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> The trails of light which they seemed to leave behind them in all kinds of curlicues and streamers and spirals did not really exist, but were merely phantom traces created by the sluggish reaction of the human eye, appearing to see a certain afterglow in the place from which the creature, shining for only the fraction of a second in the lamplight, had already gone. It was such unreal phenomena, the sudden incursion of unreality into the real world, certain effects of light in the landscape spread out before us, or in the eye of a beloved person, that kindled our deepest feelings, or at least what we took for them.
>
> W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

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Art-historical Moments in Cinema

edited by

Bruno Nassim Aboudrar
Joséphine Jibokji
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Introduction

Barbara Le Maître, Bruno Nassim Aboudrar,
Joséphine Jibokji, Jessie Martin

The ideas presented in this volume stem from a long-standing collaborative study centred on the history of forms, which over the course of time has stimulated various avenues of inquiry and inspired the analysis of a diverse body of films[1]. Given the abundance of previous publications focused on the crossroads of cinema and the history of art, it is worth stating at the outset that the originality of this project lies in its capacity to reveal the historiographical potentialities of cinema. More specifically, we are seeking to analyse the medium of film, and particularly fiction film, as an *instrument* rather than as an *object* of history: whether it be the history of art or that of forms, techniques or filmic devices. Above all else, this implies becoming aware not so much of the presence of artworks and their significance with respect to the related events, but of the ways in which the fiction itself, through certain motifs (windows, chairs, serpentine lines), visual or optical qualities (contrast of black and white, transparency) or even symbolic gestures (signing, designating or combining) evolves into — or rather, yields up through analysis — a figuration of the history of art.

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[1] While this is by no means an exhaustive list of the works generated by various seminars, conferences or day symposiums, a few examples of such studies include: Barbara Le Maître, ‘Pour une histoire des formes, au-delà du médium’, in *A History of Cinema Without Names. A Research Project*, ed. by Diego Cavallotti, Federico Giordano, Leonardo Quaresima (Milan−Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2016), pp. 175−182; Bruno Nassim Aboudrar, Barbara Le Maître, Teresa Castro, Térésa Faucon, Dario Marchori: ‘L'Histoire des formes au pluriel. *A Canterbury Tale* sans les noms’, in *A History of Cinema Without Names/2. Contexts and Practical Applications*, ed. by Diego Cavallotti, Simone Dotto, Leonardo Quaresima (Milan−Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2017), pp. 133−164; Bruno Nassim Aboudrar, Joséphine Jibokji, Jessie Martin, Barbara Le Maître: ‘Du film en historien d'art. *The Draughtman's Contract*, P. Greenaway, 1982’, in *A History of Cinema Without Names/3. New Research Paths and Methodological Glosses*, ed. by Diego Cavallotti, Simone Dotto, Leonardo Quaresima (Milan−Udine: Mimesis Edizioni, 2018), pp. 171−217 (this publication is in fact an early and incomplete version of the present volume, published in French).

Before speculating further on this process, it is necessary to clarify how such a premise — which involves viewing the film itself as a kind of art historian — may be seen to displace the conventional view of the relationship between art and the cinema. Most studies on the links between the cinema and the history of art are subject to two methodological parameters. First, their analyses are based on the explicit (or in some cases allusive) presence of artworks within the films that are studied. Second, they tend to transfer the meaning of these works over to the story being told. Time after time, the paintings (or sculptures, photographs, installations, etc.) reflect, illuminate, problematize, anticipate, or simply summarize the issues raised by the narrative, and are absorbed into the fictional world it presents[2]. Breaking with this tradition, the studies presented in this volume are based upon two guiding principles. Firstly, that of not making the actual presence of art works in the film a necessary condition for the discourse on art: the history of art can be evoked anywhere in the film. Secondly, that of not restricting the significance of such works, if they do occur, to a function of the fictional story, so as to reveal a 'story' other than that narrated by the film, a phenomenon we are calling 'art-historical moments' in cinema.

This approach brings to light certain questions, which the authors of this volume have attempted to answer in diverse ways, while at the same time leaving them open to further discussion. First, where in the film do these art-historical moments arise and what provokes them? In what ways does the film reinvent the theory or history of art? What do these moments contribute to history as a discipline? Or even, how does the film negotiate the time of the narrative in relation to the art period it references in a more enigmatic fashion? Another key point regarding our analytical method: since our discussion focuses on fictional cinema, how might we distinguish the (art) historical line of the narrative purportedly being put forward from the story that same film is telling.

---

[2] Among other examples, we could cite David Pascoe's analysis of a tableau by Januarius Zick (*Allegory of Newton's Service to Optics*, 1785) in the film *The Draughtsman's Contract*, which can be found in the book David Pascoe, *Peter Greenaway: Museums and Moving Images* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), beginning around p. 70.

Focussing on the features of eighteenth-century ‘portrait landscapes’, Bruno Nassim Aboudrar traces the paradoxes and anachronisms that have been playfully hidden within the baroque complexity of Peter Greenaway’s film *The Draughtsman’s Contract* (1982). His distinctive distribution of colours — almost entirely reserved for landscapes and inanimate objects — and the values assigned to black and white — mainly associated with women, men and animals — form the basis for an investigation in which the false evidence provided by images is clothed in the deceptive certainties of a pastiche account of the history of art.

Also centered on colour, Lucas Lei’s contribution on Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *The Red Desert* focuses on a historical moment revealing the film’s ‘latent historicism’ and studies the expression of its figurative project. The numerous frames within frames (windows, doorways, but also framed images) combined with a colour-based pictorial approach lead to the construction of an ambiguous space which creates visual and poetic echoes, proposing interactions among the characters, objects and setting and pointing to the reflexiveness of representation. In this respect, Antonioni’s film appears to model itself on painting at the turn of the nineteenth century, which represented artists’ bedrooms and workshops, and sought to articulate notions of interior and exterior, with the outside landscapes conveying a *Stimmung*. He also invokes works in which painting ‘stages itself’ by representing young artists ‘occupied with the exercise of painting or drawing’. In associating these two pictorial practices, the film offers an exploration of ‘the imaginary realms created by academic art and painting’.

Moving from windows to gardens and from colours to lines, Jessie Martin’s text, the second study of *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, exposes within the film the presence of a narrative of the origins of English painting. Although the fiction unravels against a late seventeenth-century backdrop during which painting was practiced primarily by Flemish artists, and although the film's dialogue emphasizes the non-existence of what could be called the English painter, one of the film's scenes nonetheless heralds the birth of English painting. The unexpected appearance of a serpentine line introduces — a century before its time — the thought of William Hogarth and his treatise on beauty and the nationalist conception of art. The inscription of the line in the structured and geometrical 'French-style' garden thus invites us to contemplate the link between the emergence of English landscape painting and the 'English' landscape garden from the point of view of the aesthetic of the picturesque.

Along similar lines to those traced by Jessie Martin, Barbara Le Maître in her chapter 'The Draughtsman's Chairs', examines certain figurative elaborations involving furnishings, whose purpose appears on the surface to be more functional than artistic, since such pieces would ordinarily be categorized as belonging to the decorative arts. She shows how these seats are transformed, from one sequence to another, into optical gimmicks or pastoral motifs, for example. Through the analysis of these compositions with chairs, her piece shows how *The Draughtsman's Contract* reconstitutes the ideological core and the aesthetic framework of an artistic tradition: that of the English landscape, which, as was highlighted in the preceding text, indeed owes much to Hogarth. In keeping with the guiding premise of art-historical moments in cinema, the author ultimately puts forward the idea that these chairs inform a reconsideration of the interactions between craftsmanship, the decorative arts and the art of images — an idea she expounds through reference to the thought of Aloïs Riegl.

Stéphane Privat's perspective brings us to comprehend the figure of Laura — impresario and editor of images in Chris Marker's 1996 film *Level Five* — through that of the 'admonitor'. From within the picture itself, this simultaneously physical and theoretical character described by Alberti in 1435, invites the spectator into the painted *storia* through gesture or gaze. The *storia*'s text, according to Leon Battista Alberti, is a painted version, and could only be developed elsewhere, in books and discourse: painting, according to Simonides' saying, is silent poetry. It is therefore through the question of language in cinema that the reference to Alberti — and to the history of art over which he presides — strives to decenter the site of the film. For how are we to comprehend an admonitor — a female one in this case — who is no longer solely gestural but uses speech from the outset, in a film which is explicitly devoted to the fate of images at a time when their electronic and digital incarnations as well as IT-related networks were challenging cinematographic conventions for the monstration of filmic images?

The notion of the circulation of images is at the heart of Guillaume le Gall's text in which the story related in Brian De Palma's *Mission: Impossible* is shown to be set into motion through an element of the setting, a mere aquarium, which the historian shows to be an unrecognized double of the cinematographic image, and a space for reflection on images (seen as liquid, mental, metaphorical). He finds in this 'seeing machine' the key to analysing the framing of the protagonist, which is the crux of this blockbuster's plotline. In this case the art-historical moment arises from the interplay of the aquarium, screen, and mental image, the thrill of fascination and the dangers of simulacra. Indeed, it is a history of assisted vision that is being addressed, one which, from the aquarium to the diorama, has the power to thwart Brian De Palma's visual tricks, thereby turning the decorative aquarium and its spectacular implosion into a site for the study of the transparency and opacity of screens.

Devoted to *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015), Arnauld Pierre's contribution returns in many respects to the problematics of transparency, plotting, and genealogy taken up by Guillaume Le Gall, but from a completely different perspective. Beneath the appearance of an experimental device that brings together, on opposite sides of a glass wall, a programmer and a gynoid (a modern-day cousin of the eighteenth-century draughtsman automata) the author is able to uncover the 'mythographic structure' of Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* (1915−1923), along with the maddening game of a bachelor machine. Focussed on psycho-sexual hybridity between the living and the mechanical, and thereby raising the crucial issue of machines' interference in the 'symbolic organisation of human kinship', the text shows how, in many cases, an art-historical moment may be interwoven with a moment in human history.

In the final study on *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Joséphine Jibokji examines the contract signed between the artist and the clients who commission his drawings. This contract — the importance of which is flagged from the beginning in the film's title — is indeed at the core of the narrative, yet it also detaches itself from the socially artificial seventeenth-century fictional world in order to reveal an artistic figure belonging to the twentieth century: that of the conceptual artist, a figure full of contradictions, torn between the primacy of reason and the resurgence of drives, between an obsession with control and submission to the laws of chance. In this sense, it is less the drawings than the programme, less the programme than the contract, and less the contract than that which escapes the artist's grasp that enable the appearance of this art-historical moment from the early 1980s, camouflaged in a fiction which is as historical as it is anachronistic.

One question remains: to what degree can history thus be seen to possess, within the possibilities provided by figurative representation, its own distinct mode of writing? In this respect, we might turn to the insight of Paul Veyne for whom '[…] it must never be forgotten, when we begin to write, that the chronicle of events is not the only way of writing history, and that it is not even an indispensable part of it; that it is, rather, a lazy way out'[3].

---

[3] Paul Veyne, *Writing History: An Essay on Epistemology*, trans. by Mina Moore-Rinvolucri (Middletown CT: Wesleyen University Press, 1984), p. 44. All quotes from French editions have been translated into English by the authors of this volume.

History of Art in Black and White

Bruno Nassim Aboudrar

About halfway through the film, an exchange between Mrs Talmann and Mr Neville introduces a critical position, which is metadiegetic and perpendicular to the plot. A contrast is drawn between the chromatic symbolism of the latter — red like the blood of murder, green like the lawn of an English garden — and the apparently limited resources of the black and white relied upon in Mr Neville's sketches:

> — My last six drawings will be redolent of the mystery. I will proceed step by step to the heart of the matter.
> — Perhaps to the heart of my father?
> — Lying crimson on a piece of green grass?
> — What a pity that your drawings are in black and white.

The sketches are in fact not the sole elements of the film to appear in black and white, for so do the characters, with the exception of their skin (relatively speaking, since it is so powdered that it in fact appears white) and, more broadly (I will come back to this later), everything that is alive. The result is that, in this film in colour about black and white, the only things truly in colour are the inanimate locations, the sets, the estate and its gardens — but not the drawings that seek to represent them.

Apart from the brief dialogue quoted above, this combination of black and white drawings with black and white living things goes unmentioned in the film and does not strike the viewer as

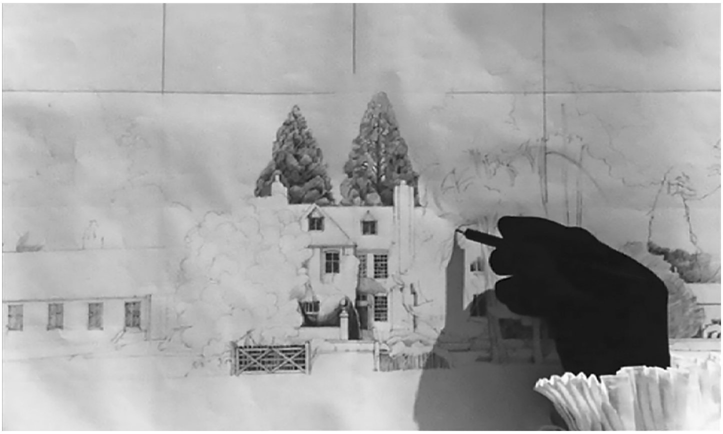

Fig. 1. *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Peter Greenaway, 1982.

puzzling, as do, for example, the living statue, the clothing in the branches of certain shrubs or even the soundtrack combining music by Purcell[1] with more contemporary compositions. And yet it gives rise to a great number of cognitive dissonances. The black and white aspect of both the characters and the drawings is simply presented as one of the film's givens, despite the largely paradoxical role that it plays, and above all, one which is independent of the narrative plot. In the film this obvious but overlooked feature comes across through a recurring image which portrays the 'genetic' process of the work; we see the drawing take shape in black on white paper, executed by a black pencil, held in the artist's hand, clad in a black glove trimmed with white lace (fig. 1). In a broader sense, Mr Neville is himself a man of black and white: he sketches on white sheets of paper and his pencils and easel are black, as are the majority of chairs and seats on which he sits to work, as Barbara Le Maître has pointed out.

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[1] See Jean-Pierre Naugrette, 'Peter Greenaway et le paradoxe de Renoir', *Critique*, 768 (May 2011/5), 432–47 (pp. 433–43).

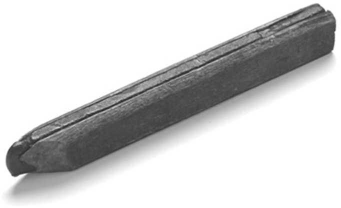

Fig. 2. Carpenter's pencil, Germany (17th century).

His lace jabots are immaculately white, as are his baroquely ornate shirtsleeves, while his clothes, shoes and wig are all black. The vision that naturally emanates from these insignia, this ideogram or visual signature (also in the genetic sense of the term) is that of a black and white drawing, produced by the black-and-whiteness of its artist and deriving from him. In the film, the drawings are not only *in* black and white, they form part of an entire work devoted to black and white.

And yet, one of the first of these cognitive dissonances occurs at this very level and concerns the instrument used to create the drawing: the black wooden pencil held in the artist's black-gloved hand. Set in 1694, the film in fact takes place nearly a century before the pencil was invented, whether you base this date on the filing of the German patent for Joseph Hardmuth's method (1792) or of the French one by Nicolas Jacques Comté (1795). These 'modern' pencils, like the one Neville uses in the film, are based on the principle of the lead being fully enclosed by the holder. In order to achieve this, the lead had to be made from a powder which was dried and extruded rather than from a soft mineral, which could not be inserted into the narrow opening of a wooden tube. The holders used in the seventeenth century were in fact composed of two separate pieces of flat wood which were glued to the lead (fig. 2). Before the invention of the French and German techniques, the leads were carved out of graphite deposits (which were in fact mistaken for lead), discovered in Borrowdale, England in the sixteenth century (1564), and were exported to Europe. From this perspective, one could argue that there is something very ‘English’ about the use of graphite for drawing (rather than hematite, charcoal or ink, for example). But not the pencil: in France, Comté’s invention was precipitated by Pitt’s blockade (1793), which prohibited the exportation of most English products, including graphite pencil leads. The pencil then, just like landscape gardens and painting itself, results from a process of cross-cultural exchange between England and the continent which, at the time the film is supposed to be set, was only just beginning.

Sketched with an anachronistic instrument, Mr Neville’s black-on-white drawings find no equivalent from the period in which, according to the film’s narrative, they are supposed to have been produced. Many have pointed out the film’s principal anachronism — the fact that it depicts English painting in the seventeenth century — a phenomenon Louis Seguin calls an ‘inconceivable syntagma’[2]. Indeed, as Jessie Martin stresses, landscape painting began in England during the eighteenth century, and immediately developed in two different directions.

The first trend, inspired more by the seventeenth-century insofar as it pays homage to the great landscape painters, both French (Gaspard Dughet, Claude Lorrain) and Italian (Domenico Zampieri, Annibale Carracci), is associated with the work of Richard Wilson (1713−1782) and was referred to as the ‘heroic landscape’. These were, for the most part, Italian landscapes from in and around Rome and, more rarely, Naples, which were adapted to accommodate more classical tastes and evoke, for wealthy travellers with a passion for Latin letters, the grandiose settings of Livy or Virgil. This is obviously not the school featured in the film.

The second trend first appears in the works of George Lambert (1700−1765) and does in fact depict English landscapes. Its faithfulness to nature and the absence of references to Antiquity, or even the region of Rome, bring this painting into line with what Pierre-Henri Valenciennes refers to as ‘portrait landscapes’, an inferior form within the hierarchy of landscapes, which, according to him, required very little ingenuity, since it was a simple matter of copying without invention. Valenciennes explains that ‘as a faithful reproduction of nature, one understands that the greater or lesser beauty of the original is what renders the copy more or less interesting’[3], thereby providing a commentary on the film’s plot which is as pertinent as it is fortuitous. But while the filmed landscapes (which are in colour) could indeed be seen to evoke certain English ‘portrait landscapes’ from the eighteenth century, such as those of George Lambert, this is not at all true of the landscapes created by Peter Greenaway himself and drawn by Mr Neville in the film. Here, the easily detectable anachronism set up by the narrative fiction, which involves assigning to a painter from 1694 an artistic mission (the creation of portrait landscapes of an English estate) known not to have been possible for another thirty years, acts as a decoy to distract the viewer’s attention from a more radical oddity: the black on white drawings executed by Mr Neville, in this particular format, did not exist in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Joséphine Jibokji: fig. 2, fig. 3). In other words, Mr Neville’s work is not simply an early foreshadowing of a historical possibility, but is, from a historical point of view, an impossibility. In this regard, under the guise of historical reconstruction, the film is in fact inventing an alternative history of art.

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[2] Louis Seguin, ‘L’année zéro de la peinture’, *La Quinzaine littéraire*, 16 November 1984.

Indeed, drawings in the format used by Mr Neville in the film, and which are as elaborate as his, are never in black and white. At the very least, they would exploit the properties of dyed paper, the nuances of wash drawing (diluted ink) and white highlights. But more often, the drawings would be in colour, perhaps watercolours, or even oils on paper. This is the case, for example, for Thomas Jones’ Welsh landscapes, which may themselves be seen as preparatory works for estate portraits. These were large format oil paintings which were of course, in colour. Peter Greenaway is clearly not ignorant of the role of colour in this type of drawing given that Groombridge Place, where the film was shot, using sets that respect reasonably well the real furnishings of the property at the time it was filmed (although disposed of since) had been the subject of this type of portrait landscape, in colour of course, at the end of the nineteenth century[4]. The choice of black and white is thus clearly deliberate, but also unusual, paradoxical, and we are invited to see it as such, if we take into account a brief reflection about its adequacy as well as about the values it embodies. Mrs Talmann gives us an oblique glimpse into the reasoning behind this choice in her ‘little speech’, which immediately follows the exchange about green and red cited at the beginning of this study. She expound*s* a kind of *Art poétique* (or theory of art), which is brief yet thorough, since it precisely articulates a poiesis, a representation of the ideal painter (this time in the tradition of seventeenth-century artistic literature) and a theory of reception:

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[3] Pierre-Henri Valenciennes, *Eléments de perspective pratique à l'usage des artistes, suivis de réflexions et conseils à un élève sur la peinture et particulièrement sur le genre du paysage* (Paris: Desenne et Duprat, 1799), p. 479.

> Mr Neville, I have grown to believe that a really intelligent man makes an indifferent painter. For painting requires a certain blindness. A partial refusal to be aware of all the options. An intelligent man will know more about what he is drawing than he will see. And in the space between knowing and seeing, he will become constrained, unable to pursue an idea strongly. Fearing that the discerning, those who he is eager to please will find him wanting if he does not put in not only what he knows, but what they know as well.

Here, the image, or rather, the series of images composed by Mr Neville’s drawings and viewed as a theoretical object, refutes the critique formulated by Mrs Talmann in the diegetic dialogue, while confirming the soundness of her critical judgement. For though she essentially accuses him of something she sees as a flaw, that of being an ‘intelligent painter’, in some sense

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[4] *A Birds-Eye Prospect of Groombridge Place from the West*, Charles Emer Kempe, 1884.