

CONVERSATION WITH MARK LEWIS¹

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Yilmaz Dziewior: A key issue of your work seems to be the relationship between the moving image – we are so used to film – and the fixed image as it appears for example in a photo or a painting. In our previous discussions you often mentioned that for the presentation of your films you want to achieve the best formal quality and compared the reception of them with viewing a painting. Do you believe painting or photography are superior to film?

Mark Lewis: No, I don't think that either painting or photography is intrinsically superior to film. But I like to think that my work is premised on the idea that, under certain circumstances, film might aspire to be a pictorial art and that film might continue and at the same time reinvent the picturesque tradition, a tradition that historically has been constructed, challenged and defined through the painting genres and more recently through photography. This proposition that a film could be pictorial is, I think, to return to the very origins of film, to that very moment when projected images started to move, or perhaps just before that moment, when their movement might have seemed an absolute inevitability.

It seems to me that at the moment of its so-called invention, film carried the promise, or at least the ambition, to be a pictorial art, albeit one limited or circumscribed by its new and unique relationship to duration. It is in fact its relationship to and experience of time and duration that initially gave to film some continuity with the ambition of painting and which, in a contradictory way, produced within film its own pictorial ambitions. If one of the ambitions of painting was to depict time and movement without actually moving itself, then perhaps film strove to return to the state of being a picture without, of course, finally ceasing to move.

For me it is this contradictory status of film with regards to the questions of movement and duration and the way they are in turn depicted (the very difficulty that film has in being pictorial, let's say) which makes it interesting and crucial to our contemporary understanding of how we look at pictures. The history of pictorialism has always involved a struggle over how to depict movement and the "reality" of time, how to make a picture of relevance beyond the frozen, putative moment that the picture might represent. Therefore from the moment that shadows were first traced on walls, the history of painting has been one of trying to understand movement and to depict it in the stillness of a picture. To some extent, then, film sort of realizes painting's ambition (to move), but in doing so calls into question what had heretofore defined a picture as such (that which, while impossibly depicting movement, did not actually move itself).

Y.D.: It seems to me that the way you arrange your films and photos in the same space is very important. Because it says a lot about your interest in the relationship between the viewer and the pictorial per se. How do you view this practical approach with regard to the intrinsic structure of film and photography?

M.L.: Many of the questions that I need to consider as an artist are practical in nature. For instance: how long should a film in a gallery be? How should I deal with the fact that a film must both begin and end and that both these terminals cast long shadows across the entire work? Should the film image be shown, as in a cinema, with dark rooms and seats and so on, or (as is my own choice) installed closer to the traditional way of viewing pictures in a gallery? And what happens when these two subjectivities – that which belongs to the cinema with its particular architecture, and that which belongs to the picture/art gallery – collide? And then there is the question of the quality of moving images, the fact that they are extremely flat with low resolution and must always suffer in comparison with “still images”. How can this effect be ameliorated? Should it be? And then if you are interested in the stillness of the filmic image, how do you deal with the further deterioration of the image that happens when the camera stops moving (camera movement like the musical soundtrack can usefully conceal a poor quality image).

Raymond Bellour has said that after you have stripped away all the special effects, all the razzmatazz that often accompanies “film installations”, there is still one underlying fundamental problem that simply cannot be overlooked: the poor quality of the filmic image when projected on video in a gallery. Moreover, as this “new” image now stands next to more traditional stable forms of imagery, one cannot help but “compare”. Bellour is right and this uncomfortable truth is one, I think, that no amount of cinematic simulacrae (loud sound, black walls and the like) will hide. The latter might just highlight the problem, in fact. I work with this terrible knowledge everyday and everyday I wonder if it is more than the filmic image can bear. But nevertheless, I am convinced that hiding the problem is not the answer.

In terms of presentation or installation, it's always a question of compromise. The conditions are never right, they are only more or less right. All I can say is that I try to have my films “live” in the kind of space that you find paintings, photographs and other well-lit objects. I would like to think that my films could stand their own next to these older (but not necessarily more traditional) forms, as equals. And to achieve that – and I grant that it may ultimately be impossible – it is necessary to privilege the viewer's experience of the work. Now as a consequence of this decision the viewer must be absolutely free to re-make the work, and therefore he or she must be neither intimidated nor silenced by the work. So that rules out black spaces and ultimately makes it very difficult to use sound.

Practical though these questions might be, to engage with them is at the same time to articulate a sense of continuity or indeed non-continuity with the “still” work of art (painting and photography and so on), and the historical ways we have engaged with and looked at the latter. I would have to say that my engagement with these questions and histories has sometimes been over-determined by a sense of disappointment. This disappointment began with the realization, that no matter what one did, the images of a film were always profoundly disappearing, escaping into the past. In effect, what I was lamenting was the absence of “presentness”, one of the primary and traditional experi-

ences of the viewer as he or she stands in front of the work of art. This latter work does not move and therefore is more or less the same now in its absolute material form as it was five minutes before and will be in five years to come; a second glance will not reveal a successive, changed image. When you look at a painting, you can really be *struck* by the brute fact of this unchangingness, and that the image holds itself unchanged durationaly. It was only later that I realized that this disappointment in the never-present image of film had something to do with the fact that the experience of looking at a film was perhaps too close to the experience of life. And it's perhaps out of this banality, out of this disappointment, that much of my work has proceeded. It has investigated the material effects and possibilities in film, in order to think through and engage with the relationship between images that try to move (but don't) and ones that try not to (but have to). In some respects, I think my work has tried to give formal substance to film's failure to be *here* in the present in a more or less unchanging form. Film in the gallery and its sense of slowness could be a way of dealing with this profound and inevitable disappointment. And while I would not rule out absolutely the possibility of using slow motion, I have the feeling that this only underlines the problem, prolongs the disappointment.

Y.D.: Does this only hold true for film? Isn't there also a big potentiality for this disappointment in connection with the still image? We all know that painting, and I do not mean the *memento mori* genre in particular but figurative painting in general, makes us aware of our own impermanence? Can't the same be said of photography?

M.L.: In recent years I have become more and more drawn to thinking about and looking at painting. I should of course say that I have been drawn to painting that is more or less pictorial, because here the question of time, presentness and duration seems particularly acute. This is not to say that in its modern form, nor in its abstract form in particular, that painting has had nothing to say to and about these issues. But nevertheless, what is always present in a great pictorial work of art is a depiction embedded in a complex relationship to time: time past, but also increasingly, with the emergence of Modernism, the anticipation of time to come. Pictorial art places the stillness of the image in relationship to things that are transformed by movement and time.

One of the reasons why painting before the invention of photography might be useful for thinking about film's pictorial ambitions is really quite a banal and obvious one: movement, time, stillness, gesture and composition were defined, worked on and imagined in painting without any knowledge of what something looked like photographically. In other words, if you wished to paint a portrait of a king in, let's say, 17th century Spain, you did so without any concept of what the king and his background world would actually look like *frozen* in time. Such a photographic concept was impossibility. Before the invention of photography, no one had ever seen that *kind* of stillness, and one still can't see it unless you are looking at a photograph. So, the stillness of the pre-photographic painted portrait was an invention of painting and had nothing to do with the frozen moment of photography. And painting had to figure how its stillness could represent and suggest more – both backwards and forwards in time – than just the putative moment that it was picturing. I think this complex representation of time in painting is one that film also shares, albeit differently. Film is made up of a series of photographs moving at 24 or 25 frames per second, but in a way, film tries to remove the strange deathliness of the single photograph by artificially bringing the dead back to life.

This engagement with painting in its pictorial form does then beg the question: what of photography? How does it figure in this investigation of pictorial possibilities, thought in terms of the temporal specificity of a particular material form? And clearly, if we follow the narrative of inventions, photography succeeds painting, which in turn provides the (material) grounds for the emergence of film. Or does it? What if photography was not at first the anticipation of painting (its enactment if you like) but the re-consideration of something painting was trying to leave behind? Photography emerged at a moment when painting of high ambition was straining (by means of a very old-fashioned and painstakingly slow pictorial method) to anticipate the future and lay claim to a rapidly changing modernity. Painting was attempting to inscribe and embody flux, change and anticipation, things that were perceived to be the urgent differentials of modernity. Against this effort, photography left everything literally frozen: all that it captured seemed immediately to belong to the past. It was not until later, well after the "invention" of film, that photography was able to free itself from this condition perhaps. Would it be possible to say that this made photography seem retrograde, like a step backwards? Perhaps the photograph's pictorial possibilities could only really be properly recognized once its history had sustained a kind of avant-garde erasure – once, that is, photography's curse of "pastness" became a secondary issue with regards to its ability to have pictorial purchase on modernity.

I am interested in considering how different types of time can be inscribed simultaneously in the same work. As part of the attempt by art to depict time and movement from at least the *Quattrocento* onwards, there have been consistent attempts to inscribe a kind of double time in the image. Often this has been achieved by the strategic use of shadows: from the *Adoration of the Magi* by Konrad Witz (1444) through to Vincent Van Gogh's *The Olive Trees* (1889), shadows were painted in such a way as to suggest that they could not possibly belong to "their" objects at the time the objects were supposedly depicted. Hence the sense of a double time. Perhaps the most famous pre-filmic work of art to achieve something of this effect, but without the use of shadows, is Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergères*. Here, as others have suggested, the reflection in the mirror inscribes inside the painting an anticipated future moment alongside the "actual" moment of depiction, as if it were almost two different frames from a film. I am interested in thinking about how film might be able to inscribe different times simultaneously in the same sequences of images.

Y.D.: Your argumentation so far has largely stressed structural and formal aspects of filmmaking. In my opinion, your work also strongly addresses social or even political topics. It does not seem arbitrary and only due to formal considerations that you have very often chosen modernistic architecture as a setting. The run-down architecture in your films seems to reveal that you are interested in the decay or failure of these movements, with all their utopian aims, while at the same time having doubts and sympathy for them?

M.L.: In a very obvious sense, I think it is impossible to separate a work's social and formal aspects. My films usually begin with the "discovery" of a *real* place or location that I find compelling in some way or another, often for reasons I am unable to explain precisely why. Perhaps the discovery of what you are doing really only begins when you stop working on something and start looking at it, and much of what I say about my

work is obviously *ex post facto* consideration. Anyway, after finding a location that I think could be the “star” of a new film, it can sometimes then take quite a long time before I am able to commit to making the film itself. Integral to the preparation of the work is an extended observation of the location, just looking and noting and recording small details that might characterize the place; and also trying to understand the kinds of inhabitations and activities that take place there. From this repetitive observation, if I am lucky a way of working begins to emerge. Important, simple decisions follow: where to put the camera, for instance; or what kind of movement, if any, should the camera or lens have; or should there be any human action in the image; and so on. All of these decisions, which, if you like, are extremely formal, emerge out of the content of the place, from observations of real activities and social occasions, from trying to understand how people *live* there; or, as is the case with some of the landscape films, how I imagine people might *be* there.

In your question you also speak about the failure of ideas or movements, and I think the *idea* of failure is important in my work. It’s important to define this concept more precisely. Because failure in capital letters is a very loaded term: it simply suggests inadequacy and bankruptcy, both of which are not really relevant here. First of all, I think that all good ambition, in art as in the world, is necessarily subtended by failure. Think of it like this: you want to build a perfect world where everyone is equal and where everyone has a decent life, good access to health care, a nice home; in all, a happy life, in so far as this might be possible, for all. As a society you make a decision and you set about trying to make this new world come into being. We have called this decision, historically, a socialist one, and for a long time architecture and art have tried to work with this idea, to give it both substance (buildings to both live in and to symbolically map and define a way of life) and visual form and ideology. Now after some necessary periods of disappointments (many massive and others less so) you can either, like tyrants do, declare victory and announce that you have realized heaven on earth (and therefore necessarily enact a kind of fascist repression in order to make that “victory” a reality of sorts); or you can engage with the failure, make it the thing to think about, treat it as an unexpected development that in turn might produce new and unexpected forms. And when people talk about the failure of the modern, or whatever, this can also suggest how much more new there is left in it, how modern, in fact, the modern still is.

The buildings or housing projects that have provided the locations for a number of my films could be described as examples of the great inter-war social experiment, when modernist architecture joined forces with radical city planning in order to try and improve the lot of the working poor. These buildings or locations had great utopian ideals embedded in them. We now know that any aspects of these great modern building projects were and are highly problematic: the plans failed in many cases to properly anticipate the realism of people living and working in these places. Does this realization then make the idea or the ideal itself wrong? Does it invalidate the ambition? In my films I think I try to give form to the stake of that idea, to recall in some way the utopian ambition of the idea, in order to try and remember what was interesting and important about it in the first place. I accept that you have to be careful not to be nostalgic, and the *archaeology of decay*, particularly in its modernist form, is certainly seductive. So that is why I also try to think about how something is experienced today, and the transformations that this might perform on the ideal. In *Children’s Games* (2002), the camera glides along the *failed* (because virtually no one uses them) overhead

walkways and everywhere in the distance are children enjoying the place in some way or another. Putting so many children playing games in a location (where they normally are not so plentiful) might suggest a utopian model (what, after all, could be more utopian than childhood) that is deeply nostalgic. But, as Mark Godfrey has pointed out, the way the camera moves, as if it were a virtual reality or computer game, inscribes a wholly modern and contemporary children's game right into the very form of the work.

Finally, someone recently pointed out to me that many of the buildings that I film have either now been torn down or are condemned to be destroyed. I was not aware of this dramatic continuity in my subject matter and I certainly do not seek it out. Often, however, as was the case with *North Circular* (2000), I find out while preparing a work that the location in question is condemned and this has the salutatory effect of speeding up my dilatory working method.

Y.D.: Your film *Harper Road* (2003), which shows a part of a street framed by two modernistic building structures shot by a camera slowly turning around its own axis and by doing so, also slowly turning the image upside down again and again, reminded me a lot of Michael Snow's film *La Région centrale* (1971). There are also significant differences between the two, like landscape (*Région centrale*) versus urban environment (*Harper Road*), or in your film people walk through the picture, whereas in Snow's film not a single soul appears. Nonetheless I see a similar approach of mapping a certain territory. But whereas Snow tries to get a total overview, you concentrate very much on just one short section of the road. Still, I think you both use a contradicting way of rendering reality. Because on the one hand, your approach and Snow's both seem rather structurally straightforward, while also revealing the way of you shot the image. At the same time, there are very irrational, almost psychedelic moments. Given this comparison, I would like to ask you about your attitude toward the rational and irrational aspects of filmmaking and what your general relationship to experimental filmmakers like Michael Snow, Stan Brakhage, or Jonas Mekas is?

M. L.: Film is a medium with quite defined limits and formal specificities and structural film understood this and sought to investigate these even as it thought through film's relationship to its technical pre-history (Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow have both made important works about "the photograph") and to the history of other mediums (Stan Brakhage and Tony Conrad). In this sense, these structural issues have been with film for a long time, even if we tend now to take so much of them for granted. The very first structural film is conveniently one of the first films ever made. I am thinking here of the Lumière Brothers' film of the workmen knocking down a brick wall and then its miraculous reversal until it is fully standing again. The film runs forwards and then it runs backwards. It does not get much clearer than that. But importantly, the reversal (the playing backwards of the film) is actually played forward in time – it happens in real time –, and in this sense the representation of reversal, like so many other things in film, is an interesting contradiction in terms. Think here of one of the founding definitions of film: "moving pictures" – how can a picture move when by definition it must be composed, i.e. without movement. But the Lumière Brothers apparently enjoyed this contradictory "relationship" as they would start their projections with a still image that suddenly would start moving. So the invention begins with contradiction. Perhaps the apocryphal screams and shock were not from people actually think-

ing that trains and so on would leave the screen and crash into the audience; rather, it might be because these same people *knew* that pictures could not or should not move, and here they were, apparently moving.

I don't really think that Michael Snow's *Région centrale* is, strictly speaking, a structural film. It is much more eccentric and hallucinatory than that. It's as if the camera has gone mad, and if not mad, then it is obeying some impossible to understand code. Perhaps the movement of the camera is trying to approximate or be the structural equivalent of the earth's movement in the universe: circling around its own axis, orbiting around the sun, and so on. Didn't Snow once describe the film in this way?

Y.D.: I'm not familiar with this comment by Snow, but it sounds very nice and adequately describes the impression one gets watching the film. Snow also said – in connection with *La Région centrale* – that, as with a lot of his other films, it is based on and shaped by the medium in his hands: film. That's what I meant by "structural".

M.L.: *Harper Road* is probably pretty close to being a structural film in so far as it very clearly makes a calculation of an effect (the ability of the camera to turn through 360 degrees which will turn the image first upside down and then right way up again) and then maps that effect as a regularity onto the film. That regularity is guaranteed by the absolute rationality and predictability of the move itself. And wouldn't this idea of predictability be a good definition of structure, or at least of how structure is *felt*? To me, these structural elements present useful ways of opening up other, perhaps in your terms, more *irrational* possibilities of viewing and identification. They eliminate certain "creative" decisions and therefore provide me with a more or less pre-determined way of working and I believe that this paradoxically frees up the work, allowing it to reveal something unpredictable and unscripted. Literally, structure produces unstructure, or at least that's what we can hope for.

Y.D.: Maybe the story "behind" this particular work and how you came to make the decision to have the camera do its structural turn in *Harper Road* might be useful here...

M.L.: The decision to make the camera move in the way it does in *Harper Road* is, in one respect, simply the answer to the question of *what is to be done?* Every location begs this question before it can be transformed into an image. And it is a question that can never really be answered as in some respects it's often just the sign of an insecurity that what is there in front of me may not be enough (although, of course, it often is). I stumbled across the *Harper Road* location a few years before I finally shot it. It is quite close to where I live and I was initially drawn to the eclectic collage of public housing architecture (modernist arcadia and 19th century dwellings), that is quite typical of the neighborhood (it's actually just a few hundred meters from where I shot *Children's Games*, *Tenement Yard* and *Churchyard Row*). There was something quite compelling and strange about the dilapidated (soon to be demolished!) small two-story modernist housing structure with its little courtyard. In particular, I was struck by the building's elements of non-utilitarian design. Take the concrete girder, for instance, that joins the two halves of the building together across the courtyard. Its function, if it had one at all, was probably to frame the view that you would have out from the courtyard, so that the inhabitants of this small two-story building could have a sharp modern edge against which to see the remnants of the 19th

century world across the street. It provides an imaginary visual border with the latter, like a *passee partout* or *parergon*. It was this detail I think that first made me feel that I could make a film there. I was particularly fascinated with the way that the deteriorating state of the beam's concrete and paintwork created a *trompe-l'œil* merging of it with the branches and leaves of the untrimmed tree.

And after many visits, umpteen photographs, hours of video footage, I still did not know what to do there. I thought about actors and actions, "stories" that might have pulled the film in quite different directions. I did in fact make another version of this film that had a very small but quite dramatic action in the background. But I also filmed the location "empty", and it was this empty version that I finally chose. Because what I think is at stake in this film, indeed what is at stake in many of my films, is the question of how to strike a balance between what *appears* and what *happens*. By appearance, I mean the stuff of depiction: objects, people, things, composure, balance, tension, and so on. By happening, I mean the events and narratives that unfold over time: change, transformation, revelation, etc. In film, the latter often, perhaps always, overwhelms the former: a simple expectation ("what is going to happen?") can stop you from looking at the image properly, or at least make you look at it differently. And the balance that I speak about is really to see if it is possible to transform the narratives of the everyday into simple pictorial observations and to do that in real time.

I made *Harper Road* some 12 months after completing *Algonquin Park, Early March*. This latter film in many ways expresses the impossibility of achieving the balance I have just been describing. For me *Algonquin Park, Early March* is a film that articulates the desire for a film to become a picture, but because the film is constantly *caught* revealing something, it fails to hold the attention necessary for it to achieve that pictorial state (how can you look at something properly when you are continually waiting to see what's going to happen next?). Perhaps *Algonquin Park, Early March* incorporates this failure as repetition – every time the film comes to its end, it simply goes back and starts its revelations all over again. Nevertheless, *Algonquin Park, Early March* insists on the structural necessity of the pursuit (I would go so far as to say that the struggle between picture and narrative is film's unconscious). Anyway, after completing the film, I felt that it was important for me to try and make a film where the movement itself was so predictable and so easy to understand that it would eliminate any sense of revelation: you would know where the image was going and how it was going to get there. Released of all responsibility to second-guess or anticipate, you might instead just look at the effect of the movement and how it transforms the image. So, *Harper Road* is just that. It's probably stretching things to speak about how figure is transformed into abstraction and back again, but this is the effect of the structural turn: it makes you think about how images are formed.

Y.D.: Some of the mentioned experimental filmmakers shot their films on super 8 or 16mm and then transferred them onto video for distributing and screening purposes. This is comparable to your practice, right? Besides the practical advantages, what are your reasons for using the apparatus of the film industry and then sticking to video and DVD projections?

M.L.: I shoot in 35mm film for a number of reasons. The first is because of the quality of the image. As I suggested before, moving images (especially when projected on video)

are extremely flat with low resolution and must always suffer in comparison with “still images”. When you go up close, they more or less all look the same (they are just pixels). Shooting on 35mm does not solve this problem, but it does help make it less bad.

The second and perhaps more important reason for working in film is again, to return to an earlier part of our conversation, a structural one: literally, the apparatus gives me a structure, it forces me to cut back on extemporization, and it provides me with plans and limits for working. And then when I try to execute the plan, there is always failure, but if I am lucky I can call it the accident. And I suppose that it is the space between plan and execution – the failure or accident – that we often depend upon to rescue works from banality or literalness.

- 1 The present text was formerly published in: Y. Dziewior (ed.), *Mark Lewis* (Hamburg: Kunstverein Hamburg, 2005)