

The trip as a script

Mobility as a tool for creation in artist's cinema

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The article's intent is to analyze aspects of artist's cinema connected to the issue of mobility and, therefore, to the context of globalization and of cultural transnationalism. These works are part of a specific segment in art in which the displacement, the journey, and / or the walk itself assume a major role in the creative process. They are relevant because they push us to reflect on the issue of mobility at the same time that they collaborate to expand the borders in moving images.

Sometimes I wonder why I went left,
while I might have had to go right...
(Raymond Depardon, Errance)

Introduction

The journey has always been a source of inspiration explored in many different ways in films from all over the world. The list of these productions is so vast that road movie has become a genre in cinema. In most cases, the itineraries of the trip appear not only as the place for the story but as a main character. Eventually it is also an element that would open up a space in the script making room for improvisation in the film.

In artist's cinema, which can be generally understood as a specific segment in moving images based on principles of both production and distribution much more related to art, documentary and experimental cinema than the usual cinema industry, the journey – more than a source of inspiration – can become an active tool for creation. It places the artists in a modified state of mind and of contact with the environment around him. The artists can then make use of this condition to produce artworks expressing a personal, critical and poetic point of view about the world.

This article is part of the beginning of a study based on the notion of voluntary uprooting as creative process. Responsible for breaking the time and space instances of the daily existence, here the uprooting is an engine for the production, being understood as a permanent and continuous exercise of creation in a dialectic movement of refinement of the personal gaze. The voluntary uprooting is an artistic position that determines a production in a context of mobility at the same time that it is a critic position of dialogue and understanding face today's world.

Here I intent to analyze aspects of artist's cinema connected to the issue of mobility and, therefore, to the context of globalization, of liberal global market and of cultural transnationalism. These works are part of a specific segment in art in which the displacement, the journey, and/or the walk itself assume a major role in the creative process. They are relevant because they push us to reflect on the issue of mobility at the same time that they collaborate to expand the borders in moving images.

By the adoption of this specific approach and by the selection of the artworks presented here, I also suggest the existence of a particular group of works that is considerably influenced by practices of the so called art in context. Described by Michel De Certeau (1990) as "the practice of everyday life" and by Paul Ardenne (2002) as a "contextual art", this is a segment in art in which the artist places his creative process directly in contact with the reality around him. He puts himself in movement in order to discover cities and roads, urban and natural spaces, a new land or his own native place. The displacement here is not just a way of movement in space, but equally a psychological phenomenon, a tool for imagination and production. This "cineplastic" – taking the concept by Thierry Davila (2002, p.21) – transforms the city into a stage for creation. In my point of

view, there is a visible connection between contextual art and some of the audiovisual works produced in the context of mobility, which were not included in the discourse of these authors due to the purposes of their publications. Most of them emphasize objects, interventions and performative actions in public spaces.

The aim here is to identify the elements involved in the production of films, videos and video-installations made by artists and analyze this aesthetic of mobility. The idea is also to understand how the journey as a space open to knowledge of the elsewhere and the other can become a protocol for the shooting. I am going to present some of these aspects examining some of the principles of these productions, which would appear as different genres ranging from documentaries to personal essays, from performative actions to fiction. In the body of work mentioned here, besides artists and documentary filmmakers I have decided to include also particular projects of cinema directors that show a distinct creative process, which are not the most representatives in their career.

A voluntary state of movement

With the global establishment of a new order related to technological and media resources, as well as the reorganization of socio-economic and geographical networks, the concept of mobility is increasingly becoming an important issue in moving images, both in cinema and contemporary art. Before we head to the production in artist's cinema it seems important to specify here the exact context of mobility where the productions analyzed take place.

The issue of mobility often evokes two different processes concerning groups of people that are placed in movement in our globalized world: forced and voluntary uprooting. In contrast to studies based on the collective nature of groups forced into exile due to war, poverty, or social and political conflicts, this article is dedicated to the singularity of a voluntary gaze. It focuses on the group that benefits from an expanded mobility, on the individual that can be understood as a global citizen, simultaneously transiting between a city-world, the "virtual métacité" as named by Paul Virilio (1984), and the world-city. If in the artworks related to forced exile the political aspects can be seen right through its content, in the ones connected to voluntary displacement they tend to appear more integrated in its form.

The question of mobility lays on the dialectical relationship between the Local and the Global. According to Marc Augé (2009, p.34), the “world as a city” represents the ideal and the ideology of the globalization system, while the “city as a world” expresses the historical contradictions and tensions determined by this very system. The mobility of the global alien is forced and he/she is frequently occupied with a sense of belonging, both to the country of origin and/or to the receiving country, while the presence of the global citizen is welcomed and his mobility is desirable. The situation of the first is normally connected to a group of people in similar condition, as the second steps out alone.

Among the global citizens we can identify a psychological and a geographic voluntary uprooting as well as a change of focus from the national identities to an individual singularity. This singularity is referred by Giorgio Agamben (1990, p.9) as a “whatever singularity”. But it is important to notice that the understanding of “whatever” should not be defined by indifference but based on the Latin translation of “being such that it always matters”. This kind of “crossroad-individual” that is currently emerging, a hybrid of different cultural influences, is described by Nicolas Bourriaud (2009, p.58) as being a “radicant”: “this contemporary subject, caught between the need for a connection with its environment and the forces of uprooting, between globalization and singularity, between identity and opening to the other”. These are attributes that are been shaped gradually and can certainly be conflicting when these individuals are confronted with their pairs or more widely with the society.

In this context it is, of course, Walter Benjamin’s figure of the wanderer (flâneur) who appears as a major historical reference. His experience is the freedom to displace, observing and being observed, but almost never interacting with the other. A similar figure in literature is the stranger. These heroes of modernity share the possibility and the perspective of the solitary traveller, of the voluntarily uprooted, of the anonymous arrival into a new place. They are closely linked to the living conditions in the flux of the cities of their time.

Displacement, exile, drift, crossing, wandering, roaming, etc. are all figures of mobility, and each one shows a specific aspect of it. The common point and maybe the reason why mobility becomes so important in the artworks is related to the fact that the journey places

the artist in a modified psychological and relational state. This modified state allows him/her to be open to new and random encounters, and decentralize himself/herself, being in a position to think differently. It forces him/her to leave his/her comfortable zone, to overcome inertia, and to produce. It also brings fruitful imaginations to be associated to stories and mythologies of the road between the ambivalences of the local and the global. The journey points out to a distinct reality in which the way to observe, think and react with the environment are not ordinary.

A journey is generally based on the trinomial composed by departure, displacement and return. Each one of these stages reveals a particular state of mind, fed with different expectations about what is ahead. If very often it is motivated by a more or less specific impulse, the journey does not necessarily have to be driven by a clear, logic or understandable reason, and it is not rare to be a goal in itself. The fact is that the movement is the entrance door for an unmediated geographical and cultural experience, for everyone's personal will of a better understanding of the self and the other, of the space between here and there. As in an experimental creative process, the movement is an entrance for one to step into the unknown.

Artist's cinema: notes on the context of production

If cinema gives us a vast repertory on the issue of mobility, which comes out essentially as content within the films, artist's cinema on the other hand tends to make a distinct point, integrating the components of mobility also in the artwork's form. In the traditional cinema the narrative organizes these components in a quite clear manner (even in a non-linear story), showing us the whole piece: cause, event and consequences. But in contemporary art it is not surprising to see artworks that show a fragmented, abstract, provocative, intuitive or more personal approach.

Even if the journey gives the director in traditional cinema a certain degree of freedom to improvise in productions like road movies, at the end they are still committed to a story. The road can feed them with inspiration and with assets they would have never thought about before the start of the shooting, but the fact is that – in almost all cases – a script is meant to be completed. We can say that in cinema the production of a film always foresees a precise final result.

In certain productions in artist's cinema (likewise in some documentaries, and in exceptional cases in cinema) the trip gets notably more relevance than the story itself. The story can be reduced to an inspiration, a referential, or a vague starting point for the production, or even replaced by new protocols of creation. The content of the film may not be defined or known until the itinerary begins and the events take place. The journey in such way can truly define the production of the artwork.

Artist's cinema is plural and does not follow a standard structure; it is diverse in its means of production and display as well as in its genres and forms. In terms of production it is noticeable that an increasing variety of protocols for both creation and display have been used, collaborating to emerge an aesthetic of mobility and proposing new space- and time-based experiences to the audience. Beyond the subversion of traditional narratives structures – which is a constant concern of cinema itself – these protocols for creation and display expand the concept of film (usually based on the single channel screen and on a limited or pre-determined length of time).

Moving images more art-orientated also invest in experimentation and eventually in the use of recent media and devices, for both creation and display. Everything in terms of equipment tends to be more compact, flexible and immediate compared to the traditional cinema industry (although the industry itself sometimes intends to follow this direction as a trend). That is not to say that, instead of working with a big crew, most of the artists only have a very small team or even work alone. All connected, these factors contribute to a significant difference in the aesthetic elements presented in the artworks.

The need for freedom in terms of movement and immediacy during the travel pushes the artists to create networks and to make use of equipment that are better adapted to their practices. Very often they work in connection with artist-in-residence programs in a foreign country. These programs allow the artists to work abroad having another geographical base and a certain structure in (or closer to) the location he wants to put himself in. The equipment that is used in this context is generally small and light, which allows the artist to go on a trip carrying nothing more than a backpack – a mobility concept that had already been extensively explored by Glauber Rocha. The backpack becomes “the artist's studio” and he

can basically work everywhere, since almost all the equipment is digital and the images are stored in files that can be easily transferred, even by internet or phone

Currently, artists and independent filmmakers still keep exploring the possibilities of the use of films, either 35 mm, 16 mm or the immortal super 8 mm. However, they specially welcome digital formats and supports, such as HDV, 3GP cell phone videos, internet streaming etc. Beyond the handy video cameras – that long ago gradually started to replace film cameras –, the artists also make use of DSLR cameras, handy sound recorders, cell phones, laptop computers, customized applications and software, GPS, and other portable devices, which all allow the development of new practices of creation taking in consideration a geographical location or a shift in space.

In terms of display, the process is not different. More and more the perspective is open for projections and interactivity out of the limits of the cinema. Video-installations, multi-screen projections, programming language based software, and a multitude of other new media offer experiences there are rather different than those in the traditional movie theater. Issues related to temporality, rhythm and length can be expanded from the film itself to the place of display.

The journey and the elsewhere as a tool for creation

The journey sets up the context for production and appears as a space for creation and personal adventure. The principle of nomadism becomes the state of the artistic work. This aesthetics is fed with the movement and insists on the poetic necessity of the departure, on an experience that can only take place elsewhere. Some works focus on the itineraries and the roads as other on the places themselves. Between other specificities of these productions there is the fact that very often the process reaches the same relevance than the final result as well as a strong interest on the traceability and the cartography. The artworks frequently are a circuit connecting one place to the other.

Artists and directors combine both the production process and the experience of displacing itself, in a continuous exercise of creation. Presenting a higher or lower degree of intervention by the artist according to the nature of the project, these productions

would range from documentaries to personal essays, from performative actions to fiction.

Documentary approaches

In some cases the artworks have a more documental approach in which the role of the artist is to capture the images trying to interfere as less as possible on the subjects. These productions share similar aspects with genres in documentaries and experimental cinema, where the act of observation seems to come out as the main source for the experience. Landscapes, cities and people will be the target of an accurate gaze.

A filmmaker that shows a remarkable look on the environment is James Benning. With an extreme minimalistic aesthetics in both the concept and the structure, Benning is able to capture the images of the places and organize them in long films that offer the viewer a beautiful level of contemplation and a positively immersion in his landscape films.

13 Lakes (16mm / 135 min. / 2004) and *Ten Skies* (16mm / 109 min. / 2004) are good instances of that immersion. As simple as indicate the titles both films are composed by a determined numbers of shots and are simply organized in sequence. Taking about 10 minutes each shot in these films is still, there is no movement of camera. The frame is totally dedicated to the landscape. *13 Lakes* presents different regions across the United States and its frame is equally distributed between the sky and the water. The horizon line is right in the middle. Following basically the same process *Ten Skies* shows a series of skylscapes, filmed in a journey around Val Verde, California. This minimal and precise configuration intensifies the experience of duration at the same time as it reveals new perceptions related to scale, ephemerality and the cinematic frame. In the stillness of the frame in both works we can see a richly and subtle change of light and shadows conjugated with the natural elements: water, vegetation and clouds. It is interesting to notice the tension hidden in the length of time of the images. The shots show mostly a desert landscape, but in specific moments clearly affected by the human presence.

While Benning has chosen the fixed frame, the Canadian filmmaker and artist Michael Snow has done the opposite. His work called *La région centrale* (The central region / 16mm / 180 min. /

1971) is centered on the landscape and precisely on the camera movement, one the most basic elements on the film medium. Michael Snow presents us a principle of autonomy of the camera. The work is a monumental three-hour movie shot on a deserted mountain, in which a system was designed in order to rotate the camera without the need of an operator and being able to do complete 360 degree movements, craning skyward and in circles in all directions. Due to the unconventional camera movement, the artwork leads the matter beyond the landscape documented in the film.

From the deserted landscapes through the roads to the city we meet David Lynch and his *Interview Project* (video / variable length / 2009). In a completely different project compared with his fiction movies the director has produced a documentary composed by 121 parts which showcases interviews with ordinary people. If the way of production is peculiar, determined by the encounters he has in the roads, its way of display is also not conventional. These interviews are displayed in the artist's website releasing a new episode every three days for the entire year. In his description David Lynch explicitly points out the character of chance within the project that is created based on random encounters along the journey:

"Interview Project is a road trip where people have been found and interviewed. People should watch Interview Project because they are going to meet hundreds of people. There was no plan really for Interview Project. That people who were interviewed each was different. Interview Project is a twenty-thousand mile road trip over seventy days across and back the United States."

The film-essay

From the position of observation and documental approach some artists would also add a layer of personal reflexions, very often expressed by his/her own voice, composing a sort of essay, diary or notes on the journey. A director (and photographer) who will take the camera in his travels with a remarkable sense of discovery is Raymond Depardon. His films are often a witness of his presence in a region that attracts the attention of his gaze. *New York, NY* (35 mm / 10 min. / 1986) is a black and white film composed by three se-

quence shots that result on a panoramic view of the city. The shots are associated with the voice of Depardon, describing – in an auto-critic discourse – the experience to make this very same film in the American city.

In a film produced ten years later, *Afriques, comment ça va avec la douleur?* (Africa, how are you with pain? / 35 mm / 165 min. / 1996), Depardon is even more expressive and fully opens up the context of the work and of his position as a director. At the beginning, he insists on exposing his thoughts inside the film. So as there would be no distinction between what is the acting of filming and the film itself as a final result. Here is how he begins the film:

“Hello. I am here at the Cape of Good Hope, right at the extremity of the African continent, alone with my camera and my amateur tripod. I’m on the highest sand dune that I have found, facing the sea. It’s very windy; I’m not very comfortable, but ready to shoot. It’s winter, a late afternoon of July. I take the opportunity to make use of the light and I improvise my first shot.

That’s it. I am starting a journey. This is not a road movie. This is not a work of investigative journalism. I’ll try to observe and listen to the ordinary pain in Africa. Subjective journey, necessarily, through my desires, but also my fears. Don’t worry; I will not try to overwhelm you. I hope I’m not going to shoot always the same things.

I don’t know my stops, I prefer to improvise, let myself to be guided. I don’t know in advance what I’ll shoot, what my meetings will be.”

The film begins and everything is clear. The viewer is invited on the trip. Depardon is aware of all issues related to the image. He works in a critic and auto-critic manner.

In the film *Tokyo-Ga* (16 and 35 mm / 92 min. / 1985), Wim Wenders had decided to make his first trip to Japan a tribute to director Yasujiro Ozu and an investigation about the Japanese modernity. It is a deeply personal movie, which gives us a small sample of life in Japan and the director’s view. Wenders goes to Japan moti-

vated to know what he could find or meet, as he explains in the beginning of the film:

“And so, my trip to Tokyo was in no way a pilgrimage. I was curious as to whether I still could track down something from this time, whether there was still anything left of this work. Images, perhaps, or even people. Or whether so much would have changed in Tokyo in the twenty years since Ozu’s death, that nothing would be left to find.”

Wenders goes through the city and meet people. The film focuses on the figure of Ozu and his films. The interviews with the actor Chishu Ryu and the cameraman Yuuharu Atsuta reveal a bit about the man behind the icon of the director. The result, however, is also a film about Wim Wenders, about his gaze and his way to become himself a director.

Creative protocols

In order to replace the predetermined script and embark on the adventure of the unpredictability, directors and artists will create personal protocols to trigger the production of the work. This principle, which is a recent trend in the audiovisual works and appears in varied ways, is often described by the generic term of “creation device” or “creative protocol”. They mostly give priority to space and instant, improvisation and chance. The term is certainly problematic as it allows to be comprehended in different ways and as it could be used to refer to most kind of procedures related to the arts. However, this is the way how it is widely used by critics to describe the strategy to subvert or to create new structures of the discourse in moving images.

The creative protocol can be understood as a tool capable of guiding the production of an artwork without a predetermined script. The main principle is not to tell a story delimited in advance, but to create a field of situations that will lead to the creation. In a practical way the creative device is the elaboration of a certain logic, rules, parameters and limits for the film to take place. As points out Cezar Migliorin (2005), the device is “the introduction of guidelines in a selected universe. The artist determines space, time, actors or characters in a universe and adds to it something that will force

movements and connections between them (characters, technicians, climate, technical appliances, geography, etc.) “.

Without the script, it is the journey, the walk, or the itinerary that will determine the creation of the artwork. In this case they are not only subjects of the works but an effective condition to be experienced, which can be directly related to the action of the artist or to a testimony of an event in the world. The film is then made *in situ* and in an almost “live” situation, being shaped from the stimulations of the visit through the proposed itinerary. It is susceptible to interference of chance and imprevisibility as the control over its content slips away from the hands of the author. The work reveals then the ambivalence: part of it is controllable and precise (which is determined by the protocol of creation) as other part is incapable of being anticipated (the events that will occur).

Creative protocols simultaneously blend the act observation/understanding of the space around with the act of production. They trigger the situation to be experienced in a certain place at the same time they produce an artwork, a final result that keeps the memory of the experience beyond the present moment. The artistic practice understood as a continuous research feeds the author with both aesthetics and personal knowledge, in a process that – retaking a modern utopia – seems to express the indistinct desire to live and to produce at the same time.

In the body of work of the Brazilian artist and filmmaker Cao Guimarães we can identify some particular protocols for creation. In the video *Acidente* (Accident / super 8mm and miniDV on DV / 72 min. / 2006), co-directed by Pablo Lobato, the creative device takes places as a poem structured by twenty names of towns of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. The artwork is driven by imprevisibility and chance. Guided by such names the artists visit the towns for their very first time. “The poem-device becomes a machine to produce images and acquires, as all devices, a certain power over the artist” (Lins, 2007).

The poem leads the artist in a continuous itinerary. The camera observes the everyday routine and reveals details about life in these small towns. This images show different aspects of the local in these regions, a universe that has its own bases and not connected to global strategies. Time in these places is different as is also different the contact of people with each other. The shots produced by the

artists are meant to correspond to this specific frame of space and time. As an immersion, the video is made through two layers of narrative: one related to the story of the poem and the other connected to the everyday life events, which appear accidentally in front of the camera in each of the cities.

The film *Ação e Dispersão* (Action and dispersion / DV / 6 min. / 2002) by Cezar Migliorin is also a travel device, and with a political component. The film was produced with public funding received from a prize for audiovisual production. In this performance-film the artist put in discussion the cultural politics and the circuit of cultural distribution. The director travels alone with his camera and the money to produce the film. He goes through several different countries. He records all means of travel he uses, all places where he sleeps and all kinds of food he eats. The only rule he adopts is never to stay two nights in the same city. He continues his journey randomly until the money of the prize is over.

Fiction

As a vast source of imagination the journey will also feed the creation of the plot or the story in fictions. However, instead of being precise the narratives tend to show a quite minimal scrip. The story does exist but rather not as the center of the work.

The video-installation *En la pampa* (In the pampa / HD-CAM / five projection video installation / variable length / 2008) by Jordi Colomer is one of the artworks that are representatives of the way how the journey can build up the story in a fiction. In this installation, composed by five video projections, the artist invites a man and a woman to live certain situations in the Atacama Desert, in the north of Chile. These two people, that are not professional actors, did not know each other before the shooting. They will go through this region in the search of a story that does not exist beforehand. All the dialogues were created naturally from the contact between them and the landscapes. Considering the way as the installation was displayed at Jeu de Paume (in Paris, in 2008), five screens are placed in different positions within the room. Each projection displays a different scene of the story. To be able to access the whole content the visitor has to displace himself, standing in front of each one. The screens show a variable running time and are set in loop. The visitor is free to watch the scenes in the sequence he wants.

Acts of presence

The presence of the artist itself can also become an element in the creation. Based on the reality, some of these artworks show us particular discourses and gestures of the artist, as well as acts that affirm his presence face of the world. Between different figures of the wanderer and the traveller, the explorer is very often connected to the incursion to desert and remote lands.

Nummer acht (Number eight / 16 mm to HD / 10 min. / 2007) is an impressive artwork by the Dutch artist Guido van der Werve. The film shows a huge ice breaker ship making his way through a frozen sea in a remote region of Finland. In front of it the small figure of the artist walks few meters ahead, as if he has to lead the way. In this monumental image the short distance between the artist and the ship, and the real imminence of a danger, makes you hold your breath. As typical of his work, this romantic figure is associated with a certain degree of irony on both the indifference how he walks in front of the ship as well as on the subtitle of the artwork “everything is going to be alright”.

A similar image is that made by the Russian artist – and graduate from the Higher Engineering Marine School – Alexander Ponomarev, in a performance called *Baffin Figure* (Video / 2006). Restituted as video and as photographs this is a performance in which the artist attaches himself in the front part of a ship. The ship goes through the open Baffin Sea, a marginal sea of the North Atlantic Ocean, located between Baffin Island and the southwest coast of Greenland.

Conclusion

Artist’s cinema made in the context of mobility pushes us to reflect on contemporary issues related to our globalized world at the same time it also questions the audiovisual production itself. Such works are somehow like heirs of experimental cinema and the old Glauber Rocha’s principle of making cinema with “a camera in the hand and an idea in the head”. This production looks backwards and recognizes the itineraries of moving images throughout the years, at the same time it looks to the future and tries to find out what are to be the new audiovisual works.

These works serve as a way to observe the environment, give room for improvisation, present personal discourses, replace the

predetermined script by new protocols for creation, inspire fictions and allow the artist to mark his presence. They also can determine a critical attitude face to the established notions and indicate us changes in social institutions such as family, place of origin and nation. They show us a particular aesthetics related to the mobility, in which their elements suggest a skepticism about stability, roots, certainty and order.

Produced independently in the sphere of contemporary art or experimental cinema, these works explore many and different paths in the field of moving images. Through its dimensions of production and distribution set out of the strict and alienating rules of industrial or commercial cinema, these artworks allow us to believe that the artistic production resists not only as an inventive, but also democratic and liberating space. These audiovisual productions made in the context of mobility push us to important reflections about the art's universe and our daily social universe. They collaborate to the renewal the field of moving images, to the understanding of our time, and to the establishment of a critical and poetic consciousness of the world.

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