

MOLECULAR PROCESSES OF BECOMING

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I have entered a semi-circular space. The round walls are covered with a projection of dark light where white patches are floating around in continuous movement. A mouth passes by, an ear. Then I hear a breezy voice: "Je suis une molecule". I become dizzy from the revolving "molecules" which make me smile at the same time. There is nothing I could clearly place, nothing I could identify with, and yet, I feel attracted. "Tu es une molecule" the voice now claims, nearly imploringly. And indeed, it is as if, for a short while, I become one of those light patches, floating along in space. The rest of the words I do not understand since I



am absorbed in my "molecular becoming". Then I walk further, to other installations in Pipilotti Rist's exhibition *Remake of Le Weekend* in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris.⁴¹

Pipilotti Rist is one of many artists inspired by cinema and (in her case) also television, in particular MTV. And even though the installation *Extremities, Soft, Soft I* just described does not seem to have much in common with cinema, I do believe that the "molecular" dimension of her work (in this work very literal) is one of the aspects which might reveal something about the relationship between cinema and visual art. I will return to this at the end of this paper.

Once again, the Paris exhibition was called *Remake of Le Weekend*. Aside from the barbecue at the beginning of the exhibition (which evoked associations with the barbecued human flesh in Godard's *Le Weekend*), I did not see any direct or literal signs of a "remake" as is common in cinematographic remakes. In the installation, though, via projections of various images in the cozily decorated living room, almost each corner, the table and chairs, the little pillows and even the bottles in the bar led to another world.

Although very different in content, Rist's installation could indeed be read somehow as a Godard movie. After all, from every image, from each perspective in his movies, one encounters entirely different images. Therefore, one could understand Godard's movies - certainly *Le Weekend* - as rooms which one traverses and where one encounters time and again new, unexpected and sometimes even illogical images. At the same time, in Godard, the narrative is never linear. Godard neither can nor desires to understand history and the history of cinema as a linear narrative. *Histoires du cinéma* is (in Deleuze's terms) a rhizomatic network of cinematographic, personal and collective mental pictures.⁴² And it is this non-linear, associative understanding of images (cinematic images) related to history or related to personal memory which connects the filmmaker Godard to the visual artists in the exhibition *Filmic Images*.

Just like Godard, Harun Farocki searches for a non-linear memory of images. "What does it mean to perceive an image in relation to other images?" he wonders in his movie *Interface*, part of the *Filmic Images* exhibition. In his entire oeuvre, that question returns and forces Farocki to select images from the history of cinema (for example, "workers leaving a factory") or from television (for example, "state images of a Ceausescu speech" or "amateur video shots of street scenes in Romania"). Farocki interrelates those images, makes the images speak to each other and to himself. At the same time he attempts to both decipher and guard the images' secret.

For filmmakers such as Godard and Farocki, it might make sense to be so deeply involved in the cinematographic image and interrogate cinematographic images with so much commitment. However, the fact that both of them interrogate their images and present them so differently from most theatrical movies, subsequently causes their work to fit together in one exhibition context. In such a context, there is (sometimes literally) space to place images beside each other, to interrelate and to question the image whereas the linear temporal course of show-

ing a movie and the institutional context of the movie industry has less space for this.

I believe that the fascination of visual art with the cinematographic image is precisely related to the desire to release these audio-visual images from their (entertaining) context and to investigate their inherent value and effect. I deliberately speak of audio-visual images since sound is also an important cinematographic dimension that visual art investigates. A nice example of such an investigation is Stephanie Smith's *Rebecca* (*Untitled*) *Rebecca*. In this work, Smith reduced Hitchcock's movie to a two-minute fifty-second soundtrack. Searching for the absent "second Mrs. De Winter" (played by Joan Fontaine in the movie *Rebecca*), Smith isolated all the stuttering and stammering of this insecure character.

In such a way, the artist explains in less than three minutes what a number of feminist theorists, such as Mary Ann Doane, have also written on the impossible position of the female character and the female spectator in classic Hollywood movies.⁶ At the same time, one can hear the entire movie in the course of the "ooh's, aah's" and "but, but, but" of Fontaine's voice on this new soundtrack. Memory (the recollection of the movie) works and that brings me to another aspect of the connection between cinema and visual art.

In my view, the wish to investigate audio-visual images is related to a modifying status of the cinematographic image. Some believe that the reference to cinema in many installations is a further transition of Duchamp's ready-made to a sort of already-made in the form of an appropriation and a contextual transformation of "things already there", of images already made.⁶ I certainly agree with that, but at the same time visual art demonstrates that cinematographic images have become "common" images, i.e. images of recollection and a fundamental part of our lives and our memory. It seems to me that cinematographic images (and television images as well) are not only artificial illusions, but also real virtual images. In this context, Deleuze's distinction between the actual and the virtual, (both are real, one is present and physical, the other past and mental) seems to be a useful conceptual tool in describing the changing status of the image.⁶

Of course, Douglas Gordon's work is a beautiful example of how cinematographic images have become part of topical memory. The prominent place of cinema in his entire oeuvre demonstrates that, just as for most of us, the cinematographic experience is a natural part of life. Gordon researches both the image and the functioning of memory. For example, he sends unsuspecting people messages such as, "Nothing can be hidden forever" or "I remember more than you know". Even if one is entirely innocent, one will become terror-stricken and start searching memory for possible blackouts, repressed events, and "souvenirs of non-existence". For a short while one will feel like Lars Thormwall, who gets an anonymous letter (from his neighbors) in *Rear Window* which asks, "What have you done with her?" For a short while, one becomes Lars Thormwall.

The two screens of Gordon's installation, *Confessions of a Justified*

Sinner (showing the transformation of Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde - from the movie of the same name), are placed in such a way that the spectator's shadow falls regularly on either Jekyll or Hyde; fleetingly one becomes Jekyll or Hyde. In *24 Hour Psycho*, the installation which made Gordon famous, the image has been slowed down to such an extent that the movie lasts twenty four hours. Hitchcock's story can no longer be followed. Something else happens though. Because of Gordon's own "false" memory of this movie, his images evoke different memories. Moreover, one perceives all kinds of things which remain unnoticed at the movie's normal speed: molecular movements of muscles, micro movements of the cinematographic image itself. While one searches one's memory for prior events and for what is going to happen next, one literally starts to feel the movie: minuscule movements directly penetrate one's body. However briefly, one becomes the cinematographic image.

Like Pipilotti Rist's work, Douglas Gordon's issue is not so much the identification with a character, but the occurrence of "processes of becoming", albeit for a limited time. The processes of becoming I speak of are meant in a Deleuzian sense. In many respects, Deleuze's work supplies concepts able to clarify what happens in the current symbiosis of cinema and visual art. What can be expressed in images in "percepts" and "affects" can be connected to (translated into) concepts. I have just mentioned the conceptual pair "virtual/actual", as well as the rhizomatic network. However, in this short paper I want to concentrate on "becoming". Processes of becoming (which Deleuze sets against a more traditional conception of "Being") always take place between things.⁶ So, if I assert that Jekyll becomes Hyde, it does not mean literally that I change Jekyll into Hyde. It means that something makes a connection among Jekyll and Hyde and me as an encounter touching me, distracting me from myself and taking me to the images. Processes of becoming always take place in the middle. Processes of becoming take place on a molecular level as well.

That brings me back to the beginning of my paper. As stated previously, I believe that a large part (although not all) of what happens within visual art is related to the molecular thought and molecular perception human beings are able of. In many installations, cinematographic images are selected (choices are always made), blown up, decelerated, doubled and sometimes partly replaced by other images or sounds because of which a new view on cinema arises (which could again influence the cinematographic image itself; of course, at stake are tendencies rather than exact one-to-one influences).

No longer are the grand (narrative) units explored, but rather molecular movements and affects images bring about. The bodily parts of conductor James Conlon's close-up while conducting Bernard Herrmann's music in *Vertigo*, in Douglas Gordon's installation *Feature Film*, are examples of such molecular images starting off many things: memories of *Vertigo* and *The Birds* (the fluttering of his hands as Bellour noticed) and personal memories; but also a feeling of being touched, of being absorbed in the molecular stream of images⁷.

Also Pipilotti Rist's installations and video evoke a molecular experience. For example, in her video *Pickelporno*, she demonstrates the meaning of "Je suis une molecule" and "Tu es une molecule". On a molecular level, heterogeneous elements can interrelate, i.e. processes of becoming between things can emerge. In the video *Pickelporno*, one observes that the status of the female body is not other than the male body (different from most popular cinematographic images), and that the status of the body spaces is similar to those of the bodies as such, for example the (fake) grass around the hip and the terrestrial globe clasped between the legs. Many shots are close to the skin or to other material, thus, the body becomes a landscape, where categories such as female, male, and world no longer exist.

In the first shots of the video, male and female can still be recognized as categories but then the change to the molecular level occurs. What we see is, in fact, a new conception of the body. Bodies able to adopt processes of becoming will leave the boundaries of the traditionally defined organism where each organ corresponds with a well-defined function and role. (Deleuze called such bodies "Bodies without Organs", which concept echoes Spinoza's philosophy.) Be that as it may, I believe that the current connection of cinematographic images and visual art is intrinsically bound with such processes of becoming where cinematographic bodies are "liberated" from the (often) rigid forms of representation of classic cinema.

I would like to conclude with a Pipilotti Rist quote from her installation *Pamela*. I hope that this quote evokes a network of associations (virtual images varying from cinematographic images to personal memories) and makes one feel how poetic the power of affects could be while starting processes of becoming.

*Mesdames et Messieurs,
bienvenue a bord de notre vol a destination*

to nowhere, to you, deep inside

*auch wenn Sie verletzt sind,
auch wenn es schwierig scheinen mag
sind wir vor 5 Minuten abgehoben*

*Die Liebe ist unklar,
darum bleiben Sie bitte angeschnallt*

*beachten Sie den Orbit, Mondaufgang, Sternenstaub,
beachten Sie links und rechts ihre Nachbarn*

*we are on the way to find you ...
so please forget who you are*

nous vous remercions de choisir choisir choisir



NOTES

- 1) *Remake of Le Weekend*, Museum of Modern Art, Paris, 1999.
- 2) See for the concept of rhizome Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, The Athlone Press, London 1992, pp. 3-25.
- 3) Cf. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987.
- 4) Cf. Annika Wik, "Already Made" in A. Koivunen and A. Soderberg (eds.), *Cinema studies into Visual Theory*, University of Turkey, 1998.
- 5) See for an elaboration of the virtual and the actual among other things Deleuze's last article "L'Actuel et le virtuel" as appendix to *Dialogues*, Flammarion, Paris 1997, and Patricia Pisters *From Eye to Brain - Gilles Deleuze: Refiguring the Subject in Film Theory*, University of Amsterdam Press, 1998.
- 6) See also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus*, op.cit., pp. 233-309.
- 7) See also Raymond Bellour's article *Feature Film* in the catalogue.