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Ways of Seeing

Marine Hugonnier's films explore what the artist describes as an 'anthropology of images'

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In his kaleidoscopic novel *La vie, mode d'emploi* (Life, A User's Manual, 1978), Georges Perec tells the tale of Marcel Appenzzell, The Misunderstood Anthropologist. Appenzzell travels to Sumatra to study the indigenous Kubus, resolving to subsume himself completely in their lives so as to get a comprehensive understanding of the tribe. He goes missing for almost six years before he is found again, emaciated and naked, having lost the ability to talk. He has pursued the Kubus obstinately,

curious as to what might account for the tribe's sudden migratory behaviour, which seems to send their developed culture into decline as they, demonstrably indifferent to Appenzzell, plunge into uninhabitable areas. 'Was it a religious ritual, or something to do with initiation rites, or magic connected with life or death?' he muses ethnographically. Finally, however, the truth dawns on him: 'It was because of me that they abandoned their villages and it was only to discourage me, to convince me there was no point in my persevering, that they chose increasingly inhospitable sites, imposing even more terrible living conditions on themselves to show me they would rather face tigers and volcanoes, swamps, suffocating fog, elephants, poisonous spiders, than men. I think I know a good deal about physical suffering. But this is worst of all, to feel your soul dying.'[1] In Perec's tragicomic tale, the active but involuntary role played by Appenzzell – possibly a spoof on anthropology's prime mover Claude Lévi-Strauss – affects his subjects to such a degree that they resist 'discovery'.

The Last Tour (2004)

In a similar way to Perec, Marine Hugonnier deliberates subjectivities and technologies of seeing with a film trilogy that she characterizes as an

anthropology of images: *Ariana* (2003), *The Last Tour* (2004) and *Travelling Amazonia* (2006). The 18-minute *Ariana* takes its viewers to Afghanistan and details how the landscape has been a protagonist in the country's fate, with battles being fought to secure strategic surveillance points in its unnamed mountains. The film deconstructs the concept of the panoramic overview through the account it gives of a missing shot: the vantage point from which Hugonnier had planned to film proves inaccessible due to a landslide. After numerous failed attempts, her crew finally obtains permission to film the city of Kabul from the top of 'television hill' (so-called because of its broadcasting masts), from where all of the capital can be taken in. As soon as they get there, however, Hugonnier stops filming. Instead we are shown clear blue sky, empty black frames and, finally, the soldier who has escorted the film crew. The viewer is deprived of the vista that the narrator describes as imparting a 'feeling of totality', thereby refusing to reproduce the power relations inherent to it. In a sense, *Ariana* helps to restore the war-torn landscape, by blocking further assaults on it – whether by firearms or television cameras. This logic of rupture recalls Maurice Lemaître's Lettrist filmmaking, in which he would produce films that used neither cameras nor projectors nor illumination; instead, cinemagoers were asked simply to imagine the films.[2]

'Reality is a beast,' remarks one person. In the lull of the tropical dusk, the camera seems intent on capturing the beast not by hunting it down, but by making it come to us.

Hugonnier approaches the politics of vision through inventions with significant ideological charges, such as the one-point perspective. According to art historian Daniel Arasse, this is 'a political operation towards the representation of power', a Cartesian principle that helped establish imperial control over distant lands by being resolutely entwined with the positivist power of cartography.[3] In Hugonnier's works, these 'distant lands' often have a quality that makes us want to be there, a remoteness that remains intact and alive, because what we see somehow conforms to our expectations of what these places should look like. The ideological crosshairs she films through are how people and cultures

produce images and technologies of seeing that shape social and natural environments, with an awareness of how images and technologies, in turn, reproduce us. In this working through of cinematic tropes there is a drive towards allegory, but Hugonnier does not remain on the level of palimpsest and meta-text: travelling becomes the embodied methodology of a camera that botanizes the world in order to see itself. Anthropology's idealized distance to its subject becomes a pure difference, only glancing back home during its peregrinations. Perennially aspiring to become the country of the future, Brazil is defined by a continuing clash between social degradation and the myth of progress. Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna's film *Iracema: Uma transa amazônica* (Iracema, 1974), which finally became available to Brazilian cinemagoers in 1980 after the military dictatorship lifted its six-year ban on it, tells the unofficial story of the Trans-Amazonian Highway. This national symbol of modernization took Brazil's colonial project across 6,000 miles of jungle, and was meant to connect the Atlantic to the Pacific via the Amazon region. In the film – a series of documentary-style tableaux connected by characters and the temporal framework offered by the camera, rather than by a plot – we follow a child prostitute, Iracema, trailing along in the wake of the Highway's construction. Between religious processions, shifty entrepreneurs, deforestation and the slave trade, Iracema is 'riding trucks to places' like some doomed drifter.

Hugonnier confronts spectacle by reinstalling blank spaces on the map: vacuums of representation where a political imagination can be reignited.

Hugonnier's *Travelling Amazonia* (23 minutes 52 seconds) documents the production of a dolly for travelling shots, using materials from the new industries the Trans-Amazonian Highway helped to establish: rubber, wood and metal. There is none of Iracema's harrowing human and environmental exploitation in the film's pedestrian meetings with people along the broken line of this still-unfinished mega-infrastructure. The voracious frontier spirit that gripped the initial road-builders seems to have settled in the tropical hum of El Dorado's faded promise. Instead, it

is as if the ghost of Iracema inhabits Hugonnier's camera and causes it to reincarnate her fate of aimless wandering. At the end of *Travelling Amazonia*, as dusk falls, the camera shooting the film is in position on the dolly, but moves only a few metres forward along a strip of deserted and half-overgrown dirt road. The last frames depict the sound engineer snapping his fingers in front of the camera to synch sound with image, although it looks as if he's trying to rouse it into action. It only creeps slowly forward on its dolly, tracking the abandoned Trans-Amazonian project as the road fades into the night. 'Reality is a beast,' remarks one of the characters to the camera – itself an appropriative device that, in the lull of the tropical dusk, seems intent on capturing the beast not by hunting it down, but by making it come to us.

We live in an era in which we are more likely to witness things for the last time than for the first: disappearances in and of the visible world, rather than discoveries. As the accessibility of nature becomes increasingly restricted, *The Last Tour* (14 minutes 17 seconds) attempts to imagine the extreme outcome of this scenario: a place where visibility would be almost completely circumvented. Splicing footage from two locations – the Matterhorn in Zermatt, Switzerland, and Disneyland's version of it in California – the film, set at a point in the near future, takes us on a 'final' hot-air balloon tour around the famous mountain before it is completely closed to visitors as an environmental measure. The camera simulates an expectant gaze turned towards the European heartland at a landmark that will soon after only be seen on postcards, reconstructed at the outermost limits of visibility as 'a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over', as Joseph Conrad wrote in *Heart of Darkness* (1902). At the end of *The Last Tour*, fireflies are released into the night: a gesture that references Pier Paolo Pasolini's essay 'The Power Void in Italy' (1975), in which he uses the imminent extinction of the country's fireflies as an allegory for the disintegration of political life in fascist Italy. In Hugonnier's work, this translates as an insistence on cinema as a political category, and with her deconstruction of the panorama – a pre-cinematic form of mass entertainment as well as a camera movement – she confronts spectacle by reinstalling blank spaces on the map: vacuums of representation where a political imagination can be reignited.

In a recent solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern – a small retrospective of her work over the past six years – Hugonnier continued this construction of empty, or potential, spaces. Two phosphorescent prints, both titled *Luciole* (2004) and produced on headed notepaper from London's Alpine Club, created voids in the exhibition. During the day the prints accumulated light; at night, when the Kunsthalle was closed and the gallery lights were turned off, they glowed in the dark: a gesture that simultaneously dispenses with the audience and extends the work's spatial and temporal contract with them. The first exhibit in the show was *Travail contre productif* (Counter-Productive Work, 2006–ongoing), a piece that Hugonnier started while working at the Museum of Mankind in Paris (in the department for the restoration of old expedition photographs, appropriately enough), when she would write down thoughts about friendship, love, economics, politics, as well as ideas for art works to offset her frustration at not having the money to realize them. Each thought or idea has been typed out on a sheet of paper and placed in a black box with the work's paradoxical title embossed on its lid. What ties this collection of thoughts together is the idea that if one fails to realize a piece, then the work becomes what it took to try to make it. Hugonnier continues to note down work-related thoughts, as a way of challenging concepts right up to the moment the works are made. In the Bern display the personal nature of the piece was emphasized, as only a few selected pages and the sentence on the top sheet of the pile inside the box were readable through the large glass case holding the work.

French pioneer of cine-ethnography Jean Rouch deliberately exploded the objective distance that academic anthropology idealized. His most famous film, *Les maîtres fous* (The Mad Masters, 1955), documents the Ghanaian Hauka cult, whose members convened to enter a trance-like state and become possessed of the spirits of their colonial officials – the true 'mad masters' of the film's title – with the Hauka playing gods of strength, 'masters of madness'. At one point during Rouch's documentation of the frothing, dog-eating Hauka congregation, it's as though the camera itself starts dancing along, ecstatically embodying what it registers and breaking down the barrier to enable the audience to take its place amongst the Hauka. While this radical approach explored the possibilities of the moving, participatory camera (thereby anticipating the hand-held style of Jean-Luc Godard, among others), the codes

of *cinema verité* were upset and, unsurprisingly, doubts were raised about Rouch's scientific rigour, as he verged on influencing what he filmed. He acknowledged as much, though, and admitted that the observer is always an intruder. The subjectivity of Rouch's participating camera was ambiguous: while a member of the Malinese Dogon tribe protested that he filmed them 'like insects', Rouch seemed possessed by an Appenzzell-like desire to become the Other, even making an autobiographical film titled *Moi, un noir* (I, a Negro, 1959).

For her new film, *The Secretary of the Invisible* (2008, 24 minutes, recently premiered at the Museum of Modern art in Geneva), Hugonnier worked with Damouré Zika and Moussa Hamidou, Rouch's sound engineer and main actor respectively. Charting their shared attempt to make a film in one day, *The Secretary of the Invisible* starts with a pirogue trip down the river Niger and culminates in a night-time 'Holley' ceremony of the Songhay people. This is an animist ritual that reassesses social problems in a possession dance, a means of reciprocal communication between people and their gods. Rouch, who filmed about twenty of these ceremonies, pondered 'how the filmmaker–observer, while recording these phenomena, both unconsciously modifies them and is himself changed by them […] when he returns and plays back the images, a strange dialogue takes place in which the film's "truth" rejoins its mythic representation.'[4]

Along the way, Zika and Hamidou chat about cinema ('a sweet lie', according to the latter), while figures of transformation and emptiness abound, correlating with other instances in Hugonnier's work where intangible influences and out-of-frame presences manifest themselves: in *Travelling Amazonia*, for instance, one character describes a spirit he saw hovering in the jungle. The pirogue captain wants to swap Hugonnier's transistor radio for 'another transmitter' of invisibility, a West African transformation mask, and hence a metonymy is established that runs through the film's discussion of authorship, and the paradox of critiquing the politics of seeing with a camera. The mask supposedly enables the inhabitation of animal spirits and, since it does not pertain to the rites of the Songhay, like Hugonnier herself it is an intruder, an alien presence.

The title of the work is borrowed from the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz's description of his role as a writer, a metaphysical drama that also perfectly explains Hugonnier's restless camera:

I am no more than a secretary of the invisible thing
That is dictated to me and a few others
Secretaries, mutually unknown, we walk the earth
*Without much comprehension. Beginning a phrase in the middle Or ending it with a comma. And how it all looks when completed Is not up to us to inquire, we won't read it anyway.*5

Rouch released the camera from the tripod and put it on his shoulder. This act was in keeping with modern art's emancipatory project, as it allowed viewers to associate themselves with someone else, to become Other, thereby potentially transgressing categories of class and ethnicity. But it also produced new illusions by taking transparency away from the filmmaker–observer and rendering mediation uncertain.

In J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003), the main protagonist, Elizabeth – a secretary or mouthpiece for Coetzee – dies and is questioned by a bench of judges about her beliefs. Quoting Milosz, she describes her calling as that of a secretary taking dictation from the invisible, to which one judge wryly retorts: 'And what if the invisible does not regard you as its secretary?'[6] If this is indeed the case, it would make her authorial solitude incontrovertible and isolate her through her lack of beliefs.[7] Elizabeth insists that she doesn't have beliefs because they scramble the transmission of voices from the invisible, but finally concludes that she instead has fidelities – something much more uncertain and difficult to maintain when one's soul, and its relation to others, is at stake. This uncertainty is also the status of Hugonnier's meditations on the nature and culture of the gaze. A fidelity to images and the way they always begin in the middle, on a screen, poised between the imaginary and the real.

[1] Georges Perec, *Life, a User's Manual* (1978), Vintage, London, 2008, pp. 111–112
[2] Craig Saper, *Networked Art*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001, p. 103
[3] Quoted from Marine Hugonnier, 'Transcript From a Talk Following the Screening at the National Film Theatre, London, 7 June 2006', in Madden (ed.), *A Film Trilogy*, Revolver Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2006, p. 107
[4] 'On the Vicissitudes of the Self: The Possessed Dancer, the Magician, the Sorcerer, the Filmmaker, and the Ethnographer', in Feld (ed.) *Ciné-Ethnography, Jean Rouch*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2003, pp.87–88
[5] Czeslaw Milosz, *Secretaries* (1981), quoted from Robert Royal: 'The Ecstatic Pessimist', *The*

Wilson Quarterly, Winter 05, p. 72
[6] J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, Random House, London, 1999, p. 201
[7] J.M. Coetzee, ibid.

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