Paracinema: The Dematerialization of Film in Art Practices (Cinema, Body and Brain)*

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> Just as the projection was about to begin, Guy Debord was supposed to step onto the stage and make a few introductory remarks. Had he done so, he would simply have said: 'There is no film. Cinema is dead. No more films are possible. If you wish, we can move on to a discussion.'
> — Isidore Isou, Esthétique du cinéma.

The fundamental aspects of paracinema analyzed in this text all seem to point to the same dilemma: how to make cinema reach the necessary balance between its mobile and static conditions, a dilemma that also addressed the problem of body and brain in the medium. Dziga Vertov's preoccupations appeared undeniably to be the germ of film's dematerialization. As manifested in his Theory of the Interval (where his particular use of Soviet dialectics deliberately misled), dialectics were seen to exist in matter itself. Intervals proved to be simultaneously the purest materiality of the medium and of thought itself, because they allowed an interaction of phenomena without confines or distances. They were, finally, what "hooks up one point of the universe with another in any temporal order."(1) Such was the thrust of Vertov's Kino-Glaz: if Eisenstein's montage was 'a restoration of the laws of the process of thought, which in turn restores moving reality in the process of unrolling' (2) the montage of intervals, in presenting an incomplete world, allowed the spectator to take possession of perception. Perhaps Godard was right in saying that these two men were in fact two hands of the same body (3), because they agreed it was in the cuts where thought was registered, while artistic montage prefigured paracinema as Hollis Frampton had defined it: 'To my mind, any phenomenon is para-cinematic if it shares one element with cinema, e.g. modularity with respect to space or time.'(4). Through interstices of sense and matter, in the very discontinuity of the flux, the dematerialization of cinema irrevocably descended, proving its ubiquity in any phenomenon that shares with the medium its spatial and temporal modularity.

Cinema's material dialectics didn't only lie in the interval-frame alternation, but in the correlation of a mechanical eye and an avatar of images in continuous transformation, that sort of Borgian Aleph that coincided with Henri Bergson's definition of matter: "I call matter the aggregate of images, and perception of matter these same images referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body."(5) But the material dialectics of cinema also proved its existence between two physical entities: the camera, "the moving and moved machine"(6) that disappears during projection in favour of the screen, and the projector, looming invisibly behind our heads, precisely the locus of all vision (7). It was within that between, in which an apparent emptiness settles, that the avant-gardes injected, as a last resort, the radical transformation of their self-critical programme, the zero degree of cinema. In consequence, the cinema's body was displaced from its elemental illusion, motion, and while inverting its laws, it went beyond the flickering flux, destroying the logic of image representation and constructing a type of perception which was not based in the definition of reality, but in the very genetics of matter. That is, in the exhibition of the properties and materials of film as the medium's reality. That is why Gilles Deleuze said that what structural-materialist cinema had inherited from Vertov was the generation of a gaseous, molecular type of perception characterized by the free will of frames becoming detached from the flux (8). And this occurred in the granulated, flickering matter proper to the hypnagogic and eidetic cinema of Stan Brakhage, as well as in the films of George Landow and JJ Murphy, in which macro-matter and molecular entropy saw their correlate in the decomposition of the image emulsion. That was one of the crises or break up moments as far as conventional cinema's suspension of disbelief is concerned.

Structural-materialist film also put into question the veracity of the realistic image, as it took as an analytical focus the reality of the medium and an aesthetics of cuts and negation. Such a self-questioning direction defined a cinema in which procedural aspects were privileged, while perception became subject of exploration. Michael Snow's Wavelength, for instance, generated a tautological relationship between cinema, space and time, elaborating a parallelism between the spectator's presence in the work and the procedural situation in which it is unrolled and developed. Andy Warhol's intentions could not be more explicit in this respect. Empire and Sleep constituted a manifest assault on the unreal, fictional and illusory premises of the film industry. By staging the duration of the film itself frame by frame, and eliminating movement, he developed a construction of perception as procedural time in its purest or most conscious state.

At this point, we reached an indispensable peak in this study: the zero degree of cinema. We considered that, with its metrical and mathematical montage, its radical absence of images and motion, and its making visible of the intercut structure of celluloid, cinema descended all the way into its own genetic material. It was the flicker cinema of Tony Conrad, Victor Grauer, Peter Kubelka; a cinema whose black and white frames, whose light and dark alternation (inaugurated by Gil J. Wolman's 'L'Anticoncept' [1951]) did not impose itself over thought, contradicting all natural

perception. This was a cinema which, in effect, asked for a body in its luminous vibration of dancing grains, its non-panoramic overflowings (explored by José Val del Omar as a means to set men into fire), its operations in optical persistence. And, as Deleuze put it, when cinema asked for a body, it inverted the philosophical formula in which the body is an obstacle for cinema to reach thought. The flicker cinema, whose undeniable precedent was Dziga Vertov, served the body to "reach the unthought, which is life"(9), not just bringing to the forefront the space of cinematic reception as an experience in which the physical apparatus of the medium was beginning to disintegrate, but also confirming that "of all the arts, none responds more fully and intricately to the flow of the breath of life than does film nor does any other give itself so freely to the sharing breath […]."(10)

Fluxus artist Paul Sharits went even further with the chromatic modulations of N:O:T:H:I:N:G, in which his circular structure explored the "physical exultation that rotary images communicate directly to the brain"(11), the nervous system and the purest optics. In effect, flicker cinema summoned up a flickering and irrational cerebral process based on a principle of demystification: cinema is not movement but luminous change. And, this principle reconciled brain and body in cinema, with its shortcuts even provoking epileptic seizures. Cinema now wanted a body on which to project its luminous flux: more precisely, the body of the audience. We saw that when we analyzed the basic principles of exhibition cinema (film installations, site-specific film presentations, interventions, films displayed without a projector, a screen, or a filmtrip, etc.), and the way it often gave priority to social responsibility over aesthetic factors, radically transforming the medium's conditions of enunciation and reception.

At that precise moment, expanded cinema appeared, as well as intermedia art and all those practices which, in the 60s and 70s, generated situations of democratic exchange of experience (The Situationist International and the happenings of Allan Kaprow, for instance) and chose to neglect the space of art in terms of institutionalized forms disconnected from the vital praxis of man. In view of this situation, the avant-garde proposed a Hegelian Aufheben, that is, the overcoming of cinema, or paracinema. This didn't consist of destroying the medium completely; rather, it consisted of integrating it into life, where it could be preserved albeit with certain formal changes (12). In a weaker sense, the suicidal protest of the avant-garde consisted of generating situations in which the projection was conceived as a happening where the collective experience of the cinematic space was prioritized, as well as the participation of the audience and/or the artist. That was put into practice by a diverse range of artists from Nam June Paik or Ken Jacobs to Claus Oldenburg or Marcel Broodthaers, although Anthony McCall's Line Describing a Cone raised our interest in a special way. With its solid light, it created an interesting hybrid between performance, installation, sculpture and cinema. It approached the dematerialization of the medium in a different way to approaches more common in its time.

With Michael Snow, we discovered that some installations and photographic pieces, arranged in correlated pairs or in the sequences of an artist's book, could create visual motion in the mind and variations in perceptual time. Snow's works produced a true cinematic quality while challenging the traditional materials of cinema and, as the Lettrists had done previously, they created an immaterial cinema based on the enchainment of mental images. As a last resort, these works and interventions established the death of film in a stronger sense, because they were often simply about invoking its essence, that is, the communications of movements and mental processes. Roland Sabatier said: "Contemplate my word which speaks about cinema and you will see my film." (13)

Their practice was that of a cerebral cinema, because the screen, the projector and the film themselves remained at a mental or imaginary level, but their cerebral cinema was corporeal too, because sometimes it could even be touched. By means of a written communication (Maurice Lemaitre's Film Supertemporal), of sound sources directly found in the venue (François Dufrêne's Tambours du Jugement Premier), of a cardboard box attached to the body, or of a simple provocation in a porn cinema (Peter Weibel and Valie Export's Tapp und Tast Kino and Action Pants: Genital Panic) cinema did finally abandon its materiality, dissolving into situations of social exchange, turning into the reference of an argument, into the subject of a debate, or the perceptual interval that invokes mobile thought.

That was ultimately the dematerialization of film or paracinema: the realization of a total or integral cinema as André Bazin had imagined it; or an infinite cinema, as Hollis Frampton proposed. What cinema had achieved, and which the other arts couldn't, was now overcome in the various ways described in this book. But, cinema hasn't died; it lives on because it keeps illuminating an intelligible matter. And the project of the avant-garde, the destruction of cinema, remains latent. Not in a revisionist manner, but as a task still to be resolved in all its intrinsic difficulty, with all its contradictions, self-criticism and impossibilities.

Notes

1) Dziga VERTOV. El Cine-Ojo: Textos y Manifiestos (Ed. Frances Llinas), Fundamentos, Barcelona, 1973, p. 102.

2) Gilles DELEUZE, Cinema 2: The Time-Image, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 211

3) Jean-Luc GODARD, Pensar entre Imágenes. Conversaciones, Entrevistas, Presentaciones y Otros Fragmentos. (Ed.: Núria Aidelman and Gonzalo de Lucas) Intermedio, Barcelona, 2010, p.98.

4) Hollis FRAMPTON, Notes on Zorns Lemma. In Scott McDonald, Screen Writings: Scripts and Texts by Independent Filmmakers, University of California Press, 1995, p. 61.

5) Henri BERGSON. Matter and Memory. Zone Books, New York, 1991, p. 22.

6) Dziga VERTOV. Op. cit., p. 19. 184.

7) Christian METZ,'Identification with the Camera'. In Film Theory and Criticism (Ed.: Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen), Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, pp. 804-807.

8) Gilles DELEUZE, La Imagen-Movimiento. Paidós Comunicación, Barcelona, 1984, pp. 126-129.

9) Gilles DELEUZE, La Imagen-Tiempo. Paidós Comunicación, Barcelona, 1986, p. 251.

10) Hollis FRAMPTON, 'Mental Notes'. In On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters. The Writings of Hollis Frampton (Ed.: Bruce Jenkins), The Mit Press, Massachusetts, 2009, p. 255.

11) Antonin ARTAUD, El Cine. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1995, p. 16

12) Peter BÜRGER, Theory of the Avant-Garde. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 49.

13) Roland SABATIER, Próximamente en esta Pantalla: el Cine Letrista. Entre la Discrepancia y la Sublevación, (Ed. Eugeni Bonet and Eduard Escoffet), Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona, 2005, p. 331.