It is interesting to envision Art History in terms of inventions. Of course, one could argue that a work of art is not simply about inventing new techniques but also being able to use the techniques in the content of this work. However, we could approach the problem in a Spinozist way that does not distinguish between the soul and the body, and therefore between the means and the essence. Studying Art History by focusing on inventions is interesting to the extent that it allows to communicate new emotions.

I am interested in observing more specifically what Spike Lee invented for Cinema. The principle is pretty simple: filming an actor standing on the dolly on which the camera is set, in a back traveling shot that makes the actor immobile but the setting around him or her moves. The main effect produced is the feeling that the actor is floating and moved by an external force.

With this process, Spike Lee manages to communicate different emotions that take over the character whose body has no choice but to obey to an irresistible force that pushes him (her) forward.
In *Malcolm X*, the character of Denzel Washington is pushed by the fatal history when he goes to give the speech during which he will be assassinated. In *Clockers*, a young drug dealer is moved by its loss of control of a situation that drives the kid that helps him to shoot a man in front of him. In the *25th Hour*, both Anna Paquin and Philip Seymour Hoffman’s characters are subjected to a state of drunkenness that brings her to seduce him and him to kiss her despite the fact that she is his 17 years old student. Eventually, in *Inside Man*, Denzel Washington, as a hostage negotiator, calm for the whole first part of the movie, is moved by a virulent anger when one of the hostages for whom he is responsible been shot by bank robbers.

There are more Spike Lee’s movies using this process (*Mo’ Better Blues, School Daze* and *Crooklyn*) but I would like to focus on the four films I evoked. The speed is interesting, as it differentiates between the fast intensity of a profound emotion such as Denzel Washington’s anger in *Inside Man* and the slow and inexorable fate that brings Malcolm X to his death. The notion of fate is important here, and I believe that it should not be considered in the usual terms. Fate, here, is not to be understood as a trick used by Spike Lee to introduce a *deus ex machina* in his films that would allow him to trigger an event in an absolute transcendental way. No, in my understanding, the Dolly Shot occurs because the whole narrative before it constructed the circumstances that make this scene inexorable. In other words, the force that I was evoking earlier is not a divine force that would influence the plot, but rather the implacable logical conclusion of the sum of events that built up the story so far.

Spike Lee’s Dolly Shots are therefore a good illustration of Paul Klee’s famous phrase: “Art does not represent the visible; rather, it makes things visible.” (1920). In fact, those
shots are not reproducing any real situation, but rather envision the inexorability of our behaviors based on the sum of circumstances that bring them in situation.


.....

Originally published on February 26, 2011