From Art Gallery to Movie Theatre: Spectatorship in Julian Rosefeldt’s Manifsto

Abstract: Experimental films have historically had a contested and marginalized position within film exhibition. With his Manifesto (2015), which has been exhibited both as a video installation in art galleries and as a feature film in movie theatres, Julian Rosefeldt collapsed the barriers between these exhibition spaces. By performing a comparative analysis of Manifesto in both forms, this article outlines the way spectators behave differently in the theatre and the gallery, the different demands the work makes on the viewer in each venue, and the difficulties of transforming the work from one form to another. By asking what is lost and what is gained, this article explores how the text, form, and venue function differently, to reveal underlying assumptions about spectatorship.

Keywords: spectatorship; installation; film exhibition; experimental film; video art; self-reflexivity; duration

Introduction

In early January 2017, Cate Blanchett fans and art film enthusiasts alike rejoiced as they learned that Julian Rosefeldt’s Manifesto, his synthesis of over fifty artists’ manifestos from a variety of twentieth-century art movements, would be released as a feature-length film. The project, which had originally ‘premiered’ as a thirteen-channel video installation at the Australian Center for the Moving Image in Melbourne in December 2015, was slowly making its way through art galleries around the world already – from Berlin to New York City to Paris to Buenos Aires – but this prospective theatrical release would bring Rosefeldt’s work to more mainstream and local audiences. Manifesto would also come to transcend two venues – the art gallery and the movie theatre – with opposing histories and expectations on spectatorship, perhaps in an attempt to bridge a gap between them.

In the movie theatre, Manifesto is exhibited as an hour-and-a-half long feature film in an anthology-like format, in which Blanchett portrays thirteen characters in different ‘episodes’ – from a plant worker and a puppeteer to a scientist and a
choreographer – who speak in the form of twentieth-century artists’ manifestos. As an installation, Blanchett’s characters instead inhabit twelve individual large projection screens, with a thirteenth screen, somewhat removed from the others, serving as a prologue to the installation. Each video is ten and a half minutes long, looping infinitely.

While *Manifesto* is worthy of many more dissections and discussions than is possible here, this article will focus primarily on the process by which *Manifesto* was transformed from video installation to feature-length film – a process which Rosefeldt has remarked took almost a year¹ – and how the work functions differently in these venues (or, maybe, how it fails to function similarly). This article argues that the gallery and the theatre place different demands on the spectator, and similarly, on the work. Some have argued that *Manifesto* has failed to reproduce the experience of the installation in the feature film. This article argues instead that *Manifesto* attempts to do different things as an installation and as a feature film.

*Manifesto* in the tradition of experimental cinema

It is worthwhile, first, to situate *Manifesto* within the context of the ‘experimental film’. *Manifesto* follows in the traditions of canonical experimental cinema and arthouse films, and explores many of the same concerns, strategies, and techniques, including appropriated language, voice-over narration, non-narrative structure, directly addressing the spectator, performativity, self-reflexivity, and duration. *Manifesto* also makes references to previous experimental films, most memorably through a spinning shot of a spiraling staircase, which visually calls to mind Marcel Duchamp’s *Anemic Cinema* (1926), as well as the writings of Stan Brakhage, one of the most prolific experimental filmmakers of the second half of the twentieth century.

Experimental films have historically had (and arguably suffered from) a contested and marginalized position within film exhibition, which has made it unclear whether experimental films belong in art galleries or should be screened in movie theatres like any other film. The exhibition of *Manifesto* as a video installation places it within an additional history of moving image artmaking that has attempted to thwart and subvert the traditions of blockbuster Hollywood films, continuity filmmaking, and the ‘industrial cinema complex’, in different ways.

However, Katerina Gregos makes an important distinction between Rosefeldt’s practice and that of traditional video installation. She argues that the history of video installation has primarily been dominated by low-budget and independent production. Typically, an artist has incorporated video into their already active practice within sculpture, painting, or performance, to expand their practice into new media.

On the contrary, she maintains, Rosefeldt’s work “draws on cinematic conventions and the vocabulary of cinema, and is often akin to cinematic production processes.” Gregos argues that Rosefeldt’s films “occupy a territory at the opposite end of the spectrum of the sometimes amateurish, facile, do-it-yourself tactics” of most video art. Catherine Elwes has similarly noted that Rosefeldt has “deftly appropriated the emblematic techniques of commercial film” in his installations. He often works with elaborate constructed film sets on sound stages, and collaborates with a large crew of designers, engineers, and performers. Rosefeldt has also shot most of his installations (which he aptly insists on calling film installations) primarily on super-16mm and super-35mm film before converting them to video for exhibition, though his five most recent works, including Manifesto, were shot on HD video.

Artists and filmmakers have certainly exhibited their 16mm films in art galleries before. Andy Warhol, Dan Graham, and Michael Snow showed their films in galleries in the 1960s and 1970s, but the scale of their productions was more akin to that of the video art which Gregos speaks of. Scale is an important factor to consider in Rosefeldt’s work. Manifesto, as well as many of his previous works, features many long-shots and vast landscapes and architectural structures. In one scene of Manifesto, a drone-shot of vast industrial ruins moves in on Blanchett as a homeless man; in another, a panning crane shot of a large theatre set reveals Blanchett choreographing an alien dance performance. Revealing the film sets and the apparatus of his own filmmaking is a familiar trope within Rosefeldt’s body of work. The choreographer scene reveals the lighting rigs, props, costumes, performers, and massive backstage ‘construction’ of his work. Similarly, in a scene with Blanchett as a news reporter ‘on location’, a handheld camera zooms out to reveal the artificial lighting, an industrial-size fan, and a rain machine, which are soon turned off and wheeled off-set as assistant producers approach her after the scene has ‘wrapped’.

In Deep Gold (2013), Rosefeldt reveals that the street scene where much of the film’s action has taken place is in fact a constructed backlot set, again revealing the costume racks, the catering people, and a production trailer. In American Night (2009), a director is revealed to be filming the performances of the characters in one video channel, while in another a set is revealed to be a two-dimensional construction, which is slowly pulled back on a dolly track as the camera moves out. In Lonely Planet (2006), the artist himself walks through a Bollywood film set, while in The Soundmaker (2004), a performing foley artist in a studio creates the sounds of his own alter ego self rearranging his living room furniture, before the cameras finally move out to reveal the two rooms constructed adjacent to each other.

Rosefeldt exhibits a clear interest in deconstructing the illusion of cinema. As such, his installation works construct a space for criticism of traditional studio

---

filmmaking by appropriating these same techniques and turning them onto themselves. This self-reflexive tendency has strong precedents in the history of experimental filmmaking, in which artists have worked to explore and expose their own filmmaking processes or the particular properties of the media with which they work. Stan Brakhage scratched and painted on the emulsion of film strips to explore the physical properties of celluloid film, while Joan Jonas played with the exhibition of video and the properties of the television set in Vertical Roll (1972). In William Greaves’s Symbiopsychotaxiplasm (1968), the filmmaker sets out to make a film about the construction of meaning in cinema by having his crew film themselves discussing the production of screen tests for the film.

Rosefeldt’s self-reflexivity becomes particularly interesting in the final episode of Manifesto, in which an elementary teacher instructs her class in ‘proper’ filmmaking technique [Figure 1], according to the acceptable principles of Jim Jarmusch’s Golden Rules of Filmmaking (2002) and Lars von Trier’s and Thomas Vinterberg’s Dogme 95 (1995). She tells her students that “music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot”, and that “the camera must be handheld”. Ultimately, Rosefeldt reveals the irony in how filmmakers supposedly working in opposition to the formulaic Hollywood traditions of narrative and continuity cinema have formed their own formulas and rules to follow, which are not entirely unlike the first.

**Manifesto as a feature film**

Out of blackness, an abstract image of an out-of-focus fire and sparks that slowly make their way across the screen accompanies the low hum of a musical cue. “All that is solid melts into air”, a woman’s voice quotes from The Communist Manifesto (1848) – Rosefeldt’s only reference to a manifesto written before the twentieth century throughout the film. “I am writing a manifesto because I have nothing to say”, the voice soon tells us. The fire and sparks finally reach the opposite end of the screen from where they started. Climactically, a firework is launched into the air as a group of homeless women cheer.

This is how Manifesto introduces its premise to the spectator as a feature film. Through a synthesis of the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Tristan Tzara, and Philippe Soupault, the spectator has been primed to expect similar juxtapositions of statements and writings for the remainder of the film. Soon, their names flash in a title sequence, alternating with Blanchett’s face in close-up, alongside more than 50 other names of artists and writers. Much like a substitute for the program notes available at the gallery, this foreshadowing sequence tells the spectator which manifestos will be featured, and what characters will reappear in the film. The formulaic title sequence, complete with production credits for director of photography, editor, and costume design [Figure 2], encourages the spectator to perceive the film as any other theatrical release, while the exposition builds anticipation, enticing the viewer to sit through the entirety of the hour-and-a-half long film.
More interestingly, the feature film has also established a direct causal chain of events between two of the video installation channels, and thus a narrative relationship. Though the connection between the Prologue – which features the abstract sparks of the fuse – and the Situationist film – in which Blanchett portrays a homeless man – is implied in the installation, the firework propels us into the spectacle of Manifesto in the feature film. The installation lacks, or perhaps does not need, this powerful push, as the fire instead burns out, before fading to black and starting all over again.

Already in the first few minutes of the film, we can discern some of the impositions the feature film form makes on the content, particularly in the form of causality and narrative, but also through a musical score, a title sequence, and credits, which are carried over into the first episode of the film. All these features tell the spectators they are watching a ‘film proper’. In particular, the introduction of music into the film reveals a certain expectation of the cinemagoer, or perhaps of Rosefeldt himself. Whether the film needs a musical score or not, the choice is telling about the type of work the filmmaker wants the spectator to perform. While the music certainly lends a unity to the separate video channels, it also removes the spectator from the meditative, silent spaces which Rosefeldt has constructed in the installation, and which we are encouraged to inhabit and stay in for a couple of minutes.

The Futurist episode, which features Blanchett as a broker on a gigantic stock trade floor, remains silent for over six minutes in the installation, as the camera looks down onto Blanchett from the ceiling before slowly moving closer, watching her on the phone, pointing her pen at the computer screen in slow motion [Figure 3]. The spectator must watch this four-minute shot in relative silence, apart from the keyboard-clicking, phone-calling, and office-talking that make up the space’s room tone, and the occasional shouting from nearby video channels. The feature film cuts down the entire ten-minute episode to just over three minutes, during which Blanchett’s voice-over occupies our attention for two minutes, and the remainder is accompanied by music.

In the reconstruction of the 130 minutes’ worth of content into a 94-minute feature film, it should make all the sense to remove these ‘passive’ meditative spaces before eliminating Blanchett’s ‘active’ performances. In the Suprematist-Constructivist episode, a two-and-a-half-minute shot of three exposed elevators travelling up-and-down is cut down to one minute and ten seconds; in the Stridentist-Creationist episode, a four-and-a-half-minute long dolly-shot surveying the aftermath of a punk party is cut into three shots, totaling less than two-and-a-half minutes; in the episode on Conceptual Art and Minimalism, three minutes’ worth of the camera slowly panning by a television studio lighting rig are cut out entirely.

Similarly, it is worth exploring which parts of the texts in the installation are kept intact in the feature film, and which are edited and cut down. Only the texts in three episodes remain intact: the punk-rocker in the Stridentist-Creationist episode, the puppeteer in the Surrealist-Spatialist episode, and the school teacher in the episode on Film. Some texts remain close to complete, such as the funeral speaker in the
Dadaist episode, the incineration plant worker in the episode on Architecture, and the news reporters in the episode on Conceptual Art and Minimalism.

The episode that is transformed the most is the episode on Vorticism, Blue Rider, and Abstract Expressionism, in which a CEO is presenting a new concept for the company. “Blast”, which is the culmination of the CEO’s presentation in the installation, is not even mentioned in the film. Similarly, in the installation, when Blanchett as the CEO speaks to one of the guests, she exclaims that “the poor are detestable animals”. In the feature film, this line is inaudible, as it becomes drowned by Blanchett’s voice-over. Instead, we only hear her say the subsequent line, “the rich are bores without exception”. While the film does not take a firm position on any of the political stakes or the capitalist critiques inherent in many of the cited writings, the spectator in the installation is given time to ponder the statements and their meanings, while in the feature film the spectator must quickly move on to readjust to the next settings, characters, and statements.

It is necessary to reflect on the choices that went into the editing of the feature film. One could, for exercise, imagine the feature film as a ‘proper’ anthology film, to the varying likes of Paris, je t’aime (2006), Four Rooms (1995), or The Day I Became a Woman (2000), in which each episode could function as a distinct and stand-alone chapter, introduced by title cards stating that we were about to watch Situationism, Futurism, etc., and in which causal or narrative relationships are unmotivated. Instead, Rosefeldt chose to impose a narrative onto the collective episodes, interweaving them thematically, metaphorically, or visually. The film cuts from the garbage piles in the incineration plant to the trashed locale of the punk-rocker party; from a spinning spiral staircase to two spinning girls playing in the woods; an upward tilt in the never-sleeping stock broker scene cuts to an upward tilt in a sleeping rural neighborhood.

It is not made clear from watching the film what motivates splitting the pop art episode, in which a southern mother recites Claes Oldenburg’s I Am for an Art... (1961) as a lunchtime prayer, into three separate parts, dispersed in-between Dadaism and Constructivism, or Vorticism and Fluxus, but one can only assume it must serve some narrative point.

**Manifesto as a video installation**

Helen Westgeest, in Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach (2016), has argued that some aspects of video installations are inherently confusing to spectators. “The simultaneously presented video images force the spectator to choose when to switch from one screen to another, to contemplate the relationship between various projections, and where to position him/herself in the space of the installation.” She argues that this experience is entirely different from that of the movie theatre, in which the spectator needs only to sit in front of one and the same screen for the

---

5 Westgeest, Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach, 96.
entirety of the work. While in the feature film, all choices of duration and length have been made beforehand by Rosefeldt and his editor, Booby Good, in the art gallery, the spectator must choose for themselves how long to stay with one screen, whether to stop and watch closely from beginning to end, or to watch for a while before continuing onto the next one.6

The six-minute silent sequence in the Futurist episode is accompanied by the sounds of nearby channels, as the simultaneous exhibition of all thirteen channels at once makes for a soundscape of accompanying voices and noises from other episodes. Being installed differently at each gallery, at the discretion of the curator, the soundscapes change each time. At the National Gallery in Prague, for instance, the shouting choreographer and the homeless man accompanied the silence of the Futurist episode. Anna-Catharina Gebbers and Udo Kittelmann argue that Rosefeldt “invites viewers to experiment by creating their own combinations of images and sounds as they move through the Manifesto installation.”7

Another distinction must be made between art gallery and movie theatre exhibition. In the theatre, each film starts at a predetermined time — a showtime. A demand is made on the spectator to arrive at the venue by 7 p.m., or attend the next screening at 9:30 p.m. In the art gallery, a spectator is free to show up at any time they wish, as the work is looped, repeated over and over again. They are also free to roam about, moving from one screen to the next, arriving in the middle of a loop. In this regard, installation viewing is closer to television viewing, during which spectators can zap through channels regularly, staying on a show for as long as they please before continuing to the next channel. Westgeest notes, however, that in the 2000s, some video artists began to urge viewers to enter at the beginning and leave at the end of their work, to watch it in its entirety.8 No such demand is made for Manifesto.

Duration stands at opposite ends in the theatre and in the gallery: while feature films have historically moved toward a higher frequency of edits9 (which is to say, faster cuts and shorter shots), installations allow the space for contemplative shots, as seen in the Futurist episode and throughout Rosefeldt’s body of work. While cinema employs fast editing in the development of a narrative, Rosefeldt’s installations linger, extending the space of the gallery into that of the screen, emphasizing spatial and temporal experience over information. Westgeest theorizes further about the work the spectator performs in installations, arguing that “the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work, which turns spectator participation into the essence of installation art”.10

With an emphasis on time and space, it is interesting to consider the practice of a filmmaker like James Benning, whose work is almost always static and durational.

---

6 Ibid, 123.
8 Westgeest, Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach, 165.
9 Elwes, Installation and the Moving Image, 260.
10 Westgeest, Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach, 81.
Though his films are exhibited and screened within the cinema context, one could imagine a project like *California Trilogy* (2000–2001) – three films each consisting of thirty-five two-minute-and-twenty-second shots, as a potent three-channel installation.

Video installations and feature films – or galleries and theatres, respectively – thus place different demands on the spectator. Whereas in the theatre, the spectator’s experience is primarily temporal, the installation adds a spatial dimension to the work, requiring the spectator to physically move through the space to experience the work in its entirety. The spectator must not only decide on how long to spend in front of each screen, but also in what order to move through the space, and where to position oneself in relation to the screens. One can decide to stand close to one screen, or one can choose to stand further back, watching multiple screens at once. Ideal viewing distances are typically suggested by the placement of benches around the gallery, but even then, the viewer is free to lean against walls or sit on the floor, to make their own choices and shape their own experience.

Similarly, in the theatre, the spectator can choose to sit close to the screen, further back, to the middle, left, or right side, but will experience the work from one and the same vantage point for its entirety. Hugo Münsterberg has theorized this kind of spectatorship as passive, arguing that the spectator is experiencing involuntary attention, and is unable to choose to focus on anything but what the screen presents.\(^{11}\) Psychoanalytic film theorists Christian Metz\(^ {12}\) and Jean-Louis Baudry have extended and developed Münsterberg’s thesis in relation to the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Baudry, for instance, compared the immobile experience of the spectator to a sleeping state, arguing that the cinemagoer’s experience is similar to that of the prisoners watching shadows on the wall of Plato’s cave.\(^ {13}\)

On the contrary, then, in installations, the spectators’ attention is voluntary, as they make active selections about which screen to watch, for how long, and which to look at afterward. About eight minutes into the installation, Blanchett turns directly toward the camera, breaking the ‘fourth wall’, addressing the spectator directly on all twelve screens. Westgeest argues that directly addressing the viewer is one of the most powerful strategies of early television, and a strategy that was later appropriated in video installation art.\(^ {14}\) As Blanchett’s characters perform monologues at different pitch levels, synthesizing into complete chords, the harmonies turn the large exhibition hall into a musical chamber, all voices synchronized as a choir. The effect is astoundingly impressive, and Blanchett’s presence is inescapable.

---


An attempt is made to replicate this effect in the feature film. While most of these monologues have been cut out of the episodes of the film, some have been left intact, primarily because it would be impossible to cut around them. Particularly in the Dadaist funeral episode, in which Blanchett delivers a eulogy, a minute-long shot has been redubbed with a more ‘naturally’ human voice [Figure 4]. Similarly, the punk-rocker and the puppeteer have been redubbed as well. After the final episode chronologically in the feature film – the episode on Film – all monologues return in their original form, by employing a split screen. While in the installation, all tones are synchronized to start at the same moment, in the feature film, the different tones emerge one by one, with the image soon following. The voices unite in choir, this time side by side, but the effect is not the same, primarily for two reasons.

Firstly, the characters are all looking at us from the same vantage point – the movie theatre screen. Rosefeldt is unable to reproduce the 360-degree space of the art gallery, in which the spectator can choose what screen to focus on at any given time. In the theatre, the spectator can only choose to see all characters at once or none at all. In the gallery, on the other hand, Blanchett’s face is everywhere, addressing the spectator from all sides all at once. However, the spectator can only focus their attention on one screen at a time. They must actively decide who to watch, and what to listen to.

This brings us to the second distinction, which in part is more important than the first. As Burcu Dogramaci notes, “the simultaneous projection of the twelve manifesto compilations […] creates a sound collage where individual voices and texts can only be made out if you are standing close to one of the screens”.\(^\text{1.5}\) As such, the perceived soundscape is dependent on the spectator’s distance from any given speaker. The sound is playing from all twelve main screens, creating a complex mix of twelve different loudspeakers and their relative positions to the spectator. One can make out the words of the screen one is closest too, but, as Kimberly Quiogue Andrews notes, as soon as you lose focus, “those words dissolve into an undifferentiated tonal mass, a chord of language that sounds like a dystopian version of whatever was going on in the early days of Mac’s experimentations with computerized text-to-speech software.”\(^\text{1.6}\)

In the feature film, on the other hand, all twelve tones are predetermined, as mixed into the stereo or surround sound tracks, depending on the capabilities of the exhibition venue. The position of the spectator within the theatre is irrelevant, as all monologues are rendered illegible and incomprehensible as one uniform noise.

---


Conclusion

This article has highlighted some of the differences between art gallery and movie theatre exhibition as they relate to spectatorship, primarily in the work that the spectator performs, but also in the way the work is presented to the audience. By performing a comparative analysis of Manifesto as video installation and as feature film, it has been possible to outline the way spectators behave differently in the theatre and the gallery, the different demands the work makes on the viewer in each venue, and the difficulties of transforming the work from one form to another.

The active participation encouraged in the installation is lost in the feature film, leaving the spectators restless to inhabit the scenes Rosefeldt constructs. However, the feature film does not attempt to replicate the installation experience, nor does it simply bring a version of the installation to the movie theatre. By forming causal relationships and shaping narrative development, and taking on the ‘feature film form’, complete with credit sequences and musical cues, the feature film completely transforms Manifesto into a new experience, which is neither better nor worse than the installation, but simply different.

Of course, it is important not to discount the platform and attention that Blanchett’s international fame has brought to the project, which undoubtedly has brought art enthusiasts to the movie theatres and Blanchett fans to the art galleries. Ultimately, Rosefeldt seems to echo the sentiments of two of the manifestos he appropriates in his film: “I am for an art that lives outside of a museum”, and “I prefer both/and to either/or”.

Figure 1: Blanchett as elementary teacher instructs her class in Dogme 95 filmmaking. Julian Rosefeldt, Manifesto, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

17 Gebbers and Kittelmann, “To GiveVisible Action to Words,” 86.
Figure 2: Production credits accompany this contemplative aerial shot in the feature film. Julian Rosefeldt, Manifesto, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 3: Blanchett points at a computer screen in this six-minute slow motion sequence. Julian Rosefeldt, Manifesto, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4: Blanchett’s Dadaist eulogy has been redubbed in the feature film. Julian Rosefeldt, Manifesto, 2015. Courtesy of the artist.
References


