



Detail of *Civilization (Megaplex)* (2008/2011) by Marco Brambilla

## PLAYER VS. PLAYED

### The Dark Lining

By Marco Brambilla

Santa Monica Museum of Art

Santa Monica, California

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Entering the darkened maze constructed to house media artist Marco Brambilla's survey exhibition "The Dark Lining" at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, viewers had the opportunity to walk through a carefully choreographed presentation of seven time-based works. Each piece was isolated and viewed either on a separate wall or in a perfectly proportioned room where the viewer had no distractions or sound bleeds, enabling their undivided attention. The works demand attention and careful scrutiny. Brambilla is a master of montage, and most of his pieces result from hours of compositing found footage.

The earliest work on view is *Wall of Death* (2001), a single-channel video projection that documents a motorcyclist standing on the pedals of his bike with his arms raised as he endlessly circles a spinning wooden drum. Through precise editing, Brambilla has created the illusion of a continuous stunt by repeating short clips of the biker in constant motion despite changes in perspective and point of view. The vertiginous motion is dizzying and disorienting. While *Wall of Death* is fascinating to watch, Brambilla chooses not to reference the history of the stunt or its potential danger; instead the video becomes a visually engaging formal study based on a smart editing concept in which the series of loops become progressively shorter while creating the illusion that each sequence could have gone on indefinitely.

Much of Brambilla's work purports to be more than it is. He frequently uses found footage, yet beyond overwhelming the viewer with a bombardment of imagery, offers very little

commentary on the source of his extractions. *Cathedral* (2008) is a perfect example of Brambilla's skill at combining and mirroring imagery to enhance visual impact. Shot during the Christmas shopping season at the Toronto Eaton Centre mall, this nine-minute video loop juxtaposes fragmented shoppers crisscrossing the screen as if in perpetual kaleidoscopic motion. The doubling and layering of the shoppers and the architecture creates a dense visual field. The accompanying soundtrack, with its digitized dingings and the ringing of distant bells, is as abstracted as the imagery. Amid the camera's slow-motion pan one can make out many of the store names as well as the cathedral ceiling of the space. These elements coalesce in a sophisticated array of dynamic imagery whose patterned effects are reminiscent of stained glass windows. The piece neither celebrates nor criticizes consumer culture at the height of the holiday shopping season, but simply uses it as colorful, vibrant, and richly textured source material.

*Sea of Tranquility* (2006) is Brambilla at his most minimal and poetic. It is a portrayal of decay as Brambilla imagines the disintegration of the lunar module, Eagle, placed on the moon by the astronauts of the 1969 Apollo spaceflight. Through accelerated time lapse—as the video is just over three minutes in length—the lunar module and the American flag placed by its side are slowly eaten away, becoming a pile of rubble. The soundtrack, based on the actual communication between mission control and the lunar pod, has been digitally manipulated, foregrounding beeps and blips and eliminating dialogue so that both sound and image are devoid of human presence. The work becomes a vivid fantasy portrait of the isolation and harsh conditions of the lunar landscape, while simultaneously a statement about the vulnerability of our creations and the limits of technology.

The three-channel installation "HalfLife" (2002) is a thoughtful meditation and commentary on online gaming—specifically the first-person shooter game *Counter-Strike*. For this work, Brambilla recorded players in a cyber cafe in Garden Grove, California. In the four quadrants of the center projection, four young players

stare intently at the viewer, who assumes the position of their absent computer screens. Almost expressionless, they silently maneuver the controls. As these youths play the game, killing and being killed, footage of the players and the game itself is projected on the two adjacent walls. The images of the players simulate those from surveillance cameras placed in the cafés to monitor gang violence. Brambilla's investigation into the world of *Counter-Strike* explores the spaces where fantasy and reality coincide and metaphorically examines the relationship between virtual and actual killings.

Understanding yet ultimately rejecting the restraints of Hollywood (he began as a commercial filmmaker directing the feature *Demolition Man* in 1993), Brambilla turned his skills as a director toward making films as art. Brambilla's work is so polished and technically apt that its content is sometimes diffused. He is interested in the confluence of spectacles, and his multi-layered video pieces carefully choreograph the viewer's experience, making sure to give them more than they can process at any one moment. Rather than ask viewers to sit down and watch a lengthy narrative, Brambilla takes many different elements and creates collages of short loops. The results are so densely layered as to require multiple viewings.

Brambilla's latest projects, *Civilization (Megaplex)* (2008/2011) and *Evolution (Megaplex)* (2010), are executed in stereoscopic 3D and must be viewed through glasses that are handed out at the entrance of the exhibition. The floor-to-ceiling projections are screened on opposite walls in the final room of the installation, allowing viewers to ping-pong back and forth from one to the other, catching all or only parts of the three-minute loops. In both works, recognizable moments from Hollywood films are assembled together, not in a linear fashion as in Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010), but as a montage that takes on the quality of an intricate painting by Hieronymus Bosch. The works illustrate the progression from Heaven to Hell in *Civilization* and the development of aggression and conflict in *Evolution*. Because Brambilla uses clips from commercial films, the first viewing

often becomes a game of recognition—Did you see *E.T.*?, *The Terminator*?, Charlton Heston?, etc. Brambilla's seamless compositing creates layers of imagery organized by theme, as well as by color and movement. More complex than a 2D design problem, Brambilla has conceptualized the transition in overlapping fragments, many of which are presented on screen simultaneously. It is impossible to take in the whole event in a single viewing.

Needless to say, there is a magnificence to Brambilla's 3D presentations, yet the deeper question becomes why. As in much of Brambilla's work, the technology dwarfs the content, and the whiz-bang effect overwhelms the more aesthetic, as well as any socio-political considerations within the work. It cannot be denied that Brambilla wants to say something grand, yet the way he goes about it—attempting to include everything—diminishes the impact. For Brambilla, less could in fact be more.

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