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Visiting a city, watching a film

Roger Odin

Everything has already been written about the relationship between cities and cinema: that the birth of cinema was contemporary with the urban revolution, that cinema buildings are an issue (aesthetic, economic, social, political) in the urban landscape and more widely in public space, that the city is inextricably linked to cinema in the social imaginary: the mythic original cities of cinema (Lyon), entire cities dedicated to cinema (Los Angeles, the Cine-city of Ramon Gomez de la Serna¹), movie cities where we have all lived (imaginary cities such as those in *Metropolis*, *Alphaville*, *Brazil* ..., real cities more or less reinvented on screen), that cinema belongs to the city or the city belongs to the cinema ...

Personally, what strikes me particularly is the strong similarity between the act of visiting a city and that of seeing a film. I see in the beginning of *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov), which places as a prelude to the entry into the city itself, images of an empty movie theater, a symbol of this analogy.

To visit a city, or see a film, is to enter a world or more accurately "to produce" a world, a "diegesis" as the film theorist would say. In both cases, the viewer and the visitor function as enunciators who build this world from the signs provided. Michel de Certeau proposed describing as "pedestrian enunciation" the series of acts by which the walker actualizes some structures among those offered him by the city, but also turns them into something else, "moves them" and even "invents new ones". Even if the visit is by taxi and not on foot, a particularly amusing example of this enunciative process is the tour of Paris that Gabriel gives Zazie early in the film by Louis Malle.² While appearing to follow a linear path, the taxi goes several times around the same monument (the church of Saint Vincent de Paul) which Gabriel and his friend present successively as the Pantheon, the Madeleine, the Reuilly barracks, Les Invalides Every city tour more or less follows this model: to travel around a city is always to some degree to invent it. To watch a film, pragmatics tells us, is the same.

The American anthropologist Sol Worth speaks of "attributive strategy" to describe this way of producing meaning.³ To illustrate this procedure, he cites a film reading test conducted with young children: while the projected sequence obviously

showed a doctor passing by an injured person without helping him, some children said they liked the doctor because he was good and looked after the victim. To the request for them to justify this assertion, the children answered that the character shown on the screen was a good person because he was a doctor and they thought the doctor was treating the injured person because this is what doctors usually do. In attributive strategies, the production of meaning is based on our knowledge (or supposed knowledge, or lack of knowledge) of the world, a knowledge that is often confused with the dominant cultural stereotypes; it also involves personal fantasies of the perceiving subject. Under these conditions, Worth concludes, the subject who approaches a film with an attributive strategy can "happily extract from this film any meaning whatsoever".⁴

The fact remains that both city and film do everything possible to control the construction of the text by the visitor or viewer: in both cases, there is a space of signs intentionally designed to position whoever passes through it. We can say of the city what Francesco Casetti said about the work of the film in relation to its viewer: it constructs its visitor, assigns him a place and makes him perform a certain way.⁵ Serge Daney observes that both film and city need signals to function properly, and points out the difficulty for the cinema (unlike painting) to make visible spaces that lack strong marking, like the sky.⁶ Watching a film, like visiting a city, falls within the realm of discourse, and most often of narrative (films which do not, such as abstract experimental films, educational documentaries, often have trouble finding audiences) and narrativity requires the due of certain tags to guide the reader ("the sky is dangerous", Truffaut said, "because it obscures the story"⁷). As a film plays the full range of figures offered by filmic language to take me where it wants (to make me laugh, cry, identify with a particular character or conversely make me keep my distance with this or that speech), the city has strategically placed signage to control my behaviour and make me attend to its speech. According to Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities*, "The city says everything you have to think, it makes you rehearse its own speech, and while you think of visiting Tamara you're only recording the names by which it defines itself and all its parts".⁸

To secure this attention, work on the emotional level is probably even more important than cognitive work. We remember the definition of film given by Roland Barthes, "this festival of affects that is called a film", which could of course be equally

said of the city.⁹ If the work of a fiction film is to make me resonate with the events narrated (I propose to call this process "*miseen phase*", the "commissioning phase" of the viewer's emotional positioning¹⁰) and hence to make me attend to the implicitly mediated speech (every narrative is based on a set of values that we communicate via the story told), all the work of the city is to make me resonate with the speech she wants to convey, a speech I apprehend through the narrative I build by visiting it.

Once out of the airport, engages me in a kind of parallel montage between two series: first, traces of industrial Bilbao, the "city of steel", "an unattractive big industrial city strictly for lovers of urban poetry"¹¹, with traces carefully and artfully maintained (large chimneys, factory buildings, brick walls); and on the other hand, everything that seeks to place Bilbao under the sign of contemporary art, to mobilize culture as a city project: the construction of a new airport and of the Uribarte bridge by Santiago Calatrava, the seafront creation of a gallery district by Cesar Pelli, a new metro designed by Norman Foster ...

Of course, this series culminates with Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum. With this production, the montage no longer marks the passage of the industrial into an aesthetic paradigm, it produces a discourse of identity. Consisting of the juxtaposition of fragmented blocks with various shapes and volumes, the Guggenheim is strikingly almost chaotic, at least in its polymorphic structure (one can see there the evocation of a ship, but also of an animal or plant form), an assembly that makes sense only by the system of relations it evokes: a relationship with the city's past (referring to Bilbao's maritime history), a relationship with nature (especially with the river, but also with the sky that is reflected in some parts of its architecture), more generally a relation to the vital dynamic of the world. This montage gives the building a Baroque, almost mythical, dimension, leading to the production of a statement of identity: an identity that asserts itself as dynamic, mixed, transformative, multi-cultural, open to the world.

Thus described, visiting Bilbao becomes like viewing a kind of propaganda film (I am thinking in particular of Eisenstein's *The General Line* or *October*), not only does the city impose on me a discourse built upon the work of affects, but a discourse that conceals another: under the guise of showing me the transformation of the city, under the cover of art, it is a matter of ideology. The new identity

discourse declares itself as the opposite of the identity that ETA would impose on the Basque country (ETA activists who have tried to dynamite the Guggenheim are not wrong in their reading of its significance).

Compared to Bilbao, Berlin depends less on montage than on point of view and staging. A series of spaces there have been specially designed with the explicit function of dislodging me from my position as visitor (spectator) and forcing me to adopt the point of view of a Berliner and more generally of a German (we could say that Berlin uses the subjective camera and identification): it is a case of making me resonate with the double vulnerability that underpins German identity (what Régine Robin calls "the double ghostly machinery of German memory"¹²), of Jews and of the Wall.

Thus the Jewish Museum designed by Daniel Libeskind aims not only to "reveal the trauma to the German society as a whole by the loss of its Jewish community",¹³ but to make me feel this trauma in my own body: narrow corridors, massive walls striped with disturbing loopholes, spaces producing a strong feeling of confinement and excluding the world (the tower of the Holocaust), loss of horizontality: the Garden of exile consists of several series of vertical columns placed on a sloping floor so that I feel in my body something of the destabilization produced by exile.

Not far from the Reichstag, the new Holocaust memorial, "Fields of Memory" is designed in the same spirit: a field of 2,700 steles spread over an area of 20 000 m² stretches out so that the visitor, having entered, will never see its limits. The space between the steles forces one to be alone: we cannot penetrate in company because of its narrowness. In addition, the arrangement of wave-shaped headstones of variable width and height should give the visitor a strong feeling of instability and the sense that his perception of the whole will constantly change. According to the architect, Peter Eisenmann, the goal is to unravel the illusion of being safe.

The Wall whose fragments are ubiquitous in the city, has resulted in the construction of an installation that operates on the same principle. This memorial, located in Bernauerstr, takes the form of two large polished steel plates which enclose a seventy-meter fold of the wall, carefully cleared of graffiti: the whole impact of this installation lies in the wooden fence that not only prevents access to the

space behind the wall, but forbids us to see what there is between the two plates that enclose it. If I still want to try to see what is behind this fence, I must contort myself to peer through the cracks between some panels of the fence. Of course, after all that effort, I discover that there is nothing to see. The space behind was left as it was when the Wall was functional, that is to say, abandoned, empty: it is the space of death. For a moment, I am led to share the frustration generated by the Wall among those it separated.

Thus Berlin works her psychotherapy by producing "installations" that lead visitors to share its problems. Berlin belongs to the paradigm of making public the intimate which is an important part of contemporary cinema, television (with its incalculable number of 'confession' programmes¹⁴) and now Internet.¹⁵

Let me be clear: my point is not to say that Berlin and Bilbao were cinematically planned, or that these cities mimic films, but to show that city and cinema mobilize the same resources in terms of the production of meaning and affects. Jean Nouvel has expressed this well from the standpoint of the designer: "Experiencing a feeling – being moved - being aware - having a sense of the perverse through emotion - analysing that emotion - remembering - implementing a strategy for simulating, amplifying it, the better to give it to others, and certainly to test it - for the delight of shared pleasure. All this is what it means to be a film director or architect."¹⁶The same is true from the side of the viewer or visitor. No wonder then that seeing a film is so frequently visiting a city. The fact has been widely studied, but until now mainly in terms of theme,¹⁷ whereas the similarity of cognitive and affective processes involved seems to me more important. If the theme of the city tour is so present in cinema, it is surely because there is no better way to bring us into the fiction, since it is only a matter for us viewers of repeating the processes of production of meaning and affects (diegetisation, narration, identification, affective positioning of the spectator) that we are familiar with from travelling around a city. Visiting a city has always been *to make up his own cinema*.

Today there is a need to take that phrase literally. Visiting a city amounts, more often than not, to seeing a film. Not only because most city tours (at least organized ones) start with a film, or rather a multimedia production, intended to help us see the city better than when we actually walk it (these productions present

themselves as offering a concentrated experience of the city: *London Experience*, *Amsterdam Experience*, etc.), but also because more and more the city is apprehended through the screen of the video camera held by the visitor. Noting that during the hostage capture at the Japanese embassy in Lima, tourist agencies had changed routes and planned a stop in front of the embassy so that tourists could film the scene of the tragedy, Marc Augé wondered if: "The city fiction of tomorrow will be anything other than a *menu* of images to consume now or to take with you, like the pre-cooked dishes of some Chinese restaurants?".¹⁸ And it is true that the visitor becomes increasingly a recorder of prefabricated images offered to him by the city (some cities have even put up panels indicating places where it is best to photograph). But what interests me especially in this remark by Marc Augé, is the idea of images to "consume later". This is indeed what marks the difference between current practice with camcorders and what happened in the days of amateur cinema amateur filmmakers, filming for the future and rejoicing in advance of the memory they will later have ("here, that would have been beautiful").¹⁹ With the camcorder, even if we still film in order to say that we were in a particular city, we saw such and such (the hostage-taking for example), it is essentially in the present, during the shooting and while visiting the city, as things are playing. The camcorder is the go-between, the indispensable catalyst without which the city cannot be seen ("my camera broke down, I wasn't able to see anything," a friend told me after returning from a trip). It is as if things can only be understood that appear on a screen. This is because the screen protects, but also because without a frame, there is no vision. At the same time, this frames my space: seeing the city through the camcorder is inscribing it in my private images, just as the television screen privatizes public space by bringing it within the space of the house; so looking at the city through my camcorder, I transform public space into private images. To visit the city now is to make my home in the city (that's what the camcorder was at first: a portable home). In fact, the city is no longer visited or even seen for itself; it is no longer the place of history and of memory: it is merely a private image among others. Paul Virilio was concerned that the public image is replacing the public space.²⁰ Now another stage has been reached: it is the private image that is about to replace the public space.

¹Ramon Gomez de la Serna, *Ciné-City*, translated from the Spanish by Marcelle Auclair, Paris, 1928/ *Movieland*, trans. by Angel Flores (New York: Macaulay, 1930).

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- ² *Zaziedans le metro* (Louis Malle, 1960), based on the novel by Raymond Queneau.
- ³ Sol Worth, *Studying Visual Communication*, Pennsylvania Press, 1981; *Through Navajo Eyes* (with John Adair), New Mexico Press, 1997.
- ⁴ Sol Worth, « Pictures Can't Say Ain't », *Versus* 12/5: 97.
- ⁵ «We seek to understand how the film constructs its viewer [...], how it takes account of him, gives him a place, and how it makes him follow a certain trajectory', Francesco Casetti, *D'un regard l'autre. Le film et son spectateur*, Presses Universitaires de Lyon : 30-31.
- ⁶ Serge Daney, «Ville-ciné et télé-banlieue », in *Cités-Cinés*, Paris, éditions Ramsay, 1987 : 122.
- ⁷ *Ibid* : 122.
- ⁸ Italo Calvino, *Les villes invisibles*, Paris, Seuil : 20.
- ⁹ Roland Barthes, « En sortant du cinéma » (“On leaving the cinema”, in *Communications* n°23, « Psychanalyse et cinéma », Paris, Seuil, 1975 : 104.
- ¹⁰ About this notion of “miseen phase”, see Roger Odin, « For a Semio-Pragmatics of Film », in Robert Stam & Toby Miller, *Film and Theory. An Anthology*, Blackwell, 2000: 60-62.
- ¹¹ *Backpacker's guide*: 97
- ¹² Régine Robin, *Berlin Chantiers*, Paris, Stock, 2001: 93.
- ¹³ *Ibid* : 376
- ¹⁴ Dominique Mehl, *La Télévision de l'intimité*, Paris, Seuil, 1996.
- ¹⁵ My observations about Bilbao and Berlin are based on visits to these cities made as part of a research programme supported by the European Science Foundation, *Changing Media-Changing Europe* (2000-2004) directed by Ib Bondebjerg et Peter Golding. The results of the team's research are published in a collective volume, *New collectivities in a European space*, Intellect, UK, 2005.
- ¹⁶ Jean Nouvel, « Les cinéastes ? Sur des choses certaines, ils m'ont ouvert les yeux », in *Cité-Cinés* : 23.
- ¹⁷ Many articles in the collection *Cités-Ciné*, already mentioned, touch on this issue. See also Michel Marie, « La thématique urbaine dans les films » in Gérard Cladel, Kristian Feigelson, Jean-Michel Gévaudan, Christian Landais, Daniel Sauvaget, *Le cinéma dans la cité*, Paris, éditions du Félin, 2001 : 51-55.
- ¹⁸ Marc Augé, *L'impossible voyage. Le tourisme et ses images*, Paris, éditions Payot et Rivages, 1997 : 164.
- ¹⁹ Karl Sierck, « C'est beau, ici », in *Le film de famille, usage privé, usage public*, Roger Odin dir., Paris, Méridiens Klincksieck, 1995 : 63-76.
- ²⁰ Paul Virilio, « Les lumières de la ville » in *Ciné cité* : 157.