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Arresting the Moving Image

Eivind Røssaak

Negotiating Immobility – The Moving Image and the Arts

Faculty of Humanities: University of Oslo 2008

One of the most significant phenomena in the world of audio-visual media – seemingly far removed from the almost daily revolutions we witness on the Internet, and yet intimately connected with them – is the way the moving image has taken over/has been taken over by the museum and gallery spaces. There are many – good and not so good – reasons for this dramatically increased visibility in the contemporary art scene of screen, projection, motion and sound. Some are internal to the development of modern art practice (because for many of today's artists a digital camera and a computer are as much primary tools of the trade as are a paintbrush and canvas or wire and plaster-of-Paris). However, there are also reasons internal to the cinema for such a seemingly counter-intuitive rapprochement: not least the much-debated (which is to say, as much lamented as ridiculed) 'death of the cinema', whether attributed to television, the video-recorder, the end of European auteur cinema or digitalisation. Cynics (or are they merely realists?) may rightly conclude that the ongoing musealization of the cinema suits both parties: It adds cultural capital to the cinematic heritage and redeems its lowly origins in popular entertainment, and it adds new audiences to the museum, where the black box, with its projected image or video installation – the statistics prove it – retain the visitors' attention several seconds longer than the white cube, with its framed paintings, free-standing sculptures or 'found objects'.

Yet it is equally obvious that matters are far from straightforward when the moving image enters the museum. Different actor-agents, power-relations and policy agendas, different competences, egos and sensibilities, different elements of the complex puzzle that is the contemporary art world and its commercial counterpart inevitably come into play. However snugly the black box can be fitted into the white cube with just a few mobile walls and lots of dark fabric, the museum is no cinema and the cinema no museum: not least because of the different time economies, already alluded to, which oblige the viewer in the museum to 'sample' a film, rather than make it the occasion for 'a night at the movies'; but also because the politics and practice of which each is a part has its cultural matrix located elsewhere, in distinct 'public spheres', with different constituencies, and last but not least, with each following a different 'aesthetic regime'.

The dilemma of contending public spheres, for instance, is acute for the (often politically committed) avant-garde filmmakers from the 1960s and 1970s, whose films since the 1980s could no longer count on screenings either in *art-et-essai* cine-

mas or on late-night television programmes. The lucky ones among them found a second life as installation artists commissioned to create new work by curators of international art shows such as the Kassel documenta. Especially since Catherine David in 1997 invited filmmakers from France, Germany, Belgium and Britain to Documenta X – among them Harun Farocki, Sally Potter, Chantal Akerman, Johan Grimonprez, as well as H. J. Syberberg and J. L. Godard – the cross-over has continued at the Venice Biennale, the Whitney Biennial, at Carnegie Mellon and many other venues. These filmmakers-turned-installation artists are now usually named side-by-side with artists-turned-filmmakers like Bill Viola, Fischli & Weiss, Johan Grimonprez, William Kentridge, Matthew Barney, Tacita Dean, Pippilotti Rist or Sam Taylor-Wood.

Without opening up an extended balance sheet of gain and loss arising from this other ‘death of (avant-garde) cinema’ and its resurrection into installation art, a few observations are perhaps in order. First, the historical avant-gardes have always been antagonistic to the art world, while nevertheless crucially depending upon its institutional networks and support: ‘biting the hand that feeds you’ is their time-honoured motto. This is a constitutive contradiction that also informs the new alliance between the film avant-garde and the museum circuit, creating deadlocks around ‘original’ and ‘copy’, ‘commodification’ and ‘the market’, ‘critical opposition’ and ‘the collection/the archive’: films as the epitome of ‘mechanical reproduction’ now find themselves taken in charge by the institution dedicated to the cult(ure) of the unique object, whose status as original is both its aura and its capital. Second, as already hinted at, problematic – but also productive – tensions arise between the temporal extension of a film-work (often several hours: Jean-Luc Godard’s 260-minutes *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, Douglas Gordon’s *24 Hour Psycho*, Ulrike Ottinger’s 363-minutes *Southeast Passage*, Phil Collins’s 2 hour-*Return of the Real*) and the exhibition visitors’ own time-economy (rarely more than a few minutes in front of an installation). The mis-match creates its own aesthetics (how to relate fragment and totality, the moment and the open-ended, or how to manage anxiety and saturation). If these works can be seen as the ‘resistance’ of the filmmaker to appropriation, other time-based art relies on montage, juxtaposition, compilation, as well as on mirror-mazes and serial modes; repetition and looping take over from linear, narrative or argumentative trajectories as structuring principles (Matthias Müller, Christian Marclay, Martin Arnold). Third, stillness and movement, the two vectors that most clearly differentiate painting and photography from the cinema and sound, find key elements of cinema – such as face and gesture, action and affect – articulated in new kinds of tensions and (self-) contradictions, across a general interrogation of what constitutes an ‘image’ and its ‘viewer’ (Bill Viola, Christian Marclay, Chris Marker). Fourth, the programmatic reflexivity of the museum and the self-reference of the modern art-work is both echoed and subverted by moving image installation art, in the form of new modes of performativity and self-display that tend to involve the body of the artist (extending the tradition of performance artists like Carolee Schneeman or Yvonne

Rainer, as well as of video-art quite generally), even to the point of self-injury (Marina Abramovic, Harun Farocki). Finally, installations also give rise to other ways of engaging the spectator: through soundscapes that create a special kind of presence (from Jean Marie Straub/Danielle Huillet's synch-sound film-recitations to Janet Cardiff/George Bures Miller's audio-walks), or image juxtapositions/compositions that provoke the viewer into 'closing the gap' by providing his/her own 'missing link' (Isaac Julien, Stan Douglas, Chantal Akerman, Christian Boltanski), and thus propose forms of 'relational aesthetics' (Nicolas Bourriaud) that are as much a challenge to contemplative, disinterested museum viewing as they counter or critique cinematic modes of spectatorship (voyeurism, 'distanciation', immersion).

It is into this lively field of new ideas and new works, challenges and competing claims, but also of confusion, polyphony of voices and typically post-modern carnivalesque heteroglossia that Eivind Røssaak's *Negotiating Immobility: The Moving Image and the Arts* (a thesis recently defended at Oslo University's Department of Media and Communication) dares to step, making a brave and welcome intervention. Brave, because the field is by now so complex and contested that it almost amounts to a minefield, and welcome because – besides being impressively well informed theoretically – it is so tightly focused. Røssaak's inquiry into the current state of the moving image situates itself strategically in astute fashion at the interface of several crossroads or turning points: the photographic/post-photographic/digital divide, the divide between 'attraction' (or spectacle) and 'narrative' (or linearity), the divide between the commercial film industry and avant-garde filmmaking, and – last but not least – the institutional divide between screen practices in cinema theatres and screen practices in the museum space. Or, in the author's own deceptively modest, scholarly cautious, as well as ironically disingenuous, but accurate, words: «In recent decades there has been a widespread tendency in moving image practices to resort to techniques altering or slowing down the speed of motion. Creative uses of slow motion, single frame advances and still frame techniques proliferate within digital cinema, avant-garde cinema and moving image exhibitions. This project investigates this tendency through a focus on aspects of three works that are representative for the tendency, show different aspects of it and are widely influential: Andy & Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999), Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (orig. 1969, re-released 2000), and Bill Viola's *The Passions* (2000–2002).»

By concentrating on movement and immobility, Røssaak can raise a number of pertinent issues without having to examine their full historical and critical ramifications, as I briefly sketched them above, about the moving image meeting the museum. 'Immobility' thus becomes a shorthand or cipher, thanks to which different theoretical-aesthetic investigations into the nature and fate of 'the cinematic' today can be deployed, while allowing the author to restrict the main body of his thesis to these three specific, yet significantly distinct, examples of filmic and artistic practice.

How original is Røssaak's book? Some of his concepts are reasonably well established and will be familiar to scholars working in film studies: 'cinema of attraction', 'media archaeology', 'structuralist film', 'found footage' are terms with firm connotations gained over the past two decades. Other concepts are more vague, modish or metaphorical ('spirituality', 'negotiation', 'excavation', for instance). While this can lead to problems of coherence and consistency, with occasionally abrupt shifts in the levels of abstraction, Røssaak's originality lies above all in his strategically judicious and felicitous choice of contrasting-complementary case studies, each of which is given a highly original historical and hermeneutic analysis. The theoretical framings, taken from art history (G. E. Lessing, Ernst Gombrich), new media theory (Lev Manovich, Mark Hansen) and film studies (Sergei Eisenstein, Raymond Bellour, Tom Gunning), are combined with empirical research (in archives, on site and in museums), which in turn leads to insightful observations on a wide range of works (from Mantegna to Franz Kline, from Tintoretto to Hogarth, from Hieronymus Bosch to Eadweard Muybridge) spanning five centuries and encompassing sculptures, altar pieces, paintings, etchings and chronophotographs. Such a broad sweep offers not only valuable context and historical background to the three works discussed in detail, but locates movement and motion in art-works across several moments of transition in the history of Western pictorial representation, thus contributing to the new discipline of «image-anthropology» championed by Hans Belting and inspired by Aby Warburg.

The first chapter on *The Matrix* is in one sense typical of the thesis as a whole, in the way it homes in on a selected part of the work, but then offers an in-depth reading of the detail thus isolated. This, in the case of *The Matrix* is the so-called bullet-time effect, which occurs three times in the film, taking up no more than one minute of the film's overall 136 minutes. On the other hand, in 1999, when the film came out, this bullet-time effect was the most talked about special effect since *Jurassic Park's* dinosaurs, and quickly became a *locus classicus* among fans, 'nerds' as well as philosophers. Defined both by its extreme permutation of time (slow enough to show normally imperceptibly fast events) and space (thanks to the camera's – and thus the spectator's – point-of-view, able to move around a scene at normal speed while actions or persons are shown in suspended animation or immobility), the bullet-time effect can be related back in its technique to Muybridge's chronophotography, but in its effect of motion frozen in time also to Andrea del Verrocchi's statue of Colleoni on horseback. Linking CGI effects to both early cinema and Renaissance sculpture and thus to a long art-historical discourse about the representation of motion and time in the visual, photographic and plastic arts is a highly original and illuminating contribution to several disciplines.

Equally full of surprises is the chapter on *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*. Here, it is the many layers of correspondences and interrelations between the 1906 Billy Bitzer film and Ken Jacobs' (1969–71) version that are explored, all of them adding to the central discussion of movement and stillness. Røssaak shows that Jacobs' repetitions, decelerations and 'remediations' of this 'found object' from early cinema –

itself, as it turns out, a ‘remediation’ or ‘re-animation’ of a famous print from 1733, William Hogarth’s *Southwark Fair* – keep double-backing into the very same problems already encountered by Hogarth (how to represent the a-synchronous and yet collective movement of crowds) and Bitzer (how to isolate and thus ‘arrest’ in both senses of the word, one of the participants – Tom who stole the pig – in the milling masses of spectators and players). Each of the three artists deals in his own specific manner, and appropriate to his time and medium, with multiple planes of action, their consecutive phases, and the tensions between guiding but also re-focusing the spectator’s gaze and attention. Even the modernist allusions in Jacobs’ work now make sense as part of the movement/stasis/focus problem, which artists have posed themselves repeatedly over the centuries. But the references to abstract expressionism also afford an intriguing glimpse into the New York avant-garde scene of the 1960s and 1970s, with its intense cross-fertilisation between artists, theorists and filmmakers. The brief section on copyright and the legal status of the moving image at the turn of the 20th century between ‘paper’ and ‘photography’ (the famous ‘paper print collection’) make Bitzer’s original material and Jacobs’ rediscovery of it a particularly interesting case of the persistence of issues of ownership and common property when it comes to our image heritage and its preservation: all issues central to the museum’s role as potential guardian of the cinema’s history.

The book’s overall title, ‘negotiating immobility’ is perhaps most aptly exemplified in the third chapter, which deals with Bill Viola’s installation *The Passions*, also known as *The Quintet of the Astonished*, a large rear-projected digital image of five people gradually and almost imperceptibly changing expression over a period of almost half an hour. Here, another formula from early cinema scholar Tom Gunning is made good use of: ‘the aesthetics of astonishment’. While Røssaak sees it mainly as a refinement and clarification of the better-known ‘cinema of attractions’, which due to its often indiscriminate application has now also come under attack, I think the term ‘astonishment’ goes beyond the visual register of spectacle and show, as well as avoiding the problematic binary divides between ‘norm’ and ‘deviancy’ (especially when ‘cinema of attractions’ is played out against ‘classical cinema’ of ‘narrative integration’). More helpful, also for Røssaak’s case of how we perceive stillness and movement in relation to each other, seems to me the possibility that ‘astonishment’ can identify what Gestalt-psychologist and others have referred to as ‘cognitive dissonance’, that is, a level of discrepancy, say, between eye and mind (as in: «the eye sees as real what the mind knows to be impossible»), or between the body and the senses (as in cases where the classic divide between mobile spectator/immobile view [museum] and immobile spectator/mobile image [cinema] is subtly dis-articulated, which happens when the moving image enters the museum). Bill Viola himself suggests as much when he talks about the high-speed photography of *The Passions*’ continuous, if complexly choreographed, motion replayed and dilated by extreme slow motion «giving the mind the space to catch up with the eye». Røssaak handles an extremely suggestive analytical tool in

this chapter, which conveys very well one of the key techniques of Viola (besides his own version of the bullet-time effect) for producing both cognitive dissonance and motor-sensory imbalance: namely that of the *'desynchronized gazes'* among the five figures, which create the oxymoronic sensation of a cubist temporality. As spectators, we do not know whether to stand stock-still in front of the projected image or mimetically mirror the slow motion of the bodies, thus finding ourselves, precisely, caught in 'negotiating immobility', i.e. trying to adjust to a 'different' motion of 'life' – or, if you like, experiencing 'ecological time' – in the midst of our hectic lives, dominated by timetables and the tick-tock of mechanical clocks.

What more natural than that Røssaak should end his book on a gentle plea for 'the politics of slow': a worthy sentiment, no doubt, but hopefully also not just intended as a 'reaction' to the generalized speed and acceleration of modern life. We don't want to make the museum merely a refuge and art a compensatory practice. Especially if it is a question of 'politics', we need to see the 'critical' dimension in movement itself – process, becoming, the possibility of transformation – lest immobility comes to signify not the absence or suspension of movement, but its arrest, with all the connotations of politics, policing and power this implies: 'freeze' is, after all, what the cops say to a suspect in Hollywood movies. And one thing that the cinema is definitely not, in the world of the fine arts, is a 'suspect', and one role the museum should not play is that of the cop, 'freezing' the cinema, either in time or in history. 'Negotiating immobility' must not become either a euphemism for burial, or a code word for resistance to change.

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