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Affecting Images: Cinema, Blur and Absorption

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RÉSUMÉ. Si le flou est une manifestation de la vision dans sa dimension la plus intime et tactile, il agit également comme un voile ou comme un écran. Ainsi, entre empathie et mise à distance, le pouvoir d'affect du flou de cinéma se manifeste-t-il de manière contradictoire. Les techniques artistiques et les choix de sujet qui, bien avant la naissance du cinéma, visaient à créer une tension entre proximité et dissimulation ont été étudiées et théorisées. Dans leurs formes filmiques elles produisent cependant une relation spécifique entre spectateur et objet du regard. Cet article se réfère aux concepts d'absorption et de théâtralité développés par Michael Fried, afin d'aborder la question de l'oscillation entre intimité et distance, visualité optique et haptique, que produit le flou de cinéma. Laissant la place à un regard empathique plutôt qu'à un regard voyeur, cette capacité particulière des images floues à révéler tout en protégeant leur sujet du regard pointe à la fois les formes complexes de l'affect au cinéma, et interroge les nouveaux régimes de vision caractéristiques de la culture de surveillance contemporaine.

ABSTRACT. *Between empathy and remoteness, the power of blurred images to affect us works in contradictory ways: although blur appears to manifest vision at its most intimate and tactile, it also acts as a veil or a screen. The ways in which certain artistic techniques and choices of subject-matter work to create a tension between closeness and concealment has been the object of theorization well before the advent of film. In cinema however, they establish a specific relationship between the viewer and the viewed. This article uses the concepts of absorption and theatricality developed by Michael Fried as tools to approach the question of cinematographic representation as it hovers between intimacy and distance, optic and haptic visuality. Leaving space for an empathetic rather than voyeuristic gaze, this particular capacity of blurred images to reveal while also shielding their subject matter from the gaze not only participates in cinema's complex forms of affect, but undermines the new regimes of vision and ubiquity characteristic of today's culture of surveillance.*

MOTS CLÉS : flou, absorption, *soft-style*, haptique, Jonas Mekas, Todd Haynes

KEYWORDS: *blur, absorption, soft-style, haptics, Jonas Mekas, Todd Haynes*

The wobbling steps of a small child walking in the grass. The sunlight surrounds her curly head with a fuzzy halo. She crouches to pick flowers. The film later shows her lost in contemplation, the camera recording the movements of her tiny hand as she plays absentmindedly with the long stem of a plant. A woman's face, off-centred and slightly overexposed, looks back at the camera, and is soon superimposed with that of a smiling man: the filmmaker himself. Then, without transition, images filmed from a car driving through a rainy, misty landscape fill the screen. A collage of simple, daily-life scenes punctuated with intertitles, *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000) is a-chronological yet composed like a diary, Jonas Mekas' occasional voice-over commentary supplementing the image with happily reminiscent or mournful and tentative ruminations. The film is interspersed with sequences of driving as well as close-ups on hands and faces, punctuating the flow of images like so many fleeting visual metaphors of cinema's ability to both touch and transport us.

Mekas' characteristic style of experimental cinema, developed over decades of practice of the Bolex camera (Turquier), enhances the frailty and imperfections that often constitute the appeal and distinctiveness of amateur filmmaking. Like his previous diary films[1], the images of *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* have the distinguishing, fluttering quality of footage shot at low recording speed. Subjected to variable exposures, superimpositions and sudden ruptures, the brief sequences, once edited together, appear in "bursts of images" (Turquier 160), all the more affecting that they are unpredictable. The low definition of the images is consistent throughout however, their hazy, grainy, sometimes completely blurred quality, due to a combination of film stock (16 mm film's variable texture and sensitivity to light and exposure), motion blur and hand-held camera movements.

In his account of Mekas' appropriation of the home-movie style, Fred Camper warns of the difficulty that his work might present to the unprepared audience, while at the same time noting that his images never leave the spectator indifferent. Mekas' filmmaking belongs to a tradition of avant-garde cinema "geared not toward using the film image for objective presentation of external events but for the exploration of the varieties of the private personas and inner visions of their makers", a tradition in which his work stands amongst the "most intense, beautiful, and moving examples" (Camper). What is it then, that endows Mekas' radical treatment of often perfectly banal images (domestic scenes, gatherings with friends, the birth of a child, family holidays, passers-by in the streets of Manhattan…), with a capacity to affect us so powerfully?

[1] Amongst others: *Walden (Diaries, Notes, and Sketches)* (1969), *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976) and *Paradise Not Yet Lost* (also known as *Oona's Third Year*) (1979). From the 1980s onwards, Mekas continued his diary work in the video as well as film format.

[Figure 1] Screencapture by the author of the article. Jonas Mekas. As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty. Jonas Mekas films. 2000.

If his filmmaking testifies to the "interiorization of the cinema image" (Camper), such subjective vision is borne by the universal nature of the subject-matter. The combination of home-movie style and pastness, established by the distinctive look and colour casts of 16mm film, further works to counterpoint the films' more speculative dimension. The cultural and historical factor however, the association of a film format and brand with a specific practice, even if that practice is intrinsically connected with intimacy and nostalgia, do not suffice to explain why this particular quality of image should yield such an affecting force. One intuits that, in cases such as Mekas' diary films, where grainy textures and hazy, unfocussed effects dominate, content and form somehow find themselves in a fragile, yet perfect, adequacy. But how to account for the way such images *touch* us, even as we are aware, as in the case of images of a tiny child, that the frontier between expression and mere sentimentality could be wearing thin?

Phenomenology-inflected film analysis has pointed out how soft, blurred or near-abstract images, in their indefinite, textured quality, have the capacity to shift perception from the purely visual to the tactile (Sobchack 1992; Sobchack 2004; Marks ; Beugnet 2007; Barker 2009). Might it be through their affinity with the most deeply buried part of our sensual memory, a memory that precedes speech, that blurred images draw their affective power?[2] Or, possibly, the way they mirror human vision when it is disrupted by rising tears? Whatever the case, the power of blurred or obscured images to touch us works in contradictory ways: it lies somewhere between empathy and remoteness. Though blur appears to manifest vision at its most intimate and tactile, it also acts as a veil or a screen. To confuse or partly efface

[2] Interestingly, in *Absorption and Theatricality*, Michael Fried evokes Diderot's account of dreaming as a heightened state of sensory perception "that restores the conditions of a *pre*-theatricalized mode of perception", and goes on to suggest the closeness of such an experience with that of film viewing (Fried 235, footnote 81).

the content of an image without rendering it invisible, is to protect the object of the gaze from prying eyes, while at the same time that which escapes surface appearances remains tangible: the mystery of a face or a landscape, or the internal feelings and subjective sensations of a character.

In Brian Massumi's definition, affect comes prior to intelligible emotions. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's initial conceptualization of the notion, Massumi understands affect as that which moves us but does not yet "resolve" into functional, fully legible emotions (e.g. anger or joy) (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 173; Massumi 23-45). Closer to affects than to emotions proper, film-blur thus works to nuance representation as well as complicate spectatorial engagement. Whereas an actor's performance, captured through fully defined images, can play out a precisely designated emotion, the blurred image appears to belong to the realm of ill-defined feelings, of sensations without a fully identified purpose. The affective powers of blur come from the corresponding imprecision of the form, the softness of the contours, that draw the image away from the optical towards the tactile, that is, from the legible and towards the sensorial. Whether it appears in the idealizing light of soft-style cinematography, or in the hazy, trembling images of 16 and 8mm film, or caught in the swirling chaos of low-definition hand-held film or video, the blurred figure or figures cease to be a mere assemblage of signifiers to be deciphered by the viewer, becoming instead an experience in sensory perception that seemingly requires the spectator to relinquish part of the objective distance that separates viewer from image.

At a time when digital technologies tend to overemphasize high definition, it is salutary to be reminded, as when watching Mekas' films, that more than the sharper, well-defined image, it is the soft contoured figure, the out-of-focus, blurred, imperfect vision, that evoke those complex, subdued emotions we associate with closeness, happiness and melancholy. From the beginnings of the cinema, filmmakers understood and exploited this particularity of the film image, drawing it away from mere photographic accuracy towards the creative and affective potentiality[3] of the clear and confused.

Clear and confused

Contradictory callings presided over the beginnings of the medium of the moving image: to some of its most prominent forerunners, it had clear, scientific applications, and their interest in the medium rested with its capacity to make the visible more *legible* (Beugnet 2017a, 2017b).[4] In '*Hard Core*', Linda Williams, taking her cue from Jean-Louis Comolli, associates cinema's infancy with what she calls the "frenzy of the visible". This "proto-cinematic will-to-knowledge", typically applied to the study and visualisation of the body, manifests itself in the early attempts to

[3] Here potentiality is understood in the sense given to the term by Giorgio Agamben, as a capacity "not to be" (fully defined and identified) (Agamben 182).

[4] Insofar as they are extractions of a 24th of the frames that combine to create the perceived moving image, photograms are, in fact, never perfectly defined.

decompose movement epitomised by Eadweard Muybridge's serial photography and Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotography (Williams 38, 321).

At the same time, and precisely because film's mechanical eye has the ability to capture and record everything, the multitude and dispersion of the subtlest of movements, including blurred effects that normally escape human perception, film appeared equally predisposed to the recording and expression of the "clear and confused" than to the scientific pursuit of precision.[5] The defenders of film as art emphasized this particular aptitude, a predisposition for the manifestation of the fleeting and the indefinite that was a natural dimension of the moving image, but that filmmakers could also seek and *enhance* (Epstein; Kracauer).[6] Hence, blur features prominently amongst the effects favored by the filmmakers of the silent era, whether their work belonged to mainstream film production or to the avant-garde.

In the end, the advent of sound or, rather, the advent of synchronised sound and image, made it desirable to curtail or control the presence of blur in the image: to fully exploit this new dimension of the medium, it was important that dialogues, and other sounds, should be immediately intelligible as well as readily assignable to identified sources. It is sharp contours and the constancy of figures that could be best put at the service of efficient audio-visual communication. With the advent of the digital, and the drive towards ever greater definition, blur's share in the film image seems to have become increasingly restricted to a set of conventional effects of cinematic grammar (the blurred backdrop, the rack-focus and their established narrative functions)[7] and associated with specific film aesthetics, genres or movements, including the traditions of analog amateur and experimental film to which Mekas' work belongs.

However, if visual precision and, by extension, the high-definition image, continue to be associated with scientific accuracy as well as the manifestation of a rational and alert conscience, they are also, increasingly, envisaged in relation to the development and intensification of a contemporary culture of surveillance. In contrast, the expression of dreams and inner feelings is persistently related to the realm of a low-definition image that appears best able to evoke, without exposing it, what belongs to the unconscious, the irrational, the affective.

Absorption

The ways in which certain artistic techniques and choices of subject-matter work to create a tension between closeness and concealment has been the object of

[5] On cinema, Leibniz and the "clear and confused", see Beugnet 2017 b.

[6] In his discussion of the Lumière brothers' films, Siegfried Kracauer points to "camera-life", the "flow of Life" and the "indeterminate" as intrinsic qualities of the medium (31, 60-73). See also Beugnet 2017 b and Erika Balsom who uses Ricciotto Canudo's writings on cinema as her starting point.

[7] It is used to evoke speed for instance, or as part of an aesthetic of enhanced readability (blurred background with the key object of interest in focus), or as the conscious attempt to artificially create painterly effects in order to endow film images with a veneer of historical authenticity (as in the use of soft focus in historical dramas and so-called "heritage" films). Or, at the other end of the spectrum, to create a sense of "raw" realism (the hand-held camera style favoured in certain documentaries or action films). (Beugnet 2017 a)

theorization well before the advent of film: Michael Fried's concept of "absorption" in particular, though based on the study of eighteen century painting, offers itself as a useful tool to approach the question of cinematographic representation as it hovers between intimacy and distance, and encourages different kinds of spectatorial engagements (Fried). In this classic work, inspired by Diderot's writings on painting, Fried identifies two contrasted modes of figurative representation: On the one hand, theatrical compositions overtly created for someone's gaze, the *mise en scène* implicitly or explicitly acknowledging the presence of a viewer who is often associated to the depicted space as an extension of an in-frame audience, or offering the best possible point of view on a carefully staged scene. On the other, non-theatrical painting favoured intimate scenes or moments, focusing on characters who are sleeping, day-dreaming or appear wholly absorbed in their thoughts, sometimes in their reading or playing. Such a choice of subject matter has deep implications in terms of the viewer's place and engagement with the work: the absorbed characters appear to shut off any other reality than the one they inhabit, and in doing so, throw the spectator back onto her or his own absence from the represented scene.

If Fried developed his theories principally in relation to painting and contemporary art, he did acknowledge the closeness of some of his conclusions with Stanley Cavell's writing on film (Fried 182, footnote 13).[8] For Cavell, cinema, more than any other medium, has the capacity to grant its audience its "wish for invisibility" (Cavell 41-45). A film presents us with an autarkic universe; a result of cinema's dual "automatism" (as photographically recorded and projected moving image), the denial of co-presence with the audience is part and parcel of the experience of the screened image and of the magic of the cinema; in turn however, this condition of invisibility imbues that experience with an inbuilt sense of voyeurism or displacement.[9] Whereas Cavell and Fried initially concur, they differ on the spectator's response: for Fried, absorption in painting need not be equated with voyeurism nor with the alienation of the viewer. Taking his cue from Diderot's careful descriptions, Fried observes that if scenes of "absorption" appear to exclude the spectator, they do, in turn, encourage a different kind of spectatorial involvement: one that is both attentive, empathetic, and non-voyeuristic (Fried 31).

There are significant blind spots in Fried and Cavell's analysis however: both focus primarily on composition and subject matter, mostly leaving out of their appreciation the physical and stylistic qualities of the medium. Yet in film as in painting, absorption also works as the visualisation of the force of matter over figure. In her study of cinema and haptic visuality, Laura U. Marks described the experience of watching haptic film in terms closely related to Fried's, insisting on the viewer's willingness to "give herself up" to the image rather than attempt to merely master it by deciphering its content (Marks 2000, 183-184). At the same time, Marks is critical

[8] Fried further observes that film provides "an equivalent for the beholder's simultaneous exclusion from and presence within the scene of representation." (Fried 235, footnote 81).

[9] Though, as Philipp Schmerheim points out, the cinema dispositif eschews the possibility of being discovered that defines voyeurism (Schmerheim 102).

of art historians' recurrent blindness to those material qualities of painting, such as the visible brushstrokes, that enhance the tactile dimension of the work (Marks 2000, 167). In *Absorption and Theatricality*, Fried does refer, though only in passing, to the similarity between the type of works favoured by Diderot, and that of earlier schools of paintings, most particularly the major figures of seventeenth-century art, including Rembrandt and Vermeer. Artists discussed by Diderot demonstrate a preference for the kind of soft touch that recalls earlier techniques developed by the masters of the Dutch school in particular: a favouring of subdued, filtered light and loose brush strokes resulting in a slightly hazy rendering of the figures. In turn, the attenuated or even unfinished treatment is part of the qualities for which Diderot occasionally shows appreciation in the work of artists like Greuze and Chardin (Fried 43).[10] The effect of 'absorption', therefore, also grows out of a painting style that encourages involvement with atmosphere and mood, rather than with narrative content.

Such observations resonate with experimental filmmaking practices like Mekas', where the effect of absorption works both ways: in the rejection of theatrical *mise en scène*, and in the privileging of film's materiality, the way the grain, light, and blemishes work to absorb the figures, sometimes fusing them with the background. At the same time, the camera works as a relay for the spectator's gaze. Even when he does not appear, or is not heard, Mekas' presence is felt, not only through editing choices but at the filming stage already: through the movements of his body transferred to the movements of the small camera, or in the way the people he films look back at the lens, and occasionally interact with him. Ultimately, in its foregrounding of mediation over absorption, Mekas' filmmaking remains determinedly modernistic. In other genres and cinematographic practices that favour blurred aesthetics however, absorption and, in turn, affect, follow a different regime of expression, one that counterpoints the enhanced material presence of the image with the distancing power of the sublime.

Soft-style

As suggested by the numerous websites that feature stills, film grabs and GIFs of the actress Lilian Gish, she remains one of the most enduring incarnations of the era of silent American cinema. It is not images of her theatrical, hand-wringing, bewildered and wide-eyed acting performances that prove most popular however, but the luminous close-ups of her face, where her delicate features, surrounded by a hazy cloud of hair, are captured in soft finish. One of the trademarks of early American film, the so-called "soft-style" cinema, though more mainstream than its European avant-garde counterparts, often privileged visual experimentation over representational clarity and narrative economy. Early film stock could yield remarkable definition and a great depth of field. From the beginning, soft-style

[10] See also Fried's citation of Diderot (118).

photography was therefore the result of a choice:[11] Vaseline and steam featured prominently together with gauze, while film stock and manual processing also allowed for nuanced gradations in the definition of the image (Bordwell et al. 288-292).

Though at its most refined it affected all aspects of the cinematography[12], soft-style cinema's most enduring trademark was the close-up on the face. It was sometimes shot with a lens covered in muslin or a similar transparent material, with holes for the eyes so as to ensure that the gaze, in contrast with the slight haziness of the rest of the face, would retain a brilliant, glistening quality. But backlighting to soften the contours, and – for the face in particular – the so called Rembrand or "butterfly" style of lighting quickly became the norm. As Janet Staiger, Kristin Thomson and David Bordwell have pointed out, the classic soft close-up on the face of the star would often be inserted in-between sequences of action shot in well-defined and contrasted images, the out-of-focus image thus effectively halting the narrative flow, breaking not only the spatial continuity but the film's visual unity (Bordwell et al. 292).[13]

It seems natural that such effects would quickly find their place in melodrama: not merely because the conventions of the genre encourage filmmakers to take absorption as a motif, but also because, in its attention to emotional complexity and inner states, melodrama opened itself to more experimental effects than other narrative genres. Furthermore, whereas performance in early silent cinema initially retained the highly theatrical, gestural quality of the stage, soft close-ups could serve to emphasize a more complex state of internal emotional turmoil: the suggestion of melancholy, doubt or grief in particular, lent themselves well to such visual treatment, relying on the expressive power of the image itself rather than on the theatrical externalisation of emotions typical of early melodramas. Pre-empting the advent of sound, the combination of close-up and soft-style photography was thus a mark of the gradual shift from dramatic to more muted performances. If the softening of the image definition encouraged the spectator to empathise however, it also worked as a veil, creating a distance or obstruction between the inquisitive gaze and its object.

As many a theorist of the cinema before and after Roland Barthes have pointed out, in the late 1920s, at the height of soft-style cinema, the use of filters and oblique light to obtain the classic, idealising close-up, had more to do with the manifestation of the sublime than with that of emotions : best exemplified by the awe-inspiring close-ups on Garbo and Dietrich's faces, absorption is in those cases, first and foremost, a mark of the star's inaccessibility and indifference (Balazs 288; Barthes 71; Morin 14). Self-absorbed even when looking at the camera, the star

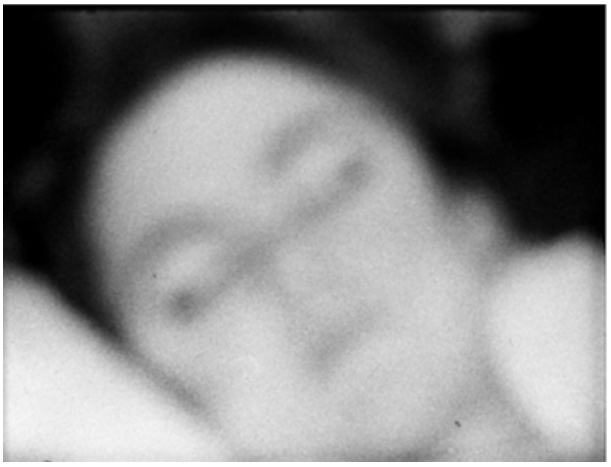
[11] For an example of early experiment with such effects, see Walker and Walker 47-49.

[12] As exemplified by Josef von Sternberg's work (Beugnet 2017 a, 90-98).

[13] Though based on a different approach, Gilles Deleuze's passages on the close-up and the face point in the same direction. Whilst emphasizing its connection with affect ("The affection-image is the close-up, and the close-up is the face"), Deleuze also points out how the close-up severs the face from the body and abstracts it from spatial markers, turning it into an autonomous entity (Deleuze 87).

remains impervious to the strong passions she produces both in the universes of the films in which she appears and in the audience that watches them. Such treatment of the face of the female figure appears to demonstrate Cavell's concept of cinema and alienation, and his description of fiction film as a training ground and mirror for human subjectivity, where the viewer relives the experience of distance and powerlessness.

As such, and although the soft-style close-up of the face remains a cinematic figure characteristic of classic silent film, it anticipates certain tropes of modernist cinema where the expression not so much of human emotions, but of their inchoateness or *absence*, comes to mirror existential uncertainty. Andy Warhol's *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1965) explores tropes that are recurrent both in Fried's study of absorption, and in classic cinema: it fuses the star portrait with the depiction of the sleeping figure.[14] The first few images of the film are almost abstract: white, curvaceous forms that we identify retrospectively as a young, reclining woman's arm. The camera remains defocused and slowly pans until it frames her face. This blurred sequence is the result of a mistake; a wrong choice of aperture which Warhol corrected in the course of the shooting (Angell 22). Yet he did not reject these opening images, adopting instead their woolly, druggy quality, the manifestation of a form of absorption more toxic than sleep.



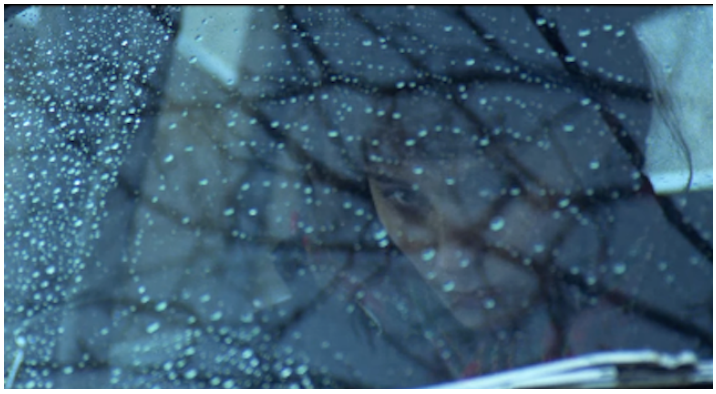
[Figure 2] Screencapture by the author of the article. Andy Warhol. *Poor Little Rich Girl*. Warhol Foundation. 1965.

The model is one of Warhol's muses, the aspiring model and actress Edie Sedgwick who was seen, at the time, as a star in the making. For more than three minutes, the camera gazes at her almost immobile face, a milky surface where

[14] This aspect of Fried's concept of absorption has been mentioned in connection with contemporary video work that addresses the issue of theatricality and absorption, as does, for instance, Sam Taylor-Wood's *Beckham Sleeping* (2004, 1 hour 7 minutes continuous loop on a 40" 4:3 plasma screen).

features are mere outlines. The image as a whole is blurred, hence the double sense of absorption that it creates: absorbed by sleep, the figure is also absorbed in the grainy matter of the image, pulled almost beyond figuration, towards formlessness. In place of the godlike indifference of the classic star, here, absorption spells blankness. Stillness, combined with defocus, transforms the face into a mask – as Mulvey pointed out with reference to Warhol's work on Monroe, it is the face as a metaphor of death at work (Mulvey 13; Ferguson 186).

If the advent of sound had marked the end of the classic soft style, and if, as with Warhol's film, modernist cinema worked to debunk some of its key visual tropes, its legacy nonetheless remains tangible in contemporary melodrama. In 2015, Todd Haynes and his cinematographer, Edward Lachman, chose to shoot *Carol*, the story of two women in love in 1940s America, on 16mm film, aiming for an image with much more pronounced grain and texture than the cleaner, more defined image shot in digital format or in analog 35 mm. Doing so, they fully exploited not only the specific formal qualities of the chosen film format, but also demonstrated a reflexive knowledge of the twined history of melodrama and cinematography that allowed Haynes to move beyond the deadlock of the Warholian death mask.



[Figure 3] Screencapture by the author of the article. Todd Haynes. *Carol*. Film Four and Number Nine Films. 2015.

The affective power of Haynes' images derives not only from the tactile quality of the slightly blurred images, but also from the passage from haptic to optic forms of vision. Induced by the alternation of soft-style cinematography and sequences shot in higher definition, or by the use of reflecting surfaces, superimpositions, and atmospheric transformations, vision shifts from sequences of images with sharp contours and contrasts to soft lines and colors, the juxtaposition emphasizing the affective force of the latter. Lachman explains:

> The idea was to create these layered compositions that were like obscured abstractions, images seen in reflections and in partly visible spaces through car windows, diners, apartments, doorway glass spattered in raindrops, urban steam and the night's condensation. All these ideas are about creating an emotional

> language in a story, through the images, that represents who these characters are and their em, danotional states. In a book, you can enter the interior world of the character, but it's much harder to show place. In cinema, it's just the opposite. You can show place in one shot, but it's much harder to enter the interior world of the character […]. The grain of Super 16 gives the film another layer that almost feels like something breathing or pulsing, like there's something beneath the surface of the character, and that felt right emotionally for the film. (Lachman)

Pointing to intertwined traditions that span early, pictorialist photography to 1950s photographers on the one hand, and soft-style cinema to present-time 16 mm filmmaking on the other, Lachman further insists on the link between the physicality of 16mm analog film, and what he describes as its anthropomorphic attributes: a quality that "gives a certain emotionality to the image that feels more human." (Lachman) [15]

Theatricality and collective absorption

In cinema as in the other arts, the multiplicity of formats, the different qualities of film stock, and, by extension, the various degrees of image definition, are intrinsic to the medium's historicity and its capacity to account for evolving perceptions and subjectivities. If the persistence of a low-definition aesthetic can be tied to the endurance of certain genres and formats – the melodrama, the home-movie, 8 mm and 16 mm film – , and the bodily metaphors carried by analog film (film as a fragile, skin-like surface and physical basis), it also surfaces in digital formats. Next to the conventional uses of blur in commercial and mainstream filmmaking (where blur functions, first and foremost, as a counterpoint to definition, to focus the gaze on the narratively "useful" zones of the image), it is deployed by certain filmmakers and artists as a means to problematise and interrogate new regimes of vision and the ubiquity of surveillance culture.

With *Zidane, a Portrait of the 21st Century* (2006), Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno offered their own portrait of a star, while also composing a complex study of absorption in the era of theatricality. Shot in the course of a 90-minute match, the film forms a dazzling montage of shots, selected from the footage filmed by seventeen cameras set around the football pitch, but also from satellite images as well as the re-filming of the TV screens from which live footage of the event is chosen for broadcast. The richness of the film's audio and visual construct thus stems not only from the cubistic assemblage of a multiplicity of perspectives, but

[15] Lachman adds: "We wanted to reference the photographic representation of a different era. They can recreate grain digitally now, but it's pixel-fixated. It doesn't have this anthropomorphic quality in which the grain structure in each frame is changing. The actual physical grain of film adds another expressive layer that is impacting the surface of the characters' emotional being. It has to do with how film captures movement and exposure in the frame, finer grain for highlights and larger grain for lower light areas – that gives a certain emotionality to the image that feels more human. I really believe with 'Carol' that people would feel something different if I had shot it digitally." (Lachman)

also from the continuous shift in image quality, from high-definition footage to heavily pixelated images.

In Gordon and Parreno's film[16] the spectator finds herself mirrored and infinitely multiplied in the image of the match's live audience which is included in the spectacle and subjected to the same variations of low definition and defocus as the star player who is the overt subject of the film. Entirely absorbed by the game, the football player appears oblivious of the many cameras as well as the gazes of the 80,000 fans that follow him. The shifts between focused and blurred shots reflect the tension between the sense of intimacy that the recurrent close-ups and the constancy of the camera gaze establish, and the regime of surveillance and extreme exposure involved by the mass audience event and enhanced by the filming apparatus installed by the artists. Yet as the player falls in and out of focus, and occasionally fades out of sight, becoming but a mere blot in the field of vision, so does the audience come in and out of sight, enfolded in the collective absorption that the match elicits. The sound, likewise, alternates between the rumour or sudden roaring of the crowd as a whole, and the occasional, ephemeral insert of a precise, isolated sound – Zidane's breathing, the noise of his shoe scraping the pitch, a member of the audience shouting or coughing.

In its appropriation of a football match as experimental art object, *A Portrait of the 21st century* does not merely contribute to a long-lasting association between avant-gardist art and popular culture, but offers its subject matter an alternative outlet, away from television's heavily normative grammar and its increasingly individualistic and narcissistic regime of spectatorial involvement.[17] In its multifaceted temporality and fluctuating look, the film denies the kind of contemporary theatricality that feeds on the illusion of "co-presentness" and hypervisibility. For all its emphasis on the single star, the film ultimately reveals little about Zidane, the player remaining true to his inscrutability and to the volatility of his reactions, as revealed in the sudden explosion of anger at the end of the match. What the film does offer however, through the constant shift of visual and sound focus between player and crowd, is a sense of shared absorption and collective watching. In the passages where the clear and defined image shifts to blurred visions, where the silhouette of the player becomes indistinguishable from the backdrop and merges with the throng of enthralled, anonymous spectators, Gordon and Parreno's film becomes a record of collective emotive involvement.[18]

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[16] *Zidane* has been released as a feature film screened in cinemas, as well as presented in galleries as a multi-channel video installation.

[17] More often than not, the image that the TV spectator watches is also on display on giant screens in the stadium – a broadcasting loop feeding on itself. As soon as a member of the live audience catches their own image live on the screens, they spring to attention and wave to the camera. Fusing surveillance with exhibition, new regimes of representation herald the return to a theatricality that also rests on a reinforced illusion of 'co-presentness': the spectator who waves at the camera, waves to me, ostensibly acknowledging my gaze with uncanny instantaneity.

[18] On spectatorship and the sharing of emotions, see Hanich 2014 and Hanich 2018.

[Figure 4] Screencapture by the author of the article. Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno. *Zidane, a Portrait of the 21st Century*. Universal International. 2006.

In an era permeated by the obsession of ever higher definition, and a growing culture of surveillance typified by the development of visual detection tools – from facial to emotion recognition for commercial and policing purposes – blur, if not always a conscious strategy of resistance against the "frenzy of the visible",[19] may well appear at least as a form of respite, a site of welcome uncertainty. Furthermore, from Leonardo DaVinci to Ernst Gombrich and Marshall McLuhan, artists and art and media theorists alike have observed how the spectator's engagement with images (the "beholder's share" to use Gombrich's term) is dependent on the kind of space left to the imagination by the vagueness of the form and imprecision of content (DaVinci 216; Gombrich 181-200; McLuhan 22-36).[20] In film, various and variable qualities of in-definition cohabit and determine the way a sequence of images may affect the spectator, move or touch her, and engage her imagination.

As a visual manifestation of affect, blur does not merely open a way into the emotional heart of the film: in the way it suggests intimacy while simultaneously obscuring the content of the image, it offers itself as the paradoxical, combined expression of intimacy and distance. Leaving space for an empathetic rather than voyeuristic gaze, for an open rather than predetermined spectatorial engagement, this particular capacity of blurred images to reveal while also shielding their subject matter from the gaze thus participates in the complex forms of affect that the film image generates.

[19] See, amongst other works by the same author, Steyerl 2012.

[20] See also Georges Didi-Huberman on the spectator's productive "*épreuve du non-savoir*" (the trial of not-knowing) (Didi-Huberman 15).

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