

From figure to figural

body and incarnation in contemporary film

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Un lac (2008), the most recent film by the French director Philippe Grandrieux, begins abruptly as a sort of perceptive shock for the viewer. We are presented with a big close up of the hands of a character who is holding an axe and violently striking a tree trunk. Rather than offering a definition of the figures and the setting of a story, the image, blurred due to the addition of internal movement, imposes a dynamic extreme (the to and fro movement of the axe that disturbs the view), a rhythmic cadence marked by the character's heavy breathing and the regular sound of the incisive tool, and above all, the emergence of red, the colour of the t-shirt worn by Alexi, the main character.

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These perceptive stimuli translate into sensations that are difficult to assign to any specific name or categorial emotion. Rather, they are comparable to what Raymond Bellour, in keeping with neurologist Daniel N. Stern, defines as amodal perceptions or vitality affects (Bellour, 2009: 153-177); variations in the image that the viewer interprets in terms of intensity, rhythm or formal pulsation before being able to name them, place them in textual categories or inscribe them in symbolic systems. On this fundamental level, the viewer is subjected to the emotional impact of the film's images. These intensive emotions (Bellour, 2009: 141) herald and determine all subsequent textu-

al development. Encoded in them, so to speak, is the mystery of the film form independently of any narrative connection. Raymond Bellour has related this process with the hypnotic nature of the filmic experience (the archaeology of cinema and the hypnotic dispositif reveal a common and convergent history) and the animal response that is tied to this process (hypnosis as animal magnetism and the emotion as the prelude to all rational formation). This entire conceptual circuit runs through the displacement of the text as an epistemological paradigm and its substitution by the notion of body, which is distinguished in the following manner: the consideration of the film as body, with its nervous connections and its symptoms; the study of emotion as the viewer's physical reaction to the film; and finally, the withdrawal of the importance placed on the visual and encoded organization of the space in contrast to the notions of presence, matter and sensation, which are more linked to the interest in a sensorial spectrum that is more closely associated with physical proximity and further removed from rational distance.

The open image

There is an extensive trend in contemporary film that focuses on this shift to the logic of sensation or, to jump ahead a bit, the ambition to translate the invisible into a disfiguration process of the visible. In the French cinema, in addition to Grandrieux, who would be an extreme case, we could refer to directors such as Claire Denis, Bruno Dumont, Bertrand Bonello and Catherine Breillat¹. Outside of France, mention must be made of the Portuguese director Sandro Aguilar, the Dardenne broth-

ers in Belgium, North Americans including David Lynch and Harmony Korine, and Canadians such as David Cronenberg, among many others.

Here it is important to clarify that we are not speaking of an experimental cinema that is disassociated from any sort of story. Rather the contrary, we are exploring a cinema that operates at the very limits of narration and figuration without abandoning either of them at any time.

Retaking the initial shot of *Un lac*, we can assert that the viewer is faced with a question, a challenge that forces him/her to contemplate the rupture or the suspension of knowledge. This questioning, which necessarily entails methodological consequences for image analysis, encodes the dialectics of what the French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman has referred to as the open image (Didi-Huberman, 2007) or the symptom-image (Didi-Huberman, 1990, 2002).

The open image, which Didi-Huberman proposes as a new paradigm for a counter-history of art, calls for a new attitude in the viewer's gaze that is open to face the visual along with the visible, and the figural rupture along with the figurative whole. If we attempt to consider cinema in this light, we will see that films such as those of Philippe Grandrieux and Bruno Dumont in fact do not exhaust their efficacy in the visible; rather they aspire to feel the pulse of the invisible, the ineffable. Their films are built on the dialectics between evidence and darkness, event and mystery, sustaining that tension throughout the story. Below are several previous indices:

An interview with Grandrieux on his first film, *Sombre* (1998), offers the following insight:

Interviewers: You work on an absence-presence through the visually “sombre” initial shot in the film, the relation with the flou... It is a different sort of presence than what we are accustomed to seeing in the cinema.

Grandrieux: A distinction needs to be made between several presences: that of the actor at the time the film is shot, his/her relation with the framing, the proximity of the other bodies that enables the scene to be shot at a given time, and that of the character him/herself, who, in the film project, in the script, must translate a sort of absence or fantasmatic presence. (De Baecque, Jousse, 1999: 40)

Moreover, *Hadewijch* (2009), Bruno Dumont’s latest film, presents the clear extension of a similar programme in his portrayal of a theology student who is trying to find a physical way to feel the presence of God, whom she worships to the point of mystical madness. This devotion for the invisible that goes far beyond the limits of reason ultimately leads her to take an interest in extremist Islam. In one scene of the film, young Céline, the protagonist, has a sort of revelation in response to the words of Nassir, the director of a Koranic school, as he speaks of Sura 72 of the Koran, which specifically deals with the issue of the revelation of the invisible, absence, the enigma, the non-manifest, the need to believe not in what is seen by the eyes, but rather what is felt by the body.

This mystery, which translates the figurative challenge of the film itself, is not far removed from the problem addressed by Didi-Huberman at the start of his essay, *Devant l’image* (Di-

di-Huberman, 1990), in which he explores the relevance of valorizing the dissimilar and the material within the framework of figurative works. The French philosopher contemplates *The Annunciation*, which was painted between 1440 and 1441 by Fra Angelico in the Convent of San Marco, and poses the central question of his text: What happens when we place ourselves in front of the image? His first confirmation is that of the almost minimal nature of the fresco. From the perspective of history and its figurative composition, the painting does not present anything particularly striking. However, the strength of the fresco resides in its capacity to visually manifest the mystery, the directly non-figurable, in the expression of the encounter between the light and the body. As Saint Thomas Aquinas asserts in his *Summa Theologica*, “The Son of God was born, taking flesh of the Virgin’s body, and not bringing it with Him from heaven.” This mystery is encoded in a wide central layer of white that occupies the space between the Archangel Gabriel and the Madonna. As Didi-Huberman asserts, the gap between the bodies that absorbs the gaze of the viewer requires a gaze in suspense; it calls for the viewer to allow himself/herself to be carried off in the phenomenology of the image. The layer of white acts as an indexical phenomenon; it acts as the imprint of an illumination. That was most probably the effect of the work on its viewer (the Dominican monk from the era of Fra Angelico, who spent long hours in prayer, contemplating the fresco). Thus, we must consider the image along with the conditions surrounding its appearance; its revealing interplay of glaring lights amid a predominantly dark setting such as that of the interior of the convent cells.

That void that absorbs the viewer's gaze appears like a sudden burst of a visuality that has been deprived of its code, like a sort of surge of the unconscious into the visible – what Didi-Huberman refers to as the visual – that evokes the sacred, the traumatic, that which resists figuration. The visual emerges as a sort of signifier with no obvious signified.

In the materialisation of the mystery in film, whether this is a sort of divine aspiration (albeit also traumatic), as in Dumont, or a driving force (as well as a force of revelation), as occurs in Grandrieux, we again see the ambition to work the unconscious of the visible, that which resists the order of the discourse or the immediate sign. We might again take a statement by Philippe Grandrieux, this time with reference to his work in his second feature film, *La Vie Nouvelle* (2002):

What do we seek, since the first traces of hands impressed in rock the long, hallucinated perambulation of men across time, what do we try to reach so feverishly, with such obstinacy and suffering, through representation, through images, if not to open the body's night, its opaque mass, the flesh with which we think –and present it to the light, to our faces, the enigma of our lives (Brenez, 2003)

Nicole Brenez, who at the time was one of the main theorists of the cinematographic figuration (Brenez, 1998), added about *La Vie Nouvelle*:

In order to grasp this ordinary, repressed dimension of human experience, it is

clear that we must turn to completely different logics than those of the usual discursive economies, invent other textures, forge other descriptive paths, employ instruments other than language and its normative links (Brenez, 2003)

As Brenez points out, in Grandrieux's films there is a demand to return to the deepest and darkest roots of representational desire, roots that are customarily associated with the sacred, power or the collective symptom. In this same manner, he considers this aesthetic programme within a great tradition of 20th-century thought:

Grandrieux's reflection belongs to the body's modernity –the modernity of Sigmund Freud, Antonin Artaud, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, to name only a few –and thus returns the anthropological need for representation to a state of immanence. The image is no longer given as a reflection, discourse, or the currency of whatever absolute value; it works to invest immanence, using every type of sensation, drive and affect (Brenez, 2003)

Philippe Grandrieux, like other filmmakers who in some manner work towards similar goals, not only inscribes his practice in a whole body of thought within modernity; rather, as Martin Jay affirms, he also prolongs the "modernity" of the body. He reevaluates the body and all of the associated feelings and sensations that come with it in parallel to the denigration of visual knowledge as established by Renaissance humanism (Jay, 1993). In the

history of ideas, it is the cultural projection of the gap between visible and visual, which Didi-Huberman delimits in the space of the pictorial portrayal. In fact, in the line of thought that leads from Freud to Deleuze, we can trace out the vector that connects the image-symptom (the surfacing of the unconscious, of unknowing, into the field of the visible) to the logic of sensation (tied to the predominance of the figural over the figurative, as defined by Gilles Deleuze in the Francis Bacon painting). At the centre of this theoretical landscape we might place Jean-François Lyotard, who defines the concept of “figural” in *Discourse, Figure* (Lyotard, 1979) based on the reconsideration of the influence of the unconscious and the dream work in the realm of artistic creation.

For Lyotard, painting should be construed as a libidinal machine in which the primary process becomes visible. The caesura between discourse and figure maintains the tension that inhabits the text, between the order of the discourse and that of the plastic, between the coherence of sense and the “other” of reason. Discourse is the space for communication, the formation of concepts and the symbolic; it is there where transparency predominates and matter lacks interest. In contrast, the figurative space would be a surge of opacity in the discourse, a breach in communication that blocks the recovery of the incommensurable in a system of meaning. Both principles, discursive and figurative, intermingle in a sort of dialectical circuit. We can see how this dialectics has a bearing on the tension that we suggest in relation to the concepts formulated by Georges Didi-Huberman.

Matrix and matter

Among the different types of images that he describes, Lyotard speaks of the image-matrix. This would be a sort of absolute basic depository in the discourse, which could only be presented plastically following a number of operations that identify with those of dream work, according to Freud’s theories: processes of condensation, displacement, censorship and apparent dramatization. This would give rise to plastic events that would come to disrupt the coherence of the discourse². The matrix would be the condition for the figural, its origin and its need, a pure libido that would mould the signifying matter, a sort of flow of energy (a now almost political energy) that would thicken the text, creating areas of heterogeneity and difference.

For his part, Georges Didi-Huberman has noted the need to reconsider the genealogy of pictorial representation, setting out to find the tools to think about the emergence of the “visual” in the field of the visible and to understand the gap that is generated in the work. To do so, he also goes back to an image-matrix found in a story of the history of painting outside the mimetic tradition. Thus, in contrast to the tradition of art as a distanced imitation, Didi-Huberman recovers a different origin, which Pliny the Elder narrates at the start of book XXXV of his *Natural History* (Didi-Huberman, 2000: 59-83).

As Didi-Huberman explains, the concept of the *imago* in Pliny would be associated with the wax masks typically made in ancient Rome following the death of a family member. Placed in the family atrium as a sort of posthumous homage, the masks were made by applying the

wax material to the face of the deceased, creating a mould that would serve as a template to produce the masks. The paintwork was limited to the colouring of the mask. Thus, it was matter that marked the concept of the *imago*.

Countering the Vasarian tradition of the optical imitation from a distance perspective, we have the index value (actual imprint) and the immediacy of presence and contact. Under these conditions, the similarity would not be connected with the appearance, but rather with the justice or injustice of the image. The imprint would determine the legitimacy of the image, and the mould would take precedence as the matrix of another approach to the consideration of the image within the context of art history.

Similarity and dissimilarity

In *Fra Angelico, Dissemblance et Figuration* (Didi-Huberman, 1990), Didi-Huberman examines the large areas of coloured stains that appear to render the common notions of theme, figure and imitation inoperable. For example, he observes the lower area of the *Madonne della Ombrina* in the Convent of San Marco, with its profusion of white stains over a red base; five apparently decorative panels located at the base of the scene that portrays a Holy Conversation. He similarly takes note of the groups of the cadenced red stains in the pictorial background of the fresco titled *Noli Me Tangere*, also in San Marco, which seem to be grouped around the Christ stigmata, yet which branch out, following a painstaking work of exegesis, into myriad stories and fates.

As Didi-Huberman affirms, these pictorial signs (*figurae*) were conceived to present the

enigma in the bodies beyond the bodies, the supernatural in the visible and familiar appearance of things. They present the mystery of incarnation in a paradoxical and displaced manner. On this point, Didi-Huberman concludes:

The figurability of the Incarnation is entirely revealed in this relation, as the perpetual vacillation between iconicity (close to the medieval concept of *imago*) which presupposes resemblance and distance, and indexicality (close to the word *vestigium*) which, in contrast, presupposes dissemblance and a manner of touching (Didi-Huberman, 1995: 7-8)

What emerges in the form of dialectics in the field of the painting diminishes in its transfer to the screen as a clash of distances, the hesitation between delineated zones and masses out of focus, or as amodal perception when the visible matter similarly appears to form as a sort of sonorous magma or a tactile substance. In any case, the image-event (in the Lyotardian sense) disrupts the definition of the story and the task of the eye.

The friction between the distant shots and extreme close-ups of the bodies determines the expression of the desire as a foolish outburst and the questioning of power that is associated with the films of Claire Denis. This occurs as of her first film, *Chocolat* (1988). In the initial shots, over a post-colonial backdrop, a woman looks from a distance at the body of a black person who is bathing at the beach. The emergence of desire is immediately translated into an excess of body presence. The camera focuses on the wet skin, which imposes its texture on the screen. The film displays the notion of a

problematic desire of the other, which creates an imbalance in the power relation between coloniser and colonised, generating breaches of resistance that are at once breaks in the story. Pascal Bonitzer has referred to this polarization of the distant and the nearby as one of the characteristic deframing techniques that modern cinema takes from new painting. The close-up shot, which can even be excessive, generates a space of a tactile nature, which is seized by the touch before it is captured by the eye (Bonitzer, 2007: 43-52).

With reference to the variables of vividness and the synesthetic magma of the image components, we will now return to the films of Philippe Grandrieux, who is perhaps the director that comes closest to a figural approach. Was it not Lyotard who at the beginning of *Discourse, Figure* recovered André Breton's dictum, which asserts that "the eye exists in a wild state" (Lyotard, 1979: 31)? Is it not Grandrieux's desire to work that wildness that tears discourse apart? Does he not attempt to access the unleashed rhythmic beauty, the violence of the other beyond his/her discursive fixation?

Lyotard wrote that converting the unconscious into discourse is the equivalent of omitting the energy that runs through it (Lyotard, 1979: 31). In contrast, displaying the flow of that energy, its problematic incarnation based on work with visual and sound materials, entails an attempt to present (in the sense of Didi-Huberman's dissimilarity) that impulsive background, the darkness of the body that the French filmmaker is after. In his films, that movement is associated with a return to origins: the original night out of which light emerged (Grandrieux's films are formed as

emergences of light amid a dense darkness, or as events that are engulfed in the darkness around the points of incandescence); the founding histories of the human being as its stories rewrite the children's tale; and finally, the origin of cinema as a constant reference to the silent film.

In Grandrieux's cinema, sensitivity, pleasure, that which is usually repressed or rechanneled by discourse (in the economic construction of the story) emerges as expression beyond meaning. Thus, we can speak of effects of presence that overwhelm the eye, leading the viewer to see the invisible. The contact with the immeasurable is negotiated in the "aberration", the vertiginous darkness, the constant movement, the diffused, the resonant wave and the threshold of the cry.

We have now seen the type of energy that is deployed as rhythmic movement at the start of *Un lac*. It is safe to say that in Grandrieux's films everything is tied to the issue of the body. The violence that determines the movement of the film from the start is associated with a conflictive desire. In the remote space where the film's story takes place, Alexi lives in a cabin with his sister Hege, his blind mother and his father, who is absent much of the time. In the intense blackness of the cabin's interior, where the figures struggle to appear, if only as ephemeral intensities of light on the screen, the sister looks after her epileptic brother. Their bodies draw in so close to one another that they graze the limits of incest, of taboo pleasure, of unleashed desire. The camera remains very close to their bodies, portraying fragments that we can barely make out; our reference of the figure lost with the constant mobility in the shot. Closeness is excessive, both between the bodies

themselves and between the camera and the bodies. The camera stops on the hands (the visible is first perceived as something tactile) and then catches the face, which is intersected by the black of the girl's hair. Yet the fragment of the girl's face soon flees, falling out of focus, barely converted into a force of resistance against the brother's energy as he pulls on his sister. The figures nearly disappear, barely leaving us with the intensity of the push-and-pull interplay, the exchange between the forces of attraction and rejection in action at the same time, merging and separating constantly. The libido is overwhelmed and the image soon comes apart, breaking into intensities of movement, close-ups of fragments of flesh and rhythmic panting with the sporadic imprecations of the woman. The distortion of the shapes acts as a dissimilarity that imposes the energetics of body and desire, not as a lyrical abstraction, but rather as a sort of real filmic materialism. The opacity and disruption portrayed in the image translate the instinctual eruption that guides the story.

Logic of sensation

What we observe in the films of Philippe Grandrieux, Claire Denis and Bruno Dumont may be the most recent consequences of what Pascal Bonitzer attempted to anticipate in relation to the influence of modern painting on the cinema, in *Décadrages*: "It is a logic of sensation that transforms space and things themselves from within" (Bonitzer, 2007: 43). Under these conditions, disquiet is brought into the space and emotional apprehension imposes itself

on the geometrical appreciation of the distances. As Bonitzer states, "*Modernity unveils the time of precarious forms and of perplexed viewers*" (Bonitzer, 2007: 48).

Décadrages ends with a chapter about Michelangelo Antonioni (Bonitzer, 2007: 99-103). It is difficult to establish a priori a relation between the Italian director and the filmmakers that we have been discussing. In his comparison, Pascal Bonitzer makes reference to Antonioni's interest in the reduction of the image to the stain, his penchant for the shapeless, for the figure that slips away into the nondescript. From our perspective, we have seen the stain as a disfiguration formed not so much as an abstract apotheosis, but rather as a return to a primal force, the intensity and emotions that are connected with the body.

Bonitzer refers to an empty field that is in fact not empty, but rather full of mist, fleeting faces, evanescent presences and all sorts of movement. Could the same not be said of the films of Philippe Grandrieux or Claire Denis? Nevertheless, this empty field does not represent the point of release of the passions and of the human existence, as is the case of Antonioni; rather it is portrayed as the site of incarnation of the mystery, where space gives way to the energy of instinct and the impetus of the dissimilar.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, the work by Martine Beugnet (Beugnet, 2007).
- 2 For a discussion on the relevance of Lyotard's plastic theory of the cinema, see the article by Lisa Trahair (Trahair, 2005).

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