

Scratching the Lens: Media, Memory and Mimesis

Memory is not the opposite of forgetting, but its lining.
(Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*)

...cinema can be a critical tool and can be used as an
effective means for recirculating memory.

(Isaac Julien, "Creolising Vision")¹

¹ Isaac Julien, "Creolizing Vision" in Okwui Enwezor, et. al., *Creolite and Creolization*, Documenta11_Platform 3 (Hatje-Cantz: Ostfildern-Ruit, 2003), 150.

² Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, (London: Granta Books, 1999), 167.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 13.

The blip-blip of electronic gates opening and shutting in the tropical night; the red cranes drifting lazily over Ipanema, competing with the hand-gliders for the hot air currents: all of this suspended in what Dionne Brand refers to as the "damp and hungry interstices" of the world, where at the edges – of the city, the nation, the favela, the rutted country road, the jungle clearing or the coastal mangrove – the "rooted and the uprooted nourish each other" as they brush up against, mark and dirty the smooth surfaces of the rationalized stronghold of the north (of the world).²

It is at this point that we stumble over the uncomfortable recognition of criticism as colonisation. Evoking the other's voice, position and poetics, is also a modality for avoiding a critical relationship with one's own voice, position and power. If, as Assia Djebar and Trinh Minh-ha urge, we are not to speak for, or in the name of, but close by, the other, perhaps a further twist and discomfort needs to be laced into the argument. My uncertain voice in the company of histories that shadow and interrogate mine, undoing its premises and promises, its languages and conclusions, proposes an (im)possibility to be registered, recorded and inscribed in the very language that announces both my presence and the subaltern who are translated, survive, and live on. To receive and acknowledge such a state is already to adopt a diverse critical 'map'. Here I no longer seek to represent the other, the subaltern, the excluded, as though I could totally exhibit and catalogue their differences in the fullness of my explanation, but rather respond to her, him, and, ultimately my self, exposed in a language and a locality that is no longer, and probably never was, mine (Jacques Derrida).³ This is to register the full etymological reach of criticism as precisely the interruption of my time, language, memory and thought by the ontological insistence of a world that simultaneously sustains and exceeds my representation.

If fundamentalism is the refusal of a poetics that draws us towards the infinite truth of ambiguity and delivers us over to the uncertainties of a disquieting elsewhere, then the ubiquitous hegemony of realism betrays the fundamentalism of vision for which the truth is believed to be transparent, immediate, graspable, conclusive.

The contemporary presence of other views, other perspectives, other maps, not only suggests that history is plural and multi-directional, but also, to follow Walter Benjamin's suggestion, that it is the site of perpetual translation and interpretation. History is neither implacable destiny nor law; it is a worldly becoming. It is in the transit of its translations that it becomes possible to trace the slide from History *per se* to the language of history, to history as language.

Now the language of history, history as language, as ethics and aesthetics, secures the relationship between each of us and the media. As Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil* (1982) most powerfully suggests, memories are indivisible from the media that record them. It is the modern-day media, in the form of photographs, film, print archives, television, newspapers and digital memories, that collates and conserves collective and individual memory for those able to access them. If the very concept of 'citizenship', 'identity' and 'belonging' requires an affective and shared sense of the past then it is the media as memory that has become central for the articulation of modern political and cultural recognition. If languages render the world a 'world', transforming space into the familiar place of 'home', then it is those very same languages that also expose its reasoning. History is not out there; it is in here, inscribed on our tongues, articulated through our bodies, spoken by our lives, inscribed on the screens that simultaneously separate and unite us.

History is therefore not only present, it is also invisible and resides in a language that is never mine. Here on the threshold of vision that is marked by the elsewhere and its transitory exposure, the image comes undone, stutters, and for an instant is traversed by an oblique glance able to catch something in its unfolding. There exists the possibility to multiply on the image a multitude of senses, of directions, to rob it of unilateral intent in order to free it for a further movement. Here emerges a cinema of the 'gap', of the 'interval'. This is a cinematografia in which the wound of memory remains open, suspended as a disembodied fragment in the spiral of time, sustained in the custody of language: a writing of the world in the world. This is not about a state of being – hence no just, perfect or truthful image – but is the image movement of a state of becoming. There is not merely a simulacra of life lived elsewhere, nor an endless play of the sign substituting the 'truth', but rather a language event, a speech act, in which consensual views and habitual understanding are set adrift in the very instance of language itself. In this exploration, ultimately explosion, of narrative convention, time creeps up on and overcomes the character, transforming the organic and 'complete' subject he or she represents into a temporal image. Where the body irrupts in the frame, where the skin – as the surface of the body and the surface of film – intercede each other's intentions, critical distance is annulled in the ontological challenge of film

as the memory of language, and the language of memory. Beyond mere understanding and the (im)possibility of fully representing history, images are suspended on the screen, as the reel spills across the editing floor, resonant with re-membling.

When Jacques Lacan returns to Freud's commentary of Hoffman's "The Sand Man", the potential loss of the eyes signals the loss of the privileged perspective of the subject. It discloses that the visible does not commence from the subject but, on the contrary, it is the subject that inhabits the visible, suggesting that the cinema is not the mirror of the subject, but rather the mirror of the visible – something that is potentially altogether more disquieting, for it announces a state of *unheimlich*. Here, not only does there emerge some 'thing' that exceeds the capacity of the eye to construct the world according to its own perspective, but also promotes the fear of no longer finding itself at the centre of things. This is a prospect that announces the very undoing of a subject-centred occidental humanism.

To speak with the cinema implies to speak of the world, not to represent it but rather to receive in the image its intensification; that is, to look again and drain language of the habitual. This is to learn the fundamental lesson of Jean-Luc Godard's cinema practice: we are not concerned here with a theory or philosophy of cinema, but rather drawn towards the understanding of cinema as theory, as philosophy. We are not so much thinking of cinema, as thinking with cinema. As Gilles Deleuze puts it: "we must no longer ask ourselves, 'What is cinema?' but 'What is philosophy?'"⁴

Such a criticism of representation, and with it of the critical apparatus that has historically proposed the centrality of mimesis to the understanding of truth, permits us to return to the *avoided encounter with the unbomely quality of the world that reside in language itself*. The politics of the grammar of representation gives way to the poetics of the image (verbal, visual, sonorial), and directs us towards a post-metaphysical aesthetics that registers the radical impossibility, incommensurability, of a full or complete 'realism' sustained by representation.

A cinema of the interruption, an interrupting cinema, a broken narrative, a fragmented, disturbed image frustrates coherence and disseminates another sense, an unsuspected direction...

Here, in a porosity sustained by the ambivalence of language, emerge the interrogations and interruptions that interpellate existing authorities and their regimes of truth. They inevitably force a reassessment of language and the right to narrate. Here the very nature of language – preceding and exceeding a pre-established semantics – becomes political in the insistence of its passage out beyond authorial intention and institutional design. For it reveals a charged poetics that transposes existing political arrangements into regions in which it is lost for words. Here language discovers the

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 280. Needless to say, this deliberate refusal of mimesis and of the hegemony of 'realism' is to be applied to all the means of representation – from photography and sound to the written word – in a radical reevaluation of a post-metaphysical appreciation of language.

freedom to explore dimensions that query the premises that cite and site the (im)possible.

The present shift in subjectivity induced by digital dialects also promotes the recovery and reworking of the Benjaminian idea of the ‘optical unconscious’. Amongst its consequences is a deterritorialised cinema that moves between the screen of the cinema proper to the creolising vision afforded by fine art and the gallery space. It leads to another cinema that interrupts the inherited understanding of narration, disturbing the hierarchy of the spectacle, rewriting the conditions of the archive and its custody of ‘truth’. It is for that reason that I would contest the idea that the ‘visible’ is merely the visual. There is something about the appropriation of appearances that exceeds an ocular logic. Visual ‘recognition’ draws deeply on an economy of sense deposited in the memory of the viewing body; a memory certainly sustained by images but by no means exhausted by them. This overspill of cinematic traces and fragments out of the immediacy of the visual into the space of the art gallery was most certainly anticipated by Chris Marker, and has consistently been extended in the contemporary works of Chantal Ackerman, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Isaac Julien.

Yet, this other, unconscious and unfathomable side of language, is there in appearances, deposited and distributed in the visual plane. It is in this sense that language - whether the language of film, literature, music or the body - goes beyond signification in order to ‘show’ some other ‘thing’. It is here, confronting what exceeds the domestic vision, that we experience anxiety and the disquiet of homelessness. It is here that we are thrown out of our selves and are drawn into an *ek-static* (Heidegger) relationship with the languages in which we habitually move. This potentially introduces us to a new relationship to the world in which we succumb to what both worlds us in our everyday concerns and yet simultaneously sends us on our way, elsewhere, beyond our selves.

It is in this sense that a caring for the past in terms of an unguaranteed openness to its languages (rather than to the domesticating solipsism of nostalgia) permits us to configure the present and the future in a manner that exceeds and interrogates their ‘customary’ framings. Bearing witness to what is irreducible to the pragmatic terms offered by linguistic or visual codification is perhaps the absolute, Edenic, purity of language to which Walter Benjamin referred. To ‘repeat’ the past in this light – after all, reading a novel, watching a film, listening to music is precisely this type of repetition – is to elaborate a freedom that the implacable semantics of the present deny. This is what Kaja Silverman calls an “ethics of desire”.⁵ Of course, this is not to master the past for the benefit of the present, rather to install a relationship with alterity. It is not to fill up time with meaning, but is rather to be interpellated by what meaning fails to reveal. One is “thereby released from the paralysis of being into the mobility of becoming”.⁶

⁵ Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 62.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

From here it becomes possible to explore the image not as the representation of reality or history (with all the attendant questions of being 'true' to life, 'faithful' to the facts) but rather as the inauguration of a poetics: an inscription, a 'sculpture in time' as Andrei Tarkovsky put it. This propels us towards considering that more-than-us which the image announces but can never fully show or codify; a visible inscription of the world in the world that explodes its immediacy, not to destroy it but to render it and ourselves anew.