SITE SPECIFIC, PLACELESS.
REFLECTIONS ON THE RELOCATION OF CINEMA ONTO VIDEO

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Film that moves onto video devices (and not only); dismantled and recomposed, recovered, reinvented, remade, materialized: "exhibited" cinema, "installed" cinema, in all the declinations outlined in recent studies and meetings, right up to "re-located" cinema, in particular in the theoretical suggestions of Francesco Casetti[1]. Images that migrate from the cinema screen to the TV screen and to the ever-present screens of computers and cell phones, from the archives to video supports and to DVDs and the internet in constant, progressive, multi-directional and often irreversible movement, from digital back to film, from targeted, individual distribution to the challenge of the movie theatre and collective viewing. A media landscape that leaves the concept of *re-mediation* behind it, together with the now evident inadequacy of the very term *medium*, redefined by the pervasiveness and productive-versatile-distributive effectiveness of images and sound thanks to digital encoding. The *video*, in terms of TV, has for some time been the centre of a shift from the movie theatre to the home; in terms of an "independent" electronic image, it has for some time been the centre of *re-reading*, *re-writing*, *layout* of invisible footage, of extremely private family memories as of popular and well-known films. In the last few years, however, the video is also moving away from out of a definable *medium* and mostly, perhaps, into the place where there is a mutation in the *experience* of moving images.

Anticipations

In a sense, ever since the Sixties, experimentation with electronic images has centred on a reflection about overcoming the specific *medium*, both through the notion, at the time groundbreaking and fertile, of *intermediality* (Dick Higgins), and through that of *expanded cinema* (Stan VanDerBeek and then Gene Youngblood, who also foresaw the *metamediality* of the computer). Videoart in particular gave importance to multi-sensorial dynamics and play, the central role of the viewer, the variables in exhibition and viewing, the "performance value" of the screen, the image and the spectator, the *medium* as an environmental experience and the shift from the private (from the circumscribed, the institutional) to the public, also in terms of architectonic and urban space, recognizing these as central issues. All this in a cultural context where unease, especially in the area of the aesthetics of reception, is one of the strongest matrices of the present "rediscovery of experience", as was recently emphasized by Peppino Ortoleva[2].

Theoretical and practical "exhibition" intuitions that developed and enhanced the modes of experimental, independent and militant cinema, designing different viewing spaces (the screen, the theatre), always temporary and mutating, from the quasi-private to the radically public.

Following in the tracks of cinematographic research but also closely related to television: video cannot be understood without TV and TV cannot be understood without video, suggest Fredric Jameson and David Joselit in their different ways[3]. Suffice it to remember how the experience of television viewing prefigures – with all the acknowledged differences (set as it is amongst a variety of other objects, with the spectator free to sit as he/she wishes, with no need to turn down the lights and the possibility of modifying images and sound) – the *installation* mode, right up to its interactive forms.

Linked to these aspects is the role that video is increasingly taking on within the relocation of the cinema not so much in the ways previously described (re-writing, re-mediation) as in the precise sense indicated by Casetti, i.e. as «a more or less physical shift, which leads a medium to occupy a new place […] and to contaminate this place with its presence»[4]. In this sense the video becomes a mediator, or – to stay with a territorial metaphor – a *ferry*, as Dubois defines it, conveying cinema to places other than the movie theatre. «The gradual but lasting effect of video was to bring moving images into the places of art. And with them it brought the cinema»[5]. The cinema – or rather the "cinema-effect" – says Dubois, also pervades the very concept of preparation, of "setting up" the art exhibition and the route through it, inspiring its lexis and absorbing its professions and competences.

Light theatres

Even if we consider the "standard" movie theatre phase as being circumscribed in the history of moving images, its features have powerfully affected our experience of film. The screen, the immobile and silent posture of the spectators, seated and facing the image, the darkness, the design of the theatre itself, these have actually become the dominating features in the experience of film in its most classic and widespread form – mostly coinciding, moreover, with the advent of sound – in the need for the spectator to concentrate on complex and lengthy narrative forms[6].

In a 1994 lecture Michel Chion lamented the lack of "standard theatres" like movie cinemas for video and for contemporary music experiences: in standard theatres, he observed, the attention is necessarily focused on the work in question, because the context becomes invisible, being predictable and never-changing. Venues that are temporarily set up on individual occasions acquire a power of distraction and hyper-visibility that "relativize" the work, diminish it and make viewing precarious and subdued[7]. A criticism shared by those authors who do not identify with the poetics of fleeting uncertainty or of the open work of art and for whom the "dominant" model of the movie theatre remains unsurpassed – indeed, should be strengthened (suffice it to think of the theatre at New York's Anthology Film Archives, designed by Peter Kubelka, who intensified the darkness and separation between spectators).

Nonetheless, far from being a "lack", diversified, temporary space, re-organized on each occasion, has been and often still is in harmony with the poetics and practices of the independent and art video. It denotes a situation that may be "militant" (clubs, party headquarters, associations, demonstrations, public squares) or heretically far removed from the black cube of the movie theatre and the ascetic white cube of the art gallery: looking out for places with a past, disused, *en plein air* or in situations that recreate an apartment, a home, the chosen place. Part of this different choice comprises the *distancing* that is added to the work by a temporary, disorienting context; the *exhibited sharing* with other, clearly visible spectators; the *lack of discipline* for the spectator-visitor, who makes choices and moves around; often there is also *sound contamination*

between the works presented or between these and the environment. Like TV, the video does not need darkness for viewing and in the Sixties, in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jean-Louis Comolli was already suggesting the affinity between the cinema of modernity and television viewing:

> *For modern cinema, we need light theatres that neither absorb nor annul, as darkness does, the luminosity coming from the screen but do, on the contrary, make it resplendent, theatres that place the character and the spectator, both emerging from the shadows, right opposite one another on an equal footing […]. The small screen is also the only one that often looks out onto a light "theatre"...*[8].

A gateway not into dream but into reality, not a spectator immersed in darkness but a recognizable one, and the "hero of the film", in broad daylight[9].

However, the video does not only inherit TV's characteristic of being a luminous and ever-present little box: it is through TV that it has established, probably, a sort of anarchical and personalized posture, so that the spectator of an art video or independent video seems to be the child of avant-garde poetics and practices and, simultaneously, of daily television viewing: rapid changes, individual adaptation of times and positions, collages of fragments, impatience with duration. In relation to this, Jameson speaks of the interesting experience of "aesthetic boredom", comparing the experimental film undergoing the ritual of the movie theatre, which cannot be interrupted, and the free viewing of video art, generally presented heretically and able to be interrupted[10]. And this leads us to reflect on the question of the intensity of viewing modes, often wrongly seen in terms of opposites between the film experience (attention) and the television/video experience (distraction): a distinction that risks neglecting the époque-making mutations of these concepts and media, which today often show us the opposite picture: suffice it to think, as an example, of how distracting and disturbing the use of mobile phones is in the movie theatre or of the quick suppers consumed in certain, specially-equipped multi-screen cinemas; and how highly concentrated, virtually *cinéphile* forms have migrated into television viewing. Reflections on the opposition between the *gaze* (the way the spectator watches at the cinema) and the *glance* (the way the spectator watches TV or video) are not only enhanced by "a third viewing style", that of the «multi-centred […] attentive but at the same time divided watching»[11], but also seem to arrange themselves today into a different pair, the freedom/constraint of the viewing mode[12]. In this sense, cinema, relocated in video, would emerge from the disciplined and standardized condition coinciding with the order imposed by the dominating structure of the movie theatre to place itself physically in a freer condition: freedom from the screen or of the screens, modification of the order of sequences, freedom of duration and playing times but also the freedom of the spectator to start and stop viewing at his own discretion, to watch and watch him/herself, to socialize or remain apart, to taste, to refuse, to concentrate or be distracted.

Yet, even in this case, with the necessary distinctions: not only because in the case of videos many people continue to prefer the "classical" theatre form, with all that this implies, but also because many forms of video presentation are built on the assumption of spectators with different and sometimes contrasting attitudes: often – in particular in the case of installations – the route is obligatory, even uncomfortable or cramped; often the viewing of individual works, concentrated (on monitors with headsets) and in the dark, combines with *flânerie* from one screen to another and the isolated experience turns into an opportunity for meeting people and for conversation[13]. And isn't this also the mode of viewing a film on a DVD player at home or on a journey? Concentration, the sphere encompassing film and "viewer", can be broken at any time, even by the sound environment, which is often not taken into consideration, even though it is a lot

more pervasive than the image: concentrated as he/she may be, and however isolated, the viewer using these tools is unable to create an impermeable bubble excluding outside noises: the movie theatre remains unsurpassed acoustically. It is no coincidence that important authors choose to install their works without sound, leaving the visitor to "put words and music to" the work; at the opposite extreme we find the sound chaos of video settings conceived as spectacular electronic screenplay rather than as the exact presentations of "audiovisual texts"[14].

In this constant flux of exhibition settings and viewing modes, which go back and forth between the cinematographic and the video, and the viewing experience itself, inside the same flow, it seems to me that the only certainty is the affirmation, outside the classical movie theatre, of subjective experiences of duration in viewing, with a tendency for the fragment to prevail (which, I repeat, is not the same as distracted viewing and is compatible with the experience of complete and lasting absorption, determined by a skill in exhibition, by the context and even more so by the power of attraction of the work itself. For instance, the power of the long-take of labour and birth in the midst of a little forest created in an industrial space, in *Sanctuary* by Bill Viola, 1989).

These aesthetics of the fragment – with precedents and implications that we cannot go into here – certainly have to do with consolidated (though not exclusively) television viewing habits, as well as with many models of personalized and free viewing; at the same time they are linked to a posture, a demand and an offer of "information" rather than narrative: when I am attracted by my own image captured on a security camera, I stop on the spot at the station, I am magnetized by the giant screen on the side of a building and even when I watch a film on the computer, looking at my mail every now and then, or opening up new windows on the screen, to what extent does the "cinema effect" triumph over the "information" effect, to what extent does the narrative trend triumph over curiosity and news reports?

Separation, combination: some examples

Perhaps this is why an author like Michael Snow has condensed his celebrated film *Wavelength* (1966-67, 45') into a modified DVD version, *WVLNT. Wavelength for Those Who Don't Have the Time* (2003, 15'). The film is *all* there but has been divided into three equal parts, lasting 15 minutes each, superimposed on one another. From the linear sequence of the full-length viewing in the movie theatre with its "stressful" yet also illuminating duration for the spectator, who is led to experience temporality (and its particular "fictional" dimension), and a viewing in which the events are "separate and combined"[15]. Separation and combination seem to inspire many of cinema's relocations in video, both in the form of exhibition and in that of a single-channel work. First of all, separation and combination of the elements used to construct the whole apparatus: hyper-visibility and "staging" (collocation in space) of the projector, the film reel, the screen, but also of light and darkness, which suggest the «theatrical transformation of the cinematographic spectacle»[16] but, at the same time, reveal the artefact, dissect it and place it *in the limelight*. Similarly to the way the film on DVD, in its Special Features section, dissects and turns the limelight onto its components, from the screenplay to the acting, from the directing to the stills taken on the set.

In the route through the exhibition *L'Île et elle* (Fondation Cartier, Paris 2006, fig. 1) Agnès Varda separates and combines the elements in her personal cinematographic experience, creating a location that evokes the beloved island of Noirmoutier: to enter a section, you have to wait for the low tide (in the images of a screen-threshold that the visitor will then cross); these "enforced"

viewing times are accompanied by free and subjective times for moving around: from the real editing table to a hut whose walls are made out of strips of Varda's film *Les Créatures* (1966). Film as walls, as home. «Free and oriented deambulation», as Raymond Bellour[17] defines it, amidst cinema equipment, video projections, photographs, objects, animations, crosses between videos and painting, and the "exhibited editing" of *Le Tryptique de Noirmoutier* with its three screens, on which the linear succession of events is replaced by simultaneousness: «The spectator-wanderer is spared the harshness of the movie theatre. He is not a prisoner of the filmmaker's sovereign editing. He does his own editing»[18]. An experience that gives the private (Agnès Varda's life) a shape and a stage and also brings the public work of the cinema back to the privacy and intimacy of "home" (the hut, the island).

Fig. 1 – Agnès Varda, exhibition *L'Île et elle* (Fondation Cartier, Paris 2006).

Separating and combining, (re)mantling and constructing a space defined by the cinema and remodelled thanks to video: as recently done by Jonas Mekas, when exhibiting his films in Lucca (figs. 2-3): on the one side enlarged stills, which become pictures, portraits conserving the trace of the cinematographic sequence (of the celluloid itself); on the other, video projections of sequences; as well as a sort of "house" of memories built of monitors arranged in a circle, on which scenes from his film diaries appear. The spectator, at the centre, does his own editing, yet at the same time is admitted into an intimate and circumscribed space, in a little theatre of memory, in a room belonging to the affections[19]. Once again, here as in other examples, the relationship with sound, noise, words, should be treated more thoroughly; as in the "cinema effect" in public places, from the security videos (around which Michael Klier built a fictional hypothesis of "gaze" in his admirable *Der Riese*, 1983) to the huge panels present in public spaces. Viewing that is often acoustically amputated: the sound which is absent or incomprehensible or submerged by other, louder sounds (traffic, announcements over loudspeakers): the spectator is asked to build up narratives starting from a single image or to contaminate them with an asynchronic, separate, casual, often absurd soundtrack which would have been the joy of the surrealists – but at home, too, the TV may well be on with the volume turned down, or used just as a radio, separating the two, audio and visual, elements.

And if video is television, television is home. We were reminded of this in 1984 by one of the masters of research in electronic images, Vito Acconci, who, together with Antoni Muntadas, was

Fig. 2 – Jonas Mekas, exhibition *6 opere di Jonas Mekas*
(Fondazione Ragghianti, Lucca 2008).

Fig. 3 – Jonas Mekas, exhibition *6 opere di Jonas Mekas*
(Fondazione Ragghianti, Lucca 2008).

amongst those most sensitive to artistic practice in public spaces «where there are people»[20].
Videoinstallations, he writes, are a combination of two opposites: the collocation in a *specific place* of a *placeless* element like video: they stop time because they pin down the placelessness and immateriality typical of the electronic (and today digital) image. The installation of moving images in public places also seems to be characterized by this combination, and the environment – Acconci continues – seems to disappear in favour of the "point" (in this case, back in the Eighties, it was still the monitor). This is why:

The conventional location for a television-set is in the home; when it is come upon elsewhere, whether inside a gallery/museum or outside, in a store-window or a supermarket, the viewer is stopped in his/her tracks: the situation is like that of a visitor from another planet happening upon a TV set – only in this case it is the "other planet" (the home, the living room) that comes upon the viewer, out of the privacy of his/her home and in public. The viewer, seeing the TV set, is brought back home...[21].

Is this still the case, perhaps? Or else is the equation TV = home disappearing, like that of cinema = movie theatre? Does cinema at the movie theatre lead us towards the extraordinary whilst the cinema effect re-located in other parts of the city is to re-create an ordinary experience?

The cinema effect that becomes TV effect/home effect in the chaos of the city? And the boundless city of images, the planetary city of the cinema that instead becomes home, hut, hearth, "bubble", a private sphere, a little theatre of memory on the individual (and personalized) devices of audiovision as in a multitude of cinema experiences "exhibited" on video in artistic venues?

In any event, an experience of orientation, of searching and the recognition of traces which at this stage – and perhaps forever – is far removed from the realms of classical narration, self-identification and the suspension of disbelief.

(Translation by Patricia Hampton)

1   Francesco Casetti, "L'esperienza filmica e la ri-locazione del cinema", in *Fata Morgana*, *Esperienza*, no. 4, January-April 2008, pp. 23-40; I also refer to papers by Casetti himself, by Carmelo Marabello, Cristina Tosatto, Miriam De Rosa, at the Paris Spring School on "Cinema, Contemporary Art, Heritage: Contemporary practices of the image and museum policies" (Paris, 21–30 April 2008). Amongst the many texts devoted by Philippe Dubois to the forms of exhibited cinema, I would quote "Un 'effet cinéma' dans l'art contemporain", in *Cinéma & Cie*, no. 8, Fall 2006, pp. 15-26.
2   Peppino Ortoleva, "L'esperienza dell'esperienza", in *Fata Morgana, Esperienza*, cit., pp. 117-133.
3   Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University, Durham 1991; David Joselit, *Feedback. Television against Democracy*, MIT, Cambridge MA 2007. I wish to thank Francesco Casetti for having brought the latter text to my attention.
4   Francesco Casetti, "L'esperienza filmica e la ri-locazione del cinema", cit., p. 29 (my translation).
5   Philippe Dubois, *Improbable Movements. The Cinema Effect in Contemporary Art*, in Sandra Lischi, Elena Marcheschi (eds.), *Realtà sospese. Video e cinema oltre/Suspended realities. Exhibition of Video and Cinema Beyond*, Mimesis, Milano 2006, p. 23.
6   Mariagrazia Fanchi, *Spettatore*, Il Castoro, Milano 2005; Gabriele Pedullà, *In piena luce. I nuovi spettatori e il sistema delle arti*, Bompiani, Milano 2008. See also: Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, MIT, Cambridge MA 2001.
7   Michel Chion, Seminar at the University of Pisa, 4 February 1998.
8   Jean-Louis Comolli, "Salles obscures, salles claires. Notes sur le nouveau spectateur", in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 177, April 1966 (my translation).
9   *Ibidem*.
10 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, cit. It should be remembered that these reflections date back to 1991: the cinematographic practice of theatrical video projection had not yet been perfected as it is today.
11 Mariagrazia Fanchi, *Spettatore*, cit., p. 43 (my translation).
12 Gabriele Pedullà, *In piena luce*, cit., p. 137.
13 See the reflections on this issue by authors, critics and curators in Sandra Lischi (ed.), *Le forme dello sguardo. Video d'arte e ricerca*, Charta, Milano 1997 and showings such as the recent exhibition *Worlds on Video*, Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, September-November 2008.

14 See the recent exhibition *Dans la nuit des images*, Grand Palais, Paris, December 2008.

15 Vittorio Fagone (ed.), *Michael Snow. Cinema, installazioni, video e arti visuali*, Fondazione Ragghianti, Lucca 2007, p. 41.

16 Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Le Mouvement des images*, Centre Pompidou, Paris 2006, p. 18.

17 Raymond Bellour, *Le Passage du Gois*, in AA.VV., *Agnès Varda*. L'Île et elle. *Regards sur l'exposition*, Fondation Cartier, Paris 2006, p. 19 (my translation).

18 Dominique Païni, *Le Tryptique de Noirmoutier*, in AA.VV., *Agnès Varda*, cit., p. 34 (my translation).

19 Exhibition *6 opere di Jonas Mekas*, Fondazione Ragghianti, Lucca, October 2008.

20 Vito Acconci, "Intorno all'arte e agli artisti," interview by Lynn Blumenthal, Kate Horsfield, in Valentina Valentini (ed.), *Dissensi tra film, video, televisione*, Sellerio, Palermo 1991, p. 36. Original text "Vito Acconci", in *Profile*, no. 4, Summer 1984.

21 But a house without the comforting assurance of well-known objects: «The land of the numb/the still/the dead». Vito Acconci, *Television, Furniture & Sculpture: The Room with the American View*, in Drine Mignot (ed.), *Het Lumineuze Beld/The Luminous Image*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 1984, p. 21.