

Discrete Monuments of an Infinite Film

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ABSTRACT

Taking as a point of departure the suspicion that the history of film can only be written through film itself, Ricardo Matos Cabo brings together heterogeneous filmic materials and disposes them in such a way that the relationships amongst them emerges organically: it is a task that has at its centre the matter projected by films themselves. In this way, the cross-dissolve that takes place during a screening – since in the cinema images are shown one after the other, rather than one next to the other – is not of a visible order, but rather operates in an intangible manner, producing correlations between images and sounds, through which film speaks about itself. This essay aims to give an account of some of the analogies produced between the films selected by the Portuguese curator in different contexts: ‘To See: Listening, the Experience of Sound in the Cinema’ (Culturgest, 2009), ‘Histories of Film by Film Itself’ (Culturgest, 2008) or ‘Residues’ (Portuguese Cinematheque, 2011). To speak about the histories that these programmes project is, to a certain extent, to trace paths across the different points of the *infinite film* of which Hollis Frampton speaks.

KEYWORDS

Film history, infinite film, projection, programming, programmer-*passer*, discrete monuments, analogies, invisible cross-dissolve, film-factory.

Constituted of all the films ever made, including 'pedagogical and amateur films, endoscopic cinematography and many more things' (FRAMPTON, 2007: 26-27), the history of cinema is an unknown territory. Given that 'one can't see all the films at the same time and at the same cinema' (KLUGE, 2010, 304), that sort of *infinite film* that 'contains an infinity of endless passages of which not a single photogram resembles any other in the slightest, and an infinity of passages whose photograms are even more identical than what we would imagine' (FRAMPTON, 2007: 26-27) can only be partially sketched in each screening, in the unexpected relationships established between the films, their images and their sounds. The history of cinema, then, coincides with the particular history of each of its screenings: the places where cinema tells and writes itself.

One wouldn't need much more to glimpse that narration, a projector in a room would suffice to see some of the 'geological layers, of cultural landslides' (GODARD, 1980: 25) that remain invisible amongst its matter. One would also have to select a few films to show them under the light of the projector – a medium of vision and analysis that allows to make out these hidden geographies. Such a task would require a discretion, a waning, of the person carrying out, so as to give priority to the matter that the cinema itself projects. In this way, those who bring together films and align them to be projected onto a screen are a sort of *passseurs* (to use Serge Daney's expression), middlemen of that historical tale, whose screenings configure itineraries crossing different points of the *infinite film* of which Hollis Frampton talks. Amongst these screenings, there are many programmed by Ricardo Matos Cabo in different venues. In this article, we will revise some of them in order to discern the 'discrete monuments' (FRAMPTON, 2007: 27) that they project.

Although films are autonomous, as Leibniz's monads, and there exist abysses between them¹, when projected across the beam of light of the project – a machine of analogies – they produce resonances, invisible elements that are generated when films are aligned one after the other. Let's consider some of the correspondences created, for instance, when watching *What the Water Said*, n° 4-6 (David Gatten, 2007) followed by *Le Tempestaire* (Jean Epstein, 1947) and *Looking at the Sea* (Peter Hutton, 2000–01), a screening that Ricardo Matos Cabo organised as part of the programme 'To See: Listening, the Experience of Sound in Film' (Culturgest, Lisbon, 2009). The three films use very different strategies to evoke the sea and make of it a true protagonist, while at the same time attempting to account for the relationships of sound and image in film. Attempting to speak of the analogies between these three films necessarily implies to situate oneself in the place configured by their projection: an unnamable space, full of epiphanies, where to appear is also to subtract.

As if in a magic trick or exchange, at the end of Epstein's *Le Tempestaire*, the sea, which has been present throughout the whole film, appears immersed at the interior of a crystal ball. Spurred on by a woman's concern while waiting for her fisherman boyfriend's return on a stormy day, an old man, known in the fishermen's village as the 'master of the storms', manages to lock up the swell in an spherical object and to ease the wind and the waves with a sigh. The magnificent images boiling inside this crystal ball have the ability to reveal cinema itself, its magical capacity to fall back movement. In a way, the maritime bad weather was already in the making in *What the Water Said*, whose images and sounds, ensuing from the action of the ocean in the film strip, also reveal cinema itself, the different layers of the film scivated by the waters of the southern coast of California.

1. See KLUGE, Alexander (2010).

The actions in *Le Tempestaire* are minimal and the few that occur are almost silent, constantly interrupted by the physical presence of the sea, in front of the village that remains quiet. In Hutton's silent film, the ocean is also observed from stillness, from a point of view already literally announced in the first shots of *Le Tempestaire*: a group of old fishermen gazes, from the shore, at the incomprehensible presence of the sea. Hutton explains that when he shot 'the material at the end of *Looking at the Sea*, I found myself un those cliffs of the west coast of Ireland, looking at the West towards the sin and thinking in those immigrants who wanted to abandon Ireland due to hunger and remained confronted with the same perspective. They would have seen the sea as this complicated obstacle' (MACDONALD, 2009, p. 225). But it is only possible to contemplate the sea from the shore once the wind and the swell ease.

The moment the 'master of storms' manages to calm the sea, the crystal ball that he holds in his hands falls to the ground and breaks down. Epstein shows us how it tears apart in silence – a treatment characteristic of sound films that announces Hutton's silent shots – as if we were just waking up from a dream, of that daydreaming state that characterises *Looking at the Sea*; as if the images and sounds of the previous films had been mere mirages produced by observing too closely the light of the sea shot by Hutton, with the serenity of the filmed landscape. But, at the same time, *Looking at the Sea* could be the silent contemplation of those bits of crystal scattered on the floor of *Le Tempestaire*, of all those smithereens that, as happened in the emulsion of Gatten's film, enclosed in side the cyclical movement of the waves.

Even though we have tried to note some of the correspondences produced by the screening of these films, their cross-fade is not of a visible order, but rather, as the sigh of the

'master of the storms', operates in an intangible manner, producing correlations between images and sounds in which film speaks of itself. The concrete tasks of the Portuguese film curator resides behind these immaterial aspects of the projection. Ricardo Matos Cabo brought together these three films – usually linked to different fields of cinema: experimental, fiction and documentary, borders that don't exist in his programmes – without attempting to harmonise them nor establishing hierarchies or relations of dependence between them. He neither tries to justify questions external to the films themselves, but instead, taking into account their formats and material characteristics, disposes them in a way that their relationships emerge for themselves. Furthermore, conceived in the context of the programme 'To See: To Listen', this screening also accounted for the different ways of working with sound in film: the direct inscription onto the optical band in Gatten's film, the use of slow motion sound in *Le Tempestaire* (Epstein works with the expressive possibilities of slow motion sound in order to discover the infinite parts that compose the sound of a door opening and closing or the rumour of a waning storm) or the imaginary of silence in Hutton's film².

Let's see other examples, since even if certain elements of his work remain constant, such as the discretion and respect for formats, the Portuguese curator has also experimented with other forms of cross-dissolve of different films that this screening doesn't represent. We will now consider a programme dedicated to the variations of one of the first motives of the history of cinema: the workers leaving the factory, which included Motion Picture: *La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon* (Peter Tscherkassky, 1984), *Arbeiter verlassen der Fabrik* (Harun Farocki, 1995) and a selection of the *Factory Gate Films* (Mitchell & Kenyon, 1900–13). Part of a large programme of films that aimed to think cinema and its history from cinema itself, 'Histories of Cinema by

2. Some of these questions were also addressed in other screenings of the programme 'To See: To Listen' such as,

for example, the sense of silence in film through a session dedicated to Stan Brakhage.

Itself' (Culturgest, 2008), this screening departs from one of the first images shot by the Lumière brothers in order to compare their images and compile some of their replicas.

Peter Tscherkassky states such analytical work by choosing one photogram of the film *La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon*, just when the workers cross the factory entrance, in order to create a new film that frames them in this exit space. His images, resulting from the impression of the photogram depicting the workers' community onto strips of unexposed film, are constituted by imperceptible and abstract elements that reveal the materiality of the film itself. Hence by penetrating into this still image, Tscherkassky deals with the material produced by the same workers of the Lumière factory in Lyon: the photographic plaques and the nitrate film, trying to offer an index of that which, according to Farocki, is missing from those takes: labour. 'The first camera of the history of cinema pointed at a factory, but [...] the factory never attracted cinema, rather it inspired rejection. Most narrative films take place after work [...] Almost all the words, gazes or gestures exchanges in factories throughout the last hundred years escaped the filmic record.' (FAROCKI, p.35)

Taking as a point of departure the take by the brothers Lumière and excerpts from films by Fritz Lang, D. W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, Vsevolod Pudovkin or Michelangelo Antonioni, Farocki examines this image so tenaciously repeated throughout the history of film. By editing them together, it seems as if cinema had not represented any other subject, as if there was something irreducible in the first film. Many of the first cinematographic companies, such as the British Mitchell & Kenyon, shot a few films à la Lumière depicting the workers entering and leaving several factories. Their cameras documented the interminable movement of the workers congregating at the entrance of mines, factories or shipyard, also showing some kids joining the workers' ranks. Further to being authentic social and historical documents, these takes refer to cinema, not only because of the

reference to Lumière, but also because in them we can perceive what led the first cinematographic cameras to point at the factories. In this multitude of workers leaving the factory, the first camera operating saw the opportunity to attract viewers for their films, hoping that they would attend the projections that they offered in fairgrounds or other places and identify themselves. In this way, in Matos Cabos's screening we can glimpse at a strange tautology between cinema and factory, present in both Lumière's film and its variations: whereas the first inaugurates cinema showing the workers that produced the nitrate films themselves, as shown in Tscherkassky's film, the later replicas portray the first cinema spectators, which the camera operators scrutinized amongst the masses of workers leaving the factory.

Ricardo Matos Cabo returns to, and further develops, the relationship between cinema and factory processes in 'Residues' (Portuguese Cinématèque, Experimenta Design, 2011), a programme of films on industrial labour and the waste that it generates. One of the screenings, which brought together the films *Fabrication de l'acier* (Gaumont Productions, 1910), *Hands Scraping* (Richard Serra, 1971), *Poussières* (Georges Franju, 1979), *Steelmill/Stahlwerk* (Richard Serra, 1979) and *Winter Solstice [Solariumagelani]* (Hollis Frampton, 1974), weaves together industrial residues, sparks, filings and dust, with the workers' labour, presenting the consequences of these invisible particles on their own body. If *Hands Scraping* literally exposes the relationship between the gestures of the workers and the waste – four hands pick up and clean the metal filings from the asphalt – Franju's documentary lists the labour health and safety risks of workers exposed to industrial dust. At times even hand-colouring the images of fire in order to show the intensity of the smelting process (Gaumont film) or to capture the abstract movement of the sparks (Frampton), cinema thus shows its ability to scrutinise industrial production and the working conditions in factories, presenting the processes missing in those first takes shot at the factory entrance.

To speak of the work of Ricardo Matos Cabo necessarily implies speaking of the films that he brings together and of the relationships that they generate in the screenings, and at the same time of perceiving the histories projected by some of the screenings that he has organised. But it is also worth noting that his way of bringing films together in a screening, of exposing through the beam of light of the projector – a machine that doesn't allow two films to show simultaneously, but one after the other – has no pre-established rules, but only infinite variations and possibilities: the screenings that we here list only account for a few of them. The Portuguese curator has also shown the same film in different contexts, such as, for instance, *Mourir pour des images* (René Vautier, 1971), included in the programme 'Histories of Cinema by Itself' and in a *carte blanche* at the Portuguese Cinémathèque (2011), or some of the films by Raymonde Carasco presented in different occasions: 'Figures of Dance in the Cinema I' (Culturgest, 2005), 'To Count Time' (Portuguese Cinémathèque, 2010) and 'Residues'. He even projected the same film twice within the same screening: *Quad I + II* (Samuel Beckett, 1981), in order to link the geometric figure exposed in the ballet and the repetition of fixed structures in dance and the rectangular form of the screen ('Figures of Dance in the Cinema II', Culturgest, 2006)³.

There are film-makers who return time and again in his programmes, such as Peter Nestler,

3. This screening, titled 'Configurations', brought together the following sequence of films: *Quad I + II* (Samuel Beckett, 1981), *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square (Square Dance)* (Bruce Nauman, 1967-68), *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (Bruce Nauman, 1967-68), *Structured Pieces III* (registro de Trisha Brown, 1975), documents of traditional dance compiled by Francine Lancelot between 1966 and 1984 (Aubrac (Aveyron), 5 October 1964; Sud-Ouest, Réunion à Menjoulic, Leucouacq, Lourdes, 31 July 1977), *Quad I + II* (Samuel Beckett, repetition), *Rhythmus 21* (Hans Richter, 1922-24), *Color Sequence* (Dwinnel Grant, 1943) and *Ray Gun Virus* (Paul Sharits, 1966).

4. The original programme included the following films, although some of them were not screened in the end:

of whom he has recently curated a retrospective (Goethe-Institut and Tate Modern, London, 2012), Raymonde Carasco or Hollis Frampton. Theme also often return, many of his screenings revolving around dance, its common genealogy with cinema, the plasticity of movement, like 'Figures of Dance in the Cinema I and II' (Culturgest 2005 and 2006) or the programmes around Babette Mongolte, Eliane Summers and Judson Dance Theatre (all Serralves, 2011). Some of the programmes were conceived having in mind the spaces where they were later shown: not only those presented at Serralves in relation to exhibitions or other museum activities, but, chiefly, in the ones that the Portuguese curator prepared for the botanical garden of Coimbra (2011), and which brought together films on scientific observation and studies on movement of the early twentieth century with more recent works⁴. When invited by the Portuguese Cinémathèque to curate a *carte blanche* as part of the cycle 'What is to Programme a Cinémathèque Today?' (2011), Matos Cabo presented a selection of films reflectioning on his own work⁵. The films selected were not so much an answer to this question, but rather presented different forms of interrogating the fact of programming cinema itself. However, all of his programmes find a common thread in the desire to present the history of cinema, albeit taking into account that this history can only be written by cinema itself⁶. ●

Préambules au cinématographe: Étienne-Jules Marey (recreation by Claudine Kaufman and Jean Dominique-Jaloux, 1996), *Éducation Physique étudiée au ralentisseur* (unknown film-maker, 1915), *Incunables du cinéma scientifique* (compilation by Jean-Michel Arnold, 1984), *L'Hippocampe* (Jean Painlevé, 1934), *Observando El Cielo* (Jeanne Liotta, 2007), *Journal and Remarks* (David Gatten, 2009), amongst others.

5. *Hapax Legomena I – VII* (Hollis Frampton, 1971-72), *Routine Pleasures* (Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1986), *Destruction des archives* (Yann Le Masson, 1985), *Mourir pour des images* (R. Vautier, 1971), *La mer et les jours* (Raymond Vogel and Alain Kaminker, 1958) and *Delluc & Cie (La première vague, 1ère partie)* (Noël Burch and Jean-André Fieschi, 1968) were the films brought together by Ricardo Matos Cabo for this *carte blanche*, films on films, which question cinema and its spaces

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of projection and preservation.

6. Although this question is present in all of his programmes, it is literally asked in 'Histories of Cinema by Cinema Itself' (Culturgest, 2008), a programme where Matos Cabo traced a few itineraries through the history of cinema, not in a chronological manner, but an archaeological one. Using excerpts from other films and appropriating images from other films, the films included – films such as *Eadweard*

Muybridge, Zoopraxographer (1974) by Thom Andersen, *Public Domain* (1972) by Hollis Frampton, *Standard Gauge* (1984) by Morgan Fisher, *Moments Choisis des Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (2000) by Jean-Luc Godard or *Elementare Filmgeschichte (1971-2007)* by Klaus Wyborny, amongst others – aimed to show how certain movements of cinematographic forms have been produced, how certain structures and themes keep on being repeated or how the history of these forms is entangled with the personal histories of the authors.