Screen Affections / Afecciones fílmicas

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Visitors entering the exhibition *Clemens von Wedemeyer presents* are greeted by a poster advertising the David Lynch film *Eraserhead*. The poster, however, has been altered: the face of the main character, played by Jack Nance, has been oversprayed with grey paint, the eraser head has been erased, as if the effects of the collective cinematographic unconscious have had literal consequences on our perception of reality. The connection between the spectator and the action, a tacit support for activism on a recognisable icon, has two possible readings: from the title on the poster to the crossing out, from the graffiti artist's action to the movie reference. This play on representation traps the visitor in an interpretative loop, as if he or she were standing between two opposing mirrors reflecting back and forth an iconic image that contains the essence of the working process that is continually repeated throughout the exhibition: a collection of film projects that deal with reality through the use of the collective unconscious and inner resources of films and film-making itself.

One of the first theories of modern cinema was put forward by the French film critic André Bazin, one of the founders of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. In his opinion cinema was the expression of photographic objectivity over time, and he believed in the possibility of realism in a naturalised cinematic gaze that identified itself with the eye of the spectator: what was filmed was what actually happened, it held a direct relation to truth (1). In the early nineteenfifties, the decade during which classic cinema took on a formal identity, one of Bazin's contemporaries, the art historian Pierre Francastel, refuted the supposed objectivity of photography when he postulated the existence of an artistic thought that was different from logical or mathematical thought: if a picture is a selective cutting or clipping in the figurative sphere, the image is created by means of a logic constructed on the basis of representation, which leads to the possibility of either thinking directly with the image or through a mode of specific interpretation of the image (2). Francastel analysed the way in which a system of representation, namely Renaissance perspective, satisfied the figurative demands of Western art for five centuries. Even though it became identified with the way in which the human eye sees things, the fact that it has become outdated shows that it was no more than a single construction out of a whole range of different possibilities. For this reason, from the very time of its birth photography became the last lingering remnant of a regime that was already falling to pieces, and it was precisely its identification with human perception that enabled photography to be the privileged medium for the devising, in the late nineteenseventies, of a critique of representation as a constructed image, created on the basis of preconceptions that acted as a filter for social content and mechanisms of power.

Film-making has followed, over the decades, a similar route to that of the critique of the photographic vision: the movie camera's gaze has not become naturalised, and it is rather our way of looking at the world that has taken on a cinematic hue. The advantage enjoyed by the movement-image lay in the concentrated experience of its projection in a darkened room, which allowed it to play with a greater number of registers amongst its audience through the construction of an environment and atmosphere. Little by little, cinema has managed to transfer its experience, and to a greater or lesser extent we now see the world as it is seen in film.

The entire film output of Clemens von Wedemeyer (Göttingen, Germany, 1974) is concerned with the logic of the gaze as cinema, in a sort of cinematic sophistication of Francastel's theory of art.

Media theory takes the perversity of the mass media for granted, highlighting the perspectives that analysed the kinds of barriers used to protect audiences from the potential effects of the message. With regard to cinema, when Hollywood was at its height, the regressive effects of commercial interests ensured that the cinematic text anchored the spectator in a specific subjective position that would guarantee the direct transmission of a given ideology; audiences were obliged to assume positions that were constructed by the cinematic text.

This model of direct influence would gradually be abandoned in favour of the premise that audiences are not uncritical consumers and are able to filter the medium (3). Cultural Studies in the Anglo-Saxon world, led by theorists like Stuart Hall, put forward other models for theorising about the effects of the media (4). At their most complex, these state that spectators are able to choose from a range of meanings they have at their disposal and which they themselves endow with form and meaning. Collectively, these meanings construct the world in which the subject exists, as well as subjectivity itself as a consequence of this exercise in providing meaning.

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan believed that the constitution of the subject occurs in the inexhaustible flow between self and signification. The post-structuralist theorists of cinema in the nineteen-seventies, taking the British film journal *Screen* (5) as their forum, applied a conception of Lacanian subjectivity to the understanding of cinema: watching a film is an example of full and psychically charged identification of the audience with the figures presented to the spectator as ideal selves. A term borrowed from Lacan (6), suture, is central to subsequent theories of cinema, and essential for explaining the relationship between the subject and the signifying chain. Psychoanalytical theory holds that the ego is formed during a process known as the mirror stage, that period of childhood in which children identify themselves with their reflection, with their ego, whilst at the same time undergoing the disappointment of recognising themselves outside their own bodies, as another person. In Lacan's view, disappointment is an inextricable part of the process of the constitution of subjectivity (7). Suture is the process of the projection of this illusion of imaginary plenitude that conceals an inherent gap in the constitution of the ego on the psyche.

With regard to cinema, suture is that process by means of which the audience binds itself to the central core of the cinematic event through which the spectator is projected and aligned with the point of view of the camera. As a form of entertainment, as a medium of mass communication, the habitual magic of cinema depends on the audience's suspension of disbelief. Watching a film necessarily implies a demand for identification, because without iden-

Occupation, CGAC, 2008-09

tification the subject is unable to generate meaning. The spectator, sitting in front of the screen in the darkened movie house, is dependent, through the plot, the environment in which it takes place and the characters and actors who play it out, on that permanent play of identification without which social life would be impossible. For this reason the signifying chains in the film story establish themselves in a form of the public sphere: a suture with others, an ambiguous instability in subjection.

The spectator identifies with the cinematic apparatus itself, and its recreation of the act of looking: the vision of the camera is made equal to the spectator's own act of perception, but there is also identification with the screen that outlines the fragment of the field of vision to be concentrated on. The screen, initially, produces pleasure in the subject, who is absorbed in the imaginary process of recognising the images, similar to that which takes place during the mirror stage. However, the symbolic aspect receives a setback when the spectator perceives the frame; this recognition produces anxiety in the subject, who doubts whether the viewpoint adopted is real or an illusion produced by the movement-image (8). The production of the subject in the perception of the film is generated in the movement between the projection of his or her gaze and the simultaneous introjection of the information received during the act of watching.

Clemens von Wedemeyer's cinema about cinema deals with what occurs between the mediator and the public sphere. The decade of film-making covered by the present exhibition constitutes a study of the history of the medium, and simultaneously a study of film thought, of how this history has been interpreted from a theoretical point of view. Just as in the history of cinema there is an unbreakable link between praxis and theory, which fluctuate and develop alongside each other, his work plays with repertory of cinemato-

Die Probe, CGAC, 2008-09

Making of Occupation / Metropolis, Report from China, CGAC, 2008-09

graphic formats, genres and languages in order to provide a critical space for his decisions as a director and the possible positions that can be adopted by the spectators facing the screen itself.

The central installation of the exhibition is a movie theatre showing *Occupation* (2002), a 35 mm film shot in public in 2001 at the *Festwiese* in Leipzig, a multi-purpose open-air arena built during the Nazi years. The two hundred or so extras who took part in the filming had no idea about the shooting programme or the script: they just turned up without any clear idea of what their role in front of the camera was to be. The film shows the interaction between the film crew, played by professional actors, and the extras, who follow their rather confused orders. The latter were placed within a rectangular space painted on the grass, an equivalent to the space occupied by a cinema screen: an illusory cinematic space created during the shooting of the film itself.

The authority exercised by the film crew over the group of extras relates this work to cinema as a mass spectacle, with the silent films of German directors Erich von Stroheim or Fritz Lang. The space of the plane gradually becomes a narrative space in which the movements of the camera or of the participants turn into cinema, through the use of resources such as cliché soundtracks and other classic devices of film language, including the presence of the film crew as just one more of these linguistic elements. At the end of the film, the extras disperse to leave the screen empty, and when the lights are switched off the film crew also dissolves out of focus. What made cinema out of cinema has disappeared; the cinema itself dissolves into blackness, the house lights go up and the audience's occupation of their seats is over.

Making-ofs occupy a fundamental place in Clemens von Wedemeyer's exhibitions: they explain another story, the documentary reality of the shooting

of the film, and offer another point of view on the final outcome. Their function is to reveal what has not been predetermined, those parts of the script that do not work or have to be modified. The spectator sees another gaze, a sceptical or disappointed one, and produces a reading from an intermediate position. *The Making of Occupation* (2002) is a dispassionate account of the three days' shooting: the story from the other side, that of the confused extras, the technical problems that had to be fixed, the magic of cinema seen from a different point of view; a tool that the spectator can use to deconstruct the central projection.

Rien du tout (Nothing at All, 2006), co-written and directed with Maya Schweizer (Maisons-Alfort, France,1976) can be seen as a commentary on, or even the other side of, the previous work. The story involves the staging of Samuel Beckett's play Catastrophe, a work on the despotic power of a stage director—played here by a woman—

over her assistant and the actor whom they are preparing to play the part of a condemned man in the Middle Ages. The young people who turn up to the open-call casting add their waiting and exchanges of everyday conversation to the work. The non-cinematographic reality of the extras gradually becomes the focus of the film: in a kind of spontaneous party the actors take over the open-air car park to put on what becomes the real play.

The catastrophe in question is the rioting in the Paris suburbs, which was going on whilst the film was being shot there on the invitation of the centre for modern art CAC Brétigny, itself located in the suburbs of the city, to coincide with a Wedemeyer exhibition that was being held there. The casting for the film took place on the opening day of the exhibition, and the shooting, which was done in the CAC's theatre and car park, was programmed to coincide with the centre's opening hours, creating a confused meeting

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of spectators, actors and film crew, with an approach that comes close to the proposals of Relational Aesthetics. In this social experiment visitors to the exhibition are caught up in the action together with the people waiting to become film, and it is they who generate the film, over and above the scripted narrative. To a certain extent, the film can be said to indirectly incorporate its own making-of: even though it has no hard and fast substance, its narrative gradually goes in an opposite direction to that which it initially appears to take: it turns back on itself until it reaches the final scene, a public tableaux vivant that is the real play that is being filmed.

Big Business (2002) is a remake of a Laurel y Hardy comedy from 1929, a paradigm of the bitter humour that characterised early Hollywood. The original begins with a text that reads: "The Story of a Man who Turned the Other Cheek and Got Punched in the Nose", the second punch being far more painful than the first. The main characters in the film are driving round the streets of Los Angeles, selling Christmas trees door-to-door during the height of summer. One of their potential customers gets angry at their insistence, and destroys one of the trees, thus sparking off a succession of gags in which violence is played out like a dialogue: whilst the bad-tempered customer smashes up the salesmen's car and trees, they in turn rhythmically lay waste to his house. One of the key aspects in the film is the presence of a policeman, a representative of law and order, who looks on in stunned passivity at the violence he allows to unfold. From today's viewpoint, it is interesting to see how in the film world the violence and climate of extreme tension generated by the 1929 crisis are transferred to the symbolic terrain of another person's property.

Clemens von Wedemeyer's version was made in the JVA Waldheim prison in Germany, where as part of their training for their future reinsertion in society the prisoners build small houses that they then proceed to demolish, a process they repeat time after time. The prison is a space outside society, with a closed order, but also one that is perfectly legible from a cinematographic point of view: the prison movie is a genre in its own right. On this occasion the violence in the original silent film is reproduced by the prison inmates, but there is a much greater tension: it even ends with the drawn-out smashing of a piano into pieces, with each blow of the axe provoking the corresponding reaction from its soundboard; the imaginary destruction of the sound that accompanied the original silent version when it was shown.

The Making of Big Business reveals how the forthcoming destruction was rigged, but also the difficulties surrounding the supposed probationary period that the space created by the shooting introduces into the normal prison routine. Through a series of interviews with the participants in the film, the prison reveals its parallels with the fiction of film. One of the prisoners reads from Pasolini's *Accatone*, the thief and anti-hero of Italian hyperrealism. Another, inside his cell, asks himself what is the minimum space a man needs for living in, what kind of architecture could make him feel at home. The off-screen narrator gradually comes to express his disappointment and awkwardness at his own freedom of movement. In this documentary on the conditions under which the film was shot, prison becomes a much more complex place: all possibility of seeing it as an imitation of a standardised social space disappears, whilst the space of the cinema is put in the position of an institutionalised social space, with a substantial relationship with power. Once again the spectator is left between two modes of representation, stuck two times over two narrative models of power over him or her: the canonical story reinterpreted

Big Business, CGAC, 2008-09

along post-modern lines and the documentary on his or her disappointment.

Metropolis, Report from China (2007) is an ongoing project that is more than just the film, once again co-directed with Maya Schweizer: it is a process of documentation concerning the possibility of shooting a remake of the Fritz Lang 1927 classic *Metropolis* in modern-day China (9).

Lang had been sent to New York by UFA to study American production conditions. In 2001 the film was the first to be included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register, not only for its linguistic brilliance but also for its ability to reconstruct an ideology and a way of thinking about the social reality of the time. Wedemeyer and Schweizer's version investigates possible parallels between the film classic and the reality of the giant of the East, whether it be from the standpoint of aesthetic similarity or in the narration, on a documentary plane, of the relationships between construction workers and their immediate surroundings. Their research into the conditions in which the metropolis is being built is done from several standpoints, and their work shifts the filmic gaze to another place in a possibility that conceals the disappointment of the impossible nature of their project, since the more research they do the greater is the both the difference between it and the original film and the extent to which fiction surpasses reality. The broken dream of the Utopia narrated by Lang is the same as that of the reconstruction of an imaginary cinematographic form on the basis of reality. What cinema constructs is a device that allows us to interpret the world frame by frame; however, apart from possible identifications between settings, the catalogue of workers à la August Sander or the documentation in the form of interviews for imagining the city, the exercise in suture will be weighed up between the references and the impressive social reality that Western audiences will face. The cinemato-

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graphic methodology of the remake turns out to be a valid one for providing an insight into modern China, on the basis of an initial script and its lack of correspondence with reality, going beyond mere Orientalism and coming closer to the incomprehensible complexity of the place itself.

His latest film, *Die Probe* (The Test, 2008), plays on theatricality as a means of displaying political content in a classical manner. The approach adopted is that of a static shot and a continuous loop, with neither beginning nor end. It shows the backstage area of an auditorium where a politician receives the applause and cheers of his supporters after an election victory. When he is finally alone with his closest collaborators, these concentrate on getting him ready to give his first speech as election winner. While he rehearses his speech, learning his lines, the spectator gradually comes to realise that he is going to step down from the post to which he has just been elected. The film

then commences its endless repetition at the point at which the politician enters on stage to play his role.

The inevitable sensation transmitted by this film is that of the optimism of an Eastern European political regime that as a result of this victory embarks upon a period of democracy. The loop, which goes from landslide victory to the decision to abdicate, emphasises our interpretation of the main character as a puppet half-dragged along by the masses and half-programmed by his speechwriter: fiction is political and predates any subject and his or her possibilities of interpretation. The film manages to transmit the mechanisms of power, with all their seduction and ambiguity in the very process of receiving the movement-image, to such perfection that when we become aware of the politician's decision to resign we are unsure as to whether we are faced with a considered act of morality or an excessive expression of absolute political power.

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As in all his films, with the construction of ambiguity by means of standard formats whose familiarity only serves to emphasise the surprise provoked by the director's scepticism, Clemens von Wedemeyer generates a suture that includes reality and the world outside cinema in the spectator's experience, but with a legibility that conceals a purely filmic interpretation and in its stead provides a cinematographic effect on our perception. In his site-specific work for Skulptur Projekte Münster 07, *Von Gegenüber* (*From the Opposite Side*, 2007), an abandoned cinema was used as a projection room for a film about the reality of the station on the other side of the street. Seeing the film is an effective narrative experience in its own right, but its interest lies in the spectators' interpretation of its settings after they leave the cinema and walk through the filmed reality they have just seen, incorporating their perceptions derived from the film with their own as they move about. Life, reality and memory, all affected by cinema, become representations that pass by at 24 frames per second.

1   See André Bazin, *¿Qué es el cine?*, Rialp, Madrid, 1990.
2   Pierre Francastel, *Pintura y sociedad. Nacimiento y destrucción de un espacio plástico, del Renacimiento al cubismo*, Cátedra, Madrid, 1984.
3   For further reading on this debate, see Umberto Eco's classic *Apocalípticos e integrados*, DeBolsillo, Barcelona, 2004.
4   Stuart Hall, "Encoding and Decoding in the TV Discourse", in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, Hutchinson, London, 1981.
5   I refer to the period between 1969, when it adopted its current title, and the end of the nineteen-seventies. It is now published quarterly by Oxford University Press.
6   Lacan used this term only once, in a seminar given in 1965, but it became a concept in film theory as a result of Jacques-Alain Miller's article "Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)", published in *Screen*, Number 18, pp. 24-25. The psychoanalyst was later to criticise the way in which his term had been abused: in his view suture was an open process, since a complete formalisation of the subject can never be fully sutured or produced.
7   Jacques Lacan, "El estadio del espejo como formador de la función del yo [*je*] tal y como se nos revela en la experiencia psicoanalítica", in *Escritos 1*, Siglo XXI, Mexico, 1984, pp. 86–93.
8   Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier", in *Film and Theory: An Anthology,* Blackwell, Oxford, 2000, pp. 403–35. See also *La imagen-movimiento. Estudios sobre cine 1* (Paidós, Barcelona, 2003) and *La imagen-tiempo. Estudios sobre cine 2* (Paidós, Barcelona, 1996), both by Gilles Deleuze.
9   It is worth noting, as the film points out in its credits, that Lang's original film no longer exists: what we can see nowadays is a reconstruction by Enno Patalas and the Murnau-Stiftung.

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