

THE TOUCH OF
THE REEL: A
CONVERSATION
BETWEEN
LINA SELANDER,
OSCAR MANGIONE
AND
AXEL ANDERSSON

Lina
Selander

Axel Andersson: When asked to participate in this discussion on microhistory and the film essay, I had to return to the historiographical sources for the first time in many years. As I did so, I was also intensely watching some of your works. Reading Carlo Ginzburg's "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About It", published in English in *Critical Inquiry* in 1993, something immediately struck me. I realized that Ginzburg repeatedly refers to literature when he wants to define his practice, with examples ranging from Leo Tolstoy to Renato Serra. I then read the description of the larger project of which our conversation is to be part, and there too I noticed that literature is given a privileged position: it states that microhistory is a 'science grounded in literary practice' and that, following Harun Farocki, the essay film 'reclaims text from images'. It also concludes that 'both the essay film and microhistory are grounded in the literary' – and there is a suggestion that the essay film 'resonates strongly with microhistory'. I have noticed a general tendency, in artistic research, to view artistic expression as something that emerges in the end, like epiphenomena of a more general textual or literary development. After watching your works, however, I felt compelled to question this literary premise. When and where did the photographic image, technics and technology disappear from the picture? In this context, it is also relevant that one could argue that the essay film is older than microhistory, and thus more likely to affect microhistory, than vice versa. The photographic image might also have influenced the making of the literary sources that inspired Ginzburg when he formulated his methodology. How, then, would an alternative reading of this history look from the point of view of another medium? These questions led me back to Walter Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" from 1931 and a reading of it in the light of microhistory. When Ginzburg refers to film, via Fernand Braudel and Siegfried Kracauer, he compares microhistory to the cinematic close-up. Benjamin, however, is insistent on something more precise that resonates with your works: the inscription in which reality 'sears' the subject. I am interested in the inscription as the prick of a needle through a material – what Benjamin calls the 'authentic'. But the image created by inscription of the real comes into

being in a context that is, before interpretation, hidden, dream-like and *surreal*, connected to what Benjamin in the same essay calls the 'optical unconscious'. I was considering whether it would be possible to read our subject through the dynamic between this idea of the authentic inscription and an optical unconscious, a relationship bridged, I want to suggest, by way of anamorphosis.

Oscar Mangione: As I understand it, microhistory based on the literary anecdote is perhaps forgetful of its relationship to the photographic inscription, to begin with, before the optical unconscious, and the sudden 1:1 relationship that it establishes between sign and reality. But it is also important to retain the notion that the films we have been doing together, as well as Lina's earlier works, are in no way outside a textual order. They are intensely preoccupied with the relationship between the levels of the photographic and the discursive. Two distinct forces are at play: a love for the image that points towards something outside of itself, and a constant undermining of the relationship between text and image. I imagine that this outside of the image, its context or place within a discursive order, in an archive perhaps, is dependent on text, and our images and sequences of images have an obvious, but vague, connection to this order. At the same time, and maybe even in the very same movement that binds them to a textual order, the works establish or try to establish independence on the level of the photographic or cinematic inscription.

Lina Selander: The films have also become more and more silent, with less text, even though *The Offspring Resembles the Parent* somewhat contradicts this. But one can think of it in terms of a search for some kind of hidden ideogram or pictogram that takes place in the editing process and that guides a gaze that edits. There is something like a text-ghost contained in the visual, a sign-like entity that cannot completely manifest itself. The image lingers in front of the viewer, waiting, creating tension on the surface in an unfolding process of (pseudo)revelation where every image is preceded and is followed by another image.

Axel: So how would you formulate the relationship between image and text? If I understand you correctly, the image obscures the text at the same time as it makes a certain type of reading possible.

Lina: I think that the text/image polarity can be understood through the analogy of rhythm and narrative. In the works, the images represent a rhythm that develops a stronger force than the textual inscription in terms of narrative. But perhaps I am mixing things up more than necessary here. I mean, what is it that 'sears' a subject and creates authenticity? Perhaps it makes more sense to think of a dynamic process of oscillation between the readable and the indecipherable.

Oscar: I can't help but think of that early work of yours, when you were just out of art school. The photograph, the needle, the text...

Lina: Yes! When I was sewing photographs in 1999 in the work *117 of 146 Instamatic Pictures*. I worked through almost my entire family photo album, connecting different parts of the motifs on the photos with each other as a way

to investigate the codification of these images, to understand what they were really about, in an emotional yet strict way.

Oscar: You also meticulously described the scenes in text. A small text; a line or two accompanying every photo. So, first there are the simple images, then the thread doing something to them, highlighting some relations, and then a text describing this engagement.

Lina: Yes, the needlework expressed a strong wish to establish relationships, and then I described, in words, as exactly as possible, what the needle and the thread had done with the photographs. It was a critique, a judgment, but it also added drama to an exquisitely uninteresting family album. In the end they were digitalized and transformed into sound by a computer program. I remember regarding this sound as the detached and merciless truth about these photos, their motifs, the people in them, the relationships... The final and truthful verdict. A sound.

Axel: It is interesting to think of both microhistory and the essay film as also being united in the establishment of a certain dynamic relationship between the singular and the context, the trace and more comprehensive knowledge. I just wanted to suggest that the essay film constantly questions the literary context in which omniscience is possible; it does this by being in conversation with an optical unconscious in which everything is seen somewhat obliquely, like the skull in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* that you use in *Silphium*. The historian, however quirky his subject matter, has to have faith in context, and exits the discipline if she or he questions it too radically.

Oscar: We – or I should perhaps say I, as there might be a difference between Lina and me here – try to be forgetful of context and focus on the details instead. The meaning, in a hermeneutical sense, is external to this constellation of details that on the surface appear to be contingent on one another. I don't know, I have no predilection for context, other than the one created by the work.

Lina: But at the same time, the context is there whether you want it or not, and it carries something with it. It can, for example, be important that an image is really from Hiroshima.

Oscar: Yes, OK, but it almost appears to be against some law to use images from so many contexts together at once. I still think that there is a strong desire to abandon the context, a wish to save the particular and singular from a unifying totality. In other words, to help the image so that it can escape the expectations placed on it and maybe even create a new context in the work. I can even feel badly sometimes and question myself. There is, after all, an implicit rule that one has to use images responsibly; that one should show respect for the origin of the image, as well as to its commonly understood meaning. From the point of view of the discipline of history, one could say that artists can create *any* kind of histories. At the same time, an artist's disregard for the ethics demanded by the context can seem almost criminal.

in an important way also about the space that the needle has to travel in order to hit its aim. In your works I often experience a feeling of seeing the slanted shadow of that which inscribes. Maybe it is even the shadow of the context, or of the optical unconscious.

Oscar: Yes, like a representation that carries all these different levels within itself. Its flatness is deceptive, and there is a point to that too. There is a beautiful little fragment in Robert Bresson's *Notes on Cinematography* where he writes about the desire to flatten the image as though he was ironing it, but without making it thinner in any way; just to make it all fit the same surface. It is interesting to think about a difference between inscription and image. Inscription carries all these complex layers, but an image can become thick, yet flat. The needle and the surface it perforates are two fundamentally different things, but the cinematic image can achieve a suspension of this difference through the continuum.

Axel: I have also been thinking about this in rather the opposite manner: that your works often achieve a performative figuration of the difference between the inscribing and the inscribed. Even in the step between two works, like the one that links *To the Vision Machine* and *Model of Continuation*. Almost like a wish to take a step away from the inscribed and flat image in order to gain a greater perspective and to see what is going on, and this *going on* is often stipulated by a technical reality. There is not only the optical unconscious, but also a technical consciousness, which is rather concrete.

Lina: I would say that there is an ongoing chain of substitutions., If the gaze at one point takes the position of the needle against the paper; i.e., the screen, then this position can be subtly absorbed into the flow of images. The location of the inscribing act moves around between all possible positions within the optical unconscious. I think of the long shot in *Silphium* from a botanical garden with four different levels of plants; real plants, illustrated, shadows, and mirrors; this is multiplicity at the same time as it is singularity. Or the shot in *The Vision Machine*, later re-filmed in *Model of Continuation*, of the stone staircase with the unintentional shadow of the man who was incinerated by the explosion of the atomic bomb. This image also contains the reflection of a pair of legs belonging to someone looking at the photograph in the Memorial Museum in Hiroshima, where I found it.

Axel: Yes, that is a beautiful example of a non-literary staging of the micro and the macro, and I would say that both the optical and the technical levels of understanding condition it. And it is a good opening to return to politics. I want to speak a little about ghosts: the past, seeing as this is what ultimately forcefully connects these films with the discipline of history. Not merely in terms of the image being a recording of the past, but also in denoting a very specific shift in which socialism has passed from being, for its enemies, a menacing ghost – like the specter that Marx speaks about in *The Communist Manifesto* – to being a ghost for the simple fact that it is dead: out of context, but still dictating the context. Where

is the specter in the image when it is so patently removed from the 'here and now'?

Lina: I am also thinking of the personal context here; this is something I showed in *When the Sun Sets It's All Red, Then It Disappears*, concerning my personal trajectory with my father being a Maoist and my longing for him and a longing for his world, which was so strongly shaped by passion and engagement. The passage from communism to capitalism is very relevant for someone like me, having grown up in a communist family.

Oscar: Is the ghost the general face of nostalgia?

Lina: Not only that. The emotional layers, related to personal history, are not the same as the purely political context.

Oscar: Yes, but one dreams of the workers taking over the factory. And the fantasy is that what one does will have something to do with such an event. An illusion. But [*to Axel*] we cannot give you the answer that contains the artist's total control over the work.

Axel: Totality concerns me much less than the difference in consistency of various contexts.

Lina: I am thinking of the shot in *When the Sun Sets* where a stain on the original film of Mao swimming over the Yangtze River meets the flash from my camera, my gaze. I see that as one kind of ghost, or as a testament of my wish to somehow enter the material, and to enter the world of my father, from which I was excluded.

Axel: Again, the flash in the image underlines this recurrent theme of the room as a technical/optical element of photography, represented in a performative figuration. What is reality, in the end? Greenblatt speaks of the anecdote as 'the touch of the real', in that it gives the reader a feeling for authenticity. But inscription carries its own double nature. The needle is not the same thing as the perforation; there is a room in between where the image takes place. In the light of this, the notion of 'the touch of the real' seems like a rather naïve literary model. Just to return to the starting question of whether one could not see the film essay behind microhistory rather than vice versa, thinking back to early film essays like Alain Resnais' 1956 *All the World's Memory*. Can we talk about 'the touch of the reel' instead?

Oscar: I think that the room naturally belongs to the film essay. It creates a space for reflection. Or rather, it performs this space.

Lina: There is also the further dimension of how the works are installed in a room, an exhibition space.

Oscar: And this also forms a dialogue between the cinematic room and the room for reflection.

Lina: The installations become something like meta-montages between different films where the spectator can merge several films into one totality. In Venice, when the voice in *The Offspring Resembles the Parent* says 'image', it also speaks to all the other screens. The installation is united in one totality, but it is

a specific or qualified totality that is not the same as omniscient narration. The sound creates a presence, and you never experience the same room twice. The sound is un-synced with the whole, and yet together with the images and the objects, it creates the impression of the internal movements in a complicated clock-work measuring some unknown quality. This auditory dimension mirrors the sedimentations of pictorial meanings. The works revolve, in one way or another, around the status of the image – as representation, memory, object, imprint or surface – and our relationships to it. They examine the official representations of historical events, as well as the visual languages and apparatuses that produce them, thereby underlining that history, in many respects, is the history of recording devices and technologies. This focus on the specificity of inscription also stresses the fact that the montage and the meta-montage cannot be seamlessly juxtaposed with metanarratives. In a way, this is also the story of modernity, its desire for totality and its failure to achieve it.

Axel: The meta-level is interesting here – thinking about how microhistory and new historicism can be said to be linked to the gradual evaporations of historical metanarratives, *grands récits*, in post-war historiography.

Lina: This is represented on all levels, from installations to the individual films. I also tried to explore the element of performative editing in *Anteroom of the Real*, where I film my hands sorting through images from the ghost town of Pripyat, outside of Chernobyl. Almost like a manual film that explores the difference between the photo and the moving image. The hands also show in a concrete way that the creation of history is actually based on somebody's decisions.

Axel: The mention of Pripyat and this work makes me think that two themes we have spoken about intersect with uncanny precision. The sealed city of Pripyat, contaminated at the very end of the USSR era, is like the room of Communism frozen in time, a spectral ghost-room/camera, in other words. It contains the consistencies of a great number of contexts, including, of course, the meta-narratological one, but expressed here through both the optical unconscious and the technical consciousness. If we allow ourselves yet another pun on real/reel, given the horrific nature of the historic event, this also seems like an 'Anteroom of the Reel'. A sealed room that intermittently opens to give hope that a link can be established between the inscription and the unconscious, for those willing to look from a different angle.

The films by Lina Selander in this book are available at <https://vimeo.com/linaselander>.

Top: *Lenin's Lamp Glows in the Peasant's Hut*, 2011 (projection).

Bottom: *Silphium*, 2014 (projection) and Working Archive, 2015 (vitrine with radiographs, fossils, stone containing uranium, ancient coin with Silphium plant, 140 photographs from the film *Anteroom of the Real*, video of *Anteroom of the Real* on an Ipad, publications and documents).

