Film, 'twixt text and museum

Patrick de Haas

Traducteur : Simon Pleasance

Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/991>

DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.991

ISBN : 2265-9404

ISSN : 2265-9404

Éditeur

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 septembre 2006

ISBN : 1246-8258

ISSN : 1246-8258

Référence électronique

Patrick de Haas, « Film, 'twixt text and museum », *Critique d'art* [En ligne], 28 | Automne 2006, mis en ligne le 01 février 2012, consulté le 30 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/991> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.991

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 30 avril 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

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RÉFÉRENCE

Michaud, Philippe-Alain. *Sketches : histoire de l'art, cinéma*, Paris : L'Eclat : Kargo, 2006

Michaud, Philippe-Alain. Bajac, Quentin. Migayrou, Frédéric. *Le Mouvement des images*, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2006

- 1 For several years now, studies of the connections between film and the other arts have been attracting ever-growing interest, attesting to a desire felt by historians and artists alike to deal with the hybridization of knowledge and praxis as the driving force behind a renewal of resources. The originality of the studies undertaken by Philippe-Alain Michaud should be removed from any comparison between two sets called "painting" and "film", regarded as more or less fixed and coherent constituent fields in their substance, and a more anthropological approach preferred, with which the features normally recognized as specific to the cinema are presented as also part and parcel of other territories, like painting, music, comic strips and, more surprisingly, carpets and fireworks. Film is thus broached less as a technical device than as a general principle, a paradigm that may pass through different types of so-called "specific" praxis. Behind its slight ironical aloofness, the title *Sketches* probably refers to the fragmentary dimension and speed of the sketch: the disparate character of the texts compiled (published in particular in *Les Cahiers du MNAM*, *Trafic*, *Cinémathèque*) is not a shortcoming associated with the restrictions of the "collected articles" genre. It conveys the diversity of the author's research objects, as well as the methodological necessity of this diversity for anyone keen to bring to the fore new observations and issues. The comma in the subtitle *Histoire de l'art, cinéma* marks a distance in the association which is much more to the point than the "&" indicated on the book band (*Histoire de l'art & cinéma*), an ampersand whose function as copula falsely harbingers an ambitiously programmatic and comprehensive study. What is involved here, on the contrary, is the study of certain

points of junction/disjunction in a walkabout that is not erratic but rather cultivated and honed, permitting the author to conduct, with alert writing, an invariably stimulating line of thinking about Buster Keaton, Antony McCall's installations, the scientific films made by Marey and Comandon, the status of the drawing, cross-dressing and pyrotechnics. The varied range of objects examined makes these texts less surprising than the *liaising* of remote elements and segments belonging to different areas of research. The author already put this "method" to the test, in a most persuasive and just as caustic a way, in a book about Aby Warburg¹, whose famous *Mnemosyne* project just happened to underscore the importance of contact being established between objects apparently alien to one another. So the author can compare *Krazy Kat*'s tossed brick (George Herriman) with Katcina dolls and a William Hogarth picture, or pick up in mid-air the expression "zig-zag of mimicry" in Eisenstein, in order to compare it to the form of lightning flash among the Indians described by Warburg. The relative suspension of the historical, contextual and logical links which are replaced by relations which may seem anachronistic or analogical, creates guaranteed surprise effects, but is not riskfree, needless to add. It takes all the author's intuitive intelligence, playing with his heterodox culture, to win the following of the reader, who is disconcerted by such journeys. With this thinking, operating like a sort of "montage of attractions" (Eisenstein), we are well removed from the well-marked paths of the interplay of influences and genealogies, with which art and film historians are familiar, and closer perhaps to the functioning of the dream as described by Freud (quoted by Michaud). This type of "out of context" reference also attests to the subjective commitment of the historian, the objective no longer being "just" to record, or even grasp the sequencing of facts, but to capture effects, no matter how destabilizing they may be.

- 2 According to the texts, it would seem that Michaud wavers between two positions, each one offering a wealth of effects: either the cinema is seen in a very open philosophical sense as a "form of thought" independently of its technical arrangement, or the cinema is broached from a more historical viewpoint, but to show that its massive and industrial development is merely a very restricted application of its many possibilities which will find an outlet in the "experimental cinema". Within the logic of the first proposition, the author can see film looming in carpets, wall-paper and panoramas. In the logic of the second proposition, the author revisits film from its earliest days to show the structural significance of discontinuity, which has subsequently been forgotten in film, regarded as spectacle, which has left traces in "experimental" film. This latter gains a certain logical centrality making it shed its marginal character in which many a film historian has adopted the habit of straitjacketing it.
- 3 One might be curious to see how the author, who is a curator at the Pompidou Centre, would incarnate within an exhibition curated by him these pertinent and suggestive liaisons.
- 4 *Le Mouvement des images* takes up the challenge. The author has elected to structure the whole around four themes: running, projection, narrative, editing. These directions are the point of departure for rich comparisons, even if they cannot be as speculative as those proposed in *Sketches*. By stressing that, on the threshold of the 20th century, "there was a massive migration of moving images in screening rooms towards exhibition venues", the author records an important aspect of present-day art, but it is not obvious that this request can be retroactively projected to artists like Fernand Léger, for example, for whom the auditorium, be it for film or spectacle, was probably preferable to the museum

venue. The incorporation of films within a space traditionally designed to accommodate pictures and sculptures is, indeed, legitimate, and it once again shows the museum's capacity of absorption of that which claimed to want to avoid such places. Here, then, are the discontinuities so well examined by the historian in his book, threatening to be smoothed out by the museum space without any possibility of our reproaching the curator.

NOTES

1. Michaud, Philippe-Alain. *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement*, Paris : Macula, 1998, (Vues) (for greater detail about this book see the article by Giovanni Careri published in *Critique d'art* n°12, autumn 1998, pp. 21-22).