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Increasing aesthetic experience, installing films

That was what Roland Barthes regretted the most. In the flow of the viewing of a film, it seems that no place has been left for experiencing thoughtfulness or what I shall call a *pensivity* (*pensitivité*). The words are well known, which Raymond Bellour quoted in an essay dedicated to the “pensive spectator”¹. “Do I add to the images in movies?—I don’t think so ; I don’t have time : in front of the screen, I’m not free to shut my eyes ; Otherwise, opening them again I would not discover the same image ; I am compelled to a continuous voracity ; a multitude of other qualities, but no pensivity : that’s why the photogram interests me.”² That default that will lead Barthes to prefer the photogram would be to find in the temporal form of the film, which favor a psychological activity mainly “protentional” and substantially caused by the hurry of the scrolling, as voracious as Cronos himself.

Yet, in order to undo the grip of this temporal form of the film, there are other ways than to rely on the photogram or on the freeze frame—which strongly distort the temporal experience of the film—and that is to rely on excerpts. In the eyes of Barthes, the photogram was interesting because it materializes something similar to the hermeneutic pause—and the possibility to “add to the images”, namely to supplement the images with a vagabond semiosis. The excerpt, which carry out duration, allows to materialize the aesthetic “moment”—or would I name it better by saying the *momentum* since the latin word evokes more substantially the idea of an impulse or of a potency.

Filmic studies : from inception to intensification

The “filmic studies”³ which I produce are meant to arouse something of the aesthetic momentum implied by the excerpts, to reinforce the call to states not only of *pensivity* but also and, for the most, of *sensitivity* in the spectator’s experience which is usually and routinely “compelled to a continuous voracity”. Indeed, this kind of temporal voracity will regularly stamp out the induction of an aesthetic relation as much as a critical relation for the reason that the “attentional resources” of the spectator are commonly focused on these significant elements in regard to understanding a narrative. But we need more that the only process of extracting excerpts and restoring the momentum it carries if we wish to undo the habits of perceptual anticipations. We need the apparatus of *formal processes* and, whenever possible, of *scenographic setups*.

¹ Raymond Bellour, “Le spectateur pensif” (1984), in *L’Entre-images*, Paris : la Différence, new edition 2002, pp. 75-83.

² Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, Paris : Editions de l’Etoile/Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1980, pp. 89-90.

³ I already had the occasion to discuss my practice as a producer of what I call « filmic studies », which are a kind of “installed” video essays in Loig Le Bihan, “Explorer, expliquer, exposer le film.” in P. Dubois, F. Monvoisin, E. Biserna, *Extended Cinema. Le cinéma gagne du terrain*, Pasian di Prato : Campanotto, 2010, pp. 439-445.

My pieces are conceived and designed to be installed and staged following a kind of “grammar” inspired by the multi-channel video installations we can find in galleries and contemporary art exhibitions. The purpose is to benefit from the possibilities offered by ever the use of multiple displays and their “staging”. It is also to suggest an “aesthetic attitude”. Besides the fact that exhibiting these “critical” installations in academic or cultural institutions such as libraries will ease the *inception* of an “aesthetic attitude”, a few formal processes, which I oftenly make use of, will ease not only the inception of that “aesthetic attitude” but its *intensification*. Taking into account the limited time I have today, I will choose to focus on two of these formal processes : First, the looping of the excerpts. And then, the use of multiple displays or split screen.

Extracting an excerpt from a feature film will allways deviate the initial experience of shots and sequences that are “natively” constitutive parts of a more larger temporal form, but nevertheless the looping of the excerpt allows to preserve something similar to the momentum of the excerpt. It also happens to *outsource* it and “open” its temporality (to use Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s word). Yet, looping the excerpt, opening it to an unbounded temporality, it is to a certain extent “compelling” the spectator in reshaping his attention in the sense of an intensification not only of a *semiotic sensitivity*, but also and for the most, of an *aesthetic—or shall I say aesthesic—sensitivity*. If we follow up the precise and precious psychological analysis made recently by Jean-Marie Schaeffer about the aesthetic experience in his namesake book, we have to notice how it involves the exchange between a kind of “standard” attention for this other kind of attention, called “aesthetic”. Standard attention is based on an efficient perceptual processing of the stimuli, on the use of subconscious “short reactional loops” and, above all, “transitive” ones that are goal-oriented toward a quick schematization and categorization or toward an urgent understanding of, let’s say, a narrative situation for example. On the contrary, aesthetic attention is characterized by its circular dimension : *it aims at its renewal, and nothing else*, regulated by the two polarities of curiosity and “fluence”—In Schaeffer’s vocabulary, the flulence identify with a pleasant ease in the perceptual or conceptual processing, that is experimented at the peril of boredom : “The circle formed by this complex attention exercised for its own sake and by the hedonic calculation evaluating this exercise and modulating the attentional processing in the aftermath define the aesthetic experience. [...] the aesthetic experience is this circle and nothing else than this circle.”⁴ Looping excerpts is then an appropriate way to enhance this circling.

The looping of excerpts is the first among the formal processes that I make use of in my installations, but there are other factors that will enhance the aesthetic experience of these excerpts. One is the use of multiple displays or, on the occasion of a mono-channel viewing, the use of the *split screen* device. Schaeffer himself underlines that a few films using this device of the split screen are aimed at arousing a kind of attention which he names “parallel”, that is to say a kind of attention which targets several focal points at the same time. He first comments on Jacques Tati’s strategy who, in his famous feature film *Playtime*, offers many long shots in which the composition will drive a kind of tabular contemplation and then discusses the split screen device itself : “A more classical form to invite to a parallel attention is the technical device of the split screen which is in use since 1930 [...] It is a less demanding strategy in terms of attentional resources than the one used for *Playtime*, and this is because of at least three reasons. First of all, the number of inlayed screens, and then

⁴ Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L’expérience esthétique*, Paris : Gallimard, 2015, pp. 249-250. Here and after, my translations.

of focal points combined is limited to two, three or four. Thereafter, each of the inlayed screens is generally highly focused ; finally, and mainly, the split screen is geared as to pre-structure the dispatching of attention, since every focal point has its own frame, which will simplify the attention effort.”⁵ Conducting the spectator to experience a parallel attention, it’s at the same time damming up the logics of an attention called, on the opposite, “serial” (schematizing and “ranked”), to reintroduce this kind of back and forth dynamic between a focused attention and a distributed attention, between this kind of commonly targeted attention on which, for example, the continuity editing system of classical montage is builded and a tabular attention which randomly scatters the focal points. Moreover, this reinforced dynamic between focalized attention and distributed attention, between serial and parallel attention, leads to a state in which “top-down” perceptual processing will be much more prominent and will determine an attentional investigation of “low level” stimuli whereas these very same stimuli are usually processed through “pre-attention” ways, which means subconsciously. In other words, during an aesthetic experience, the limit of perceptual responsiveness is “lowered” (meaning increased), sometimes considerably, and the ability to discriminate the smaller elements that objects or textures put before our senses is extensively enhanced. It is what Jean-Marie Schaeffer is talking about when he comes to designate the saturated—or overloaded—dimension of the aesthetic relation which opposes to the goal-orientated standard attention, much more “economic”. He takes on this example of a painting by Cy Twombly titled *Leda and the Swan* (1962)⁶ of which, once you have elapsed the “first encounter” of an effort to categorize which will promptly be accomplished, you spectator will need whole of your attentional resources, and maybe also some prior knowledge, to maintain without displeasure a successful continuation of an aesthetic experience. By discovering this scribbled surface where only a few graphic signs are understandable at first sight—a window up to the right, the word *Leda* down to the right next to other strikethrough words—, you will be driven to open widely your eyes in front of this graphical senseless entanglement, which may be unpleasant unless your curiosity shall be awakened by the oddity of these erratic traces or/and by a prior knowledge of the works of the artist, leading you to voluntarily “lower” your sensibility threshold. “These expectations will lead you in a second stage to come down towards lower levels of perceptual processing in which you will pay attention to the layouts as layouts (orientation, continuity and discontinuity...). Your attention will anchor on visual features of low level : you will seek for figurative indices, microstructures of designs, ‘twomblyan’ graphic signatures so to speak. Your attention will engage in an endogenous manner in a descending dynamic that will lead you to consciously process numerous elements which, when you first looked at the painting were wether preattentionally processed, wether ruled at as mere ‘noise’.”⁷

The example of *Wendy’s TV 1 & 2* (Loig Le Bihan, 2017)

I now would like to draw on an example with my last installation, a diptych, which I have newly produced, with the precious help of my colleague Claire Chatelet, in the aftermath of the completion and the publishing of my book dedicated to *Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980)⁸.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

⁶ <http://www.christies.com/media-library/images/features/articles/2017/03/21/twombly/twombly.jpg?w=780>

⁷ J.-M. Schaeffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

⁸ Cf. Loig Le Bihan, *Shining au miroir. Surinterprétations*, Aix-en Provence : Rouge profond, 2017.

This filmic study, called *Wendy's TV 1 & 2*, aims at producing an intensification of that kind of aesthetic relationship one could freely adopt when viewing the "source" feature film of Kubrick.

Projection :

Wendy's TV1 (The Shining/Summer of '42, 1'12", looped) [Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4]

It seems to me that the most prominent aesthetical effect of this first part of the diptych—the ignitor of a *curiosity* that will counterbalance the *fluence* eventually produced by the piece⁹—has to be found in the sound modulations of the echo effect between the dialogue lines enunciated by the characters of the film quoted in *The Shining* the way they are restituted in its mix (audible on the left speaker) and via the soundtrack of source film *Summer of 42* (1971) by Robert Mulligan (audible on the right speaker).

The slightly imperfection of the synchronization between the two excerpts produces a reverb effect and a spatialization that gives a kind of monumentality to a scene which, in the film, is altogether rather minor (and has been ruled out of the european version of the film). But it also leads the spectator to a "refining" of his listening which will eventually conduct to a better appreciation of the sound mix, of the overlaying and masking effects between the dialogue lines of the two films.

Projection :

Wendy's TV2 (Shining/Carson City, 1'38", looped) [Fig. 5, 6, 7, 8]

In a first viewing of this second piece of the diptych, chances are great that the "voracity" of the film will overrule the backgrounds of the images in the fringe of the visible. But chances are great also that the pragmatic context and the experience of the first piece of the diptych will engage us to try to identify the link between the two excerpts, and to renew our attention.

We will succeed in establishing this link more or less quickly by catching up the image broadcasted on a TV screen in the background of the Torrance's apartment (which has an excerpt from the western *Carson City*, 1952, by André de Toth¹⁰). All of these will play a part in this first stage of the reception of the work, a stage in which the attention of the viewer might be of a "divergent" style, as Schaeffer would put it, that is to say an attentional activity dimly selective, unranked, segmented which will delay the stage of integration of the datum and of categorization.

If the "hedonic valency" (as Schaeffer calls it) that is produced by the aesthetic experience of this work is sufficient—and that's my strong wish—, then the experience will extend and wether move on to a state of *pensitivity* (in which maybe the figurative echoes between an elevator and a tunnel will resonate...) or wether simply go on in an increased state of *sensitivity*... And maybe, then, will we finally recognize, behind Jack's character, the TV in the hallway, the same prop that we saw in the other piece of the diptych... And maybe will we incidentally, after a period of time, notice this woman with a bun who change her position in the armchair from one shot to the other...

⁹ On the counterbalance of fluence with curiosity in aesthetic relationship, cf. "De la fluence à la curiosité et à l'intérêt" in J.-M. Schaeffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-250.

¹⁰ For a critical explanation of the use of this excerpt from *Carson City*, cf. the section of my book titled "*Carson City et le double tunnel*" (Loig Le Bihan, *Shining au miroir, op. cit.*, pp. 181-183.)

“I’m not free to shut my eyes ; Otherwise, opening them again I would not discover the same image”, said Roland Barthes. It seems that to his point *pensitivity* state required to shut one’s eyes. But if pensitivity calls for shutting your eyes in order to concentrate your attentional resources on an imaginary thinking, there’s another state, *sensitivity*, no less meditative. And it calls for a wide opening of our eyes.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2

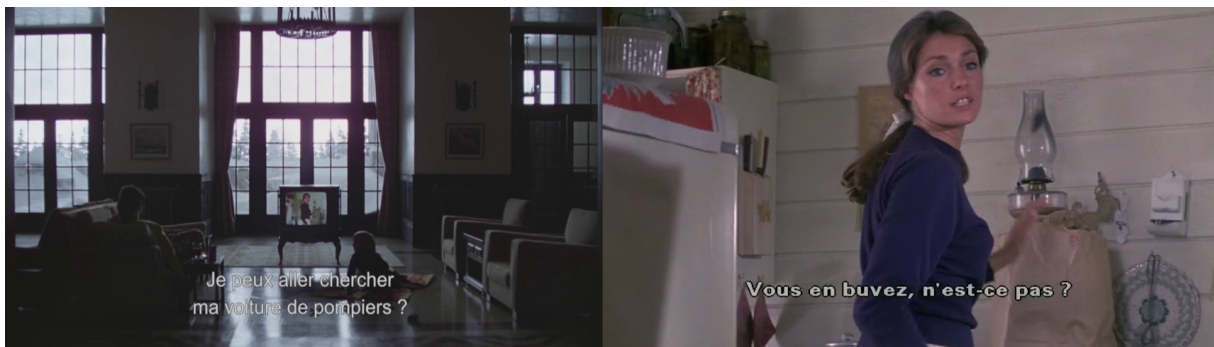


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8