ARCHE AND REPRE-SENTATION

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“Commencez par filmer des montagnes, 
alors vous saurez filmer des hommes.”
Ernst Lubistsch

“Representation exists whenever a subject 
(author, reader, spectator, or voyeur) throws his point 
of view on a horizon from which he trims the base 
of a triangle whose apex is his eye (or his mind).”
Roland Barthes

ARCHÉ AND REPRESENTATION

At the early start of Herman Melville’s Moby Dick (1851), 
Ishmael⁵, the leading character of the saga, discusses 
the fact that, for numerous New Yorkers, their free time 
stroll would end up in the Battery area, the southern 
port borough of New York City. Ishmael remarks 
philosophically on the significance of this gathering: 
male adults examining in a morbid stance the water 
horizon; as if they were driven into an hypnosis of loss, 
emprisoned and divided between the release given 
from the arrival of news of an unknown world and the 
pressing desire to embark into oblivion. The struggle 
between free will and obedience appeared to be a

1 Apud Jean Luc Godard. In Brenez, Nicole (Ed.). Jean Luc Godard, 
2 Roland Barthes, Diderot, Brecht et Eisenstein. Apud Victor 
Burgin. In Ensayos: La Modernidad en la Obra de Arte (1976), 
Barcelona: Editora Gustavo Gili, 2004, p.34.
3 Melville, Henri. Moby Dick or the Whale. Chapter 1: Loomings. New 
choice between running away or staying. Ishmael is more prosaic and positivist, reasoning that the adhesion to water is a symptom of the biology of bodies: water becomes a magnetic field and a metaphysical space. A few decades earlier, around 1830, on his arrival to New York but still in high sea, Alexis de Tocqueville grasped on the built coastline, and to his surprise, a group of “white marble” residential buildings: the historical and architectural thickness that these North-American villas denoted seemed to him a contradiction in terms considering the still young and novel nature of the Island-city; only the next day would he confirm the deceiving character of this experience: the palaces were not masonry structures but brick and wood lookalikes. From the high sea the building environment was a scenic mimicry of virtue. Thus in Melville we find the desire for the unperceived—a world on itself—whose gateway is the oceanic plane, and in the French diplomat we see reality as inapprehensible and historically determined (as a product of the “Epoch of Democracy,” according to Tocqueville, which implies the equivalence of materials and the decrease in artistic merit). Reality appears as a setting and as an anthology.

This digression between the expectation of what is not being lived and the exclusionary and incomplete nature of the gaze interests me as an arché of the film Archive and Nostalgia of José Maçãs de Carvalho. A film from another city, from another geopolitical context, at a time more than two hundred years past from Melville’s fiction and Tocqueville’s scientific-political reporting. In fact, we find in this film, bodies (subjectivities but also abstract systems) that become movement in space and
a space, the Asian Großstadt, Hong Kong, which moves and defines itself within what Manfredo Tafuri calls the “defeat of reason”\(^4\). An accumulated defeat to the point where the conventionalization of modern architecture, (the “global sameness” referred in 1968 by Buckminster Fuller\(^5\),) became synonymous of capitalism. These are spaces that move beyond what they seem to be and despite the intensity of their appearance. We are, as we shall see, before the kinetic representation of non-life. 

*Archive and Nostalgia* has a belvedere quality which will be understood here as a reflex of the artist José Maçãs de Carvalho critical thinking on the Archive; an action that positions the archive, dialectically, as the foreground both of the private and social pressure to quantify and qualify the lived and the disappeared and to make it reborn as a document. The archive is life beyond death, beyond finitude and irrelevance; and its promise of totality (everything accounted for and in the verge of revival, of coming back) affects both the realm of direct, biographical experience - the photo album, the travel journal, the notebook, the by-products of travel and recreation- and the political unconscious embedded in cultural constructs such as family and gender relations as well as ideological and historically determined products.

So this film’s story will travel from the “deluge” of imagery, the natural condition of the archive permissiveness (the troubles between accumulation and

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categorization), through the questioning of the artwork as a self-evident, self-complacent cul de sac. Every artwork is densely populated by traces, references of other aesthetic-expressive situations. It quotes consciously or unconsciously; this pervading presence of another history and another experience cancels the absolute sovereignty of its author and questions the work as a given. It defines its limits through the limits of other works. Perhaps this is a foundational feature of images and of their objectification. Robert Rauschenberg explained this process in an interview as he remembered that his first one man show had an unexpected visitor: Marcel Duchamp. Rauschenberg was not present, but was told that Duchamp picked up one of his small combines, a box with nails and four stones, which was labelled as a musical piece, and rattled it producing a sound. Duchamp’s reaction was concise but symptomatic: “I think I’ve heard this song before...” 6. Chance produces repetitions. And this “all over again” protruding from the past into the present, moving between standardization and error, is a powerful mechanism of art. It is in this sense that we position “Archive and Nostalgia” out of the pathos of originality, apart from the morbidity of art being a “blackout” experience, a conjunction of aesthetics and amnesia. That is why this essay validates this film as an “intertextual” work, a term defined in the words of Omar Calabrese as “a network of references to texts or groups

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6 “I had a box filled with nails and four rocks. It was called Music Box. You were supposed to rattle it and listen to all the chimes that went on. I wasn’t in the gallery but he did that and he said “I think I’ve heard this song before” which is a great compliment.” In Art and Design–Art Meets Science, May–June 1990. An interview with R. Rauschenberg, p.17.
of previous texts …”. In Calabrese’s rationale this is the “space of theory”, a space also of non-experience (a space of condensation but also of foresight) and from where we will engage (in the cognitive plane) along these lines with the intention of being something more in the reception of this non-experience. Viewing the film meant an hermeneutic “maelstrom”: indexes, vectors, symbolic forces, associations, genealogies, avatars began to emerge as lost cargo.

Still a warning should be given to the reader: the invisible (what cannot or is not supposed to be seen: the emotional experience of place, the experience of revisiting, the dangers of memory) acquires a visual (cinematographic) thickness but it is this same visuality that denies the experience of a totality. It will be a relapse throughout this essay the kind of awkwardness and despair of the painter related by André Breton in his novel Nadja. Writing is a belligerant but blind force, it moves mountains, starts revolutions and colludes with immateriality but all its historical leverage is still incapable of capturing the quality contained in the image. Perhaps it is this lack, this deferred, after the


8 “Ainsi, j’observais par désœuvrement naguère, sur le quai du Vieux-Port, à Marseille, peu avant la chute du jour, un peintre étrangement scrupuleux lutter d’adresse et de rapidité sur sa toile avec la lumière déclinante. La tache correspondant à celle du soleil descendait peu à peu avec le soleil. En fin de compte il n’en resta rien. Le peintre se trouva soudain très en retard. Il fit disparaître le rouge d’un mur, chassa une ou deux lueurs qui restaient sur l’eau. Son tableau, fini pour lui et pour moi le plus inachevé du monde, me parut très triste et très beau.” In Breton, André (1928;1998). Nadja, Paris: Gallimard, collection Folio, p.149.
fact, “limiting behavior” of all text that is fundamental to overcome the “face value” of the artistic work. We know that the representation of the logos, of the truth (of a Weltbild) through art has lost its urgency- Jean Luc Nancy commented recently in an interview with the Belgian newspaper Libre, citing Nietszche, that “art is given to us so that we will not die of the truth” – but it is also useless to expect that words arrive, as a sort of verbal mimicry, to the truth (to the world) of an artwork. The written word is a surface that coats and prolongs but does not belong to the work, closing in on it as a false consciousness or, conversely, as an awareness (the lack of evidence can also be the evidence of a lack). To the troubles of semantics one has to add another: images are, contrary to their pervasive influence in our world, lesser beings. Through the physical slowness of their presence they promise an intensity and a duration that is not intrinsic to them. And this happens in a contemporary framework where the suspicion over images has become denser and problematic - they lie, deceive, are untrustful and manipulative, they misrepresent reality especially when they work as economic and quantitative activities. Yet our relation to the transcendent (or to its disavowal), our relation to what we can not be or can neither live, or to what we can not or should not say (because we do not know how), depends, (such as a substance trying to embedd a form, even if it’s a recessive form), on the devices of that incompleteness; it depends on the bankruptcy and historical uncontrollability of all representations, of all images, permanently drifting between obedience and dissidence: otherwise, why do we need, and for what, so many images?
But in spite of the epistemological deficit of the word upon the image, and of this one upon reality, the analogon like Umberto Eco designates the image, and, in this case, the kinetic and the filmic event, Archive and Nostalgia- a late-modern impréssion soleil couchant - pushes this text for the culturally determined, pushes me to observe in this film what Jan Mukarowsky\(^9\) describes as the noetic basis of the artistic form: “residues of systems of former thought that surface in the new”; and this consciousness (thought) that becomes discourse which in turn becomes work (sign) repositions artistic modernism, (but an anti-Greenbergian modernism) as one of its possible doors of entry. Both the “dialectical negativity” and the artistic technocracy, geological formations of modernism, persist in José Maçãs’s film: the problem and the distrust of representation as an essential denotation of reality, the testing and surpassing of the “conventions of perception and expression”, the mobilization of the spectator, the strangeness provided by the juxtaposition of two contrasting meanings, sound and image. The sequence of lullabies songs (sound) reiterates a psychological end of the day mood but this call for bodily suspension is adapted into the sleepless and the restlessness atmosphere of the electro-magnetic metropolitan night. The genealogy of this relation reverts to the Dada or Surrealist collage and to the Kuleshov Effect, both technical procedures that, through chance

and juxtaposition, construct meaning by alienating from the poetic game the link of the referent with its cultural origin; a new meaning blows up through the transformation of the image into an algebraic function, \( f(x) \), with a start and an arrival set; this implicates that for what concerns art making and the production of ambiguity, meaning is not ontologically fixed. In this film for instance it also emerges through a space-time built by a constant (the closed frame of the Honk Kong bay) and a variable (the elapsing time from sunset to deep night). José Maçãs de Carvalho’s film is a mutation, in our post-media art epoch, of this counter-language by combining purist form (the succession of lullabies work almost on the verge of abstraction) with a cinematics that is both documentation and prise de vue.

This essay will compare fixed, pictorial images, with a film and an author, José Maçãs de Carvalho, for whom the surplus of representation and verisimilitude works, by contradiction, to unearth from their cultural vests the representational paradigm and the fictional construction of experience (myth and storytelling). The superabundant world of the Grossstadt which is exposed in this kinematic imagery works antithetically to make the apparent less a resource and more an immanence of our physical, subjective interaction with the world. The paintings which will interact with this film as counterparts are positioned within a modern tradition that battled against representation through structural compression (through the equivalence between form and background, through the undoing of verisimilitude and of central perspective); The first painting in particular embodies what Pierre Bordieu described as
the mantra of modern art: the “ending of a narrative congruence between pictorial objects”, a congruence, one must add, that shaped (and in different media devices still shapes) the history of western figurative imagery and depiction of the heroic and the tragic.

So, I will name two paintings that are reflected in my reading of this film. The first is La Ville (1919, 227×294 cm Philadelphia Museum of Art), a post-Cubist work by Fernand Léger; in this painting Léger reads the city as a “forest of symbols” juxtaposed in a nervous, intermitent and dissonant communication. The formal and compositional appearance of Léger’s painting is a succession of vertical surfaces that suggest the fragmented flow of the “promenade architecturale”, a phenomenological, optimistic itinerary interspersed by modern, still empty, still expectant pictograms. To paraphrase Blaise Cendrars, words, both as meaning and as image, are beginning their parasitic invasion of city walls. We are confronted with a decentered pictorial condensation of the machinist ecology that is the city to come, the anti-narrative city, immersed in abstract and encripted messages. Though this sense of a built environment crowded by graphic signs prevails and we fail to master a comprehensive picture, for Léger the city could still become a “technicolor” synthesis of the modern experience, (a powerful combination of advertising plus architecture plus technology). The modern urban sprawl could still be saved from disorder and craziness. La Ville is the

display of that expectation where new things, new ways of communication, new ways of moving through space, of social interaction, acquire an iconic density. One of the details attached to my anachronistic association is that Léger’s scheme voices the language of cinema. La Ville can be grasped as an overlay of still frames, of pictorial découpage pulling the viewer into a stereoscopic urbanity. Both cases, the post-cubist painting and José Maçãs de Carvalho film, are placed in the syntactic and semantic sphere of the cinematic frame, combining the pictorial genre of the landscape, (the left-right compositional rhythm, the interplay between foreground and background, the abstract geometrical element enhancing the organic form) with the urban large scale; in Léger this dialectic between the scenic drift and the visual shock is a surrogate of the Billboard which epitomizes the speed of detail and the slowness of the great plan. In spite of the strong frontality both artworks dissipate our awareness of the surface’s flatness: in Léger this happens by giving a body in movement dimension to the aesthetics of the flow chart and in Archive and Nostalgia this immersion happens through the imperceptible violence (or “truth” according to Antonioni) of 24 images per second where objects cruise the waterfront decentering and receding between the monolithic background and the full blown foreground. The second painting is the fresco Frozen

Assets (1931-1932, 239x188.5 cm MoMA), the brutal X-ray of New York created by the Mexican painter Diego Rivera shortly after his arrival to this city. As in what José Maçãs de Carvalho’s deep space composition is clueless (but not apathic) about the social and economic patterns mastering the Hong Kong skyline, Rivera’s painting is loud and clear on that subject giving a depiction of capitalist’s cadaverization of space. He contrasts the “congestive” verticalism of the skyscrapers, also newcomers to the New York *gestalt* and technocratic products of the competitive building boom of the early thirties, with the social impact of Depression, when starving and dying of starvation were not stranger to Manhatan. Hiperbolic abundance and individualistic vitality in the built form neighbors the scarcity and permanent crisis and depletion of the working force as a social agent. In his Parisian exile Walter Benjamin would comment on the recessive character of the modern dwelling as it mirrored the fading and breakable human condition: “for the living we have the hotel room and for the dead the crematorium.” But if these places of irrelevance and anonimity were becoming according to Benjamin the new normality in the dawn of Europe’s nazi-fascist upsurge they also reverberated in Manhatan as Rivera showed: in the anti-naturalistic topographical

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sections of his portrait of New York, the class struggle is metonymically condensed in the waiting and dismissal times lived both by the commuters at the aerial platform (the current High Line on the Lower West side, visible in the painting at the base of Manhattan) and by the homeless cramped in the dormitory. Also, class struggle is spatialized both as accumulation and dead labor in Rivera’s scenic manipulation of the Rockefeller Center, the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building and of the underground safe\textsuperscript{13}. In José Maçãs de Carvalho’s film, the unsettled, unclear nature of Léger’s Ville, migrating between utopia and reality, and the post-human pathos of Rivera’s New York are rediscovered in the way the aesthetic idea works as a supporting actor for the main and unexpected protagonista: the capitalist homogenization of the monetary and property game. The aesthetic but temporary dissipation of the \textit{hominis lupus hominem}, what Gianni Vattimo would call ideology covered with a layer of aesthetics, reverts from the preservation and permanence of the political-economic status quo within the urban and architectural form. If the picturesque fictitious the socialization of the city, (city as a \textit{fête galante} based on publicity and representation), its economic form remains trapped in the conflictual realm of possession and dispossession: The cubomorphism of buildings, the nocturnal recreation of their façades, the appearance and theatricality of the unproductive is materialized in a compacted area hysterically focused on efficiency and on the maximization of surplus value. The titanic Bank-

Casinos of the global financial flow offer themselves as icons of a shared city but these structures such as their contents, (hundreds of millions of bytes clustering transactions, management decisions, strategic planning, goods, balances of payments, public debts, credits, taxes, mergers, take overs, off shores, etc), are the true metaphysical and anti-democratic space that decides and builds the city without its citizens. Positioned on the other side of the bay, the gaze intensifies the picturesque experience as an exclusion, and also as an escapism or a “false consciousness”, but an exclusion that already occurs, as Victor Burgin recalls in his essay The Remembered Film (2000), “in an environment daily engulfed by imagery”, “wrapped in images”\(^{14}\). The building’s nocturnal radiance has the same effect of Dan Flavin’s fluorescent lights preventing “a prolonged look: in the last analysis there is nothing to see”\(^ {15}\), only the evidence that a reified image can also come out of an overflow of images. This film compresses various space-times. We are not only conditioned by the simulacrum of the picturesque-tourist image. Though the post-industrial and outsourced city is given a bland harmonic pattern what looks promising for the viewer throughout the projection is the phenomena of difference in repetition: different space-time injunctions are available such as the screen’s autocratic space-time; or the projection room, place where repetition becomes the atmosphere (a dark one) of the all over again but also of the vivid discontinuity between the self that gazes the screen and the content within the


\(^{15}\) In Flam, Jack (Ed.). Robert Smithson, the Collected Writings, Berkeley: California University Press, 1996, p.15.
screen; also available to our eyes is the Now of the film’s Hong Kong, *the present tense* that ceased to exist as concrete matter but continues as image; the historical space-time of modernization and industrialization; the antithetical space-time of the financial economy and of technological automation.

Archive and Nostalgia is the visual, practical organization of a reasoning in which the indiscernible can not be separated from the image although is an absent, non corporeal element both of its making as of its permanence: the indiscernible is, in this work, like the writing of light, a kinetic force printing, marking the flow of frames. The image is an index of that siamese and mutually exclusive connection between the desire to separate, to reveal and bring forward and the force of that which is not evident, which is not, and can not, be readable.

The film operates both in an aesthetic as a conceptual framework articulating the analogical depiction (empathy and resemblance are at work here as aesthetic vectors) with the diagrammatic (moving images becoming ideation). This implicates an antithesis of the secular and non-auratic appropriation of Architecture that Walter Benjamin describes as being our collective distracted experience of the built environment.
This is also José Maçãs’s assertion on his PhD thesis\textsuperscript{16} and an effect of the ocularity and motionless \textit{durée}: it is time that is spent and not space that is added meaning that atentiveness becomes gridlocking and self-reflexive. The film’s “encadrement” is also an effort to retrieve why we struggle with a sense of gratification before the false rationality of the “super object” city (Henri Lefebvre); and to question the aesthetic fullness, that one feels before the destructive impulse of the contemporary city. An unlimited and liquefied geography is the object of a gaze. It is this ideological surrender of sensibility to a destructive impulse that gives contextual and metaphorical strenght within this film to the word Nostalgia. It is the pain of beauty as an irreversible eternity, going back even to “love at last sight,” and the reaction to separation from an original unity. But this reaction, this pain, is all about self-awarenees, it opens up the past as a creative


In Benjamin the aesthetic reception of architecture only takes place in its condition of tactile appropriation as individuals distractedly perceive in their daily use the organization of space and the phenomenological atmosphere of built form. The aesthetic dimension and the artistic meaning of the space they inhabit or frequent, the picturesque, the photogenic experience of the totality comes later, Through photography, propaganda, and advertising. The haptic experience of architecture only exists in the social condition of the tourist (or of its more specific typology the student of architecture). This reading seems to pose an ideological problem to José Maçãs de Carvalho film: what does separate it from the touristic point of view? Poetic ambiguity, pos-production, the wrecking of a sense of totality, the nolstagic input of experience as loss are the corner stones of this fake similarity with a tourist prise de vue.
possibility, as raw material to be reused by the mutating present. Following Heidegger’s own terms: “a thought that remembers becoming”\textsuperscript{17}, a thought that thrives in the nostalgic and escapist gaze as an archeological site of the future to come. Time’s interstices are then lived as a flash, as an already falling effort to confront the storm of progress, a lost effort in which the Angel of History tries to give a sense of wholeness to what accumulates in ruin, in loss; that tries to make sense of a space, the Tafurian Großstadt, which can only be experienced as a commodity and in which the last thing to dissolve is property.

2. A \textit{FENÊTRE EN LONGUEUR}

In the almost eighteen minutes of José Maçãs de Carvalho’s film (17’53 '') the camera is fixed. The plan is tautological: the nature that speaks to the camera arises both as premise and conclusion, immersiveness and distance. This \textit{roundabout} sensation, throws us back into the insufficiencies of representation: it gives us plenty of visual information but it’s all about a detached and dead instead of live experience. Representation means above all the loss of reality and the candid but stiff camera tells us that. For as much detail we get the more we sense the drift from totality. And the resulting opacity, the semantic \textit{mise-en-abyme}, the radical questioning of the culture of absence, seems to ask us whether it

must mean: why should the product of a poetic, almost solipsistic, drive, be rationalized? But we will get there, to this need to inquire, to disturb the image - an image that bothers us because it ignores us. The editing is restrained. Here we have no shot reverse shot, no blow or close ups, no frozen images, double screens, not one image after another, in conflict, in disruption or in continuity. None of that. The lens keeps us at eye level and does not follow, does not zoom the small and the distant, does not move, it is not peripatetic. The camera does not agree with anything in particular, does not emphasize; eventually it simulates neutrality. As the convalescent of Edgar Alan Poe’s *Man of the Crowd* (1845), I am thrust into a world held at a distance and revealed in the singular, as a fragment, as an interval before the end. I am pushed first through the generic and the abstraction and then through the detail: “As the night deepened so deepened to me the interest of the scene”\(^{18}\). And this is an important feature: the camera is immersed and produces a *mise en cadre* but by denying any partisan proximity; because everything is (un)important in its shooting indifference, our attention is called into each of the parts. The camera, - who manipulates and who edits- is aware of this but there is no possession of the world, the suspension of disbelief, as a social mechanism interacting fiction with reality, presence with deferred action is not fully deployed, the substitution clause, “this is in the place of that, has been canceled. Again the truth of the image, and what happens in it, and the truth outside the image, from

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which it intends to get closer, to be a gerund, appear to us separately. And the framework, as a laconic cliché, is the confirmation that this world (both image and built environment) moves to the derisory. José Maçãs de Carvalho is aesthetic and methodologically close to Vertov’s kino-eye detachement- I am here probably under the influence of Vertov’s film Lullaby (Kolibelnaya, 1937) and in particular, when Vertov condenses a generic mother, made of a succession and overprinting of several faces. In Archive and Nostalgia, this metamorphosis is made in the sound layout, through the different languages that utter the lullabies. What can be recognized from this mechanical look in the film? One can name a few features: A writing of space and political history through kinematics, the world as a visible but unapprehensible and indiscernible fact to the human eye (divided between aesthetic complacency and the impossibility of the authentic), the unwill of falling into the easy games of optical illusion, anti-naturalism as a source for mnemonic thrive. But José Maçãs de Carvalho is not a proxy of the Vertovian eye. His interest doesn’t include vertovian body and mechanical immersiveness in the disparate world; the artist lens is mineral, inorganic, unattached unlike Vertov that “writes” and owns the city through the indiscreet and blant closeness of the lens, giving it back in a caleidoscopic and non-hierarchical multiplication of fragments without a coherent linear sequence. What remains as a shared ethos is the absence of naturalism and subjectivity, there is no psyche in the abstraction: both don’t expect image to be a metonimical event of totality. The peripatetic and fluid human gaze is replaced by the
“cyclope” of the film machine. We do not physically discern pathos (malaise), between the harmonious (the scenic background), and the political, (the violent and formless character of the polis denying beauty through alienation), still we feel that the ocularcentric character of the film denotes a dissatisfaction with the routine of the picturesque and the aesthetic-retinal appeasement that is related to it.

It has already been noted that the framework is not digressive, does not scale up, does not stray from its target. This is so because only in this way the archival experience of the visual (the immeasurable and useless accumulation of biographical nothingness: subject raised to the power of n, object, place, events raised to the power of n) can be expressed as a meta-image on (and about) the materiality of the visible. A meta-image that rescues analogy from the limits of the visible. Something similar to what happens in Nice, by Jean Vigo. My attention to José Maçãs de Carvalho’s film is strangely indebted to this film and especially to the initial part dedicated to the Esplanade des Anglais. But in José Maçãs de Carvalho’s film, the totality is denied through another conflict: the spectator is not distracted by a story but is aware of his reification, his uncertainty in face of a past world, whom he does not belong to. A world at arm’s reach, familiar, but so distant and strange in its banality. It is a static, almost indifferent accumulation of instants of a flow, done in a specific place, in a concrete political geography, in a given timetable. The camera watches without expression as a dashcam, but here is the poetic greatness of this film, it is space in movement turning into movement.
in time but without wear, without any pathetic or tragic outcome. The author’s annihilation within the film is almost absolute. It is the sound, the editing of the world’s lullabies (in a combination of Babel and hypnosis, overconsciousness and sleep) which puts the specific signs of the portuguese artist’s language back into the film. It seems a paradox, but the expression of reality, depleted of optimism or any pessimism, without alienation, only extension and duration, dissipates the atmosphere that defines the ethos of José Maçãs de Carvalho’s work.

The boats cross, indifferent to their extension as image, the bay, carrying out the daily connection between the island of Hong Kong, Kowloon, and the Outlying Islands (Lantau, Lamma, Cheung Chau, Peng Chau), networking and scheduling the spatial process of work and rest (an Asian métro, boulot, dodot on and off beat). The arterial-day-long and venous-nightly life of the city moves away and approaches the surface of the bay. In the scenic background of the financial center of Hong Kong, we see electromagnetic machines amassing conflicting functions of routine and impermanence; ominous steel and glass towers crowded with control and command rooms, meeting rooms, and all the office spatial tipology. We observe outdoor vaults, the consummate globalization of a new type of panopticon, the office open-space, where mutual surveillance, normative dress codes and social behavior are naturalized. Slowly, in a passive transit between the twilight and deep night the surface of the buildings lights up, swallowing up the darkness. The dampness runs down the mountain ghosting the monolithic
“graveyard-like” canyon. In an uninterrupted movement, the city evolves into the weariness of possibilities, the weariness of aesthetics, the fatigue of experience; the city becomes a kinetic otherness, a sisyphian world, frightened, alienated, alive, busy, shifting cowardly to the next day.

The city is displayed here as the decisive separation between man and nature: the realm of necessity entangles the subject and the community in an uncontrollable abstraction: the babelization of language reaches its golden age in modernity. The word, multiplied and displaced in a thousand senses, in a thousand phonetics, devours the redemption of the architectural prototype: the skyscraper. Unlike the Nietzschean dream of Paul Scheerbart and Bruno Taut, the “giganti della montagna” is not a curative space, of rediscovery and disobedience. The crystal ridge will not unify humanity in a common effort, in a spiritual effort but will reproduce itself in competition and antagonism: the tower will be the schism between community and language, it will be the primitive accumulation, the accumulation of competitive capitalism, of imperialism and colonialism. It will become the locus where mass culture and classical tragedy conflate but it will also be the rediscovery of the human effort freed from the injunctions of the divine, without the supernaturalisation of the verb and without intelligibility. Modernity as the ethical agency of image and communication is contradicted by its main phenomenon, the city. The same modernity that dreams with the universal, with the harmonization of the disparate, with the technical overcoming of the exotic and the savage; a
schizoid modernity that endorses violence, massacre, expropriation and deportation, and dreams with social control through the reconciliation of passions (Charles Fourier’s cenobite dream of social and psychic harmony), with a global bridge language, capable of elapsing the idiomatic, the vernacular, capable of bringing mathematical clarity, capable of bringing forward for all and in all the invisible of the dream and the visible of desire. This same modernity (imprinted in us) is confronted, in the babelic lullabie, with its ignorance: the other, its racket and serenity, is not our measure. The film’s soundtrack disembodies our gaze, deterritorializes it. Thus, we are propelled between Hong Kong, and the unknown, a melodic and reverberant unknown. This film shows us that the unknown has not been extinguished, it has become an attribute, a mythological accent (and a style) of the different scales and ways of inhabiting the everyday life; perhaps it lost any mild capacity for promise (the future seems both unlivable and unbreathable). And in this transit between an opaque future and the daily occurrence of banality and repetition, space (a foreign place, the exotic, the stranger) yielded to time (to the accumulation and infinitesimal register of fractions of time): the time that alienates space, the time of the day and night rhythms and its different dwellers.

3. PRESENCE AND DISPLACEMENT

I did not want to end this long essay without mining it with a contradiction, a friction in my reasoning that shifts and drifts between contemplation and observation. The
false unity between contemplation and observation is at bottom an aesthetic problem about how to “take possession” of the mediations we name and articulate within the word “city.” Contemplation is the exercise of subjectivity in a distracted relationship of the senses with the world. A relation that does not read this world, this “informality” as a positive space, as a figure-ground opposition, neither as a delimited content, but as a phenomenological substance. Observation, on the other hand, lies in the parametric realm; monitoring, supervising, probing implicate alienation, separation, essencialism; this activism of measure and control speaks, as Paulo Virillio points out in his Panic City, about empowering and broadening the reach of what the eye (and the mind) can grasp so as to build an economy where knowledge, paradigms and information become property and capital. Both operations have their geography. In the city contemplation cedes to observation. The flaneur probes, categorizes, finds constants (eternity) and variables (fleetingness). The commuter does not loose himself, doesn’t step out of normality, out of conformity. Contemplation is wayward, longing and procrastination. And As Giulio Carlo Argan says, “The city is the dimension of the distinguished, the relative, the conscious, the ego; The sublime nature is the dimension of the transcendent, of the absolute, of the superego.”

But in an unexpected contradiction, perhaps aided by the fact there is no effort within this cinematography to tell a story, to use the resources of fiction or to bring

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mythology into the urban realm; we realise that in the lack that defines the phenomenology of Archive and Nostalgia, is clearly the machine that contemplates and it’s us whom observe the product of its contemplation. And that is why as a spectator this film enhances the same non-belonging and destitution that one experiences through a map. Nothing is static, nothing that our gaze roams in the screen layout exists there, at that moment, it is all rhetoric. That is why I also recall the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein in reply to his sister Hermine as he tried to explain his decision to become a primary teacher and to abandon the social guarantees of their family heritage: “You remind me of someone who is looking through a closed window and can not explain to himself the strange movements of a passerby. She does not know that a violent storm unfolds outside and that this person keeps standing with a huge effort.” This is the possible bending in the face of loss, in the face of evasion - and this writing is an escape effort. The filming of past experience is necessarily, to us, incoherent, sometimes impenetrable, sometimes impalpable as an empty-filled-empty space where the drift can be both philological (as Benjamin plunged into the bibliographical mermaids of the Bibliotheque de France) as physical. It was towards Appollinaire’s standpoint and his concept of a modern

Anphion (the mythological musician that by playing his music built a city), that I have approached the viewing of this film and the making of this text: Appolinaire’s city is one of titanic, anti-utilitarian forms, it’s a city filled with monuments that quote, reinvent, lie and have their history and emplacement altered for the sake and convenience of tourism and survival. It is not far away from the city of this film where the law of the survival of the fittest is accumulated to the point that it becomes architecture, where the power of the corporate sovereign (imaterial and globalized), condenses in the building’s pulsating energy the national and neo-colonial myth.

Hong Kong lives the schizophrenic conflict between a “China”, whom the West wanted and wants for China, and another “China”, whom China reinvented in October 1949 and wants for itself. What lies between these two “Chinas” will either change or disappear. Under these conditions architecture is not revealed as a sign of power, as the epic of permanence and the global organization of life, but as the kinetic and twilight state of a scenario. But even so, the laws of economics remain. The heroism of buildings is that of accumulation and the tropes of modern architecture (such as verticalism, structural coherence), return, but now as farce or entertainment. This is the mantra of the film: space dies and time prevails.