Re-enacting cinema at the crossroads: Nicky Coutts's *Passing Place*

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Prologue

Nicky Coutts's film *Passing Place* (2009) consists of six re-enactments of the moments in which crossroads appear in the following films: Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* (1967), Jim Jarmusch's *Down By Law* (1986), Robert Zemeckis's *Castaway* (2000), Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1985), Stuart Rosenberg's *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and Luis Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). The crossroads in *Passing Place* is located in rural Northumberland and the 're-enactors' are local people who live or work nearby. The original films were chosen by both Coutts and the participants, *Passing Place* being made during Coutts's residency at VARC (Visual Arts in Rural Communities) at Highgreen Tarset. While artists have been 'remaking cinema' for over a decade,[1] Coutts's film should be seen against the backdrop of the more recent phenomenon of re-enactment in artists' practices, which focuses on the event of performance rather than on the medium of film per se. In this focus, the interrelationships between temporality and memory, acting and authenticity, become paramount. Rather than writing solely about Coutts's film, I shall use it to think through these interrelationships, ultimately focusing on those aspects that allow me to unravel my encounter with *Passing Place*. The work was shown at Danielle Arnaud Contemporary Art in 2010 along with two other films by Coutts,

1. See 'Remaking Cinema' by Jean-Christophe Royoux in *Cinéma, cinéma: Contemporary Art and the Cinematic Experience*, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 1999, pp. 21–27.

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Nicky Coutts, *Passing Place* (2009), re-enactment of a scene from *Down By Law* (1986), dir. Jim Jarmusch. Courtesy of the artist.

Nicky Coutts, *Passing Place* (2009), re-enactment of a scene from *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1985), dir. Maya Deren. Courtesy of the artist.

Nicky Coutts, *Passing Place* (2009), re-enactment of a scene from *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1985), dir. Maya Deren. Courtesy of the artist.

Eastern (2010) and *Reminsizenzen der Erinnerung* (2010), both of which also engage with cinematic re-enactment, but which are beyond the scope of this article.

Act I

Related to the recent trend of re-enacting classic performance art pieces from the 1970s, but making different claims for temporal and historical relevance, a younger generation of artists use film and video re-enactments to re-stage moments from the past in order to translate them for the present. Two such examples are Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's *File Under Sacred Music* (2003), a video documentary of their re-staging of a bootleg tape of The Cramps' infamous 1978 concert in the Napa State Mental Institute, and Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), in which, working with film-maker Mike Figgis, he re-staged the 1984 confrontation between the striking miners and the police using non-actors, some of whom had taken part in the original protest. Although the end products of these re-enactments are conceptual documentaries that encourage a detached form of spectatorship, given the double removal in time from the event and the (intentional) lack of focalization in the works, the participants in both are given an opportunity for self-representation of an arguably therapeutic kind. The audience at Forsyth and Pollard's re-staged concert, who were from the mental health charity Core Arts, intentionally used the situation 'to perform more madly'[2] their physical responses, putting them on a par with the musicians' deranged performances. And Deller's piece, which put the police and the miners on an equal footing, can be considered as the acting out and working through of repressed memories of the original event, thereby allowing for an alternative history to emerge from the official documentation.[3] Both these artworks retain strong links with theatrical rather than purely cinematic performance, but their approach to re-enactment as a form of self-representation, through the acting out of a historical or memorial event is one that I want to bring forward into my discussion of Coutts's film in Act IV.

Act II

But first I want to explore two other examples of cinematic performance in artists' re-enactment films. While both Omer Fast's *Spielberg's List* (2003) and Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory* (2000) refer to 'real' events, their use of re-enactment shifts the issue slightly from the relationship between an original event and its staged repetition to a concern with layers of representation in which cinema takes on the role of being a liminal site of memory. Fast's two-channel projection *Spielberg's List* mixes documentary-style interviews of the extras from Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, which was filmed on location in Krakow, with footage of the 'real' camps and the sets that Spielberg built there which, now falling into ruin, have become a tourist attraction in the area. As the interviews progress, the extras, who had been selected from the local population, clearly begin to confuse their memories of the Holocaust with the re-enactment of it in Spielberg's film. *Spielberg's List* shows us that our individual memories are infiltrated by the images we see projected on the screen. Memory does not easily distinguish between classes of images, the 'real' and its media representation are equally hallucinatory, the boundary between them unstable. While this lack of distinction and the ensuing confusion between the real and the fictional may seem somewhat alarming, it is important to note that history is not only constructed from

2.   My notes from Pollard and Forsythe in conversation with Michael Bracewell, South London Gallery, 16 March 2011.

3.   In 'Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*: Politics as Art Therapy', J.J. Charlesworth makes the point that Deller's re-enactment reduced the stakes of the original fight which was about defending wages and living standards to a session of art therapy, see http://jjcharlesworth.com/articles/orgreave.htm. The opposite point is made by Claire Bishop in 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, February 2000, pp. 179–85. Also using the model of therapy, she situates the value of Deller's work in terms of its reopening of an old wound and keeping the memory of the miner's strike alive.

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the 'facts' but also from the reconstructed scenes or images of memory. As film-maker Werner Herzog says:

> We must ask of reality: how important is it, really? And: how important, really, is the factual? Of course, we can't disregard the factual; it has normative power. But it can never give us the kind of illumination, the ecstatic flash, from which truth emerges. (Herzog in Kunzru 2011)

In exposing the layers of fiction that underlie documentary fact, artists' cinematic re-enactments might be aiming at an illumination more akin to Herzog's 'ecstatic flash' of truth rather than the representation of reality.

Huyghe's *The Third Memory* is equally telling of the dynamic interplay between 'real' event and 'screen' memory. His two-screen projection shows the real John Wojtowicz, who is played by Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon*, the 1975 Hollywood feature film of his story, re-enacting in the present his infamous bungled robbery of a Brooklyn bank using his 'authentic' memory as a corrective to Sidney Lumet's film, clips of which are also included in Huyghe's film. Some have claimed that *The Third Memory* returns agency and control to Wojtowicz in the face of the appropriation of his story by Hollywood (see Erickson 2009). However, what becomes clear in the course of the re-enactment is not only that Wojtowicz's memories of the 'real' event have become confused with Al Pacino's portrayal of his role in the film, but that prior to the original robbery, Wojtowicz had watched *The Godfather*, which coincidentally also stars Pacino, and had used that film as an inspiration for the robbery.

Given the layers of mediatized recollection that Fast and Huyghe bring to the fore, one might raise the question first posed by Pil and Galia Kollectiv as to whether re-enactments merely repeat the 'logical conclusions of the spectacle's repetitive imperative' or whether they have a critical function and might 'form blockages in the spectacle's seamless flows'? (Pil and Galia Kollectiv, 2007: online). At a time when modernist strategies of distanciation have become questionable, given the all-pervasiveness of spectacle in everyday life, as well as conceptual shifts towards relation and connectivity; re-enactment seems to offer a renewed possibility in that it provides the distance in time necessary for criticality combined with the immediacy often required of art today. Rod Dickinson put it succinctly in relation to his work, *The Milgram Re-enactment* (2002), a live re-enactment of Stanley Milgram's infamous psychological experiment from 1960 that tested how far people would go when ordered to inflict pain on others:

> My hope with these pieces is that the audience's direct experience of the live performance is constantly undercut by their knowledge of the layers of mediation that are at play in both the original historical event and my double of it. […] Rather than making 'history' real, history is actually experienced by the audience as deferred and displaced, but through the apparently mediate and direct lens of performance. […] Re-enactment seems, as a form of representation, strangely well equipped to address moments of collective trauma and anxiety. Almost as if, taking a Debordian turn, the re-enactment operates as the uncanny of the spectacle. A live image, in real space and real time, but simultaneously displaced. (Dickinson in Arns 2007: 61)

In contrast to Dickinson's optimism about the critical potential of re-enactment, Tom McDonough, assessing Huyghe's work, concludes that the uncanny return of the repressed, which re-enactment elicits, 'seems to have becomes exhausted' as a 'critical force' (McDonough, 2004: 112). Instead, he argues that the social character of human

labour now operates as a pure exchange value in a circuit of informational processes in which there is no place for subjectivity as 'a locus of potential resistance to capitalist production, or at least a space of interiority not yet subject to the discipline of the workplace' (McDonough, 2004: 113). Rather than celebrating Huyghe as a Brechtian master of distantiation, McDonough states that, in *The Third Memory*, Huyghe 'makes use of these Brechtian practices to demonstrate precisely the difficulty of dislodging the Imaginary ego installed by ideology, of disrupting those identifications fostered by contemporary culture' (McDonough, 2004: 110).[4] Rather than the 'optimistic vision of Huyghe as an artist [...] combating the occupation of spectacle, we should understand him – more modestly – as one concerned with how this condition is inhabited today, with exploring the topography of the spectacle from within' (McDonough, 2004: 109–10).

McDonough is perhaps too dismissive of the potential for the uncanny nature of re-enactment to signal the resurfacing of something half-remembered, which might reconfigure imaginary identification. While I agree with McDonough's claim that 'there is no longer any hierarchy of "direct" experience that might privilege the lived experience over its later recountings or memories' (McDonough, 2004: 111), I would still maintain that the subject has agency in relation to the appropriation and constitution of its gestures by the forces of mediation, and that re-enactment as an uncanny repetition can play a role in reasserting agency in the face of its seeming demise. Citing Huyghe out of context from McDonough's article hints as much: '"it is never about referencing or deconstructing a film or the nature of Hollywood. I am speaking about the story of a man and about representation. It is about how you create an image and have that image represent you"' (Huyghe in McDonough, 2004: 110). If 'the cinema of exhibition' holds out more possibilities for exploring gesture and character outside of their imbrications in narrative, the phenomenon of the remake in narrative cinema, while mostly a money-making outcrop of the Hollywood industry, can also demonstrate the value of re-enactment as a temporal reconfiguration from which a glimpse of the real might emerge from the layers of fiction.[5]

Act III

In his 2004 essay, 'Planet of the Remakes', Sven Lütticken claims that the cinema of exhibition offers new opportunities for remaking cinema in a critical manner. He refers in particular to Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), which takes Hitchcock's classic suspense film and stretches it to 24 hours, literally extending the 24 frames per second of film time into the human time scale of a day. He also cites Stan Douglas's *Journey into Fear* (2001), a 15-minute re-enactment film whose soundtrack has 625 permutations that would take 157 hours to watch in total.[6] Lutticken is very keen on the literalism of Gordon's 'remake', which he contrasts to Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* (1998), saying that while Van Sant's *almost* literal remake affords a somewhat uncanny experience, '[r]egrettably, however, Van Sant could not resist making some changes that compromised the conceptual clarity of his exercise' (Lutticken 2004). Van Sant made Hitchcock's already sparse script even more minimal and shot his film in colour instead of black and white. But it is perhaps the inclusion of slightly new scenes, the extended versions of some original scenes and, more importantly, Van Sant's choice of Hollywood actors for the leading roles that mostly reverse Hitchcock's characterizations, and these account for Lutticken's negative assessment. However, in a short review of Van Sant's *Psycho*, Gavin Smith insists that with its ritualistic attention to detail, the remake

4.   In relation to Huyghe's *Remake* (1995), a video reproduction of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, Royoux makes the point that his use of Brechtian devices in having actors perform the script in a literal and nonchalant manner served to 'dissociate each shot from the continuum of film' (Royoux 1999: 23), thereby incorporating an updated version of Brecht's alienation effect.

5.   Royoux refers to artists' cinema as 'the cinema of exhibition' (Royoux, 1999: 21).

6.   *Journey Into Fear* is based on a scene from Orson Welles's 1942 film of the same name and its 1975 remake by Daniel Mann as well as excerpts from Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*.

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could be described as a re-enactment, which 'is fundamentally an investigation of the expressive and thematic possibilities of nuance', small adaptations that reconfigure past cinematic gestures into new meanings for today (Smith 1999). In Hitchcock's film, Norman's effeminate creepiness operates as a site of the uncanny, the return of the repressed, whereas, as Smith asserts, Van Sant's choice of Vince Vaughn, who possesses a boyish yet more conventionally robust masculinity, results in a Norman who 'is one of us' rather than 'conclusively Other' (Smith 1999). This small adaptation allows Van Sant to intimately link 'Norman's spoiled infantile sexual identity' to the normative heterosexual authority of Viggo Mortensen's Sam, the fiancé of the murdered Marion, rather than casting these figures as binary opposites as in Hitchcock's original film. Smith views this link as subversive of the prevailing heterosexual order. This is a small difference, but it shows how the literal appropriation of a familiar cinematic narrative from the past and its re-embedding in the present transforms the uncanny double into a regeneration of meaning rather than it being a purely traumatic resurgence of the past.

Act IV

In a strange way, Coutts's use of re-enactment in *Passing Place* has surprisingly more in common with Van Sant's *Psycho* than with the experiments with cinematic form in the aforementioned examples of 'the cinema of exhibition'. Although the production values of Coutts's film and the DIY aesthetic of her props and 'actors' are completely different from Van Sant's remake, and Coutts's re-stagings are only brief moments rather than a whole narrative film, the link between them stems from the fact that both are approximations of the original cinematic texts, which engender new intersubjective relations within and without the frame. Coutts's re-enactments of crossroads scenes, while being fairly close approximations of the original films, also differ slightly from them; some of the minimal dialogue in the original scenes may be cut, a colour shot might be inserted in an originally black-and-white sequence, a character might shift in age or gender. Some of these alterations stem from the fact that her 're-enactors' all approached the project differently. There were those who knew the films well, having contributed to the selection process, and studied their parts thoroughly, deciding how they would represent their characters; while others were content to be guided through their parts without having seen the original film. Community art projects usually have little meaning for those outside the community and even then their meaning is short-lived. However, by re-enacting films borrowed from the collective memory repertoire of cinema, *Passing Place* creates a virtual community between the on-screen participants and its off-screen viewers. Undoubtedly the process of re-enactment allows the former community – a disparate one consisting of local inhabitants and blow-ins from the city – to represent themselves to themselves through the mediation of cinema. But, rather than simply claiming this as a return of agency and control of one's image in the face of spectacle, the re-enactments allow us to see how our gestures and relations oscillate uncomfortably between repetition and alienation, and yet are uniquely ours.

Coutts claims that it is not important for the viewer to know the films that are being re-enacted, stating that *Passing Place* is more about 'how many fictions can you pile one on top of another before a slither of fact is revealed'. However, my initial experience of half-remembering the actions and gestures being re-played in these vignettes was enhanced by returning to some of the original films. In the

re-enactment of the scene from *Down By Law* (Jim Jarmusch, 1986) in which two of the main characters exchange jackets at the crossroads before going off in opposite directions, Coutts removes some of the dialogue. Without the rationale for why they swap jackets, which is contained in the original film's dialogue, this gesture becomes isolated as something significant in its own right. If we can say that the crossroad represents a point of juncture, in Coutts's film it becomes a further point of juncture between the performative repetition of gestures and the fictional layering of everyday life. It is clear to the viewer that the 're-enactors' are not professional actors, because their performances are a mixture of awkwardness and embarrassment. However, the performances are strangely compelling because of their doubled nature; the participants both act out their chosen roles and communicate the sense of themselves as inhabitants of this isolated place. This doubling has at least two effects, one of which is that the pro-filmic itself acquires a performative aspect, each re-enactment contributing to the development of the crossroads as a character in the film. What is ostensibly in the background, the place of rural Northumberland, comes to the foreground of the film, its transformation by weather, time of day and camera angle, taking on as much weight as the human dramas that unfold at this metaphorical locus of crisis, decision and destiny.

The second effect stems from the uncanny resonance between the re-enactments and the original films, the 're-enacting' bodies split between simply being 'themselves' at a location familiar to them and attempting to perform the characters from the films. The gestures they perform, i.e. shaking hands, walking, striking blows, etc. are familiar both in the everyday sense and in their resonance with the original films or films like them. However, they are also completely unfamiliar, given both the new context and the hesitant performances, as if the 're-enactors' were learning these everyday gestures for the first time. This is different from the merely bad acting one might find in amateur dramatics, where a failed performance occurs either because the actor has no talent or is trying too hard to embody a role without success. In *Passing Place*, it is as if the 're-enactors' have become split into 'Spect-Actors' (Boal in Auslander 1997: 99).[7] They are both acting and observing themselves acting, the gap between these positions mirroring the gap between their performances and the performances they evoke from cinematic memory. While re-enactment is often strained 'with a pedagogic [...] tool' (Margulies 2002: 218) and community arts no less so, *Passing Place* transcends this condition by making the theatrical and the authentic coexist in the Spect-Actor's body. In this respect, *Passing Place* runs counter to Margulies's notion that: '[a]cting is the constitutive aporia of re-enactment. To make public means to perform, but any nod toward theatricality calls into question the authenticity of one's gestures' (Margulies 2002: 227). According to Coutts, *Passing Place*'s realism is of a different order: 'if fact emerges it's temporary and if fictions are re-enacted they fast become an inseparable part of the location they were newly sited in' (Coutts 2009).

This is especially the case in relation to the film's re-enactment of the beginning of Deren's *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1985), which stands out somewhat in the sequence, because Coutts appropriates the soundtrack of Deren's film, superimposing another layer of location and community, Haiti, on the Northumberland setting. At first the trance-like dance that the lone protagonist re-enacts seems more out of place than even the mythic battle fought by 'Oedipus' in his encounter at the crossroads with his, unbeknown to him, birth-father, 'King Laius', in Coutts's re-enactment of Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex*. Coming as it does in the middle of *Passing Place*, the re-enactment of Deren's film acts as a commentary to Coutts's film as a whole, the voice-over from Deren's film explaining the meaning of the crossroads as a special place where rituals are enacted. But this cinematic moment also manages to re-embed the performer's extraordinary gestures as part of an everyday mythology

7. Augusto Boal uses the term 'Spect-Actor' to allude to the birth of theatre as the art of looking at ourselves in which we are at one and the same time actor and spectator. I am loosely appropriating the term here.

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of place. In between the original and its double, a shred of truth is glimpsed, enfolded in the crossroads as a virtual interchange between sediments of time and memory where the ordinary becomes extraordinary, while the extraordinary reveals layers of the ordinary.

Epilogue

In her book, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic,* Rachel O. Moore states that Robert Bresson did not want drama from his actors (models) but rather he sought the 'unthought gestures that characterise much of how we behave in daily life', the automatic gestures and responses that we enact out of habit and rote (Moore 2000: 117). While Coutts's minimal direction of her 'Spect-Actors' is not at all like Bresson's training of his 'models', in her participants' non-dramatic presentation of the original scripts there is more in the nature of his 'somnambulist aesthetic' than a Brechtian strategy of distantiation and alienation (Moore 2000: 120). In Coutts's re-enactments, the zombie-like nature of the gestures re-enacted at the crossroads, both mythic and everyday, are not, as Moore claims in relation to Bresson, 'used to "usurp the power of the dream state to create a state of profound fatigue"' (Moore 2000: 120). Rather, Coutts's Spect-Actors' re-embodiments of clichéd gestures create new patterns of repetition, and thus a space of difference that makes the temporal and spatial displacement of their performances generate renewed significance. Perhaps this is akin to Herzog's moment of illumination, the ecstatic flash from which truth emerges, glimpsed momentarily in the layers between two takes. Coutts's crossroads is a networked site where we exchange gestures between the 'real' and its cinematic re-enactment, between memory and its transformation into action in the present.

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Rubedo, *IWASI* (2003-08), still from the film, digital film, 5'54". Courtesy of the artist.