

# FILMINUTIAE



## Take #08 // Photographs of Films (2016)

Mixed media artist Jason Shulman created a global sensation with his striking still photographs of complete feature films.

Using long exposures he condensed their full length into one frame and, in so doing, exposed what he has called their 'visual quintessence'.

In the following interview we discussed the project in full, talking around its origins, making the inevitable Muybridge reference, and musing about whether there is an enduring magic in cinema that makes it a perfect subject for art.

**FM: Welcome to Filminutiae. To start at the very beginning. Where did the idea for photographing full feature films come from? It seems so simple and obvious and yet, in 120+ years of film history, I can't think of it being done before?**

JS: I started photographing short sporting events, then shot some rolling TV news. And then, obviously, the next thing had to be a film. I was surprised that the simple idea of using a camera and a long exposure to photograph all of the light given out by a film had not been done a thousand times before. Amazingly it seems there are still gaps to be filled. For example, and I'm not comparing the two processes at all, remember in *The Matrix*, the scene where the character is frozen and yet the tracking shot continues? This technique could have been resolved by Muybridge and his horse bet in 1878. If he'd positioned all his cameras in a circle, instead of in a line, and then had the horse trip them simultaneously, he'd have invented it. But for some reason this blindingly basic idea took until 1999 before becoming a thing.

**Quite. I suppose all that we can be sure of is that some things are created by accident, some by design. With his approach Muybridge was trying to solve a certain debate and ended up contributing to the invention of moving image, did you have any particular aim in mind for your project?**

Curiosity.



*A Clockwork Orange (1971), 2017*  
Artwork by Jason Shulman

**Did you use any particular equipment?**

A large camera and a large monitor.

**You have mentioned in other interviews that it was the films that one might not have expected that produced the most interesting results. Of course, subjectivity being what it is, this will no doubt be different for every viewer. What was your expectation of the results? Anything like what you arrived at?**

Before I photographed the first film I thought that all the light from all the different shots would probably produce something that looked like a dirty paint swatch. As we can see, this wasn't the case.

**Indeed. Quite the opposite in fact. Now, I am sure I know the answer but I have to ask, did you process or retouch the results in anyway?**

There are no individual colour corrections. I don't, say, bump up the blues. The final print is produced conventionally from a digital file.

**How did you select the films that you photographed? The choices seem very random but, perhaps, they were very distinct according to personal taste or some sort of system?**

It turns out that most movies look remarkably similar rendered this way. At the start I tried to predict which films might make the most interesting marks. But it's impossible. So I shot hundreds of films, anything that came to mind. Then stopped and chose the ones with interesting compositions, tones or tells.

The project has done very well online, published on your own site with many news sites then featuring it, but I believe it started as a physical exhibition at the COB?

Correct.

Where else has it been exhibited physically?

The White Noise Gallery in Rome. 'Daydreaming with Stanley Kubrick' in Somerset House, and at Photo London.

My favourite is *The Wizard of Oz*. I love how the Technicolor of the film has come through but in a somehow muddied form which, for me, seems to reflect the sinister aspects within the narrative but also the bad luck of the production history. There's the legend about the Munchkin suicide, the spate of injuries during the making, Judy Garland's personal difficulties and so forth. Which is your personal favourite and why?

Really? Munchkins topped themselves? I never knew that. No, I don't have a favourite or if I do, then not for long. This week's top 3 are... *Taxi Driver* (1976) Because it could be its poster. *Digby, the Biggest Dog in the World* (1973) Because of its inky translation of the antics of an enormous Sheepdog who got that way because he ate an untested fertiliser. And *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (1964) Because in it's gestalt a picture of Jesus appears. And that is like a mini fucking miracle.

As you have said, you see the images as exposing the "visual quintessence" of feature films. Were you inspired by other art that also deconstructs cinema? I ask this as many artists are inspired by film but artists that directly use feature films as media in their own art seem very rare. I am thinking specifically of Douglas Gordon's 24 hour *Psycho* but I can't think of many others. Perhaps there was other work you had in mind, maybe not even film related?

I can't think of any cinema-based art that's been an influence. I've always liked how the Futurists dealt with time and motion. Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* is a wonderfully insightful painted take on the long-exposure. But it's not really related.

I don't know, I feel that it's somehow related in that it's a painting emulating the effects of film. It's interesting you should bring that up as what I love about your project is that it uses photography in a similar way to how the Futurists and Cubists were using painting, this idea of capturing multiple images and perspectives in one, playing with time and space.

I also love that you are using photography in it's purest documentary form, to record something visually using a mechanical process, and yet the results are anything but. Their root is the concrete object of a film, but the results are about pure form, colour and light and are very emotive to look at. They remind me of experiments into so-called 'nothingness' by colour field artists like Rothko, Barnett Newman, perhaps even late Turner and light artists like James Turrell?

This is a bit longwinded, I know. What I am trying to say is that with this thought in mind the pictures would seem to fit into the lineage of both Impressionism/Abstract Expressionism. I'd like to know if you personally view them fitting into that canon or are they something else for you?

I'll give a short answer to your long question; threads are gathered, opinions formed. The history of art is never written by the artists, mainly because they can't spell. I'd like to think I'm 'ism' free.

Do you think that there is something about cinema that makes it such an ideal subject for art?

It's not ideal but it interests me for now.

OK. Going a bit further into that, do you think there's something about our period right now that led to the work capturing the public imagination like it has? I wonder if it is because there is a massive weight of association on the project as we are on the cusp of new ways of making and consuming film, which is creating a mass nostalgia for old films, meaning people are currently lapping up anything to do with film history and traditional film culture?

I don't think it's a particularly culturally timely concept. Everyone from the Dadaists through Pop and the Post Mods could've taken something from these and slotted them into their argument. But it is technologically timely. If you were to shoot a film this way from the back of a cinema the resulting photograph would have a hotspot in the middle that fades towards the edge of the frame. This is because of how light travels through the projector's lens, it splays it, and that makes getting an even exposure impossible. I photograph a big, practically pixel-free monitor that doesn't splay. Something that's only been around a few years.

**That's a good point. I hadn't considered the importance of the monitor to the project. Interesting! Taking the point about technology in another direction, the work has had a massive success online and across social media, do you think there is something about the project that makes it right for these channels?**

I have to admit I don't know why the internet took to it so readily...but I'm glad it did.

**And finally, with the success of the project are you thinking of doing any more? Perhaps taking it in a new direction?**

At the moment I'm working towards a mainly sculptural show for The COB Gallery in London in October.

I can't remember how I first stumbled upon Shulman's pieces but all I know is that once they went from being an idea so obvious that seemingly no one had ever thought about before to suddenly being all over the internet.

Featured on Wired, CNN, the Guardian, Financial Times not to mention a whole host of visual culture and photography sites, it's fair to say that the work captured the public imagination. And it's no wonder really.

Although originating as a gallery bound exhibition of physical prints, the series is perfectly suited for digital distribution. They are immediately striking to look at, are easy to understand both in form and methodology and their collective subject is one that everyone knows, at least in principle.

As has been said many times, by freezing the disparate elements of a film into one image the pieces tell us something about the visual concerns of the film-makers. They inform us of the colour palette, show us the effectiveness of the original film stock in capturing that element, suggest the degree of kineticism in the cinematography and, related to that, some of them hint at their production design. What I find most intriguing about the project is that it is one application of the photographic process recording another, the still camera remixing the disparate elements of moving image into

a new form and easily dismissing what it doesn't like (theatrical performance, sound, the nuances of each film frame). This rampant reductionism could be read as saying something about the dominance of the static image over cinema but for me the reverse is actually the case. In the same way as architecture has been described as frozen music, these images are like frozen film theory. Like the most sensitive and revealing essays these images deconstruct a film text and reflect it back at us, allowing us to consider their formal qualities in a unique way.

Many of these images are, of course, very similar. In many cases the titles could be swapped and the audience would be none the wiser. This sounds like a negative but in fact speaks of the power of an element of cinema that is critical but not often thought about; the audience's association with a film title. This means that even if they have not seen the film in question the viewer is able to bring something to the artworks. Much like the work of colour field artists, the images are pareidolic, allowing the audience to impose their own meaning by finding familiar patterns in the images, their thoughts inspired by their particular level of knowledge of the given film.

The Photographs of Films series thus makes the process of watching a film tangible. When the credits roll we might remember a few specifics but in general our memory of a film starts to fade as soon as we leave the cinema or turn off the BluRay. What is left is an impression, all the many elements of a film, the design, the performances, the camerawork, the music et al, have worked together to create an experience which, whether positive or negative, has nevertheless had an effect on us. When we recall this in future we will have our emotions stimulated once again, based upon our reaction to the film in that first instance.

Shulman's images are a representation of that imprinting process, their own power being that they once again invite us to recall our experience of a film, whether we have seen it or not.