

OLATZ GONZÁLEZ ABRISKETA, IÑAKI IMAZ, ASIER MENDIZABAL

Jørgen Leth filmmaker

“Film is a series of images put together. Not a sequence, not a story, but a series of images, nothing more. The order of the images is less important than the single image. The final consequence of that assertion is that the images may be put together blindfolded. That their order may be determined by means of rules that make allowance for a strong element of chance. Like William Burroughs, I consider chance a great inspiration. I allow chance some leeway in my films, during shootings, but often during editing, too. In various ways, I invite chance to join in the game”. Jørgen Leth This is my Working-Credo, which still holds.

Jørgen Leth was one of the guest speakers at *Periferiak*¹. First we saw two very different films, *66 Scenes From America* and *Haiti. Untitled*. And then he himself arrived to present his successful first short film, *The Perfect Human* and his latest film *The Five Obstructions*, a quintuple remake of the former, in which Lars Von Trier tries to break down Leth's shining—almost Faustian—image. But Jørgen Leth is difficult to deconstruct. He has spent too long considering the tiny but significant strokes of habits, of human nature, especially in films such as *The Perfect Human*, *Life in Denmark* and *Good and Evil* (the title is reminiscent of the underlying dichotomy of the human *being*: the fracturing of nature, the loss of instinct, the divine punishment that paves the way for culture).

In these films, Leth who is a qualified anthropologist, dissects everything that forms the subtle cultural apparatus that shapes us, and does so within Danish society. He places himself in the role of a latter-day Adam, receiving the peeled fruit from his wife's hands; he shows us his daily shopping, he washes himself and climbs into the passenger seat of the mythical vintage 2 CV.

With an economy in the composition of his images which he admits having borrowed from Malinowski (particularly from the Polish anthropologist's field photos), Jørgen Leth is determined to display the Danish covering of human nakedness. He does so through his observation of the objects that surround them, their small everyday rituals, the embodied gestures, feelings, words and actions that shape them.

In Leth's hands, photography—which Malinowski felt contained a certain descriptive limitation—becomes the basic material for the composition of his films. Direct, face-on images, which are lodged unarticulated in the spectator's memory with all their comprehensive and aesthetic force. A beautiful woman picks the hair from her face and puts it behind one ear. A man weeps inconsolably. The naked body of a pregnant woman is carefully washed by five maidens dressed in white. Men and women dressing and undressing in front of the camera, naming each garment they use. A cup shatters against a table. A reproach. More reproaches. A cow. A pig. A man eats an apple. And a banana. There is a refrigerator. A house. A policeman shows us his motorbike. He starts it up. Testimonies of life. A boy sings. And amongst all this, the moving memory of lost nature—the emotional dissolve through the tops of the trees and the voice of Sanne Salomonsen, the Danish Sandie Shaw.

Some time ago (though, despite Benjamin, not before these films were made), anthropology came to recognise that the fragment contained greater legitimacy and evocative power than any totalising synthesis. However, it has been incapable of going beyond the distant gaze which any trans-cultural rapprochement must inevitably endure. As a result, *66 Scenes From America* and *New Scenes From America*, two other films in which Leth continues with the procedure described above, lose the mobility and the small comings and goings of aesthetic emotion. The object of study is no longer oneself, but another. The issue has become discovering and representing another culture, another response, and not poking around amongst the results of that utter nakedness our ancestors (Leth's in this case) felt before the world. In America, the camera stays absolutely still. The pictures go by as if in a pan shot, surprising us with their exoticism, but without managing to undermine our unconscious. And not because we are not American. Neither are we Danish. Undoubtedly, Leth has something to do with all this.

2.

“Only God, my dear / Could love you for yourself alone / And not your yellow hair”
William Butler Yeats

Haiti. Untitled is about a country that is still submerged in utter chaos. Before seeing the film, we knew the clichés: the inhabitants are French-speaking (as the result of a colonial past), they are very poor and they practice voodoo. We also know that America and France are currently intervening in the country's political, economic and military affairs. In other words, the situation lends itself to being filmed using a series of standard western norms on socio-political commitment. Although the erotic fascination that Caribbean idiosyncrasy exercises on us may also form part of our image-luggage, in some ways it belongs to a more repressed domain.

The film consists of a presentation of 16 mm and 35 mm pictures, taken directly on the street, from interviews, performances in front of the camera, etc. This mix has been edited in a way that cannot be exclusively classified as either a protest documentary or an anthropological documentary nor yet a purely aesthetically-driven piece. Some people seem to find something annoying in the film, a certain “incorrectness” in “pedagogical slips” that can even seem demagogic (through a rhythm that over-emphasises certain aspects of the narration, using sound and visual effects, etc.); others, in contrast, have highlighted an overly “aesthetic” and “disrespectful” bias in the way women are represented. What for some is a symptom of commitment, for others is quite the opposite, a sign of an adoption of bourgeois ways and a lack of social conscience. And vice versa. It would be going too far, however, to say that either view extends to a wider perception of his work. At a given time and under certain specific conditions, the question becomes relevant —perhaps more so than in the general context of his cinematographic output. In any case, it is here that, exaggerating the extremes, we now centre our attention.

Given our special liking for the aesthetic, we feel that, in either case, our relative moral sense of scandal may well be just a clumsy way of expressing the aesthetic scandal the film provokes in us for one reason or another.

A comparison between two sets of scenes may cast some light on this aspect.

Specifically, we are referring to the voodoo sessions and the scenes in which black women act directly before the camera, and specifically, the final shot of the woman

lying on a bed of white sheets. Together with ethnographic images, there are others of Haitian women in which the ethnographic is diluted by what appears to be a more libidinous gaze. But why should we draw a distinction between one set of images and another? What is the technique that leads us to draw such conclusions?

In 1863, Manet's *Olympia* caused a scandal. Clearly, the reasons for that scandal and those which concern us now are different, but they do have something in common. In both cases the subject makes us feel uncomfortable, although this would not be visible were it not for the technical renovation involved. *Olympia* was provocative because it was white on black (on another black woman, indeed), because of the absence of modelling, because of the general flatness of the picture, and above all, because the scene, as Foucault analysed it in his talk in Tunisia, is lit from outside, as if the light that makes the figure visible came from a light given off by the spectator's eyes (so that it is not a scene *per se*, but the illumination of a flat surface from outside).

In the voodoo sessions in *Haiti. Untitled*, there is a development at a profound level, the characters come in and out of the picture, they “do something”, their actions have a purpose, an existence independent of the camera. The light comes from the event that has been captured; indeed, it is an unsuitable light for filming in. At a certain point when the bonfire is the only source of light, the flashes of the women's white dresses come to meet us in some way; the event offers itself up to us, but that does not mean that we consider ourselves responsible for the tumult, which seems to happen despite us. The final scene in the film, on the other hand, like that *Olympia*, is fundamentally flat, essentially vertical and horizontal. The image appears as a *thing* before our eyes, as a *picture* rather than as a virtual space for narration, and this complicates our ability to view it as an autonomous reality. The slightly elevated point of view, standing in front of the bed, contributes to the spectator's “self-awareness” as a generator of the image. The black woman (who is no more than a girl) is presented as an almost shapeless lump, as a mass that projects forward, directly towards our eyes. The frame, the flatness, the lack of movement, the high contrast, the white sheet, simply accentuate the feeling of involvement. The problem, if there is one, is not the nakedness, but that consciousness of “knowing ourselves to be the camera”.

Haiti. Untitled is therefore a heterogeneous work, which juxtaposes a type of cinema that we might call *classical*, one of phase, with “modern”, surface, flat cinema. It is the screen-as-window, in which the object represented, despite the verisimilitude, becomes fiction by appearing to be separate from our conscientious. But it is also the scene as a picture that emphasises our gaze, our presence. There is no single point of view, and that demands that we take a position. If we are disturbed by what we see, it may be because, although on occasions the images drag us in with all their power of fascination, at other times we are inescapably outside, aware that the nakedness of that woman is *also* our responsibility—and by extension, everything else may be too. Jørgen Leth might be said to build his viewpoint through that inside / outside dialectic, uniting the western awareness with its desiring inverse (with which, as children of the Enlightenment, we ought to be familiar), with something we would prefer not to know about ourselves.

Ultimately, it is a question of placing everything on display, of extolling the surface, the consequence of a technical and aesthetic option. Of course, this is ideology in action, or—it comes to the same thing—politics.

3.

Jørgen Leth lives in Haiti, and it is therefore not surprising that his documentary *Haiti. Untitled* is a work that is made more complex by a certain anxiety in the look, which always appears to be extremely personal, and that for that reason it constantly causes problems with the narrative resources a documentary appears to require. However, Leth, who has lived in Haiti since 1991, already made two films there before this documentary. The intriguing thing for us is that the two—*Haiti Express* and *Traberg*—are his only two feature-length fiction films. Leth often mentions his wish to blur the limit between documentary and fiction, and he says it almost lazily, as if he were still talking about these two categories as film genres. However, in the way he makes film, these two categories confront each other, not as two conventions of the medium, but as two dialectic poles which generate everything that interests us most about his work, and which are particularly and most disconcertingly present in *Haiti. Untitled*.

When he decides to classify the first two of these three films as fiction, we must presume that he is taking into account the fact that in both of them the story is narrated through the eyes of a principal character, who takes on the look of the author. In both cases the main character examines the inapprehensible political situation of the country: in *Haiti Express* an actor plays a journalist interviewing some key agents in the political upheaval of the time in El Salvador and Haiti. But the interviews are real, and the interviewees are responding to what they believe to be a television crew. In the specific case of Roberto D'Abouisson, the death-squad ringleader, this method creates a terrifying tension (the actor admits he had to use Valium to cope with the situation). In the case of *Traberg*, the character who holds the investigator's gaze could be an inversion of the previous one. Ebbe Traberg, from whom the film takes its name, is a journalist in real life, a good friend of Leth's, but in the film his position as a journalist is elided, just as the whole detective plot which should have formed the basis of the narration was, because events during filming (successive attempted coups d'état, etc.) ended up breaking into the film. In these two films he appears to be quoting from the suspense plots of conspiracy films. This is an especially solid example of fiction narrative, in which the facts are merely elements that foster the development of the structure of concealment and revelation. However, as we have seen, the narrative collapses to allow the truth appear through fiction. "Truth, one might say, has the structure of fiction", said Lacan. Jameson explains that these words underline the psychic function of the tale and fantasy in the subject's attempt to integrate its alienated image.

In *Haiti. Untitled*, Leth ignores narrative strategy, and it is for this reason that he defines it as documentary. And this is really of little importance, because here too there is going to be a sort of alter ego, an intermediation of his gaze. Many of the pictures from the film document the work of Chantal Regnault, a press photographer (again!) working in Haiti. This time, however, the character does not act as a vehicle for the plot, but to resolve a problem which is more ethical than methodological. Leth freely admits that by including scenes where he shows the photographer taking pictures of murder victims left abandoned in the middle of the street, he could indirectly film things which could not have been addressed without that mediator.

This mediation means that the view embodied in the film camera, and thus the one with which we identify, is neutral: a circle of curious passers-by surrounds a body; within

that circle, a photographer takes pictures, while the onlookers look on helplessly. But suddenly, in a fresh edit, the point of view of the camera moves slightly behind the first row of onlookers and we see the same picture as before, only now in the foreground we see the heads and backs of those who previously closed the circle behind us. This apparently involuntary movement means that our eye seeks some subjective identification with that of the serene Haitian spectators of this brutal scene. And however much of a trick this resource may be, it is never going to be what we see most documented, and it is never going to be more constructed in that “line of fiction”.

Whenever we think about Leth, we are always conscious that, as Godard and Gorin de Vertov said, “he made fiction films with elements of reality, ‘like everyone’”, and he appears to hand us back the phrase in his last film, a portrait of Soren Ulrik Thomsen, where the poet recites a poem from which one verse still rings in our ears: “if everything was like it was when I was seventeen, fiction, it would all have a meaning”.

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JØRGEN LETH was born in 1937 in Aarhus, Denmark. He is a cinema director and producer, poet and television commentator. In the 1960s he was a founding member of the avant-garde film group ABCinema. He has published ten collections of poems and four essays. He was a lecturer at the National Cinema School of Copenhagen and the Oslo Studies Centre. He also gave classes at the universities of Berkeley, UCLA (Los Angeles) and Harvard. He has been living in Haiti since 1991.

Filmography

- 2004 *The Erotic Human Being*, diffusion by Jørgen Leth
- 2004 *The Five Obstructions* by Lars von Trier, Jørgen Leth
- 2003 *New Scenes from America*
- 2001 *Dreamers [The Naivist Painters of Haiti]*
- 1999 *Jeg er levende. Søren Ulrik Thomsen, digter. [I'm Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen: A Danish Poet]*
- 1996 *Haiti. Uden titel [Haiti. Untitled]*, with Jean-Bertrand Aristide
- 1993 *Michael Laudrup - in fodboldspiller [Michael Laudrup- A Football Player]*
- 1992 *Traberg*
- 1989 *Dansk litteratur [Danish Literature]*
- 1987 *Notater fra Kina [Note Book from China]*
- 1987 *Composer Meets Quartet*
- 1989 *Notater om kærligheden [Notes on Love]*
- 1986 *Det Legende menneske [Moments of Play]*
- 1986 *The Yellow Jersey*
- 1983 *Pelota*
- 1983 *Udenrigskorrespondenten [Haiti Express]*
- 1982 *66 scener fra Amerika [66 Scenes from America]*
- 1981 *Step on Silence*
- 1979 *At danse Bournonville [Dancing Bournonville]*
- 1979 *Kalule*

1979 *Peter Martins, en danser* [*Peter Martins: A Dancer*]
1977 *En forårsdag i Helvede* [*A Sunday in Hell*]
1975 *Det Gode og det onde* [*Good and Evil*]
1975 *Klaus Rifbjerg*
1974 *Stjernerne og vandbaererne* [*Stars and Watercarriers*]
1972 *Kinesisk bordtennis* [*Chinese Ping Pong*]

1972 *Livet i Danmark* [*Life in Denmark*]
1971 *Eftersøgningen* [*The search*]
1970 *Motion Picture*
1970 *Teatret i de grønne bjerge*
1970 *Frændeløs* [*Without Kin*]
1969 *Dyrehavefilmen* [*The Deer Garden Film*]
1969 *Jens Otto Krag*
1968 *Nær himlen, nær jorden* [*Near Heaven, Near Earth*]
1968 *Ofelias blomster* [*Ophelia's Flowers*]
1968 *Det perfekte menneske* [*The Perfect Human*]
1965 *Se frem til en tryk tid* [*Look Forward to a Time of Security*]
1963 *Stopforbud* [*Stop fro Bud*]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

ⁱ The third Periferiak was held in Bilbao and San Sebastian from 22 April to 2 June 2005. Other guest speakers included Joaquín Jordá, Belén Gopegui, Jørgen Leth, Philippe Bourgois, Teresa del Valle, Giovanni Arrighi, Antonio Méndez, Dora Salazar and Santiago López Petit. The first of these forums took place in Livorno in 2003 and the second was held in February 2004 in Bilbao.