

# FROM PAINTING TO CINEMA, FROM CINEMA TO PAINTING: HISTORIES OF A MAGNETISATION

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**History of representation is parceled into provinces that study image under its deposition on different means of expression. However, audiovisual heterogeneity of our time, show how easily images pass from one medium to another.**

**It is necessary to build another visual history that claims the mixture instead of the essence, a history that tracks the circulation of images. In that his story certainly should occupy a special place the relationship that have maintained cinema and painting for over a century.**

**Key words:** Cinema, painting, post-cinema, post-painting, expanded cinema.

## Histories of what is visible

The history of visual representation is a fractioned history, divided in different provinces that attend to their particular object of study according to their material substantiation, their sedimentation in expressive media that allow understanding their essence and which legitimate, therefore, their difference with respect of other images (preserving their purity). Thus, the history of Painting could be clearly differentiated from the history of Sculpture. These two, by virtue of a final technologic mediation could never be mistaken for the histories of Photography or Cinema, both also separated by the particular way they are interwoven in time.

However, the immense heterogeneity of audiovisual production which defines our time seems to proclaim quite the opposite: there are no images welded to a particular expressive media, there are no representations that do not travel from one medium to another, that do not seek their reflection, their *doppelgänger* in other representations that surround it.

Therefore, it would be necessary to change the perspective on that history of representation, turn it around and reconsider it from the opposite angle. Which is the same, it would be necessary to construct a visual history reclaiming the mixture as opposed to the essence, that would trace the transitions and circulation of images, their comings and goings within the audiovisual universe. And in this history, yet to be written, the relationship that cinema and painting started over a century ago should, indubitably, have a the special place.

## Painting legitimates cinema

Understanding the relationship cinema/painting from the perspective of surface analysis that gives priority to recurring themes and visual approaches between the two media (from mere allusion, to the perfect translation of painting into frame, the *tableau vivant*) brings us *almost* to the origin of the cinematographer. Specifically, to that early film typology that was religious cinema. Quickly it became eager to transpose on the screen the composition and iconographic codes of a long-standing pictorial tradition. From the early *La vie et la passion de Jésus-Christ* by the Lumière Brothers (1898), to *From the manger to the Cross* (1912, reproduction of the gouache and watercolours of the popular Bible illustrated by French artist James Tissot in 1894), to mid-century big Biblical productions (as it was the case of *The Ten Commandments*, 1956, or *King of Kings*, 1961), pictorial religious references were have been constant in cinema.

In the same way, as historic cinema established itself at the beginning of the twentieth century (largely due to the need of the new expressive medium to grasp the attention of the bourgeois public, which would be regularly attending theatre shows, but were alien

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AUMONT, JACQUES: *El ojo interminable. Cine y pintura*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1997, p. 188.

to the popular world in black and white of fairground attractions, in which the first films were shown), painting became its main source of legitimacy. Unsurprisingly, until the arrival of the first photo-sensitive capture systems, paintings were the only source of visual information on the past; the faces of emperors, their attires, their hairstyles, the decorations in the spaces they moved through in their historic tasks, all of it has only reached us from paintings of portraits, still life, or indoor scenes or historic scenes. Such connection developed, anyway, with diverse guises: from the usual superficiality of most Hollywood productions to the pictorial catalogue of *La Kermesse heroïque* (1936; more recently with the addition of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 2003, and, in Spain, *Alatriste*, 2003), the radicalism of proposals like *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and *La marquise d'O* (1976), which lighting is completely natural, or their opposite, *Pirosmani* (1969) and *Perceval le gallois* (1978), films which strong hieratic and artificial attitudes stem from the complex transposition of pictorial references invoked (*naïf* painter Pirosmani in the first place, medieval miniatures in the second). The radicalism of the latest consists in not reducing itself to bringing certain pictorial compositions into the film, but in operating within the same representation codes of the referent paintings.

In any case, due to obvious reasons, it is in biographic cinema on artists where pictorial referencing reaches its maximum expression. In the first place, because the viewer recognises the painting as painted by the character the story is about (thus strengthening the impression of reality). In the second place, because the camera adopts the same point of view as the painter while producing the piece (an explicit example of *primary identification*). This clearly displays the way the gaze travels from the viewer to the screen, and back to the painter. Last but not least, because the painting usually becomes a symbolic element which condenses the keys to the artist's personality. Illustrating this is the way *Café de noche* (1888) is evoked in *Lust for Life* (1956). The defeated character is portrayed for the first time, crushed by toil and poor living conditions, he also learns that his brother is getting married. Vincent later shows Gaughin the meaning of *something* he is drawing: he has tried to represent all evil and the most violent human passions, representing "a place where a man can ruin his own life, become insane or commit a crime". Precisely during this comment, the camera allows the viewer to see that what he is doodling is one of the lamps of the café, a motif definitely charged with *madness*.

### Cinema confronting painting

Opposite to this outlook on the relationships between cinema and painting, another perspective draws a completely different picture. Cinema here

is not regarded from the stance of *correspondences* and much less from that of direct relationship (probably, image by image, cinema is closer to photography than it is to painting). Cinema is here considered from dialogue and confrontation: its own *mixture*. It is from this change of perspective that we can analyse those "sporadic equivalences in the most implicit part of art" that, according to Jacques Aumont, both media present.<sup>1</sup>

If we stated above that understanding cinema/painting relationships from an iconographic perspective meant studying it *nearly* from the origins of cinema. This analytical turn requires that we begin when it appeared, at the very time that, practically just leaving the workshop where it was created, a mechanical device took to the streets to register "life" passing by. In this sense, we could join Godard in saying, in the words of one of his characters of *La Chinoise* (1967), that Lumière was the last impressionist painter. A bold statement if we take into account the scarce attachment that the inventors of cinematographer had for the artistic quality of their device. Immerse in nineteenth-century bourgeois environment of the industrial town of Lyon, the Lumière Brothers had no interest for art and artists. However, such intuition is still true: there is a certain "family resemblance" among the impressionist painters and the views by Lumière (the emblematic *Arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat*, 1897, is similar to *La gare Saint-Lazare* by Claude Monet, 1877, or to *La gare de banlieu* by Georges d'Espagnat, 1895; in the same way, *Sortie d'usine*, 1895 or *Ateliers de la Ciotat*, 1985, refer to *Une forge*, 1893, an industrial foundry scene painted by Fernand Cormon, or *La Fonderie*, 1899, painted by Maximilien Luce).

Beyond such theme coincidence, which belongs to the spirit of the *fin de siècle* (naturalist novel focuses on the same subjects, same backgrounds), the pertinence of the expression stems from its expressive similarity: its capacity to capture the fleeting and evanescent, the cinematographer carried out the program of the impressionists, to its limits. In order to illustrate this change in the approach to the cinema/painting subject, it is worth to question one of the elements that the two media share: the frame (understood as what the operator decides to leave *inside* and *outside* of the image limits). Many authors have pointed out how important this is, among them, André Bazin<sup>2</sup> who from Resnais' *Van Gogh* (1948) established a clear distinction between picture frame (*cadre*) and cinematographic frame, *cache* (viewfinder). The first, wrote the French author, is centripetal, constitutes an open space towards the inside of the picture, while the second one is centrifugal, directing the eye towards the outside of the composition, toward everything which is out of range and exceeds the screen limits. This was accepted by most authors who have considered the

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✍ Luis Armand Villalba, ilustración sobre *Barry Lyndon* (1957).



matter, but was questioned pertinently by Jacques Aumont, who criticised the “essentiality” of the distinction, affirming and demonstrating the complementary presence of the centripetal/centrifugal forces in the two media. Painting, as evidenced in *Las Meninas* or in paintings by Edgar Degas, has also been aware of the frame and used it rhetorically, playing intelligently with what is inside and outside the field. Therefore, it is not a qualitative difference, but a quantitative one: the movement of the camera makes cinema more permeable to spaces inside and outside the field of vision than painting.

### Cinema/Painting, Post-cinema/Post-painting

The necessary theoretical evaluation outlined above is insufficient to understand the links cinema/painting at a time in which the forms that populate the audiovisual universe (from *Videoart* to *Video-dance*, from *Postcinema* to *Postmedia*, but also from *Postpainting* to *Expanded painting*) seem to upset our audiovisual imaginary, that in which both Painting and Cinema have a substantial role.

On one hand the cinema that could be defined as classic, in a way too simplistic, ceased being the soul of the world, as Deleuze wrote.<sup>3</sup> It is no longer the symbolic vehicle of the great narratives that give given sense to the world, rather, a marginal practice that has come to be called *Audiovisual*. Because, in a parallel manner, the overflow of the artistic world onto the remaining spheres as has occurred in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (whose consequences include dematerialising the work of art, rupture of hierarchy in high and low culture, the mix of practices and aes-

thetic problematic), the image-movement has been progressively surpassed the limits of the exhibition/projection space, overflowing onto other screens and other surfaces. First television, then computers and later on video consoles and mobile phones, etc., media that little or nothing have to do with the exhibitivistic characteristics that made the cinematographic device unique (darkness, community, corporal stillness – characteristics only conceivable under ideal conditions, determine in the last instance the experience of the film in the projection hall).

In the same way, in the field of painting, what is pictorial seems to have become independent from the frame which traditionally held it to disseminate itself throughout space and through the surrounding objects, following the trajectory sculpture had already travelled. It is the case of the work by Daniel Burden, reduced in practice to a succession of strips that cover walls and landscapes, the mural projects of Sol Lewitt, thought specifically for the spaces in which they are shown, the optical experimentation of the Belgian artist Ann Veronica Janssen, projecting coloured lights on walls and floors. Or also, the work of Jessica Stockholder, halfway between sculpture and installation that totally flood the exhibition space with the most heterogenous materials, arranged according to their plastic qualities. The spectator, in this case, lives within the image.

There is no doubt that *cinema* still exists (as it is also true that there is *painting*). But in the same way, it cannot be denied that there is a progressive convergence between certain lateral proposals in both fields that would have been rightly noted by Jean-Christophe Royoux in writing about exhibition cinema,

“What is outlined today, in this scene is not merely the interest artists have in cinema, nor the improbable interest of the film-makers in plastic arts, but rather and parting from two very different histories, the convergence of cinema and plastic arts in the configuration of a representational space that radically transforms the conditions set forth in the image: the exhibition film.”<sup>4</sup>

The new situation that has finally constituted an authentic discursive practice in the terms proposed by Michel Foucault<sup>5</sup>, a sort of space of dispersion in which plastic arts will share with cinema some stylistic features, common problems, certain theoretical links, and, finally, a referential universe that would allow its analysis, or at least its questioning through a set of questions common to both.

One of the main features shared by this post-cinema and this postpainting seems to be determined by a greater participation of the spectator with respect to the work. From a new relationship of the image with the exhibition device in which it is inserted, Artist-filmmakers such as Isaac Julien and Eija-Liisa Ahtila evidence this reconsideration. The first, a recognised director-activist developed important documentary work from the last of the 80's (*Looking for Langston*, 1988, *Franz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*, 1995), has carried out during the last years an interesting consideration on postcolonial globalisation in the artistic institution through a triptych formed by *True North* (2004), *Fantôme Afrique* (2005) and *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), a work that is made up of projections on several screens in which the images that occur and interact according to rhythms and cadences that sometimes affect the visual sphere and sometimes the plastic one, while others attend to semantic matters. Maintaining similar exhibition proposals with the use of multi-screens results normal also in the work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila, as in *If 6 was 9* (1996), *Consolation Service* (1999) or *Love is a Treasure* (2002), although her work is perhaps more thoughtful and poetic.

### The cinema that does not want to imitate painting

From what has been written up to now, it might seem that this increased value of the cinematographic image, a moving mirror of painting, has been due to the determination of some peripheral positions far from the great cinema we know. Nothing is further from the truth; a great part of classic cinema has always understood the expressive power residing in the image. Aside from the musical genre, the formula least pressured by narration and therefore the most inclined towards the show (from Busby Berkeley's abstract compositions to the pictorial pastiche of *An American in Paris*, 1951), the melodrama has a special ability to make

the emotional conflicts the character suffers visible through special spatial and chromatic values.

This functionality is fully active in *Some Came Running* (1958), in which Ginnie, the eccentric character of shady behaviour, in love with Dave, the leading character, is associated throughout the film with a dissonant cherry red (specially in flashy dresses but also in her excessive makeup). A characterisation that, besides providing information on her origin (she is an uneducated country girl, etc.), gives her inner world an acid dominance. In the same sense it can be seen in the last sequence which takes place during the celebration of the town's centennial, in a typical dramatic crescendo. Ginnie and Dave, newlyweds, unaware that the woman's jilted lover wants to kill them, dive into the abstract and vertiginous fair space to approach the bar where their friends are waiting. The sequence is constructed chromatically from the interaction of very saturated reds and blues, luminous and garish projected by the fair attractions (besides, when the thug appears on the screen he is just a dark shadow on a very powerful red background). Finally a chromatic play that, added to the dynamism of the scene and the height of the soundtrack (the crowd roars, the insistent bars of the grind organ of the different fair stands and over both, the expressive extra-diegetic music underline the imminent danger and inevitable encounter of dire consequences: standing between the two men, Ginnie dies in the arms of her brand new husband.

However, surpassing this dramatic functionality, many directors have known how to sidestep the dramatic mooring to offer a plastic exhibition, if the work of the Russian Sokurov with films such as *Mat i syn* (1997) or Antonioni and the landscape exuberance of *Il deserto rosso* (1964) can be questioned for its authorial and minority character, the same cannot be said about a mainstream film-maker such as Michael Mann, a director who has known how to combine content and form in an audiovisual discourse open to majority public (the beginning of *Collateral*, 2004, can compare with the heights of vanguard cinema, *Berlin, Symphonie einer Grosstadt*, 1927). In this sense, our attention is called by the booming offer from the Far East, a cinematography that seems to be specially permeable to plastic values. The powerful visual quality of Wong Kar Wai's work (particularly, the diptych made for *In the mood for Love*, 2002 and 2004, 2004, as well as his majestic immersion in historical cinema that is *The Grandmaster*, 2013), Im Kwon-taek's wise management of pictorial inheritance (from *Sibaji*, 1987, to *Chihwaseon*, 2002, an extraordinary compositional appeal of the Korean painting), or the abstract drift of *Mambo* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2001), in most cases it concerns the proposals that, besides being meant to be read (a plot, a story) are mostly meant to be seen.

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