cinem-a-crobatic:
trans-active cinema production in search of urban schizophrenia

by

Iki Nakagawa

Bachelor of Fine Art,
New York University
Tisch School of the Arts
Department of Film and TV, 1993

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Massachusetts Institute Of Technology

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signature of the Author

Iki Nakagawa, Department of Architecture
January 17, 1997

Certified by

Dennis Adams
Associate Professor of Visual Arts Program
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by

Edward Levine
Director, Visual Arts Program
cinem-a-crobatic:
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Iki Nakagawa, Department of Architecture
January 17, 1997

Annette Michelson
Professor of Cinema Studies
at New York University

W. Mitchell
Dean of the School of
Architecture and Urban Planning
at Massachusetts Institute of Technology
iki nakagawa

Submit to the Department of Architecture
on January 17th, 1997 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Advanced Visual Studies

Abstract

On December 15, 1996, from 1:30 to 4:30, cinem-a-crobatic was formally presented at
Columbus Park, New York City. The park is located at the intersection of China town and the
Federal Court district.

cinem-a-crobatic attempts to amplify the complex and shifting relationship between the urban
landscape and the experience of its inhabitants, through the introduction of a new form of urban
cinema production. Unlike most conventional cinematic productions, cinem-a-crobatic is a
cinema-production-like “play.” Its participants are the production crew and the public who interact
with the crew at the site of production. The production crew consists of a director, a camera
person and actors. I have also included a person who interviews the director and actors to question
their motives behind each scene. The roles of the production crew are interchanged among the
participants. cinem-a-crobatic not only stimulates new possibilities of cinematic story telling by
integrating the realities of urban life as a structural basis for its narrative construction, it also
attempts to serve as a new method for generating social interaction.

Central to the production of cinem-a-crobatic was the use of a new video device that was
specifically developed for the project. It was mounted on a standard film dolly and functioned as a
nomadic instrument which was pushed around the park by the participants. It functioned both as
a sculptural matrix for the production and as a visual lure for drawing the public into its
performative arena. This device recorded, edited, and projected the captured video image on the
surface of a transparent glass screen that simultaneously framed the real landscape.

This thesis text is in two parts. The first part describes the project in detail, including a brief history
of how the project evolved, who the participants were, and the nature and use of the video device.
The second part discusses the autobiographical and philosophical framework for the project.

Thesis Supervisor: Dennis Adams
Title: Associate Professor of Visual Arts Program

cinemacrobat  

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1.1.1. moving the device

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PART one.

Cinem-a-crobatic:
trans-active video production in search of
urban schizophrenia
In an attempt to situate cinema production as an arena to stimulate a new form of human interaction, *cinem-a-crobatic* explores the following three areas of inquiry:

1. To utilize cinema production as a way to unveil two modes of reflexivity. The first is the private relationship between one's personal psyche and creative processes. The second is the collective relationship between one's personal psyche and the other's psyche in their collaborative process of creation.

2. To reveal the way in which the human subject experiences various shifts of her/his psychological state within these modes of reflexivity.

3. To foreground the psychological disorientation caused by these shifts, and by extension, to locate urban cinematic production as an arena to exercise this psychological disorientation.¹

To explore the above three areas of inquiry, I formulated a structure for the participants to follow. First, person A is asked to conceive and to direct a two to three minute scene. In this scene, person C worked on the camera, person B documented the making of A's scene and the rest of the participants acted. After A's scene was produced, B was asked to conceive and direct another two to three minute scene to immediately follow A's scene. In this scene, A worked the camera, D documented and the others acted. Rotation continued until every role had been interchanged, at which point we returned to the first rotation.

José, one of the participants, commented on the open ended structure of the workshop by saying,

> Here we don’t have much format, I mean, we do have a format but the format is basically like a little shell, like a scale. and you have a right to choose what goes into that scale. You know, like format here is like a skeleton and we are the organs...like muscle and shit and we decide what goes in and what comes out.

¹ I stress the verb 'exercise' in an attempt to acknowledge and work within this state of flux rather than to simply adjust to it.
1.1.3. participants and their scenes.
In February 1996, I proposed to the Professional Performing Arts School in New York City to organize a video workshop at the school. This institution is specifically programmed to provide a high school education for students who plan to continue their careers as performing artists. The academic curriculum is taught during the morning and, in the afternoon, studio courses are provided by professionals in the field. The students come from every borough in New York City and represent a wide range of ethnic and class backgrounds.

After I announced the workshop topic to the student body, three students came to the first session: José Madero, Reynier Molenaar, and Zuri Russell. Three weeks into the workshop, four other students were added to the group: Amanjah Anthony, Paul Baily, Gilmer Cook, and Katherine Paulino. They were brought to the class by Ms. Kim Bruno, the director of the studio program at the school, because they were all neglecting their course work. Perhaps, a part of the success of my project was that it provided students with a nurturing environment for them to “play” 2 rather than to “perform.”

There were two assignments given to the participants at the beginning of the workshop. The first, was to produce video scenes collaboratively based on the structure described above, and the second, was to produce a personal video journal during their role as an interviewer.

The workshop met twice a week from 1:30 to 4:30 in the afternoon. The participants chose two locations to produce scenes, Columbus Park and SoHo. For most of the participants, their experiences in these areas were mostly new, unexpected and even awkward. In one of the interviews, Paul addressed his reaction to SoHo by saying:

*Neighborhoods around here is whacked, no kids, no park to play, I just see old people that don’t wear bra, women walking around, they all look like they sniff cocaine I don’t really feel out of place, ’cause I don’t really care who’s around me. I don’t feel in place either, because this is not my type of community, it looks like boring life around here.*

2. Paul, Gill and Amanjah call themselves “POLO-Play Only Live Once” crew.
1.1.4. production in Soho

1.1.5. video interview

cinemacrobatic
The production scenes that the participants created in SoHo were highly dramatic. One scene was about a professional hitman trying to kill a boy who had information about a government conspiracy. An anti-government agent was simultaneously trying to protect the boy. As the production personnel were interchanged, the story became confused, it was no longer clear who was chasing and who was being chased.

The scripting of the scenes often seemed to reflect the participants personal backgrounds. I asked Zuri to explain the relationship of his identity to one of the scenes he was directing. Referring to the significance of one of his characters who was being chased, he said:

This running affects not just me, but everybody has his vice like a demon that they don't particularly like, you know, and I mean, it doesn't have to be one particular thing, but when you run from somebody, it's, ahm, you feel overwhelmed...run very fast and then hit the wall.

The concept of interchanging roles generated real psychological disturbances among the participants, that were then transposed back onto the content of the video scenes. Referring to a scene that he both directed and acted in, José explained the psychological effects of his multiple roles.

I'm half and half in reality, you know, I'm just getting out of it but he is out of it and when I walk up to him, he still see me as Mario, so he is presuming that I'm Mario. But he is now Reynier, he is not Louie anymore, so the first thing he is gona tell me is that 'yo yo yo, Mario, look, I'm not Louie anymore, whole thing is a game we are not in the reality this is not real reality and I'm like what are you talking about, my name is not Mario, my name is Johnny, Johnny, Johnny are you awake?

In further questioning José with regard to these psychological effects he said,

he (the character in his scene) is being dragged from reality to reality, he doesn't know what's real and what's fake. All he knows is that he is there but he doesn't know why.
1.1.6. viewing

1.1.7. José’s scene in Soho

1.1.8. Zuri explains...

cinematicrobatic
Amanjah raised a different perspective towards the shift in between reality and fiction when I asked him to explain the relationship of his identity to one of the characters he was playing.

personally, seriously this is like so fiction and so fake, I don’t have any personal experience to even try to compare to this
(...)
when me and my man Gill, we was looking for this kid name Rumor, at our school, right, ’cause he had jumped on my man Steven, so me and Gill went looking for him and (...)
his friends gave him up to me, they told me where he was, and me and Gill went to do our thing, we beat him up, you know..."

Although Amanjah started his comment by saying “...so fake, I don’t have any personal experience to even try to...” he went on to contradict himself as he described his personal story. Was his story fiction or non-fiction? I believe that because he stated that he had no personal story, he felt safe in providing a narrative which might or might not have been true. In this regard, the story is not non-fiction but not wholly fiction either. He created a breathing space in a situation which was totally foreign to him. In a way, he created another self who was strong and aggressive in order to feel protected. In this regard, the narrative functions as a kind of self-defense mechanism.
1.1.9. production in Soho

cinematicrobatic
This space between fiction and non-fiction played an active role in situations where there was a conflict between the production crew and the local inhabitants. Every week after the production at Columbus Park, we went to the same pizza store where we discussed the workshop and screened the scenes from the day on the existing monitor inside the store. At one point, the owner of the pizza store asked us to leave, claiming that the vulgarity of the video content would disrupt his business. Some of the African American participants interpreted his rejection as racist. Some of the others interpreted it simply on the basis of his temperamental character. These various interpretations were then integrated into the narrative of our new scenes. By transforming the real situation into fictional scenes, we were able to diffuse our somewhat hostile feelings. In this sense, this experience provided a new method of generating social therapy.
pizza man vs cinema crew

cinemacrobatic
For the official presentation of the project, several new members joined our group; Cookie and Candie Freeman, Talisha Martin, Sean Nelson, and Wendy Tsang.
1.2.1. using device

cinemacrobbatic
The video device consists of two parts. The first is a recording and editing mechanism and the second consists of two display units which sandwich the first part. (see 1.2.3., isometric) The first part contains two Hi-eight camera and Hi-eight record decks. Camera 1 records interviews and Camera 2 records scripted scenes. Every scene recorded by Camera 2 will in turn be feed to the record decks. The second part contains two sets of beam splitters. The first set displays video images from Camera 1 and is viewed from the director’s point of view. The second set displays video images from Camera 2 and is viewed from the point of view of the actors.
isometric

1. isometric

1.2.1. isometric

1.2.2. isometric

beam splitter

Hi-8 camera1

Hi-8 camera2

record deck

cinematic

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1.2.3. screen

When one views the screen during the recording, one sees both the captured video image and the real scene beyond the screen. When one views the glass during the playback, one sees the present scene interacting with the recorded past. For example, one would see an actor passing in front of the glass while there would be no one present beyond the glass. The director could script his/her new scene utilizing the recorded image. For example, an actress could perform with the recorded actor.
1.2.4. screen

cinemacrobianc
1.2.5. production stills

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PART two.

background of the project
In my childhood, I experienced the interpenetration of fiction and non-fiction. Indeed, my early imaginary experiences have strong connections with cinematic experience. From the time I was three years old, my father filmed almost every event of my daily life with his eight-millimeter film camera. Later, this footage was projected on our living room wall to be viewed and discussed among family members. For me, this experience of myself flickering on a wall as a film image set up the beginnings of my imaginary life.

Later, when I was ten years old, my father produced a narrative feature film. For this film, I played the role of a little girl who develops into a schizophrenic woman. The physical events which occurred during the course of film production became part of the daily events of my life. In one scene, I pretended to jump off a suspended balcony and fall to the ground. This action was shot in two parts, one of me jumping and the other of me lying on the ground. Because I did not really fall, I opened my eyes while lying on the ground and smiled up at the camera.

Despite this somewhat terrifying action, the experience of being on the film set provided an extraordinary feeling of safety and comfort. During the production, I was called by my fictional name, Unica. Members of the crew, mostly university students of my father, acted as substitute older brothers and sisters who prevented me from being hurt during the film production. Events consisting of scripted and non-scripted activities created a dual reality, and I recognized this complex reality as providing a nurturing and protecting environment.

When I finally saw my other identity projected on screen, I experienced a very strange identification with the image of Unica. It was a kind of out of body experience; I, as a bodily existence, was displaced and only I, as a consciousness,

3. I am using the term very loosely here and will be discussed later in Metz (via Lacan)'s theory of imaginary.
4. The film was based on the short story of Unica Zurun titled "Sombre Printemps" (The dark spring). It was written at the end of her life. The story treats her own dream: young girl aged seven years old woke up in the middle of the night and she met "Homme Jasmin" for the first time.
passed into the reality projected on screen. I began to recall and relive all the
events that had taken place during the production. Because some of the events
were recorded as film images, I became confused whether I was remembering the
events in my mind or seeing the events in front of my eyes. When the projection
ended, I became very disoriented. It was as if everything I had lived was
illusionary and had never existed. Not only my sense of reality, but also my
identity became fragmented and disassociated.

Consequently, I appropriated these two parts of cinematic experience, 'making'
and 'viewing', in order to cope with day-to-day experiences. For example, there
were fights between my parents. When my mother became hysterical, she threw
glasses and dishes on the floor. In order to calm her, I would start picking up the
shattered glass. I was, of course, terrified by this situation and did not know how
to deal with my feelings. In order to cope with these feelings, I disassociated
myself from the person who was experiencing the event by creating another
identity who observed that person from a distance.

First, I saw the event as a part of a scripted scene in which I was performing the
role of girl who witnessed her parents fight. In other words, the anger and terror
created in the fight became an acted reality. Second, I, as a spectator, saw the
girl as if I were watching a character in a film. These two ways of transforming
real events into fiction enabled me to disassociate myself from the person who was
experiencing the terror of the event.

While this self-defense mechanism created a protective layer between the inside
and the outside of myself, it also created a distorted image of reality. This
distortion occurred as a dichotomy of real/unreal. Regardless of whether the event
was scripted or not, the enactment had to be pursued. In other words, I would still
continue to pick up the shattered glass. There were also unexpected occurrences.
For instance, my mother would tell me to go to my room. At this point, my
enacting of what was scripted in my mind was interrupted. In other words,
another kind of reality disrupted the reality which I had conceived. Consequently,
I lost control over what was real and what was not. I could not distinguish
between the one observing the event and the one participating in that event. In
my mind I was still picking up the glass, but my body was halfway out of the door.
This created a split self.
transitional phenomena;  
a space of ‘in between’

In his theory of transitional phenomena, D. W. Winnicott discusses the complex dialogue between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ reality. This dialogue is discussed in terms of the relationship between the mother and the infant.

The infant cannot be said to know at first what is to be created. At this point in time the mother presents herself. In the ordinary way she gives he breast and her potential feeding urge. The mother's adaptation to the infant's needs, when good enough, gives the infant the illusion that there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant's own capacity to create. In other words, there is an overlap between what the mother supplies and what the child might conceive of. To the observer, the child perceives what the mother actually presents, but this is not the whole truth. The infant perceives the breast only in so far as a breast could be created just there and then. There is no interchange between the mother and the infant. Psychologically the infant takes from a breast that is part of the infant, and the mother gives milk to an infant that is part of herself.5

Two objects are generated during the breast feeding. The first is what is created within the psychology of the infant, his/her sense of breast. The second is what is presented by the mother, the breast itself. I call the former the object-in-self and the latter the object-in-other.

Because the infant is incapable of recognizing the mother's breast as the object-in-other, the inside and outside reality of the infant overlap. Transitional phenomena generates a situation where the object-in-self and the object-in-other are off-registered from their desire to correspond.

When the mother offers her breast to the infant, an illusion is created that there exists a physical reality which corresponds to what the infant imagines.

    The transitional phenomena represent the early stages of the use of illusion, without which there is no meaning for the human being in the idea of a relationship with an object that is perceived by others as external to that being.6

6. ibid., p. 11.
Through this use of illusion, the infant incorporates “other than me objects” into his/her psychological development. This use of illusion thus facilitates the infant to integrate the “other” into the constitution of “self.”

These diffuse two objects, however, are contingent upon one another. In other words, if the object-in-other does not exist, the dichotomies of self/other, of the inside/ the outside reality, and of subject/object begin to diffuse. Two objects begins to be united. At this point, the person becomes schizophrenic.

They (schizophrenic) may see the world subjectively and be easily deluded, or else while being firmly based in most areas they accept a delusional system in other areas, or they may be not firmly structured in respect of the psychosomatic partnership so that they are said to have poor coordination. Sometimes a physical disability such as defective sight or hearing plays into this state of affairs making a confused picture in which one cannot clearly distinguish between a hallucinating state and a disability based ultimately on a physical abnormality. In the extreme of this state of affairs the person being described is a patient in a mental hospital, either temporarily or permanently, and is labeled schizophrenic.7

In Winnicott’s theory of schizophrenia, it is as if the baby is dreaming of breast feeding while there is no one to breast feed. Because there is no outer reality to provide the object-in-other, the object-in-self pretends to be the object-in-other. The two roles are fused by the subject. Not only does one become absolutely disconnected from outer reality, one becomes dissociated within the self. The schizophrenic person no longer knows who is the person providing the object in other and who is the person generating the object in self. It is as if his/her body is skinless. The protective layer between inside and outside, the self and the other, is dissolved.

7. ibid., p. 66.

cingmacrobatic
In Christian Metz’s theory of the imaginary, spectators are considered to be the central element in the construction of cinematic narrative.

What is characteristic of the cinema is not the imaginary that it may happen to represent, but the imaginary that it is from the start, the imaginary that constitutes it as a signifier. [...] The imaginary, by definition, combines within it a certain presence and a certain absence. In the cinema it is not just the fictional signified, if there is one, that is thus made present in the mode of absence, it is from the outset the signifier. [...] The unique position of the cinema lies in this dual character of its signifier: unaccustomed perceptual wealth, but at the same time stamped with unreality to an unusual degree, and from the very outset.

In cinema, it could be said that the object-in-self corresponds to the interpretation of the spectator and that the object-in-other corresponds to the film on the screen. But this dichotomy is easily diffused. The object-in-other, the film, as Metz states, is stamped with unreality from the very outset (i.e. we all know that the image of the lion on screen is not a real lion standing in front of the screen).

8. In ‘main stream’ cinema the film is presumed to be self contained. The spectator is passive, waiting to be spoon fed by the reality constructed by the film. In this text, I am referring to the traditions of Avant-Garde cinema, in which filmmakers challenge their audience to construct their own interpretation of the film. See more in Phillip, "NOTIONS OF AVANT-GARDE CINEMA" in Film As Film, The Art council of Great Britain 1979. p. 9
One could argue that in Metz's concept of cinema, the transition between the object-in-self and the object-in-other takes place through 'identification' of the spectator.

What I have said about identification so far amounts to the statement that the spectator is absent from the screen as perceived, but also (the two things inevitably go together) present there and even 'all-present' as perceiver. At every moment I am in the film by my look's caress. This presence often remains diffuse, geographically undifferentiated, evenly distributed over the whole surface of the screen; or more precisely hovering, like the psychoanalyst's listening, ready to catch on preferentially to some motif in the film, according to the force of that motif and according to my own fantasies as a spectator, without the cinematic code itself intervening to govern this anchorage and impose it on the whole audience. II

9. The term "imaginary" Metz refers to, derives from Lacanian psychoanalytical theory. In that theory, the mirror stage, where the infant begins to unite different parts of his body by looking at his reflection, and identifies himself as the image in the mirror. Development of dichotomy of self who watches the image and the other self who is being reflected is the characteristic of the imaginary. See Shigeru Kashima "Definition of terms" in Japanese Translation of: Le Signifiant imaginaire. Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 1981, p. 269.
11. ibid., p. 54.

cinemacrobatical
In the 1920's, Dziga Vertov, the constructivist film maker, extended the participatory role of the spectator to every stage of film production including the conception of film themes, choice of images, and editing processes.\textsuperscript{12}

Alexander Medevkin, a colleague of Dziga Vertov, pursued a related technique by organizing a film train, fully equipped with residences for film personnel, studios, developing laboratories, film storage facilities and projection rooms. This train traveled to various locations in Soviet Russia and the Ukraine, producing a series of social satires as well as instructional films.\textsuperscript{13} Most of the films were produced for the local people where the train stopped. The films provoked discussion among their audiences that became a conceptual basis for the next film's narrative (see 2.3.1-3). Medevkin's desire to work with the needs of the local people lead to the development of a film camera that resembled a pistol. It was used by Russian soldiers during World War II (see 2.3.4.).\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{14} See Marker, \textit{The Last Bolshevik}, Chicago: Video Data Bank, 1993.
2.3.4. a pistol camera

cinemacrobatic
From 1906 to 1930, Dora Film, an Italian production company, encouraged local inhabitants to participate in the production process. Their production sets were built directly on the street. Everyday life and film production life were merged into the day-to-day experiences of the local inhabitants.

2.3.5. A film set as a temporal architecture in the city.

*cinemacrobing*
Urban geography and multiple psyches
in the theory of the International Situationist Movement

In his theory of psychogeography, Guy Debord, the central theorist of the International Situationist Movement, explores the various interactions between city inhabitants' subjective perception and the urban environment. To implement his theory he developed a technique of passage through the city, called dérive.

Among the various situationist methods is the dérive, a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. The dérive entails playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, which completely distinguishes it from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll. In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. The element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the dérive point of view cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones. But the dérive includes both this letting go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities.[...]

While this technique foregrounds a dialogue between each individual's personal experience and his/her urban environment, and further stimulates the city as a living force, the experience may result in psychological distraction and a kind of split personality. In his letter to Debord from a sanatorium, Chtcheglov expresses the danger of dérive to human psychology: “A series of dérive is dangerous because one who travels so far without self-defense would be defeated by split personality, weakness, amnesia, and destruction.”


cinemacrobatric
Within a series of dérive, the distinction between the inner perception of urban space and outer reality often becomes diffused. The individual practicing the technique of dérive can become confused about whether a particular experience he/she has had is based on the present perception of the space or on perceptions of other spaces.

It is true that in the case of a series of dérive over a rather long period of time it is almost impossible to determine precisely when the state of mind peculiar to one dérive gives way to that of another. One sequence of dérive was pursued without notable interruption for around two months. Such an experience gives rise to new objective conditions of behavior, which bring about the disappearance of a good number of the old ones.18

Debord suggests group dérive in order to provide a more objective reading of urban space.

[T]he most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same awakening of consciousness, since the cross-checking of these different groups' impressions makes it possible to arrive at objective conclusions.19

One could argue that the group provides a therapeutic setting for individuals to recuperate objective experience in the urban living.20

---

19. ibid., p. 51.
20. The device which aids the individual to recover the lost object in other, is, for Winnicott, played by the psychotherapist. See Winnicott, Playing and Reality, A Tavistock/Routledge Publication, 1996, p. 71.
summary

cinem-a-crobatic provides a new 'playground' within the urban park where the participants in cinema production become acrobats21 striving to maintain the balance between the space of the virtual and the real. In this arena, conflict between strangers is embraced as a new form of social interaction.

21. The word "acrobat", deriving etymologically from the Greek "akrobates" (akro-batein), contains the meaning of edge as well as tip/beginning (ak) and the meaning of become, invent, and welcome (batein). Like the mythological figure Icarus, the acrobat is one who invents ways in which to bring oneself high up to the state of edge and becoming. Cinemacrobatics is a cinema which attempts to actualize these two implicit meanings both in the fabrication and the perception of images.
shout outs

to all the people listed here:

*cinem-a-crobati-crew:*

Amanjah Anthony, Paul Bailey, Steven Brooker,
Gilmer Cook, Candie and Cookie Freeman,
José Madero, Takisha Martin, Sean Nelson,
Zuri Russel, Wendy Tsang, Reyneir Molenar,
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Kim Bruno, Stephen Benton, Paul Christie,
Pat Wegan, Ikue Ito, Taketoshi Chuganji,
S. Utaka, Ike Ogawa, Annette Michelson,
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Adams, Taketo Shimada, Toshio Motoike
Maureen Slattery, Kati Kornendi, David Smith
Chris Dewart, Sarah Doherty, Brant,
Gloriana Davenport, Kevin, J. Depp Inc,
Fons Ltd, Chihaya Nakagawa,
And people in and around Columbus Park.

x.x.x.

cinemacroباتic
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Figure of transitional phenomena
Illustration found in
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still taken from the video,
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2.3.5.
Film set as a temporal architecture in city
Illustration found in
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Stills taken from the video documentation by Joan Logue

All graphic arrangements designed by the author.

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