Screens

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But Who Actually Watched Mark Lewis’s Films at the Louvre?¹

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The four films created by Mark Lewis for his work *Invention au Louvre*² are projected in a room that is not really a room, as this beautiful rectangular space is also a thoroughfare leading to an elevator from which visitors come and go. It is adjacent to the wide and endless corridor along which are displayed the monumental elements that allow visitors to imagine the building of the Louvre from the 15th century, thanks to a reconstruction that is underlined by the light shed on it by Joseph Kosuth’s contemporary art piece *Neither Appearance nor Illusion*, an installation comprising of discontinuous sentences whose immense sparkling letters are displayed on the upper part of the walls, along with architectural reconstructions of the Louvre.

It was by chance that, one day in December 2014, when I first saw these films by Mark Lewis in the “Salle de la Maquette,” I had planned to meet some foreign friends there, forgetting the maddening queue that visitors now have to go face if they are not lucky enough to have advance tickets or member’s passes. I had to wait for them a long time, taking this opportunity to watch repeatedly, until they arrived and then with them, the four films dedicated by Mark Lewis to four spaces of the Louvre and showing both the spaces themselves and the many artworks, paintings, and sculptures exhibited in them.

Mark Lewis has made many films (89 to date since 1995, if we are to believe his website) and despite the extreme variety of objects and situations chosen by him, what they all have in common is that they subscribe to a point of view about the moving image similar to what Henri Michaux called for in painting in his 1945 provocative text “Combat contre l’espace.”³ Which meant, for Michaux, a fight against all the metamorphoses of perspective that, like an inner demon, constantly innervates and devours painting. Adopting, in terms of the material body of the image itself, unlike other experimental artists, a perfectly conventional point of view based on a beautiful and often high definition of photographic or digital images. Mark Lewis’s films voluntarily disrupt their perceptual order through two main approaches, both related to the obstinate continuity of filming (one must add to this the corrosive disruption of the editing phase in the rare – and older – works, in which he seems to adopt a narrative perspective to ruin it even
more): on the one hand, the intangible fixity of the shot within which the elements of reality keep appearing until reaching a kind of exhaustion; on the other, essentially and increasingly, more or less chimerical camera movements whose formalizing power has been dramatically increased, to the point of becoming improbable, through the use of both new visual devices and the illusionist virtues of digital processing.

The paradox of these shots that succeed each other, like wisps of smoke driven by an automatic energy, is that they require an attention that struggles to understand the interest of the motifs that endlessly appear, submitted to the gentle action of a movement with no apparent determination. Such attention requires perception to fix itself on what it keeps seeing if the aim is not to miss any of it. In a beautiful tribute to James Benning, musician Michael Pisaro explained how, when watching his long – but imperceptibly animated – fixed shots, one could go so far as to prevent oneself to blink for fear of missing a subtle transformation occurring unexpectedly in parts of the image.\(^4\) Referring to experimental music, he emphasized the unusual calm that then descends on the mind. So that “by means of duration, each work, he finally added, creates its own definite kind of stillness.”\(^5\)

But Mark Lewis’s films are quite different, as it is the movement of the body as such and the patiently traveled distance, that, ideally, require similar attention. Unlike Benning’s films, intended for theatrical release, which favors the concentration of the spectator, Mark Lewis’s films are mainly displayed in galleries and museums, in which a variable level of distraction is usually the norm. But even when accepting the hypothesis of an attentive visitor, this attention immediately seems more threatened in front of his films than in front of those of the Californian filmmaker, whose continuity remains anchored in a sound world that gives them a certain level of reality, since the perfect silence in which they are immersed significantly increases the physical sensation one has when feeling divided between the perception of the movement itself and that of the motifs that it constantly reveals. For the viewer, it results in a kind of mental intermittence, difficult to describe, oscillating between moments of extreme concentration and moments of unavoidable distraction that is immediately corrected to give oneself the misleading assurance that nothing has been missed. Such an impression increases when the movement of the camera, just after the beginning of \textsc{In Search of the Blessed Ranieri} for example, suddenly starts to show – in a quite improbable way – the upper part of the museum, where one can hardly imagine that a real camera can reach. Knowing that this shot was made, not by actual filming but thanks to thousands of digital photographs assembled by computer to produce a virtual movement, does not really help, as all these stubbornly continued movements already seem virtual through the exponential use of the Steadicam. It is rather the physical confusion offered to the eye that surprises and attracts. A similar effect is obtained, in another way, in \textsc{The Night}
Gallery, filmed among a wealth of ancient statues, where the intermittent variations of light and shade accompanying the movement that seems to animate them, develop around these motionless bodies a perceptive beat that submits the gaze even more to its conditions of possibility.

This is where, captivated as I was by these flexible and immovable trajectories that revealed to me, without seeming to, so many nuances, shades, and motifs through so many known, unknown, or forgotten paintings, I finally asked myself who had actually watched Mark Lewis’s films at the Louvre. Starting with me, it seemed the conditions of projection might have been too adverse to the sustained effort required from the viewer willing to watch them: viewers were invited to sit on one of three benches facing the screen on which the films were projected one after the other, only separated by a black frame, as if to further accentuate the illusion of a single movement whose phases were listed on a display placed at the entrance to the room, which also provided the titles of the films, thus making them recognizable. The image offered to the viewers was indeed not as sharp as it could have been due to the large open curtain letting in the light coming from the large corridor housing the reconstructions of the buildings of the Louvre. On top of which, there was the close proximity of the mock screening room that hosted the projection of Kosuth’s cryptic unfinished sentence with its twinkling letters (“Le mur entre dans le champ du visible jusqu’à l’endroit où une maquette d’ensemble du palais est posée. Une première réflexion, puis un”). Thus, leaving the flow of more or less noisy visitors walking along the vast corridor, occasional visitors poked their heads in or actually came in, sometimes sitting on one of the benches, probably to persuade themselves that they would see images.

“This is not a film for children!” warns a voice outside, shortly before a museum attendant, coming from the elevator, crosses the whole room, loudly clip-clopping on the floor with her big heels. A little later, a whole group of mothers with their strollers, loudly babbling in the dark as if crossing the concourse of a train station. Later, three men came in and sat next to me; I remember that, of all the visitors who came in during the two hours I was there that day in December in front of Mark Lewis’s films, it is them who stayed the longest, a few long minutes, talking to each other, one of them whistling, the other playing with his iPhone. I stopped taking note then, trying, while surrounded by my vigilant friends who had finally arrived and who started watching all the films along with me, to fight against all the combined forces that deterred me to actually watch Mark Lewis’s films.

Three months later, I arrived in the screening room again, right in the middle of Pyramid in which, filming the ground beneath the Pyramid of the Louvre, Mark Lewis uses a 180° inverted image effect he had already used when revisiting, in his own way, in 1997 in Upside Down Touch of Evil, the famous sequence shot during the opening scene of Orson Welles’s film – museum visi-
tors also being shown walking upside down, doubled by their shadows, across the open space leading to the exhibition rooms.

It is 2:10 pm. I am sitting on the front bench beside an attentive woman. A group of people comes in, one of them says: “It’s a projection,” and all leave. A family of three arrives, the daughter sits with one buttock on the bench to my left, the parents look as if they have been stopped in their tracks, ready to escape, she gets up almost immediately, they move away. 2:15 pm. An old man comes in, sits and leaves immediately. The woman sitting to my right asks me if there are several films following each other. I answer her question. She goes out to have a look at the display outside and comes back, relieved to know where she is at in what she’s watching. We are alone. A couple enters; they sit behind us, speaking loudly. Two strollers arrive from the back of the room. A Japanese visitor comes in, stares at the screen, turns round twice and then leaves. Someone comes up, stops, takes a photo with his iPad and leaves. A young woman leans against the entrance door just long enough to catch the long movement revolving around the *Victory of Samothrace*. Still chatting, the couple gets up and leaves. 2:25 pm. My faithful screening companion abandons me. A horde of people comes from behind and leaves while, in the huge room, a crowd of visitors are attracted by the artworks. Then others tumble through the open door, while a guide accompanying a group points toward us to underline the details to take note of in a painting. I try to imagine what goes on in the heads of these people who may have come to the Louvre to see paintings and who seem so little interested in seeing themselves see, in feeling, in the relentless nature of the movement that takes place on the screen, an exalted sign of the substantial change that would seize them if they accepted to expose themselves to the differences of art through time. I am alone in front of *La Grande Odalisque* by Ingres. I would prefer, like Cézanne, a Venus by Titian, but no matter. What a blessed solitude, despite the sound and light in the distance. Someone comes through the door just long enough to take a picture, his camera caressing a painting; he takes out some biscuits, noise of crumpled paper, talks to a friend who just came in, then they both disappear. A woman sitting behind me wants to get up, her husband stops her, she frees herself from his grasp and leaves, he joins her immediately. A couple arrives, leaves, the woman’s high heels make a lot of noise. I stop taking note, which distracts me even more from watching the films than the paradoxical difficulty I have of watching them if I try to ignore everything around me.

In a remarkable study, Élie During tried to suggestively identify the terms relating to a new vision of cinema that, according to him, Mark Lewis’s films seem to express. No longer just a movement-image and/or a time-image; but beyond Deleuze’s crystal-image, a *volume-image* (to name but a few of the most striking phrases: “a volume-image for a formal time frame”; “the volume itself of the image as an image”; “vision without a point of view, overview with no over-
hanging”; “indecisive time for an indecisive gaze”; “the hologrammatic image, which is the other name of the volume-image”; “something like a formal time detached from the movements of the world and from life itself”).

One may find the last of these assumptions a bit exaggerated as it too bluntly separates many of Mark Lewis’s films from their obvious content, which remains active despite the abstraction process that impacts them: such a vast choice of motifs indeed implies social, political, historical, and anthropological dimensions. But at the insistence and seriousness of the terms suggested by During, one must above all ask oneself whether such films can still be called cinema, or whether they embody another type of cinema to such a point that it becomes difficult to use the same word to describe such different effects. These effects differ depending on the two main types of shots used over time by Mark Lewis. In the case of prolonged static shots, it is the dilution of the gaze that is at stake, its scattering when watching a hardly labile succession of micro-events with no real distinction: through large windows relentlessly shot from an acute angle, the slow and incessant comings and goings of planes and other vehicles (Airport, 2003, 10’58’’); on a patch of land surrounded by neutral buildings, a football game between children and teenagers in the distance, which one can only follow with a distracted eye (Tenement Yard, Heygate Estate, 2002, 4’). Unlike the film of the Lumière brothers, to which Mark Lewis strategically claims to refer to, based on capturing accumulated reality, always more or less surprising and concentrated in a short period of time, in his films, he wipes out reality, focusing on his concept (although it is aimed at showing social reality) more than on the inevitably relativized monitoring of his experience. One must note as well, in another way, following the same still shot technique, the example of the perceptual challenge shown in Escalators at Pinheiros (2014, 3’7’’), in which the filmed intersecting movements of three crowded escalators and the uninterrupted flow of passers-by moving in the horizontal background challenge any potential consistency in the gaze.

But it is of course the movement, whether forward and/or rotating, that is the major issue here. Take, for example, the surprising Children’s Games, Heygate Estate (2002, 7’31’’), which shows a haunting progression through a small alley that meanders in a tangle of small gardens and buildings, overlooking several streets. The meaning of the title of the work becomes clear thanks to the side shots, always fleeting and distant, taken by the Steadicam, and showing, on the right or left, following its course, children and teenagers once again engaging in various games in this housing estate. The video thus seems to split with a kind of abstract determination between what would be the flashes of the Lumière films documenting their subject, scattered in the margins of the decor, and the pure gaze of the central eye attached to its trajectory. But what is this eye doing, riveted to the image in which pure movement is triumphing? It is distracting itself, so to speak – despite the blinking on which Walter Murch based a kind of
theory to explain his film editing approach but that he also considers as a rhythm, internal to the emotions induced in the viewer (this blinking that we should indeed forbid ourselves doing in order not to miss anything of the vibrating matter of James Benning’s shots).

This eye, our eye, is distracting itself in the sense that here it can only absent itself from itself, through variable jolts, to constantly have to return to what it sees; as it is impossible, even if one has the impression of not having taken one's eyes off the screen, for the human gaze to embrace in such a homogeneous and continuous manner the automated vision of a machine that seems to suck up the reality within which it deploys itself. It is these multiple moments of empty stillness that constitute a layer parallel to embodied perception. And this is how these films give the impression of being situated, this has been sufficiently insisted on, somewhere between cinema and photography. But it is in a quite remarkable manner that fixity and movement confront it. Rather than through the increased attention induced by photography, which is free of the scrolling movement of projection that is attached to the time of the video (this is Barthes’s main argument in _La Chambre claire_), it is through a singular defection of attentive perception that already generally threatens the projection of moving images in the exposure situation that these films seem carried away by a movement becoming pure time, which does not seem to belong to the time of cinema.

But this, and it is their very strength, is not only due to the gap created between the dispositif of the museum and that of cinema, because inside the cinema dispositif in which they are sometimes projected, these films show above all the imminence of a space-time that is alien to the one that has defined cinema until now – a form of time that is mixed, layered, laminated, a completely different kind of volume. The strength of Mark Lewis’s films, which is largely due to their brevity, accentuating their prototypical nature, makes of each of them a blueprint, projected towards an image extended beyond cinema.

And it was finally on my computer that I felt I had watched all of the four films that make up _Invention au Louvre_. If one can only enter at random the “Salle de la Maquette,” one may rather choose specifically from the menu of the display provided at the entrance. _Pyramid_, as we have seen, uses the recurring stylistic device of inversion Mark Lewis has been fascinated by ever since _Upside Down Touch of Evil_ – for example _Rush Hour, Morning and Evening, Cheapside_ (2005, 4’15’’) and _One Mile_ (2013, 9’2’’), where a famous London square turns on itself, suspended in the air, its buildings and column diving into the sky. But in _Pyramid_ one can give an additional meaning to this stylistic device: here, it is no longer only an excessive image of the effect that often leaves the viewer rather speechless when watching Mark Lewis’s films, but a vision of what happens to the visitor as soon as he enters the museum, leaving his familiar identity behind to virtually become a viewer of paintings, shown upside down
here to express his virtual but possible access, unlike art (which Malraux called
The Metamorphosis of the Gods).\footnote{14}

Likewise, the very gentle movement, sometimes interrupted, that takes us, through The Night Gallery, among statues that are alternately lit or left in the shadows, is not only a challenge dedicated to the uncertainties of the gaze, but a way of translating how the gaze never stops, when confronted with the appropriation that is created by an artwork, to freeze and escape – to really fix the gaze and see a particular statue when it is better lit, one sometimes has to do what the computer allows so easily: freeze the image, which almost provides us with the same sense of free eternity that one has when looking at a photograph.

In filming paintings, like in Child with a Spinning Top and In Search of the Blessed Ranieri, it is, above all, the smooth and endless movement of the camera and its variation of speed that shows us a world that seems, more than most films by Mark Lewis, to be closer to the common cinema experience. In both films, for example, the camera sometimes stops in front of the works for short or long periods of time, especially in the second film. At other times, it constantly goes back and forth between the paintings and those who look at them (thus developing even further the effects of the famous museum photographs of Thomas Struth), both made gentler and intensified by a slight slow motion that allows one to better perceive the movements, gestures, and expressions of the visitors.

Filming paintings has quickly become one of the major challenges of cinema, and understanding the modalities of such filming has also become one of the most critical topics of cinema theory, from Jean-Georges Auriol to André Bazin. As for filming paintings, two approaches seem to illustrate the extreme polarities used to film them: on the one hand, Van Gogh (1948) by Alain Resnais, an historical reference, in which accumulated movements emphasized by editing seem to literally go through the paintings and thereby “solubilize,” so to speak, “the pictorial work into natural perception,” inventing “a realism on the second level, from the abstraction of the painting”;\footnote{15} and, on the other, Cézanne (1989) and Une visite au Louvre (2003) by Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, where the shots of the paintings do not go beyond their frames, except for a few detailed shots, to show them as well as a cinema image can. The unequal strength of these movies is inseparable from the commentary that accompanies them: a dramatized and somehow outdated voice-over for the first one, and Cézanne’s extraordinary words taken from his conversations with Joachim Gasquet in the other two.

But there is at least a third approach one could call a journey through painting, of which Diderot was the main initiator and of which Élégie de la traversée (2001) by Alexander Sokurov is a perfect example. Following the obscure story of a man who could be the director himself, travelling from Russia, through improbable night images haunted by mist and snow, the camera leads us to the
place where his spiritual quest finally finds its conclusion; the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, where, at length, some of its most famous paintings are filmed: The Tower of Babel by Brueghel the Elder, Poplars near Nuenen by Vincent Van Gogh, Saint Mary’s Square and Saint Mary’s Church by Pieter Jansz Saenredam, to name but a few. The strange thing is that, pushing the identification of the gaze of this strange visitor to the painted matter to the point of making him wonder, through the inner voice that accompanies the whole movie, “Could it be me who painted this picture?” the matter of the paintings, tightly framed by the close-ups but above all scanned by the loving movements of the camera, is more or less animated by a series of subtle effects (simply described as “visual effects” in the credits) that create tremors and simmers.

But such a film is probably quite different from Mark Lewis’s films. His journey through painting nevertheless has a simple appeal that allows gentle attention, as if the visitor was taken by the hand to enter the fictional world in which he passes from one painting to another, stopping for a couple of minutes on his tentative exploration, focusing even more by means of an initial close-up on the central motif of L’Enfant au tonot by Chardin that one thus discovers gradually. It may be useful to compare this filming to that of Museu d’Arte São Paulo (2014, 5’51”), in which, through a long uniform movement along the walls of the rooms, one can barely see anything of the paintings, immersed in the shadows, their golden frames the only clue that underlines them, until the end where the image slightly lightens up to get closer, as if surprised, while a visitor turns her gaze toward us, to reveal a later version of Chardin’s painting.

There is also a particular emotion of feeling caught in the flow of visitors becoming more or less attentive viewers of paintings, whether individuals, couples, families, groups with their guides, or pupils with their teachers; one can sense this attention from the intensity of their gazes, their gestures (pointed hands, cameras). The slow continuous movement that carries us through its silence thus loses some of its conceptual impact to become a means among others to introduce us into the intimacy of the painting.

In this sense, Invention au Louvre appears as a rare occurrence in the varied but almost uniformly provocative landscape of Mark Lewis’s films, to occupy a minor and singular place within the vast panorama of films on painting, through which cinema is constantly questioning what its movement owes to the accumulated time in so many deceivingly still images.

But perhaps I am deluding myself. The impression, which suddenly comes to me, of a common fragile similarity between these films by Mark Lewis and those that usually belong to cinema, may be ultimately due to the common treatment that the computer applies to all images, since it has the incredible privilege to be able to both animate or freeze them, in all their dimensions, endlessly, allowing us to feel and think of them in a different way.

Translated by Nick Cowling and Marie-Noëlle Dumaz

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