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Cinema delle origini/Early cinema

[Film medici di Vincenzo Neri] (it 1908-1928) Vincenzo Neri ; 24'. (16fps)

Born by accident.

Introduction

Wednesday, noon. The week has been long. Rich. Very rich in images and sounds. My head is filled with pictures, faces, shots, emotions. My eyes are burnt by the light of the screen I watched for about 70 hours. My back now perfectly fits the curb of the seat, and my legs gave up their role as essential support for my body that seems to be condemned to the seated position. My arms restrain themselves to the simple movement from the water bottle to my mouth. Each movement, when hungriness is unbearable or when nature's needs are irrepressible, is imprecise and painful. Balance and motivity sounds more like recollections than aptitudes. And, while my whole being slowly decrepit into a parasitic macro-cell feeding on artificial light, the screen mostly shows vigorous people, soldiers, workers, fishermen, fighting, struggling for better tomorrows. The counterpoint is so strong that I'm wondering if, by a Wildean magical phenomenon, those light and shade figures are feeding on me. And, all of a sudden, coming from nowhere, with no explanations but a name on the schedule, the bodies become fragile, painful, and skinny. Pale. Naked. The Vincenzo Neri medical films restored by HagheFilm, dating back from 1908 to 1928, break the lines that the festival seemed to have set until now. Dry, rough, direct, and utilitarian, those 28 reels show a clinical world where people are not actors (people that do things) nor characters, but mechanical phenomenon. Where gesture is not the carrier for a project but the subject in itself.

The images are quite damaged. From time to time the decomposition of the film creates beautiful abstract forms that invade the screen. We can see a man walking, naked, crossing the screen horizontally, his leg and his head shaken with trembling. Then mentally retarded persons, posing naked before a black wall. Children or old people with physical malformations. They walk horizontally or frontally, showing their face or their back to the camera. Sometimes their feet are plunged into white paint in order to leave traces of their path on the floor. The shots are mostly large, but they sometimes get closer to show a tinier movement. The back is sometimes plain black, sometimes a cold and desolate concrete wall, and from time to time a decrepit baroque trompe-l'oeil. We can read resignation on every face and pain on every body. A pianist is accompanying this selection of shots with romantic and melancholic melodies. Sometimes the movements on the screen impose a rhythm to the musician who plays percussive parts while we are looking at a doctor's hammer desperately trying to get a reaction from his patient's knee or from many other parts of the body. The absence of any reaction and the paleness of the bodies evoke death. A close shot reminds us Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*, or more precisely, Orlan's *L'origine de la guerre*. The small hammer begins again his regular movement just above the penis. A few seconds later the trunk of the patient is scratched by a needle.

The grouping of all those isolated shots, the repetition of gesture apparently without goal and the systematic nudity create an almost surrealistic atmosphere. Especially when a very long shot only shows three still rabbits facing the camera, with apparently no relation with the previous scenes. The music slowly takes us to an hypnotic state, where condolence and disgust fade away.

Those images asked me a lot of questions, about their origin, their aim or the conditions of the shooting. Were they part of a specific protocol shared between many motivity specialists or a few tests made by an isolated and inspired doctor? Was it an analysis tool, an animated notepad or a media to exchange with colleagues or to teach students? The question of the use of animated images in science is very interesting and not well explored. An historical investigation would have been really exciting, but I felt that my enthusiasm for this program was quite disproportioned regarding the documents in themselves. This is not only the films but the show that I want to discuss. The projection of those films at that moment, in that place, opened for me a lot of interrogations surrounding the images. About their status, the expectations of the festival public, the place of non-fiction in the schedule, the power of music to transfigure images... Through this paper I'm trying to draw concentric paths, using an historical, archival or aesthetical approach, in a movement alternately centrifugal and centripetal around an object which core is constantly escaping my tracking.

The place of non-fiction movies in collections, theaters and festivals.

Even if my experience as a silent movie festival goer is thin as a celluloid film and my knowledge of the field as dense as an unused film stock, I think I can assert, without the risk of being contradicted, that this kind of show is, if not unique, quite rare.

This rarity can be questioned.

This selection of shorts was presented as "medical movies", something we can assume is a sub-genre of the "scientific movies", itself a component of the "non-fiction" category.

In fact, looking at the Giornate schedule we can see that non-fiction movies are not so numerous. During the 2010 edition we could see 25 documentaries and 50 fictions (considering large short movie selections as one show). But if we put apart contemporary documentaries and "making of" (as they are as closely linked with fiction as with documentaries), only 12 silent documentaries remains. In terms of time it is even more impressive. Documentaries represented only 12% of the total projection time of the festival.

Though, non-fiction production was prolific during the silent movie era. Before the invention of video and television as a technology and a media, all audiovisual stuff was done with the tools and techniques of the cinematograph. The press, the states, every organ of power discovered the specific ability of the cinema to talk to the masses. It was able to entertain but also to inform, to teach, to explain, to manipulate, and because of that, could not stay in the only hands of the stallholders. Showreels, documentaries, propaganda movies were shown in the same stands or in the same theaters, before the same public than fiction.

In those times of great structural, technical and cultural changes, it was also the best way to record images of the present day as a testimony for the next generations. For that reason, some governments, but also some magnates, financed large cinematographic report programs.

Billions meters of non-fiction films were shot, edited and shown. But were they preserved?

It is often said that 75 % of the movies from the silent era is considered to be lost. I don't know if more precise figures exist about the relative parts of fiction and non-fiction but, in France for example, most of the first projects to preserve movies were built towards non-fiction. The cinematograph had not even celebrated its third anniversary when a polish photographer, Boleslaw Matuszewski, foreseeing the historical and pedagogical value of the moving pictures, and considering that they are a more objective and credible witness of the present time events than writing or photography, published a book in Paris about the necessity to preserve newsreels for the future generations.

From 1909 to 1931, the French pacifist banker Albert Khan sent 15 photographers and cameramen around the world and founded the "Archives of the planet" where he preserved their reports. In 1914 the French War Minister created the "Army photographic front" who is still one of the French biggest cinematographic archive. In 1925, after a thirteen years gestation, an institution dedicated to the collection of documentaries about the city of Paris came into being. Eight years later, in 1933, the Minister for education founded the National Cinematheque which is also dedicated exclusively to documentaries. We have to wait until 1936, almost ten years after the arriving of the talkies and the great auto-da-fé that stroke the silent film stocks, for the French Cinematheque, which is concerned by fiction, to be founded by Henri Langlois, George Franju and Jean Mitry.

As it took years and years for the cinema to prove that it was something else than vulgar entertainment, we can assume that this pattern, concentrating its attention over non-fiction only, has been shared in many countries, and that, by the way, non-fiction collections are quite rich. I don't know the proportion for silents, but, all periods taken together, the French Cinematographic Archives (Archives Françaises du Film) collection is composed of 58 % of non-fictions against 42% of fictions.

Despite this fact, the films taken from the real are very rare to float in the fictional ocean of festivals and cinematheques. The reason why could perhaps be found in the editorial field. If that ostracization does not come from objective criterions it must lay in subjectivity.

The heart versus the brain. An organic change in the way to look at cinema.

The Cinephilie, the love of movies turned into a cultural and intellectual movement, was mainly built over fiction. Movie buffs, like the literature lovers, are looking for Art. And Art tends to develop itself better in the total freedom of creation that fiction offers to the author. The romantic figure of the artist, concentrating genius and talent, small god living among humans, was strong for decades and still has influence, even if it is attacked by many sides¹. Any work that tries to show the world, or any of his many elements, as it is, without the evident interpretative translation of a creator, is suspected to be mainly utilitarian and prosaic, and thus does not deserve admiration. In fact, a cinephile doesn't appear to be someone who loves cinema, but rather someone who loves fiction movies.

Sometimes, one documentary filmmaker eventually achieves to be considered as an author. But, if such a title can be given to a fiction movie-maker, when considering his predominant themes, or maybe the recurrence of his reflection topics or the subtlety of his psychological analysis (elements that, in fact, are not essentially cinematographic), it is mostly the formal dimension of a documentary that is being estimated. So, a fiction work is recognized and analysed in its substance and in its form, while a

¹ From time to time, the ideology of the "amateurism", fed and manipulated by the media, gets attention. It gave birth to reality TV – ordinary people turned into stars – User Generated Content – ordinary people turned into movie makers or journalists – etc...

documentary is only considered a work of art when it has formal qualities. Evacuating political, social or historical dimensions.

So, if we keep in mind the subject of this paper (it should be a pity to lose it in the very beginning!), a grouping of very crude and specialized medical shots, the question should not be the rarity of those images, but rather their presence in a cinema festival. In my opinion, this presence shows an evolution in the way we look at cinema history.

The cinephilie was built over the artistic nature of cinema. Cinema history naturally took the same disposition and concentrated its attention on “masterpieces” and “authors”. In fact, the attraction for greatness was shared between many disciplines. But the historiography shows that things changed. Historians slowly neglect great men and events for cultural studies, for the depiction and analysis of ideas. Today, history of art is thinking mostly in terms of continuity than in terms of successions of secessions, orientation that erected a strong avant-garde cult. The history of cinema is driven by the same forces and is now getting interested mostly in technique, in studios, in production, diffusion and exploitation than in stars. Some aspects that were disregarded by the first generations of cinema historians are now taken into account. This approach opened new fields of interest and study and found new objects.

A passing of the torch has been done between a self made generation of cinema lovers (I would like to use the French word “amateur” that also means the “one who loves”, unfortunately the English acceptance is univocal), for whom emotion and sensibility are essential, to a specialist one, trained in universities, working with method and sometimes even tools (databases, statistics, etc.). The institutionalization of the discipline has blown out the verve, dampened the passions. The cult of objectivity and neutrality of the university tends to gag the individual, who has to refrain himself to express his sensibility and to favor cold analysis. The negation of the self has a perfect representation in the imperious use of the “we” pronoun. The intellectual emasculation of the historians has led to a dispassionate history that traded the gossip for the scientific exploitation of the archive.

Lovers watch with their hearts while specialists dissect with their brains.

The festival is not the favorite place of the specialist, who needs the calm of the isolated consultation, a protected cocoon for his meticulous observation. The festival is the lover’s work and den, him who is in search of emotions, pleasure, irritation, anger, trances from tiredness and overdose. His gluttony verge on pathology, which is specialist’s greatest enemy. Nevertheless the festival cannot be absolutely impermeable to the specialist influence on cinema history, and from time to time, it is seized by curiosity. The presence of such specialized documents as those medical films in a festival proves, in my opinion, the way how eyes open wider on the diversity of cinema.

To refine the qualification of our object. Document vs documentary.

The expression “non-fiction” is very generic and we should try to define better the nature of the images we are talking about. In fact it is quite embarrassing to define anything by a privative prefix. That’s why in the previous lines I also used the word “documentary” as a synonym, while, in fact, it is not. Those two expressions, quite common, achieve to roughly qualify our object. Those images do not tell a fictional particular story, but they give an account of a piece of reality.

But we should beware of polysemy. Those images could be said “documentary films”, if we consider the first word as an adjective and the second as a noun. But we should not as it could be understood as an autonomous expression depicting a specific cinematographic genre. They seem to relate to the documentary regime but they are out of aesthetics and rules of the documentary film genre.

Documentary film is an extremely vast universe. It goes from Dziga Vertov’s *The Man with the Camera* to John Grierson’s *Drifters* or from Jean Vigo’s *A propos de Nice* to John Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*. It can be didactic and precisely written, carrying a message, or it can tend to formalism and abstraction. It can aim at showing life objectively, in a precise place and time, or to get to philosophical and universal notions. But, whether it tends to naturalism and objectivity or to assumed subjectivity, a documentary film is always the work of one (or many) author expressing something by the choice of the subject, the commentary, the frame or the montage. The documentary movie is a discourse. These notions seem to lack from the films we are talking about.

We could also be tempted to make a comparison with the “report” genre or its ancestor, the early cinema “views”, in the Lumière brothers’ trend. But we can doubt whether Vincenzo Neri’s films try to show, explain, or report anything to an audience.

Those images are “documentary” in their essence. They are a document because they transform a changing real, subject to time and all physico-chemical forces to a stabilized item². They give a stable representation of, they record and report a pre-existent reality but they are not a narrative and meaningful construction using the tools and techniques of cinema to represent a real. This is why, in my opinion, they cannot be considered as “documentary films” but rather as “filmed documents”.

Is any animated picture a movie ? Can we consider any film as part of cinema ?

While working on this paper I discovered that my worst enemy to think about cinema is vocabulary. A few words only depict the technique, the Art, and the place where it is shown, or, the work of art and the physical element which is used to make and show it. Cinema and Film. This discipline suffers from pathological metonymy. If the words cinema or film can sometimes refer to all documents produced by the cinematographic technique, they sometimes only refer to fictions. The writing world has been far more methodic and clear : a novel is not simply a book, which is not simply paper. And printing is not literature.

The questions of “presence” and “absence” seem to me to be essential in the study of those images. If they show many people, and if they are sometimes filled with bodies, we feel mostly the absence.

Absence of cinematographic or textual discourse: no intertitle and no montage but a simple grouping of images made by the same person. A purely utilitarian frame, using a full shot when the topic is to observe a movement in space, or a close shot when it comes to look at an organic displacement. High-angle shots derive only from the fact that the phenomenon to observe takes place on a lying body. The frame never expresses more than the things it is showing, it never hides an element to make sense. It has absolutely the same function as the fabric window used by the surgeons while operating : it reveals only what is immediately useful and hides what could disturb the observation.

² Or, to be more precise, as we are talking about fragile cinema archive, to a more stabilized form. This films still show phenomenon that have passed away long time ago with the people that embodied them.

Absence of protocol or didactic: those films are not so systematic like could have been a pedagogic document, showing the repetition of an action with changing parameters, like the same movement with or without a stick, or before and after an electric shock. By the way, they do not respect the concept of the experimental method.

Finally, despite their attribution to a specific doctor, whom we do not know if he is the organizer or the operator, we cannot feel any presence behind the camera. The signature has thus more in common with the historical information and the scientific responsibility than with the concept of authorship.

The only small traces of presence we can feel are like accidents: the humanity of the patients sometimes achieves to escape from the formal dehumanization they are subjected to. Between two shots where the bodies are turned into pieces by the necessity of the observation, we catch a glint in a glimpse, reminding us that the flesh we are watching is not so cold.

Those films are as naked in their form as the bodies they are representing. Here the movie camera seems to be a scientific tool as could be a stethoscope or a X-Ray tube and the film is the equivalent of an electrocardiogram or a fecal analysis report. It is a way to fix a representation of a phenomenon in order to analyze it. Thus, those images are not the result of a (scientific and/or artistic) creation process. They are part of a process, whose result is not of cinematographic form. It seems to me that this kind of images are as closely linked with cinema as closed circuit television. And perhaps that, as everything written is not literature, everything filmed should not be considered as cinema, even pre-cinema.

An intimate relation between cinematograph and science.

It is part of common knowledge that the last years of the very long gestation of cinema were mostly marked by the scientists' interest for the analysis of movement. E. Muybridge and E.J. Marey appear as the grand-fathers of the Lumière brothers' Cinematograph and those two names and their work are perhaps better known in cinema universities than in engineer's school. The photographic guns and every other chronophotographic systems permitted to record and analyze physical and physiological phenomenon. The movie camera then became an exploration tool for many scientists, with the purpose to reproduce a phenomenon or to reveal something impossible to see with the eyes, by the use of slow-motion (the fly of insects) or speed-up (the growth of plants), for example. Some of them, like Jean Comandon or Pierre Thevenard in France, were also directors of scientific and sometimes even fiction movies. But to consider every animated image produced in a laboratory as cinema could appear excessive. Some of the scientific images that Comandon, Thevenard, or their colleagues obtained during their research were sometimes used into specialized or larger audience movies as knowledge transmission material³: and gained by the way, and only because of that specific process, the status of cinema images. Without their integration into an intelligible context, they stay purely scientific data.

If the distinction of the objects in the early days of cinema between cinema and scientific images is quite complicated because of the use of more or less the same systems, the contemporary medical animated images (3-D, 4-D, 5-D electronic microscopes, stars spectrum analyzers, etc.) show that they absolutely differ in their essence. In fact, even if they used discontinuous stream of 35mm film stock, some of those early systems differed radically from what is known as a movie camera. Essentially because they

³ Pierre Thévenard observed the development of fly larvae with the use of X-rays and chronophotography. The animated picture he obtained gave him exclusive information on the hatching process that he used for a scientific publication. Later he used the more beautiful and meaningful images in his pedagogical movie "*Les aventures d'une mouche bleue*", "*The adventures of a blue fly*", 1954.

translated invisible phenomenon into visible artifacts by the use of optical (diffraction) and non-optical (invisible radiances) rules, while movie cameras stay mostly in the optical and visible world. Nowadays the moving images equipments used in scientific research center, while deriving directly from those early experiences, don't have anything in common with any actual movie camera.

Vincenzo Neri's films show real-time visible phenomenon recorded by optical means. But, if the technique is cinematographic, the objective is clearly not.

An involuntary sacrilege...

The notion of intention, the one which governs the use of a camera, seems essential to identify the nature of such images. For sure, we can only guess about the intentions of Vincenzo Neri without reading his notes. But what we see on screen does not look like a film designed to be shown to a non specialist audience. It does not even look like a film ever designed to be shown. And thus it does not seem to be of cinematographic nature.

In this regard, the way to displace a document from the scientific domain to the public domain asks question. It could appear as an historical informative program, showing how a camera can also be a scientific tool and thus respecting the nature of the object, if a contextualization, explaining why those films were shot, in which conditions and how they were used had framed the projection. The choice to accompany the screening with music does absolutely the opposite.

There is lot of debates, sometimes inflamed, on the way to accompany silent movies. Some extremists prefer absolute silent projections, in the tradition of the first cinemateques. Among the tenants of the musical screenings, some defend the absolute respect of the original score, or by default, the use of trendy themes of the time, when others prefer the contemporary re-interpretation, arguing that when they were released, *Intolerance* wasn't accompanied by Babylonian instruments and melodies nor *Robin Hood* by a hurdy-gurdy. I usually stay away from those never-ending nit-picking, but concerning those medical reels, the question reach another level. In all probability we can assume that they were never accompanied by any music except, perhaps, the conniving grumbling of a colleagues' audience. The adjunction of music for the presentation before a non-specialist audience is a very strong choice that transvestites the films and put them, by force, in the world of aesthetics. It would have the same humoristic potential than the nomination of a lawnmower manual for the Strega⁴ Prize if, and only if, the congenital deformation of a child was curable with the help of a simple screwdriver.

This program is not only an aesthetic representation, by mimic, of suffering, what cinema does every day, and that is already shocking. Those few notes, that could seem harmless and lovely, involuntary erect into aesthetics a representation of people suffering for real. In that sense it can be considered as a sacrilege and an insult to the human integrity. If that cold and shocking show does not aim at explaining things about the use of the cinematographic technique in science, it falls into pure un-complex voyeurism, the most natural but no less disgracing failing of any cinephile, by the use of the same vulgar dynamics than fun fairs' monster shows.

...giving birth to a provocative contemporary work of art.

But, why not ?

⁴ The most important Italian literary prize.

In my opinion those films (in the material sense) are not movies (in the way that they don't belong to cinema), but the fact to program them in a movie festival and to accompany them with music becomes an act of artistic nature. As when Marcel Duchamp makes a piece of art from a trivial manufactured object by electing it and signing it, the author of the work created during the screening is not the doctor responsible for the shooting of the material, but a common authorship is shared between the programmer, the restorer and the musician, even if they are not aware of it. The work goes beyond the status of movie, as it is not fixed in a enduring form, to reach the one of ephemeral performance. It eventually quits the domain of cinema to reach the one of contemporary art. An intoxicating work, provocative by the way it turns human bodies into patterns, impertinent in the way it uses the malformations of people as shapes and textures. A politically incorrect show that gave me great pleasure and excitement. An excitement that surely exceeded the real intrinsic power and range of this involuntary artistic affront, because of my schizophrenic status of specialist⁵ and *cinophile*, and because of the unique physical and psychological state that the festival rides in us. But, even if the creative part of the proposition was quite thin and shy, if the musical part had most in common with the routine than with an inspirited and unique creation, the show confirmed my intuition of a great underlying and dormant aesthetical potential in scientific filmed documents. A potential that could be revealed far much stronger by dark electronic, metal or post-hardcore musicians, pushing the coldness and violence of those images into climax by repetition and montage.

⁵ I devoted my master thesis to scientific films archive, after a 6 months training period in the archives of a biomedical research center, the Institut Pasteur.