



Daniel McKewen
Distance

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In Pursuit of Critical Distance

Christopher Handran

The position of the fan is generally assumed to be incompatible with that of the critic. To be a fan is to love fanatically, to give in to one’s subjectivity, while critics require the objectivity that is afforded by dispassionate ‘distance’. However, Nicholas Bourriaud argues that the fan is not passive, but creative, because consuming culture means interpreting it in acts of interiorised, silent production.¹ Fans are semionauts navigating the mediasphere, inventing trajectories between signs.² Video artist Daniel McKewen takes this thought as his starting point in examining his own consumption of (and by) popular culture.

McKewen’s love of Hollywood cinema can be seen in his video installation *Top Ten Box Office Blockbusters of All Time, in Dollars* (2010–). On ten monitors, he shows the current ten top-earning films. Each is overlaid with two sets of animated numbers in juxtaposition: one tallying up the film’s budget, the other its earnings.³ We watch the films through this distracting veil. While ‘shock and awe’ blockbuster cinema can be understood as a contemporary form of the sublime, here the focus is the staggering scale of behind-the-scenes expenditure and earnings. *Top Ten* illustrates a kind of bottom-line aesthetics, in which mass popularity, assessed financially, functions as a measure of quality. This external measure of success can serve to reconfirm, justify, and even replace one’s own judgement. McKewen shines a light on this condition and gives it form: the result is akin to Immanuel Kant’s mathematical sublime, rendered as special effect.

While McKewen’s work throws a critical light on cinematic spectacle, his critique does not position itself outside of popular culture. As much as he comments on celebrity culture and is aware of Hollywood’s tricks and temptations, McKewen acknowledges that he is enthralled by it. He says:

I don’t want to have that baseless desire, I don’t want to be played . . . I understand how fake it is and I don’t want to fall for it but on some level I already did . . . And I’m fascinated by the fact that it works for me—it gets me every time.⁴

McKewen’s *Close-Up* videos show the workings of this seduction in an unnerving light. In *Angelina Close-Up*, *Kate Close-Up*, and *Naomi Close-Up* (all 2011), McKewen pans slowly, in extreme close up, across details from black-and-white publicity images of the three celebrities. While the subjects are all identifiable by their first names, they are barely recognisable in the videos. Recalling Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 film *Blow-Up*, McKewen’s digitally mediated gaze goes in so close that their iconic features dissolve into the grain of the printed image, its abstract surface. A disquieting soundtrack of the artist breathing suggests the gaze is too intimate—unwelcome. The

freely available source images McKewen uses here were created to precipitate viewer desire: desire to see the subject’s latest film, to be with them, to be them, to possess what they possess, or to be a part of their world. Yet this desire itself is not meant to be exposed. Re-presenting the images in this way becomes disturbing, as if something shameful and private has been revealed.

The fan’s transforming gaze is also explored in the two-screen video *Every Face on Vanity Fair’s Hollywood Covers 1995–2008* (2009–12), where McKewen morphs faces from *Vanity Fair* covers into one another. Unlike the seamless blending of difference strived for in classic examples, such as Michael Jackson’s *Black or White* music video (1991), or the unifying morphology of Nancy Burson’s pioneering composite portraits, the digital matter of McKewen’s surfaces is exposed and ruptured, as iconic and upcoming celebrities become part of one homogenous mass. Recalling instead the disruptive dissolves of early horror-movie werewolves and villains (like Mr Hyde), in McKewen’s *Vanity Fair*, each individual face becomes one more mutant variation on the same. McKewen labours over these digital surfaces not simply to mortify and debase these glamorous creatures, but to reveal this sameness.

McKewen’s source, *Vanity Fair* magazine, is a mass-media exemplar of the intermingling of criticality and complicity that he practices. Seeking to position itself as a review of popular culture, politics, and current affairs, the magazine attracts both serious political and literary writers and big-name celebrities, such as those that populate the cover of its annual Hollywood Issue. The magazine’s title also harks back to several literary sources, notably William Makepeace Thackeray’s satirical novel of the same name.⁵ Thackeray’s 1847 ‘novel without a hero’ presents the story of ruthless, aspiring, downwardly mobile anti-heroine Becky Sharp. The ‘Vanity Fair’ of the title—a fictitious fairground that framed all the characters as mere puppets—is a motif that bookends the narrative. McKewen’s *Vanity Fair* may leave us wondering if it is the actors, or, as film theorist Christian Metz suggests, their audience, who are puppets here.⁶

For Metz, the cinema seduces viewers into the position of voyeurs, who relinquish their agency to it. However, while acknowledging that he is subject to cinema’s thrall, McKewen resists its seduction, his video responses mortalise his objects of desire. In his morphing the fleshy surfaces of *Vanity Fair*, we can detect a sublimation of his desire to emulate Tom Cruise. In *The Passage of Indeterminacy in the Intensification of Being* (2011–), we witness his exorcism of his desire for Katy Perry. Similarly, in *Untitled* (2012), the glamorous features of Hollywood starlets are transformed into strange, windswept landscapes that, in turn, recall the ghostly netherworlds of *The Lord of the Rings*.⁷ Although McKewen does not expect these subversions to entirely undo Hollywood’s spell, his videos create space for critical awareness to coexist with the pleasure of consuming.

McKewen acknowledges that, in drawing on the Hollywood dream machine, he is somehow complicit. This is not only true of his use of Hollywood imagery, codes, and conventions, but also of his dependence on cinema’s tools. For McKewen, the technology he uses in making his work is as much of a guilty pleasure as the movies and celebrity culture that provide its content. His fandom is that of the techno-fetishistic connoisseur, the ‘prosumer’. In the figure of the prosumer, the entertainment industry has created their perfect fan. Invented to market home-cinema equipment, this term denotes a ‘serious fan’ who wants the highest quality experience, for which they need the best equipment. The prosumer is a fan who buys into the hype, but also adopts a position and seemingly objective criteria from which to critique it.

The fan’s criticality offers an alternative to those who would argue that effective critique must be disinterested. The investment fans make in the cultural products they consume places them in a privileged position from which to critique them. Fans make the objects of their desire part of their everyday lives. They form communities, online and in person, where—like McKewen—they supplement the objects of their desire through works of homage, montage, and fan fiction. Indeed, the sense of ownership felt by some fans exceeds the entitlements of the culture’s creators—consider the vitriol expressed by *Star Wars* fans at the franchise’s recent incarnations. Perhaps, in this way, fandom constitutes another form of critical distance, something akin to striking distance—the proximity required to land a blow.

It is from this position that McKewen addresses his viewer; not from behind the screen, but from in front of it, beside them in the front row, sharing the experience, from one fan to another.

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1. See Nicholas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2002), 22. The idea of silent production is drawn from Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984). **2.** Ibid., 18. **3.** To keep this work current, McKewen tracks the changing fortunes of the top ten, updating the work as films enter and exit the list, and as their earnings increase, especially through re-packaging and re-release. **4.** The artist in conversation with the author, May 2012. **5.** The term ‘Vanity Fair’ initially came from John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). **6.** See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Cinema and Psychoanalysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982). **7.** Parts 2 and 3 of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* (2003), have both featured in McKewen’s *Top Ten Box Office Blockbusters of All Time, In Dollars*.

IMAGE Daniel McKewen *Untitled* 2012, video.

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