

Looking at the Little Events: the Case of Chris Marker and David Perlov

Marta Montiano

The cinema continues to be in contact with the world. As Jean-Louis Comolli once said, the *mise en scene* of the documentary appears to be the strongest link that keeps the world and the cinema connected. It also gives the impression that the most direct way to approach things is from everyday film practice, filmmaking day after day, capturing the simplest things, sometimes in a domestic context. Some manifestations of the contemporary documentary film are identified with the idea of filmmaking as an individual everyday practice, a dynamic posited by Alexandre Astruc's *camera-stylo* (the camera as a pen) and an activity to which Chris Marker has also made reference: "We possess the means –and this is something new– for a form to filmmaking that is intimate, solitary. The process of making films with oneself, the way a painter or a writer works, no longer has to be necessarily experimental" (ORTEGA and WEINRICHTER, 2006: 187). The meaning of this would thus be to see and understand filmmaking as an individual job of collecting a series of *live* snapshots of reality, a collection of images which, as Marker suggests, quoting from *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shônagon, "make the heart beat faster".

Through the recording of everyday activities, some filmmakers have sought to establish a connection with the world. As if by paying the attention to the closest things and the simplest movements, it would be possible to see these things for the first time. Film images rediscover the world for us and function as a revelation. Filming would be an everyday activity so that 'cinema' comes to be considered a verb, whereby the activity is almost more important than the theme or content. However, the images that result from this kind of film practice are usually characterised by great force. This would suggest that Chris Marker's, Jonas Mekas' or David Perlov's filmography is full of images pregnant with significance, whether random portraits or filming of *down time*. The desire of the image is a question that Marker raises at the end of his film *Sans soleil* [Sunless] (Chris Marker, 1983), when he returns to the quote with which the film opens: the image of three blond children staring at the camera, i.e., staring at him. The filmmaker's voice constantly asks himself, asking us: "The trembling shot under the force of the wind that was hitting us on the cliff, everything that had been selected to arrange and that best reflected what I was seeing in that moment; why was I keeping it at arms' length, at the end of the zoom, up to its last twenty-fourth of a second?" What is the relationship that the filmmaker establishes with these children? It is connecting relationship with the image in which the object of desire is the image of others, the collective present, "not turned in on oneself, but on the other, the others", as Oliver Kohn puts it (ORTEGA and WEINRICHTER, 2006: 109).

Observation as work and routine

Chris Marker's alter ego in *Sans soleil* embarks on a journey in search of the mundane, of the collectable movement whose simplicity contains all the power of the cinematographic image. A similar attitude can be identified in the work of Israeli David Perlov, which is made up of two parts: *Diary* (1973-1983) and *Revised Diary* (1990-1999). What is fascinating about his daily film practice is how from behind the camera he attentively observes an everyday movement (for example, a man sweeping the street, or a window opening) and feels the desire to see it better and to collect that movement in the form of an image. A reflection on the question of the visual offered by writer and critic John Berger is in close alignment with these images of Perlov's. In his book *About Looking*, on the topic of the painting of Gustave Courbet, Berger writes that in Courbet's work, "everything is interpreted with wonder: wonder because looking, which is something free of rules, consists in being constantly amazed" (BERGER, 2001: 136). Perlov's films are open to wonder; they allow themselves to be amazed and set out to look from the very begin-

ning. His *Dairies* involve embarking on filmmaking from zero: buying a modest camera, leaning out of the window and recording repeated everyday routines as if they were being looked at for the first time. The images that result are gazes on the world of an almost primal nature. In May 1973, Perlov bought a camera and began his everyday film practice. His first shot, taken from a window of his home, already hints at the framework of what would become a task of observing the movements and actions of everyday activities, detached from mere narrative or dramatic interest. The exercise of these *Dairies* is based on the activity of observing, which Perlov himself admits has become the key to his work and his way of life. These images report his impressions of *the infra-ordinary*: the movement of the traffic in the street, the movements of people walking by under his window, the everyday activities of his wife and daughters, the collection of faces of friends who come to visit him. The simplest movements draw the attention of the filmmaker, who feels the desire to capture and preserve them. He does the same with the recording of everyday street sounds; the sound of a bus horn or of a gate rattled by a playing child.



Filming life is important, says Perlov

For the director, observation becomes a routine and a game. On the one hand, observing and filming are daily practices that the filmmaker finds it necessary to perform with a certain regularity. As is explained in Perlov's voice, managing to film one interesting movement sparks the desire to "film more and more". The filmmaker says of these images: "I want to start filming on my own and for myself. Professional filmmaking has ceased to appeal to me. I am looking for something different. I want to get

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closer to the everyday. Most of all, I want to do it anonymously. It takes time to learn how to do it". This routine needs a certain degree of practice to be able to film the movements that best reveal their vitality. On the other hand, the practice of observing becomes a game, consisting of establishing a fixed frame (which may be the window of the filmmaker's own home) and collecting the movements which, by leaving chance to do its work, can

be captured within that frame's boundaries. This game of capturing the vitality of small events in the street, the flow of life in the streets, the movements visible from the window, the images produced more or less by chance, the different frames that can be established, recalls the urban symphonies that made portraits of different cities: *Man with a Movie Camera* (Chelovek s kino-apparatom, Dziga Vertov, 1929), *À propos de Nice* (Jean Vigo, 1930) or *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt, Walter Ruttmann, 1927). The game of spying on the outside world also provokes the desire in the person filming to record the movements happening on the other side of the window, inside the domestic space.

In his book *About Looking*, John Berger describes an experience that illustrates the main characteristics of the visual approach to the everyday taken in David Perlov's films. Berger explains that, occasionally, when he drives home, a closed level crossing brings him to a stop next to a beautiful green field (BERGER, 2001: 184). During a pause of a few minutes, chance offers him the opportunity to observe what is happening there. This privileged place for observation a short distance from his house and, nevertheless, he seldom visits it. Berger's explanation for this makes reference to a notion of the event in which space and time unite. The *events* that occur in the field are similar to those listed by Georges Perec in his book of short works *La infra-ordinaire*; i.e., habitual, everyday events that have nothing spectacular about them. They are also along the same lines as those events recorded by Perlov's camera from his window: "Two birds chasing one another, a cloud crossing the sun and changing the colour of the green" (BERGER, 2001: 184). These little events acquire a special meaning because they occur in those minutes when Berger is forced to stop, or during the space-time in which Perlov leans out of the window, a camera in hand.

The mode of perception described here by Berger coincides in many respects with the observational images developed in Perlov's diaries, with the window as the paradigmatic and privileged place. There is a moment when the filmmaker proposes a game around the gaze. From a window that looks out onto a courtyard of a dwelling in Paris, a camera leans out and establishes some boundaries inside the image, a re-frame configured by the lines that form an inner wall, the floor, an outer wall. The game involves lingering on the filming of these boundaries and hoping (trusting) that *something* will happen. The smallest event will be recorded and the filmmaker will consider it a stroke of fortune and an image of great value and a power that is almost revelatory. The images that will occur inside these boundaries will be nothing more than the steps of a pair of high heels, or the legs of a man running. Perlov will comment about this image that, far from any dramatic or narrative interest, what is interesting is not the reason for running, or the destination of the runner, but the image itself of a man running. The frame established by Perlov's game is the cinematographic image that forms the basis of the events that occur inside it. The frame-image, like the field, not only frames the events, but also, as Berger suggests, *contains* them. Suddenly, what had started as just one more experience of everyday observation, says Berger, "opens in its centre and gives birth to a happiness which is instantly recognisable as your own. The field that you are standing before appears to have the same proportions as your own life" (BERGER, 2001: 188). This happiness that Berger describes is something like the David Perlov's stroke of fortune when, without expecting it, an event slips into the frame he has imposed.

The act of collecting

The idea of collection seems an appropriate concept for examining the way in which the perception and filming of daily life is structured. The things seen in this kind of filming are described as a series, an unfinished list of impressions, or a collection of sketches. The case of the description of still-life is especially significant. In *La infra-ordinaire*, Georges Perec counts the objects found on his routine walk: "on the side, Italian furniture or Japanese lighting shops, sellers of engravings, of art books, of Indian jewellery, of film posters, of any kind of pseudo-antique or pseudo-modern thing in the style of yesteryear, today or tomorrow: it is there where, for couple of francs, one can obtain a tin of food that contains a little Paris air, a pencil sharpener shaped like a paddle steamer, or like an old gramophone or like... Centre Georges-Pompidou, a vintage school notebook with an antiquated multiplication table on its back cover" (PEREC, 2009: 37). This accumulation of images, although it seems to offer no *profound* knowledge of reality, is established as an

image pregnant with significance. When Perlov or Merker visit a city, they see things like, in Percec's words, "a very dignified gentleman running in a squall with his bowler hat on, [or] a small girl sitting between the paws of one of the lion statues of Nelson's Column". This idea of collection gives rise to a notion of a new kind of gaze. In his meticulous journey, Georges Perec suggests the idea that the discovery of new locations and challenges for the gaze is something that revolutionises the mode of perception of the gazer. The filmmaker of daily happenings is dedicated to recording what he finds around him; the people, the movements. What is the interest in filming these things? In *Sans soleil* Chris Marker explains: "He liked the fragility of those moments suspended in time. Memories whose only function is to be leaving behind nothing more than memories. He wrote: I have been around the world several times and now only trivialities still interest me".

The film, which becomes an essay on memory, begins with the practice described here: the recording of things which, apparently insignificant, produce a kind of revelation when turned into a cinematographic image. It is about translating the lived experience into an image, which gives rise to an archive or collection of images of the world, people and beautiful things. Marker admits that, even though he had wanted to make a film about the economic miracle in Japan, he ended up filming something more direct; the celebrations in the street, and recording the sound, the intensity of the dances, conveying to us his presence and the presence of the people portrayed. These "things that make the heart beat faster" have this effect because they are recorded and turned into a cinematographic image, and on some occasion the filmmaker has felt the need to capture the image and to engrave onto the retina the full power of a portrait. There is a kind of revelation in these images, and in editing together a shot filmed in Africa and another of emus living in Île-de-France, the filmmaker expresses a feeling of universality or of the coexistence of different times. Or, as Oliver Kohn has expressed it, the "feeling of travelling around the planet with a huge open eye, in passing from one landscape to another with a click of the camera shutter, from one face to another, which we know are far apart, separated in space and time, but which nevertheless speak to each other, and we can hear their voices" (ORTEGA and WEINRICHTER, 2006: 107).

Marker's film gives us a means for interpreting this kind of image and cinematographic practice of collecting: the memory. He films in order to compile some archives of the world, as an *aid* to the memory. David Perlov tries

to organise the fragments he takes from reality, perhaps to understand it better, and to preserve the memories. The signs of memory, in the so-called *zone of Sans soleil*, can be held, says Marker, "like insects that have flown beyond time, and that can be observed from a point of view outside time": i.e., eternity.

Beyond the intensity of the things revealed by the cinematographic image, the critical pedagogy of Marker's work reaffirms the *essence* of the image, the need for critical images that are not confused with the reality they represent. Jean-Louis Comolli suggested that we film in order to see. The images, as in the case of Robert Flaherty in *Man of Aran* (1934), are the only remaining proof "of the existence and the power of beings and things". In the cinematographic image, reality is revealed in a new dimension: through the cinematic process, the world is transformed into a gaze upon the world.

Organising the domestic world in images

Filming in order to see is what David Perlov was doing in his diary practice, which has many points of connection with family films. In his endeavour to record life, the images are snapshots of reality, gazes upon the world, functioning without needing to be supported by a story. In order "to see life" as he aims to, he abandons the stories and plots used in other documentary practices and limits himself to documenting the everyday, "the ordinary".

This determination to capture the everyday doesn't obviate public life or politics. The filmmaker leans out from his domestic environment to film what is going on outside. He chooses to establish a distance and also a boundary, signalled by the window frame, as a point of transfer between outside and inside, public and private worlds. In his ambition to capture the essence of reality, he acknowledges the difficulty of answering the question: *how do you film public life?* Thus, the filmmaker

Trembling shot by Chris Marker





Sans soleil lingers on random images

has to adapt to the somewhat random boundaries established by the window in his room. Reality is too big to be recorded with a camera, or to be understood with a gaze. This act of filming is realised in a series of snapshots of reality, which produces some archives aimed at the future. Filmmakers who assign themselves this kind of work gather some material that is useful for acquiring a better understanding, but it is also a task of organising the information, the events, the feelings, producing a more accessible whole. In this attempt to organise reality, Perlov engages in a second reading of the images filmed, reviewing the filming process and identifying the construction of ideas. In this revision, he completes the meaning of the images, although it is always an open meaning, as he questions their significance and opens them up to the spectator.

As is evident in Perlov's work, filming the everyday involves focusing the attention on movement, especially human movement, and trying to glean the essence of each one. The most interesting events to collect are therefore the simplest movements, accessible from a window, flowing motions that can capture reality: his wife changing her dress in a single shot, "the active angles of my house". Sometimes the sequences filmed outside capture movements that are strange for him, but in most cases any simple movement can prove to be hypnotic for the camera's gaze: two people praying on the beach, an oriental group's dance, a woman cleaning. The images of the everyday are tentative, open possibilities that esta-

blish their way of relating to the things of the world; lived experience turns into an image. To record and archive the lived experience is to settle accounts with intimate reality, an activity designed to live the present with greater intensity. But the emotion experienced in the present opens up the possibility of preserving a reminiscence for the future, for the memory itself.

Perhaps as a result of the sensation that the world is too full (of gazes, of images), Perlov decides to start considering the images from the private sphere, inside the home. Fascinated by the profusion of acts and movements outside that he captures from his window, Perlov feels "the need to turn around, to focus my camera inwards, into my own house". In the domestic space the possibilities for collecting images seem to grow. An image paradigmatic of this question is the movement made between rooms by his wife, Mira: "I still haven't managed to understand how Mira, in a single shot, manages to change her dress and come back so quickly".

Perlov's work focuses precisely on these possibilities of the everyday environment, with the aim of capturing life in the present tense. If the common photograph was once a product for private use, with significance only for the one who took it and the people portrayed in it, these films recover universality and transfer to the public sphere some materials that originally seemed to be reserved for the private sphere, the sphere of family and intimacy. The person behind the camera also leaves proof of his presence in the moment of filming. His personality and



In Perlov's *Diary*, the experience of a field

existence also go on living in the images filmed. In addition to the attention given to the faces and activities of others, of friends and strangers, there are many moments in David Perlov's diaries when the filmmaker finds himself alone inside the family home. Recording on film the time that he spends on his own is an expression of the most absolute intimacy, of the person behind the camera. On one occasion, Perlov states that the family scenes represent too much presence and that he, on the other hand, needs to adopt a distance. When he is alone, the presence behind the camera recovers its significance. The indoor space represents his need to be alone, although only on a few occasions does Perlov actually show his own image in the mirror. The apartment walls, the windows, the paintings and photographs hanging on the walls are the expression of the individual who is alone with himself. The faint movement of the camera is the direction of his gaze and his wandering around the home. Through filming, filmmakers like David Perlov and Chris Marker seek to stay in contact with the world, with reality. Rather than looking at himself, the filmmaker leaves traces of the little events that he saw. ■

Notes

* Editor's Note: This essay was originally published in *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, num. 12, in July 2011 under the Spanish title "Mirar los pequeños acontecimientos. El caso de Chris Marker y David Perlov". The English version was translated by Maja Milanovic and revised by Martin Boyd in September

2013. The pictures that illustrate it have been provided voluntarily by the author. *L'Atalante* is grateful to Manuel Asín (Prodimag / Intermedio), and to Mira Perlov & Yael Perlov, for their permissions to publish still photographs from Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, and David Perlov's *Diary* and *Revised Diary*, respectively.

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Marta Montiano holds a BA in Audiovisual Communication from the Universitat de València and has completed a Master's in Contemporary Cinema and Audiovisual Studies at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. She recently presented her dissertation, titled "La imagen coleccionada de lo cotidiano" [The collected image of the everyday]. She regularly contributes to the magazine *Lumière*.