

Notes & Documents

Más Se Perdió (we lost more)

14 mins, 16mm

Stephen Connolly 2008

A selection of texts which have informed the work, and a transcript of a Q & A session at a 'Work in Progress' screening of the film.

'Our design freedom was total, even in the choice of site. For the School of Ballet, we found a small valley from which the approach was from above. That would have permitted me to almost hidden it. At first I thought of burying the School of Ballet, but that proved too expensive. Ironically today, with the help of nature, the building has spontaneously become submerged.'

Vittorio Garatti, Architect of National School of Ballet, Cubanacán, Havana, Cuba

(from *Revolution of Forms: Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools*; John A. Loomis, Princeton, 1998)

The National Art Schools form the most polemical and spectacular complex realized by the Revolution: widely disseminated at an international level, considered by some as the genuine expression of revolutionary architecture, they are at the same time repudiated, classified within a series of errors committed in this so called 'romantic' period.....

The Revolution is a collective work, whose end is the creation of a new society. It constitutes a dynamic process, vigorous, impossible to crystallize in formal symbols that do not coincide with the functional use intended for the community, inherent to the rigor imposed by the scarcity of available resources, a transitory condition of underdevelopment. For the other part, none of the acts of the people are grandiloquent and studied, but on the contrary, they always conserve the freshness of spontaneity. The monumental implies authoritarianism, order derived from above to below in pyramid fashion; therefore can monumentality be expressive of the Cuban political process, based in the dialogue and constant integration between the leaders and the masses? Therefore, can the space of the artist be monumentalized? Can he exile himself from the bosom of society, submerged in Arcadia; can he produce a creative act that is not born from real daily life of the revolutionary process? Even though the National Art Schools constitute the most intense aesthetic and spatial experience realized by the modern Cuban architecture, their forms do not coincide with the new contents; the formal exuberance is not accompanied by the scientific rigor necessary to respond to the functional needs. The thirteen million pesos invested in this complex, condition the effectiveness of an architecture that above all must be the real representation of the material and spiritual necessities of society, and not the product of a particularized, problematic interpretation carried over from the cultural background of the designer. Within such limits, hypotheses for the future are converted into utopia; into fiction. Reality is materially conditioned.

Roberto Segre, La Arquitectura de la Revolución Cubana

Montevideo: Facultad de Arquitectura Universidad de la Republica, 1968

(from *Revolution of Forms: Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools*; John A. Loomis, Princeton, 1998)

'We began the schools with the belief that all was possible. There was so much faith in the future at that time and a complete lack of preconceived ideas. This perhaps eventually took the schools somewhere that was economically out of scale with their ambitions. But was this any reason for the absurd attacks suffered by the architects?..... Nevertheless, the euphoria, enthusiasm, unbounded happiness.... This is what I believe is most reflected in the schools. That is today still their greatest message.'

Vittorio Garatti, Architect of National School of Ballet, Cubanacán, Havana, Cuba

(from *Revolution of Forms: Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools*; John A. Loomis, Princeton, 1998)

Chris Marker – Letter de Sibérie (1957): Spoken voiceover to images road construction in Yakutsk - sequence visually quoted in *Más Se Perdió* (identical images occur three times)

1

Yakutsk, capital of the autonomous Soviet socialistic republic, is a modern city, in which comfortable buses made available to the population share the streets with powerful Zims, the pride of the Soviet automobile industry. In the joyful spirit of socialist emulation, happy Soviet workers, among them this picturesque denizen of the arctic reaches, apply themselves to making Yakutsk an even better place to live!

2

Yakutsk is a dark city, with an evil reputation. The population is crammed into blood coloured buses, while the members of the privileged caste brazenly display the luxury of their Zims, a costly and uncomfortable car at best. Bending to the task live slaves, the miserable Soviet workers, amongst them this sinister looking Asiatic, apply themselves to the primitive labour of grading with a drag beam.

3

Yakutsk, where modern houses are gradually replacing the dark older sections, a bus less crowded than its London or New York equivalent at rush hour passes a Zim, an excellent car reserved for public utilities departments on account of its scarcity. With courage and tenacity under extremely difficult conditions, Soviet workers, among them this Yakut afflicted with an eye disorder, apply themselves to improving the appearance of their city, which could certainly use it.

Extract from 'For an Imperfect Cinema'

'Imperfect cinema finds a new audience in those who struggle, and it finds its themes in their problems. For an imperfect cinema, "lucid" people are the ones who think and feel and exist in a world which they can change; in spite of all the problems and difficulties they are convinced that they can transform it in a revolutionary way....

To show the process of a problem, on the other hand, is to submit it to judgment without pronouncing the verdict.The subjective element is the selection of the problem, conditioned as it is by the interest of the audience – which is the subject. The objective element is showing the process – which is the object.'

Julio Garcia Espinosa, For an Imperfect Cinema 1968, translation: Julianne Burton

(from : *The Cuba Reader*; eds A Chomsky et al, Durham 2003)

Notes from a work in progress screening of *Más Se Perdió*

'Enhanced transcript' of a Q & A session at the BFI in December 2008 after a screening of *The Whale* (2003), *Great American Desert* (2007) and *Más Se Perdió* (2008). These short essay films are part of an ongoing series of works called **Afflicted States**. Thanks to Sacha Craddock (facilitator), Adam Clitheroe, Sandra Gillespie, Sally Stafford and Neil Stewart.

Can you tell us about *Afflicted States*?

Afflicted States is a series of works begun in late 2001, when exploring the relationship between the individual and state seemed to take on a new urgency. These short films relate the present to the past, through an exploration of political experience within consumer society, and react to a perceived historical amnesia and erasure of the preceding decade.

A title crops up in your new work *Más Se Perdió*: 'Reality is materially conditioned' - and this resonates with your approach to image and particularly sound. Can you talk about this?

If the starting point is the material process of making the work – most times the films are shot without a traditional film crew. As the films are personal and solo efforts, in practical terms, it is tricky to shoot picture and record sound at the same time. So recording sync sound - captured at the same moment as image - is a problem of practice, but I've tried to turn this difficulty into an expressive advantage.

If the sound for a film is conceptually split from image, the sound track can be treated as a composition in its own right and subject to its own independent rules, patterns of generation, and development through the temporal run of the work. The sound track can be thought of as a soundscape. This also means that, within the process of making, although the content of the picture may set off a journey to find analogous sounds, the distance between the suggestion of sound from an image, and the actual sound acquired and used, creates critical possibilities. Expressively, this distance can contribute to generating a degree of tension in the soundscape.....

Up until recently, the film soundscapes don't generally include music, so the classical music sounds in *Más Se Perdió* mark a new departure. During the shoot, I became conscious of how classical music in a Cuban context took on a certain rhetorical quality - a classical band accompanied the May 1st parade in Havana for instance - and I wanted to work with this. There are historical links between classical music and nationalism – the soundscape of the film makes the suggestion these links are present in the discourse of the 'apparat' in Cuba.

The music-like sounds in *Más Se Perdió* are extracts from a ballet - *Sleeping Beauty* - in keeping with the visual exploration of a ballet school building. This sound was sourced from LPs 'played' by hand, thus de-naturing their musical qualities and rendering it as 'sound'.

Do you use a strategy of withholding information in the work? If so, how, and why does this work?

The work presents the world in fragments, and there may appear to be linking information missing. These lacunas are intended – they are holes designed to arrest and draw in the curiosity of the audience....

Más Se Perdió explores the ruin of a ballet school, the design and construction of which, in the face of widespread shortages just two years after the revolution, was specifically sanctioned by Casto and Guevara. The camera explores the plastic, expressive form and unique materials of the ruined school, and we learn by inter-title the building was declared complete in 1965, more or less in the state in which we see it now.

By the time of the school's completion, the 'materialist turn' of the left had begun, as also evidenced in the Sovietisation of the Cuban 'apparat' and the buildings faced official neglect. The internal tensions within this conceptual move are signposted in the film by an inter-title, dated 1968:

*Hypotheses for the future are converted into utopia, into fiction.
Reality is materially conditioned.*

The author is Roberto Segre, a Cuban Architecture critic; the quote sums up his views on the building (cf Segre – above).

Do you use conceptual rules when shooting or choosing images?

I don't generally use conceptual rules that govern the way images are created or what they depict - I think addressing the provenance of images and exploring formal pictorial issues is the terrain of a previous generation of experimental filmmakers such as John Smith and William Raban. Instead, general guidelines are generated, before and during the shooting of the film. The guidelines are expressive in intention and effect, and very much govern how places and things are presented.....

Colour and tone are also used expressively in *Más Se Perdió*. In the images of the ruined ballet school that form the major spatial world of the film, inside is shot in black and white, colour is used outside. This simple system is deployed to put in suspension, to put on hold, ideas of past and present that we may apply to the depiction of a ruin. Naturally, a ruin invokes the place of the past in the present. The use of two systems of depiction, with their temporal 'colour auras', cancel each other out.

'Colour aura' is also foregrounded in the repeated sequences of workers building a road in *Más Se Perdió*. These images have a punchy super 8 home movie feel - a 'colour aura' that date-stamps them as from the past. However, each of these sequences is prefaced by an inter-title, announcing the date and time of the shot (12.35am, 16 February 2008) - the temporal location of the film is the same as it's production - in contradiction to the 'colour aura' the images possess. This mis-match of 'colour aura' to image document suggests clues as to the 'fitness', or relevance of the representation, to the time of production of the work. (cf Chris Marker commentary text, above)

You repeat the inter-titles itemising the date and time of shots in *Más Se Perdió* - why?

One function of dates and times itemised by inter-titles in *Más Se Perdió* has been mentioned above: operating in combination with the 'colour aura' of the worker sequences to perform a self-reflexive critique of these images. Another function of these inter-titles is to contextualise the central visual depiction in the work, the exploration of the ruined ballet school in a suburb of Havana, Cuba.

The city of Havana has many architectural ruins. Much of the fabric of the city dates to the pre-revolutionary period (pre 1959), and a lack of capital investment since then has led to decay and dilapidation. It follows, that albeit the filming of colonial or pre-revolutionary Havana may document an aspect of the city, the depiction of decay brings with it a political charge. In a Cuban context, without qualifying material, creating the conditions for an empathic relationship in an audience with the undoubted aesthetic qualities of these ruins, may amount to equating the last 50 years of the life of the city, in the revolution, as decay. This is not the project of this film.

Thus *Más Se Perdió* very particularly documents a modern ruin, and a ruin of the current political regime: the Ballet School, part completed 1965, is an authentic ruin of the revolution. The question of why the school was not completed by the revolution is unanswered, and as discussed above, a central lacuna in the work.

The date and time inter-titles identify a temporal location for the work - in this case the same as the time of the production of the film. Thus the inter-titles suggest the shots are authentic documents of quotidian activity, and function, by foregrounding the time of production, to reinforce the connections between the historical dimension of the ballet school and the temporal ascription of the film. Finally, the inter-title repeats are also a rhetorical tactic, and mirror the blocking of image sequences into groups of three through the work.

I see in your work a movement towards defining a sense of community and a sense of hope through people being connected. There is a sense of the work being a human response to these big things - politics, the social and so on - although the work is quite modest. The work gives me a feeling that things will be ok despite everything!

It is interesting you say this. Before working in film, I was employed by Social Services caring for homeless people. These are some of the most excluded and marginalised people you can find. If you adopt their perspective, the social: 'Society' – can appear like a huge structure, an edifice, hanging over and above, a structure which also excludes them. That vision is about power. And the experience of being with them gave me an appreciation of the operation of power - political, economic - as a system of relationships, woven into the fabric of the social sphere.

I'd suggest for me, making meaning in film is centrally concerned with setting up relationships – between images, sounds, time, space, the real, the depicted, the omitted, artifice, and so on, - there is a natural fit between this content - political relationships - and the moving image medium. In other words, to my mind, film is an ideal medium to explore political power in the social sphere. So most of my work explores a dialectic between the individual and social. These relationships are explored in different contexts through the temporal journey of each film.

And I think - to try to answer your question more directly - once these things are given form, are revealed as palpable, are revealed as possibly even having aesthetic possibilities, they then take on human dimensions and scale. The fact that the work tries to address them, means also that the work is not disinterested. I hope there is a human concern with value, which maybe seeps across to an audience. It's not just about the narrative, the visual, or the 'spell' cast by the moving image.

Stephen Connolly 12.2008