

Time at a crossroads:

some background thoughts on *Death 24 Times a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* in relation to the temporal imaginaries of the compilation film. (A condensed version of the Stanley Picker Public Lecture, delivered May 2017)

I would like to reflect on ways in which the cinema offers images and patterns that confuse and fragment the linearity that so easily channels experience and representations of time. Although an inescapable forward movement from birth to death regulates all life, aesthetic, intellectual and historical perspectives all have the power to create varied imaginaries of time. While time is difficult to pin down, hard to articulate, to conceptualise, or imagine, society is 'possessed' by patterns of temporality, habitual and intangible, which form an essential part of its fabric and ideological structure. For some time there has been widespread reaction against temporal linearity, for instance, in radical challenges to historical narrative and avant-garde challenges to narrative film. But I am also suggesting that over recent decades questions about how time is visualised have taken on a higher profile. My last book *Death 24 Times a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* was written in the late 90s/early 2000s, responded to and was in dialogue with, the period's heightened 'time consciousness'. It was in this conjuncture that I began to use the film/digital dialogue as an experiment with the representation of time, given that, with a touch of the button on the remote control, the linear drive of film narrative could be fractured and find stillness. And the cinema's complicated temporality, the paradoxical coexistence of sequence and instant, could emerge into visibility, further enhanced by repetition and reversals of time and movement. Furthermore, from a historical rather than a formal perspective, rather than relegating its predecessor to the realm of the archaic, the new medium could initiate a dialogue between the old and the new. The traditional pattern of temporal linearity, of both narrative and history, could be simultaneously and cinematically disrupted by an aesthetic exchange that transcended the purely technological.

But recently, sometime after the publication of *Death 24 Times a Second*, I began to think about a confusion of time that has always existed, as long as the cinema itself, in a certain kind of film genre: the appropriation or compilation film, using found footage, involves a look back into a past from a present, addressing a future spectator, creating a complex layering of time.

Some background to *Death 24 times a Second*

For me, as someone involved with both cinema and its history and the left and its history, the 'time consciousness' to which my book *Death 24 times a Second* responded was double sided. A seeming crisis in contemporary perceptions of the direction of history coincided with a crisis of cinema history. Broadly speaking 'time consciousness' can be associated with the atmosphere of the millennium but also with a sense of an 'end of an era', a response to various history altering

events that had accumulated over the previous two decades. Some items from a familiar list: fall of communism, the rise of neo-liberalism, the consequent hastening of industrial decline - with its consequent impact on the traditional working class and, inevitably, on the politics of the left - then the momentous shift in capitalism toward finance and hedge-fund short-termism, the rise of precarious labour, the shift of manufacturing from the first to the third world... anyone can add to the list. While the neo-liberal right might have welcomed the end of an era or the so-called 'end of history', these events were disorientating to a left used to thinking in terms of working towards social and economic progress. Then, around the same time, speculation was raging about the death of the cinema, prompted particularly by the coincidence of its 1995 centenary with the technological revolutions emerging out of the new world of the digital. As concepts of time seemed to stand at a crossroads, embodied by the uncertain future faced by cinema itself, I tried to think about the cinema not only as a time machine that could question and resist a hard separation between the past and the future; but also, holding on to the special place that the cinema had always occupied for modernism, I hoped that this uncanny, cross-media dialogue would revive a wider sense of its cognitive potential. My thoughts, inspired as they were by the impact of digital technology on film in the early twenty-first century, had been beautifully encapsulated as a tenet of modernism, many years before, by Annette Michelson (to re-quote a key quotation in the *Death 24* chapter 'The Pensive Spectator'):

'To describe a movement is difficult, to describe the instant of arrest and of release, of reversal, of movement is something else again; it is to confront that thrill on the deepest level of filmic enterprise, to recognise the privileged character of the medium as being in itself the promise of an incomparable, and un hoped for, grasp upon the nature of causality'.¹

The compilation film, in a small, but significant shift, turns the idea of a 'promise' towards already existing footage and its recent explosion as a genre could well be symptomatic of the early twenty-first century's accelerated 'time consciousness'. As Giorgio Agamben has suggested, if cinema has fulfilled its destiny as a recording instrument, the time has come to analyse that world of time preserved. Here Agamben is commenting on Guy Debord's film *Society of the Spectacle* (1973) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (completed 1998):

'There are two transcendental conditions of montage: *repetition* and *stoppage*. Debord did not invent them, but he brought them to light; he exhibited the transcendentals as such. And Godard went on to do the same in his *Histoire(s)*. There is no need to shoot film any more,

just to repeat and stop.’

And he goes on:

‘... cinema, or at least a certain kind of cinema, is a prolonged hesitation between image and meaning. It is not a matter of a chronological pause, but rather a power of stoppage that works on the image itself and pulls it away from narrative power to exhibit it as such.’²

Some background to the compilation film

In the title of his early book on the topic *Film Begets Film*³ Jay Leyda sums up the double temporality characteristic of the reconfiguration of found footage, which is also evoked by Christa Bluminger’s term ‘second hand film.’⁴ Although existing footage has been reassembled since the beginnings of cinema, there are landmark moments in its history. Estir Shub pioneered the use of found footage as critique in her film *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), Joseph Cornell pioneered its use as art in *Rose Hobart* (1936) and the form has continued along these paths as well as deviating into others.

Here, I want to think about the compilation form as structured by gaps that illuminate the form but vary in cultural significance. In the first instance, there is the gap in time between the original footage and its reconfiguration into a new work. This essential double temporality ensures that the compilation film is essentially fragmented and non-linear; its ‘bits’ cannot cohere into a seamless whole. Fragmentation of time is augmented by heterogeneity of source material: for instance, home movies or industrial footage, or different media, often carried over into a sound track composed of documents from the past juxtaposed with a voice-over composed in the editing. But in this variety of ‘stuff’, can be found a gap in value between the found material and its ultimate compilation. Here I am interested particularly in the compilation film as critique (the path leading from Estir Shub), in which the editor/compiler uses the found material for political purposes, to expose injustices and oppressions of the past. In the dislocations between found footage and its reconfigured form, ghostly figures, preserved as they are on film, refuse to be laid to rest. In this context, the compilation film is a story telling medium in which people and their lives can be retold with their experience and point of view reconfigured alongside the material. The double inscription of peoples’ lives and their stories enhances the longstanding sense of film as a medium of haunting, noted from its earliest days and carried over from the still photograph. I have associated these characteristic gaps between the found footage and the completed compilation film with three tropes, which, I hope, will

give them greater substance and also create connections and links with existing cultural ideas.

Palimpsest: evokes the gap in time between the original footage and the final film. A palimpsest refers to a double inscription: one text is laid over another; the original might be partly erased but still haunts the later text. Similarly, as found footage is overlaid by its later reconfiguration, two time levels exist simultaneously. This persistence of the past generates its own metaphor of haunting.

Détournement: refers to the possible ideological gap between the original footage and the final film. The term cites the Situationist practice in which a pre-existing cultural text (usually of high standing) would be distorted for political critique, producing an antagonistic or antithetical meaning.

Gleaning: relates to the gap in value between the found material and the final film. Suggested by Agnes Varda's film *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (France 2000) the term gives a cultural lineage to the process of collecting, accumulating, sifting through and recycling discarded materials. To my mind, gleaning not only refers to what was, once upon a time, a specifically female task (collecting the unwanted residue of an agricultural harvest) but also evokes the kind of apparently trivial things, personal or emotional, collected and saved, in which women invest value. By extension, the term also evokes the often apparently valueless nature of found footage material that, almost by definition, has no place in film culture; only when re-evaluated and recycled does it acquire significance, and consequently, value.

Although the compilation film has no inherent relation to women, its formal properties fit well with stories that emerge out of silence and cultural marginalization, tentatively making the shift from an individual and private world into circulation in the public sphere. The process of gleaning and rearranging primary material, rather similar in a sense to the work of 'history from below', excavates a story, transforming it from absence, invisibility and silence into a meaningful discourse. However, the original material never loses its specificity and the form preserves the voices of its witnesses. In the essential incompleteness and residual heterogeneity that characterises even the final version of the edited film, this refusal to be neatly closed off seems to carry the ghostly voice's message insistently into a social space that can address the future.

I have evolved my ideas about the compilation film, sketched above, very much in relation to Alina Marazzi's *Un'ora sola ti vorrei* (Italy 2000). The film reconstructs the story of Marazzi's mother, Liseli, who disappeared from her life when she was a young child and was never again mentioned by her family. Years later, Marazzi discovered that even the slightest document relating to her mother's life, her illness and her death and every trace of her presence, had been carefully preserved by her parents, including home movies, shot by Liseli's father, Alina Marazzi's grandfather.

The film is constructed out of the traces of Liseli's life, that is, out of intrinsically informal materials (letters and diaries make up the sound track; photographs, home movies and medical documents make up most of the image track). It thus exemplifies the gap of gleaning, a trajectory of things without value re-valued into a historical record with social relevance. But central to the film is the gap of *détournement*. In the first instance, Alina was searching, on a personal level, for her lost mother; but she came to the realisation that Liseli's story has a significance and importance beyond the individual. Her grandfather's overarching intention, as his granddaughter perceived it, was to record a particular bourgeois way of life, through that of his own well-to-do and cultured family. In the context of Marazzi's feminist consciousness, the footage finds a changed, or charged, significance; that is, the film moves the story from the realm of women's silence and suffering to recognition within a feminist discourse of history. Liseli, although an articulate and intelligent young woman, was unable to break through the silence surrounding intractable social pressures involved in motherhood, succumbing to depression and ultimately to suicide. The topic, the crisis of motherhood, affects the films' aesthetic strategies, the actual way political, feminist significance is woven out of this difficult material.

The aesthetic of compilation, its fragmentary and unfinished nature, reflects the difficulty of telling Liseli's story; but, while using the course of Liseli's life as a 'vertical' form, the film breaks up linear chronology with 'horizontal' insertions. The non-chronological editing enhances the temporal confusion inherent to the found footage film, the gap between Liseli's father's home movies and the final film. Furthermore, as footage is slowed down and stilled and repeated the presence of the past is accentuated, so that the actual instant of registration emerges into visibility. Due to the editing, to the association between the photographic image and death, as well as stilled and repeated images, the film casts the shadow of her future death even over the

young Liseli. But, to reiterate, ultimately, and beyond the ‘double’ temporality characteristic of the compilation film, *Un’ora sola ti vorrei* moves from the individual instance into the realm of history. Marazzi, in her account of the film, has said:

‘In the dialogue between the images and the words, beyond the letters and diaries, there is another level of writing: Ilaria’s and mine. We edited and re-edited, subverting the original intention of the images, appropriating and retelling the story as it seemed to us, taking up the point of view of the filmed. In a certain sense we liberated the feminine spirit imprisoned in those boxes, as though with Aladin’s lamp.’⁵

So far, I have emphasised the confusion of time that exists between found footage and its reconfiguration in a final film. But the politics of compilation as critique ultimately depend on an exchange that will only happen in the future: that is, how the re-told story will deliver its message. In his reflection on the temporality of the archive, Jacques Derrida emphasises this future dimension. He says:

In an enigmatic sense, which will clarify itself *perhaps* (perhaps because nothing should be sure here, for essential reasons), the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. It is not a question of a concept dealing with the past that might be already at our disposal, *an archivable concept of the archive*. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, a promise and of a responsibility towards tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never. A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise. And we are never very far from Freud in saying this.⁶

In *Un’ora sola ti vorrei* the implication of the promise moves, personally, from Liseli to Alina and back again and then, politically, to the film’s future. Liseli’s image moves from her ghostly presence on film (celluloid’s characteristic illusion of the living dead is further enhanced by her actual untimely death) to the ghostly spirit that refuses to be put to rest, *perhaps* until a feminist future can make at least a gesture towards the silenced past. This is the point at which, after decades of invisibility, the emotional significance of the film’s actual instances and split seconds become political. In the last resort, this material carries in its celluloid footprint something (*perhaps*) that can

be returned to the historical consciousness of the future. Just as celluloid confuses temporality, so does the concept of promise: speaking towards a time in which unrecognised experiences might find recognition or even redemption.

Throughout this paper, I have been trying to think about questions of time and images of time that can be found specifically in film, stretching from coexistence of instantaneity with duration to the reconfiguration of existing found footage into a message with its own future promise. Film seems, at least to my mind, to fulfil Derrida's concept of 'spectral messianicity', reminiscent of Annette Michelson's rather messianic hope that film's ability to capture the past for a future present could throw light on the enigmatic temporal sequence of cause and effect.

I want to end with a reiteration of the image or metaphor of haunting. This ghostly persistence, a refusal to give up the voice of protest, finds materiality embodied in the human figure and voice inscribed in celluloid (or later media). And on a further level, the compilation film, particularly in the pathway of *Estir Shub*, brings its own spectral resonance as it gives a voice and a story to those deprived historically of both. These patterns of time defy the rigidity of the linear and demand to be thought in varying and fluid relations. Very evocative of this kind of hovering outside of organized time is Derrida's point early on in *Spectres of Marx*:

'A spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalised presents (past, actual present; now future present). We are questioning in this instant, we are asking ourselves about this instant that is not docile to time. Furtive and untimely, the apparition of the spectre does not belong to that time...'⁷

- ¹ Annette Michelson: 'From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera*' in *The Essential Cinema* ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York 1975) p104
- ² Giorgio Agamben: 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films' in *Art and the Moving Image* ed. Tanya Leighton Tate Publishing in association with Afterall London 2008
- ³ On the early history of the compilation film, see Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964.
- ⁴ Christa Bluminger: *Cinéma de seconde main: Esthétique du emploi dans l'art du film and des nouveaux medias*. Paris Klincksieck 2013
- ⁵ Alina Marazzi: *Un ora sola ti vorrei*. Milan. Rizzoli 2006. P 53 (This is Alina Marazzi account of making the film and it accompanies the dvd.)
- ⁶ Jacques Derrida: *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Chicago. Chicago University Press 1996 p 36
- ⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Specters of Marx* Routledge New York and London p xx