**CURATING SPECTRAL SPACES**

*[INTRO]*

This book documents the five projects that were commissioned and produced for *The Cinemas Project* by artists: Brook Andrew, Mikala Dwyer, Bianca Hester, Lily Hibberd and Tom Nicholson. Alongside the documentation of the projects are interviews with the artists and essays pertaining to the work commissioned.

An important impetus of *The Cinemas Project* has been the history (and living history) of cinema in regional Victoria. We are delighted to include essays reflecting and reminiscing on the place of cinema and its activation today by the film historian, curator and broadcaster Ian Christie, Anniversary Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck College, University of London; and Adrian Martin, Professor of Film Studies at Goethe University, Frankfurt and Monash University, Melbourne.

The following essay briefly introduces the ideas inherent to the overall framework of *The Cinemas Project –* these are explored in more depth in the individual essays and interviews that follow.

*[ESSAY]*

The focus of *The Cinemas Project* is what has been termed the ‘spectral spaces of cinema’ in order to account for the way in which cinema, particularly cinema buildings, open up a space of both social and imaginative gathering – a place of ‘real’ and fictitious encounter. One of the starting points for the project was the fact that cinema buildings were at the heart of so many small towns in regional Australia, yet often these were only very temporary (being weekly screenings presented by travelling picture showmen at the shire hall or mechanics institute) and many have long since disappeared. These buildings, therefore, had a complex presence. They were places in which people got together in ‘real’ time and space not only to watch films but also for community meetings and events, yet they were also places in which other worlds were accessed – other worlds of dreams and desires, and places far from Australian shores. *The Cinemas Project* has sought to access these spaces of cinema through a series of newly commissioned artworks that address the living memory of cinema, such as Lily Hibberd’s work in the Latrobe Valley, or more laterally address the operations of cinema and the power of images in our midst. Artworks in the latter category include diverse approaches ranging from Brook Andrew’s powerful video installation with live performance exploring the dark power of images to subjugate Indigenous peoples, animals and ‘people’s affected by the colonial diaspora’ ([[1]](#endnote--1)), to Bianca Hester’s delicate film-based work and public performances that engage the ground upon which cinemas had been located. It is the notion of the ‘spectral’ that enables *The Cinemas Project* to straddle these approaches – one grounded in living history, the other in more conceptual questions – because it bridges the gap between dichotomies of ‘real’ / fiction, presence / absence, actual / imagined.

*The Cinemas Project* began with a journey and a process of speculation (which is in itself another kind of journey) – a journey to find ‘hidden’ or lost cinemas, and a questioning of what remains. The project began with a series of trips around regional Victoria (undertaken with the artist, Sam Nightingale in 2011) searching for the spaces of cinema: cinema buildings that were still standing and in use, those that had been repurposed, those that had been demolished. Through his indefatigable research Nightingale travelled armed with historical photos, documents and maps so that often in searching out a cinema, we found ourselves looping between images – between photographic image and the ‘real’, and between what the experimental film maker Stan Brakhage has termed ‘brain images’ and photographs and the ‘real’. Brakhage used the beautiful, evocative term ‘brain images’ to describe those images we see ‘in a flash’ when we close our eyes – flashes of colour, images of memory – and which he believed should be incorporated into ‘the film experience’. ([[2]](#endnote-0)) As we began to talk with the people that we met during our travels other images came into this loop. Conversations began with questions, ‘do you remember’, ‘could you tell me where’ and proceeded through rich visualisations of memory, fiction and the truth-untruth of dreams.

As you will see in the short photo essay that is included in this book, Nightingale documented the façades of cinemas or what stood in their place. He had undertaken extensive research into identifying the historic sites of cinemas and collating information about these sites; during these initial research trips across regional Victoria, we visited approximately 150 sites out of a possible 450. Nightingale’s project focussed upon photographing each cinema building if it was still standing, or, if not, photographing the space within which the cinema had stood whether that space was occupied with another building, a car park, empty block and so on. In this way, his is a kind of ghost photography – the documentation of a spectral space that questioned whether the ‘spirit’ of a building (and what it contained) could remain. Together these images form a strange typography of shape and form that ranges from the magnificent (albeit in some cases decrepit) cinema buildings from the hey-day of cinema construction in the 1920-30s, to those cinemas more colloquial in form, to those that are totally absent – replaced with another structure entirely. The faces of these buildings reveal the intricate patterning as if a type of skin upon which evidence is born of a layered and accumulated history. Nightingale’s project and his research stands adjacent to the five commissioned works by Brook Andrew, Mikala Dwyer, Bianca Hester, Lily Hibberd and Tom Nicholson. It has formed a research rich ‘prompt’ for *The Cinemas Project* as a whole, grounding the project in a specific interest in cinema history, which the commissioned works take up in diverse ways ranging from direct engagement as in the case of Lily Hibberd’s work to more conceptual questions concerning image-making and the role of images, as mentioned earlier.

In exploring the spectral spaces of cinema *The Cinemas Project* engages with ghosts, apparitions, hauntings as well as other forms of seeing suggested by the etymology of the word ‘spectral’ – deriving from the Latin prefix, *spec*.The ‘spectral spaces of cinema’ therefore refers to the diverse, temporal spaces that are opened up both within the narratives of film, and by acts of reminiscence, memory and imagination. But it is also concerned with the tension between lived experience, written histories and these projected images. Projects such as those by Brook Andrew and Tom Nicholson remind us that the images are not benign but can be imbued in and with violence. Images effect how we think and feel, and in this way they can change the course of history – especially if we consider the role of images in the violence and subjugation of indigenous peoples. It is particularly important to remember not only the violence enacted by images themselves but also the violence of their prohibition as is exemplified by the segregation enacted in cinemas, which sorted people by race and class and in some cases prohibited Aboriginal Australians from attending at all. ([[3]](#endnote-1)) For many, reminiscing about cinema-going brings happy memories of adventure and abandon, dreams for a future now remembered from that future, but we must not forgot this is also a history of prohibition – of unseeing and of being *unseen*. Andrew’s work, *De Anima*, engages with this condition of unseeing through the re-editing of images collected from anthropological films, propaganda films and home movies in order to re-animate previously overlooked or subjugated images returning a sense of vitality to their presence in the gallery. In a different way, Tom Nicholson’s complex work, *Indefinite Substitution* addresses the history of forgetting or ‘unseeing’, revisiting the history of John Batman and William Buckley through the action of collective monument making.

We can identify two different conceptions of time within the artists’ work realised for *The Cinemas Project.* On the one hand is an understanding of time as a kind of ‘haunting’ that refers to the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida’s notion of ‘hauntology’ as a ‘being with spectres’. ([[4]](#endnote-2)) The French word for spectre – *revenant* meaning ‘the returned’ – highlights the way in which the past *returns* to the present and maintains a relation with it to paraphrase Derrida. ([[5]](#endnote-3)) This is not to suggest a dichotomy or separation between past and present but instead that the past always returns or is always existing in relation to the present. We could consider this in connection to the layering of images in Lily Hibberd’s exhibition where the past and the present are always together – this is the ‘being with spectres’ of which Derrida speaks. On the other hand, we find a notion of time as expressed through the work of artists such as Bianca Hester and Mikala Dwyer in which there is no past to haunt to the present, instead, time is durative and the past, present and future all exist together in one vast accumulative space. This is exemplified in Henri Bergson’s philosophy in which time is understood in spatial terms. As Ronald Bogue has written of Bergson’s ideas on time: ‘ there are no irreducible bodies in the world, simply “modifications, perturbations, changes in tension or energy, and nothing else”’. ([[6]](#endnote-4)) This understanding of time is particularly evident in Hester’s *sonic objects, solar objects: variously* in which she, with groups of volunteer participants, sought to ‘sound out’ or activate the ground upon which cinema buildings (and a drive in) had stood. The group explored a range of performance-processes using objects developed by Hester in order to access and activate the different material conditions encountered. Here time is accumulated or built up in the materiality of the ground. Bergson’s concept of duration is also sympathetic with the manner in which time is inhabited in the manner of an endless yet productive loop such as we find in Tom Nicholson’s work or in Mikala Dwyer’s attempt to access ‘an extra space’ through the materiality of site.

The looping that is inherent to Nicholson’s work, *Indefinite Substitution* unfurls via the action of making and un-making of images, the result of carrying sculptural busts of Batman and Buckley back and forwards between sites around Port Phillip Bay. In this work, the history of Batman and Buckley is evoked through the actions of movement and exchange in the present, and the work also creates the possibility for a future image through the act of undoing the pictorial representation of these protagonists replacing it with an embodied ‘portrait’ derived by the pressure of the hands of approximately 50 participants. In this way, there is a complex activation of past, present and future at once. This work provokes us to consider our participation in the production and effectiveness of certain images, and it equates this process with the collective beliefs and rituals that construct (other) monuments. *Indefinite Substitution* therefore loops between a ‘known’ and contested history of site and its depiction, and the re-making of that history through the embodied action of participants in order to produce a different image of that history for the future.

In Lily Hibberd’s work this looping is replaced by more of a sense of doubling or layering of images, which suggests a different approach to time. This is foregrounded through the projects title – *Twin Cinema: 4 Devils and a Woman in Red*. Here the notion of ‘twinning’ refers to the act of splitting or ‘twinning’ of single screen cinemas to make them more profitable and therefore sustainable after the advent of television in the late 1950s. (Later the ‘twin’ was extended to the triple then further multi-screen combinations resulted in once majestic auditoriums being carved up.) At the same time, the reference to twinning finds strong expression in the realisation of Hibberd’s project (which included an exhibition and memory day as well as the performance of the script that she wrote about The Regent in Yarram with a local cast in the cinema itself). Hibberd spent almost two years visiting and interviewing residents of Yarram (a small town in south Gippsland) and later, Morwell and those that had lived in the town of Yallourn (which was demolished in the late 1970s). The result of these interviews and the collection of memorabilia and cinema equipment is an exhibition in which images of the past are projected into the present so that there is a layering of the past into the present moment of the exhibition. Here a doubling and layering of past into present takes place through the enlargement and suspension of a small photographic image (akin to the small frame of the film strip) in the gallery, enacting the mechanics of film in the manner in which these have been enlarged from a smaller image that is not visible, and subsequently ‘projected’ into the space of the gallery. There is also a more literal doubling that takes place within the space of the gallery itself as the gallery in which Hibberd exhibits is situated directly adjacent to the auditorium of the Town Hall Cinema – both are now exhibition galleries, part of the Latrobe Regional Gallery. Hibberd hangs the archival image of the Town Hall Cinema such that a viewer in passing from one gallery to another passes from the ‘real’ view to the photographic view of the cinema.

This notion of doubling, ghosting or the double-projection is further complicated in what the artist has named, *Yallourn Theatre Demolition Banner*. This is an enlarged image of the Yallourn Theatre whilst it is in the midst of being demolished. Visitors to the exhibition are invited to affix their memories of cinema going at the Yallourn Theatre to this image, thus layering images from the mind’s eye (memory) upon the photographic document. Yet this space between memory and fact or between subjective and objective forms of knowledge is not clear-cut. The photographic image shows the Yallourn Theatre shortly after its screen has been removed, and through the hole left by the screen’s absence we see the town of Yallourn during demolition. Again there is a strange doubling or multiplication of the image taking place here for the screen no longer projects but reveals – literally allowing us to *see through* the space of projection and revealing what for many residents is a part of an ongoing narrative of loss. It is an image that has been repeatedly remade in subsequent years through town reunions, photo swaps and reminiscing such that its status as an objective document has already become compromised and it must therefore be understood as a multilayered projection of memory upon which new memories (those of the notes affixed to it) are layered. The notion of doubling that is inherent in the ‘twin cinema’ provides us with a rich metaphor for the manner in which memory is also a form of double-projection that occupies the space between what is seen and what is remembered.

*The Cinemas Project* is situated in the space between the material and the immaterial; a place of remembering, dreaming, desiring, hoping, and mourning. As Adrian Martin puts it so eloquently in his essay, this is the space between the ‘palace and the bunker’ – the concrete experience of being-there and the drama, the trip, the psychedelic whirl of images projected. These are spaces (and times) of speculation, spectatorship, haunting… Finally, there is another journey or speculation that takes place inside and outside of this narrative and that is the journey undertaken with five artists to commission and produce new works that might relate somehow to the idea of cinema. This journey has involved site visits, discussion and conversation over the course of almost three years. As a curator, to engage with an artist in the process of producing a new work is to enter into a world of projected possibility. This is not to entertain the idea that an artistic practice is a set of whims pursued at random but a project that emerges from an established problematic and rigorous field of enquiry that opens itself up into a space of possibility – ‘lines of flight’ that emerge through testing, experimenting with and exercising practice. It is important to point out that many of the projects involved semi-public production periods in which local communities were invited to participate, and all involved intense research and production periods in the respective locations assigned to their projects – the regional cities or towns of Bendigo, Mildura, Warrnambool, Morwell and Yarram, and Geelong – and we thank those participants for their time and generosity of spirit in coming on this journey with us.

1. Email correspondence with Brook Andrew, 2 September 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. Maria Nugent, ‘Every Right to be There’: Cinema Spaces and Racial Politics in Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia’ in The Australian Humanities Review, Issue 51 November 2001.* [*http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-November-2011/nugent.html*](http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-November-2011/nugent.html) *Last accessed 12 September 2014.* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), xviii. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx,* 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Ronald Bogue quoted in Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic and Temporal Critique* ( Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)