

The Blind Viewer

Helena Vilalta

After watching Peter Gidal's *Room Film* 1973, Michael Snow commented: 'Your film had to be worked at. I felt... as if it was made by a blind man. I felt that searching tentative quality, the quality of trying to see'<sup>1</sup>. The desire to see anew, as if it was for the first time, a learning to unlearn<sup>2</sup>, is one of the most enduring aspects of Gidal's film practice and theory. A body of material as rich with possibilities as unresolved questions, paradoxes and dead ends. And yet, at a time when artists' moving image has too often become a sheer repository for discourse, a reinvestment in Gidal's attentiveness to the 'coming into presence' of the film may shed light on what these images and sounds do, rather than say. The question remains: how is a critique of image-production enacted, instead of represented?

Black screen. A violin plays the first notes of a 1923 sonata by Eugène Ysaÿe. The shutter of the camera opens and white light floods in. Against the backdrop of four large windows, overlooking leafy green trees, a young woman faces the camera at medium close-up. She appears to be absorbed in the composition. The muscles of her torso and neck seem about to set in motion, yet she remains at a standstill. Her nodding to the increasingly restless musical movements makes apparent her intimate recognition of the piece. Suddenly, the music ends, her torso arches backwards, and the camera follows the laboured choreography of her body across the dance studio. About a minute into the silent dance, she freezes and runs around as if to look towards the camera. The reel finishes, red light spills over, and the screen returns to black.

[p.44]

Should Manon de Boer's 16mm film *Dissonant*<sup>3</sup> end here, it would be a subtle film study of a dancer's interpretation and the subjective embodiment of sound and emotion in space. And yet, the obstruction of the visual field is but another stage of the performance, which incorporates the viewer in a playful displacement between image and sound, perception and memory: just as she responds to a recollected music, we are invited to see by memory. Over the course of the 11-minute film the footage of the dance is twice disrupted by intervals of black leader, which stand for the change of each 3-minute film reel. Bereft of any visual references, the spectator is only left with the aural record of the ongoing performance to imagine the movements of the dancer. The spectacle no longer depends upon the gaze of the beholder, and the viewer turned listener is invited to reconsider what it might be to see and listen in the first place.

This looping choreography is repeated several times over the course of the film, adding to the disorientation of the viewer. As the gestures of the dancer overlay in our memory, the boundaries between rehearsal and performance, score and improvisation, structure and change become blurred. Repeatedly falling down only to stand up again, moving in circles or engaging in an energetic wrestle against imaginary adversaries, hers is a dance full of self-contradictory tensions. Her discontinuous movements respond to the dissonances of the inaudible score, and are punctuated by moments of hesitance and attentive concentration. Suddenly her body remains at a standstill, as if trying to mentally tune-in to the reminisced music before resuming movement. Charged with great internal tension, these moments of stillness in-between choreographic figures paradoxically concentrate and interrupt the movement of the dance.

The rupture of the imagery doubles the

[p.45]

suspension of meaning prompted by the hesitations of the dancer. Just as she seems to absent herself from representation, the visual interruptions invite the viewer to step for a moment outside of the illusory movement of images. Following on the detachment of her movements from the music, *Dissonant* aims at emancipating, if only transiently, the viewer's imagination from the dictate of an unfolding chain of images. The expanded intervals inbetween each take open up temporary spaces of indeterminacy, which frame, yet not fully predetermine, the experience of the viewer. The film almost becomes a musical score, compelling him to perform an interpretation of images, rather than read a meaning into them. In this way, the vanishing of representation comes close to the concept of silence in John Cage's work: it is not so much an eviction of meaning as an invitation to a heightened state of perception.

*For in this new music nothing takes place but sounds; those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment.*<sup>4</sup>

As opposed to the trite definition of film as a transparent window onto the world, the 'open doors' of Manon de Boer's films are rather an invitation to divert the attention of the spectator from what is on-screen to what remains off-frame. As much as resisting to close down meaning, the visually blank intervals in *Dissonant* materialise what Gidal has called the 'coming into presence of the film': 'the system of consciousness that produces the work, that is produced by and in it.'<sup>5</sup> In a similar way to the visualisation of splices in structuralist film, these intervals perform a contradictory function, acting both as 'image and process, interruptive and its opposite'.<sup>6</sup> Their blankness foregrounds the technical manufacture of the film, as much as film-viewing as production. But, perhaps most significantly, in the transposition

[p. 46]

from the images to the sounds of the dance, they shift the spectator's attention from the achievement of her movements towards her arduous labor – her panting and labouring breathing, the shuffle of her footwork. Indeed, *Dissonant* is as much an experimental film about perception and memory as a documentary portrait of an artist at work.

Without doing away with representation, Manon de Boer operates a subtle yet significant shift within the normative hierarchies of the film apparatus: she creates images to be listened to and sounds to be seen. Consider under this light the opening image of the film. The frontal framing of the portrait makes apparent the staging of the scene. She is posing for the camera. And yet, her slightly titled glance avoids meeting the viewer's gaze and its surrogate, the camera. We face her image, but we share an aural space with her: the violin sonata. The rhythmic variations and the shifting timbre of the music reverberate in the expressions of her face, the gestures of her neck, the shutting of her eyelids. Yet her thoughts remain impenetrable to the eyes of the viewer. What we see is the surface of an image, opaque and inscrutable, which obstructs any illusion of psychological depth. In exposing the vulnerability of her image, as it allows to be affected by the music, her portrait becomes a resonating surface: an image in permanent state of becoming.

*The idea of opening the windows and doors is, I think, not just about the connection between the interior space of the concert hall and the outside world, but also about the connection between the outside world and the inner space of the body and the imagination.<sup>7</sup>*

Rigorously interrogating the image, Manon de Boer's work can be embraced within the paradoxical task of a structuralist practice, which persistently comes up against the limits of representation. Contrasting with the emphasis

on disembodied forms of production in Gidal's definition of materialist film, *Dissonant* places the becoming subject of the performer, of the dancer as much as of the viewer, at centre stage. The film is first and foremost an inscription of a body as it demarcates a space. As the image vanishes from the frame, her breathing and the sounds of her movement envelop the blind viewer, profoundly upsetting any sense of control over the scene. In this blacked out stage, the spectator is compelled to find new ways to orient his own movements in the imaginary space of the film. The desire to see is thus diverted into an invitation to act; the relations between what and how is being represented coalesce in the production of a subjectivity in making.

In Manon de Boer's film-essay *Resonating Surfaces*, cultural critic Suely Rolnik reminisces her participation in the counter-cultural resistance against the intense repression of the Brazilian military dictatorship in the late sixties, which lead to her imprisonment and subsequent exile to Paris. Rolnik's narration traces what was for her a traumatic divorce between two political attitudes: a struggle for a perceptual and emotional emancipation and a politically militant resistance, each showing a complete disregard for the other. Manon de Boer's film practice stands at a similar intersection. The discrepancy between images and sounds in her work speaks of a commitment to resist the language codes of a spectacular regime of images, inviting viewers instead to become blind to what has been seen for them. At the same time, however, her films voice an obstinate urge to see and hear in darkness.

## Footnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Snow, Michael, September 1973, quoted by Peter Gidal, 'Theory and Definition of Structural / Materialist Film', *Structural Film Anthology*, London: BFI, 1978, p.17

<sup>2</sup> Borrowing a famous line from the poem, 'what we see of things is things' by Alberto Caeiro. Pessoa, Fernando, *The Collected Poems of Alberto Caeiro*, Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007

<sup>3</sup> de Boer, Manon, *Dissonant*, 2010. 16mm film installation, colour, Loop / 11"  
[see Appendix viii for image]

<sup>4</sup> Cage, John, 'Experimental Music', *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, London: Marion Boyars, 1980, p.7-8

<sup>5</sup> Gidal, Peter, 'Theory and Definition of Structural / Materialist Film', *Structural Film Anthology*, London: BFI, 1978, p.2

<sup>6</sup> Gidal, Peter, *Materialist Film*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 108-109

<sup>7</sup> *Resonating Surfaces* is the title of a 2005 film-essay by Manon de Boer. It refers to Suely Rolnik's concept of a 'resonant body', which stems from her analysis of Lygia Clark's project Estructuração do self ('Self Structuring'), developed between 1976 and 1988.

[p.61]