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## Anita Di Bianco: the Echoes of the Audio-Visual

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**“What defines modern cinema is a ‘to-ing and fro-ing between speech and image’, which has to invent their new relationship.”**

Gilles Deleuze: *Cinema 2, The Time-Image.*

*Com Viet*, *Dreaming and Drugs*, and *Ballad in Plain D* form a cycle of three works by Anita Di Bianco. These works are composed of equal parts literature and cinema – they are, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze, “audio-visual”. We hear the literary quality of the works, their slow, carefully spoken words taken from *Les Yeux ouverts*, a book of interviews with Marguerite Yourcenar, and from *Campo Santo* by W. G. Sebald. And we see their cinematic quality, the lush colours of the 16mm film, the restrained editing and precise framing of each shot, the camera’s movement. We might say then that literature provides the works’ content, its story, and cinema its means of expression. But that would be too simple and fast and would not tell us much at all. If these works are to be understood according to their own logic of composition, allowing them to stand up for themselves, we shall have to show how the (art)work puts literature and cinema into a series of relations, a series of movements. But in this the logic of the (art)works is paradoxical because they do not put literature and cinema into relation as if *art* was an *and*, a conjunction of the audio and the visual. Instead they assume that each term – literature/cinema – contains an after-image of the other, as if each inhabited the other as a gap that insured their intense reciprocal determination. Literature calls forth cinema and cinema literature, but each within themselves as each other’s limit or internal outside, making the *and* of their conjunction *echo* within the empty place they give to each other.



Com Viet

How does this work?

In Di Bianco's work words determine what is seen, inasmuch as everything that is seen in the films finds its reason in the script. Everything is seen in order to give voice to the words, even, as in many of the shots from *Com Viet*, when we see empty spaces that seem to have nothing to do with the words. What happens in these works are first of all the words, and if we do not hear or understand them there is nothing. While this would be the opposite of silent cinema, these films also ignore the strict structures of the 'talkie' where shot and counter-shot follow the dialogue. The only dialogue here is that between voice and image, each of which calls to the other, and from the empty space the other implants within it, receives back an echo. This is what we hear when we listen to the words. In *Com Viet* and *Dreaming and Drugs* the writer Marguerite Yourcenar – performed by a man – talks of how s/he wrote about Hadrian and Zeno. She effaced her personality in order to create a silence within herself, a silence in which to hear him. She nourishes her characters in this way; she feeds them her being and her flesh but nothing of 'herself'. This "hallucinatory stammering" (as *Dreaming and Drugs* has it) of the author/character is also a description of the actor, the very actor we see in the work and at work, reciting his lines, obfuscating *himself* in order to become an other, to make *her* present. To write is therefore like acting, or more accurately, to write or act

is to be acted upon, as if from without. To make these figures present – to make them heard and seen – requires a certain absence, a space into which an other might step. This is not only the space of writing and acting but the space of the film itself, whose empty spaces seem to exist only to be filled by the voice of Yourcenar, and the actor who pronounces her words.

This structural, internal absence of word and image in Di Bianco's work is also a reflection of cinema on itself. For absence from ourselves is the pre-requisite for our presence in the cinema, for the 'suspension of disbelief' by which we too become an other. We are reminded of the outraged early critic who lamented the fact that in the cinema he couldn't even think his own thoughts. In the dark space created by this absence from ourselves another world steps in, takes possession of us, and takes us to another place. This 'place' is inseparable from the absence of the self that formed it, making it a here and now animated by a nowhere, an *Erewhon* as Samuel Butler called it. Both literature and cinema, Di Bianco's films seem to be showing us, vibrate within this place of displacement. In the Yourcenar films the visual (the empty restaurant, the apartment, the actor) and the audio (Yourcenar's description of writing as self-negation) open up an absence the other rushes in to fill, a movement – like a tide – which obeys the pull of its own emptiness. Is this internal outside the source of the great sense of



Com Viet

melancholy in her work? Literature and Cinema are thus the internal-outside of the other, and in Di Bianco's work their mutual absence from each other comes together in an uncanny, ghostly echo.

In *Ballad in Plain D* we hear Sebald's words recited by a female actor. S/he tells us how early cinema was ghostly by nature, and not only revelled in all sorts of para-psychological realities, but actors entered and left its motionless frame like ghosts. Most ghostly of all, however, was the "quasi-transcendental gaze" of the actors, suggesting a life so otherworldly and strange that the tragic hero no longer had any part. A bit like Kafka's novels or perhaps even Kafka himself, who, and here the film quotes his words, felt like a ghost among men. This is a neat reversal, for now literature arises from the writer's absence from the world of men, appearing only as a spectral presence. The writer, who drifts unseen within the world, haunts its inhabitants with his words, hollowing out a dark and intimate outside, a literary underworld. This is an idea (the film tells us) also entertained by Nabokov, who speculated that daily life was influenced by spectral and alien figures occupying an "extra-territorial afterlife". Not unlike Nabokov himself, who tells us (through Sebald, by way of the actor) that he appeared in films shot in Berlin, none of which are known to be extant, and which were possibly destroyed or perhaps never existed in the first place. Cinema in this sense, like

literature, does not 'capture' life – it constructs instead a fragile projection, a fleeting extra-terrestrial reality that it offers back to life like its undead doppelgänger.

We might think then that Di Bianco's work is a kind of fantastic cinema in the tradition of Méliès' disappearing magician, starkly opposed to documentary, to the open-eyed wonder of the Lumière brothers' objective camera recording the world as fact. But actually it's not as easy as that. *Com Viet*, a half-hour film, is composed of 10 shots. 3 are empty interiors of the Asian restaurant that gives the film its name, 5 are of other interiors within which the actor moves and talks, and 2 shots are close-ups. All the shots are filmed by an unmoving camera, apart from the second close-up that follows, slightly, the actor's head. But because it is a close-up you barely notice the movement. Formally, *Com Viet* is almost a contemporary Lumière – a real-time window on a well-worn world, revealing its sad and disappointing beauty. The sophisticated tales of possession and literary creation seem at odds with these matter-of-fact views of slow and languid insignificance. Why does Di Bianco call upon these ghosts of early cinema?

The film uses the devices of silent cinema, but only in order to make a film that is constantly talking. Its empty, still spaces are in fact anchored and connected by the close-ups, inasmuch as it is the talking head of the actor



Ballad in Plain D

who provides a *reading* of these spaces that traverses their disparity and emptiness. Reading is the operation of the eye that would make cinema a kind of literature, and an operation of the voice that makes literature a kind of film. Reading becomes in this way the presence of the audio in the visual and the visual in the audio, the presence of literature in cinema and vice versa. But this presence is at once an absence, the presence/absence of the writer, and the actor, as they are seen and heard in the reading of the film. Reading is in this way the mechanism by which Di Bianco is able to explore the audio-visual through the gap that brings them together.

*Dreaming and Drugs* utilises this gap in a new way, compacting and intensifying it to the point of hallucination. It returns us to both the text of Yourcenar and to the ambiguity of a reading that is both a documentary re-enactment and a fictionalisation in its contemporary mise en scène and its male actor. But *Dreaming and Drugs* takes its 'documentary' aspect further than the other films, including a 'voice-off' who asks questions and to whom the actor seems to address his words. Additionally, and unlike the other films, the 'reading' in this film is almost naturalistic, holding to the cadences and rhythms of an animated and everyday speech. This naturalism is further emphasised by the reticence of the camera, by the absolute reduction of its presence, unmoving, to the recording of the performance.

At this moment Di Bianco's work comes closest to a realist cinema in which audio and visual together construct a common space. But then two-thirds through the 25-minute film, in the middle of an account of Dürer's apocalyptic dream, there is a CUT. Dürer himself expresses the violence of this moment, "I was so greatly shocked at this that I awoke", and indeed it is as if we, the viewers, awake, but into a confused state where we are not yet sure what is dream and what is real. In this simple edit we move from a full-length shot of the actor prowling around the unmoving frame of the camera to a half-length shot whose frame follows him. This edit, this CUT, is between documentary and fantasy, between objective and subjective, between word and image. But it is not that on one side there was fact, on the other fiction, because the break between them puts fact and fiction into a relation that results in what Deleuze calls fabulation. This would be the process by which life becomes the fact of making fiction, and cinema – following Yourcenar – abandons the model of truth in order to turn the 'real' into a reading. So whereas the difference between audio and visual at first seems to evaporate into 'reality' in *Dreaming and Drugs*, in fact the mechanism that puts literature and cinema, the audio and the visual, into this realistic contact, emerges in the cut as what also keeps them apart, cuts them asunder, creating a kind of constant vibration from one to the other. In *Dreaming and Drugs* word and image do not lose their separation but their distance becomes



Dreaming and Drugs

the smallest possible, like that between the actor and his reflection in the mirror placed in the room's corner. Like those magical experiences we have while dreaming or under the influence of drugs, it is only their distinction from something we rather naively call the 'real' world that makes them false, and by refusing this distinction Yourcenar and Di Bianco both suggest that reality itself becomes a process of fabulation.

The 'spaces' explored by Di Bianco's films – the spaces of cinema, no less – are therefore defined by reading, they are both audio and visual, fact and fiction, and are composed ('read') through the break that articulates these founding dichotomies. As such, there is no metaphor in Di Bianco's work – the images do not visualize the words and the words don't explain the images. Words and images are not each other's secret or explicit meaning. Thus, Di Bianco's audio-visual cinema is neither fantastic nor documentary, and I would describe it instead as abstract. The films are structured as readings of themselves, they simply echo their own genetic gap. By this I mean that reading the film performs a continuous movement between its constitutive terms, from one to the other, a movement that is not spatial but intense. We move from cinema to literature within the very terms themselves, each calls out to and echoes the other as each other's absence. Two sides of the same page, or lovers living on different sides of the world.

*Ballad in Plain D* introduces several new elements. First of all, there is considerable camera movement; pans and zooms and even a hand-held sequence. This gives the camera a subjective aspect which often leaves the face of the actor to consider the surrounding space. These are not exactly point-of-view shots, but they add a wandering gaze to the images, they give the reading a certain drift. This is emphasised by sequences in which we hear the actor's voice but do not see her talking, creating a space between the audio and the visual which the camera seems to fill. There are also 3 black sequences – 2 towards the beginning, the other at the end of the film – which also seem to materialise the cinematic mechanism of the work, emphasising its conceit. And yet the words tell us of ghosts and of Kafka's experience of life as a kind of noctambulism, the ambiguous status of the writer drifting through life as if in it and yet not quite part of it. The tension here is not between the documentary film and the creative writer, instead the camera occupies the place of the writer, who describes other writers, and so takes its place as one of many ghosts. Unlike *Dreaming and Drugs* and *Com Viet*, the reading of the *Ballad in Plain D* does not describe the gap or absence in which others can appear and live, instead it is the others – the other writers as well as the strange being of the camera itself – who seem ephemeral shadows without bodies walking in the mysterious and crepuscular light of the world. The reading therefore creates another gap, another presence-



Ballad in Plain D

absence of literature and cinema to each other, but now operates through the camera's gaze, somnambulant. This sleepwalking gaze seems to turn the reading almost entirely transparent, as if its audio-visual components revealed each other – like the films of Nabokov – in a never-ending movement of disappearance.

Although Di Bianco's work seems to follow Deleuze's description of modern film, and indeed it is haunted by Straub and Huillet, we find it in an art gallery. What might make it art? Or is this question now without meaning, moving on as we have from the more rigid distinctions between the arts that Deleuze embraced? To a certain extent this is true, and we are now living the victory of the avant-garde where everything, including life, is now art. But this is a victory only insofar as it now allows us to say nothing about everything. Di Bianco's work is too precise for that. Her work is art inasmuch as it refuses a universalised aesthetic state that seems to have been the mechanism by which contemporary art has become indiscernible from life. This is its beauty and its strength. It produces itself through a strict reduction of means that produces a beautifully unnatural style, a slow but thrilling weirdness. The reduction to literature and cinema, and the reduction of both literature and cinema to a reading that operates as their audio-visual echo of each other's absence is, as I have said, abstract. Nothing is represented except, perhaps, for representation's

disappearance in self-reflection. Is this not a most impassioned plea for – or more, the demonstration of – modern art's continued relevance?



Ballad in Plain D

