



DREAM MACHINE

NICOLAS PROVOST



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In his work, the digital image is not simply communicative; it is sculptural: a medium all its own that can be shaped like clay, chiseled like marble, and whose components can be scrambled like the elements of a Rauschenberg Combine.

Nicolas Provost and the Lost Language of Dreams

Leo Goldsmith

In *The Perfect Wave*, a surfer glides along the edge of an enormous wave – a small mountain of water, larger than he is, coursing inexorably forward. The figure swerves, swerves back, while the bleeding edge of the wave, cresting white, seems always at a point of tension, always on the verge of breaking. But it never breaks: instead, the ocean rushes forward, carrying the surfer along – and us with it – always and forever.

From the ocean to the air: a jet plane courses across an empty sky. Soaring amid the clouds, buffeted by jet streams, the plane glides over air pockets and bisects a chemical sundown, a lone voyager in an inexorable trajectory. In the background, the wind drones on the soundtrack, and we hear snatches of a hushed, half-remembered exchange between lovers:

He
I'm seeing something that was always hidden.
I'm involved in a mystery – I'm in the middle of a mystery.
And it's all a secret.

She
You like mysteries that much?

He
Yeah. You're a mystery. I like you ... very much.

Taken together, *The Perfect Wave* (2014) and *Moving Stories* (2011) offer a twin encapsulation of Nicolas Provost's work, which since the early 2000s has been moving in a perpetual forward momentum. As suggested by the preceding fragment of dialogue from *Moving Stories* – sourced from David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1985) – the subtle waves and swerves of Provost's films propel us deeper into a mystery, the secret at the heart of the image itself.

Surfers and jet planes, divers and invaders, butterflies and samurai, walkers and wanderers, stalkers and lovers. These figures roam throughout Provost's works, seekers of a pure cinematic sensation, one that speaks to us in a language made familiar by decades of image culture. And they draw us along with them, through subtle codes of gesture and rhythm and light, deeper and deeper into an unknown territory of the senses.

Nicolas Provost (born in Ronse, Belgium, in 1969) has worked as a moving-image artist in a number of different modes, formats, and genres. Through his vivid cinematography, found-footage collages, digital appropriations, genre-infused city symphonies, glitch manipulations, and short and feature-length narratives, Provost has engaged the codes and conventions of cinematic narrative and photography, exploring forms so ingrained in our sensibility that they almost constitute a kind of *lingua franca*. Playing with anticipation and suspense, dreams and imagination,

tensions and accents, his work distills sounds and images into narratives that explore the emotions and the senses.

Much of Provost's work makes use of pre-existing images from various cinematic modes and genres: excerpts from classical Hollywood films appear in works like *Gravity* (2007), *The Dark Galleries* (2013), and *Long Live the New Flesh* (2009), and international art cinema resurfaces as the ghosts of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* in *Papillon d'amour* and *Bataille* (2004). Sometimes more arcane or degraded sources serve as the basis for Provost's works, such as the hardcore pornography in *The Painters* (2013), or the hi-def, commercially produced stock footage used for the images in *Moving Stories*. Yet even when he shoots his own footage – as in his feature film *The Invader* (2011), or in works like *Plot Point Trilogy* (2012), *Induction* (2006), and *Exoticore* (2004) – he still utilizes our common visual vernacular, speaking to us in the most intimate grammar of images.

This moving-image language has emerged over decades of moving-image culture. In the early 1980s, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze published his monumental two-part treatise on the history and aesthetics of the movies – *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* – which offers a richly detailed history of the trajectory of the cinema's aesthetic development. But Deleuze also makes a claim for a particular evolution of visual language and sensibility, one that effects our very understanding of the moving image, and how this image models for us an experience of motion, time, and consciousness itself.

For Deleuze, the history of the cinema entails, first, the gradual establishment of a generalized, universal visual language of communication, and, second, the slow fragmentation of that language, a fall from grace. The linkage of images via associations across edits – the systems of montage and continuity editing – establishes a logical succession of cause and effect, of action and reaction. According to Deleuze's history, however, this system gives way to a more fragmentary cinematic mode following the Second World War. Under this new aesthetic regime, action is no longer followed by a necessary and logical reaction, and chance and the unknown invade the system with shards of time and space with a new image – a *crystal-image* – which encapsulates the new fragmentary consciousness of late modernity. Indeed, it is hard not to see the reflections of this cracked mirror in our own contemporary image culture, in which images obtrude upon our senses from every direction, a cacophony of voices from the outside gasping for our attention.

Provost's work makes a claim similar to Deleuze's – but, perhaps more importantly, it attempts to rebuild the lost connection to this cinematic language. “For me, one of the most hopeful ideas is that all these years of cinema have connected us to our subconscious,” Provost has stated. “And it is with that collective memory that I try to make poetry.”¹ For Provost, the classical cinematic model is perhaps not so much lost as it is in hiding: lurking in the very architecture of our digital tools and apps and interfaces. The art form that emerged in 1895 – from Edison's “factory of ideas” and from the Lumières – is still very much alive; the minute pleasures of those first moving images, such as

His work more explicitly constructs a bridge between the cinematic space and that of the contemporary art gallery, rather than a division.

of a couple kissing – glimpsed through the viewfinder of a small box by one person at a time, or by the first cinema audiences – still enchant through new and unpredictable media forms and technologies. In this contemporary moment, the animal called a computer has mutated into a medium of all media – a found-footage machine, the ultimate appropriation artist – and our digital sensibility, already programmed with the language of the cinema, is able to make microtemporal connections between disparate spaces, to map cause and effect on our ever-unfolding timelines, to hyperlink the past with the future in an eternal present. We think and communicate in the images, affects, and textures of a thoroughly cinematic culture.

In response, many contemporary artists have used both the digital image and the context of the gallery to explore the lost languages of cinema's past; these artists seek new connections, bonds that can be re-formed with the distracted and exhausted contemporary viewer. Since the

early 1990s, as many historians have noted, contemporary art has demonstrated a particularly cinephilic bent, one often bordering on nostalgia for the lost object of cinema, and enabled by the increased quality and decreased cost of large-scale digital projection in gallery spaces. Writing on the tendency of artists to sample, remix, restage, or otherwise appropriate the images of commercial cinema and classical Hollywood, Catherine Fowler has claimed that this transposition of cinema to the gallery context constitutes a form of collaboration between those respective worlds, a dialogue between the movies and contemporary art that "offer[s] a new way of looking backward that is alive with personal rewards, since it incorporates our own personal engagement with the cinema."² For many of these artists, the gallery becomes a space in which nostalgic past and the contemporary moment can merge: old images, apparatuses, and affects find a new home in the white box, salvaged from the apparently moribund contexts of commercial cinema and revived through the artist's intervention.

For other artists, this relationship is often more ambivalent, representing less a nostalgic glance backwards than a more critical point of view. In her discussion of artists like Douglas Gordon, Candice Breitz, Christian Marclay, Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller, and Stan Douglas, scholar Erika Balsom has observed that the relation of many contemporary artists to their source material is, at best, ambivalent, but more often deeply suspicious and even critical. "These artists bring together spectators through their common recognition of mass cultural icons and stories," Balsom notes. "This at once

The Invader, 2011



forces them to take account of how thoroughly such icons and stories have shaped the ways in which they understand their lives and their history.”³ These artists adopt a long-standing ambivalence between the Artworld and Hollywoodland, one that seeks a critical distance from which to analyze and comment upon mass culture’s effect upon the viewer and society at large.

In Provost’s films – both those he shoots himself and those in which he appropriates other films – there is a sense that he carries on this tradition. But there is a key distinction: His work more explicitly constructs a bridge between the cinematic space and that of the contemporary art gallery, rather than a division. As concerns Provost’s work, Balsom explains that the transposition of cinema into the gallery “allows for the formation of a community around such collective recognition, repurposing shared memory towards knowledge-producing ends.”⁴ Provost’s work is concerned with the construction of links rather than barriers, as in the imaginary *film noir* corridors of *The Dark Galleries*, which allow us to navigate between cinematic spaces as though through a phantasmagoric art gallery, or in the visions of excess in *The Painters*, in which the fractured, datamoshed digital imagery of pornography bleeds by analogy into the extravagant surface of a classical oil painting. There is a certain equivalency or equanimity between the gallery and the cinema that is fluid rather than antagonistic, an index of our own image culture, freely moving and uncompartimentalized. As Provost has stated, “When I make a work, I try to make something that can function as a classic painting on the wall and also as a big theatrical cinema experience.”⁵

Cinema’s textures and genres and conventions function as the material for Provost’s work, albeit less for the purposes of preservation or critique than for ends distinctly his own. The logic and technologies of the contemporary are deployed in his work to continually – and precisely – refine cinema’s visual language. Rather than stand at a critical distance from the image, Provost’s films seek as close a relation as possible. Partly, this implies a direct contact between the work and the viewer through cinematic genre – the horror movie, the conspiracy thriller, the hardcore porno, and even the modernist art film: all appear here, intimating a certain disposition to the spectator through the subtle telegraphy of movie conventions. Now, however, resituated in the space of the gallery, these textures and tones assume new associations: extracted from the dimly lit strictures of the cinema, these works open new, dark galleries of the mind and the emotions, a direct passageway to a purer image world. And if this constitutes a kind of nostalgia, it is not a reminiscence of the past, or a fidelity to Hollywood’s “golden years,” but for a time in which Provost never lived. (Perhaps no one did.) Instead, it is a nostalgia for utopia, a lost Atlantis of the image, a nostalgia for film as art.

The modalities of late-twentieth-century modernism and postmodernism have offered a crucial position from which to critique consumer culture and the sensory technologies that transmit it. But this critique, which has become over

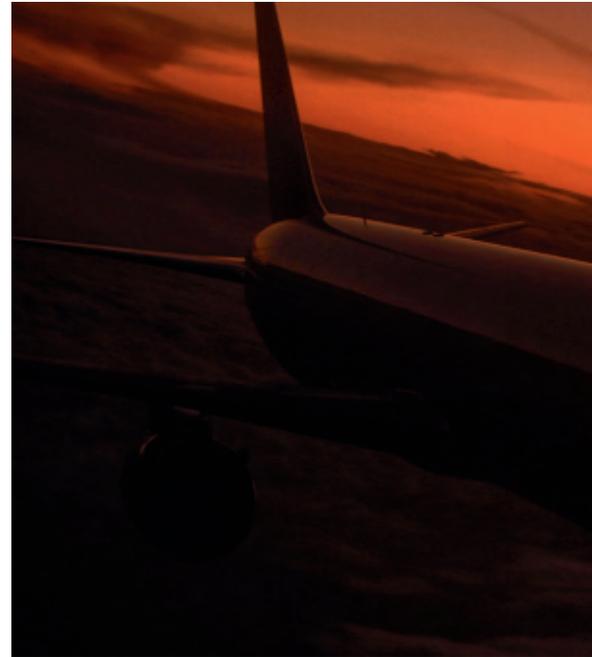
the decades a mainstay of contemporary art and the avant-garde, is now itself a kind of default option – so much so that it is now the position of mass culture itself to be ironic and knowing in advance, to foreclose emotional access to the image via both prophylactic denial of spectatorial pleasure and half-serious communication between artist and spectator.

As his feelings about visual language imply, Provost steps back from these efforts. In many ways, one might say that his work represents a step beyond. In fact, Provost takes a page from David Foster Wallace’s famous appeal for a kind of post-irony, and in this sense he forms a New Sincerity entirely his own: an effort to use cinema in order to reestablish connection without irony, without kitsch, without the knowing aside or the corrosive smirk in which all pop-cultural references, all the films and TV programs and YouTube videos, have already been predigested – liked and favorited and rendered crushingly banal. Reflexivity, once the great virtue of the self-conscious and the all-knowing postmodernist work, has itself become unconscious, pre-programmed, thereby denying the subtle alchemy that composes all of cinema and its illusory pleasures, and, worse yet, rendering these pleasures guilty.

Provost’s work cuts through this cynicism, correcting it in the direction of a more sincere sentiment in order to divine the original mysteries of the image. In *Suspension* (2007), a mirror plume of smoke billows hypnotically in infinite impossible permutations. In *Gravity*, images of romantic clinches from myriad classic films are layered, spiraling out in an erotic vortex. These works offer us a return to that moment in which the experience of watching the image enables the flow of dreams, and, per Wallace, becomes once again expansive, summoning “the transcendence of everyday life.”⁶

In *Gravity*, familiar images and Hollywood tropes attain new weight and new narrative power. Few images are as clichéd as the kiss, but here Provost summons them to craft an entirely new narrative of the romantic relationship. What at first glance seems a veritable tsunami of movie romance gradually breaks down and reorients itself, rising and falling in waves of tension and release: the first encounter, love at first sight, the first kiss, passion, doubt, drama, separation, suffering. With each image, cinematic narrative becomes a material object – one stratified in a precisely rhythmic, layered arc representing the story of romance – as different characters from different movies experience the same emotions at the same time.

Robrecht Vanderbeeken, in his essay in this volume, notes that “Provost plays with the codes of cinema to create visual poems about our reality, more specifically about that with which our experience of reality is permeated: cinema.” And Provost’s work responds to – and even takes seriously – the conditions of contemporary digital image culture. With the emergence and proliferation of digital media technologies since the 1990s, the ability to capture and manipulate media of all kinds has expanded enormously, making nearly everyone producers and consumers of the image. For the theorist Nicolas Bourriaud, the result of this proliferation of appropriation strategies and applications is an



Girl
Is everything OK?

Boy
Yeah.

Girl
It's a strange world.



The Perfect Wave

2014, loop





