in the mind of the viewer. Such derailing strategies were: evidencing work on the film strip itself in a reassertion of materiality (Peter Wollen); performing actions in front of the screen (Malcolm LeGrice); and extending projection beyond the screen into the space as a whole (Anthony McCall). As a resistance to the elision of duration and process in classic realist forms of narrative, 1970s critical film theory and practice foregrounded form, resuscitating the instant as a moment that stands out from narrative continuity and which might generate reflection on the conditions of the medium and/or the conditions of subjectivity. This position is not far removed from Eisenstein. Although most avant-garde filmmakers would eschew Eisenstein’s narrative base, they share the idea that the singular impact of the “work” of the film would generate a higher significance in the mind of the viewer, in this case an awareness of real time and space as opposed to the illusions of the apparatus. The revelation of process, duration, and “work” was intended to insert a historical temporal dimension into a medium used to efface history by dressing it up in narrative conventions. The insertion of a moment of reflection whereby relations between past, present, and future can be renegotiated, where one might reflect on the apparatus and one’s complicity with it, was thought to oppose the constant replacement of one instant after the other in classic narrative cinema. But as D.N. Rodowick eloquently demonstrates, the opposing sides of this binary have more in common than one might think, in that both sides used the image to control the viewer. While the Hollywood film might lull its viewers into a stultifying passivity and the avant-garde demands the viewer’s active participation, the latter was dependent on a one-to-one relation of viewer to form that ultimately also removed the viewer’s agency as a subject.

The opposition between Hollywood and the avant-garde ultimately rests on treating film as a language, a literary one in the former, a material one in the latter, but ultimately this disconnects the viewer from incorporating the film image into his/her world. While Eisenstein’s and the avant-garde’s filmic syntax celebrated the instant as a discontinuity capable of generating new awareness and Hollywood narrative forms wrap the instant in continuity, what links these positions is the occlusion of the viewer’s temporality. Referring to the shift from actuality to narration in early cinema, Mary Ann Doane states that:

As film becomes a syntax whose unity is no longer a direct reflection of the space and time it records, the spectator is no longer an “onlooker” or “bystander,” but occupies an unthinkable space or site. This discourse, together with the development of the narrative cinema,
traces the reduction of the embodiment and contingency of the spectator.\textsuperscript{12}

There is an alternative cinematic tradition. Andrei Tarkovsky opposed Eisenstein’s literary approach to filmmaking in that it deprived the person watching of that prerogative of film, which has to do with what distinguishes its impact on his consciousness from that of literature or philosophy: namely the opportunity to live through what is happening on the screen as if it were his own life, to take over, as deeply personal and his own, the experience imprinted in time upon the screen, relating his own life to what is being shown.\textsuperscript{13}

What gets elided in narrative cinema, and of course what Tarkovsky gets in, is that time in which nothing happens. In the development of modernity there is, Doane says, an “escape from the meaninglessness of contingency.”\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly, she contrasts the industrial means of process, duration, and “work” with the instantaneity of the age of electricity. The age of electricity ushers in an escape from the boredom of unpunctuated time, towards, on the one hand, a fetishization of the significant instant, and on the other, the instant as a series of moments whose contingency is redeemed by narrative. Narrative rescues the passing of cinematic instants from the quagmire of disappearance where images move at a speed that does not allow their “internal relationships [to] be read.”\textsuperscript{15} This speed is exaggerated in the age of the byte.

The strategies of 1970s radical film practitioners no longer have the political currency that they once had and grew out of. It seems that the binaries of mainstream and avant-garde have come much closer together, particularly in the gallery film installation, which is where I will now turn my attention. My argument is that the absconding of cinematic preoccupations—modernist, avant-garde, and mainstream alike—into artists’ gallery film installation offers reflective spaces to counteract the liquid instantaneity by which we now process the discontinuous. In a parallel move in film theory, there is a resuscitation of interest in early theorizations of the sensuous interrelation with the film image from Bazin to Benjamin, but also Béla Balázs, Antonin Artaud, and Hugo Munsterburg. Some of this interest emerges from Gilles Deleuze’s books on cinema and is deployed by film theorists Laura U. Marks and Vivian Sobchack as a reconceived phenomenology of film reception.\textsuperscript{16} This reconception offers a theoretical resistance to our fast-paced imaging technologies and the constant availability of visual information in the homogenous spatial layers of the interface.

For some artists and theorists, time in the contemporary world no longer follows a linear order of successive moments, but has been taken over by technological metaphors. Time becomes “a system of representation of a physical world where future, present, and past become interlinked figures of underexposure, exposure and overexposure.”\textsuperscript{17} This dismantling of linearity is thought to produce more complex representations that echo the multi-dimensionality of time, but, I would argue, do not reflect our experience of time. Distinctions between artists interested in the multi-dimensionality of time can be seen in whether and how this temporality is to be located in space, i.e. embodied or incorporated by the viewer.

Two artists who are interested in time, but explore it in different ways, are Tacita Dean and Doug Aitken. It is unfair to subject them to a simple comparison, but they exemplify two contemporary approaches to the cinematic instant, which have an affinity to my argument. I shall use Dean’s film, \textit{Michael Hamburger} (2007) as a foil to the smooth liquidity of Aitken’s representation of time, and position her in terms of the alternative tradition I have aligned with Tarkovsky. Referring to the inevitable linearity of montage, Aitken asks: “How can I make time collapse or expand, so it no longer unfolds in this one narrow form?”\textsuperscript{18} Dean might ask this very same question, but her anachronistic use of duration stands in stark contrast to Aitken’s embrace of the digital.

Aitken’s installations generate hypnotic flows between screens and bodies-on-screen, creating seamless environments that take the viewer on a liquid journey beyond the capacities of human vision. For Aitken, the human subject is dissolved...
CINEMATIC INSTANT

in the liquidity of time and space in a technosphere of sublime proportion. As opposed to the eternal, significant instant of modernist painting, which had a humanist address, this instant is inhuman. For example, Aitken’s installation Diamond Sea (1997) was filmed in the vast, empty, landscape of the Namibian Desert, which effectively represents time as eternal. Both Dean and Aitken are interested in desolate places, but Aitken’s are devoid of human habitation. For Diamond Sea, Aitken was attracted to a blank spot on the map, which he discovered has been sealed off from the world since 1908. In this restricted area, there is a diamond mine where machines function around the clock without human involvement. “The camera became a silent eye focused on capturing light and space from a non-judgemental perspective. Here the focus was on something incredibly elusive. In its installation form, the work cycles without beginning or end.” While the installation—comprised of three channels, a monitor, and a Duratrans backdrop—is complex, and dependent on the architectural environment of the gallery, the viewer smoothly traverses the various segments without becoming situated, as if mirroring the “bleak and distant moon over the empty desert which is the sole witness to this infinitely circular story about diamonds, greed and sublime machines.”

Another artist’s film installation that epitomizes this subjectivity is Angela Bulloch’s Solaris (1993), which re-edits select clips from Tarkovsky’s film of the same title. Bulloch chooses the parts of the film where Hera, the simulation of the protagonists wife, is sleeping and waking, and cuts them together in a rapid montage. The resulting effect suggests a body dependent on shock in order to feel, a body whose liveness derives from being switched on and off rather than continually enduring in time. The two pairs of spheres opposite the video, whose lights come on and off in relation to the action of the characters and the editing of the script, add to the technological jolt of
instants that fade and pass in a demented cyclical motion. In Aitken’s and Bulloch’s installations as I read them here, the temporality of the instant is experienced as a series of shocks that generate a perpetual present, thereby de-historicizing the subject’s sense of continuity in time. Embodiment is evacuated in liquid landscapes of digital smoothness or forced into momentary being by technological resuscitation.

While I do not want to go back to describing the body in the terms of traditional humanism or phenomenology, I also do not accept the ubiquity of theorizations of subjectivity that reduce embodied experience to a set of surface exchanges and electric jolts. Just as Benjamin bemoaned the waning of experience in modernity, I would like to raise the question: given the context of the instant in new technology, where succession in time is replaced by rapid screen layers, how might space be reconfigured so as to allow for the re-embodiment of the instant? In turning now to Dean’s *Michael Hamburger*, I do not merely want to put forward a phenomenological body imbricated in space and caught up in linear time, but to argue that, co-existing with those instants that vanish at the speed of light without being registered, there is another kind of instant which is measured internally and lived continuously. Dean’s 28 minute film is interesting in this light. It is a fictional documentary whose structure follows the pattern of most of her films: it is comprised of cinemascopic shots that endure over varying, seemingly slow, periods of time, with each cut from one shot to the next creating a severe break between each duration. No instantaneity here, one might say. However, there are indeed two intersecting kinds of instant. One is the materially present instant of the cut, which interrupts the drift of the viewer’s floating contemplation of a scene. The other is more internally felt in relation to the slowness of each shot, the banality and emptiness of each distinct duration, generating air in the image, which allows the viewer to breathe, so to speak. This combination of slowness and disjunction instigates the temporality of which Henri Bergson speaks in *Matter and Memory*, that of the instant perched on the cusp of being and doing. This is a point in a continuum prior to the splitting of experience into perception and action, oblivion and trace, which seeks “experience at its source, or rather above that decisive turn where, taking a bias in the direction of our utility, it becomes properly human experience.”

Fig. 3. Tacita Dean, *Michael Hamburger* (2007). 16mm colour anamorphic, optical sound, 28 minutes.
the continuous diversification that occurs between duration as a continuous experience of time and extensity as selected moments enacted in time. In other words, the passing of instants is a continuum in which certain instants are selected for memory and spatial action, while others remain virtual as potential, not disappearing into the ether as does the aforementioned contemporary instant that is premised on syntactical communication. These virtualities are affectively registered. Here we have two temporal movements that are in dialogue with one another, neither the absolute instant as in modernist painting nor the eradication of instants in the seductive barrage of montage, whether spatial as in the interface or temporal as in advertising and cinema. Paradoxically, a film image that does not disappear quickly might be most suited to instigating the potential of the Bergsonian instant in the contemporary mediascape.

Dean’s film is a portrait of the poet and translator, Michael Hamburger. We are presented with shots of Hamburger talking about his collection of harvested apples, some of which are quite rare and are native to various European countries. The poet’s migration, both actual and poetic, is encapsulated in these objects that grow and rot over time. We witness the poet walking in his orchards, the camera remaining at a respectful distance so that other things begin to capture the attention, wind blowing through the trees, the changing weather. Abrupt cut to a shot of the poet sitting at his desk, his back to the camera. He is still. A plume of smoke unfurls above his head, the swirling motion evoking the pace of his thinking, the pulse of the image. A car passes by the window. A shot of a murky room follows. A rectangular slit of lamplight gives a glimpse of the adjoining room. Where should “I” look, and at what? Strains of classical music generate a slow moving rhythm. Fleeting gestures of the poet’s hands are glimpsed in the slit of light as he conducts the music he is listening to in the adjoining room. Nothing more happens. Shots of the house, red brick and mortar, and we return to the apples, objects that embody a seasonal rhythm that is not lost, but marginalized in a culture obsessed with the temporality of immediate value, the perpetual present of consumption. Here there is immediacy, but it is sensuous, carrying all time within it; the movement towards death; the accumulation of the past. It is refreshing to be here at last to move amidst the leaves and feel the inner movements of time being processed by the body with its own particularity and at a pace of its own. Luddite technology, a spatiality of cuts, a temporality of the three-fold present, the instant here revolves like a door that is both open and closed. This is the instant whose passing is registered by the viewer, a necessary experience in a world where bits and bytes generate accelerated excitations that find no permanent habitation, but are dissolved in the continuous light of cathode rays. For me, this film exemplifies Tarkovsky’s idea that we go to the cinema (or in this case, gallery) to regain time rather than lose it. Regaining time does not mean denying the instant as a moment that passes, but registering it as passing. The pace of Michael Hamburger, its slowness and diffuse attention, allows us to feel time through the body, much like the “deadline” in the body which Deleuze says we experience in relation to Andy Warhol’s durational early films. While there are many moments in Deleuze’s cinema books where he proffers perceptual instants of inhuman, vertiginous, heights, more akin to Aitken’s work, here he attaches this vertigo to the body, a tired and waiting body at that:

The daily attitude is what puts the before and the after into the body, time into the body, the body as revealer of the deadline. The attitude of the body relates thought to time as to that outside which is infinitely further than the outside world.

The sensibility of the body as “ revealer of the deadline” can also be found in the experimental cinema of Sharunas Bartas. For example, in his film Freedom (2000), three people— two men and a girl— slowly traverse the desert after a drug deal gone wrong. There is no dialogue, the film being carried by gesture and mood. Its 96 minutes seem, on one level, to drag on and on, but, because of this slowness, one becomes keenly aware of the body’s movement through time, both the protagonists’ and the viewer’s. We feel the passing of time as a movement towards death; this is not a climax, but rather an accumulation of time witnessed and
experienced in palpable terms. In the contemporary mediascape, waiting and boredom are eradicated from dominant forms of the instant. We are given the illusion of instants that are constantly being replaced.

In a world that does not wait for the body, one needs a paradoxical duration as a way to register the instant. As opposed to Eisenstein’s cinema of shocks that no longer register, Tarkovsky’s cinema of continuity gives us the actuality of time imprinted, where instants can be registered by the body as passing and accumulating rather than generating disembodied consciousness. This cinema of duration, in which I would include Dean, allows space for the viewer to move through states of being. The filmmaker Jacques Rivette, who experimented with film lengths (192 minutes to 760 minutes) to play with the pleasures of a “floating attention” and multiply the possible forms of the spectator’s attentiveness to the text, is very clear on this. For Rivette: “This pleasure…can tend more in the direction of…let’s not say work—which is a large word that has been much abused….—but, this pleasure in fact passes through certain stages, certain periods, which can equally well be attentiveness, perplexity, irritation, or even boredom.”

The time of boredom, deemed dead time in the media spectacle where everything is perpetually present and new, is the time which allows for the registration of instants that are passing and also remembered. According to Fredric Jameson, we are currently faced with a hysterical sublime in relation to technology and mass communication, whereby the subject is helpless in the face of simulacral images that paralyze historicity. This is what Aitken’s Electric Earth effectively portrays. For Jameson, boredom is a very useful instrument with which to explore the past and to stage a relation between it and the present. As a strategy, it refuses the momentous and remains resolutely within the realm of the ordinary. Boredom gives us access to the time in which nothing seems to happen and which is crucial to the registration of the instant as a temporality that passes and accumulates, ruptures and endures. The time-space of boredom gives us access to the minute variation of the present as it bifurcates into the past and the future, thereby instigating a historical dimension of experience. As opposed to shock, or the distraction of a perpetual present, boredom allows us to cultivate existence as that which remains open to the minutiae of variation. I do not think Dean deliberately adopts boredom as a strategy, but she is clearly a practitioner of the commonplace. Her work articulates a sense of history that accumulates in bodies, both human and non-human. As we watch the poet move through and between shots that evidence the elusive nature of time passing—changes in weather, light, the seasons, and momentary permutations of routine—we register the multi-dimensional sense of this temporality. Dean’s work gives us “[t]he everyday; what is most difficult to discover.”

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Notes
CINEMATIC INSTANT


7 Ibid., 121.


11 I am referring here to the most extreme examples of avant-garde practice such as the work and writing of Peter Gidal, where film form is treated as a syntax rather than a registration of an affective pro-filmic world and where the viewer is a reflection of this formal syntax.


14 Doane, 162.


16 Marks deploys Deleuze’s notion that cinema can give us “the genesis of an ‘unknown body,’” as one of the bases of her argument “that cinema may indeed be capable of bringing us to our senses.” Marks, The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses (Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 2000), 148. Sobchack, for her part, is more skeptical of Deleuze, saying that he “neglects the embodied situation of the spectator and of the film” (31). However, she links Cinema 1: The Movement-Image to her project in The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).


18 Ibid, 51.

19 Ibid, 52.

20 Ibid, 56.

21 Ibid., 61.

22 Ibid, 67.


24 Ibid, 185.

25 One might think here of the cinemas of Nicolas Roeg and, more recently, Alejandro González Iñárritu, as attempts to represent the multi-dimensionality of time using frenetic flash forward and flash back, as attempts to rescue montage from the vagaries of advertising (or to compete with it).

26 Tarkovsky, 63.

27 Deleuze, Gilles, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 189. This is in contrast to the following citation: “A disturbed brain-death or a new brain which would be at once the screen, the film stock and the camera, each time membrane of the outside and the inside” (Cinema 2, 215). In this vision, more akin to Aitken’s work, embodiment evaporates in favour of an emphasis on liquid, gaseous, perception without a perceiving subject similar to the drugged vision Deleuze mentions in Cinema 1: The Movement-Image, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, (London: The Athlone Press, 1992). See also John Johnston’s “Machinic Vision,” Critical Inquiry, 26 (Autumn 1999), which embraces the infinity of Deleuzian gaseous perception as a way of describing the decoded field of electronic informational impulses.

