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Konzept und Leitung: Friedrich Balke, Florence Freitag

A symposium debating the film 'All this can happen' (2013) by British Choreographer Siobhan Davies and filmmaker David Hinton, a cinematic interpretation of Robert Walser's text *The Walk* (1917). Organised by the Research Group BildEvidenz.

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Title of paper: *Abandoning to Worklessness*

Part 1: Different kinds of spectatorship (L. Mulvey)

Part 2: The broken image (M. Blanchot)

Part 3: No to interpretation and metaphor (M. Deren)

1. Different kinds of spectatorship

In *The Pensive Spectator* Laura Mulvey quotes Dziga Vertov's writing on the quality of the sustained look of the camera:

First thought of the kino-eye as a world perceived without a mask, as a world of naked truth (that cannot be hidden).¹

Mulvey reminds us, that the early avant-gardes of the 20th century were particularly interested in the aesthetic exploration of movement and stillness, although it is also conceivable that this interest was provoked by the medium of photography and film - because it made it possible.... Either way, the power of the extended look of the kino-eye has not waned over time, even though we now have a diversity of image-making technologies and a massive body of film to look back on.

Still images are a particular case of cinematic images as they halt the flow normally associated with film. As Raymond Bellour argues, "the still image breaks the spectatorial immersion in the unfolding of a narrative." Instead of being carried along by steady change and incessant developments, the spectator is given a single image and the time to look, to observe, and to recognise.

When the flow of images on screen is suspended we begin to see 'it', the movement itself - like the extraordinary precision of the builder in *All this can happen* who moves about in great heights and steps across the abyss from one girder to the next, or the marvelous swing of the shovels in the foundry, the gentle rhythm of a man strolling down a country lane, the imperceptibly fast flicking of fingers, the deeply mystical and erotic unfolding of a flower, or the extraordinary contortions and repetitions of a traumatized body. The mechanics of the movement are 'foregrounded' when narratives and contexts are

¹ Laura Mulvey, 'The Pensive Spectator', in Mulvey, L. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaction Books Ltd, 2006) 181.

suspended, that is the purely physical and technical aspects become more visible, as well as something of the existential [body-mind unit].

The distance provided by the still image also silences the viewer, according to Annette Michelson. She argues that there is something unspeakable about these images:

To describe a movement is difficult, to describe the instant of arrest and of release, of reversal, of movement, is something else again; it is to confront that thrill on the deepest level of the filmic enterprise, to recognize the privileged character of the medium as being in itself the promise of an incomparable, and un hoped for, grasp upon the nature of causality.²

Laura Mulvey was inspired by the writing of Raymond Bellour when she advances the term of the pensive spectator, who emerges or is created by “moment[s] of stillness within the moving image and its narrative,” and who reflects not only on what is in the image, but on the nature of cinema. Reflecting on the impact of the still image in film Mulvey writes that “this pause for the spectator, usually ‘hurried’ by the movement of both film and narrative, opens a space for consciousness of the still frame within the moving image. Similarly, the pensive spectator, who pauses the image with new technologies, may bring to the cinema the resonance of the still photograph, the association with death usually concealed by the film’s movement [...]”³

Mulvey has been concerned with, and written about, the spectator since the 1970’s, critiquing the voyeurism and the privileged viewing position of the spectator facilitated by conventional cinema and the big screen. Looking back over several decades of film critique she muses;

“I tried to evolve an alternative spectator, who was driven, not by voyeurism, but by curiosity and the desire to decipher the screen, informed by feminism and responding to the new cinema of the avant-garde. Curiosity, a drive to see, but also to know, still marked a utopian space for a political, demanding visual culture, but also one in which the process of deciphering might respond to the human mind’s longstanding interest and pleasure in solving puzzles and riddles.”⁴

Mulvey contends that there is something both ‘primitive’ as well as utopian about this other kind of spectating, and that it is both possible and conceivable. Going a step further beyond the pensive spectator she calls for a curious spectator and argues that he/she “may [even] be the ancestor of the pensive spectator [...]”⁵

Dance filmmaker Miranda Pennell shares Mulvey’s interest in the still image and its capacity to suspend the conventional consumption of cinematic material. Thinking about the role of the still image in dance film, Pennell argues that the disrupted gesture should be considered as a choreographic gesture, as an instance of dancing, in that it is a delight in movement for its own sake, movement which is not in the service of narrative progression.

² Annette Michelson, ‘From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov’s the Man with a Movie camera,’ in *The Essential Cinema*, P.Adams Sitney ed., (New York, 1975) 104. Also quoted in Mulvey, 2006,182.

³ Mulvey, 2006, 186. See also: Raymond Bellour, *The Pensive Spectator* (2007)

⁴ Mulvey, 2006, 191.

⁵ Mulvey, 2006, 191.

“Contemporary dance, like avant-garde film”, she writes, “plays to our own curiosity about the nature of the body, or of film, and our desire to look at its movement. [...] there is a special pleasure derived from its “constructedness” of choreography, as there is of avant-garde film. Avant-garde film and dance can draw us into the materiality and construction of the body or of the film and its projection.”⁶

The fact that David Hinton and Sue Davis go back to the beginnings of cinema is no coincidence. A fascination with movement, the desire to understand movement - and stillness - was at the heart of the work of photographers like Etienne-Jules Marey and Muybridge and filmmakers like Dziga Vertov as indicated above, and is central to *All This Can Happen*. Through the still, which is held on screen, replayed and multiplied, and then released, perhaps for a fraction, into movement, Davies and Hinton invite the viewer to watch, to recognize, to marvel, to compare, to be struck, and perhaps to notice a little more about this complexity that is movement.

At a Screendance Symposium at the University of Brighton in 2011 Davies and Hinton introduced their joint project and spoke about their shared interests and differences. Sue Davies highlighted her interest in “noticing movement”. Speaking of her work as a choreographer she said:

“Part of the activity of choreography when it involves dancing or movement, is the complexity of this body of knowledge, let alone the meat and potatoes of where it is in the contemporary culture or in a particular space.”⁷

Film therefore becomes a means to both explore and share this human body of knowledge, and to “orchestrate” the movement as Davies said at the time.

An orchestra of movers observed by curious and pensive spectators?

2. The broken image

“The everyday, he says - the ‘unqualifiable everyday’ - is ‘the inaccessible to which we have always already had access’.”⁸

I want to think a bit further about the particular case of the still image in cinema, drawing on an essay by Maurice Blanchot entitled *Two Visions of the Imaginary* (1985), in which he reflects on the nature of images and on the relation between objects and images.

⁶ Miranda Pennel, “Some Thoughts”, (in *The International Journal of Screendance: Scaffolding the Medium*. Spring 2012, Volume Two. 2012.) 77.

⁷ Claudia Kappenberg and Sarah Whatley, 'A Report on the Screendance Symposium' (in *The International Journal of Screendance: Scaffolding the Medium*. Spring 2012, Volume Two. 2012.) 144.

⁸ (Ann Smock, Infinite conversation/ Maurice Blanchot, in *Radical Philosophy*, Issue 120, Obituaries/Profiles - July/August 2003)

In All this can Happen there is an uncanny analogy between the repetition of movements of the catatonic and traumatised patients, and the irregular regular repetitions of images on the screen. The analogy is so strong that we don't even know if the jerky movements of the head in the opening image is part of the actual film clip, and therefore a symptom of the traumatized patient, or an effect produced in the editing, a filmic construct.

Either way, what is this jerking and compulsive repetition in the body? Such a person resembles a broken record player, where the needle is stuck somewhere on the grooves. And indeed the traumatised person is compelled to repeat his experience, emotionally or physically, unable to let go of something that is past and happened elsewhere. In such a case we speak of breakdowns, or of a broken man.

We can apply this notion of something broken also to the film itself, as the arrested, still image mimics a filmstrip which is stuck in the projector or broken, and to the digital image, as the frozen digital frame signals an absence of something, of cinematic flow and the passing of time.

There is therefore an analogy between three levels that are operational in the film, between the body – broken and shaking; the soldier – traumatised and staggering about like a horrific double or copy of himself; and the film – seemingly broken or at least stuttering.

If something is broken our perception of the thing changes; a tool which works is invisible to us, but a tool that is broken becomes present to us.

In his essay entitled 'Two Versions of the Imaginary' Maurice Blanchot reflects on this shift in the perception of objects and writes that a "utensil, once it has been damaged, becomes its own image."⁹

"The utensil, no longer disappearing in its use, appears. This appearance of the object is that of resemblance and reflection: one might say it is its double." Blanchot continues to link the category of art in general "to this possibility objects have of 'appearing', that is, of abandoning themselves to pure and simple resemblance behind which there is nothing - except being."¹⁰

With few words Blanchot describes the perceptual shift that occurs when an object is thrown out of, or released from, its normative functioning. When tied into a habitual functionality objects and utensils are invisible to our consciousness. In the damaged or dis-functional state the utensil appears as image, as resemblance or double, and becomes visible to us.

Describing images as a 'thin ring', Blanchot places the image in between the solid object and the nothing whereby the image signifies the dissolution of the thing. He writes;

"In the image, the object again touches something it had mastered in order to be an object, something against which it had built and defined itself, but now that its value, its signification, is suspended, now that the world is *abandoning it to worklessness* and putting it to one side, the truth in it

⁹ Maurice Blanchot, 1981.

¹⁰ Maurice Blanchot, Two Visions of the Imaginary, in The Gaze of Orpheus and other literary Essays, trans. Lydia Davis, Station Hill Press, 1981, p84

withdraws, the elemental claims it, which is the impoverishment, the enrichment that consecrates it as image."¹¹ (Italics mine)

A signifying object fulfills a purpose in the world and disappears in this use, but the object which no longer fulfills this signification, which does no longer master its existence is claimed, or reclaimed, by something more elemental. No longer supported by a causal chain, the object in the image is exposed to time and to transformation. Devoid of use-value this image is an (almost) sacred thing.

An example from *All this can Happen* could be the still images of the women on the street in the frazzled pictures; the images are half eaten by time and full of marks and blank areas, only barely representing their subjects. Rather than actual representations the images offer a resemblance and loosely refer to their subjects. Therefore, the women do not become present as one might expect in film, they remain distant and as part of an intangible past.

The distance between the image and what it refers to interferes with how we see. According to Maurice Blanchot: "Not only is the image of an object not the meaning of that object and of no help in comprehending it, but it tends to withdraw it from its meaning by maintaining it in the immobility of a resemblance. [...]"

The still image immobilizes the object and in becoming image the object loses its meaning. We can see this time and again in *All this can happen*;

the worker on the building site, frozen in his step by the still image, loses his purpose and his context and comes to resemble a fool.

the catatonic soldier, devoid of his capabilities and his context and frozen in his fall by the camera, becomes a double of himself, a grotesque copy and barely human.

And so in the cinematic flow of images and things and the narrative flow of people and places this and that appears only to disappear, barely gaining significance. The walking, wandering narrator himself is also part of this constellation as someone who gathers only images, while others are working to produce stuff.

He is however ambivalent with regards to being 'just' a walker, while everyone else is hard at work. The narrator comments: "Left of the road here, a foundry full of workmen and industry causes a noticeable disturbance. In recognition of this I am honestly ashamed to be merely out for a walk while so many others drudge and labour."

However, the narrator deliberately abandons himself to worklessness – and he was fiercely critical of everything that smacked of capitalist gains and industrialisation. He says:

Speaking of thrashings a countryman deserves to be well and truly thrashed because he is not hesitant to cut down the pride of the landscape, namely, his high and ancient nut tree in order to trade it for despicable, wicked, foolish money. [...] - 23:40

¹¹ as above, p81

Walser is part of generation which tried to hold onto values beyond the production of productivity, who wanted to celebrate experience which had come under considerable pressure through industrialisation. As Martin Heidegger wrote in a letter from 1963:

“But to experience the useless is today for man the most difficult thing...”¹²

And Niuccio Ordine wrote only last year: “A large part of us is owned by money, but the useless is that which renders us more human.”¹³

If Walser advocates the *Zweckfreiheit* and *Ziellosigkeit*, the uselessness of walking, his literary work must be considered as a fervent testimony of his belief.¹⁴

3. No to interpretation and metaphor

Maya Deren argued time and again against the interpretation of her films and those of her contemporaries through, for example, an exploration of the artist’s biography or a Freudian supposition of a symbolic value of objects. Deren therefore dismissed any association of her work with the symbolic iconography and methodologies of surrealist work. Arguing against many of the ubiquitous critical discourses, Deren wrote in *New Directions in Film Art*: “Unless there is a very good reason why an artist would substitute one thing for another, it might be good to believe that the thing you see, or read, is exactly the thing the artist has intended.”¹⁵

Walser’s Walk is exactly that, a walk. No more, no less.

07:17: And now walk on (film voice over).

¹² Martin Heidegger in conversation with the psychiatrist Medard Boss in Zürich in 1963; Medard Boss Ed, Martin Heidegger, Zollikon Seminars: Protocols, Conversations, Letters. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001) 159, 160.

¹³ Nuccio Ordine, *L’Utilité de L’Inutile* (2013) 22.

¹⁴ See workshop konzept: So sehr Walser auch die Zweckfreiheit und Ziellosigkeit des Spazierengehens betont, so hebt er doch zugleich die epistemische Bedeutung der entstehenden literarischen Protokolle hervor, für die nichts zu geringfügig ist, um aufgezeichnet zu werden.

¹⁵ Maya Deren, “New Directions in Film Art,” 209. [compare with this view of a critic: “*The Walk*, then, is not the narrative delivered in temporal continuity it purports to be, but an allegory, a series of vignettes strung together to delineate the outside forces prevailing upon the writer’s existence...”]

Bibliography:

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