

Decompositions

Régis Durand

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Among other activities (writing, performance), Éric Rondepierre produces fairly large-format photographic works (a metre square, sometimes more). These works have one thing in common: they are based on film stills which the artist has selected after painstaking searches with a VCR or film viewer and then photographed and enlarged. Within a given corpus (early films or trailers, for example), he will locate and capture a fragment, or sometimes two, which he will extract in function of a specific project. What then are the criteria of this special form of freeze frame?

In the *Excédents* (Surpluses) series, they are black images, frames which were used for subtitles or quite simply added during the restoration of the film. In *Annonces* (Previews), the artist has located, in the trailers for certain films, a frame where the text is just starting to appear in a form that is still almost undecipherable, like a kind of ectoplasm, a disturbing or grotesque form where the letters which are going to occupy the screen in an instant can just be made out. Later, in the 1990s, there was the *Précis de décomposition* (Decomposition summary) series, perhaps the best known, in which, working with anonymous films from the beginning of the century, Rondepierre chose images altered by time or storage conditions, where chance gave rise to remarkable visual effects. For several years, without or without a still camera, sometimes cutting directly into the film stock, Rondepierre has turned to effects of montage, the way two images can be combined or linked together. It is as if, after seeking to isolate one frame from the filmic continuity in order to exploit its particular visual qualities, he were now attempting to seize what is perhaps the essential element of the cinema—the articulation of the images, the montage.

Of course, what is involved is still making a single image, a ‘picture’, by stopping the continuity just where a remarkable juxtaposition or ordering is produced. But it is no longer the accident happening to (or in) the isolated image which interests him, but rather the play around the invisible line which separates and unites two successive frames.

In both cases, however, we are confronted with a gesture that is at once disconcerting and essential. Essential because it goes straight to the heart of the filmic matter, whether in terms of its medium (the film stock) or its progression (montage). But also disconcerting: Rondepierre speaks of the “perceptual divorce” produced by the joining of two images when they are isolated from the flow which projects them at the rate of 24 images per second. At that point, an unknown image emerges, which does not belong to either of the two, “a single visual enigma which causes the eye to vacillate, to hesitate”.

It is this confusion that touches us in turn, like the blotch, the ‘ectoplasm’ in the corroded images or the mysterious deformation of the emerging letters. Because for us it is the materialisation of a secret, autonomous life of film, the organic substance of this thin film

stock on which time and the dust of life have been deposited, and which thus manifests the signs of its mortality.¹

In the course of looking for a specific segment of a film on a VCR, who has not had the experience of such an apparition, which suddenly puts us in contact with a secret life of the cinema? For exactly where the narrative model has been imposed, with its predilection for the fable or the adventure unfolding towards their inevitable conclusion, there exist other hypotheses, other logics. So-called experimental film, for example, which works on the very materiality of the medium. That of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, in particular, seems close to Rondepierre in its analytical approach to vintage documents, which are re-photographed frame by frame, re-cropped and elongated in an attempt to delimit the “letter”, the most hidden thought arising from it.²

In Rondepierre’s case, the object is, to be sure, completely different. But like them, what he is looking for in the film is something other than its simple consumption in the course of its duration and the tale that is being told. It is not that he is postulating any hidden truth to be discovered in the detail of the matter itself, against the flow of the projection, off the beat. On the contrary, he is looking to see how time, in all its forms (the historic time which causes the film stock to deteriorate, the filmic time which is elaborated in the sequences of still images) has worked to produce forms. In this respect, the artist acts as a ‘painter’, in the contemporary sense, which means an inventor of visual configurations not necessarily resulting from the brush but from any kind of material or device. But his particular material, the film broken down frame by frame, has its own logic. It gives rise to forms, characters, stories which are invested with a powerful imaginary energy and create a tension with the immobility that the frame and the deterioration impose on them. Rondepierre now often works on two consecutive images, focusing on the ‘bar’ which separates two frames in order to bring out a new, composite image which is invisible during projection but worked on by the very act of montage, the repository of this work and the strangeness it brings with it.

What is important here is this: the play between one image and the same, almost, separated from its predecessor by 1/24th of a second, and in which something has nonetheless changed. And if what happens between two frames may seem to be the minimum unit of montage, it very quickly gives way to that paradoxical, almost untenable idea, evoked by Eisenstein, who

¹ Jean Louis Schefer has shown how decomposition and disappearance are inherent to the filmic image. In *Du monde et du mouvement des images* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1997), he writes for example: “At its birth, the image is simply given to time, or it introduces it. That time is not the one of movement or action. It is its essence and its seeming gangrene. It thus allows the passage of what was previously outside of it or came after it: its sphere of evaporation” (p. 17). This essay as a whole is an excellent meditation on the idea that “the introduction of time in images is a hint or a possibility of the instant ageing of the world” (p. 76).

² On Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, see the special section in *Trafic 38* (Paris, summer 2001), with essays by Philippe Azoury, Dominique Païni and Danielle Hibon, Christa Blümlinger and Raymond Bellour. The following remark by Azoury, for example, gives a good indication of the analogy (and the differences) between the two approaches: “Since 1979, the Gianikians have been composing the ‘archaeological’ part of their cinema from found frames, focusing on the period from the beginning of the century to the early 1930s (in other words, the Golden Age of silent film). A mass of archives which they classify and itemize before reappropriating it, refilming it with the ‘analytical camera’, a machine of their own invention which probes deep into this body of damaged images, joining, repairing, saving, editing, reviving these views, bringing them to another state, slowly drawn out, slowed down, held back, re-cropped, disfigured, refigured, compressed, zeroed in on, revealed. Liberated” (p. 50).

brings montage back from the relationship between several images to the core of the minimum unit, the single frame: “. . . the basic centre of gravity . . . is transferred to *inside* the fragment, into the elements included in the image itself”.³

As chance (?) would have it, at the same time I’m writing these words, I’m reading Isidore Isou’s 1951 book (or film-book) *Traité de bave et d’éternité* (Treatise on drivel and eternity).⁴ Beyond the provocative extravagance inherited from Dada, Isou seems to be looking for new kinds of relationships between images, and also between images and words—relationships which would no longer owe anything to the narrative/discursive montage but to a movement of simultaneous attachment and detachment, a “disjunctive conjunction”.⁵

In Rondepierre’s case, what is involved is not ‘spoiling’ the image but identifying how the process of ‘spoilage’ (if we use this term to designate all the accidents affecting it) transform that image, bringing out an unexpected beauty and meaning. It is these rare moments of epiphany that interest Rondepierre, who seems to believe in a possible redemption of images, a kind of grace which is accorded but hidden, and which can only be discovered through the discipline and acuity of the eye. And what might pass for a tranquil Jansenism is not the least appealing aspect of this work.

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³ We owe the rediscovery and analysis of Eisenstein’s “vertical reading” of images and of montage as the “accentuation within the fragment” to Roland Barthes. See Barthes’s 1970 essay “The Third Meaning—Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills”, in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 52-58.

⁴ Isidore Isou, *Traité de bave et d’éternité* (Paris: Éditions Hors Commerce, 2000).

⁵ What Jean-Pierre Rehm, in his postface to Isou’s book, identifies as *zeugma*.