

## THE SINGLE-FRAME MOVIE: JASON SHULMAN



*Dumbo (1941)*

Artwork by Jason Shulman

At 86, Jean-Luc Godard is the “last man standing” of the much vaunted auteurist generation of French movie directors. (Of course, this “man” epithet excludes the wondrous Agnes Varda, who continues to surprise us at 89.) The French “politique des auteurs” argument was that the film director is the de facto “author” of his movie, a questionable thesis to anyone who has been on any movie crew, and a laugh-out-loud absurdity in the American film industry.

So, it is interesting that an artist can aspire to capture the entire visual content of a feature-length film in a single photographic exposure — auteurism reduced to and frozen in a single frame. This is the technique behind the recent work of British sculptor and visual avant-garde artist Jason Shulman, who has reduced the running time of many iconic motion pictures to, well, an abstract photograph. The resultant images evoke the sensual dynamics of 20th century color field painters, or even the 19th century crepuscular marine landscapes of J.W. Turner:

The expectation is that such a long exposure will produce nothing more than a mish-mash of gray color or, as in the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto, a blazingly white field where the light projected onto a movie screen becomes the light source for an architectural study of venerable renovated or abandoned movie palaces. Sugimoto has pursued this work for several decades, and it is the subject of his recent book.

Here is his 2014 photograph of the Teatro dei Rozzi in Siena, Italy:



A quote from the book's promotional material explains Sugimoto's intention:

*Sugimoto began by photographing the classic movie palaces built in the 1920s and '30s, their ornate architectural elements a testament to the cultural importance of the burgeoning movie industry. He continued the series with drive-in theaters. In the last decade, Sugimoto has photographed historic theaters in Europe as well as disused theaters that show the ravages of time. Taken together, these photographs present an extended meditation on the passage of time, a recurring theme in his artwork.*

Alternately, here is how Shulman explains his process:

*There are roughly 130,000 frames in a 90-minute film, and every frame of each film is recorded in these photographs. You could take all these frames and shuffle them like a deck of cards, and no matter*

*the shuffle, you would end up with the same image I have arrived at. Essentially each of these photographs shows the genetic code of the film.*

How did Shulman come up with the idea to distill a full-length movie into a single image? In a June 30, 2016, interview in *American Photo* conducted by Adam Ryder, Shulman reveals that it emerged from one of the most horrific events in American history.

*About six years ago, artist Jason Shulman began taking ultra-long exposure photographs of news coverage from the morning of September 11th, curious to see if the resulting images would distill something representative of his own memories of that day's news coverage. While using a similar process in 2014 to study the motion of athletes at the Sochi Winter Olympics, Shulman became curious about using the same technique with feature-length films.*

German painter Gerhard Richter attempted the same distillation in September, his own attempt to find meaning in the tragedy of September 11:

In the *American Photo* interview, Shulman explains how he set up his camera in front of a high-resolution monitor then ran the film, leaving the shutter open the entire time. He does not reveal details about exposure, but given the accumulation of light on the screen, the exposure aperture must have been very small — or he employed considerable neutral density to prevent a whiteout.

Ryder quotes Shulman:

*I was surprised that they worked at all .... When I shot my first full-length film, I thought that the assault of light entering the camera would produce a flat, colorless photograph. I was amazed at the translation of a film that emerged. What intrigues me about this series is that they are fingerprints of a film's agitated light. Within each fingerprint, every frame of the film is contained.*

The first film he recorded this way was not a classic like *Citizen Kane* or *The Wizard of Oz*, but the 1974 disaster potboiler *The Towering Inferno*. Shulman's website features thumbnails of 55 movies he has reduced to a single image.

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From its origins, still photography has had to deal with the dilemma of time. Early processes were held captive to time by having to freeze movement in order to record any event or object. Objects in motion became blurs in an otherwise static field, whether nature or architecture; in topographic studies, running water or windblown grasses read like a flowing fabric. Contemporary photographers such as Alexey Titerenko returned to photography's origins to exploit this idea of human movement through long exposure images.

The history of photography has partly been a search to capture the elusiveness of this world in constant motion. Photographers often either freeze dynamic events in a single image or, in the case of Eugene Smith, present a carefully edited series of photographs to capture the drama and narrative of an unfolding event.

There are, conversely, movies that exploit the arresting, even iconic power of the still photograph to tell a story that is normally the province of the dramatic feature film, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* being one of the most noted exemplars. Here is an extract:

3.

To hoist the petard of auteurism onto the single movie image, it seems more proper to look at the constituent elements squeezed into the single image: light, color or grey scale, movement and composition. This is the province of the cinematographer, not the film director. Shulman's photographic record constitutes a kind of Brownian motion record of just what a motion picture is.



*Rear Window (1954)*  
Artwork by Jason Shulman

Many of these are decidedly abstract, but Shulman has suggested in interviews that several frames actually record readable figures, such as (so he says) James Stewart and his camera from *Rear Window* ...

... or The War Room from *Dr. Strangelove*.

The most explicit image of all is a ghostly human face from Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*.

It's a startling evocation of the visage of the Shroud of Turin's Jesus Christ.

And totally abstracted into a field of black, white and gray, the frame of *Wild Strawberries* does seem to capture the emotional essence of a Bergman movie ...

... just as the bloody action of *Caligula* seeps into the mostly red field of its image.

And, finally, the frame from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* seems to combine shadowy figures in front of several rectangular screens, almost a self-referential storyboard frame of an audience watching a multi-screen movie. You can't help but wonder whether Kubrick would have smiled in recognition.