Pigott, Michael. "Introduction." *Joseph Cornell Versus Cinema*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 1–8. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544728.0007>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 15:07 UTC.

Copyright © Michael Pigott 2013. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Introduction

This is not a book about the films of Joseph Cornell. This is a book about the significance of Cornell's films to the project of understanding how we relate to moving images – what they do for us now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and what they have done for us at various points throughout the twentieth century. It is also a book about the transferable values of images, about compression technologies, and about time.

Cornell is primarily known for his boxes. These intricately crafted collages of pop culture fragments and the detritus of an antique dream world would eventually earn him recognition as one of the major American artists of the twentieth century. The boxes are concise distillations of a fervid fantasy life, each one an imaginative seed for the viewer. This work has rightly been given serious critical attention, yet his body of film work has gone relatively under-explored. I intend to examine his approach to film-making on its own terms, as a series of innovative, idiosyncratic and seminal engagements with the medium of film.

Cornell amassed huge 'dossiers' full of the images and things he found in junk shops and thrift stores around his home in Queens, New York. On his travels he also collected celluloid film prints, many of which he found discarded in the warehouses of New Jersey. He cut up and reassembled this material, carefully extracting the moving images that resonated most for him (for a variety of reasons), re-ordering them, mixing them with sections from other films, and often adding his own soundtracks during projection. He had a string of assistants who went on to become some of the central figures of experimental film – Rudy Burckhardt, Stan Brakhage, Larry Jordan and Ken Jacobs – and through them he altered the course of experimental moving image art. In the words of J. Hoberman, '... it is apparent that Cornell, as much as Maya Deren, was the progenitor of American avant-garde film'.¹

Cornell's film work has never been so relevant, and it reveals much about some very recent developments in practices of viewing and creating audiovisual media. The concepts of the video mashup, the remix, and user-generated content permeate contemporary discussions of our audiovisual culture. Yet in some respects these engagements are nothing new. Joseph

Cornell made the first fanvid, and was a pioneer of the remix.² Just as he trawled warehouses and junk shops for material, so contemporary remix artists trawl the digital silos of the Internet for raw material. Cornell's film work therefore offers a fascinating and insightful perspective on the twenty-first century media user's experience; the ways in which the contemporary user approaches, thinks about and engages with the entangled mass of audiovisual texts before them, developing sometimes very personal, idiosyncratic tastes and often lovingly (or not so lovingly) turning and tuning these texts to their own ends.

Content, user-generated or otherwise, saturates many twenty-first century lives. The great quantity of audiovisual texts that we encounter (or are available to us) on a daily basis is matched by the speed at which they can be accessed by us, or, indeed, that they can access us. In response to this overwhelming burden of information and speed, many groups and individuals have made a conscious choice to live slowly, to consume and create audiovisual texts that move slowly and promote slowness, absorption and concentration rather than speed, dispersal (or 'multi-tasking') and accumulation. Cornell's later film work also presages this shift in attitudes. His 'slow cinema' offers another alternative form of moving image making, one that grows from and builds upon his earlier found footage work.

While these might seem like novel connections to make, beyond this novelty there are much more significant, fruitful and fundamental links to be made, both in terms of learning about and understanding Cornell's work, and in terms of learning about and understanding today's audiovisual media.

P. Adam Sitney, one of the few critics to have written in depth about the film work, appraises the situation well:

Joseph Cornell's cinema remains the central enigma of his work. His films have a roughness and an insidiousness that the constructions and collages never exhibit. A convenient attitude to take toward them would be to undervalue them, as many have done, including the artist himself.³

This book, therefore, attempts to re-evaluate Cornell's film work, but it does so not by analyzing the films in relation to his already vaunted box works, nor by slavishly defending the films according to existent regimes of

cinematic value, but by connecting them to a series of persistent issues that have been articulated in a variety of ways during the last century, and now raise their heads again as a set of new and unique problems and solutions. I argue that Cornell's films offer a linking factor that connects what seem like uniquely contemporary issues back to a longer history of discourse and negotiation, and furthermore, that Cornell's films benefit from reading them in this light – they were solutions to problems that have only now become apparent as such, and their value emerges from the way in which they set up radically alternative terms of engagement and valuation within the cultural and aesthetic contexts of 1936, 1955, and 2013. The study will reveal the significance of his work for the field of film history, but also for the study of twentieth century art, aesthetic philosophy, contemporary audiovisual culture, and the relationship between images, technology and culture.

Silence

It is undoubtedly the case that the silence around Cornell's film work comes partly from his disinclination to show his work or promote it during his lifetime, as well as the indeterminate provenance of much of the work that was discovered after his death. But it is also very probable that the critical silence stems from the very nature of the works themselves. As we will see, they do not lend themselves readily to the critical structures (or frameworks, or systems, or simply approaches – whatever we choose to call them) that emerged during the course of the twentieth century in order to cope with the phenomena of the moving image arts – those that dealt primarily with narrative cinema, nor even those that dealt with the avant-garde.

In comparison with his box works, Cornell's films, at first glance, seem to lack content, intent, authorial voice – they seem to offer so relatively little. However, I will argue that it is precisely because of this paucity of authorial control, the stripping back of concept and narrative, that Cornell's films establish, in a variety of ways, a new and revolutionary mode of film-making. In fact, as we will see, he sets precedents for a number of new modes in the field of experimental moving images.

One of the things that I will suggest is that Cornell's films document and re-present paths toward discovery. In this way they engage directly with questions about the role of the spectator as active participant, and the nature of knowledge transfer, understanding, and aesthetic experience.

Understanding is different to *interpretation* according to the French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman (and also, I would argue, according to Hans Georg Gadamer and Henri Bergson). Interpretation is a complex form of rule-following, whereas understanding is a more heterogeneous and idiosyncratic event, one that is necessarily incomplete, always in a process of closing or attempting to close, but also, and always, in a synchronic process of opening up again, of being foiled and forced to return to the object of understanding. The same viewer/reader may experience very different understandings of the same object across a series of viewings/readings. This is precisely the problem and value of Cornell's films. They evade interpretation in a most concerted and stubborn way, yet open themselves freely and generously to understanding. Because of the way that the majority of critical frameworks function, therefore, his film work has largely been met with silence.

It may strike some that my choice of theoretical sources – Georges Didi-Huberman, Jean Luc Nancy, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Virilio, Jacques Rancière, Henri Bergson, and Aloïs Riegl – is a touch eclectic, and perhaps arbitrary. In response I would assert that I have drawn upon the work of this motley crew of theorists because I believe that there is a rough accord in their approach to the relationship between the subject and the object, between the audience and the work, the person and the thing. At the very least, each in one way or another contributes to such an accord. Each does the work of drawing the outlines or colouring in the form of a fully-fledged conceptual framework. The present work, if it is anything, is only a synthesis of these ideas as a provoked response to the searingly incisive and revelatory film work of Joseph Cornell. It constitutes an attempt to formulate an aesthetic theory that emerges as a response to the exceptionality of Cornell's art, the things it asks of the viewer, and the experience that it sets up. Whatever is illuminated in relation to this limit case may then be turned back upon the generality of film experience, art experience, and the understanding of aesthetic life.

The Cornellian Century

By Night With Torch And Spear (c. 1942), which I discuss in detail in Chapter Two, was only discovered after Cornell's death, amongst the film collection that he donated to Anthology Film Archives in 1969. Consequently, its

provenance or status within Cornell's oeuvre is somewhat uncertain. It is unclear as to whether Cornell considered it to be finished or worth releasing. While Cornell was a prolific box maker, and was quite successful during his lifetime in terms of selling and exhibiting his box works, he was somewhat reticent and even secretive about his film-making. So while part of what I argue here is for the significance of Cornell's films for the history of film and moving image art, most of his films were seen by very few people during his lifetime, and a relatively limited number since his death. In a sense, the history of Cornell's films and their significance is a hidden history. Because of this fact, and also because of the myths, legends and stories that accrue around Cornell, which one can never be truly confident in, I choose to call it an alternate history. The centrality of Cornell's film work, and the hidden significance and prescience of his formal and thematic experimentation, leads me to suggest the notion of a Cornelian century, an alternate history of the twentieth century that recuperates the film work of Cornell. As we all know, the telling of a history is the telling of a story, and the villain in this story is Salvador Dalí.

There is an apocryphal tale of a meeting between Dalí and Cornell. The specifics of the tale change slightly from teller to teller, but the several witness accounts all agree fundamentally that something like the following happened. Cornell curated a programme of films at the Julian Levy Gallery in New York in 1936. As part of this programme he showed *Rose Hobart* (1936) for the first time. Several of the major Surrealists from Europe were visiting New York at the time, and Cornell had been prominently included, along with the work of Ernst, Duchamp, De Chirico, Hausmans, Arp and Dalí, in the 'Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by Alfred Barr. Dalí was in the audience at Cornell's screening, along with his wife Gala. After *Rose Hobart* had finished he allegedly leapt to his feet in a fury and pushed the projector over, claiming that Cornell had stolen the idea directly from his subconscious, and he then stormed out. His wife Gala came up to Cornell afterwards to apologize, explaining that Dalí had been furious because he had a similar idea for a film, but had not gotten around to actually doing it. It could also be the case that Dalí saw this film and simply wished that Dalí had come up with the idea. Either way, Dalí had already done his damage. Cornell was famously shy and reticent, and he was so shocked and disturbed by Dalí's outburst that, although he continued

to make them throughout his career, he seldom showed any of his own films again within his lifetime.

So this is partly why I describe the work that I am doing as writing an alternate history – it is the history of Joseph Cornell the film-maker, whose films quietly turned film form inside-out, and who explored possibilities that the rest of the experimental film-making world would not come across for another thirty years. The Cornellian century is an alternate history, an attempt to think about what might have happened, in order to identify how things might have been, but perhaps most importantly to better understand how the things that *have* happened have been theorized, criticized and talked about.

Cornell was before his time, after his time, a man out of time. He was an anachronism, a geographical oddity (because he stayed in one place, never venturing outside of New York, yet he also constituted a sort of European Surrealist outpost in the USA). His oeuvre is connected by a theme and a function – the recreation of the past from a series of clues, the recreation of the magical everyday of a lost world through the fragments that remain. In this way it is a recreation of history, the fabrication of histories correspondent to, though not quite the same as, the official story. Cornell concentrates whole eras and worlds into his box creations, and across the range of his body of film work he performs a similar feat. His films condense time and space, carefully eliminating and expanding details, twisting perception out of everyday grooves. The oddity of the man, and the work that he undertook of reconstructing an uncertain past, drives the present study on toward the fabrication of a Cornellian century.

This kind of approach has precedents. In his recent work on the history of media and technology, Siegfried Zielinski has proposed a form of historical re-imagining that he calls ‘anarchaeology’.⁴ It focuses on histories of failed or unrealized inventions, on anomalous discoveries and theories, each the obsessive project of an ‘outsider’, each of which was at odds with the predominant discourse and conformity of their day. Before that, Michael Foucault suggested that there was more to be discovered in an archaeology of the ruptures and disturbances in systems and regimes of thought, art and sociality, than in the study of the linear progress of reason, discovery and evolution.⁵ And before that still, Walter Benjamin laid out his early years in Berlin as a tale of forking paths, roads not taken, memories bearing richer flesh and weirder contours than their origins ever had.⁶

This book is interested in placing Cornell's work and thought in dialogue with a future culture that Cornell could not have foreseen, with a mediascape he would not have considered, and ways of being in the world that he could only have imagined. Yet I would like to argue that Cornell glimpsed the fringes of the future, that his anachronism and oddity afforded him a privileged position from which to explore new or undervalued modes of being and knowing. His films, while never widely viewed, understood or valued, have nevertheless had a lasting impact. They too lingered on the fringes of the future, popping up here and there as an influence on another artist's work, or as an unexpectedly striking retrospective in a university or festival, an astonishing short feature on an archive DVD, a clandestine force to be reckoned with. P. Adams Sitney once again offers insight:

Slowly, and always in a maze of ambiguities, these works keep reappearing to testify to a passion and a genius for cinema that stubbornly persists in undermining our expectations and challenging our certitudes, by hinting that the very experience of cinema might have a dimension we would rather overlook.⁷

Joseph Cornell versus Marcel Duchamp

Just as Cornell took on a series of assistants who helped to organise his materials and produce his films, Marcel Duchamp took Cornell on as an assistant in the early 1940s, with the task of helping him put together several iterations of his *Boîte-en-valise* (1935–41). This was a deluxe edition of twenty boxes containing reproductions and miniature versions of many of his famous works (there was a tiny porcelain reproduction of *Fountain* (1917), for instance). During this period of collaboration Cornell began his *Duchamp Dossier* (1942–53), a large collection of papers, fragments and scraps, some of which were outtakes from the *Boîte-en-valise* series. Cornell obviously held Duchamp in high regard, a fact evidenced in his highlighting of Duchamp's work as superior to the Surrealist work that they both found themselves lumped in with. Cornell had already begun to build three-dimensional collages into boxes by this stage (notably *Soap Bubble Set*, 1936), but the influence of Duchamp on his work is palpable.

Apart from the affinity between these two artists, there is an interesting comparison to be made between their careers, and the respective trajectories

of appreciation and influence commanded by their work. After the initial success and infamy of the 1910s and 1920s, Duchamp and his work somewhat receded from the discourse of the mainstream art world, his iconoclastic deconstructions of the notion of the art object displaced by the renewed Modernist focus, and profound belief in the integral power of the art object, of the Abstract Expressionists. However, from the mid-1950s on his star began to rise again, as a number of young artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage drew upon the astonishing precedent of his work as a source for reaction against what they saw as the patriarchal, masculine, intellectualist and essentialist doctrine of an art world dominated by Abstract Expressionism. Interest in Duchamp was revived, and artists such as Rauschenberg seemed to take up where he had left off. This was most clearly articulated in Joseph Kosuth's 1969 article 'Art After Philosophy', in which he credits Duchamp with having invented conceptual art forty years before it was consolidated into a movement.⁸ Another path not taken, now taken.

Cornell's fame grew gradually and continually over the course of his career, allowing him to quit his day job in 1940 to make art full time. His box collages garnered him much fame, invitations to exhibit, and avid collectors. His film work, however, has certainly not been rediscovered in the same way that Marcel Duchamp's conceptual work was. Its influence has been felt through the work of the young film-makers that he inspired, both directly and indirectly, but it needs the kind of explicitly articulated recuperation and assertion of significance that was accorded Duchamp's work in the middle of the century. This book is an attempt to identify some paths not taken, and the ways in which those paths are bound up with the history and future of moving image art.