

# Women's Cinema/Artists' Cinema

## Spectatorship in Nashashibi's *The Prisoner*

by Gillian Sneed

### Abstract

*Rosalind Nashashibi's The Prisoner (2008) is a five-minute, continuously looped 16 mm film installation in which an anonymous woman is followed as she walks through an urban environment. As she traverses interior and exterior terrains, the camera acts as her unseen pursuer. The projection appears to be a split-screen film, but is actually two projections of the same film played side-by-side. To achieve this effect, Nashashibi has threaded the actual film strip in a loop through two adjacent film projectors, the delay between the two projections being the length of time it takes for the film to loop through the second projector. The film takes as a point of departure a scene from Chantal Akerman's film *La Captive* (2000) — itself adapted from Proust's *The Prisoner* — in which the main character stalks his lover through city streets. The approach to Nashashibi's work is two fold: its content is examined through the lens of the legacy of "women's cinema," and its physical installation is investigated through an engagement with discourse around "artist's cinema." By focusing on the issue of spectatorship — from the perspectives of both feminist film theory and expanded cinema/installation art theory — it shows that both the film's content and its installation are intimately linked in constructing its meaning.*

The only time I ever saw Rosalind Nashashibi's *The Prisoner*, was in 2008 at Manifesta 7 in Italy. In a former post office repurposed as a giant group exhibition space, the work was installed in one of the many cubicle-sized offices occupying the building. As I entered the small, darkened room, I saw two connected 16 mm film projectors on a plinth, projecting what appeared to be a split-screen film on a wall. Before I even focused on the film, the first thing I noticed was sound: loud classical music and noisy projectors. The music was very suspenseful, immediately engendering a sense of tension and mystery. These sensations were also reinforced by the images on the flickering screen: two mysterious female figures walked through a similar cityscape, the camera tracking them from behind. As the women traversed interior and exterior terrains, the camera — and by extension, the viewer — was positioned as their unseen pursuer. The clacking of their high heels hitting

the pavement reverberated throughout the room, imbuing the installation with yet another layer of sound.

For the first five minutes of the film, I was very disoriented. Because of the escalating music, I assumed there was a narrative to be deciphered, and that the action was building up to something. Also, the longer I watched, the more I realized I couldn't make out the relationship between the two films. They seemed very similar, but it was not immediately apparent they were in fact the same film at two different points in the "story line," and that there were not two women, but one.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, I inspected the dual projector. It was a very impressive object. The filmstrip itself was clearly on display as it was tugged out at a high angle, and mechanically threaded through the other projector. I redirected my attention back to the film, becoming gradually more engrossed in the mounting tension. Who was the woman? Where was she going? Who was following her? Sexual tension was implied — both by her attire (high heels and a smart skirt and blazer), and by the camera's (and hence my own) pursuit of her.

Yet, my feelings for her were ambiguous, perhaps because of my own identity as a woman. At moments, I was seduced by the desire implicit in the gaze I was forced to inhabit. She was a beautiful, elusive, and intriguing figure. However, there was also something mundane about her gestures — she was just an average woman walking through an average space — which made her also seem banal. Ultimately, I just wanted to learn how the story was resolved. Yet, after another few minutes, I realized that at some point without my awareness of it, the film had invisibly looped, and she was walking on the same path I had already seen. It was only then that I began to realize that the two screens depicted different moments in the same film.

Indeed, *The Prisoner* is a five-minute, continuously looped 16 mm film installation, which appears to be a split-screen film, but is in fact two projections of the same film played side-by-side simultaneously, with the second projection at about a 30 second delay after the first. To achieve this effect, Nashashibi has threaded the actual film strip in a loop through two adjacent film projectors, the delay between the two projections being the length of time it takes for the film to loop through the second projector.

The film takes as a point of departure a scene from Chantal Akerman's film *La Captive* (2000)<sup>1</sup> — itself adapted from *The*

<sup>1</sup> Manifesta7, "Rosalind Nashashibi" <http://www.manifesta7.it/artists/473> (accessed 1 May, 2010).

*Prisoner* (the fifth volume of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*) — in which the main character, Simon follows his lover Ariane up a long stairway and in and out of shadows. In Akerman's film, the clicking sound of Ariane's heels against the pavement was recorded at a close proximity. While the figure appears far from the camera, her footsteps seem aurally much closer, a fact that is disorienting to the viewer, resulting in an intensification of the film's sexual tension.

Nashashibi appropriates and extends the sequence in Akerman's film to prolong its rising tension into an infinite loop. As she explains: "I wanted the film to have [a] polished sheen to further resonate the juxtaposition of the very mechanical, rough installation. It allows you to see time, filmic time."<sup>2</sup> Hence, filmic time is made physically tangible through the inclusion of the sophisticated dual projector (which functions like a sculptural element in the work), while echoing the narrative time of the film itself.

In fact, it is this reciprocal relationship between the film's content and its installation that I will explore in this essay. My approach will be two-fold: first, I will examine the film's content through the lens of the legacy of "women's cinema," the term generally used to refer to feminist theatrical cinema produced by women in the 60s and 70s;<sup>3</sup> then I will consider its physical installation in the space of the art gallery by engaging with current discourse around what Gene Youngblood described as "expanded cinema"<sup>4</sup> in 1970, and what today is often termed "artists' cinema"<sup>5</sup>, both terms referring to experimental film and video, non-standard modes of display, and the relationship between contemporary art and conventional cinema. By focusing on the issue of spectatorship — from the perspectives of both feminist film theory and installation art theory — I will show that both the content and installation of *The Prisoner* are intimately linked in constructing its meaning.

Though *The Prisoner* is an "art film," I contend that it should be understood as rooted within the tradition of "women's cinema," a genre that has usually been associated with conventional narrative film. This is not just because the artist and the film's sole character are women, but also because of its genealogy

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Basciano, "ArtReview meets Rosalind Nashashibi to discuss her forthcoming ICA retrospective," *ArtReview* 1 Sept. 2009, <http://www.artreview.com/profiles/blog/show?id=1474022%3ABlogPost%3A859163> (accessed 1 May, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Alison Butler, *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen* (London: Wallflower, 2002), 2–3.

<sup>4</sup> See Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> See Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site, and Screen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

that links it to Akerman's earlier work.<sup>6</sup> Women's cinema has its theoretical roots in the 70s, in the writings of the pioneering feminist film theorists Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston. Theorizing the gaze, narrative forms, spectator positioning, and subject construction Mulvey, Johnston, and others, offered compelling critiques to earlier film theorists like Christian Metz.<sup>7</sup> They theorized the "male gaze," interpreting it through Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and describing it in terms of "scopophilia," "voyeurism," "fetishism," and "narcissism." Following from Freud, masculinity was associated with activity, and femininity with passivity. Spectatorship was viewed as being analogous to subject formation, with "woman" being an empty and co-opted sign. Ultimately, feminist film theorists of the time argued that sexism was embedded *a priori* into the cinematic apparatus, or the system in which the camera, projector, and screen produce cinema audiences as the subjects of ideology.

Soon after, they began to propose what a feminist "counter cinema" might look like. In "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" (1973) Johnston argued that to resist the objectification of women in cinema, women filmmakers needed to expose their own fantasies and desires.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Mulvey advocated "a new language of desire" to "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space ..."<sup>9</sup> Yet, while Mulvey advocated avant-garde cinema as a possible model for the feminist film of the future,<sup>10</sup> Johnston's discourse remained tied to conventional narrative cinema.<sup>11</sup>

By the early 80s, Johnston began employing an analytical approach to film that prioritized discursive structures over looking relations. Similarly, in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984) Teresa de Lauretis argues that narrative is central to feminist cinema in its ability to give visibility to previ-

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6 Even so, it must be noted that while Akerman is associated with women's cinema and sustains a "cult following among feminists, [she] prefers to be seen as an auteur like any other." Butler 2.

7 The history of women's cinema outlined in this essay has been generally informed by Butler 1–24.

8 Claire Johnston, *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1975) 31.

9 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3. (1975): 8.

10 Specifically, she advocated the negative "strategies of defamiliarization, rupture and reflexivity," but later "conced[ed] that negation was a strategy of its time" Butler 6–8.

11 Butler 11.

ously ignored (female) subjects.<sup>12</sup> Even so, she ultimately advocates for a women's cinema that contains elements of both avant-garde and narrative cinema,<sup>13</sup> an approach with which *The Prisoner* is closely aligned.

For instance, while the film is positioned within the realm of avant-garde/expanded cinema because of its experimental, a-temporal, abstracted, and sculptural qualities, *The Prisoner* still relies on what critic Eliza Williams describes as "the archetypes and codes contained within [classic] cinema."<sup>14</sup> The montaged shots tracking the anonymous woman as she walks, the clicking of her heels, the swelling Rachmaninoff soundtrack, and the whirring of the noisy projectors, mimic the standard devices employed in the thriller genre to foster a mounting sense of tension. However, *The Prisoner* never allows this tension to be relieved.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the disorienting sound delay of the second projection epitomizes what Butler describes as "the prevalence in women's experimental cinema of films which play against the conventions of synchronized sound to create separations and disjunctions of [the] body..."<sup>16</sup>

Butler also points out that the denial of visual and narrative satisfaction is a key component of feminist aesthetics.<sup>17</sup> This quality is not only characteristic of Akerman's films,<sup>18</sup> but also of *The Prisoner*, in which a resolution is never achieved. There is no climax, catharsis, or dénouement; there is only an infinite loop of rising action. In this sense, any narrative pleasure has been completely eradicated.

Even so, it seems to me that visual pleasure is still possible in *The Prisoner*. Yet, how it is afforded is a curious question. One approach to conceptualizing the kind of pleasure it might impart is located in the writing of Gaylyn Studlar, who, in the late 80s, compared the pleasures garnered from looking at film to

12 Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 8–9.

13 Butler, 17.

14 Eliza Williams, "Rosalind Nashashibi," *Flash Art* 269 (2009): 88; Similarly, Basciano comments on the "Hollywood feel" of the soundtrack, Basciano; and Charles Darwent writes, "Nashashibi knows the tricks and lets us know that she knows them: the camera angles, the sudden close-ups, the out-of-synch double action, all of them filmic conventions that say 'suspense'." Charles Darwent, "Rosalind Nashashibi, ICA, London," *The Independent*, 19 Sept. 2009 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/rosalind-nashashibi-ica-london-1790277.html> (accessed: 1 May 2010).

15 Williams 88.

16 Butler 78.

17 Ibid. 7.

18 Ibid.

masochism.<sup>19</sup> For Studlar, the regressive disintegration of ego identity that a spectator undergoes in watching a film would under normal circumstances be quite uncomfortable, even panic-inducing. However, in the context of the darkened enclosure of the cinema, the viewer experiences the relinquishing of control and the immersion of the self within the “dream screen” as pleasurable. “[The] unpleasurable event is made pleasurable,” Studlar writes, “through ... the cinematic apparatus ... [because it] affords the pleasure of the boundaryless self drawn into perceptual unity with the dream screen.”<sup>20</sup>

In “Film and the Masquerade, Theorizing the Female Spectator” (1990), Mary Ann Doane similarly concludes that female spectatorship is masochistic. For Doane, spectatorial desire — positioned in classic film theory as voyeurism or fetishism — emanates from the pleasurable transgression of watching the female body without her knowing she’s being watched.<sup>21</sup> She cites Metz, who emphasizes that the voyeur “must maintain a distance between himself and the image” because it is the gap between the subject and the object which represents the subject’s desire for that object.<sup>22</sup>

Disregarding lesbian desire, Doane asserts that a female spectator’s desire — only understandable in terms of narcissism — negates this gap.<sup>23</sup> Because the female spectator identifies with the female body on the screen, instead of desiring it from a distance, she experiences a sense of close spatial proximity to it.<sup>24</sup> As a result, she is forced to oscillate between her instinctive closeness to the on-screen woman and the film’s framed distance from her, a situation that positions her (the viewer) as a “transvestite.”<sup>25</sup> In this way, the cinematic apparatus produces an unsustainable position for the female spectator, because she

19 Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Studlar’s position was seen as a refutation of Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

20 Studlar 185. Studlar goes on to explain that it is the apparatus itself that provides the “grounding” for the “multiple partial, shifting, ambivalent identifications” the viewer experiences, a fact that “point[s] to the importance of bisexuality and a mobile cathexis of desire in understanding cinematic spectatorship.” Studlar 185.

21 Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade, Theorizing the Female Spectator,” *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 43.

22 Doane 45.

23 *Ibid.* 45–46.

24 *Ibid.* 46.

25 *Ibid.* 48. The similarities with Studlar’s notion of “multiple” or “bisexual” subject positions are striking.

is only given two options: masochistic over-identification with the object or narcissistically desiring herself.<sup>26</sup>

Following from Studlar and Doane, it could be argued that the visual pleasure afforded by *The Prisoner* is purely masochistic. Fitting well with Studlar's model, the spectator of the ever-unresolved film is a "deprived observer who must be satisfied with the pleasure of expectancy."<sup>27</sup> However, the "specular-distanced gratification"<sup>28</sup> that both Studlar and Doane refer to is only partially fulfilled. While the film includes several long shots of the walking woman, it also depicts many close angles and moments of close proximity — even intimacy — which suggest an alternative relationship between the cameraperson and the woman. It also implies the possibilities of a different kind of desire, one that could be addressed in part by a discussion of how some female filmmakers may frame the gaze differently than men.

In "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory" (1985), de Lauretis poses the question, "what formal, stylistic, or thematic markers point to a female presence behind the camera?"<sup>29</sup> One of her conclusions is that in opposition to traditional cinema, which assumes a male spectator, films by women address the spectator as female.<sup>30</sup> It is a curious point in relation to *The Prisoner*. Does the film assume a female viewer? Who does the viewer identify with? The camera, the on-screen woman, or both?

The camera's occasional nearness to the woman, the film's disorientating visual and aural structure, and its use of the viewer's point of view rather than that of an onscreen observer, work together to "create a strange sense of proximity and complicity."<sup>31</sup> We know for a fact that the actress playing the woman in the film is the artist Anna Gaskell, a friend of Nashashibi.<sup>32</sup> From this, we might assume that Nashashibi herself was the cameraperson who actually pursued Gaskell as she walked.<sup>33</sup> Could

<sup>26</sup> Doane 54.

<sup>27</sup> Studlar 180.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid..

<sup>29</sup> De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 131.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 135.

<sup>31</sup> ICA, "Rosalind Nashashibi: Exhibition works." <http://www.ica.org.uk/21703/Rosalind-Nashashibi/Exhibition-Works.html> (accessed 1 May, 2010)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid,

<sup>33</sup> I was unable in my research to ascertain for certain who actually filmed the sequence.

this explain the character's perceived complicity? She seems to know her "stalker" is there, and she seems comfortable with this, allowing the camera to come very close. Yet the nature of the relationship between the cameraperson and the woman (playful? ambivalent? masochistic?) remains ambiguous.

If indeed Nashashibi *did* insert herself into the film as the pursuer/cameraperson, this would present another parallel with Akerman, who often performs in her own films.<sup>34</sup> It would also epitomize Butler's claim that authorial self-inclusion is a recurring motif in women's avant-garde cinema.<sup>35</sup> The result of this approach is that while the gender identity of the mysterious woman appears stable, the gendered subjectivity of both the cameraperson/pursuer and the viewer seems mutable, flexible, and ambiguous, a fact that parallels both Studlar and Doane's suggestions that the cinematic viewer's gender position is rendered instable.

According to de Lauretis, in Akerman's films, female experience, everyday gestures, interpersonal relationships, long time duration, and moments of silence work in concert to evoke personal yet "socially coded" experiences.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Nashashibi relies on social codes of femininity, yet undercuts the fetishistic desire to possess the female body with a casual handheld approach to the camera work, in which it is implied that the subject knows she's being filmed. Furthermore, the looped structure and the repetitiveness of the walking, as well as the anti-climactic monotony of an ordinary gesture all diffuse the scopophilic heterosexual male gaze, implying instead a sensibility informed from an alternate subject position.

In this way, *The Prisoner* typifies what de Lauretis describes as the ways in which "narrative and narrativity ... are mechanisms to be employed strategically and tactically in the effort to ... shift the terms of representation, to produce the conditions of representability of another — and gendered — social subject."<sup>37</sup> In fact, in "Film and the Visible" (1991), she goes on to discuss this *other* gendered social subject: the lesbian, and the visual pleasures afforded in the erotic contemplation of women *by* women.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, it is quite possible that the desiring gaze framed by *The Prisoner* is a queer one.

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34 Butler 59. The difference, of course is that Akerman performs *in front of* the camera.

35 Ibid.

36 De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* 132.

37 Ibid. 109.

38 De Lauretis, "Film and the Visible," *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay, 1991) 259–62.

Throughout the 90s and early 2000s queer film theory was in its ascendancy. Most queer theorists shared Tamsin Wilton's critique of classic feminist film theory's "restrictive binarism" of masculine vs. feminine identity and desire.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in "Reviewing Queer Viewing" (2004), Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman point out that all spectatorship — including queer spectatorship — is often conflicted.<sup>40</sup> Asserting that "queer" representations disturb stable definitions, Evans and Gamman advocate "polymorphous identifications"<sup>41</sup> putting forth the term "genderfuck" to describe gender as a simulacrum that claims no original.<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, it seems to me that the visual pleasure afforded by *The Prisoner* is indebted to a "genderfucked" subject position. Nashashibi purposefully manipulates the camera's eye to mimic the scopophilic gaze of a stalker. Yet, she also simultaneously disputes this by enabling multiple gender/sexual subject positions. In so doing, she not only destabilizes the presumed gender of the cameraperson (and by extension, the viewer), but she also deliberately reinforces the chaotic interweaving of the subject and the other of desire.<sup>43</sup>

In "Ex-Changing the Gaze: Re-Visioning Feminist Film Theory" (1995) Gertrude Koch poses a useful question: "the issue remains whether ... the female look through the camera at the world, at men, women, and objects will be an essentially different one [from the classic model]."<sup>44</sup> While for de Lauretis, the answer is yes, she stresses that the project of women's cinema is no longer to expunge men's vision, but rather to produce a new kind of vision in which other social objects and subjects are privileged.<sup>45</sup>

Ultimately, *The Prisoner* exemplifies such an approach, and fully embodies the tenants of women's cinema as de Lauretis lays them out:

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39 Tamsin Wilton, *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (London: Routledge, 1995) 113.

40 Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, "Reviewing Queer Viewing," *Queer Cinema, the Film Reader*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin (New York: Routledge, 2004) 212.

41 Their view could be seen as an expansion of the "bisexual" or "transvestite" subject positions proposed by both Studlar and Doane.

42 Evans and Gamman 219.

43 Elizabeth Cowie, *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 14.

44 Gertrude Koch, "Ex-Changing the Gaze: Re-Visioning Feminist Film Theory," *New German Critique* 34 (1985): 147.

45 De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* 135.

the disjunction of image and [sound], the reworking of narrative space, the elaboration of strategies of address that alter forms and balances of traditional representation ... the inscription of subjective space and duration inside the frame ... [through] repetition ... and discontinuities ... [in order to] answer the call for "a new language of desire".<sup>46</sup>

Yet, how this "new language of desire" is represented and manipulated is *not* only achieved through the narrative content of the film. It is also facilitated through the film's physical installation in space. Indeed, equally important as the film's narrative content, is its physical set-up as an art installation. As Alexander Alberro has indicated, the formal characteristics of the exhibition of moving image art also plays a crucial role in its meaning.<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly, it was a contemporary art curator, rather than an art historian, who was one of the first to compare moving image projection to an art installation. In her introduction to the catalogue of her seminal exhibition, "Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964–1977" at the Whitney in New York (2002), Chrissie Iles articulated the differences between the sites of the black box and the white cube. Citing Roland Barthes's "Upon Leaving the Movie Theater" (1975),<sup>48</sup> she describes the movie house as a cocoon inside of which idle bodies are hypnotized by projections on a screen, and contrasts this with the interior of the gallery in which film or video projection deconstructs this scenario.<sup>49</sup>

For Iles, moving image installation in the white cube builds on the phenomenological approach of Minimalism, activating

<sup>46</sup> De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* 145.

<sup>47</sup> Alexander Alberro, "The Gap Between Film and Installation Art," *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate Pub. in association with Afterall, 2008) 420.

<sup>48</sup> Barthes writes: "... there is another way of going to the movies ... ; by letting oneself be fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surroundings — as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image, but precisely *what exceeds it* (italics mine): the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies, the rays of light, entering the theater, leaving the hall; in short, in order to distance, in order to 'take off,' I complicate a 'relation' by a 'situation.' What I use to distance myself from the image — that, ultimately, is what fascinates me." Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987) 349.

<sup>49</sup> Chrissie Iles, *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964–1977* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001) 34.

the viewer and engendering more participation.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, she contends that because projections are presented as “split, overlapping, multiplied, [or] serialized”<sup>51</sup> on the gallery walls, they function to draw the spectator’s attention away from the screen to the space around her, as well as to the actual mechanisms and properties of the moving image and its technological components.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, in *Installation Art: A Critical History* (2005), Claire Bishop also contends with the issues around spectatorship in moving image installation. She correctly demonstrates that both Metz and Mulvey were more focused on the psychological experience of the cinematic audience in relation to a film’s narrative content, than to the viewers’ physical experience within the movie house, and she insists that the entire environment must be taken into account in assessing moving image installation.<sup>53</sup> Yet, in contrast to Iles, who aligns moving image installation with Minimalism, Bishop categorizes the art form within a genre she calls “dark installations,” and situates it as something that exists *in-between* the black box and the white cube. Unlike Minimalist sculpture, which functions to increase the viewer’s awareness of his body in space, Bishop claims that “dark installations suggest our dissolution.”<sup>54</sup> A viewer’s awareness of his body is experienced “as a loss”, she argues, because it is difficult to sense his own physical boundaries as they dissolve into the darkness.<sup>55</sup>

Significantly, Bishop also claims that moving image installation engenders two different forms of spectatorial pleasure: one related to identification and seduction, and the other, related to the cinematic situation itself.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately, she dismisses the idea that installation art is reaffirmed through the physical pres-

50 This assertion reveals a possible misreading of Barthes on her part, in that he seems to imply (much like Jacques Rancière in his article, “The Emancipated Spectator”) that the viewing experience — what he calls “the cinema experience” — is already activated. He writes: “the movie house (ordinary model) is a site of availability (even more than cruising) ... It is in this urban dark that the body’s freedom is generated... .” Barthes 346. See also Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator” *Artforum International* 45.7 (2007).

51 Iles 35.

52 These include: “the projector beam as a sculptural form, the transparency and illusionism of the cinema screen, the internal structure of the film frame, [and the] the camera as an extension of the body’s own mental and ocular recording system ... .” Iles 34.

53 Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005) 94–95.

54 Bishop 82.

55 Ibid.

56 Connolly 25.

ence of the viewer, instead suggesting that the installation functions to stage an irresolvable antagonism between the centered and decentered subject.<sup>57</sup>

Coming back to Nashashibi's *The Prisoner*, then, it is clear that the viewer experiences the work as an entire installation, not just as a film. It is an interactive experience in which the projectors function like kinetic sculpture. The viewer's awareness is clearly drawn to the apparatus's form, location, movement, and sound, as integral aspects of the installation. Similarly, the fact that the films are projected on the gallery wall also draws the viewer's attention to the space itself, enabling her body to become more fully involved in the work. This is particularly true of *The Prisoner*, in which the phenomenological experience of the woman moving through space in the film reveals a direct relationship to the phenomenological experience of the viewer moving around and watching the film in the gallery. Not only does the viewer begin to occupy the visual field (and embodied physical movement) of the pursuant cameraperson,<sup>58</sup> her own gaze becomes camera-like itself.

Ultimately, the mechanics of *The Prisoner* — its visual and aural repetitions, sculptural elements, and projection on the wall — exemplify Iles' belief that in projective installations, temporality and spatiality compete, the result being that "temporality is used to render spatial presence elusive."<sup>59</sup> For Iles, and in *The Prisoner*, space and the picture plane are destabilized, redefining the limits of illusionism as experienced through the body, and "mak[ing] visible a model of consciousness in which ... we recognize that we exist within a continuous projection of our own event."<sup>60</sup>

While Iles describes the viewer's awareness of her body in a moving image installation as a *reorientation* to space, Bishop counters that the experience of navigating the body in a dark space is one of total *dissolution*.<sup>61</sup> For Bishop, then, installation "does not just articulate an intellectual notion of dispersed

<sup>57</sup> Bishop 133 (italics in original).

<sup>58</sup> Because the shot is framed as a moving gaze tracking a figure through space, the viewer feels as though she is seeing with the eyes of the pursuer. Similarly, because the hand-held tracking shot is not smooth, the viewer feels the pursuer's movement, both as she stands still, and as she moves around the gallery, in which case the sense of embodied mobility is heightened.

<sup>59</sup> Iles 65–66.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, for James Elkins all of seeing is a dissolution. He writes: "... looking has force: it tears, it is sharp, it is an acid. In the end, it corrodes the object and observer until they are lost in the field of vision. I once was solid, and now I am dissolved: that is the voice of seeing." James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 45.

subjectivity," it actually *produces* an "experience [of] this fragmentation first-hand."<sup>62</sup> In the case of *The Prisoner*, the body is not just reoriented to the space, but rather, dissolved within it, and within the physical and subjective space represented in the film.<sup>63</sup>

According to James Elkins, seeing, which is by its nature is saturated with affect, transforms not only the subject, but also the object of the gaze.<sup>64</sup> For him, looking is not a single one-to-one relationship, nor is it impassive.<sup>65</sup> "The *beholder* is many beholders," he writes, "and the *object* is many objects."<sup>66</sup> Nashashibi's *The Prisoner* exemplifies Elkins' observations. By manipulating cinematic conventions and audience expectations, *The Prisoner* underscores the artificially manufactured structures of the gaze produced through the installation of the cinematic apparatus (which Nashashibi pointedly emphasizes through the staging of the installation<sup>67</sup>). She clearly references classic film theory, as aspects of the work closely follow Metz's description of the cinematic spectatorial process.<sup>68</sup> Because the viewer identifies with the projector, the camera, and the screen, the projector replicates the act of perception. Because vision is both projective and introjective, the subject projects her gaze while simultaneously introjecting the content gleaned from it. Thus in many ways, Nashashibi's work embodies Metz's statement: "I am the projector, receiving it, I am the screen; in both these figures together, I am the camera, pointed yet recording."<sup>69</sup>

Yet, through Nashashibi's engagement with women's cinema and artists' cinema, she also troubles this looking relationship. Through the feminist and queer strategies of women's cinema, she destabilizes the gender and sexuality of both the camera-person and the viewer, hence subverting assumed heterosexist conventions of spectatorship. She also decenters and reorients the viewer through her deployment of the piece in space (i.e. highlighting the dual projector, projecting on the wall, doubling the film projection, and presenting the film in darkness),

62 Bishop 130.

63 Ibid 131.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Elkins 43.

67 i.e. the apparatus is emphasized by the central location and attention given to the dual projectors.

68 See Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier [Excerpts]," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 244–278.

69 Metz 254–255.

which demonstrates the ways in which looking, subject identity, and object identity are ambiguous, flexible, and even polymorphous.

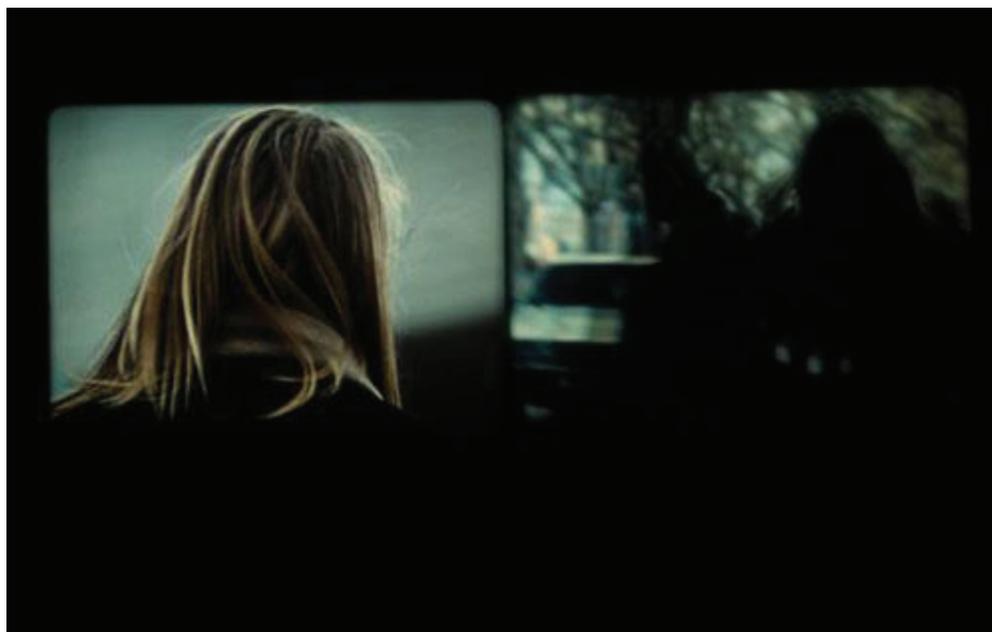
*The Prisoner's* mystery and intrigue, its unresolved suspense, repetition, and disorienting characteristics produce a different kind of desire and effect a unique kind of pleasure — of multiple and alternative subject positions, that are “genderfucked” — that perhaps bring us closer to what Bishop describes as “the ‘reality’ of our condition as decentered subjects without closure ... .”<sup>70</sup> Ultimately, *The Prisoner* exposes and defies our spectatorial expectations. In so doing, it epitomizes what Elkins terms the “evaporation of the viewer,”<sup>71</sup> by inviting us to inhabit a space *in-between* the self and the other, where “part of me is the object, and part of the object is me.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Bishop 133.

<sup>71</sup> Elkins 44.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*



Rosalind Nashashibi, *The Prisoner* (film still), 2008; 2 screen 16mm film, 5 mins. Courtesy doggerfisher gallery, Edinburgh.