

THE SUSPENSION OF CINEMATIC *MOMENTUM**

Overwhelmed as we are by a supreme iconisation of the digital, it may be worthwhile, based on this a priori mundane observation, to dust off some nostalgic issues that might suggest an excess of revisionism by revisiting the question of the suspension of photographic *momentum* in the filmic construct.

Valid examples can certainly be found in the history of cinema to illustrate this analysis, to substitute those options I have actually chosen. The need, however, to capture from different angles the meanings of still image or *frozen* image as an unnatural image, deprived of movement within the filmic discourse, has made me choose *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* (Ken Jacobs, 1969) and *Tren de Sombras* [Train of Shadows] (José Luis Guerin, 1997).

The technological advantages derived from digitalisation in its three-dimensional evolutionary projection

might end up burying analogue tools and media once and for all, and banishing certain forms of visual production that were once irreplaceable. These new logics push us towards the need to rescue that "strict materiality of cinema" which Santos Zunzunegui observes in the studies of American theorist Noël Burch (see prologue in *El tragaluz del infinio* [BURCH, 2008: 10]); a redemption that can be extended to the forgotten footage used by Jacobs and Guerin to rescue that beloved prostitute that is the analogue image in its original sense, to which cinema owes its *raison d'être*.

Tom Tom the Piper's Son and *Tren de Sombras* take us back to the origins of cinema from its utmost avant-garde periphery, to the foundational character of a language from the sequencing of the photographic image; at the same time, they proclaim the ability of the projec-

tor to give life to that photograph, to give "life to those shadows" that Noël Burch finds in early cinema, a prelude to the Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR) that served to standardise a way of making and watching cinema. Both proposals deconstruct movement in order to construct a reflection that operates on filmic time through an optical effect, stopping the film to show an extraordinary visual anthropology in the frozen image; the photographic image as a record of an unchanging time, both a perpetrator and a victim of the revival of lost memory. The expression of movement (in the sense of change, a synonym of crisis, conflict or drama) constitutes the essence of cinema, but it is also its annulment. In a deductive syllogism derived from these premises, I understand the detention or suspension of cinematic *momentum* to entail a phenomenological change in the interpretation of the resulting image.

Based on the experimental form (Jacobs), and on the essay as a hybrid that prolongs the principles established by the fake documentary (Guerin), the two filmmakers manage to conceptualise the origins and evolution of the projector while maintaining a lucid dialogue with the moving image. Jacobs and Guerin excavate the genealogy of the grammar generated by constructing an exposition that is only accessible and decipherable through the abduction of the awareness of the viewer, who is invited

organisation they perform. This is a cinema that is activated by the power of suggestion, an implicit universe with a high concentration of rhetorical figures and symbols where the expressive

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is more common than the explanatory.

Apart from the already fertile meanings contained in the metadiscourse engendered by found footage and essay films, I would like to underline the central role the suspension of cinematic *momentum* acquires in *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* and *Tren de Sombras*. These films use frame freezing as a trick that shows us that the perception of the image is not a visual but a cultural fact (the image is a result of knowing how to

and time. It is precisely this mechanical operation (stopping the Moviola) that Guerin uses to offer us with a new interpretation of the found images. A hidden narrative that we decipher with a new way of seeing and which John Berger (1977) would associate with a sign of authorship in the field of photography by rewriting the principle through a process of deconstruction; by reorienting the point of view and the information contained in the pristine image they are working with.

Jacobs literally *stirs* the found footage (as an audiovisual construction technique that acts through the appropriation and intervention of pre-existing material; through filmic recycling) with each shot in *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* by Billy Bitzer (1903) in order to give a different dimension to the film. The definitive impact of this action is directly imposed on the nature of Renaissance representation, transcending the flatness of the primitive image, the heir of the nineteenth-century photographic universe and of the theatre (group compositions, distance from the photographed object, uniformity of vertical illumination, frontality of the point of view, depersonification of characters...).

Jacobs' *indeterminate cinema* or *paracinema* proposes a cinema based on apostasy, a break with or transgression of the canons that ended up homogenising the cinematographic image in the twentieth century. With technical manipulation

as a rhetorical weapon (editing and trickery) Jacobs rewrites the filmic text by codifying it on multiple levels of signification. In this sense, a connection with Méliès' cinema can be observed;



Evidence of the filmic device

to turn from passive spectator to participant, to close the expository cycle through full immersion, a seduction authorised by the poetic drive the signifiers acquire after the discursive re-

look). Jacobs applies the composite cut with the selection and manipulation of information through a reframing that gives a new meaning to the image by introducing the concepts of movement

a link established with that *first cinema* that used tricks as a primitive device, as an optical effect that sought to generate fascination through the discovery of a magical element and thus achieve illusionism in the *mise-en-scène* of the narrative (BURCH, 1990). In Jacobs' *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*, frame freezing has a twofold intention however: to the magical effect of trickery, he adds the action of stripping the original image of its primary message by stopping time, by suspending the cinematic *momentum*. In this way, Jacobs seeks to awaken a new experience in the spectator, who is offered consecutive viewings of the same visual composition, in which we can access different readings captured in the frozen frame (Jacobs also resorts to repetition or looping to force the gaze). All the elements and visual details (*cinemas* for Pasolini), especially the great visual density and saturation contained in the shots in Bitzer's film, are stripped bare.

Let us fix our gaze more closely on the tricks played by Jacobs in *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*. For this film, we can turn to some theoretical considerations that Santos Zunzunegui (1989) uses to redefine the phenomenological *corpus* of the photographic image in *Pensar la imagen*. Through a technical microanalysis of the frozen frames we

observe a remarkable ideological distancing from the most traditional theoretical positions that pivot around the photographic moment, its character of instantaneity, of portraying the immediate, of photography in the sense of

process has its foundations in a multi-scaled concept; the scale introduces and suggests a change that obviously does not go unnoticed by the spectator. The reframing therefore provides a new grammatical element in the re-

Guerin builds a structure that is organised into various levels of plot and reflection; here the accident, as a device that provides a meaning that is capable of rewriting the message, has a prominent position due to one of the different expectations that spectators have in their implicit agreement with the documentary form

"iconic expression that crystallises a visual instant" (ZUNZUNEGUI, 1989: 131). In the frozen frames we observe an image that contains a much more complex past tense, an extended tense expressed with an image in which we recognise the expressivity of the characters (personification as an element that takes us to IMR and breaks the distance between object and subject). This

construction of the discourse. These decisive archetypes of editing that Jacobs applies to the original film allow us to single out part of the information contained in a wider shot that contained too much information to be processed by the human eye in such a short period of time.

The still image is presented as a microstory (an element of the cultural postmodernity that Jacobs' work falls within) resulting from the suspension of the cinematic *momentum* (memorable emphasis of this action, flanked by that flicker that draws our attention to the filmic origin of the photograph, which is taken from a still frame as a unit or as a part of a larger construct). It is a suspension of movement that is ultimately a suspension of time, of the kinetic dynamism that José Luis Brea (2002) identifies with the image produced with technology, an election qualified by a formal decision that is not at all arbitrary. And here is a significant fact that stands out in this meditative process: certain still frames achieve a higher level of signification, which is perceived without the sequencing of the images, isolating them from the

A privileged instant captured by frame freezing



rest of the filmic investive. A temporality is articulated in the implicit time or zero time pre-established in the individual images with information that has gone unnoticed after a first viewing or superficial reading, but which is unveiled with the ineffable and manipulating aid of technology.

The room for speculation is arranged, a sumptuous banquet where new ingredients are offered to delight our senses with the discovery of hidden information that went unnoticed during our first viewing of Billy Bitzer's film.

Jacobs' interventionism –the manipulation of the moving image, the alteration of its temporality or the transformation of reframing and change of scale– brings forward the materiality of the medium he works with (in this case, the filmic medium), its vulnerability and mutability (actions that will be linked with the ideological positions found in video art with electronic images and later with digital images). The image resulting from these practices is but the result of a recording of light subjected to chemical processes liable to produce accidental variations that escape their creator's control. The subjective reality contained in the image presents the specificity of the medium that portrays its mimesis in the real world.

Located in an alternative wasteland (a location that responds to a shrewd examination of the cinematic medium), Guerin approaches the representation of reality by evoking a cinema of the everyday (linked of course with the diary-film style of Lithuanian Jonas Mekas). Guerin seeks to portray the closest reality, a cinema that is heir to the Lumière's film-document, which Burch does not hesitate to place outside the scope of what we know as institutional or classic cinema: "The pleasure Lumière himself and his spectators yesterday and today obtained and obtain from his films does indeed emanate from an *analogical effect* (produced by photography whatever one's intentions), but from one which is non-linear and acentric, which does not locate the spectator subject at the centre of an



Reframing of the essential

imaginary space; that is why I believe the pleasure –and also the knowledge– he produced is of quite another kind from the pleasure of the Institution to come. And yet, it can also be argued that these Lumière films and the practices deriving from them are at the root of what can be isolated as the *documentary ideology*..." (BURCH, 1990: 33).

In this filmic horizon we look to the

Photographs that exude the marks and stains of ageing, Chronicles of the inexorable passage of time on the celluloid

signs left by chance to locate a subplot or microstory within the main narrative. Guerin builds a structure that is organised into various levels of plot and reflection; here the accident (as a device that provides a meaning that is capable of rewriting the message) has a prominent position due to one of the different expectations that spectators have in their implicit agreement

with the documentary form. In *Tren de Sombras* we can distinguish a clear and brilliant meditative use of that naturalist and "improvised quality" that Bill Nichols recognises in documentary cinema. This brings us closer to models that avoid artifice or fictionalisation in the writing of the filmic text despite the persuasive dialogue with the fiction or false reality found in *Tren de Sombras*.

At the beginning of the film, before the opening credits, Guerin inserts a declarative text that determines the ideas developed throughout the film. This statement of intentions tries to outline faint but guiding clues that will help to unveil the plot and guide the gaze of the spectator, who at the same time is invited to engage in an exercise of reflection and to look beyond the images:

"In the early morning of 8 November 1930, Parisian lawyer Gérard Fleury set off to find the light with which he wanted to end his pastoral film about the area around Lake Le Thuit. On that same day, he died under circumstances that have never been explained. A little earlier he had made one of his modest family productions, which turned out to be his very last film. Irreversibly damaged by seven decades of humidity and inadequate preservation, we have proceeded to restore it.

Gazes that go on forever, that are directed at the other, induce us to participate in the story, to share and respond to the image with our imagination

We thank the Ives Brothers and Mirelle Fleury, as well as the Languest, Gaultier and Ferri families of Le Thuit, for their invaluable aid in restoring these old family film scenes: rudimentary but vital images that recall the infancy of cinema”.

These sublime lines superficially condensing the plot offer a synopsis of the phenomenology of the origins of cinema: the light, a *sine qua non* condition for the formalisation of the representational act from plastic arts (the genesis of colours) to photography and cinema (photosensitivity of the medium); from landscape photography, associated with Renaissance representational models, to the family portrait and later the homemade films we consider to be the natural continuation of the Lumières' films; the *accident* as the epicentre where the synergies that rewrite filmic discourse originate, a furtive event that reveals hidden readings of images to our gaze; the referentiality to physiological affections, to the materiality of film as the sensitive *mould* that Gilles Deleuze (1997: 24) uses to define the analogue medium (it is worth mentioning the wonderful visual references to Brakhage's visual syncretism in *Tren de Sombras*, to a cinema whose main rhetorical and aesthetic source emanates from the materiality of the components, materials and processes with which the images are nurtured).

The *Brakhagesque* images that conclude the opening credits are followed by portraits of the lawyer Gérard Fleury (photographs that exude the marks and stains of ageing, chronicles of the inexorable passage of time on the celluloid), the operator of the cinematic device he will use to film the microuniverse that surrounds him. It is obvious he belongs to a certain social class of the world portrayed, an owner of the means of visual production, although this is another matter worthy of a deon-

ological treatise of its own on the origins of cinema and its relation with the bourgeoisie.

The analogy with Jacobs' offering is evident. Although the message contained in *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* has a higher metaphorical codification, Jacobs and Guerin coincide in presenting raw footage, in offering the audience a first viewing to construct a new statement on the basis of that appropriation. This creative act that emerges from the recombination of pre-existing material allows a new visual exploration of the images with the suspension of cinematic *momentum*. When the projector stops, only photography remains, a photography to which Guerin returns – after giving life to it through the incorporation of time in the sequences that take place inside the house, especially in the portrait room – to alter it with reframing and scaling (overcoming the visual field with which photography limits the world). Frame freezing, like photography, depicts an instant of rea-

lity, a cut or a part of a whole. It constitutes an appearance of the real world to which it belongs or belonged.

Tren de Sombras is structured by a new form of editing consisting of various mechanical techniques Guerin never fails to display (detection of the Moviola, inversion or delay of speed, reframing, screen partition, transparencies, incorporation of the sound of the projector...). In this editing style we can recognise a new use of frame freezing as an element that generates a filmic sense that launches a new discursive dialectics, and that even produces new compositions and new shots depending on the dramatic development of the narrative.

The gestures, the gazes into off-camera space (imaginary space/imaginary story), any sign, however trivial (the singular instant or “any instant” captured by cinema [DELEUZE, 1997: 6]) that we perceive in the human faces seem to acquire a surprising transcendence and to be elevated to a privileged

A protagonist that had gone unnoticed



category; the instant is immortalised in *Tren de Sombras* to capture the sentimental link between two characters. The gazes we discover in the frozen frame are directed into an unsettling off-camera space. Gazes that go on forever, that are directed at the other, induce us to participate in the story, to share and respond to the image with our imagination. Guerin implores the spectator to develop a mental editing that completes the technical editing. The gaze that searches for Fleury is searching for us.

Freeze framing captures the emotion, immortalises the impression of the moment, and it is then that this indeterminate instant grows in meaning to go beyond the photographic mould of a "light impression" –Bazin as quoted in Deleuze (1997: 24)– and thus arrive at a photographic image as a time mould, an impression of time lapse. Everything is interrupted to show the impression of the moment. The emotional point. The suspension of cinematic *momentum* becomes for Guerin a device that ultimately activates a subsequent progression of events. The memory offers a new, subjective interpretation of the image by looking at/remembering the events of the past in Marienbad (*L'année dernière à Marienbad* [Alan Resnais, 1961]) for a second time.

As a conclusion I would like to underline once again our fondness for the filmic image derived from trick photography, a grammatical device that entails diverse mental processes implicit in the action of remembering. With the suspension of movement and by extension the suspension of time, the idea of the photographic portrait situates us in the recovery of lost memory by remembering what has disappeared or what was forgotten; it is a resurrection activated by the evocative power of cinema and photography to revive ancestors, a remembrance we access through the desecration the original image. In this context we can hear how the echo of *Tren de Sombras* cries out for a clear authorship, a voice that continues the lines drawn in the valleys of *Innisfree*

(José Luis Guerin, 1990), a film in which we find those very same temporal connections between past and present, between reality and fiction.

Notes

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