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FILM

BLEEDING EDGE

September 27, 2019 • Amy Taubin on Christian Marclay's *48 War Movies* (2019)
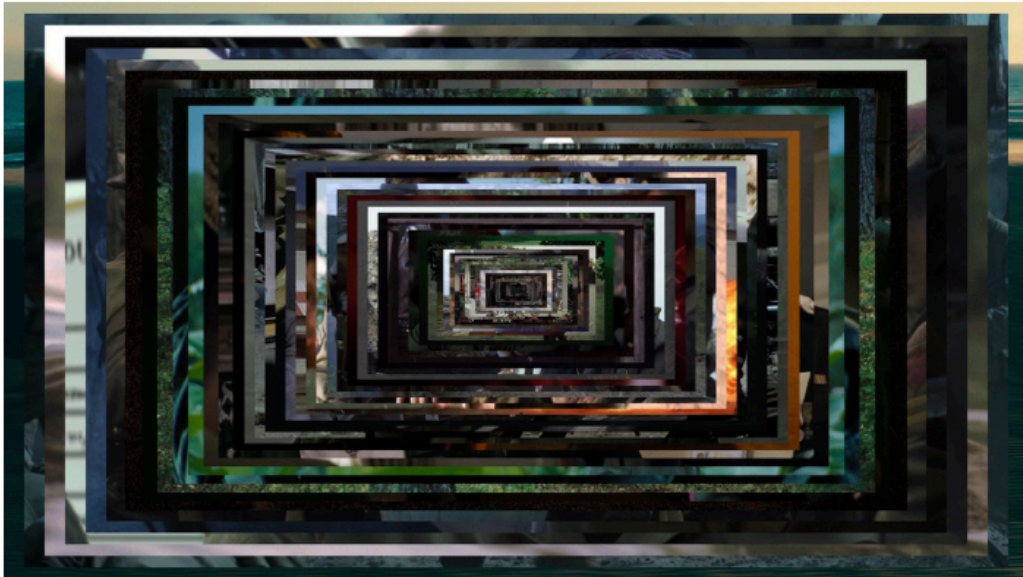
Christian Marclay, *48 War Movies* (still), **2019**, single-channel video installation, color and stereo sound, continuous loop, dimensions variable. © Christian Marclay. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

THE TITLE *48 WAR MOVIES* seems straightforward, and so is one's immediate impression of Christian Marclay's single-channel video installation, which debuted at the Venice Biennale and is currently at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York. The piece is kinetic, cacophonous, and in your face. But it's what you don't see that gets you thinking. Marclay digitally layered forty-eight feature-length war films, each slightly larger than the one which almost conceals it, so that only the four outer edges of each film's frame are visible. The movie in the center is the exception. We can watch it entirely, although it is too small to be legible as more than a monochromatic rectangle. And because of its size, we perceive this film—which in terms of the process of layering is the first film, i.e. nothing covers it—as the forty-eighth, i.e. the one that's farthest away from us in space and time. The illusion of three-dimensionality in *48 War Movies* is both strong and unstable. The piece is a spatiotemporal puzzle that abstracts its source films just as those films abstract their own terrible subject: the experience of war.

Almost all of Marclay's visual and aural works, including his most celebrated installation, 2010's *The Clock*, are collaged from existing sources. For *The Clock*, Marclay selected clips from thousands of movies that reference time by showing clocks or watches or mentioning a specific time in dialogue or titles. He assembled the clips in the order of the time each referenced, thus constructing a twenty-four-hour movie timepiece, which is calibrated so that the time within the movie collage is synced to the actual time of the projection. Rather than entering a time zone different from one's own and, as it were, losing oneself there—one of the pleasures of time-based art—*The Clock* made viewers hyperaware of their subjective sense of time, both practical and metaphysical. For this cinephile, *The Clock* was at first amusing: I identified clips; I admired the way Marclay turned continuity editing, the basis of film narrative, against itself by employing the conventions of cutting on motion, shot/reverse shot, allowing the direction of an actor's gaze to initiate the next shot in which we see whatever he/she is looking at, or overlapping sound from one shot to another. Marclay used this editing language not to connect the pieces of single story but to produce continuity among movies in general, or at least among those that fit his criteria of referencing time and which could gracefully be excerpted to fill the finite length of a day. And it is important that *The Clock* is a finite structure. Because each time viewers check their own watches to see if they match the timepiece that is *The Clock*, they become aware that their own time is finite, not only in the sense of how long can they afford to look at a work of art because everyone has many things to do every day, but in the sense that their lives will not go on forever. Like another great time-based work, Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967), *The Clock* provokes nothing less than a confrontation with mortality.

So too does *48 War Movies*, but here the confrontation is immediate, as it would be if one were fighting in a war or living in a war zone. Every moment is an assault on the eyes and ears. The source materials are Blu-ray disks of war films, all of them playing simultaneously and looped to play over and over again from beginning to end. Because the films are of different lengths, the temporal relationship among them has seemingly infinite variations. But because of technical limitations, they could only be fed into a single channel for twelve hours. At Paula Cooper, the piece is set up to begin and end at the same point every day. Marclay wasn't particular about the choice of films. He required only that they be in color and available on Blu-ray in 16:9 format (or easily conformable to 16:9). They are layered in the order in which they were produced, so that the outermost movie/edge (the one that seems closest to the viewer) is the most recently released. Marclay didn't tweak the color or enhance the sound, which plays in stereo from four speakers, two above the image and two below.

In part, because of the placement of the speakers, *48 War Movies* is a frontal bombardment. The audio tracks of all forty-eight movies play simultaneously in their entirety. The experience of the piece is radically different from the many VR pieces that attempt to plop the viewer in the center of a deadly situation (I find most of those pieces obscene). There is a literal and experiential distance between viewers sitting on a gallery bench looking at a screen some fifteen or twenty feet away. We cannot close that empty space by identifying with a character (there are no characters) or by falling under a narrative's spell.

The image in front of us oscillates between flatness and depth as the viewer's gaze is pulled between the flickering, exploding concentric strips of color and light (the edges of forty-seven war films, because films can only place us at the edge of an experience) and the nearly still point at the center. If you stay long enough, you might become aware of your peripheral vision and the difficulty of ever seeing the big picture, the entire picture, the picture of a world in which war is a constant, but, for most of us in a gallery in Chelsea, sufficiently far away for it to be an abstraction that we take intellectual and aesthetic pleasure in to the peril of ourselves and everyone else.

— Amy Taubin

48 War Movies *screens at* Paula Cooper Gallery *in New York until October 19, 2019.*