Art-historical Moments in Cinema

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Introduction

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The ideas presented in this volume stem from a long-standing collaborative study centred on the history of forms, which over the course of time has stimulated various avenues of inquiry and inspired the analysis of a diverse body of films[1]. Given the abundance of previous publications focused on the crossroads of cinema and the history of art, it is worth stating at the outset that the originality of this project lies in its capacity to reveal the historiographical potentialities of cinema. More specifically, we are seeking to analyse the medium of film, and particularly fiction film, as an *instrument* rather than as an *object* of history: whether it be the history of art or that of forms, techniques or filmic devices. Above all else, this implies becoming aware not so much of the presence of artworks and their significance with respect to the related events, but of the ways in which the fiction itself, through certain motifs (windows, chairs, serpentine lines), visual

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[1] While this is by no means an exhaustive list of the works generated by various seminars, conferences or day symposiums, a few examples of such studies include: Barbara Le Maître, 'Pour une histoire des formes, au-delà du médium', in *A History of Cinema Without Names. A Research Project*, ed. by Diego Cavallotti, Federico Giordano, Leonardo Quaresima (Milan−Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2016), pp. 175−182; Bruno Nassim Aboudrar, Barbara Le Maître, Teresa Castro, Térésa Faucon, Dario Marchori: 'L'Histoire des formes au pluriel. *A Canterbury Tale* sans les noms', in *A History of Cinema Without Names/2. Contexts and Practical Applications*, ed. by Diego Cavallotti, Simone Dotto, Leonardo Quaresima (Milan−Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2017), pp. 133−164; Bruno Nassim Aboudrar, Joséphine Jibokji, Jessie Martin, Barbara Le Maître: 'Du film en historien d'art. *The Draughtman's Contract*, P. Greenaway, 1982', in *A History of Cinema Without Names/3. New Research Paths and Methodological Glosses*, ed. by Diego Cavallotti, Simone Dotto, Leonardo Quaresima (Milan−Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2018), pp. 171−217 (this publication is in fact an early and incomplete version of the present volume, published in French).

or optical qualities (contrast of black and white, transparency) or even symbolic gestures (signing, designating or combining) evolves into — or rather, yields up through analysis — a figuration of the history of art.

Before speculating further on this process, it is necessary to clarify how such a premise — which involves viewing the film itself as a kind of art historian — may be seen to displace the conventional view of the relationship between art and the cinema. Most studies on the links between the cinema and the history of art are subject to two methodological parameters. First, their analyses are based on the explicit (or in some cases allusive) presence of artworks within the films that are studied. Second, they tend to transfer the meaning of these works over to the story being told. Time after time, the paintings (or sculptures, photographs, installations, etc.) reflect, illuminate, problematize, anticipate, or simply summarize the issues raised by the narrative, and are absorbed into the fictional world it presents[2]. Breaking with this tradition, the studies presented in this volume are based upon two guiding principles. Firstly, that of not making the actual presence of art works in the film a necessary condition for the discourse on art: the history of art can be evoked anywhere in the film. Secondly, that of not restricting the significance of such works, if they do occur, to a function of the fictional story, so as to reveal a 'story' other than that narrated by the film, a phenomenon we are calling 'art-historical moments' in cinema.

This approach brings to light certain questions, which the authors of this volume have attempted to answer in diverse ways, while at the same time leaving them open to further discussion. First, where in the film do these art-historical moments arise and what provokes them? In what ways does the film reinvent the theory or history of art? What do these moments contribute to history as a discipline? Or even, how does the film negotiate the time of the narrative in relation to the art period it references in

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[2] Among other examples, we could cite David Pascoe's analysis of a tableau by Januarius Zick (*Allegory of Newton's Service to Optics*, 1785) in the film *The Draughtsman's Contract*, which can be found in the book David Pascoe, *Peter Greenaway: Museums and Moving Images* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), beginning around p. 70.

a more enigmatic fashion? Another key point regarding our analytical method: since our discussion focuses on fictional cinema, how might we distinguish the (art) historical line of the narrative purportedly being put forward from the story that same film is telling.

Focussing on the features of eighteenth-century 'portrait landscapes', Bruno Nassim Aboudrar traces the paradoxes and anachronisms that have been playfully hidden within the baroque complexity of Peter Greenaway's film *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982). His distinctive distribution of colours — almost entirely reserved for landscapes and inanimate objects — and the values assigned to black and white — mainly associated with women, men and animals — form the basis for an investigation in which the false evidence provided by images is clothed in the deceptive certainties of a pastiche account of the history of art.

Also centered on colour, Lucas Lei's contribution on Michelangelo Antonioni's film *The Red Desert* focuses on a historical moment revealing the film's 'latent historicism' and studies the expression of its figurative project. The numerous frames within frames (windows, doorways, but also framed images) combined with a colour-based pictorial approach lead to the construction of an ambiguous space which creates visual and poetic echoes, proposing interactions among the characters, objects and setting and pointing to the reflexiveness of representation. In this respect, Antonioni's film appears to model itself on painting at the turn of the nineteenth century, which represented artists' bedrooms and workshops, and sought to articulate notions of interior and exterior, with the outside landscapes conveying a *Stimmung*. He also invokes works in which painting 'stages itself' by representing young artists 'occupied with the exercise of painting or drawing'. In associating these two pictorial practices, the film offers an exploration of 'the imaginary realms created by academic art and painting'.

Moving from windows to gardens and from colours to lines, Jessie Martin's text, the second study of *The Draughtsman's Contract*, exposes within the film the presence of a narrative of the origins of English painting. Although the fiction unravels

against a late seventeenth-century backdrop during which painting was practiced primarily by Flemish artists, and although the film's dialogue emphasizes the non-existence of what could be called the English painter, one of the film's scenes nonetheless heralds the birth of English painting. The unexpected appearance of a serpentine line introduces — a century before its time — the thought of William Hogarth and his treatise on beauty and the nationalist conception of art. The inscription of the line in the structured and geometrical 'French-style' garden thus invites us to contemplate the link between the emergence of English landscape painting and the 'English' landscape garden from the point of view of the aesthetic of the picturesque.

Along similar lines to those traced by Jessie Martin, Barbara Le Maître in her chapter 'The Draughtsman's Chairs', examines certain figurative elaborations involving furnishings, whose purpose appears on the surface to be more functional than artistic, since such pieces would ordinarily be categorized as belonging to the decorative arts. She shows how these seats are transformed, from one sequence to another, into optical gimmicks or pastoral motifs, for example. Through the analysis of these compositions with chairs, her piece shows how *The Draughtsman's Contract* reconstitutes the ideological core and the aesthetic framework of an artistic tradition: that of the English landscape, which, as was highlighted in the preceding text, indeed owes much to Hogarth. In keeping with the guiding premise of art-historical moments in cinema, the author ultimately puts forward the idea that these chairs inform a reconsideration of the interactions between craftsmanship, the decorative arts and the art of images — an idea she expounds through reference to the thought of Aloïs Riegl.

Stéphane Privat's perspective brings us to comprehend the figure of Laura — impresario and editor of images in Chris Marker's 1996 film *Level Five* — through that of the 'admonitor'. From within the picture itself, this simultaneously physical and theoretical character described by Alberti in 1435, invites the spectator into the painted *storia* through gesture or gaze. The *storia*'s text, according to Leon Battista Alberti, is a painted

version, and could only be developed elsewhere, in books and discourse: painting, according to Simonides' saying, is silent poetry. It is therefore through the question of language in cinema that the reference to Alberti — and to the history of art over which he presides — strives to decenter the site of the film. For how are we to comprehend an admonitor — a female one in this case — who is no longer solely gestural but uses speech from the outset, in a film which is explicitly devoted to the fate of images at a time when their electronic and digital incarnations as well as IT-related networks were challenging cinematographic conventions for the monstration of filmic images?

The notion of the circulation of images is at the heart of Guillaume le Gall's text in which the story related in Brian De Palma's *Mission: Impossible* is shown to be set into motion through an element of the setting, a mere aquarium, which the historian shows to be an unrecognized double of the cinematographic image, and a space for reflection on images (seen as liquid, mental, metaphorical). He finds in this 'seeing machine' the key to analysing the framing of the protagonist, which is the crux of this blockbuster's plotline. In this case the art-historical moment arises from the interplay of the aquarium, screen, and mental image, the thrill of fascination and the dangers of simulacra. Indeed, it is a history of assisted vision that is being addressed, one which, from the aquarium to the diorama, has the power to thwart Brian De Palma's visual tricks, thereby turning the decorative aquarium and its spectacular implosion into a site for the study of the transparency and opacity of screens.

Devoted to *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015), Arnauld Pierre's contribution returns in many respects to the problematics of transparency, plotting, and genealogy taken up by Guillaume Le Gall, but from a completely different perspective. Beneath the appearance of an experimental device that brings together, on opposite sides of a glass wall, a programmer and a gynoid (a modern-day cousin of the eighteenth-century draughtsman automata) the author is able to uncover the 'mythographic structure' of Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915−1923), along with the maddening game of a bachelor machine. Focussed on

psycho-sexual hybridity between the living and the mechanical, and thereby raising the crucial issue of machines' interference in the 'symbolic organisation of human kinship', the text shows how, in many cases, an art-historical moment may be interwoven with a moment in human history.

In the final study on *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Joséphine Jibokji examines the contract signed between the artist and the clients who commission his drawings. This contract — the importance of which is flagged from the beginning in the film's title — is indeed at the core of the narrative, yet it also detaches itself from the socially artificial seventeenth-century fictional world in order to reveal an artistic figure belonging to the twentieth century: that of the conceptual artist, a figure full of contradictions, torn between the primacy of reason and the resurgence of drives, between an obsession with control and submission to the laws of chance. In this sense, it is less the drawings than the programme, less the programme than the contract, and less the contract than that which escapes the artist's grasp that enable the appearance of this art-historical moment from the early 1980s, camouflaged in a fiction which is as historical as it is anachronistic.

One question remains: to what degree can history thus be seen to possess, within the possibilities provided by figurative representation, its own distinct mode of writing? In this respect, we might turn to the insight of Paul Veyne for whom '[…] it must never be forgotten, when we begin to write, that the chronicle of events is not the only way of writing history, and that it is not even an indispensable part of it; that it is, rather, a lazy way out'[3].

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[3] Paul Veyne, *Writing History: An Essay on Epistemology*, trans. by Mina Moore-Rinvolucri (Middletown CT: Wesleyen University Press, 1984), p. 44. All quotes from French editions have been translated into English by the authors of this volume.