

## Life Camera Action: Films on Paper

By Robert Davis | January 22, 2009 | 1:37pm

Life Camera Action They say that a picture is worth a thousand words, but when a movie travels from one country to another, the first thing it accumulates is a bunch of them. Words. They appear at the bottom of the picture like mold on cheese, and although they open the world of foreign film to a vastly wider audience, their presence is a constant reminder of our differences, the accent that an expatriate can't seem to shake. Life Camera Action For the past decade, New York-based artist Stefana McClure has been inspired by that very text to create what she calls "films on paper," a seemingly obsessive art project in which she laboriously traces all of the subtitles that appear in a film, on top of each other in layers, and then transfers them to a piece of plain, colored paper. The result is an abstract work, roughly the size of a computer monitor, that captures not the story or cinematography of a film but the shape and placement of its text, the part of the picture you're normally supposed to see right through.

Along the bottom of one of her pieces—a tracing from a film with English subtitles—is an indecipherable, blurry white smear that, when examined closely, shows fragments of letters leaking through. In a piece that's based on a film with Japanese subtitles, the white marks appear not as a stripe across the bottom but as two rows of squares, like the tire tread of a BMX bike, revealing the invisible grid used for Kanji characters.

Born in Northern Ireland, McClure studied sculpture in London and paper-making in Kyoto, and she now lives and works in New York, so crossing cultures and living as a foreigner is something she knows well. As with any abstract piece of art, McClure's "films on paper" invite all kinds of thoughts and associations, especially when they're seen together.

She doesn't say exactly how she selects the films to work with, but her choices often seem to echo her apparent fascination with language and culture. In *Mystery Train* involves a young Japanese couple visiting the legendary hometown of Elvis Presley and Carl Perkins. Even those of us who don't speak the couple's language understand the gist of their constant argument about which musician is better, but for the rest of their story, we need the subtitles. For her transfer of *Mystery Train*, however, McClure playfully used a version intended for a Japanese audience, a version with Japanese subtitles in every story but that one, reversing everything.

Often McClure's choice of paper seems linked to the film's color palette, but, curiously, she used blue paper for Wim Wenders' distinctly gray *Wings of Desire*, a film about angels in Berlin who listen to the thoughts of the people they watch over. Wenders lets the audience listen, too, and at times the soundtrack is so dense with whispering German voices that the English subtitles only offer an approximation. The movie's layered audio approaches the abstraction that McClure achieves visually. (One character's voice is clear to English speakers: Peter Falk plays an American actor working in Berlin.) McClure could have used gray paper to hint at the film's hue, but I like the choice of blue because it reminds me that the film itself makes a memorable shift to color at an important moment.

Clint Eastwood says that Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* was the inspiration for *Fistful of Dollars*, and some have wondered if Kurosawa drew inspiration from an American novel, Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*. Tsai Ming-Liang's film *What Time is it There?* follows a Taiwanese woman to France where she remains spiritually tethered to the guy in Taipei who gave her a watch. Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)* is one of the few films made in the Inuit language of Alaska. Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* explores the legacy of the hydrogen bomb through the relationship of a Japanese man and a French woman. And in 1930 when talkies were new, Josef von Sternberg shot each scene of *The Blue Angel* twice, once in German and then in English, to create, simultaneously, two distinct but nearly identical movies in two different languages.

Based on these films, McClure's strangely fascinating works are usually exhibited with little comment, but her interest is clear. Her meticulous process of translation not only reveals patterns that we normally ignore but also seems to capture something essential about the language beneath—the language within—every film.

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