

FILMIC PHOTOGÉNIE IN THE THEATRE

SIGRID MERX

Between 2003 and 2005, the Flemish theatre director Guy Cassiers produced four performances based on Marcel Proust's novel *A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS PERDU*. Since my research focuses on the influences of (live) video technology on the representation of time in theatre, the work of Cassiers, characterized by a sophisticated use of video technology, may provide interesting insights in the role technology plays in staging Proust's novel, which touches upon temporal experiences and ideas, in particular, the process of remembering.

Cassiers shares with Proust an interest in representing the subjective world. They both experiment with creating a perceivable inner world of thoughts, dreams and sensory experiences. They also use cinematographic techniques, such as zooming in and out and close-ups, to represent and express this inner world. This paper will introduce the filmic concept of *photogénie* as a useful analytical tool, which sheds light on how and why Cassiers uses these techniques in his Proust performances to represent the subjective world of the main character, Marcel.

During early French film debates, *photogénie* was one of the most widely circulated concepts. Filmmaker Louis Delluc first introduced the concept, which had origins in the field of photography, and used it to describe how the film camera showed reality in a *new* way. Delluc believed that »the real« (or what he also termed »the factual« and »the natural«) was the material of film, but that it was transformed by the camera and the projection screen into something new, without becoming any less real (Abel: 110). The camera de-familiarized the familiar and presented the spectator with a new perspective on reality. It is important to realize that *photogénie*, as understood by Delluc and many other participants in the film debate, assigns the aesthetic and transformational power »of looking at things in a new way« not to the artist, but to the technological device. *Photogénie* has to do with the possibility of the camera creating and installing a perspective, even before cinematographic techniques are implemented, such as editing, framing and camera positioning, to create perspectives for a possible narrative.

The French film debate originated in early 20th century Paris and was centred around questions regarding the specificity, function and effects of film and the aesthetic possibilities of film as art. Filmmakers and critics participated in this debate, primarily conducted in newspapers and magazines. The question of how to represent modern temporality – particularly aspects including velocity, memory and simultaneity – with cinematographic means was one of the recurring topics in the debate. A group of French impressionists, including important advocates such as Ricciotto Canudo, Emile Vuillermoz and Germaine Dulac, dominated the debate. The French impressionists, also referred to as »The First Avant-Garde« or »Narrative Avant-Garde«, felt that film should become a site for experimenting with and sharpening the expression of modern experiences, specifically, the subjective experience. In particular, the *photogenic* powers of film would instil a new mode of

observation. These French impressionists were seeking for »a subjective cinema« as an alternative to classical narrative cinema. They considered film the ultimate medium for expressing the subjective, which, in their opinion, was on the brink of elimination due to such modernization processes as industrialization and urbanization.

Almost a century later, Cassiers has made similar remarks regarding theatre. He feels that in this mediatised world, the subjective perception should be safeguarded. He views theatre as the threshold of the sensory experience, an intermedial stage where various media can come together, each in a different way, to address and titillate the senses. The aesthetics of both the French impressionists and Guy Cassiers, although occurring during different time periods, can be characterized as predominantly lyrical, focusing on the representation of an inner, subjective world full of memories, desires, needs, anxieties, thoughts and sensory experiences. They are less interested in the representation of an outer world, characterized by unfolding coherent actions based on the principles of causality, continuity and linearity. These latter principles, according to the French impressionists and Cassiers, do little justice to the dynamics of the subjective world. They both assign a special power to the technology of the camera in creating this subjective perspective in art. As Germaine Dulac stated in 1924 during one of her film lectures,

»What is more mobile than our psychological life with its reactions, its manifold impressions, its sudden movements, its dreams, its memories? [...] The cinema is marvellously equipped to express these manifestations of our thinking, our emotions, our memories« (Abel: 310).

For the motto of one of his performances, Cassiers borrows a quote from Lewis Carroll: »Learn to look at everything as if you are mentally cross-eyed.« During interviews and lectures, he never stops emphasizing his purpose of looking for a point of view, or language, which puts the individual memories of the spectator into another perspective, searching for that special moment in which their perception of reality shifts. In the case of Cassiers, the *photogenic powers* of the camera and film projection are explicitly employed to implement this shift and activate the audience's senses.

The French impressionist Louis Aragon closely ties the concept of *photogénie* and the idea of creating a new mode of observation to the use of the close-up. By zooming in on objects, the *photogenic* qualities of the camera isolate, enlarge and re-contextualize these objects, freeing them from their function within the narrative and exposing them as independent poetic objects, or bearers of modern beauty (Abel: 111). As such, these objects stimulate the senses of the spectator.

The extremely large close-up is one of the most powerful elements of Cassiers' artistic language. In one of his Proust performances, the camera zooms in on the face of the actress who is playing the role of the mother of Marcel. The zoom stops when the whole frame is filled with the sight of her cheek. Showing an image in extreme close-up disconnects the object from what is outside the frame. A head from which one can only see a cheek loses its meaning as a head, as well as its meaning as a cheek. Instead, it is viewed as a mere landscape of skin. The image becomes texture, material, and independent. It transforms into a new sensory image. In the case of real-time video, this creates an exciting tension between the live – the physically present actor – and the mediatised – the extreme close-up.

The relationship between the projection and the physical object of projection is always very meaningful in Cassiers' performances. Their simultaneous presence on stage shifts the audience's focus to the differences between them. As Delluc states, the film image as a *photogenic image* forms a new reality. In Cassiers' Proust performances, the fact that the projection is different from what is shown on stage transforms what is on the stage, offering different perspectives. In so doing, it addresses the larger Proustian theme. In the case of the extreme close-up of Marcel's mother, Cassiers uses the zoom-technique to literally reduce the role of the mother to that of her cheek.

In his novel, Proust describes how every night, the young Marcel would wait for his mother to come upstairs to give him the opportunity to kiss her goodnight. He is eager for her to come to his room, but at the same time, fears the moment that he may kiss her because it means that she will soon leave him alone again. For the young Marcel, his mother is primarily the cheek to be kissed. The image of the cheek, together with the physical presence of the performer, expresses how Marcel experiences his mother. Together, with their intermedial interaction, they create an internal, highly subjective perspective.

Regarding the novel of Proust, Gilles Deleuze distinguishes between three different worlds, each of them having its own principles of representation. *The World of Love* contains characters who tend to love the image that they have formed of their loved ones. These images are coloured by subjective wishes, fantasies and anxieties, and have become disconnected from reality. *The World of the Salon* is all about showing off – showing imaginations, pretensions, and the outer image of one's self to the world. Proust characterizes the salon as an exchange of images without any content; it is inhabited by, as he says, »the dead«. Finally, *The World of Art* transforms reality, not into a fixed image, but into vivid, lively images which stimulate the senses and enable the audience to regain lost time.

These three worlds and their modes for creating images and transforming reality are all represented in the Proust performances of Cassiers with the use of video. By showing video images of the women Marcel loves, while the same women are on stage, for example, in PROUST 1: THE SIDE OF SWANN, the audience is forced to see that these video images do not represent the physically present women. Instead, these images, such as the case of the close-up of the cheek, are highly subjective images of Marcel's longing. By playing a pre-recorded movie without sound and letting the physical actors dub the movie on the spot, PROUST 3: THE SIDE OF CHARLUS allows the audience to view how the salon is a world full of imitation and make-believe. The actors mimic their virtual doubles in almost every detail. They do not create an original image of themselves. Instead, they take upon themselves a role already filled for them. In doing this, they demonstrate how presenting one's self in the bourgeois world means nothing more than any acting, according to fixed conventions.

Finally, PROUST 4: THE SIDE OF MARCEL demonstrates how a projection of Vermeer's painting VIEW AT DELFT, referred to in PROUST 1, 2 AND 3, is digitally manipulated. In a series of deconstructive movements, the realist image of the city is transformed into one big yellow screen. Earlier in the performance, Marcel Proust sees this painting at an exhibition and is so stunned and touched by this beautifully painted piece of yellow brick wall that he would have traded his life for it. Here, art is presented as a pure sensory experience that stimulates the senses and imagination and does not offer fixed images.

Cassiers not only uses video projections and cameras to create a subjective perspective, he also simultaneously stages technology within the live performance, visible to the audience. Not only does the camera possess transformational (photogenic) powers, but the live performance does as well, making the technological process of transforming reality and different ways in which this process can manifest itself visible on the stage.

In the work of Cassiers, the *photogénie* of the video projection is not only active as a process, but staged within a theatrical context. It therefore demonstrates a process for producing meaning. The theatre spectator is forced to reflect on these characteristics that induce meaning, whereas in most films, the spectator is immersed in the illusion of the diegetic world. The film spectator is not aware of the photogenic potential of the camera to create a new perspective and a new way of observation, but is aware of the live performance, with its capacity to stage other media and develop such levels of awareness among the theatre audience.

The call for reflection in the Proust performances is strongest with the simultaneous presence of the physical subject and its projection. The spectator is challenged to compare the two and constantly shift between perspectives. During this act of comparison, differences come into focus and call for a more reflexive attitude on the part of the spectator, who is put in a position where he or she must actively assign meaning to these differences, thus taking up an active, creative role in which he or she fills gaps between live and mediated performances, using his or her own imagination. The imagination of the spectator in this sense is endowed with the same transformational power as the camera; it is able to create a new, subjective perspective on reality.

One thing observed at the very onset is that *photogénie* assigns aesthetic and transformational power to look at things in a new way in relation to camera and projection screen technology. How can this concept help an audience understand why and how Cassiers employs video in his performances? It can be concluded that Cassiers uses the possibilities offered by video to visually create a dynamic inner world of subjective experiences on the theatrical stage. At the same time, Cassiers assigns the exact same transformational power of film to a live performance. Although he uses the photogenic qualities of the camera to create images that, when interacting with the physically present performers, demonstrate how people always construct subjective images of the world around them, thereby transforming it, he does not limit this transformational power to the technology of the camera. The technological potential of the camera to create a subjective perspective functions primarily as a tool and points to one of the dominant themes of the Proust performances: how individuals deal with life by constructing their own version of reality.

Sometimes, as in the case of the guests of the salon, this construction is meant to keep up appearances. At times, as in the case with Marcel's impressions of the important women in his life, this construction is not realistic, but is instead based on desire and longing. Finally, as is the case with art, sometimes the artist's construction of reality invites the spectator to take a new, fresh look at his or her own version of reality. In the work of Cassiers, technology plays a crucial role in this invitation. Cassiers employs video and video projections to titillate the senses and stimulate his audience, allowing them to become more aware of not only how a camera transforms reality and produces meaning, but also how their own inner experiences affect their subjective construction of reality.

Literature

- Abel, Richard (1993): *French Film Theory and Criticism: Volume I 1907-1929*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1964): *Proust et les signes* (3d ed.). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. [English Translation: *Proust and Signs*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: George Braziller, 1972].

