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PERSISTENCE AND ARBITRARINESS: CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT REPETITION AND DURATION IN CINEMA

FILIPE MARTINS

1. The movement-image and the origin of persistence

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In its materiality, reality tends to equate to pure chaos: magma of disorder without mechanical components, without parts. A “gaseous” landscape, as Gilles Deleuze puts it. In his words: “It is a world of universal variation, universal undulation, universal lapping: there are no axes, no center, neither right nor left, neither high nor low” (Deleuze, 1983/2004, p. 86). This effervescent chaos, in constant change or “movement”, can only be conceived as a totality, prior to any process of decomposition or extraction of privileged instants. Science, insofar as it pretends to organize reality by decomposing it into operative and quantified elements, little or nothing can tell us about such scenery. Science, by definition, removes chaos and the totality it expresses. For Deleuze it is primarily cinema, and not science, that has the capacity of tangible access to the whole. Based on Henri Bergson’s philosophy, Deleuze developed the concept of movement-image to account for this capacity of cinema. This concept, in turn, calls for a radical reframing of the notions of image and movement.

Firstly, the *movement*. Deleuze reinterprets it not as an abstract relationship between two distinct points – for example, two frames whose difference would express a change in a situation – but as a direct manifestation of the whole. As Deleuze notes, “movement cannot be reconstituted with positions in space or moments in time, that is, with ‘motionless cuts’. (...) One can try to bring together two moments or two positions, the movement will always take place in the interval between the two, and thus on our backs” (Deleuze, 1983/2004, p. 11). While frames constitute “immobile cuts”, frozen states from which movement is abstracted, as in Muybridge’s photographic series on the gallop of the horse, cinema introduces a new type of cut that Deleuze designates as a “mobile cut in duration”. If the whole is the duration itself (the Bergsonian *durée*), the movement-image constitutes a direct and integral block of the whole: “Cinema does not present us with an image to which movement is added, it immediately presents us with a movement-image. It presents us precisely with a cut, but a moving cut and not an immobile cut + abstract movement” (Deleuze, 1983/2004, p. 13). In fact, the movement constitutes a qualitative addition, even from a merely perceptual point of view. According to Christian Metz: “The movement cannot even be ‘reproduced’, it can only be reproduced by a second production that belongs – for the observer – to the same order of reality as the first. Therefore, it is not just a matter of verifying that the film is more ‘alive’, more ‘animated’ than photography, nor that objects are more corporealized; goes beyond that: in cinema, the impression of reality is also the reality of impression, the real presence of the movement” (Metz, 1972, p. 22)⁹. The movement, in this sense, transcends the contents

9 In this regard, the criticism that Deleuze addresses to Metz’s theoretical positioning seems to us excessively reductive when he observes: “It is curious that, in order to distinguish cinematographic image from photography, Metz does not invoke movement, but narrativity” (Deleuze, 1985/2015, p. 47). Deleuze assumes, moreover, that Metz makes the cinematic shot coincide with a linguistic statement, although Metz is more cautious, equating the

that express it (bodies or movable things), establishing itself as a tangible manifestation of the whole, being that “the whole is what changes, it is the openness or the duration” (Deleuze, 1983/2004, p. 34). It can be said then that the movement-image, in its essence, constitutes the very expression of the original chaos, the “universal variation” or ‘immanence plane”, as Deleuze calls it. Through cinema, it is a whole new way of objectivity that seems to emerge. An exemption of the gaze – intuited from a very early age by film theorists – that in no way resembles the methodological exemption of science. It is a full exemption, with no closings or exclusions. In its purest form, the movement-image is a “matter-image” or the direct image of “matter-draining”. From the point of view of a cinematographic practice, as we will see later, this essential complicity of cinema with the original chaos can only be (entirely) summoned by some form of *arbitrariness*.

Second, the image. To understand it in Deleuzian terms, it is necessary, first, to distinguish it from the perceptual image as it is generally described by psychology or, in a broader sense, by phenomenological tradition. The Bergsonian image that Deleuze recovers takes part of an essentially materialist perspective, as opposed to phenomenology. It is no longer a mental representation or a product of perception or a *mimesis* or a *Gestalt*. The images exist in the exteriority itself, in the material fabric of an ever-changing reality. There is an infinite (and therefore open) set of images that constitute the whole, even before any phenomenological eye or agency that intends to observe them. Images are outside consciousness and, to a large extent, constitute a form of consciousness (or omniscience). “The eye is in things, in luminous images in themselves” (Deleuze, 1983/2004, p. 86). Bergson describes them as centers of confluence of forces, kernels of action

shot with the linguistic sentence (more than the word), but never taking this metaphor – by the way, assumed – to its last consequences. As Gaudreault and Jost note: “Metz (1968) does not claim that the shot is a statement – an idea that is sometimes attributed to him – but simply that the shot is more like a statement than a word” (2005/2009, p. 35).

and reaction. In this sense, they tend to converge with the very concept of movement. In Deleuze's words, it is "a world in which IMAGE = MOVEMENT. (...) All things, that is, all images are confused with their actions and reactions: it is the universal variation. Each image is just a 'path' over which the modifications that propagate in the immensity of the universe pass in all directions. All images act on others and react to others on 'all of their faces' and 'all their elementary parts'" (Deleuze, 1983/2004, pp. 85-86).

Each image is conceived here as a point of instantaneous action and reaction upon which all other images interfere, wherever we place them. Take, for example, a universe composed of atoms (understood as particular images). Bergson makes the following description: "In each [of the atoms], the actions carried out by all the other atoms of matter are felt, varying according to the distance. As centers of force: the lines of force emitted in all directions by all centers direct the influences of the entire material world to each center. Like monads: each monad, as Leibniz intended, is the mirror of the universe" (Bergson, 1939/1999, p. 33). In short, the image understood as a center of omniscience or a dynamic "reflection" of the whole.

In this scenario, what can one say about human consciousness and the particular images it represents? Bergson admits that such representations constitute a special regime of images, but refuses any dualistic separation that requires reintroducing a phenomenological dimension: "All the difficulty of the issue that concerns us stems from the fact that we represent perception as a photographic view of things that would be taken from a specific point with a special device, in this case, the organ of perception (...). But how can we not see that the photography, if photography exists, has already been obtained, it is already taken inside things and from all points in space?" (Bergson, 1939/1999, p. 36). In this perspective, the mental representations of human consciousness are of the same nature as all other images in that they add nothing to what was already there. There is no transcendence or qualitative difference. "There is only a simple difference in degree, and not in nature, between being and being consciously perceived" (Bergson,

1939/1999, p. 35). The only difference is quantitative, pointing out, not an addition, but a deficit. The images of human perception are less complete, subtracting elements from the whole. While the matter-images of the non-centered universe are total, the images produced by human consciousness (and, ultimately, by all living beings) are partial, imposing a specific perspective, a kind of ‘discernment’. Human images imply a subtractive process: they are a partial retention depending on the needs (or capacities) of the perceptual body. They function as opaque filters that retain only what interests them, according to their specificity. Bergson designates such filters as “centers of indeterminacy” which he describes as “characteristic of life” (*Ibid.*, p. 66). It is these centers that mark the birth of axes of perspective: bodily eyes. Bodies, first of all. The body is an image that has been installed as a persistent center in relation to which all other images become partial, put in perspective.

In its simplest form the body appears as an “interval”, a gap between action and reaction. Unlike the matter-image, which reacts instantly to all others on all its faces, the “indeterminacy center” installs a gap between the action exerted by the environment on the body and its reaction to the environment. The gap is the interval itself. It is from it that Deleuze will deduce the different subspecies of the movement-image, which arise when this original image is refracted by the sensorimotor scheme of an organism: the *perception-image* at one end of the interval (receiving the action of the environment), the *affection-image* within the interval and the *action-image* at the other end of the interval (the reaction itself). Such gaps between action and reaction – the “intervals” or “indeterminacy centers” – do not necessarily require the involvement of complex consciences. They can be reported to the simplest organisms, to the very origin of life: “At the level of the most elementary living organisms, it will be already required to conceive microintervals. (...) Biologists speak of a ‘pre-biotic soup’ (...) where outlines of axes and centers, a right and a left, an up and down, would appear in the non-centered universe” (Deleuze, 1983/2004, p. 92).

The Bergsonian description of the indeterminacy centers and their relationship with the environment corresponds perfectly to what Jakob von Uexküll designated, in biosemiotics terms, as *Umwelt*: it is the “environment world that is constituted by a more or less wide series of elements called [by Uexküll] ‘bearers of meaning’ (*Bedeutungsträger*) or ‘marks’ (*Merkmalträger*), which are the only ones that interest the animal” (Agamben, 2002/2011, p. 61). For example, the spider’s web, which is an extension of the spider’s body, is perfectly adjusted to “see” the fly and nothing else. Each center of indeterminacy corresponds to an *Umwelt* or a “disinhibiting circle”, as Heidegger called it. This disinhibition coincides with the body’s own operability according to its particular sensorimotor scheme. The animal becomes disinhibited insofar as it reacts to the environment according to its disinhibiting circle. There is an absolute complementary relationship between the organism that behaves in the environment and the characteristics of the environment that disinhibit its behavior. According to Deleuze and Guattari, it is a counterpoint relationship: “The spider web contains a ‘very subtle portrait of the fly’ that serves as a counterpoint” (1991/1992, p. 163). One could say that it is only according to the specificity of the organism, that is, of its particular mode of organization, that the environment will reveal a certain counterpoint or disinhibiting circle, not being possible to assess the intrinsic design of the environment itself. That is why each organism is enclosed in its own private, incommunicable circle: “The two perceptive worlds of the fly and the spider are absolutely incommunicative” (Agamben, 2002/2011, p. 63). But the environment itself also offers a potential order upon which different disinhibitors are established. There is an emerging order that assists all possible disinhibiting circles equally, even though it can only be specified in counterpoint with each one. We designate this intrinsic environmental order as *persistence*: the fly is repeated in the spider’s web and that’s why the spider’s disinhibiting circle works.

Bodies demand persistence and imply it as their counterpoint. They require pattern recognition as a condition of their own existence. The very possibility of codifying the matter dictates (or filters) its laws according to the needs of an organic center. Without the occurrence of patterns, the organism cannot survive. Persistence is proof of the center itself: it is what dictates the subtractive operation from which “universal variation” becomes finite, regulated. Where there is persistence (of the disinhibitors), there is (organic) life, there is organization. In the case of the human, we can understand this regulation as a kind of anthropic principle: reality is as such because we exist in it. Without the possibility of a specific standardization of reality – perfectly adjusted to our biological (and anthropological) demands for existence – the centers that constitute our bodies and our consciences would not have appeared. Persistence supports all possible sensorimotor schemes, including ours. It is the very *raison d'être* of the memory and the warrant of the relevance of the past.

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2. Performative persistence

This intrinsic feature of the world, which allows us to order disorder in spite of the “universal variation”, is certainly essential to sensorimotor performance and survival: the monkey that relies (insistently) on the branch to avoid falling from the tree. Life in its literalness. But Bergson’s intervals can produce images of greater complexity. In the human domain – where cinema stands as movement-image – persistence has evolved into two fundamental types of discursive orientation: the *episteme* (shaped by the different sciences and technologies that seek to domesticate chaos and control nature) and *communication* (implying the recognition of another type of order, more volatile, which is the message). Any pattern or indication of persistence, however minor, may always raise one or the other of these suspicions: the existence of a law and the authorial signature. The machine and the performance. The prosthesis and the otherness.

Cinema uses both anthropological features: it is, first of all, a technical device – and it was in these terms that it came into the world –, but it did not take long to receive new layers. Hugo Münsterberg, one of the first great cinema theorists, described its evolution over three fundamental and cumulative stages: as a scientific (or technological) curiosity; as an information vehicle or a social instrument; and, finally, as a performative (or narrative) vehicle. The first stage, the technical condition of cinema, can tell us little to nothing about its ontology. That is why Deleuze's studies on the movement-image and the time-image tend, as Rancière points out, to be closer to a philosophy of nature than a study about the device cinematographic possibilities¹⁰. In Deleuze's view, the ontology of cinema does not lie in the cinematograph, but in matter itself (movement-image) or in memory (time-image), of which cinema is the witness par excellence. The second stage proposed by Münsterberg lies exactly in the middle between the remaining two stages and, to a large extent, precedes them from an anthropological point of view¹¹. On the one hand it exceeds the technical stage of cinema, but still

10 Cf. Rancière, 2011/2014, pp. 179-180.

11 Informative orientation precedes epistemological surveillance (which is a correlate of technology), but it also precedes performativity (which is a correlate of intersubjectivity). In fact, we can understand the informative discourse as the most archaic of the discursive modes, to the point that it does not even deserve a properly anthropological status (animals also process and share information). Before the prosthesis and the otherness, there was only literal meaning: the animal's strategic gaze that continuously collects and processes information from the environment in order to enable proper behavior. As for the episteme and performativity, they appeared later, and in unison, from a common genetics – the invention of the subject –, but pointing in radically opposite directions: the struggle against subjectivity in the case of epistemology and the nourishment of subjectivity in the case of performativity. Despite the tension between both emerging trends, they are not dissociable. They appear as the two sides of the same coin, which here serves as a perfect metaphor: heads on one side (communication, performance), tails on the other (the episteme, the technical prosthesis). Together, both trends emerge from a common anthropological drive that can be generically called *techné* (cf. Martins, 2016).

remains at the service of practical or social intent; on the other hand, it involves information exchanges, but it is not yet fully performative – information is not, in itself, synonymous with authentic communication¹². In other words, cinema is assumed here, using the terms of Jürgen Habermas, as a device at the service of the “strategic action”, more than “communicational action” (Habermas, 1988). The cinematographic machine, in short, limited to the literal sense (which optimizes the flow of information), or devoted to “advertising” (which strategically directs the flows of information in the social context). Finally, the third stage, according to Münsterberg, opens the possibility of a cinematographic art by assuming the expressive capacity of cinema and its natural affinity with narrative. The advent of cinema as a vehicle of performativity. Perhaps its ontology resides here, or at least its teleological resolution as a “photoplay”, as Münsterberg called it (1916).

If we accept this stratification model, persistence must operate differently in each of the strata. In the last stage of maturation of cinema, the persistence will no longer correspond to simply recognizing objective patterns, information, facts or functions. Such elements will still be implied, as technical foundations (1st stage) or informational appropriations (2nd stage). But, now, persistence may also take on a performative dimension, as a trace of subjective alterity. It is no longer a question of recognizing order in the world, but a consigned order. No longer the informed world, but a performed one. Imagine the excessively ordered arrangement of a set of stones in the middle of the quarry; or the overly capricious configuration of a cloud in the sky; or a trivial object imposing itself in the exhibition space. Any of these examples may serve to illustrate some type of performative persistence. They are objects that carry (explicit or contextual) signs that suggest an authorial signature, even when the author is not really there.

12 Cf. Martins, 2016, specially the chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Conversely, the lack of persistence, at this level, will no longer necessarily imply a disorder of the world or an illegibility of the object, but only an absence of authorial intention: an *arbitrariness* (even when the artificer, in the common sense of the word, was duly confirmed). The type of persistence that we accuse in performative objects can be described as an excess of order. They are excessive, too directed, even when formally chaotic or contextually fortuitous. This excess no longer corresponds to the order itself, but to a supplement of order that overflows the natural order (or disorder) of things. For example, a mythical or mystical construct, or an artist's purpose. When the disorder remains in the real object, it becomes chaotic, without law (or legibility) and without control. Science and technology serve precisely to recover and ensure that control. But when we refer to the arbitrariness of the performative object – which, by definition, detached from the real and its literality –, the disorder becomes only relative, and must be considered from the performativity viewpoint. We can, for instance, accuse arbitrariness in a fully ordered object, insofar we understand this underlying order in the same terms in which the real tends to be ordered (informatively) or manipulated (technically). It is the case of the artwork that was reduced to the technical aspects of its execution, leaving no other order to read. To a large extent, even the most organized object can be accused of arbitrariness if it does not know how to justify its organization from a performative point of view, that is, if it does not know how to promote a reading level that exceeds its informative or technical dimension. When this incapacity occurs, even if occasionally, there is a literalization of the work, whose catalyst is the arbitrariness.

If the concept of arbitrariness serves us here to designate disorder in the performative context, then the suspension of performativity should imply the absence of arbitrariness, regardless of the ordered or chaotic character of the object. It makes sense to speak of arbitrary elements in an artwork, but it does not make sense to speak of arbitrary elements in the real, because the real has not made decisions (nor has it failed to make

them). The arbitrariness, thus understood, is always related to an action – or perhaps an inaction – of the author. That is precisely why we speak of arbitrariness and no longer of disorder *per se* to refer to the lack of order in an artwork or performative object. Arbitrariness, unlike disorder, has always someone “to blame” – it always presupposes arbitration.

There is, of course, a false arbitrariness that we must exclude from the start, which has detached from its own arbitration. Remove Duchamp’s “fountain” from its context and it will become a mere urinal, perhaps still produced by a craftsman, but no longer with an authorial signature. We will still have information, cognition of the object, adaptation of the object to a new context (for example, utilitarian), but there will no longer be performativity. Or, consider the same work correctly exposed in a place of artistic reception, but observed through the eyes of a child who does not know the codes or the cultural framework for an adequate reading. In both cases – whether due to contextual deficit or lack of competence – the performance failed. Even so, we are not really facing arbitrariness here (the *ready-made* assumed as an arbitrary object), but mere reception misunderstandings that made the performance unfeasible. In these examples, there was not literalization of the artwork, but only literality of the object.

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The arbitrariness that interests us is of a different order. It presupposes a tacit compromise between author and recipient in ideal conditions: for example, the cinephile or film critic before the cinematographic work. It is here, within a performative consensus, that the concept of arbitrariness can receive its most precise meaning. What does the film critic refer to when he speaks of arbitrariness in a cinematographic work? At this level of discussion, which is what interests us for an analysis of the poetics of cinema, it is the very possibility of criticism that struggles for legitimation. What should be the criteria of the film critic, the audience or the artist himself before the work? How can we even sustain the viability of any aesthetic judgment in this complex panorama that the field of the arts presents us with today? Any alternative to aesthetic relativism will lead us to an

investigation set between the artistic object itself (its composition or structure) and its phenomenology (the aesthetic experience and its mechanisms).

It is at this point that the arbitrariness/persistence pair intersects with the aesthetic questioning. We propose that these two poles form, in fact, an essential axis of poetic orientation that the field of art adopts. Supporting itself in this tension axis, art fulfills an implicit policing – transversal to cultures and times – that helps to shape the symbolic values of the field in each historical moment. In a more or less intuitive, more or less concerted way, persistence regulates artistic visions and aesthetic options, as well as the requests from audiences and critics. It is true that this axis that crosses arbitrariness and persistence is not the only one involved in the art discourse – which, as we know, does not admit infallible or sealed recipes –, but it is perhaps the most primordial axis, given the primordially of the very notion of persistence, as we described it.

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At the phenomenological level of performativity, and at the art reception level in particular, persistence is not only the recognition of order in the midst of chaos, but constitutes the very tangibility of a poetic composition, the reflection of a plan or an authorial order. In the case of cinema, this persistence echoes the “great imagist”, as Albert Laffay called it. Ultimately, it is always the author who persists. But the author is phenomenologically indirect, he is only presupposed, and should remain as such. It is in the tangible features of the artwork, in the author’s legacy, that persistence actually manifests itself, being frankly identifiable in cinema and the arts in general.

3. Figures of persistence

There are several figures or subspecies of persistence. It all starts with the simple repetition of elements that, in each new appearance, consolidate their active role in the artwork, contributing to an order or cohesion. For example, a musical

measure, a rhythm, the repetition of a certain color in a combination of clothing, the recurrence of a diegetic element, etc. Persistence is a powerful poetic instrument: we find it in rhymes, choruses, narrative arcs, thematic elements, the choice of techniques, the consolidation of styles.

In fact, it is not possible to talk about style without implying some kind of persistence. The recurrence of a stylistic element tends to define its author's poetic mark. For example, Van Gogh's style in his unmistakable brushstroke (which persists). Style is not mere filling or embellishing of the form (as Susan Sontag pointed out¹³), but it also does not refer only to the technical processes involved in the materialization of the work (in the sense proposed by David Bordwell¹⁴). Above all, style appears as a binding element of the author's brand, it is what allows him to be identified. We can deduce it from the set of works by an author, or we can recognize it in a common trend by different authors. But we can also point out the style in an isolated work, a singular act that proves the uniqueness of its author, insofar that this uniqueness persists throughout the composition. Strictly speaking, when the work is seen in its individuality, the style belongs to it more than to its author. In its zero-degree, style tends to converge with the concept itself, understood as a centralizing element of the work's cohesion¹⁵.

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Some of the figures we associate with persistence can be understood as a kind of perceptual onomatopoeia founded on

13 Sontag, Susan (1964/2009).

14 In his words: "Syuzhet [plot] and style each treat different aspects of the phenomenal process. The syuzhet embodies the film as a 'dramaturgical' process; style embodies it as a 'technical' one" (Bordwell, 1985, p. 50).

15 We can distinguish several types of concepts: formal (for example, the black separators between cuts in *Love* (2015), by Gaspar Noé; or the famous "forth and backward" cuts in *Easy Rider* (1969), by Dennis Hopper); narratological concepts (in *Son of Saul* [2015], by László Nemes, the absolute fixation of the camera on the main character); and mimetic or metaphorical concepts (in *Dogville* [2003], by Lars Von Trier, inverted or invisible voyeurism as a visual metonym).

the body itself, as a centralizing source of points of view. The semiotics of camera movements, for example, constantly use this body analogy: zoom in equals to a nearing on the object, while zoom out tends to suggest a farewell or departure. The same bodily sense applies to travelling and panning. However, despite these dynamics, film theorists are only partially right when they distinguish theater from cinema referring to the latter's exclusive ability to freely manipulate the points of view according to the intentions of the narrator, who would thus come to hold an absolute power. Quoting Gaudreault and Jost, "due to the position it occupies, [the camera can] intervene and modify the viewer's perception of the actors' performance. It can (...) force the viewer's gaze and, no more, no less, direct it" (2005/2009, pp. 40-41). The narrator's power would then tend towards an omnipresence, especially in the so-called "classic cinema", more oriented, according to Bordwell, to "produce narrative omniscience through spatial omnipresence" (Bordwell, 1986/2005, p. 287). This absolute power of the narrator would lead, in the limit, and almost paradoxically, to the dissolution of the narrator as a concrete or measurable element: "Classical omnipresence transforms the cognitive scheme that we call 'camera' into an ideal invisible observer" (Bordwell, 1986/2005, p. 288). The narrator, in short, sacrificed in the sake of a better visibility of the cinematographic events, presented through ideal points of view.

But what does this ideal nature of the points of view consist of? If the goal is "to preserve the most advantageous point of perception throughout the film" (Bordwell, 1986/2005, p. 288), what determines this advantage? It is said that the ideal perspective, in fictional cinema, is the one that most clearly describes the events of the fable. But, even diminishing the importance of the narrator in the way the story will be narrated, there is still another aspect that cannot be overlooked: there is, on the one hand, the clearness of the visual and narrative content, but there is also the clearness of the point of view. Except for a certain experimental cinema, it will be difficult to give up the latter (which is not to be confused here with the

narrator's self-awareness). That is why the natural limitations of the theater are also, to a large extent, limitations of the cinema. The freedom of the spatial (and temporal) perspective in cinema is not unlimited, as in theater; and it is not unlimited in that it must cultivate the consistency of the narrative content, but also the consistency of the point of view. There is a virtual eye in cinema that refuses certain points of view because it tends to simulate a real, bodily eye. This virtual eye persists as an implicit, but inevitable, allusion to a body. It is a whole other regime of persistence that flourishes from this center. And it is precisely in this context that we speak of perceptual onomatopoeia. There is a range of cinematographic norms that are justified only by reference to the virtualization of an implicit body, in a similar way to the explicit body of the spatially fixed audiences of the theater. For example, the use of editing rules dedicated to visual continuity. The 180-degree rule does nothing more than delimit the space of persistence of the virtual eye, to which some freedom is thus refused, as only half of the complete angular field (of 360 degrees) that surrounds the filmic event is inhabited. Without this rule, the virtual eye is deallocated and there is a risk of confusing the viewer in each new cut between shots. The 30-degree rule has a distinct function, serving mainly to disguise any possible continuity errors in the cut between two shots with similar visual content. Through this rule, any variation of the visual content will be justified by the change of the angle (in a safety minimum of 30 degrees) and not by an intrinsic change of objects or characters. This ensures, once again, the visual continuity proper to a virtual eye that, like the real eye, does not accept jumpcuts. The perceptual comfort sought by these classic rules of cinematographic grammar is repeated in multiple other technical examples focused on visual or sound continuity, from the color grading to the audio leveling worked by the sound designer. Continuity is an expression of the virtual body's own persistence and tends to reset itself in each new scene of the film (the scene being defined precisely as a kernel of spatiotemporal continuity, that is, an episode of embodiment).

Persistence is implied in the continuity between juxtaposed shots, but it also affects the individual shot, promoting specific strategies – or *diligences* – that guide the virtual eye, calibrating the highlights and conditioning perception. For example, the technique of narrowing the depth of field, which helps to highlight the area of relevance, contributing, like the framing itself, to direct the focus of attention. General principles such as the rule of thirds are also recurrent. There is a whole range of rules that continually guide the narrative or aesthetic focus. All diligence is a form of persistence. And not only the diligence of the gaze, but also the work on what is to be offered to the gaze: the scenography, the art direction, the light and colors, the characters' disposition in the frame, all the elements of plastic expression in the *mise-en-scène* take part in this comprehensive subspecies of persistence. Thus, under normal conditions, the character or object tracked by the mobile camera will persist over the rest; and the same should happen with the character or object that persists conveniently in the center of a fixed frame (*mise-en-place*). Whether through the behavior of the camera or the disposition of the pro-filmic content, the performative persistence is manifested in various diligences. At every moment, it constitutes the expression of the author, his appeal for a focus or intention.

The very inside of diegetic universes reflects several forms of persistence. There is, from the outset, an almost universal tendency towards an economy of ingredients that will take part in the thematic, contextual or formal delineation of narrative spaces, regardless of logistical constraints (although these are also influential). The *diegesis* cannot admit everything at the same time. It establishes its own focus within a limited operational space, or it will risk dispersing itself – and dispersion, in these terms, is a sign of arbitrariness. In fact, critics repeatedly speak of dispersion to refer to counterproductive narrative orientations. To say that the narrative is too dispersed is just another way of accusing fragmentation, disarticulation, lack of direction – in short, *arbitrariness*. To avoid it, the focus tends to narrow the

areas of persistence. In classic cinema, this focus translates into the setting of a clear main character, the delimitation of diegetic space-time and the definition of the strict rules of a given canon. The canon, in turn, will be able to expand beyond individual works, regulating sequels and prequels, spin-offs and other transmedia approaches to diegetic universes. If a given product deviates from the consistency laws of its respective universe, then it will not belong to the canon (for example, an *unofficial* novel set in the *Star Wars* universe by George Lucas).

Similar principles of diegetic consistency regulate the course of the fable's events, as well as its mode of organization in the plot (*syuzhet*). The concept of *narrative arc*, in this context, is one of the most sophisticated forms of persistence within the *diegesis*. Each story will tend to be composed of multiple arcs of different length, complexity and subtlety. Some begin and end within a single scene or dialogue, others connect the first and last shot of a film or saga. Some relate to the characters purposes, others relate to the mere recurrence of places, objects and situations¹⁶. A visual point of view or framing is often recovered. There is always something in each narrative arc that is repeated or resumed in some way (usually to express evolution and not just circularity). Sometimes the arc is achieved by justifying someone's narrative purpose or something that previously lacked explicit motivation. *Chekhov's gun* labels this apparently unmotivated element that, at some point, will prove to be part of a narrative arc, however small the arc may be. Ideally, in a scenario of absolute narrative consistency, each thing should be involved in its own arc. It is true that Chekhov's guns, like everything that is destined for repetition, risk predictability – which, as we know, hardly contributes to the overall effectiveness of the narratives – and hence the need to hide such

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16 For example: the last sequence in the last episode of the last season of the *Game of Thrones* series (2011-2019) is essentially reminiscent to the first sequence in the first episode of the first season.

figures with countermeasures or diversion maneuvers (the so-called *red herring*). But, conversely, the persistence effect itself can also disguise the convenience of the narrative elements. If the “gun” is introduced only at a crucial moment in the plot, in order to promptly serve a specific function, its inclusion will tend to feel forced, gratuitous, arbitrary, especially if it has a determining function (*Deus Ex Machina*). But this convenience will be softened if this key appearance of the object is just the culmination of a series of other previous occurrences (not necessarily useless or unmotivated). In Woody Allen’s *Irrational Man* (2015), during the climax, the philosophy professor tries to drag his former student into an elevator shaft in an attempt to murder her. As they fight in front of the elevator, a small flashlight falls from her bag and the professor slips on the flashlight, falling into the pit. Evidently, this narrative solution would be too convenient if the flashlight had been introduced only at that moment to force the narrative twist, without any previous mention of the object. But this flashlight had been introduced before (only once), offered by the teacher himself to the student in an amusement park while the two maintained a loving relationship (which already prepared a certain irony). Through this earlier introduction, the flashlight was deliberately inserted into a persistence device, a narrative arc – the arc of the lantern. The seemingly casual circumstances that introduced the prop for the first time, as well as the long interval (of about fifty minutes) until its reappearance to serve a purpose in the narrative outcome, certainly help to disguise its convenience. But it was the previous introduction of the lantern in the plot that allowed it to be legitimated narratively, not because it was necessary to explain its origin, but above all because some kind of persistence or iterability of the prop throughout the film was required to camouflage its convenience at the key moment. The persistence of objects, events and characters helps to naturalize them in the narrative, and they are repeated even when their recurrence is unnecessary, that is, even when a single occurrence would be sufficient to fulfill their determining role in the diegetic play.

The recurrence of elements does not always have to obey the conventional principles of narrative progression. It is not essential that the repetition of an event or object is linked to a concrete motivation that, in due course, would be clarified in the diegetic whole. In the work of David Lynch, the use of recurrence as an autonomous figure is remarkable, regardless of narrative cohesion. Especially since *Mulholland Drive* (2001), the rarefaction of nexuses is definitely assumed, but the persistent (or even obsessive) effect of certain figures is never lost. In *Inland Empire* (2006), for example, a group of three anthropomorphic rabbits appears repeatedly without their narrative or symbolic function ever becoming clear. In fact, there is no longer any need for diegetic relevance; the recurrence of rabbits is enough to integrate them into their own narrative arc, even if it remains indecipherable or inconclusive. Surrealism, in general, tends to make use of this poetic methodology, whose usage of free associations is not necessarily contrary to persistence, but, on the contrary, allows to emancipate it from narrative bonds. In *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), by Luis Buñuel, it is the hand infested with ants and the dismembered hand on the ground, the eye cut by the blade and the moon cut by the cloud, the character and his double, etc. Repetition or recurrence are here more essential than their diegetic function.

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Persistence manifests itself inside the fable and in the way it is reorganized in the plot, but also in purely plastic or stylistic supporting figures. These too take part in the consistency of the composition and, sometimes, in its simplicity, in the economy of elements. The film credits will, as a rule, insist in a certain font or graphic concept. Even Gaspar Noé's psychedelic opening credits fulfill a specific type of visual and rhythmic conceptualization. Symmetry is another figure associated with this type of coherence. There can be no symmetry without parts that repeat or reinforce each other in the frame or between juxtaposed frames. Wes Anderson's frames exhibit symmetry insofar as they make visual elements persist: the left side persists on the right side; the lines persist throughout the length of the frame; and the symmetry figure itself persists

throughout the sequences. In cinema in general, the visual field and the counterfield tend to dialogue through scale and angle correspondences. Even the Eisensteinian shots often clash with each other based on similar principles, creating opposition, but also relations of continuity and conformity that keep on the precision of visual or conceptual symmetry (for example the sequence of the two napoleons in *October* (1927)).

As a rule, all styling figures are built based on a principle of persistence. Imagine a single jumpcut isolated in a film. There being no other narrative or formal motivations, we will tend to conclude that the figure was introduced to amend, cut out, eliminate a defect in the take, etc. Or it could have been simply an arbitrary, unreasonable occurrence, an oversight of the author. Its isolation will bring this visual jump closer to a flaw than to a stylistic option¹⁷. But now let us imagine several jumpcuts repeating on several occasions throughout a scene or across the length of the film. Even if a contextual motivation is not yet confirmed, the simple persistence of the figure will tend to indicate a purpose. Each repetition will contribute to the legitimization of the figure. No longer a strange element, but a stylistic figure. Like the humorist who prolongs or repeats a trivial situation until it becomes laughable. Eventually the reinforcement of the “error” will tend to provide it a purpose, even if the purpose remains ambiguous. In fact, persistence

17 There are, of course, exceptions. In *House of Glass* (2018), for example, there is a single isolated jumpcut (assumed here in its most rigorous sense, as a time jump to a later moment in the same frame). As director and editor, I decided to insert this jumpcut for several reasons that complement each other: contextually, the cut happens during a close-up of the main character while consuming crack, and can serve, in a more immediate sense, as a visual metonymy of his mental blackout or disruption of normal consciousness. On the other hand, the cut introduces a sense of real time or duration: there is an uncertain amount of time between the two parts separated by the jumpcut, creating a virtual extension of the situation: distance between the act of breathing in the pipe smoke (1st part) and the act of breathing out the smoke (2nd part). Finally, there is also the purpose of accentuating the persistence of the situation itself: the return to the same situation after the cut to reinforce the crucial moment.

feeds the scope of the elements by attesting not only an authorial intention, but also their fortitude.

Ultimately this applies to virtually any figures. For example, persistence can shape a positive version of redundancy. It is true that this figure generally has a damaging effect: it fails by excess. But while redundancy is an excess of something, the excess of redundancy may not really be an excess, but the right amount of something. Even if nothing is added in each new repetition or reinforcement of the redundant content, the redundancy excess tends to neutralize the redundancy itself, making it operational. The redundancy figure, like any other typically negative figure, can also be re-appropriated for an aesthetic purpose. For example, through the irony or the pathetic. In *The Perfect Human* (1967), by Jørgen Leth, one of the scenes shows us a man dressed in a formal suit and dark glasses dancing on a completely empty background. As the man dances in the same spot with funny gestures, a voice narrates the situation in voice over: “Look at him... look at him now... and now... look at him all the time... now the music has stopped... no more music... the perfect human in a room... (...) and a voice saying a few words... this voice saying a few words... look at him now... look at him all the time” ...

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4. Duration and persistence

The simple insistence of the filmmaker on an arbitrary event – for example, a trivial landscape that lasts for several minutes in a fixed frame – will tend to diminish its arbitrariness or irrelevance. Thus, persistence also ends up being implicated in duration itself, offering a complementary – not Bergsonian – way of understanding temporality in the context of cinema. It is known that modern cinema – the one that flourished mainly after the Italian neorealism – introduced a new relationship with duration, which Deleuze would theorize through his concept of *time-image*. For authors like André Bazin, the motivations of this new type of cinema are related to realistic goals that value

the virginity of the real (namely its ambiguity and contingency), as opposed to formalism, which best fits to the author's manipulative influence, or even as opposed to the false realism of Hollywood, whose *trompe-l'oeil* is considered insufficient for achieving aesthetic authenticity.

In formalistic terms, one of the characteristics associated by Bazin to the new aesthetic paradigm is the refusal of montage and the defense of the sequence shot (in particular the open shot with depth of field, capable of encompassing the whole event). In Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), the scene in which Nanook struggles with the seal through the ice hole would have lost its realistic impact if, instead of a general shot, the scene had been divided into dramatic fragments. In Bazin's words: "It would be inconceivable that the famous seal hunting scene in *Nanook of the North* would not show us, on the same shot, the hunter, the hole and the seal. (...) What must be respected is the spatial unity of the event, since its rupture would transform reality into its mere imaginary representation" (Bazin, 1991, p. 62). Likewise, a dialogue between two fictional characters will tend to sound more truthful if it takes place entirely within a single overall shot, while the field/counterfield scheme will denounce, in each cut, a manipulation of the dialogue by the editor. In the edited scene, there is more control over the actors' performances (which can be reconstructed and perfected), but, on the other hand, there is no proof of the intrinsic merit of those performances. A well-executed scene will claim added value if it is not anchored in technical devices such as editing (or even other more modern forms of manipulation, such as CGI as opposed to practical effects). In the genuine sequence shot, duration is, in this context, related to another important figure of persistence: *improbability*. The longer a shot extends over time, the less likely it is to preserve global harmony. In fact, the filmmakers' fascination with sequence shots is largely due to the challenge of their execution, especially when they include sophisticated camera movements or complex actors work. Here, cinema approaches the same challenges implied in theater, dance or other performing arts where the execution takes place in real time.

There is also a more profound effect in this type of persistence: as the cinematographic shot extends over time, without cuts or interruptions, it will tend to become more autonomous. The duration allows the shot to stand only by itself, detached from the other shots or even from other parts of the same shot, especially if the visual content persists without a clear development of the action (such as a fixed landscape or a repetitive situation). Gradually, the interior of the shot takes on a breath of its own, more sensorial, but also more reflective or intellectual¹⁸. In *Jeanne Dielman...* (1975), by Chantal Akerman, a housewife carries out her daily tasks in a methodical, almost mechanical routine. We see her cooking in real time, bathing in real time, shining shoes in real time. The frames are repeated on each return to the same spaces and the days are essentially similar without the characters ever deviating. We breathe time and repetition. In *The Turin Horse* (2011), by Béla Tarr, the camera follows the austere daily life of a farmer and his daughter in long sequence shots¹⁹. Right at the beginning of the film, the camera accompanies the horse that pulls the cart on a gray day. The narrative information, here, is minimalist, running out quickly; but the situation soon takes on its own weight, replacing the action. A more contemplative regime of perception then takes place: slowly, the horse's true effort is revealed, the painful rhythm of the animal steps, the scars or imperfections in the buffeted fur, the windy and cold fog, the perseverance on the face of the man who drives the wagon... all the misery in the world contained in this long shot. In both examples, the duration feeds a greater realism of the scenes, but also accentuates the "false"²⁰, the

18 For Deleuze, the paradigm shift that separates the movement-image from the time-image was announced precisely with Hitchcock's "mental-image".

19 In its two and a half hours, the film contains only thirty shots (an average of five minutes per shot).

20 Regarding the time-image, Deleuze speaks of a "power of the false" to describe this indiscernibility between the real and the imaginary, this "virtuality" or "falsifying narration". In his words: "As for the distinction between subjective and objective, it also tends to lose importance as the

subjective, the spiritual. There is more dreaminess and plasticity. Ultimately, everything is mixed: animals, places, objects take on a central role, while the human is confused with the landscape or gives way to the landscape. Sometimes the characters leave the frame and only the place persists. It is a free complicity between the elements. In *A Ghost Story* (2017), by David Lowery, this complicity is shown through a ghost that personalizes the very notion of duration and memory. The ghost remains in the house as time passes slowly, integrally (the shot of the widow eating the cake while the apparition watches). The duration explores the vitalism of things and spaces, giving each place its own weight, a sense of entity (sometimes haunting or haunted).

Above all, time makes the content of the frame persist, adds *presence* to it. Here is a notion on which descriptions are plenty, but which essentially tends to a commonplace: the apology of the immediate and the dilution of appearances and meanings. The “soil” in Heidegger, the description of the “chestnut root” in Sartre, the “burning of the wrapper” in Benjamin, the “figural” in Lyotard, the “crystalline image” in Deleuze, all these are examples of a common understanding of “*presence*” as the sign of an aesthetic *epoché*. From Sartre’s phenomenological existentialism to Deleuze’s materialistic immanentism, presence refers to the “thing in itself”, in its pure existence. Thus, behind the wrapper of things, there would be a fundamental truth accessible through a direct reading of time. In the duration, the “veil of representation that covers the nameless reality of the true world” is removed (Rancière, 2011/2013, p. 54).

optical situation or visual description substitutes motor action. We fall into a principle of indeterminability, of indiscernibility: we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental in the situation, not because it is confused, but because one does not have to know it and it is not even necessary to ask it. It is as if the real and the imaginary ran one after the other, reflected on each other, around a point of indiscernibility” (Deleuze, 1985/2015, p. 17).

For Deleuze, the *crystal-image* (pure time-image) is not an organic relationship between an actual image and another actual image, but the inorganic relationship between an actual image and its own virtual image. Deleuze refers, in this second case, to a non-chronological temporality: instead of a horizontal course of events that follow one after the other, there would be a vertical relationship between the event and its own memory. In Deleuze, as in Bergson, it is a matter of “distinguishing between the spatial view that passes through the event and the temporal view that is embedded in the event” (Deleuze, 1985/2015, p. 158). In other words, it is a question of “staying in the event, of not leaving it” (Deleuze, 1985/2015, p. 158). Deleuze concludes: “It is very different if we settle inside one same event, (...) if we replace the pragmatic longitudinal view with a purely optical, vertical view or, better said, an in-depth view” (Deleuze, 1985/2015, p. 158).

But it may not be absolutely necessary to use Bergson’s non-chronological time (the *Aiôn*) to point out the characteristics of a cinema of duration. The figure of persistence allows us to access a similar intuition through the phenomenological approach, without prejudice to Deleuze’s materialistic approach²¹. The temporal persistence of the performative frame, understood in the chronological sense, can also promote, by itself, an integrality of the object. The simple extension of the duration is enough to produce a phenomenological effect of intensification and autonomy. In this process, it is not a question of attesting an aesthetic authenticity (which always runs the risk of referring

21 Deleuze does not really depart from the materialistic perspective when theorizing time-image, despite the role of thought, subjectivity and memory in this particular type of image. Here, memory occupies a place comparable to that of matter. Quoting Deleuze: “just as we perceive things where they are present, in space, we remember them where they are past, in time, and we both leave ourselves in one case or another. The memory is not in us, we are the ones who move in a memory-being, in a memory-world” (Deleuze, 1985/2015, pp. 155-156). And he adds: “Subjectivity is never ours, it is time, that is, the soul or the spirit, the virtual. The actual is always objective, but the virtual is the subjective” (Deleuze, 1985/2015, p. 132).

to the essentialist domain of “the thing itself”), but only of promoting the suspension of organic connections, in a manner similar to that described by Deleuze when he talks about the rupture of sensorimotor schemes. In its temporal persistence, the frame reverts to itself in a kind of self-imposition, becoming self-reflective, facing inward, toward its own hidden wealth, instead of projecting to the outside or reconnecting to the comprehensive set of which it would be part of. Ultimately, the shot or event that extends indefinitely in chronological time will end up becoming pure reverberation or self-referentiality. In this phenomenological context, duration is assumed as the zero degree of persistence; it is persistence in a pure state.

5. Arbitrariness and literalization

As we have seen, the figure of persistence is, in one way or another, involved in the poetic process, shaping the artists’ secret rules, regardless of their style or manifest. It is the attractor of order and conglomeration, perhaps the most primordial of all the attractors of discourse, including the artistic discourse. But art makes use of both order and disorder. There is a principle of composition, but there is also a “cult of the error”, a dionysian drive, sometimes hysteria or an excess of passivity. Furthermore, art requires creativity – and not just imagination, engineering or production –, being part of a regime of variability whose discourses do not accept fixed recipes. No other discourse depends as much on renewal and difference as art, even though the artworks ratified at a given historical moment may preserve and even increase their value in the future. One could thus conclude that arbitrariness, like persistence, also participates actively in the aesthetic effectiveness of the artworks. But arbitrariness has nothing to do with the irreverent, deviant or dionysian aspect of artistic expressiveness. And it is also not to be confused with other poetic attractors that focus on ambiguity, contingency or deformity, which are so often decisive for the aesthetic effect. The arbitrariness, in the

sense that we grant it here, is always negative. It relates only to an interruption or failure of persistence. It is its opposite. The subversive artist can, of course, use “arbitrariness” as a tool or as a theme, making it work. There are emblematic artworks in this sense. However, in such cases, it will no longer be arbitrariness, but pure randomness or disorder in the service of a higher order that is not arbitrary. The arbitrariness is canceled when it becomes an operative ingredient of the composition itself – assuming that the artist has enough talent not to let it spill over.

In turn, persistence is a guiding principle whose attractor is the author’s intention, which, by definition, is never arbitrary. Or it should not be. It is precisely here that an important part of art criticism finds its reasons. The critic also demands persistence, the indication of congeniality, the authorial presence, the planning without which the work will fall into dispersion, incoherence, nonsense, gratuitousness... in short, arbitrariness. The artwork always claims someone at the helm, even before the artist’s name.

Understood in the broadest phenomenological sense, authorship constitutes a profound attractor that summons the discourses – artistic and others – to the performativity domain. In the case of art, this specific orientation establishes a poetic (or pro-aesthetic) vector that extends from arbitrariness to persistence, moving away from the first towards the second. In one way or another, all artistic expression avoids arbitrariness by resorting to different figures or species of performative persistence. This does not imply privileging a specific tendency of cinematographic expression over another; or to choose an art that advocates order (narrative, formal, moral, figurative, representational, etc.) against an art of disorder. Arbitrariness can equally undermine the aesthetic effectiveness of one trend or another. About the regime of time-image – equally permissive to “bad cinema” – says Deleuze: “There is no value judgment here because this new regime does not generate less than the old one its prefabricated formulas, its recipes, its forced and empty applications, its failures, its arbitrariness” (Deleuze, 1985/2015, p. 208).

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Arbitrariness causes the literalization of the artwork, the interruption of its performative dimension. Performativity implies a compromise between author and spectator, and it is this commitment that is suspended when arbitrariness imposes itself. If the authorship is lost (in arbitrariness), the co-authorship is also lost (the performative commitment tacitly assumed during the artistic reception). In other words, arbitrariness causes a kind of desertion, a fracture between the two poles of a phenomenological intersubjectivity constituted by the sum of the author (presumed in the work) and the co-author (who pursues the author's intention, realizing it during reception). One of the counterparts cannot survive without the other: performativity is always participatory. This bond corresponds precisely to the notion of *belief*.

At this point, it should once again be emphasized the essential difference between literality (of the object) and literalization (of the work). In the first case, there is no arbitrariness, but, at most, randomness or perceptual confusion. In the second case, which already implies a performative framework, literality is not given, but is associated with an insufficiency of performance that is characterized by a persistence deficit. It is this deficit that names arbitrariness and translates, from the reception point of view, into a loss of authorship and a literalization of the work. When this deficit shows, the audience detaches from the performative dimension and the work is reduced to its objective, informative, literal condition. The audience then focus on the object itself – more than the author's intention, source of the performance – but in a very specific way: no longer in terms of a presence or focus on the thing itself (literality), but in terms of a performative inoperability of the work, or rather, an arbitrariness (literalization). The focus is then adrift, lost in the intricacies of the work, hostage to its deficit, ending up concentrating on the deficit itself. Here are the terms of withdrawal, which is also a disbelief: the audience has lost the reading key and, above all, the belief in a reading key. To accuse arbitrariness in the performative object is like abandoning belief. The object is reduced to its

literality and becomes disconnected from the author (in which the audience no longer believes). In short, a literalization. It is at this point that the composition becomes disorganized, that the sound becomes noise, that the images become orphans, that the concepts or intentions are lost. The arbitrariness is a rejection.

On the other hand, the performative persistence, through which we move toward an authorial order, cannot by itself guarantee a properly aesthetic effect. While avoiding arbitrariness, the repetition effect will easily lead to familiarization, passive reading, *immersiveness* (performative content literalization), or, on the other hand, it can incur predictability, unmasking of the operation, *cliché*, *artificiality* (author's intention literalization). Therefore, it will be necessary that other poetic vectors come to counter the standardizing effect of persistence. Aesthetic fruition of a cinematographic work is inscribed in the delicate intersection between several poetic vectors and falters as soon as one of them overlaps the others: this is what happens when excessive persistence leads to *immersiveness* (the intensive torpor of entertainment, the impetus of intrigues, the eroticism in general) or *artificiality* (imitation, schemata, falseness)²². In other words, the performative persistence, which is essential in poetic work, in opposition to arbitrariness, may itself lead to other literalizing modes, against which the filmmaker will also have to take measures in his creative process. The aesthetic experience attractors, by themselves, do not have an aesthetic nature – or art would be reduced to an infallible technicality – and should be considered in the dynamic relationship they establish with each other and with further deviant forces that continually threaten the aesthetic proficiency. In cinema and in the arts in general, maintaining this balance dictates the very effort of poetic composition.

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22 Immersiveness and artificiality join the arbitrariness as distinct modes of literalization. And each of these literalizing modes constitutes the negative pole of its respective poetic vector: arbitrariness/persistence, immersiveness/difference and artificiality/contingency. Due to lack of space, we will not address here the remaining vectors. (See Martins, 2018).

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