

**On the Occupy Poble Sec
cinema forum:
listening to the screenings
and giving an account
of the listenings
as ABR methodology**

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In 2011, after the 15M Movement occupation of Plaça Catalunya came to an end, a number of neighbourhood-level assemblies were formed throughout Barcelona. One of these, in the Poble Sec area, organised a monthly cinema forum as a pedagogical tool for discussing current political issues and its own presence in the city. In its meetings an open discussion, consisting of a talking circle, followed each screening, and situated the sounds and images of the film in the local context. For instance, *Twenty Years is Nothing* (Joaquim Jordà, 2005) led the group to think through how political struggles had been pacified during the Spanish transition to democracy and subsequently ignored in later official accounts; and *Videograms of a Revolution* (Andrej Ujica and Harun Farocki, 1992) was chosen to consider the production of symbolic violence in the 2012 general strike, the biggest in Spain during the recent economic crisis.

I was involved in this activity for the time it lasted, from January to July 2012, and had the opportunity to examine the assemblage required to put it into practice. It employed a conjunction or entanglement of:

–Film technologies. In this case, an apparatus bringing together things that were previously dispersed and that could be provided by several different people: a light cannon, a screen, the DVD or computer file of the movie, speakers, wires, a computer, etc. This had nothing to do with a traditional cinema theatre since the screening equipment had to be reassembled almost every time from scratch; also, it could turn any room into a projection environment.

–Relational politics. After the screening, the discussion was animated by two or three people whose political backgrounds meant they were involved or interested in the session's main issue, and who would start by talking about it for a while: the Spanish Transition, the current social meaning of a strike, the relationship between protests, violence and media, and so on. For this purpose we did not seek out experts but common people. Then the debate took place in the talking circle and included some care practices – such as providing food and drinks or promoting attentive listening – organized by different members of the assembly. Thus, as Annemarie Mol (2008) has remarked: «In the logic of care the action moves around. One moment you care and the next you are taken care of. Care tasks are shared in varying ways. They also change. Something is done – and when it doesn't work the crucial question is not whose fault it was, but what to try next» (: 80).

–The production of common space. The cinema forum took place at several different points in the neighbourhood: the auditorium of a public building called The Sea House, the kitchen of the civic centre of Poble Sec, and the second floor of the Ateneu Rebel social centre. However the activity was not limited to simply filling these spaces, but also shaped them by a shared existence based on looking and talking. Because space, as Doreen Massey (2006) has conceptualized it, is not mere surface, but a constellation of ongoing human and non-human trajectories:

The first proposition is that space is a product of practices, relations, connections and disconnections. We *make* space in the conduct of our lives, and at all scales, from the intimate to the global. This is a proposition that is now frequently accepted, yet more honoured in the recitation than in the practice. The second proposition is that space is the dimension of multiplicity. Evidently, without space there could not be multiplicity (in the simple sense of the existence of more-than-one-thing). However this proposition implies also the reverse – that without multiplicity there could not be space. Space and multiplicity, in other words, are co-constitutive. The third proposition follows from the two that precede it. It is that space is always in process; it is never finished; never a completed holism. There are, in more practical terms, always connections, relations, yet to be made, or not made. Space is an on-going production (: 89-90).

Furthermore, my research tried to link this particular mode of being with a tradition that has often turned the black box of cinema into a school bringing the real closer and allowing us to rethink it in more depth (Daney, 2004). A parallel account of these alternative, pedagogical ways of using screenings, running through Alexander Medvedkin's cine-train, the Groupe Medvedkin, the Pedagogical Missions of the Second Spanish Republic, Dziga Vertov's Cine-Eye, Jean-Luc Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group, etc., outlines a history of this tradition and helps us grasp how «the current» («not what we are but rather what we are in the process of becoming»; Deleuze, 1992: 164) works in the Occupy Poble Sec cinema forum.

The Sensorial Turn

At first, the inquiry took the shape of an ethnographic observation enquiring how objects and feelings, times and spaces, words and bodies, were related and distributed in the encounters facilitated by this activist-cum-aesthetic activity. However, this approach soon came up against a paradox: although the cinema-forum was mostly a space filled with images, the mechanics of the projection left the audience in the shadows and therefore out of my sight. Due to this, the method relied more on listening than seeing – or more precisely, on *listening to the screenings*.

The screening thus became a sensorial territory that partly fitted R. Murray Schafer's classic idea of a soundscape (1993), in that it was an «acoustic environment» isolated as «a field of study», consisting of «events *heard* not objects *seen*» (: 7-8). However, these events mostly referred to what was happening on the screen. There would be a kind of circuit between the film that could be seen and the collective body that was paying attention to it, and evidence of this came from the «soundtrack» – sometimes more or less individualised – through which the latter responded to the former. Moreover, after the screening, the debate did not only concern speeches and dialogues that needed to be listened to, but also bodies in touch with each other, often learning to speak in public. So listening meant paying attention to this corporeality and to its forms of mediation at the same time.

Thus as Sara Pink (2009) has written, in line with Etienne Wenger's notion of «knowing in practice» and Tim Ingold's understanding of the acquisition of skills through «attentive engagement», the very idea of participant observation in ethnography should be rethought: «Participation might be understood as producing multi-sensorial and emplaced ways of knowing whereby visual observation is not necessarily privileged» (: 63). This also involves the ethnographer becoming in a certain way a co-participant of the practices s/he investigates: «The sensory ethnographer would not only observe and document other people's sensory categories and behaviours, but seek routes through which to develop experience-based empathetic understandings of what others might be experiencing and knowing» (: 65).

This sensorial turn also obliged me to tackle two connected questions, both relating to the process of writing: firstly: What kind of account could emerge from this position of listening, even in a literary sense? And secondly: What kind of work could images do in this account?

Accounting for the Listeners

As Hernández (2008) and Barone and Eisner (2006: 96) have argued, Art-Based Research (ABR) not only involves visual or performative representations, but also textual productions whose heuristic aim is to find new ways of looking at experience and, rather than giving answers, to open up questions about previously unperceived features.

Arts-based researchers often experiment with their research texts, in hopes of designing a format that will achieve the heuristic purposes of enhancing perspectives and raising important educational questions in the minds of readers. Arts-based textual formats have tended toward the literary or quasi-literary, employing formats associated with, for example, poetry, critical essays, plays, novels, biographies or autobiographies, and collections of life stories. The literary text will sometimes – usually for the purpose of educating readers about the value of the textual experiment – be accompanied by descriptions of (or stories about) the research process, or analysis of themes embodied within it.

In my case, I tried to describe what happened during the screenings not in categorical terms, but attending to the «vitality affects» that, according to Raymond Bellour (2013), catalyse the encounter between cinema's body and the collective body formed by the audience. Unlike discrete and more conscious emotions such as happiness or anger, these kinds of feelings need to be formulated in mostly kinetic terms: shaking, crescendo, crash and so on. Below is an example from the screening of *Twenty Years is Nothing* which took place on 23rd February 2012 in the kitchen of the Poble Sec civic centre, with over fifty spectators present:

This common body, waiting expectantly in the darkness, gradually enters into the narrative play leading them through Pepi's words towards the abbreviated existence

of Juan Manzanares, which she does not reveal, however, until the final third of *Twenty Years*. His footsteps in the snow spread a shared silence out from the screen, a silence whose breathing envelops the room, and whose interruptions, to laugh or murmur some reaction, interweave with a sequence of scenes set in a village in the Pyrenees. This is where two women workers from Numax end up, fleeing from the city and forming a family that Pepi visits. Up to now the film has accumulated reencounters and memories, but where is it going, and what for? Very close to me, a woman in the audience sighs and begins waiting once again.

At the same time as providing a denouement to the exercise of memory around Numax, the bank holdup in Valls, during which Manzanares is captured by the Civil Guard, pushes the room into a new physical encounter in which people's feelings suddenly take a new turn. The sequence is made up of two interviews, with the then governor of Tarragona, Vicente Valero, and Mateu Seguí, Juan's lawyer, cut with archive shots from a local television which managed to catch the event live. The presenter, who is not up to the task of commenting on the action, does what he can. He speaks only a few metres from the bank, from a building across the street where he can hardly catch a glimpse of what's happening inside. At the same time as he mixes obviousness, imprecision and absurdity in his commentary, we hear laughter from *this side* of the screen, pausing only to take in the next gaffe, i.e. it is synchronized with the rhythms of the ridiculous commentary and the camera zooming in as it tries in vain to get a look inside the bank. I see and hear Tomás Lucero, sitting at a table next to the cooker, on the crest of this wave of mirth: he lifts up his palms and slightly separates his hands, symmetrically, as if he's about to applaud. Finally the whole room bursts into a huge collective laugh, including his.

Also, these descriptions are intertwined with sections of a genealogy of filmic pedagogies in which each part is a separate, fragmented stratum. For instance, the two paragraphs I have quoted above as examples are preceded and followed by an inquiry on the screening practices of Alexander Medvedkin's cine-train in the 30s, and on the Groupe Medvedkin – organised among others by Chris Marker – in the late 60s. The writing style of this part is closer to the essay and completely different to that employed in the ethnographic parts, essentially because its fieldwork object was not the real situations in the cinema forum. The contact between these two strata – the ethnographic and the genealogical – is intended to produce a constant overlap of the past and the present, or in Foucault's terms, between the *archive* – «the depiction of what we are and what we are ceasing to be» – and the *current* – «the newness of an apparatus in relation to those which have gone before» (Deleuze, 1992: 164).

Last but not least, a few sequences of photographs are included in order to revisit some sites of the cinema forums, though now empty of people, so that the images can be «worked on» by the texts alongside them. The absence of human beings, combined with the presence of the things and materials that once mediated the cinema forum sessions, aims to translate Doreen Massey's ideas about space cited above. The images are seen as a space resulting from a constellation of trajectories and practices,

most of which are narrated in a non-visible format, i.e. through the writing. «Arts-based researchers often use language that is evocative, inviting the reader to fill the gaps in the text with personal meaning», argue Barone and Eisner (2006: 97). But here the power of the evocation also depends on the non-correspondence between what is told and what is shown. This disjunction can also be found in the cinema of Jean-Marie Straub or Marguerite Duras, where «the voices emerge, on the one hand, like a story/history [*histoire*] without a place, while the visible element, on the other hand, presents an empty place without story/history» (Deleuze, 1999: 55).

To sum up, the strategy of narrating an account of the listenings, after listening to the screenings, is about seeing through words, and telling a story through the gaps between images and text. Thus ABR methodology becomes a way of shifting the boundaries of the senses, and thereby perhaps also expanding what is thinkable about the Occupy Poble Sec cinema forum.







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