

Interview to Abigail Child





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by Sebastian Wiedemann

Sometimes in a Film Festival the most interesting things happen between the movies, between one projection and another. Talks about and around the images. Talks between friends due the images. I send you these questions to remember and to put on record those cinema meetings that we had in Goiania-Brazil.

No doubt good humor is something very important in your life. How do you feel that this fact influence your work?

The world is entertaining and comical in its absurdity and its beauty. Humor is the other side of great tragedy: what is left when the abysmal happens. Humor is also or therefore Courage. Humor is very human.

All doubt.

There's something very ludic/playful in your images, as if you were not afraid to play with them, as if you want to always open the images and give them multiple senses. A performativity of the image. It is never what it seems, is not a window to the world. It is a vehicle, a medium where the reality we see is just the starting point. How do you feel this in your work, I mean, this condition of the image?

Yes and yes. "Not afraid to play... to always open the images and give them multiple senses". They have these. I thought of this as action, an enacting that the audience protracts and redacts through their body and mind. The world is not what it seems certainly or the seams are what we don't see and I want you to look at that. The starting

point is the vehicle, the body is the vehicle; the medium is the world. It is always moving. You are moving inside it—a voyage but hopefully not a travelogue. More a big swim. Immersed.

Felt an instant rapport with Phenomenology when first read it.

In Goiania I could see your four recent works. All of them very different from each other. Elsa, Vis à Vis, Unbound and Riding the Tiger. And certainly I could see that you have different ways of understanding the montage and structure possibilities. Could you talk about your conceptions and ideas about it?

I see more relations between the films. Unbound is a version of The Future is Behind You from almost a decade earlier in their mutual ideas of home movies as fiction. Elsa merdelamerdelamer is a kiss, an angry and fearful one, while Vis à Vis is a series of loving kisses. The first one is a homage to the past and the other to my contemporaries.

Riding the Tiger is more anomalous perhaps though I started as a documentarian. Game, (1972) a portrait of a prostitute and her pimp on the streets of New York prefaces Mayhem (1987) as well as B/Side (1996); also, On The Downlow (2007) negotiates sex on the margins as do both my earlier and later works: Mayhem again, also Covert Action (1984), Perils (1986) and Ligatures (2009).



There are city symphonies that thread through: *Below the New* (1999) in Russia and *Riding The Tiger* (08-2014) shot in China. Here my sense of sudden change and cultural incomprehensibilities and resulting tragedies that include denying/erasing history —come to the fore.

Sound also plays a key role in how you compose your films. In fact when I said that I feel that there is something ludic/playful in your images, I think it is also due to the relationship that is woven between what we see and hear, a complex relationship. As if the sound does not let the image be anchored. Instead the sound makes the image freer. Tell me about your relationship with music / sound and how you feel that it operates in your films.

Sound is where my work comes together formally or rather my interest in changing the image is enacted. Playful and “unanchored”. That last a good word. The sound makes the image more free. I learned a lot about music in recording studios in the ‘70s. In one case, a newly composed song was played by Stevie Winwood and Traffic one day and the next, by a group of black studio musicians. The recorded music was completely different in these two sessions: bodies were different, tone, histories, rhythms—the way the music lifted from these mixed particulars.

Rhythm is important to my work, to all art. If it doesn’t move, it can’t live. Rhythm can make a

work flat or humorous or fabulous. Rhythm is the movement of all of us on a planet that keeps moving, as so are we always in movement.

In Unbound is more specific, you have a strong relationship with memory. Still, it is something present in all the works you presented. How do you feel and see the relationship between memory and your images? How does memory influence your ideas of montage?



After watching a number of my films, a colleague commented that my works were all about rewriting history. He was right: to make a history I can live with, critique a history that deserves it, go below the surface and discover the situation inside the global moment: whether it is young girls growing up between the war (*The Future Is Behind You*) or a teenage writer negotiating children and writing with a romantic husband (*Unbound*).

I am always surprised by people who don’t like or know history. History is not merely what has happened, but the cultural ground of the Now. The future is behind you...

The feminine is also something recurrent in your work; proof of this is your trilogy in progress started by the figure of Mary Shelley. Tell me a little more about this project in three movements.

I am concerned not with the feminine so much as the life of women. This is underdeveloped in the



world: in politics, in history, in literature. It's so easy to forget women got the vote only in the last 100 years and more recently across the globe. We are new in the world and to ourselves in this power to speak. We need to strengthen all possibilities and our prior absence offers an open field of study and exploration.

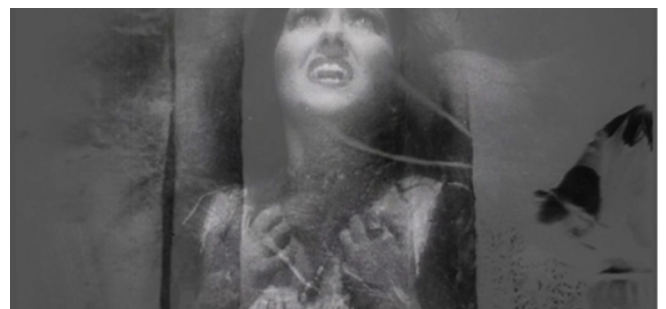
Much of my work deals with the female body. In *Is This What You Were Born For?* my series of 7 films from the 80s, *Mercy* —the last film in the series— uses the male body as a structuring device. *On The Downlow* also negotiates male desire, but in the main, women and women's bodies are a focus in my films: whether that be the princess and peasant who exchange roles in *MIRROR WORLD* or teenagers in *CAKE AND STEAK* or women of an orthodox family in *SURF AND TURF*, or the mythological evil wife in *DARK DARK*. Women are interesting, complicated and being one, the issues are available to be explored are multiple. Whether in terms of bonding, jobs, biology, feelings, history, destiny —women are the underdeveloped sex, as story and fact, in public and interiorly, complicated and crisscrossed by exterior demands and unfreedoms.

When editing *UNBOUND* I realized the film was about the failure of ideology for women and I had this idea to continue beyond Mary Shelley and Romantic of the 19th century (filmed in Italy), to explore Emma Goldman and Anarchy in the 20th century (filmed in NY City) and *Woman and Science* in the 21st century in Tokyo. That these issues played out as ideological hierarchies and that for women these absolutes did not always allow them permission for love and creativity. Mary Shelley is constrained by the societal mores of her time. She was rejected by contemporaries and even after Shelley's death, treated as a pariah. She remained faithful to Shelley and Romanticism but this faith seems a dependency

rather than a freedom later in her life. Emma Goldman believed in free love and anarchism but ultimately renounced violence and suffered in her love life. She asks plaintively what people would think to realize the notorious activist was sobbing for her lover? It was hard to reconcile her life with her loves and often the lovers wanted her to quit her public roles—a repeating conflict between interior and exterior demands. The heroine for our current century would be virtual and the setting... a Tokyo of the future. The last is still percolating as I work on the current film.

You also write poetry and you have told me that often you carry several projects in parallel. How do you feel this influences your creative process? Anyway, tell me about how you think your creative process works. What influences you? What allows you to flow more in your process?

I do projects in parallel mostly because the ideas are churning and there is never enough time. Many of my films are short, as are individual poems or even critical articles—the latter show up collected into books and occasionally the short films form a feature-length trilogy. This trilogy is an attempt to do longer works, but shorter works keep cropping up as opportunities (*Elsa merdelamerdelamer* and *Salomé*) or standing excitements from my personal archive. *Vis À Vis* is typical of the latter in that I saved the footage over time whenever I was logging my material. I had a first idea for this film a decade ago. It took until 2013 for the idea to come to fruition.





Ideas are multiplying and leftover and finally attended. My job teaching in Boston is more interruptive than if I were living in the same city (I live in NYC). Once I am not working, my process might change. On the other hand, I have always had a multiplying mind: writing and film, a member of both my cooperative apartment and my city garden. I find working with others and perhaps multiple projects allows me a certain kind of freedom, allowing things to happen that wouldn't otherwise. So that the cross fertilization of people, ideas, art forms, and projects is essential to my process.

At some point we talked about what would be a political film and both agreed that a film can only be political when it proposes new forms. That is, when form is the real content. Could you tell me more about it on the relationship between experimental film and politics?

To be clear I don't think art changes the political facts. Perhaps Errol Morris's film *The Thin Blue Line* is the exception to prove the rule. Art rather prepares the ground for change. It opens the mind, changes the structure and allows for new ideas and new structures. Shelley's comment that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" is not, perhaps never was, true but we are poet thinkers and politics are in our world.

I add that the artists who say their work has no

politics have a politic: they are approving the status quo as well as tuning out the world, saying art exists outside that world. Rather art is part of the socios, part of culture, and needs to be, to be relevant. Not to say the personal or the interior life isn't important, just that it exists in relation. We are not *sui generis*. We are born into a world that re-configures us, and it is naïve to think we are not. We are not unitary nor singular nor alone. We are part of relations, albeit fractured, ambient, elastic, close.

You've written a book on film theory and you told me that you have another one in preparation. You teach also in SMFA Boston. Tell me a little more about your critical and pedagogical work. Do you feel that is something that nourishes your artwork? In what way?

Cage suggests that inspiration and analysis should be separate. I agree. Once you have had that inspiration and made a work, or begun one, the analysis comes in. It is helpful to examine what you have done: does it transform? Meets your expectations? Does it give you a clue where to go next?

Poets I know in the 70s said theory is poetry or can be, and they pointed to Walter Benjamin. Surely not all theory reads as poetry but a poetics might. How something is done is as important, more important often, than why. Artists writing about their work are liberating, particular and informative. [Why we love interviews so much]. I value my reading of Valery, Benjamin and Artaud, Barthes, Virillio, and diaries and texts by artists such as Bacon, Vertov, Eisenstein, Stella, Klee, Kubelka, Viktor Shklovsky, Zukofsky, Stein (the list can go on and on and on). These are lively thinkers and often dynamic writers. I may not think of them when I am creating but their ideas can give me strength to continue. The same for my own critical writing and pedagogy. They



challenge my thinking and my art.

Finally, what would you say, what advice/message you'd let to the new filmmakers or to the incoming ones?

A film or a cinematics of image —is numerous, exciting and powerful in our culture. Knowing how to look behind and around and aside the image is more important than ever. The art is young, there's much to explore. Bring a criticality to your investigations and simultaneously be light with it.