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Framing, Masking, Revealing: Mark Lewis's Regime of Projection

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Framing, Masking, Revealing: Mark Lewis's Regime of Projection*¹

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This article analyzes the complex and plethoric video artist Mark Lewis and his *Willesden Launderette Reverse Dolly Pan Right Friday Prayers* (2010, 5'), highlighting how he works with cinema theories and devices. The article demonstrates that the paradoxical allusions that Lewis's work makes toward the 'classical' dispositif of cinematic projection shine a light and at the

same time challenge cinematic theories and theories of perception. Moreover, the use of specifically cinematographic techniques such as the dolly or the rear projection screened in the museum context, and in a loop, displays the projected image in its hybridity and, more broadly, celebrates the cinematic dispositif while refusing to view it in a nostalgic way.

Keywords: apparatus, dispositive, temporality, punctum

If cinema may be understood as, among other things, an art of decoupage, Mark Lewis's *Willesden Launderette Reverse Dolly Pan Right Friday Prayers* (2010) offers a kind of demonstration of this. This decidedly formalist film presents four movements and four pauses—in a single shot, within the space-time of five short minutes—highlighting a spectacle of appearances and disappearances on a London street corner through adjustments of the framing. The film sets out its 'program' with its very title. Initially, it presents a tracking shot: we leave the interior of a laundromat via a reverse dolly, interspersed with pauses allowing for the contemplation of a particular assemblage of lines and forms. And so we go from spinning dryers to the front window, behind which a man sits motionless; then, still tracking back, toward a wide shot of the laundromat, whose exterior is enlivened by the interplay of transparencies, lights, and reflections. The camera then leaves this laundromat and pans more than 180 degrees to the right, taking in both sides of the street. We discover a working-class neighborhood in the late afternoon, when Pakistani men in Muslim clothing walk toward a place of worship. In displaying the co-presence of secular and religious activities within its movement, *Willesden Launderette Reverse Dolly Pan Right Friday Prayers* highlights cinema's status as an art of passage. While pausing on a particular framing, the film emphasizes both the degree

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of its artificiality and its documentary aspect, whose purest indicator is the fleeting reflections of birds projected onto the windows of the laundromat.

The question has arisen—without neglecting to put it to the artist himself—whether Mark Lewis's films are real 'films' or not, to the extent that they are rarely screened in movie theaters and most often exhibited in a museum context, and that they are not shown at specific times of the day, but in a loop. They evince a spatiotemporal continuity, in the style of the Lumière brothers' films and the earliest moving shots in cinema: they are not, therefore, edited in the traditional sense and present themselves as 'single shots.' This has encouraged the association of these films with the domains of painting and photography. Among the most engaging hypotheses in this area, we may mention David Company's idea that the pictorial effect in Lewis's work emerges from silence:

'Not enveloped by sound, the beholder is not recruited into a cinematic spectacle but permitted to remain detached and observant, as though in a gallery of photographs, paintings or sculptures. In this sense, Lewis does not use the gallery wall as a screen: he accepts it as a gallery wall' (Company, 2009: 20).

This immediately aligns cinema with the audiovisual and the spectacle. It also leads to projecting other silent films onto gallery and museum walls (and not onto screens), starting with those films typically associated with avant-garde movements. This kind of curatorial practice is actually fairly common these days, notably when it comes to multifaceted bodies of work: Paul Strand, for example, is increasingly being presented as both a photographer and a filmmaker, within the same museum space.² Strand's photographs are exhibited as original, indeed vintage, prints, produced through various procedures for photographic film. On the other hand, his motion pictures, shot using film stock, are shown in a more or less open space by means of a digital medium that never claims to convey the experience of the original film, instead creating a kind of comparative complement to the photography exhibition, which is conversely endowed with the aura of craftsmanship. But when Mark Lewis decides to transfer Super 35 film onto a digital medium, it is a mode of exhibition that he has chosen. We should also note that Lewis's films are not 'exhibited' films, extracted from theaters and merely 'hung on the wall,' but are on the contrary intended to be 'installed,' i.e., located in a given space and, most particularly, putting the viewer in a given setting. This viewer must find their place before the image, being at liberty to vary their point of view. This is especially striking at the BAL arts center in Paris³ when, in going down the steps leading to the basement composed of white columns, our eyes encounter a film that, with a vertiginous Steadicam shot, depicts the winding staircase in a building designed by Oscar Niemeyer (*Staircase at the Edificio Copan*, 2014).

The radical difference that Company establishes by distinguishing 'wall' from 'screen,' and painting (or photography) from cinema, corresponds in his view to a series of oppositions between the terms of detachment

and envelopment, as between those of observation and spectacle. From this perspective, cinema—as apparatus or *dispositive*—does not allow for attentive observation. This negative definition (and this privilege granted to the gallery space) neglects the constant, paradoxical allusions that Lewis’s work makes toward the ‘classical’ *dispositif* of cinematic projection, even deep inside the ‘white cube.’ Lewis not only seeks to recall the figures of a ‘distant’ observer within film history, but also to use—without nostalgia or fetishism—what we could call, in accordance with Jean-Louis Baudry, ‘basic cinematographic apparatuses’: technical tools that allow the camera to move, or a mode of projection that draws the viewer’s attention to a very luminous high-resolution image, placed high upon the wall, sometimes with the possibility of sitting or lying down, in other words of remaining still for some time.

The distinction between wall and screen merits discussion if it must serve as a means for comparing cinema and painting. Many years ago, André Bazin had defined the budding dialogue between painting and cinema arising from the essay films of the 1950s—by Resnais and Clouzot, for example—through a differentiation on a formal level. He asserted a fundamental distinction between the frame (in painting) and masking (in cinema): one is centripetal, the other centrifugal. Unlike ‘the space in which our active experience occurs,’ the frame encloses a ‘space that is oriented [...] in a different direction’ within the painting, thereby offering ‘a contemplative area opening solely onto the interior of the painting.’ ‘The outer edges of the screen,’ on the other hand, ‘are not [...] the frame of the film image’ but rather

‘the edges of a piece of masking that shows only a portion of reality. The picture frame polarizes space inwards. On the contrary, what the screen shows us seems to be part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe’ (Bazin 1959: 128).

One of the reasons for this fundamental difference lies in their respective regimes of temporality: the painting’s temporality develops geologically, deeply, while film’s temporality functions geographically, on the level of editing. Whereas the frame emphasizes pictorial heterogeneity, in opposition to the natural space in which it inserts itself, the masked film image ‘destroys’ that pictorial space through its permanent outward spread.

It must be added that this fundamental disjunction between on-screen and off-screen space can arise not only through editing, but also through the movements that take place in front of the camera or through the mobility of the camera itself. The separation between what is shown and what is hidden is fundamental to the organization of a shot in cinema, as ‘a shot is not a perception,’ as Pascal Bonitzer says. ‘It is an assemblage of volumes, masses, forms, movements. The frame is not the vague limit of the visual field. It is a cropping of space that creates the interrelation’ (Bonitzer 1985: 21). Mark Lewis’s films display that very property of the screen, which is not the world and which does not have horizons, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 82).

Mark Lewis is particularly intrigued by painting when it captures time. Concerning a work by Auguste Renoir, *Le Pont des Arts* (1867–1868), he notes that it portrays the slow tempo of a lazy afternoon when time 'stands still,' even as it appears transitory, via visible shadows. We may also observe a third kind of time, one of the making, again transitory, of the painting itself:

'a time that embodies both contemplation and passage, stillness and movement, a condensation that the viewer experiences or unpacks when considering the formal depiction of the different kinds of time' (Lewis 2003: 3).

We thereby sense to what extent the hybridization of forms of time constitutes a key focus of Lewis's films (in much the same way that Jean Epstein spoke of it in order to circumscribe the essence of cinema). To Company's argument concerning silence, we must therefore add a question dealing with the perception of time, which is impossible without considering the function of movement inherent to cinema.

Hendon F.C. (2009), for example, starts with a classical, stable composition presenting a wide, slightly high-angle shot of a section of the stands in a disused football stadium on a summer day. In the distance, we see women and children having fun on the sidelines. The camera then leaves this scene and pans to the left over the overgrown field, revealing the faded sign featuring the name of the local team: 'Hendon F.C.' This moment allows for the appreciation of several things: the beauty of this sports ground that has become a ruin; the historicity of this structure overrun by nature; and a twofold temporality, underscoring both the lost sociocultural function of the field and its current status as an abandoned plot of land. The depth of field allows for connections between different planes within the image, between its temporal layers, as in the Renoir painting. But through that connection, we may also recognize an affinity with the films of the painter's son. According to Bazin, in Jean Renoir's work such use of depth of field, similarly to his long shots and tracking shots, is a response to 'the constant concern not to allow the photography or the editing to break up the dramatic focus of a scene' (Bazin 1971: 58). Of course, Lewis does not make what are generally known as fiction films, but he evokes an imaginary space that approaches fiction, by moving within a single shot from a present-day social scene (featuring migrants) to a site overtaken by nature, and from there to 'another scene,' also social, but belonging to the past (recalling the days when the stands were filled with supporters).

The camera then cranes down from its high angle, turns, pivots and starts to sweep across the tall grass covering the field. We pass very closely overhead; we attempt to make out some details. The undulating trajectory of this gaze, produced by the crane, is reminiscent of drones, those new machines of vision. At one point, when the camera turns in the bright sunlight, we see the crane's shadow: 'it' reveals itself, like a kind of *punctum* of the apparatus. This *punctum* effect is due to the movement engendered by what an American critic of the late nineteenth century—discussing the well-known 'phantom rides,' shots made by a moving camera in the early days of cinema—called

'the unseen energy' that 'swallows up space and flings itself into the distance' (Gunning 1994: 197.) When the apparatus finishes its circuit around the stadium and returns to the location from which it started, it stops on a slightly low-angle shot in the grass, quite unlike the initial point of view.

This 'circuitous' shot puts the spectators/visitors in a very special kind of position, allowing them to temper their description of the *dispositif* with which they are dealing. Instead of regarding Mark Lewis's creations as either works of cinema or works of photography, it is better to get a sense of how they explore the interrelationship between the two realms. Given that these works are 'installed,' they literally exhibit the screen's masking effect. Through their mobile composition, they transpose the temporality of painting and photography. Without any obvious editing, they remain within a regime of theatricality and attraction associated with the *dispositif* of their projection, as the earliest films did.

It is well known that Mark Lewis has a particular predilection for the technique of rear projection (aka back projection). This is not so much because he is interested in extolling an obsolete special effect, the sign of an art of moviemaking that could be associated with 'the age of machines' (Fernand Léger): instead, it is a result of this technique's modernist dimension, given that it creates a tension between the representation and its materiality. This interest also corresponds to the artist's taste for a certain kind of stratified representation as seen in Renaissance paintings, creating spaces at once separate and integrated, as Laura Mulvey points out (cit. in Lewis 2009: 25-29).⁴ In his essay on the function of rear projection in Hitchcock's films, Dominique Païni emphasizes to what extent this is a pictorial suture between figures and a background, enabling the creation of a semblance of reality 'without erasing the illusory device that created it,' or even of 'a symmetry of pictured pictures.' For Païni, the aesthetic tension of this special effect lies 'between establishing a space with actual dimensions via different camera angles, and [an] inclination toward illusion' (Païni 2000: 58, 69-71).

Although this technique of rear projection has its roots in pre-cinematic *dispositifs* such as the diorama or theatrical backdrops, in Lewis's work it appears as a special effect that brings out the aesthetic power of cinema. In this sense, *Rear Projection: Molly Parker* (2005) is Lewis's most emblematic work. In a text on one of the first classic films using rear projections, Tay Garnett's *Her Man* (1930), Lewis describes their particularly striking effect, which causes a split between the drama in the foreground—performed by two actors who are 'firmly studio bound'—and the documentary background, in motion, in which the anonymous urban space flows past. For Lewis, this effect is due to the editing together, or even the collage, of two different kinds of filmic experience:

'Against the plot and via a reality effect, the film registers a time that cannot be reduced to theatre or story. As we experience this reality effect of the back-projection, we begin to notice reluctant "extras," all the people in the background who when they saw a flat-bed truck driving around "their" city with a camera mounted on its back, presumably stole moderately surprised or inquisitive second glances as it passed them by' (Lewis 2003: 2).

There is nothing nostalgic about Lewis's reuse of an obsolete special effect. As a visible effect, displaying the projected image in its hybridity, the rear projection in Lewis's work embodies a kind of 'modern' antiquity, understood as a structural tension⁵ between a stable composition and the experience of the ephemeral. This kind of tension can be incorporated into a history of painting, but at the same time, in the way it captures chance moments in daily life, this tension often references what is inherent to cinema and what makes cinema a hybrid domain: movement, as well as editing, which in this case resembles a form of collage.

This figurative tension is also on display in the films by Lewis that explore the modern world, relying on especially intricate camera movements that may involve a dolly, a crane, a car, or a helicopter. These films highlight the aesthetic value of this movement through the duration and the continuity of a lengthy shot. (We should not refer to such shots as 'long takes' or 'sequence shots.' Firstly, these are not narrative films—despite the fact they are staged—so they cannot be analyzed on the basis of narrative logic. Secondly, these are one-shot films, no more no less.) The figurative tension is therefore not produced in the same way as with rear projections; it lies in the surprising revelation of an unexpected detail or event within the motorized *dispositif* of the mobile recording. The permanent deframing [*décadrage*] is thereby indicative of both a protean composition and a grasp of what is transitory. It becomes a sign of the presence of the apparatus, as well as of the 'optical unconscious' in Benjamin's sense of the term.

Thus *Motion [From the Minhocão to the Cinema Marabá]*, a 'film' from 2014, places the spectator before a 'poetry of change' intrinsic to that modernity defined famously by Baudelaire as 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent' (Baudelaire 1932: 1163). This modernity possesses an acute awareness of temporality currently characterized by a heightened form of acceleration, accompanied in turn by contradictory effects of deceleration, developing what we—taking a cue from Hartmut Rosa—could call an 'aesthetics of slowness' (Rosa 2017). The very title of this film makes its intentions clear, in a conceptual gesture recalling some of the Lumière brothers' films: covering a journey that leads from the *Minhocão* highway to the *Marabá* movie theater in São Paulo. In the course of a night drive that goes from a play of shadows worthy of Arthur Robison's *Schatten* (1923)—shadows that spread out onto the disused viaduct of the *Minhocão*—to a movie theater in an adjoining neighborhood after which the theater is named, we discover the life of a great city on which locomotion has left its mark. Here, the transient lies in the moving point of view. Just when we approach the *Marabá*, from some distance we start to notice a small spot on the sidewalk, in the shadows. Once our gaze stops in front of the theater entrance, we assess the incident that must have taken place before the car arrived, as we observe a cyclist sprawled across the sidewalk.

In photography, the *punctum* is a 'detail': 'Certain details may "prick" me,' as Barthes says. The *punctum* is connected with time: it 'could accommodate a certain latency;' it 'is a kind of subtle *beyond*' (Barthes 1980: 71, 84, 88, 93). We may attempt to transpose this concept to Lewis's films.

What constitutes the *punctum* of a shot—whether for a moment, or when the image is paused—can, as the image moves and through deframing, lead to its end (in both senses of the term): toward a major event (the people leaving the theater will attend to the injured man) that gives rise to a virtual fiction (the film stops just when we start to observe dramatic actions, at which point we leave the mode of contemplation).

If the *filmic*, in Barthes's view, was 'that in the film which cannot be described' because the film 'does not exist (any more than does the text)' (Barthes 1982: 43-61), we may suggest that, in Lewis's films, the filmic-as-*punctum* with which they are associated lies in movement and in vision itself, presaging military surveillance via new technologies (drone wars). In *Forte!* (2010), filmed from a helicopter, the aerial view makes it clear that the fortress featured in the film was built before the invention of the airplane. The scale of the very wide shot reveals an ant-like line of a mass of humans running out of the fortress, bringing to mind the notion of massive destruction as it was invented during World War I and pursued in today's conflicts with increasingly automated weapons. This manner of conceiving the contemporary world, which focuses on the biopolitical effects of the neo-capitalist condition by means of an assortment of diagrams and maps, has an aesthetic counterpart in this film. Here, Lewis recreates for us something along the lines of what Serge Daney called a 'cine-demography' (Daney 1991: 147-150): Daney, noting the disappearance of crowds from fiction film, perceived a lack of proportion between humans and their environment. In the early 1980s, he proposed the study of the increasing absence of these cinematic beings that constitute crowds, crowds that gave the cinephile spectator a sure sense of belonging in the world. In his text, Daney composed an homage to extras, overshadowed by the star system and under threat from the economic transformation of the Hollywood studios: low-rung, anonymous workers to whom Lewis also paid tribute in his film *The Pitch* (1998).

The crowd, which featured in so many works of 1920s cinema, is also a figure of the public space of modernity, such as Georg Simmel described it in his study of the life of great cities (Simmel 1971: 324-339). Today, Mark Lewis captures the crowd in the many crossroads of daily life, those anonymous sites of 'supermodernity' (Marc Augé): places of business or entertainment, transportation networks. But he also seeks it out where it has disappeared, or is about to, because the cities have transformed themselves and their centers have shifted.

Above and Below the Minhocão (2014), for example, constitutes a kind of monument to a modernist neighborhood of São Paulo, featuring an elevated highway. This road is filmed at the end of the day, when it is reserved for the exclusive use of pedestrians and cyclists. The framing privileges long shots much of the time, taking advantage of the fact that the figures are enlarged by their shadows. With a slow, twirling movement of the crane, the camera apparatus captures fleeting moments—for example, when two cyclists pass by—or 'micro-events,' like when a man goes out into the courtyard of a building to make a phone call. Sometimes, the imposing presence of the

crane elicits a gesture from a passerby, waving to the mechanical eye attached to it, as people filmed by the cameramen of Edison or the Lumières once did.

At one point, the conspicuous framing (a high-angle shot), with very high-contrast lighting, emphasizes the modernist aesthetic of these buildings, their geometrical aspect. Here, Lewis—through effects of flat, uniform coloring and of serialization in a style recalling Paul Strand—composes what Rosalind Krauss has called ‘the grid,’ which ‘announces, among other things, modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse’ (Krauss 1984: 9). In *Above and Below the Minhocão*, there is a tension between these moments of formal abstraction and a reality effect that is inherent to the scene’s twofold temporality, the overlaying of several periods of urbanism, of modernity and supermodernity: a political dimension emerges just through the representation of these places in their fleeting role as indicators of change. The pedestrian takeover of the highway is probably a portent of the neighborhood’s gentrification. Thus, the transformation of this road could paradoxically be a threat to the current inhabitants. In capitalist society, Simmel says, the functional value of money abstracts qualities: instead of serving as an intermediary between social relations, modern monetary exchange becomes their template (Simmel 1978: 224-225, 237-238).

In the films by Lewis that feature the mobility of the cinematic eye, we may distinguish two tendencies, corresponding—like his films featuring rear projection—to two ‘models’ in the history of cinema. One stems from what Tom Gunning calls the ‘cinema of attractions’ of the early period, embodied in Lewis’s work by documentary-style moving shots (already seen in the work of the Lumières as well as in Edison’s films and produced by attaching the camera to some modern form of transportation). The other is a product of what in classical cinema could be called the autonomization of the gaze, a somewhat rare phenomenon at the time that could be seen, for example, in the films of Max Ophüls. In *Le Plaisir*, the camera leaves the characters and explores the upper portions of a church to the sound of ‘Plus près de toi, mon Dieu’ (i.e., ‘Nearer My God to Thee’), breaking away from the religious ceremony and the story for a moment. In contemporary cinema, this type of insistent movement is more prevalent (in films by Antonioni or Varda for example): we may lend it a ‘camera-consciousness’ or say that it pursues a ‘free indirect discourse,’ in line with the concepts of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze 1983: 108).

The tension that develops in the lengthy shots filmed by Lewis is in fact a product of these two functions: the pure attraction of the phantom shots of early cinema, and the later function of the ‘roaming’ shot in fiction films. This last aspect is a sort of inverted consequence of the crane’s continuous movement, a purely cinematic *dispositif* that both frames and conceals: instead of suspending the story, as in narrative cinema, the insistent movement in Lewis’s films leads to its possibility. In its winding trajectory, *Above and Below the Minhocão* crosses several times over the viaduct, transformed into a pedestrian zone, to return to a man and a woman whom we have seen

sitting down on it earlier. We have occasionally forgotten about them, because they stayed off screen, but they appear in the center of the final frame. Here, the hint of an embrace, barely perceptible, becomes particularly touching.

The small element that 'pricks' me presents itself as a gesture filmed in real time, an unexpected gesture that only assumes its full importance because we have gone through all the time it took for it to come about. It is precisely for that reason that the artist has chosen a wide, high-definition projection here, and given visitors the possibility of sitting down, for they would not notice this moment of grace if they did not spend enough time facing the screen-wall. Thanks to the specific duration of the shot (11 minutes) and its irregular movement, we may see the appearance, disappearance and reappearance of something that 'is an enigma' (Michel Frizot)⁶ or that "'pricks" me' (Barthes), something we discover anew in a surprising and moving way every time. In Lewis's 'formalist' films, the *punctum* is connected to both movement (foiling the shot's enigmatic dimension) and time (allowing for contemplation). It may lie in the bustle of a distant crowd, flooding out of a fortified castle atop a snowy mountain, or in the gesticulation of someone out for a stroll in São Paulo, realizing he is being filmed by a camera mounted on a crane, or in the small spot formed by the body of a cyclist, sprawled on a sidewalk in the shadows at night, who can only be perceived by coming up to him with the car on which the camera is mounted.

While Mark Lewis's works seem to call upon a mode of attention close to the experience of photography, the form in which their technical conditions are exhibited also reveals the specificity of their medium. For the artist shows us precisely 'why cinema is important' more than ever, in the same sense as when Michael Fried (2010) explains 'why photography matters as art as never before': for him, the *punctum* is the fundamental element of what he calls the 'antitheatricality' of photography. In this sense, Lewis, in his installation films or his 'formalist' films, explores the effects of decentering and of the latency of a subtle beyond, by presenting cinema as the mode of experience of time's passing.

1. This text is a revised version of a paper given on 12 March 2015, at the invitation of Diane Dufour and Chantal Pontbriand, as part of an exhibition titled *Mark Lewis—Above and Below*, at the BAL arts center in Paris.
2. See for example the major exhibition *Paul Strand—Master of Photography*, which took place at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2014-2015.
3. *Mark Lewis—Above and Below*, Paris, Le BAL, March-April 2015 (curator: Chantal Pontbriand).
4. In this sense, Mulvey likens some of Lewis's compositions to the "spatially aggregated" backgrounds in paintings by Jan van Eyck and Giovanni Bellini, while emphasizing the Brechtian effect of rear projection in cinema.
5. Mark Lewis does not refer directly to the technique of rear projection when

he defends his concept of historicity.

6. See the title of the exhibition of amateur photography curated by Michel Frizot at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris from décembre 2014 to janvier 2015, *Toute photographie fait énigme (Every Photograph is an Enigma)*. [Translator's note: The English title was explicitly used in the presentation of the exhibition by one of its organizers, the Fotomuseum Winterthur in Switzerland, www.fotomuseum.ch.]

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Translator's bio

Allyn Hardyck is a translator based in Paris. He earned a BA in film from the University of California, Berkeley, followed by two graduate degrees in philosophy from the Université Paris 8. He has worked regularly with Raymond Bellour, translating new texts and revising earlier translations. He has also translated texts by Michel Chion, Philippe Grandrieux and Luc Moullet, among others. He is currently one of the two translators of the *Journal of the CIPH* (Collège international de Philosophie), available on the website of Cairn International (cairn-int.info).

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