

Marion Tampon-Lajarriette

The Dimension of Images

A rally between Elie During and Christophe Kihm

First Service: the frame and the pixel

C.K.: It all begins with the sending of a file larger than 200 megabytes, downloadable via FTP. It contains video extracts from two of Marion Tampon-Lajarriette's latest projects and a file supplementing the one available on her website. It takes a few minutes to recover it via broadband, long enough for numerous comings and goings in front of a computer screen indicating the increasing percentages of the download in progress. Two hundred MB: the weight of the images contained in the files is the first information provided as soon as the production, transfer or diffusion of digital images are mentioned. As a new image format – a new information mode for a data carrier and a new arrangement of this data itself – digital technology has made weighing its measurement system, whereas silver-gelatine photography techniques preferred millimetres. There's no cause for concern at this development, but everything to learn about this new order of data and what it implies, in concrete terms, for the construction of the images themselves.

One line of enquiry is suggested by Marion Tampon-Lajarriette through the presentation on her website of her video installation piece entitled *Stream* (2008), which she describes as "... the dimensions in which I work as a video artist; moving digital elements that are ceaselessly decomposed and recomposed with one material: the pixel." The artist is right: the weight of these images calculated in bytes and megabytes links them above all to their basic component, the pixel, in the same way as the size of silver-gelatine photographic images are related to their negatives. The use of pixels to construct digital images, if we follow her reasoning, opens up aesthetic possibilities through the processes of decomposing and recomposing, as though, in moving from the "pixel-matter" to the "image-matter", an interplay of subtraction (or loss) and addition (or saturation) could cause a gradual variation in the information content (just as the adjustment between sharpness and blurring could serve as an optical barometer for silver-gelatine photography). The artist also talks about a series of operations, "a process of compressions" (referring to reducing the weight of the information, even losing some of it) and "re-formatting", indicating the transfer of data onto different supports which modify its organisation and affect the texture of the images. It's therefore a question of "working the material" as though, like a sculptor, the digital video artist could model or even facet the images. Densities have to be set for the images and sounds, as signals produced and picked up electronically. Finally, it's necessary to compose, that is, to assemble, as though "digital" was the place (or the dimension) for dithering work related to the methods used to disassemble and re-assemble the images themselves.

Return of serve: "In the beginning, the Spirit hovered over the waters"

E.D.: Thank you for this first shot. I shan't move up to the net straightaway, but stay a while at the baseline. The opening's good; it's indeed a question of knowing what's invented "at the dimension" of the image. Not in a critical relationship to the overwhelming torrent of visual information, attempting through the search for "just" images to prevent a loss of experience which would be the flipside to saturation or hyperesthesia; not by pre-empting the foretold catastrophe, that of a general derealization or a cycle of endless repetitions made possible by technical reproducibility, but by locating oneself in infra-semantic proximity to the material itself and to its digital texture. Just images, therefore, and the opportunity to process them as a whole, en masse, by playing with the degrees of resolution and their discrete distribution (in contrast with the silver-gelatine continuum), by folding, re-filming and compressing as well as by extruding, cropping, embedding, unfolding over n dimensions (*Manderley*), by freezing the flow of images, by holding the video sequences strangely suspended (*Museum of a Memory*, a tribute to *The Jetty*), or, conversely, giving still images the appearance of movement again (*Paramnesia*, a homage to *Last Year in Marienbad*). In each case there's a kind of alchemical transformation, a minor miracle. There's a frequently recurring motif in Marion's work: the sea, the coastal view. Here, the surface of the waters flows continuously like an endless carpet (*Erehwon*); there, she invades the field to the extent of eliminating any depth (*Camera 1, shot 8*). When the videographic emulsion given to the sea is sufficiently dense, you can almost imagine walking on the water, or disappearing into it as into a thick fog (*The Sleepwalker, Stream*). These hypnagogic shots allegorize a general process: it's a question of reaching, via a passage bordering on traditional editing operations, a state of coalescence or fusion where the images cease to be added one to another but instead constitute a kind of resistant frame. Perhaps it was this matter that Pasolini intended when he explained that the "endless, infinite shot-sequence" was the horizon of all cinema. There's often talk of "digital territories", like wildernesses to be explored by a few daring pioneers (in increasing numbers, all the same...), but "territory" has to be taken seriously; you have to picture the artist as an ant finding the grainy surface of the images directly under its feet, or as a mole exploring galleries in all their virtual depth. In this case, "virtual" doesn't imply the horizon of an indefinite cloning power, nor reality reduced to its sign, but the resources found at the margins of or beneath the image, which are also memory's secret areas of communication. You can fall into an image (*The Viewers, The Sleepwalker*), wander around in it (*îles / elles*), explore its surface in an endless tracking shot which becomes indistinguishable from a long static movement, from a kind of crawling of the image itself (*Erehwon*). In these different forms of motion there's something both strange and obvious.

Going up to the net: the studio as control cabin

C.K.: If the rules of the game we're playing are to be understood, as you suggest, as a tennis match, then, two comments: it's a model that suits me, since it links the quality of the exchange to game performance; your skilled return immediately offers a variation on its orthodoxy, for although you're only remaining at the baseline - which seems reasonable to me for a warm-up - you're sending back several balls all of which I won't be able to hit on the rebound (in which you could see an archetype of the digital image, a ball being struck and splitting into three or four others, but that's another story...). Processing images as a whole or en masse, as you mention, is also to process them as volumes and sets. I will return to my consideration of terminology, insofar as it makes it

possible to understand and to exemplify new image practices. Each image processing operation in your diverse list applies to a whole. Each image is seen as a set of data and consequently of parameters on the basis of which many different interventions are possible. You therefore have to imagine the artist on a flight deck, at a control panel, where the combination of different machines enables this work to be carried out. Here, the classic distinction between the different stages in filmmaking no longer has any meaning: screenplay, cutting, filming, editing or postproduction, as the title moreover indicates. Production and postproduction don't merge into one, but their processes are redistributed in line with and according to the demands of each project: the editing is above all an editing of processes because, for the images - what structures their whole - and what gives this control cabin where the processing is carried out its key importance - is actually the dithering. What holds the separate elements together, what binds them one to another, connects them and makes them into new sets, is their rearrangement on a virtually infinite, common frame.

Each of the image processing operations leads to a "rendering", denoting the smoothing of the superimposed elements on this common frame where they now co-exist, forming a whole. I'll come back now to the idea of controlling, enabling me to take up your remarks on the phenomena of falling, walking and exploring found in the images. The act of controlling still seems to me to encompass them, for the control of machines is linked to the control within images. Video games and their navigating protocols could serve as a model here, since some of Marion Tampon-Lajarriette's projects explicitly refer to them, even sometimes employing a joystick or interactive interfaces, which come very close: *The Viewer, Every Time I Thought of the Script*. This control within images has two main potential qualities: it makes it possible to carry out the exploration and to examine it at the same time; it enables the viewer's gaze to travel over the surface of the images while simultaneously plunging into them, like those invasive cameras that investigate the body, thus satisfying a curiosity as touristic as it is medical.

Attempt at a passing shot: what's a tracking shot?

E.D.: Yes, digital navigation no longer deals with the images themselves as discrete information units; it plies the flow of images directly. It can either, as you rightly point out, skim over the surface like a drone, like a huge dragonfly buzzing as it hovers, or perform a kind of endoscopy, working its way into the folds of the image-substance, like the performance held at Mamco, when a group of visitors explored the galleries by the flickering light of an electric torch (*MoCLT* image series).

What's remarkable in both cases is that the process is far removed from the cutting and montage techniques usually associated with the artistic remontage of film images. Even when the process explicitly resembles cropping (I'm thinking here of *A Story Already Told*, a project based on Scorsese's film *Taxi Driver*, or of *Every Time I Thought of the Script* based on *Contempt (Le Mépris)*, written by Moravia and filmed by Godard), we're struck by the fact that the reconstruction of a virtual space (between the images, between the words and the images) does in effect do completely without any evocation of off-screen. It's possible to unfold this virtual image space – this "fourth dimension" which envelops them all – by exploring the borders and margins, by imagining new cuts, without having to suppose a core of invisibility which, in principle, could only be represented in fragments, in the cracks or fringes of the event and the spectacle, like an insistence on or an obsessive fear of reality at the very centre of the image. In other words, we don't need to place ourselves immediately in a relationship of detachment

from the representational order. And, as it's been a question of topology right from the start, I would say: "No need to tear; it's sufficient to fold, to re-fold, to unfold." That's why I'm not sure, at heart, that it's enlightening to describe Marion's work (as she herself might have done at the start) on the basis of the idea of an "infinite off-screen of the image", or it should be specified that the off-screen is not elsewhere, neither beside nor behind. It's right at the centre, within the actual dimension of the images. Already, and especially in film, the tracking shot, for me, has never been anything other than a continuous sequence of crops carried out right inside the images. Mitry understood it like this. The shot-sequence resembles a form of editing internal to the shot. It begins with an overall shot; then the virtual movement of the camera explores the image and displays its dimensions. Balazs wrote in the 1920s: " My eye is carried along by the camera. Right at the centre of the image. I see things from the space of the film. I'm surrounded by the characters in the film; I'm involved in the action, which I view from all sides¹." Obviously, there's a difference between cropping in real time, at the actual time of recording (in the case of the "natural" tracking shot) and cropping an image which is given explicitly as an image (a still image, for example, towards which the camera moves). But is the difference one of nature or of degree? Isn't a moving shot always given as a succession of images? Whatever the case, the natural markers of perception, the actual distinction between motion and immobility, still image and moving image, are completely disrupted; the tracking shot exploits the moving camera's resources to take from the subjective viewpoint of the actor or spectator's gaze a point of view inherent to the virtual movement of the shot. This, I believe, is the great invention of cinema; through which it captures a kind of movement without support, as Deleuze has clearly demonstrated. The possibility of relating the tracking shot to certain stage elements (a character's gaze or movement, for example) requires that this principle of virtual, transversal movement should be independent from all the visible movements taking place within the shot. The tracking shot explores the shot; this is not a metaphor. Combined in the close-up, it reveals what the depth of field had enveloped virtually: a "haptic" space, filled with movement, that the eye can in some way touch. If "every image contains a virtual infinity of images²", the continuous cropping process of the travelling shot resembles an exfoliation of the visible, constituting the space at the same time as it explores it.

The tracking shot can show, in the first instance, the three-dimensional possibilities of the film image by giving objects a specific volume and depth, by freeing up the "entire field" to restore plenitude to the space. The western, said Bazin, "rejects the screen frame", but rejecting the frame, isn't to reject or to reintegrate an off-screen; it merely gives an extra dimension to the image, or, why not, a reduced dimension. This is what happens when the virtual movements of the camera (complicated by digital manipulation) smooth the image, causing it to resemble wallpaper or a huge decalomania. I'm thinking once again here of the long static tracking shots of *Erehwon*, but we must of course look to see, in all of Marion's artwork, what kinds of different spaces are constructed by each particular type of tracking shot. My feeling is that the spatial construction is very often a question of subtraction, so that the tracking shot becomes indistinguishable from a simple optical zoom into the image (then reduced to its two-dimensional essence). This is how I approach Marion's work based on the remontage of some of the sequences from *Contempt (Le Mépris)*; moving around within

¹ Balazs, *L'Esprit du cinéma*, Paris, Payot, 1977, p.128

² Pascal Bonitzer, *Le Champ aveugle*, Paris, Editions Cahiers du cinéma, 1999, p.17

the image is first of all to move "over" the image, in close proximity to it, with no points of reference. It's like an erratic zoom into a panorama. It's only by chance that this takes us to the "grain" of the image; this, moreover, doesn't mean much anymore after the compressions and format conversions. What matters is to develop a twofold image awareness, the ability to target the image itself through the movement or flow which carries it away; just an image among images.

I would add that the tracking shot can, when necessary, be suggested by simple photographic editing; *The Viewers* is therefore a kind of "stationary" tracking shot. The analogy which comes to mind is that of a stereoscope or the false 3D cinematic effect, where the impression of depth is artificially accentuated by superimposed shots or precisely cut frames... It's also possible to create volume through an accumulation of subtractive processes, by adding large numbers of three-dimensional screen-images. In *Manderley*, for example, we're dealing with a structured panorama in the form of a concatenation of vignettes: images of images are reorganised into clusters or series. This objectified vision is in effect reminiscent of a viewing or control space. What I find striking, is that this arrangement bypasses three-dimensionality and avoids any illusionistic or immersive effects. The configuration is part 2D and part 4D.

The Short Ball: how to escape romanticism

C.K.: Your remarks about tracking shots have given me an idea for a hypothesis, which I will readily formulate in the following way: with digital technology, systems for the production of forms become established that require us to take the images and their transformations out of a natural or even naturalistic model (inherited among others from Goethe's ideas on morphology and metamorphosis), in order to describe and understand them in their inherent form. Marion Tampon-Lajarriette's work, because it finds its aesthetic requirements in the phenomenotechnical "dimension" of images, well illustrates this point.

But, first of all, as you have mentioned in the course of your observations, there's a danger to be averted; the silver-gelatine image, in both photography and film, has consistently nourished an entire discourse aimed at romanticising the techniques. It's tempting to associate the chemical developing processes with alchemical ones (emulsion). From this, a whole vocabulary develops that is organised, along the idea of revelation, in relation to truth and spirituality. This is the common rationale of the image as a reality-revealing agent (for music, a lexicon of fidelity has been grafted onto technical objects, but in the end the effects produced on the discursive and conceptual level are identical and just as doubtful). As you again pointed out, this approach intersects with a second order of discourse, which, for its part derives its piquancy from mechanical reproducibility, which conditions and renders more complex the act of revelation, no longer seen as a mere technical process, but as the true nature of the image, and so makes it possible to distinguish – or even to select – good images according to the criteria of accuracy and truth (cf. all the expressions concerning the "just image" which is just an image...). But the framework wouldn't be complete without a third order, where revelation is again brought into play in its relation to the imprint and the trace, to the fleeting, transient impression of truth in the nets of photosensitivity. In short, there's room for romanticising, thematizing or creating a dialectic, especially because, due to the positive/negative complementarity, the relation can still be reversed between the visible and the invisible, light and darkness, the present and the absent, the manifest and the missing.... The rhetoric is well-known,

acting as an ideological shield against the numerous critics and hermenauts defending the qualities of one medium over another. However, there's no point comparing silver-gelatine film and digital technology on an ontological level, or on a metaphysical or symbolic plane. Although we can highlight the distinctions and differences, we should also understand that they have similarities too, notably certain image production systems and certain concepts, which you precisely put into perspective with the tracking shots. A question of method, then, rather than of medium. We're willing to bet that all these odds and ends contributing to the discourse on the image could be destabilised by a consideration of digital systems, since the latter no longer offer the poético-symbolic shot of the silver-gelatine support, but refer us back to the material literality of the pixel, calculation and data. We should also mention the favoured place for filming in the digital age, from where the virtual space of the images can be considered: the green screen. This screen, employed and almost even highlighted by Marion Tampon-Lajarriette in *îles / elles*, a video in which a collaged figure traverses images of landscapes. The green screen is not a neutral space, an empty set devoid of any relation to reality. On the contrary, and as this artwork and its protagonist show, it's a place associated with all the operations of folding and unfolding, tracing, exploring and stratifying images. From this place, and in the extent to which it offers multiple shots on the virtual image space, new possibilities for film are already being experimented. We can therefore conclude this exchange with a phrase which still fills tennis players with enthusiasm, by giving it programmatic value: **New balls, please!**

Elie During and Christophe Kihm 2013

"Paramnesia", artist bilingual monograph, Edited by SAV – Fondation Ahead, Geneva