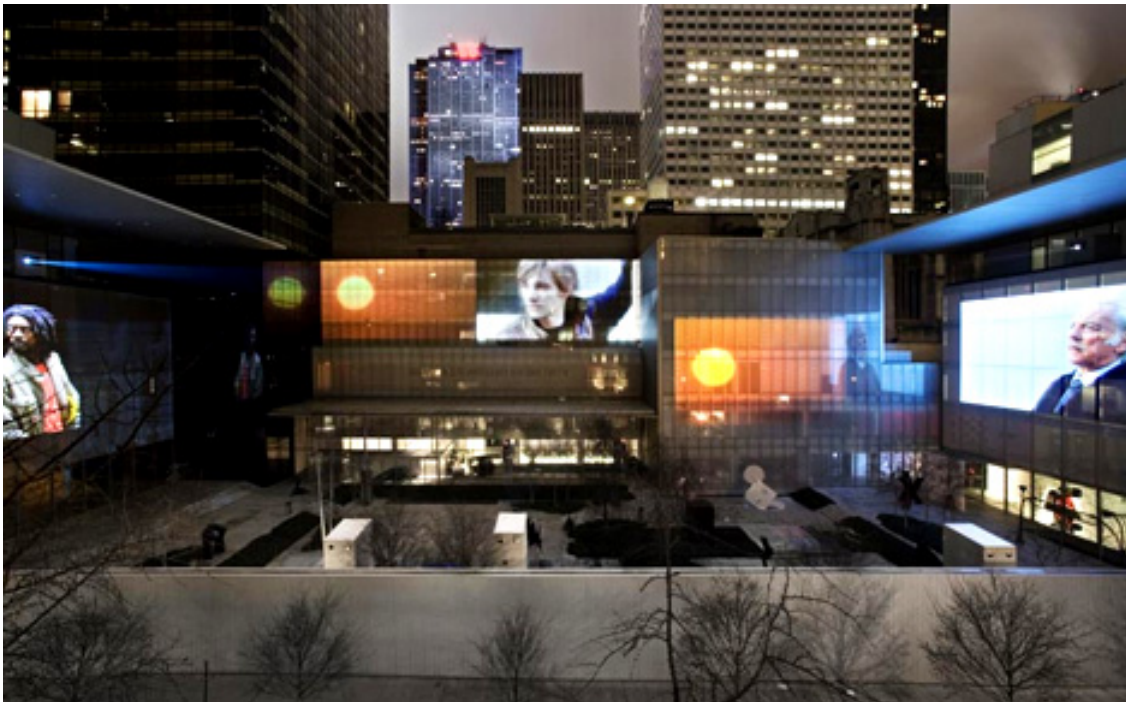


## **Crossing the boundaries of the cinematic screen in Doug Aitken's *Sleepwalkers***

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Doug Aitken envisioned a dialogue through technology, which has entered fully into the public realm of art. In *Sleepwalkers*, lives become architecturally integrated through the use of several screens. And thus, the installation entices the viewer to engage in a type of social interaction with the film screening where the public and private spheres collide.



Doug Aitken's *Sleepwalkers*, a multiple-screen installation, is amongst major public artworks produced in the United States. The project came to fruition out of a vision Aitken articulated in an interview to Vanity Fair magazine: "I was walking down an avenue alone in the early morning, looking up at the skyscrapers, and wanted to see them animated, in

conversation with each other” (Myers 68). The project was commissioned as a joint venture between Creative Time and New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). *Sleepwalkers* showed nightly in the winter of 2007 commencing on January 16<sup>th</sup> and running through to February 12<sup>th</sup>. It consisted of five filmic narratives, each thirteen minutes in duration, that are projected onto six MoMA’s external facades. The continuous sequences of cinematic scenes flowed onto the exterior of the buildings along West 53<sup>rd</sup>, between Fifth and Sixth avenues and West 54<sup>th</sup> streets, between Fifth and Sixth avenues. This provided viewers with diverse vantage points as the images were projected onto site-specific locations including 53<sup>rd</sup> Street above the Museum entrance and as well on the facade of the MoMA’s Abbey Aldrich Rockefeller Sculptural Garden. The following essay will delve into the intertextual, intermedial and intercultural references that surface within this work.



### ***MULTIPLE CHARACTERS ON MULTIPLE SCREENS***

The MoMA walls became animated during this nighttime installation, as the nocturnal movements of five city inhabitants simultaneously were

projected onto the architectural surfaces of the museum. The five archetypal characters represent New Yorkers and include a bicycle messenger (played by Ryan Donowho), an electrician (played by Seu Jorge), a postal worker (played by Chan Marshall), a businessman (played by Donald Sutherland), and an office worker (played by Tilda Swinton). Each character comes from one of the five distinct boroughs of New York and thus symbolizes the intercultural composition of the city.

Aitken's characters are clearly meant to represent the socioeconomically diversity of the city. And yet the "stylized mise en scène collapses class distinctions" (Schambelan 17). The actors serve as visual icons on the screens and simultaneously embody an intertextual reference to the Hollywood cinematic frame. Aitken has used recognizable figures from cinema such as Donald Sutherland, Seu Jorge and Tilda Swinton, were somewhat bringing even more the illusion that we are watching "real" New Yorkers to a cinematic idea of star system.

Although the characters were filmed in various locations throughout New York, the several screens syncopated various images of their daily rituals.

Instead of presenting a continuous narrative, Aitkin focuses on the common threads of existence that connect the workers despite their divergent lifestyles. The actors are filmed at synchronous mundane moments and often performing the same actions—waking, showering, having a cup of coffee, walking down a hallway, staring out a window. (Cash 106)

An optical displacement occurred as the five diverse journeys were intertwined simultaneously across several screens. The screens spreading out across the buildings served as a visual expression for the multiple narrative perspectives. The use of several screens in conjunction with "Aitken's fast-cut editing, interspersed with longer contemplative shots gives the piece a visual rhythm" are "particularly effective when multiple projections are viewed together" (Cash 106). The individual and the collective experience become embodied across the multiple-screen environments.



### ***FORMS OF ABSTRACTION***

Aitken characterizes his work as "a much more abstract form of communication. The frame is gone, the screen is broken, and there's almost no cropping at all. The viewer is active, welcome to swim in an open sea of images" (Hall 80). Abstraction becomes a vital element to

emerge out of the piece largely due to the fact it relies on the use of several screens. He employs abstraction as a means of collapsing the narratives, isolating specific moments, and exploring the medium of film itself.

Throughout the work, Aitken explores not just the constructed landscape upon which *Sleepwalkers* is projected but also the architecture of the video image itself. At key moments the images break down into abstraction, sometimes into pixels that are the building blocks of most moving pictures we encounter today. (Murphy 7)

Abstraction collapses the moment of the real, or hyperreal, and breaks the image into pixilated fragments, announcing to the viewer its mediatized status. "Just when the action in the projection feels to real, it retreats into flashing colors and geometric grids" (Martin 121). As a formal property, abstraction relates the individual character to the urban landscape. "Architectural and environmental details, such as spinning wheels, coffee cups and light switches, and close-ups of the actors become formal abstractions that are integrated into the urban fabric" (Cash 106). Aitkin edited sequences to suggest a dreamlike state for each character.

### ***DEVOID OF SOUND***

The potency of image culture becomes evident through the characters performance of gestures, which in turn, function as signifiers. It reveals that, "It is almost unnoticeable that *Sleepwalkers* has no sound. The narratives are conveyed through understood actions; we all know the sound of a yellow cab screeching to halt or a bike whistling through traffic." (Martin 121). This relates to Gilles Deleuze's assertion of analogical language as "...a language of relations, which consists of

expressive movements, paralinguistic signs, breaths and screams, and so on” (Deleuze 14).

This is a silent film, Aitken said, so I couldn’t rely on traditional things like soundtrack or sound effect to communicate tempo. I was really interested with working with people who can feel a tempo in a physical way, who can really communicate a pulse, a rhythm. (Finkel 22)

Sound is void, obliterated and only alluded to through gestures, objects, and the urban locale. However, “in case viewers felt sound-deprived, they were able to call a special number on their cell phones to listen to recordings of the curators and artist discussing various aspects of the work (also available at [moma.org](http://moma.org).)” (Cash 107). This option references the contemporary climate of technology and the integration of the viewer, as with the DVD where options are presented to the viewer to constitute a unique experience.

### ***REFERENCES TO EXPERIMENTAL VIDEO***

Aitken intertextually references experimental film through his non-linear sequences and fragmentary filmic devices, which conveyed no beginning or end, and through subverting traditional conventions of projection. The use of abstraction becomes integral to this context for,

Intercut throughout are abstract images—a kinetic grid of rectangles... Times Square signage, tangles of electronic wiring. There are jittery montages and rapturous pans, aerial shots and close-ups, pseudo-psychedelic effects and moments of serene stasis. (Schambelan 17)

Within the pedagogy of experimental video, the screen itself became a source for experimentation. The screens were multiplied and images proliferated and subsequently divided over several screens. In his book *Broken Screen* (2006), Aitken compares his work to the raw and non-linear *cinéma vérité* of Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* (1966). Warhol's film combines split screen techniques and multiple projections where numerous performers discussed their unusual lives from multiple perspectives and at several different levels at the same time (Weibel 43). Warhol's concept for the film was that it would be unlike watching a regular movie, as the two projectors could never achieve exact synchronization from viewing to viewing; therefore, each viewing of the film is, in essence, an entirely different experience. Aitken deployed the same method by recombining characters, as the film looped, but only to produce minor variations. The recombined narratives subsequently created slight variations in the viewing process. Incorporating the interior audience into the exterior experience of the work was made possible through the use of transparency. "Visitors inside could be seen through the projected images, creating another layer of voyeurism" (Cash 105). This element connects this installation to the concept voyeurism and the gaze in art and film studies.

As in the independent film *Timecode* (Mike Figgis, 2000), stories intersect in *Sleepwalkers*, providing the viewer with the ability to choose which filmic sequence to focus on. "Forever swept up by and against the flow, people's daily lives accrue as unexpected convergences or collision points" (Conner 46). The film was shot in HD for the crystal-clear detail to be enlarged, and the content was replayed in HD video as well.

Criticized for bordering on pure fantasy and reality TV, the contemporary cinematic effects in *Sleepwalkers* have been regarded by some critics as compromising the piece. "Instead of offering an insightful snapshot of New York's infinite mosaic of city life, Aitken's "sleepwalkers" come across as little more than the usual suspects seen in mass media" (Conner 46). However, the scale and juxtaposition of the screens, in combination with the outdoor venue ignited a different type of engagement and association for the viewer, and therefore Aitken went beyond relying on classic Hollywood narrative.

### **COMMODITY AND THE SPECTACLE**

In the film industry, films are commonly reconfigured and merchandised across a range of "commodity forms" (Wasson 19). Aitken had intended to mimic this commodification strategy by creating a smaller-scale version of the work for distribution. Although, he had stated before its inception that, "The form will remain fragmented, simultaneous, synaptic—anything but linear" (Finkel 22). He believes that "our way of living today is expanded, fragmented, kaleidoscopic. We have huge amounts of information coming at us, with our Treos, pagers, and iPods" (Finkel 22). The moving image is now an integral part of the metropolitan public sphere, as mediated through numerous electronic billboards and LED screens. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* comes to mind as Aitken successfully fused art and spectacle through both intertextual and intermedial strategies.

Through *Sleepwalkers*, Aitken confronts public space, and to this regard addresses the historical trajectories of video art. At the same time he engages in a postmodern discourse that celebrates pop cultural references. He also criticizes the viewing convention inherent in film



screening and the commercialism of the jumbo screens used in Times Square.

Aitken was able to expand avant-garde film-installation practices by fracturing the narratives while referencing cinematic culture and code. Traditionally video-art installation worked outside the commodity structure and subverted the traditional notions of art. Aitken's film-installation is unique in that it blurs the boundaries between art and architecture, public and private spheres, and the individual and collective experiences of narrative in the modernity.

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