Towards a poetics of the cinematographic frame

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Abstract
In delineating a poetics of the cinematographic frame, this essay presents a typology of framing styles, and demonstrates ways in which filmmakers use the frame as an expressive resource—and ways in which the frame uses them. The examples discussed are modernist in orientation, and each has a particular association with a city—its history, architecture, and cultural character. Although it is common practice to refer to various—especially, modernist—framing situations as instances of deframing, the essay also enquires into the problematic nature of this term, suggesting alternative visual and cinematographic contexts more amenable to the deconstructive implications of this term. As the boundaries between cinema and the other arts continue to converge and relations between frame, image, and screen become more complex, this essay offers a reassessment of some first principles of film language, especially the aesthetic integrity of the cinematographic frame.

Keywords: cinematographic framing; film aesthetics; improvisation; reflexivity; deframing; cinema and the city

It should not be difficult to write an aesthetics of the cinema on the basis of this weighted and oft-employed concept.

Wolfgang Kemp

There is always more to framing than framing. As much a metaphysical conundrum as a compositional device, the frame does not simply surround and present the image; it structures it, and what is framed and not framed, included and excluded, centred and de-centred, invariably reveals a method, a choice, a way of seeing the world. Is the frame, then, the primary unit of film meaning, “the absolute standard of reference for the whole of cinematic representation”? Does it matter chiefly in relation to image composition or projection, the shot, or the screen? What are the implications of its tendency “to disappear altogether, to achieve invisibility—both in the dominant procedures of film theorists and in the consciousness of the film viewer”? What does the cinematographic frame share with framing formations associated with still photography, video, multi-media, or installation art works? What differentiates framing from “de-framing” in a world where cinema and the other visual arts and practices seem to be moving inexorably “towards the configuration of a space of representation which radically transforms the condition whereby the image is authorised”?*Correspondence to: Des O’Rawe, Queen’s University, Belfast, UK. Email: d.orawe@qub.ac.uk

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Any analysis of framing is also an analysis of visual style and all cinematographic frames correspond to one of four types: indiscernible, figurative, aleatory, or reflexive. The first category relates to the style of framing found in most commercial cinema where the rules of continuity realism and “seamless” narration demand that a film never draw attention to itself as a film, as an aesthetic artefact. Rather than discussing this category in detail (where, in one sense, the frame, like the cut, does not exist), the essay examines approaches to film-making characterised by more expressive and broadly modernist framing techniques, instances where—to paraphrase Gerald Mast—the film frame is less a passive container than an active signifier. The second category (figurative), then, is discussed because it comprises shots and sequences where the position of the frame decentres, distorts, or “disconnects” the image for deliberate figurative or metaphorical effect. The third (reflexive), on the other hand, refers to avant-garde or artists’ filmmaking practices where institutionalised framing conventions are deliberately subverted. (Within this context, for example, the inherent properties of the cinematographic frame become the “structural” subject matter of the work itself.) The fourth (aleatory) category encompasses the notion of arbitrary framing and relates to moments when the behaviour of the frame is determined largely by chance and accident, by contingency rather than cinematography. Although figurative, reflexive and aleatory framing styles might also be said to exemplify deframing, the essay questions that assumption, arguing instead that “deframing” signifies something other than a technique to produce perspectival distortion or compositional imbalance (which would still constitute framing, after all) and that its more radical—deconstructive—implications are better understood in relation to various installation and performance-based art works, where what is being deframed is the assumption of a difference between the interior and exterior of the artwork itself, its apparent boundaries, and identity.

**FIGURATIVE/VENICE**

The frame is the basic unit of film meaning. A shot can contain any number of frames—or just one—but the process begins in the act of framing; it proceeds from frame/s (selection) to shot (composition), to sequence (montage), to film (production). The style of many important filmmakers can be defined by how they use the frame as an expressive resource, as something significant in a figurative or metaphorical sense rather than a neutral receptacle for the reproduction of reality. When influenced by some form of Expressionism, for example, filmmakers typically distort perspectives, and saturate the shot with ominous shadows, shapes, and reflections. In films by F. W. Murnau, Fritz Lang, John Ford, Tim Burton, and David Cronenberg, for example, natural and architectural features of mise en scène are often deployed to double-frame (encadre-en-abyme) characters and situations, conveying a leitmotif or foreshadowing a significant event. Such examples invoke the films of Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock, which also belong to a commercially orientated cinema in which the frame is actively involved in the action, where its placement and movement articulates a drama while simultaneously generating other figurative possibilities. In *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1948, Columbia), for example, the frame appears to constantly distort, de-centre, and displace the images. Although, often praised for its assortment of so-called Wellesian “touches,” this mesmerising mixture of angles, tilts, and perspectives gives the film an unusual coherence, an achievement made all the more remarkable given its inauspicious production history. What is being framed throughout *The Lady from Shanghai* is the relationship between (the sinister) Elsa and Arthur Bannister, that grotesque marital trompe l’œil that finally disintegrates amidst mutual gunfire, crashing glass, smoke, and mirrors. The languid full shots and close-ups (pin-ups) of Hayworth (albeit inserted at the insistence of Cohn) provide a supplementary distortion never entirely at odds with Welles’s delight in stories and images of deceit, and dangerous, doomed liaisons. Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954, Paramount) is similarly illuminating in terms of its deployment of figurative framing techniques within the “classical” Hollywood style. The opening title sequence, for example, has as its backdrop a series of three adjoining windows that divide the screen into perfect thirds. The windows are open but their translucent cotton blinds are down. As the music starts (a taut, oboe-jazz composition), credits
appear across the screen, and one after another (window frame-by-window frame) the blinds rise slowly to reveal the inner courtyard of a small, busy New York apartment block. The camera dollys through the central window, floats into the courtyard, and frames a cat running up some steps below. Once the cat has left the frame, the camera pans carefully across the courtyard with its roof and fire-escape ladders, windows, balconies, picket fences, little gardens, and even a bird cage before returning back through the original open window, and into a close-up of the perspiring brow of L. B. “Jeff” Jefferies. The sequence then cuts momentarily to a close-up of a thermometer on the wall beside the window (showing the temperature to be 92°C) before dollying out again into the courtyard. This time the camera frames specific apartments as the occupants prepare for the day ahead: a middle-aged man shaving and listening to the radio, a couple on a balcony the day ahead: a middle-aged man shaving and listening to the radio, a couple on a balcony looking out onto the world around him, turning homes into theatres, lives into performances, and unhappy husbands into murderers: to frame is always to imagine.

The type of motivated or “expressionistic” framing associated with a Welles or Hitchcock can seem radically different from the more austere framing arrangements found in the work of filmmakers such as Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Eric Rohmer, Michelangelo Antonioni, Alain Resnais, and Hou Hsiao-hsien. Within this tradition, the frame is strangely evasive, detached, often drifting across and beyond conventional lines of movement and action, as if independent of its own contents and subject to some mysterious motivation. However, regardless of whether or not a cinematographic imagination tends towards expressionistic excess or minimalistic austerity, vivid representation or virtual abstraction, the positioning of the frame to signify something dangerous, disruptive, alien, confused, or empty invariably makes it a figurative device. In the case of Antonioni, for example, the frame will sometimes seem to acquire a life of its own, either by becoming indifferent to its ostensible dramatic purpose or by moving elsewhere from the action to probe the gaps, ellipses, “nothingness,” at the centre of reality. This is not to say that Antonioni’s frame merely frames blankness or critically undermines its own formal and visual function. Rather, the configuration of objects, gestures, and perspectives within the frame can be characterised by a certain intangibility that both maintains the expressive primacy of the film image itself while also signifying the irreparable brokenness of the things it appears to represent (stories, characters, relationships, fictions).

Take, for example, the Venice sequences towards the end of Identification of a Woman/Identificazione di una donna (1982, It./F.), one set on the lagoon just beyond the islands, the other in and around the lobby of the Gritti Hotel on the Grand Canal. The first sequence opens with an aerial shot of a man and woman, travelling in a motorboat, heading out into the more open waters of the lagoon. Niccolo, a middle-aged film director, has already spent part of the film searching for his former aristocratic lover, Mavi, who left him (inexplicably) after a brief, sexually intense affair. He is also searching for an idea—or ideal—for a film about women. Recently divorced, all Niccolo’s relations seem to be with women, including his sister (a gynecologist), his ex-wife (who has escaped to the country), and his new lover, Ida (an actress performing in an avant-garde dramatisation of Les Fleurs du mal). Niccolo has brought Ida to Venice on this short holiday.

As this sequence cuts to a long shot, their boat approaches the camera. Niccolo disengages the engine, and they drift into the centre of a fixed frame. The couple embrace, briefly discuss solitude and the water before he gets up and stands astride at the stern of the boat. He stands in full reverse shot, centre-frame, arms outstretched, an image of a dominant figure, author-
ative yet absurd, both in control of the space he surveys and, of course, not. The boat rocks slightly on the dead water. The couple sit down together, talk, kiss, and begin to make love. Throughout the sequence, the style of framing is static and uneventful. The boat (a recurrent motif throughout Antonioni’s work) is a symbol of *stasis* and isolation. The colour palate and lighting make it virtually impossible to distinguish the bleached grey of the skyline from the shoreline. The characters’ conversation and actions, the incidental gestures and elliptical statements about inspiration, the belly of *Moby Dick*, and the futility of marriage correspond to the pervasive sense of lugubriousness, the overwhelming stillness and silence that finally seems to drive them into a sudden intimation of mortality. The camera gradually withdraws into a wide shot of the lagoon, its water now rippling, choppy, and changed.

In the next sequence, the couple disembark at a jetty close to their hotel. A traghetto pilot (ferryman) appears, complains that they cannot moor the boat there, and is hastily bribed by Niccolo. A large “Madonna and Child” shrine is framed on the wall behind them. They enter the hotel through its heavily glazed double-doors. A young girl, wearing a sheepskin over-coat similar to that worn by Ida, stands at the reception observing them. The concierge informs Ida that a telephone call is waiting for her and as she rushes off to the privacy of the booth, Niccolo is momentarily obscured by a pillar, as the camera pans away from him, framing other women now milling around the lobby. Although the film then cuts to a full shot of a corridor off the lobby, the frame “ignores” the cut and continues to pan left (following the same trajectory as the preceding shot in the lobby). We hear and glimpse Ida talking excitedly on the telephone. She is clearly pleased by some news and the rich lighting and warm colours that now surround her contrast with the image of an expressionless Niccolo, standing in the cold, neutral background of another doorway—virtually forlorn. The camera again discards him, stopping momentarily at an old oil portrait of a stern-faced Venetian nobleman. It pans along the wall, framing various lamps and paintings as it travels, before a bellboy, carrying a tray with a bill on it, walks across the shot. The sequence then cuts to an elderly woman sitting in the lobby writing at a desk. She turns and glances into the camera as it passes, before framing a younger woman in medium close-up, who also turns and looks towards it. Uninterrupted, it moves into another lavish reception room, decorated with large mirrors and crystal chandeliers, before arresting in a long shot of an elderly woman playing the piano.

At this point, Niccolo walks back into the frame; with his back to the camera, he removes his coat. The camera slowly turns towards him as he leans against the wall and places an unlit cigarette in his mouth. The scene then cuts to a long shot of Ida entering from the opposite end of the room. Illuminated by the arrangement of lights and mirrors in the room, she appears radiant in her white shirt, and white jeans. As she approaches Niccolo, the frame *refuses* to centre or balance their spatial relationship. They face each other awkwardly, across a small table and two empty chairs. There follows a medium close-up of Niccolo, with the image of Ida reflected in the large wall mirror behind him. Ida walks towards him (and out of *his* mirror), hesitates, and then stands adjacent to him, at a right angle. She tells him her good news: she is pregnant and the father is someone she had been with just before they met. Niccolo’s image appears in the long narrow mirror that runs down the wall beside Ida. She walks away and his reflection follows her. They walk back into the lobby where they are now framed standing either side of a doorway, both reflected in another mirror. In the background, a carefree (honeymooning?) couple skip out through the hotel doorway. Niccolo watches them and then walks out into the porch in their wake. The camera frames and follows him but he is now
remote. Ida follows him and then melodramatically declares her love for him (by paraphrasing W. H. Auden’s “Funeral Blues”). As they “talk,” both are framed standing against the interior of an exterior door, divided now by the centre panel of its frame. Niccolo turns and stares out through the window as a vaporetta passes by, its reflection shimmering in the glass in front of him.

Identification of a Woman: framing separation.

In both sequences, the framing and composition—rather than editing, acting, dialogue, and sound—is primarily responsible for conveying point of view and meaning. In the first example, the exterior world is blank and featureless; there is no background to interrupt the intimacy of the couple, no history to intrude on their fantasies. Throughout, camera movement is minimal and the framing remains balanced and exact. In the second, the background is full of movement and activity, talk and music, people (mainly, women) coming and going, looking here and there. Indifferent to conventional motivation, this time Antonioni’s frame discards its contents and seems left to its own devices. As such, it finds (identifies) histories, archetypes, thresholds, and liminal spaces that constantly elude Niccolo in his quest for something that does not exist. Virtually everything that happens between Ida and Niccolo in the closing gestures of their affair happens with or through what they reflect and what reflects onto them, as they disappear from one another. 10

REFLEXIVITY/NEW YORK

The eye finds the image (or the image finds the eye) and the frame captures it. The moment a fragment of perceived reality is framed, it becomes an invention. While the visible shape and dimensions of the frame can influence our ways of noticing and appreciating what it contains, this does not alter the fact that everything framed is unreal, and every frame is marked by a trace or memory of the real it has left in its wake. How then does one go about making the cinematographic frame the subject of film, framing the frame, so to speak? As mentioned earlier, in traditional narrative cinema, the frame is indiscernible, and tends to be “overlooked in favour of frames, because it is frames, and not the frame, which sustains the illusion.” Other filmmaking forms and practices, however, regard demystifying the frame as a way of foregrounding the materiality of film itself, as part of a more general “rejection of commercial cinema’s disinterestedness in the peculiarities of the mechanisms that give rise to the image.” 11 As Annette Michelson has pointed out, it was Marcel Duchamp, as much as anyone, who first commandeered the frame “to challenge the value of pictorial purity: The frame, empty and infinitely mobile, directed literally and metaphysically towards the world itself, proved an im placable generator of forms.” 12 Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, various filmmakers utilised the frame to interrogate the representational conventions and narrative mechanisms of the medium. 13 An important tendency at this time was labelled “structural” by P. Adams Sitney (or “materialist” by Peter Gidal in Britain), largely because its proponents and practitioners took form-as-content to a new “degree zero,” eschewing any trace of drama and fabula by paring the medium down to its inherent material properties and processes (including the frame and framing, the zoom, tilt, cut, close-up, filters, and so forth). The experimentalism of this tendency—in North America, at any rate—was motivated by a desire to situate art outside dominant (i.e. commercial) perceptual regimes. This tradition owes more to the pop-cultural antics of Andy Warhol than the politics of the anti-war counter-culture: Sleep (1963, 16 mm, b&w, 321 mins.) and Empire (1964, 16 mm, b&w, 485 mins.), for example, are “structural” in all but official designation. 14 While Warhol paved the way for the formalism of Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, Hollis Frampton, and Ernie Gehr, the less iconic (“commercial”) figure of Joseph Cornell also encouraged the
post-war American avant-garde away from ersatz surrealism and dreamy lyricism, especially in his collaborations with Rudy Burckhardt Angel (1967, 16 mm, col., 3 mins.), and Stan Brakhage.

The wooden boxes, miniature cabinets, bric-a-brac assemblages, and collages that characterise Cornell’s artwork involve the containment of objects, artefacts, and curiosities (sometimes random, sometimes not). They are framing structures that enclose the flotsam and jetsam of experience. Cornell, however, is not merely a collector or collagist of the quotidian: the peculiar surrealism of his work jolts our sense of proportion (and appropriation), craft (and consumption), artefact (and artwork), and criss-crosses the boundaries between collage, sculpture, and installation art. Furthermore, as Sitney also noticed: “the serial structure, involving a return to and reorganisation of elements in two or more related works, which unites many of his boxes and collages, extends to his films.” This is especially true of Gnir Rednow (1955–1968, 16 mm, col., 6 mins.), which Cornell created using outtakes from Brakhage’s Wonder Ring (1955, 16 mm, col., 6 mins.).

When he arrived in New York from San Francisco in 1955, Brakhage was already quite an experienced filmmaker, although his work was still “dramatic” in orientation. When it was announced that the Third Avenue elevated train (the “El”) service was to be discontinued that year, and the line demolished to make way for new developments, Cornell “commissioned” Brakhage to make a film to mark its passing. Brakhage returned with Wonder Ring, a short kaleidoscopic montage of some of the El’s shapes, movements, and vistas. After the flickering, handwritten, opening title sequence, the shots are repeatedly structured and double-framed by doors, windows, ceilings, railings, bridges, and even corner buildings. Brakhage uses these random architectural “frames” to create a lattice of triangles and squares, images of the urban geometry “watched by” the El commuters on their journeys.

Making Wonder Ring was an important experience for the 22-year-old Brakhage. It was his first attempt at a more abstract style of filming, and its formal shape and minimal content registers the recent influence of figures such as Cornell, Marie Menken, John Cage, and the writer and surrealist poet, Parker Tyler. For Cornell, however, Wonder Ring, was still too “documentary,” too obvious. There is some controversy about what happened next but it would seem that Cornell collected the outtakes from Brakhage’s film, flipped (or “flopped”) them, spliced them together into their original order, and reversed the lettering of the film’s title, thereby creating a new film, Gnir Rednow. In so doing, he created more than simply “inbound” and “outbound” versions of the one film. Cornell wanted this new work to be projected forward and backward in a continuous loop, its time and movement constantly eluding representation: “For Cornell, the Third Avenue El is not just a structure, it is a structure of feeling.”

In its avoidance of any narrative beyond a sequence of images of/from the El and its environs, the camera fixes on frames and framing structures, on both where and what the passenger might see on their journey: to travel on the El was to be a cinema-goer as well as a commuter. In this sense, Gnir Rednow is a “remake” of both Wonder Ring and Rear Window (a film loosely adapted from a (Cornell) Woolrich short story, which had its world premiere in New York City, on 4 August 1954).

ALEATORY/SARAJEVO

In one sense, the cinematographic frame, in enclosing fragments of a reality within its boundaries, exists to counteract accidental or aleatory formations. If anything, it renders a representation within a completely intentional format. Yet, as Noël Burch commented, “the aleatory is quite at home in film and always has been,” and framing situations, like many aspects of artistic endeavour, can benefit as much from chance as design. This
approach to making film tends to belong within a wider modernist context, encompassing theories and practices synonymous with improvisation, automatism, and indeterminacy. While most directors prefer their images to serve a plot, screenplay, storyboard, performers—not to mention the array of studio-based resources that exist to prevent the intrusion of the “genuinely contingent”—there are always others “willing largely to subordinate their camera to the aleatory world they [refer] to as reality.” Such filmmakers are commonly associated with cinéma vérité or Direct Cinema, for example, François Reichenbach (New York Ballade, 1955, Fr., 18 mins.), or Bill Lichtenstein and June Peoples (West 47th Street, 2001, US, 104 mins.), and that region where the documentary aesthetic and the 2001, US, 104 mins.), and that region where the documentary aesthetic and the

**example,** the three “explorers” visit the Maritime Museum in Amsterdam where they suddenly confront the atrocious actions of the Dutch slave traders. This experience provokes them into a discussion on history (and how it is being “framed,” in the “here and now” of this museum), and their own journey through this strange country. The images of Amsterdam-based filmmaker and photographer, Johan van der Keuken are similarly characterised by formal techniques and ontological dilemmas related to questions of framing. Van der Keuken’s work registers a sense of being “torn between his taste for sustaining images ... and the feeling that the act of cutting off part of reality and giving it meaning against its own will embodies a harmful arrogance.” Most filmmakers are naturally preoccupied by such questions but few share van der Keuken’s degree of commitment to transforming this “reticence” into something intrinsically artistic. His short documentary, Sarajevo Film Festival Film (1993, 14 mins.), is an example of what can happen when concerns about the contingencies of visual representation and perception come into direct contact with civil conflict.

During the siege of Sarajevo (April 1992–March 1996), van der Keuken was invited to screen some of his work at the inaugural Sarajevo Film Festival, “Beyond the End of the World: 23 October–3 November 1993.” Haris Pasovic, who had—amongst many other things—produced Susan Sontag’s controversial Sarajevo production of Waiting for Godot earlier that year, organised the festival, and appears in the opening sequences of Sarajevo Film Festival Film, accompanying van der Keuken, his wife (the sound engineer/editor, Noshka van der Lely) and producer (Frank
Vallenga) across the embattled city. Ordinary Sarajevians are observed moving hurriedly through the streets, ferrying water and provisions amidst the noise of sporadic sniper-fire and trundling UN personnel carriers. Occasionally, Pasovic talks to the camera about the festival, the war, and surviving in his city. The second part of the film features Marijela, a young student of architecture who lives in an apartment block at the frontline with her sister, and their blind, elderly father. Throughout the festival, she regularly attends screenings and Sarajevo Film Festival Film makes no secret of its wish to pay tribute to the heroism of Marijela Marjeta and her besieged city.

From its pre-title sequence, shot from the dark, rattling interior (camera obscura) of a moving Land Rover (where van der Keuken’s bouncing hand-held camera captures images of the streets outside through the vehicle’s “letter-box” windscreen27) to the final close-up of Marijela’s face in the cinema, the film repeatedly returns to images of actual and figurative frames, screens, light, and darkness. The contrast between the harsh, dangerous circumstances of life in and around the tower blocks and the shelter of the cinema is emphasised throughout. Shots of the bullet-holed and bomb-damaged buildings, the ever-precarious water supply, and the family’s difficult life in their cramped, darkened apartment are intercut with images of the cinema projector lights, the appreciative audience, and grainy sequences from some of the films being screened. Towards the end, van der Keuken observes the sisters preparing a small garden for vegetables. In the background incessant but still distant sniper-fire is heard, the women keep low and calmly continue their work. Suddenly, the shots become loud and immediate. Van der Keuken drops his camera. It continues to film as it turns into the ground before he manages to catch it and frame a shot. The two sisters crouch on their knees but seem stoical, Marijela tries to relieve the tension: “I suppose it’s not dangerous,” she remarks: her facial expression tells a different story. Then, a sniper returns fire from an apartment block directly above them, and van der Keuken diffidently directs his camera towards the vicinity of this gunfire before the danger passes. The film cuts to its closing shot of Marijela’s face engrossed in cinema while her voice-over recounts the things the war has taken from her.

The crossfire sequence in Sarajevo Film Festival Film is memorable not least because—despite the film's hand-held, ad hoc looseness—it emerges as part of a remarkably coherent vignette of a day in the life of a besieged city. In every shot, of this film, there seem to be windows or doorways of some sort, size, or description: a ghoulish mannequin in a display cabinet, a discarded threshold, large black sheets on a clothes line, rows of derelict cars pock-marked with bullet holes, and even as the camera randomly scans the film festival audience the framing is careful and sensitive to any fortuitous associations. The success of the festival as an event is a testament to the endurance of the city and for van der Keuken this fact symbolises something indestructible about the human spirit amidst the Bosnian-Serb mortars and sniper-fire and the impotence of the UN “peace-keepers.” And, at that moment, caught in the crossfire, when the rolling camera falls from his hands amidst violence and fear, in the split second when circumstances frame the filmmaker and not vice versa, Sarajevo Film Festival Film becomes a different kind of documentary, or document: “There, miraculously, just for once, [van der Keuken] received an immense, enigmatic recompense for all his pains: he really did touch reality.”28

DEFRAMING/PARIS

If we can differentiate framing styles in terms of their figurative, reflexive, and aleatory characteristics, when—exactly—is an image deframed? Formally, if an image is framed because it
determines p.o.v., centres its subject, and affirms the ontological order of things, is it, then, de-framed when it is perceived to violate these conventions? When is an abnormal point of view sufficiently abnormal to constitute an “explicit framing otherwise” signifying an anomaly that presents an opening to an unexpected, alternative dimension of the image?²⁹

According to Pascal Bonitzer, for example, “de-framing” (décadrages) does not simply connote a preponderance of obtuse perspectives and oblique angles: it compels the eye to encounter an alternative image. It is “a perversion, one that adds an ironic touch to the function of cinema, painting, even photography, all of them forms of exercising the right to look.” In this sense, de-framing establishes the fundamental difference between cinema and other visual arts “because of movement and the diachronic progress of the film’s image, which allows for its absorption.”³⁰

In the 1960s and 1970s, this approach to relations between the frame and the image informed alternative ways of thinking about the effects of modernity on the visual arts, and the role of cinema in creating new ways of seeing. Deframing was an “exemplary cinematic effect” that could (scandalously) link the paintings of a Dégas or Manet with films by Eisenstein or Welles and/or photographs by Stieglitz or William Klein. And yet, this argument seems to be sustained by an underlying confidence in the metaphysical integrity of the frame, and what Bonitzer terms “de-framing” might easily be regarded as framing by another name.³¹ In other words, if the notion of “deframing” can only function as a meaningful sign when the frame is assumed to be a stable, objective, supplement to the image—when its (parergonal) indeterminacy is overlooked—is it really de-framing anything?³²

Towards the end of his essay on this subject, for example, Bonitzer remarks: “In Godard’s work […] what is important is neither framing or de-framing, but what shatters the frame, like the video trackings on the surface of the screen, line and movement that deceive any controlling immobility of the look [emphasis added].”³³ Surely, it is not a question of “neither,” “or,” and “but”: every shot, cut, and sequence in Week End (1967), Tout va bien (1972), or Numéro deux (1975) is framed, as is the “fraternity” of superimpositions, juxtapositions, dissolves, insets, captions, and citations in Godard’s magnum opus, Histoire(s) du cinéma (1988–1998).³⁴ If anything, describing images and sequences in these films in terms of “deframing” or “deframings” runs the risk of invoking a pseudo-deconstructionist term to describe a complex but essentially rational and conceptually coherent set of artistic processes and effects. In relation to performative and installation-based visual art works, however, the question of deframing seems much less problematic and when used in this context seems to do greater justice to its radical implications.

Take, for example, two “installations” exhibited in Paris in recent years; both of which have various cinematographic associations (especially, in terms of their engagement with processes of visual art production, and the projection and perception of images): Jean-Luc Godard’s Voyage(s) in Utopia: Jean-Luc Godard: 1946–2006: In Search of Lost Theorem/Voyage(s) en Utopie à la recherche d’un théorème perdu (2006), and Felice Varini’s 7 Lines for 5 Triangles/Sept droites pour cinq triangles (2003). Much of what became Voyage(s) in Utopia was generated from the remnants of Godard’s Collage(s) de France, archéologie du cinéma, après JLG, an earlier Pompidou project he was forced to abandon—and itself, derived from an ill-fated proposal for a lecture course on the history of cinema at the College de France, in 2005. Divided into three rooms, each signifying a temporality or tense (“2: Avant-Hier,” “Hier,” and “Aujourd’hui”), the exhibition resembles a building-site (if anything, the floor of a department store in the throes of a refit). The first room is dedicated to the memory of Collage(s) de France and is a random assemblage of miniature wooden models of that exhibition, boxes, discarded writing and planning instruments, defaced sheets of paper, photocopies, cables, wires, and exposed sockets, and other flotsam and jetsam from contemporary (technological) life. The second room is “dedicated” to cinema and has as its centre-piece a large miniature railway set, monitors and televisions (of various ratios and sizes), and a number of large potted plants (ecology). Various “classical” films (with familiar Godardian associations) are being screened on the monitors (e.g. Welles’s, unfinished, Don Quixote (1959); The Barefoot Contessa, Joseph Mankiewicz, 1954; Johnny Guitar, Ray, 1954, and Rossellini’s, Journey to Italy/Viaggio in Italia, 1953). The third section invokes notions of...
flatness (and coldness): some flat-screen televisions (showing porn, sport, and *Black Hawk Down*, Scott, 2001), “flat-pack” furniture, domestic utilities, and “home entertainment” equipment, an overturned scaffold, books nailed to a table, and so forth. On one level, *Voyage(s) in Utopia* seems to be designed around these themes, or frames: “–2: Avant-Hier” referring to the multimedia installation that might have been (the past); “Hier” to the halcyon days of cinema (past perfect); and finally, “Aujourd’hui” (the future present) to the demise of cinema, politics, imagination amidst the banal pornography of commodity culture.

Throughout *Voyage(s) in Utopia*, a history and language of the image is being deframed. An installation that is also a “de-installation,” it refuses to situate its own artefacts (and associations) into anything resembling a theme. In so doing, it is also a concentrated assault on the burgeoning institutional partnership between the museum (of multimedia) and the cinema (of memory). Godard leaves no boundary or bond intact including his own friendship with the museum’s curator, Dominique Païni. With its large ground-level windows looking out on the Beaubourg street (framing the rushing pedestrians and tents for the homeless, what is outside) and its exposed wires, pipes, and ventilation ducts, *Voyage(s) in Utopia* is a caricature—or miniature—of the Pompidou Centre itself. This scattering of objects, images, languages, leaving nothing connected to anything else, except in an associative and entirely speculative sense seems a more plausible “perversion” than any individual image on display, and *Voyage(s) in Utopia* adds more than a touch of irony to “the right to look”.

The work of Swiss artist, Felice Varini, who paints or plasters large geometric shapes (squares, circles, triangles) on to buildings and public spaces, also seems better suited to the notion of “deframing,” than particular images from cinema, photography, or painting. Varini first projects the shapes before tracing and painting over the (projected) image. The paintings are three-dimensional and perspective-specific and can only be seen in their entirety, as a complete shape or form from one vantage point (from everywhere else, the viewer will see only unaligned fragments). For Varini, the fragments matter more than the whole: “the work is outside the vantage point, where reality allows for shapes to live.” These images and installations constitute defframings both in the sense that they perform spectacular feats of incongruity (largely, by being superimposed onto familiar structures or cityscapes), and also because they take the frame outside out onto the street into the ordinary world. Varini’s shapes only appear intact, from one (eye-level) perspective, from elsewhere their incompleteness can acquire random meanings, associations, and new topographies. In *7 Lines for 5 Triangles/Sept droites pour cinq triangles* (2003), for instance, Paris has come to us already framed by historic architecture, town planning, landscaping, and perspective: its buildings, boulevards, parks, and gardens frame what we see and how we see it. In superimposing his bold red lines on to these structures and vistas, in defacing the cityscape with such precise, pristine forms, Varini subverts the rationality of modernity. The moment of merging these fragments into a unified geometric shape becomes as much an experience of blindness as insight: Paris is not merely deframed, it is made to disappear altogether, leaving only seven red lines for five triangles.

**ENVOI**

This essay has suggested a poetics of the cinematographic frame that ranges from one form of invisibility to another. At one extreme, for example, there is the “frame-less framing” characteristic of much mainstream commercial cinema and
television. This highly regulated, institutionalised practice invariably seeks to conceal the act of framing from its audience, rendering it indiscernible, and prohibiting any disjunction between the world and a given image of the world. At the other extreme, there are multi-media and moving-image-based installations that exemplify the phenomenon of “deframing” because they displace, or dissolve, the boundaries between the interior and exterior of the artwork to such an extent that the images they exhibit or install defer framing, and circulate within various random and associative contexts, some of which are cinematographic. This essay has largely concerned itself with the task of analysing the principle styles of framing that exist between these extremes, seeking to demonstrate how these forms and structures can be aligned with a broadly modernist aesthetic practice and film culture. With the proliferation of new media and audiovisual technologies, the frame has proved an important object of study, especially in wide-ranging surveys that endeavour to trace the ever-changing relations between images, screens, and spectators. While it is important to recognise the “inter-medial” and wide-ranging aesthetic role of the cinematographic frame in this context, it is also important not to lose sight of the particularity of film language and history and the variety of forms and genres it has created.

NOTES

1. Wolfgang Kemp, ‘The Narrativity of the Frame’, in The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork, ed. Paul Duro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.
2. Jean Mitry, The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema, trans. Christopher King (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 77.
3. Gerald Mast, ‘On Framing’, Critical Inquiry 11.1 (1984): 86.
4. Jean-Christophe Royoux, ‘Pour un cinéma d’expérience I: Retour sur quelques jalons historiques’, Omnibus 20 (1997): 10. Qtd. in Le mouvement des images/The Movement of Images, ex. cat., eds. Philippe-Alain Michaud et al. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2006), 98. Clearly, new digital technologies have facilitated a radical convergence between cinema and other visual arts, yielding ‘new techniques of immersion and participation, opening up wide potential for artistic application’, but it is important to remember that this is not necessarily a recent (or technology-determined) phenomenon; before Douglas Gordon, Mark Lewis, Tacita Dean, Paul Sietsema, Matthias Müller, or Pierre Huyghe began manipulating the grammar and apparatus of cinema, experimental filmmakers had been reinventing visual forms and genres, remaking their medium, and adopting so-called “deconstructive approach[es] to the visual and auditory synchronicity of cinema”. Ursula Frohne, ‘Dissolution of the Frame: Immersion and Participation in Video Installation,’ trans. Isabel Flett, Art and the Moving Image, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate/Afterall, 2008), 369–70. For further discussion—with an emphasis on framing in terms of ‘the continuum between the [cinematographic] in-frame and the out-of-frame … and the wider context of moving image gallery work’ (326), see: Catherine Fowler, ‘Room for Experiment: Gallery Films and Vertical Time from Maya Deren to Eija Liisa Ahtila’, Screen 45.4 (2004): 324–43; and Alison Butler’s more recent ‘A Deictic Turn: Space and Location in Contemporary Gallery Film and Video Installation’, Screen 51.4 (2010): 305–23.
5. Mast, ‘On Framing’, 85.
6. The influence of Expressionism on cinema—particularly, in Germany during the 1920s and Hollywood in the 1940s is often exaggerated and usually confusing. At one level, it is nonsense to talk about ‘Expressionist cinema’ in the same—or a similar way—breath as one would Expressionist painting, sculpture, or theatre for that matter. This article tends to adopt a more nuanced appreciation of its influence on particular cinematographic and staging techniques. See Jacques Aumont, ‘Où commence, où finit l’expressionnisme?’, in Le Cinéma Expressionniste: De Caligari à Tim Burton, eds. Jacques Aumont and Bernard Benoliel (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 13–29.
7. In particular: the opening long crane shot in Central Park, Welles and Hayworth at the aquarium, Grisby’s (low angle, below the belt) shooting of...
Broome, the surreal theatricality of the trial sequences, the Chinese theatre, and the funhouse sequence. The film was originally conceived on the hoof by Welles while trying to persuade Harry Cohn to invest $50,000 in his Broadway version of *Around the World in Eighty Days*. The production of *The Lady from Shanghai* was plagued by problems (Welles and Hayworth’s complicated (post-) marital relations, the accidental death of a cameraman, mysterious illnesses, bad weather, insect bites, and the company of Errol Flynn). It was then frantically cut and re-cut by the studio before being shelved by the mercurial Cohn.

8. In classical mythology, Mount Ida is both associated with Rhesus, ‘the mother of the gods’, and the Judgement of Paris. In the sequence directly following the Venice segment discussed here, Antonioni cuts to a shot of Niccolo noticing (identifying) the bronze statue of Venus in the hallway of his apartment building.

9. The painting is in fact a copy of Titian’s portrait of Doge Andrea Gritti and the hotel was originally his palace. Given that Niccolo’s desire for the aristocratic Mavi had been mediated by his own ambivalent attitude to that social class, these surroundings, and their history are hardly coincidental.

10. For further discussion of frames-within-frames in cinema: see Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Albert to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 2006), 200–3. See also, Gilles Deleuze’s, *Cinema: 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Atheneum, 1992), 12–18. As an epigraph to this discussion, Friedberg quotes Deleuze: ‘Doors, windows, box office windows,skylights, car windows, mirrors, are all frames. The great directors have particular affinities with particular secondary, tertiary, etc. frames. And it is by this dovetailing of frames that the parts of the set or of the closed system are separated, but also converge and are reunited’. *Movement Image*, 14.

11. Nicky Hamlyn, *Film Art Phenomena* (London: BFI, 2003), 57.

12. Annette Michelson, ‘About Snow’, *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 112.

13. For a critical overview of the importance of framing formations and ‘screen geometry’ in both classic and contemporary film *avant-gardes*, see A.L. Rees, ‘Frames and Windows: Visual space in Abstract Cinema’, in *Avant-Garde Film*, eds. Dietrich Scheunemann and Alexander Graf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 55–75.

14. On Warhol’s use of multiple screen techniques, see Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, 207–11.

15. Sitney, P. Adams, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 332.

16. ‘My study of the prints made it absolutely clear that the films shared not one single shot between them’. Mark Toscano, ‘Archiving Brakhage’, *Journal of Film Preservation* 72 (2006): 23.

17. Sunny Salter, ‘Farewell to the El: Nostalgic Urban Visuality on the Third Avenue Elevated Train’, *American Quarterly* 58.3 (2006): 873.

18. Perhaps, this association was not lost on Pierre Huyghe when he conceived *Remake* (1995), a multiple screen audiovisual projection based on Hitchcock’s film. For a succinct overview of the ‘replay/remake’ technique in this regard, see: Tanya Leighton, ‘Introduction’, *Art and the Moving Image* 35–37. Another interesting film to consider in relation to framing and the Wonder Ring/Guir Rednow project is Raymond Depardon’s *New York, N.Y.* (1984, 35 mm, b&w, 10 mins.), most of which is shot through a window on the Roosevelt Island tramcar as it crosses the 59th Street Bridge.

19. Some important examples of aleatory and ‘spontaneous’ composition from other arts might include: W.B. Yeats’s *A Vision* (1925); Jean Arp’s *Collage Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* (1916–1917), and Richard Serra’s molten metal ‘splashings’ (1968); Allan Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959); Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (1960), and John Cage’s *Water Music* (1952).

20. Nöel Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. ed. Helen R. Lane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 109–12.

21. Incidentally, Reichenbach would later work as Chris Marker’s cameraman on *The Sixth Side of the Pentagon/La sixième face du Pentagone* (1967, video, Fr., 26 mins.), and produce Welles’s *F For Fake/Verités et mensonges* (1974, Fr., 85 mm.).

22. Robert Bresson, *Notes for the Cinematographer*, trans. ed. Jonathan Griffin (London: Quartet Books, 1986), 134.

23. S.M. Eisenstein, *Beyond the Stars*, vol. 4 *The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein*, ed. Richard Taylor, trans. William Powell (London: BFI, 1995), 30.

24. Sam Rohdie, *Montage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 82.

25. During filming, in 1991, a group of Dutch anthropologists (Stef Meyknecht, Dirk Nijland, and Joost Verhey) attempted to make their own documentary about the making of *Madame l’Eau: Rouch’s Gang* (1998, col., 70 mins.). See Christopher W. Thompson, ‘Aventure, ethnologie et hazard’, *CinéAction* 81 (1996): 69–73.

26. Alain Bergala, ‘On Photography as the Art of Anxiety’ in *The Lucid Eye: The Photographic Work*, ed. Johan van der Keuken, 1953–2000 (Amsterdam: De Verbeelding, 2001), 21.

27. He deploys the same hand-held framing technique in *De grote vakantie/The Long Holiday* (2000, NL, 142 mins.) when filming from inside another Land Rover as they travel over hills in Nepal.

28. Bergala, ‘On Photography as the Art of Anxiety’, in *The Lucid Eye*, 25. Oja Kodar’s *Vrijeme Za ... A Time For ...* (1993, Cr/It., 99 mins.) also contains
sequences shot during actual gun battles in Zagreb during the Bosnian War.

29. Jacques Aumont, *The Image*, trans. Claire Pajakowska (London: BFI, 1997), 118.

30. Bonitzer, ‘Deframings’, 199.

31. For a wide-ranging discussion of the frame and film theory, see: Edward Brannigan, *Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006).

32. Coincidentally, Jacques Derrida’s book on the frame and the phenomenon of parergonality was first published in the same year as Bonitzer’s original essay on décadrages: Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 1978), and Pascal Bonitzer, ‘Décadrages’, *Cahiers du cinéma* 284 (1978): 7–15. See also *The Truth in Painting*, trans. eds. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 37–82. Bonitzer’s essay was subsequently published in *Décadrages: Peinture et Cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1987), and then translated into English by Chris Drake. See Pascal Bonitzer, ‘Deframings’, in *Cahiers du Cinéma: 1973–1978: History, Ideology, Cultural Struggles*, vol. 4, ed. David Wilson (London: Routledge, 2000), 197–203.

33. Ibid., 201. The original is: ‘Ce qui est important chez Godard, par exemple, ce n’est ni le cadrage ni le décadrage, c’est ce qui vient sidérer le cadre, comme les tracés vidéo à la surface de l’écran, lignes, mouvements qui déçoivent toute immobilité maîtrisante du regard’. *Décadrages*, 85.

34. With reference to *Numéro deux*, Friedberg remarks: ‘In full blown self-reflexivity, Godard asserts control of every shot and its combination—images are not juxtaposed in a random dialectic as in Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls*’, in *Virtual Windows*, 216.

35. Gil Dekel, ‘I am a Painter: Interview with Felice Varini’, *Poetic Mind* 2 (2008): http://www.poeticmind.co.uk/2_Questions/Interview_Felice_Varini.shtml. See also: Adrian Shaughnessy, ‘Architecture as Canvas’, *Creative Review*, April 2008, 40–44; and Felice Varini and Fabiola Lopez, *Points of View* (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2004). Varini’s 2003 installation at the Place d’Odéon was the subject of a documentary, 7 Lines for 5 Triangles/Sept droites pour cinq triangles (Antoine de Roux, 2004, DVD, Low Wave/Editions Artists at Work). A comprehensive overview of Varini’s career, including images of his work and bibliographies is available at: www.varini.org