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THE LENS & SCREEN ARTS

EDITED BY **ADAM BELL & CHARLES H. TRAUB**

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LOOKING AND BEING LOOKED AT

2014

Shelly Silver and Claire Barliant

Experimental filmmaker and photographer Shelly Silver and writer and curator Claire Barliant discuss the role of narrative, genre, and "watching" in the formation of Silver's films, and posit for the future the idea of a machine to teach someone to see.

CLAIRE BARLIANT: I thought it would be good if we started by talking about one of your most recent films, *TOUCH* (2013). The protagonist is an older Chinese man, who is gay. Also, he is straddling two different worlds: his memory of China and New York City. But he's not really at home in either place. The idea of using a fictional character and real-life images to illustrate his world was very interesting. And he is so fleshed out, it really feels like you're listening to this person. But it's all manufactured.

SHELLY SILVER: I like the word *manufactured* in this context. It rubs up against many things the film talks about. It's from the Latin for "made by hand," which is what it meant in the sixteenth century. A hundred years later it came to mean producing on a large scale with machinery as well as "to invent or fabricate."

I did manufacture, in all senses of the word, the character and story and film. Although he is based on research, this man does not exist, and I decided what the character did for a living, how he spoke, what and whom he desired, why he left Chinatown and then came back.

I also in a sense constructed what is seen of the neighborhood, shot by shot, deciding where I pointed the camera and at what time of day.

TOUCH grew out of my experience making the short film *5 lessons and 9 questions about Chinatown* (2011), which was commissioned by the Museum of Chinese in America, as part of the Chinatown Film Project. *5 lessons* anarchically moves among the past, present, and futures of Chinatown—from the draining of

Collect Pond to the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act to impending gentrification. A chorus of different voices—in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin—asks who belongs, owns, and controls a neighborhood. The chorus ends with the question, "Who are we?"

For *TOUCH* I wanted to slow down and address the neighborhood from a solitary vantage point. The idea for the main protagonist originated with the actor Lu Yu, who had done the Mandarin voice-over for *5 lessons*. I was struck by his voice and wanted to make a character based not on him but on who "this voice" might be. A good deal of research went into *5 lessons*, and with all that in the back of my mind I started writing this character who was both insider and outsider. I chose this position for him partly because I too am an insider/outsider. I'm not Chinese but have lived in Chinatown for the last twenty-eight years. Outsiders make good observers, especially those who are looking for a way in. As I was doing the initial interviews for *5 lessons*, I was struck by how many people said that they too felt like outsiders in Chinatown, for any number of reasons. Some said it was because they spoke the "wrong" dialect; others because of where they came from or when they came; for others, the reasons were economic. This feeling of not belonging was a surprisingly common one.

TOUCH was shot largely on the block where I live, the juicy sound of the butcher shop being scrubbed, the purveyor of pork products lugging a large, wide-eyed pig. In the act of filming you see things you never noticed before, and this is part of the experience I wanted to give to the viewer.

CB: Can you talk more about your process?

SS: The process of making *TOUCH* was different from making traditional narrative or documentary films, which often relies on prescripting and a fairly rigid structure of preproduction, production, and postproduction. I was constantly moving between shooting, editing, and writing. This is a very live way of working.

There are three films I've made this way: *suicide* (2003), *What I'm Looking For* (2004), and *TOUCH* (2013). Together they make up a loose trilogy of fictional essay films that are each filmed from the point of view of a solitary fictional protagonist. This first-person essay structure allows me flexibility both in process and subject matter—voice-over can be endlessly rewritten, reflecting whatever the character is thinking that day; scenes can be cannibalized or shifted elsewhere. The process is closest to puzzle making, collage, or bricolage.

Each film has what I think of as three main characters. There's the central fictional character who comments on or fights against the documentary-based images. We see the world through his or her eyes. The second "character" is the place or places where the films are shot. For *TOUCH* it's Chinatown; *What I'm Looking For*, Lower Manhattan post–September 11; and *suicide*, the traveler's world—as Emerson says, "anywhere but here." And, because these characters have a playful and at times passive-aggressive relation with the viewer, who is

often addressed directly, the audience can be seen as the third character, a character that is both desired and implicated.

CB: *TOUCH* is in fact devoted to the topic of watching. Why have you decided to focus on this theme, and how is this phenomenon important for your artistic work generally?

SS: Most films are devoted to watching; that is the process they activate. *TOUCH* brings that watching to the surface, as something to hold up to the light and examine. The act of watching forms the film.

Watching is a form of taking care. At its best, it's a form of reaching out, or as the character in *TOUCH* says, a kind of touching. It's through looking and showing that my invisible character begins to be present—to us and to this community that he fled as an adolescent. *TOUCH* is a paean to a certain kind of watching.

Watching in public, this collective act of looking and being looked at, has gotten a bad rap in the last few decades. This parallels our giving up of our proprietary ownership of public space, this place where we gather to see and be seen, to check each other out. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* Jane Jacobs, the great examiner of American cities, writes passionately about watching, describing it as the fabric that holds us together as feeling, empathic creatures. She singles out the crucial importance of "eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street." Now we have "eyes" on the street, in the form of disembodied surveillance cameras, faux streetlamps with black bulbs, rectangular boxes hanging off metal wires, where we can't see the people on the other end of the cameras. Surveillance is one-sided. It's destructive, rending the social fabric. These cameras are especially prevalent in Chinatown, which is close to several prisons and a main police precinct.

This co-optation of public space, this not seeing who is watching but knowing that they are, causes a floating anger and anxiety, which does not get aimed at the police or so-called Homeland Security. It instead gets transferred to those we do see, the people we share the streets with, whether they have cameras or not. The general unlocalized paranoia gets localized onto each other.

CB: Much of your work is shot in public space. What is it about public space—why do you choose to work in that arena?

SS: Growing up in NYC, much of my childhood was spent on the streets. I feel comfortable there, and I feel most comfortable on streets where I don't know everyone or anyone.

Our society is increasingly focused on the individual, whereas I am searching out the "we," or the bridge between "I" and "us." And the streets are where you find "us." My films *Former East/Former West* and *in complete world* are both based on street interviews with scores of people I didn't know and would never see again. *Former East/Former West,* filmed in Berlin between 1992 and '93, raises the question of a shared country, language, and ideology after the fall of the Wall.

in complete world, shot in the early days of the 2008 presidential primary leading to Obama's first election, is about civic responsibility in the face of individual desire, and the interviews with these strangers who I share a city with made me proud to be a New Yorker. I couldn't imagine either of these projects being filmed anywhere other than the public space of the street.

CB: This reminds me of another quote from *TOUCH:* "What I own of this place, I own through the images I take." If you're able to view it, it's public, it's available somehow. It's open space that is available to everyone.

SS: Here, the character is positing a different idea of personal and shared ownership. He is well aware that he doesn't legally own the buildings he's filming—he's being evicted from his mother's apartment. But as keeper, steward, examiner, and fabricator of histories, he knows that images and memories are a crucial form of owning. They also create an uncanny fluidity in time: "I will own this place even after it ceases to exist."

This question of control, ownership, and the right to stay is also central to *5 lessons* and NYC in general, this city where I've lived for most of my life. When people talk about neighborhoods changing, they often attach the words *progress, natural,* or *inevitable,* when there's typically nothing natural or inevitable about it. Neighborhoods are changed based on decisions made largely by politicians, judges, and developers. New York City laws favor the landlord over the tenant, the developer over the community, especially during the Giuliani-Bloomberg years. Neighborhoods are also engineered, manufactured.

CB: Chris Marker, the great film essayist of the late twentieth century, seems like an interesting reference to talk about in relationship to your films. In *La Jetée* (1962), he uses still photographs to compose a fictionalized essay while yours at times feel to me like moving photographs. There is a stillness to the way they are composed.

SS: The film of Marker's that's had the greatest effect on me is *Sans Soleil* (1983), where the voice of an unknown woman reads letters sent by a fictional cameraman—friend or lover—who is travelling across continents. In this film Marker builds a web of desire (there must always be desire!) that holds together fragments of ideas, places, people, histories, and lush images, many of which were shot by others. We, the viewers, thrive in the space between this low-voiced woman and this absent, hyperarticulate man who seems just out of reach.

suicide (2003), which was also shot around the globe, was made in dialogue and argument with Marker. It's a faux personal video diary of a crazed, suicidal filmmaker who endlessly circulates through the world of transitional spaces, airports, train stations, malls—what Marc Augé refers to as nonplaces—in the hopes of finding a desire to continue living. Unlike Marker's protagonist, she, in an extreme take on tourism, projects her desires, fears, and history onto everyone and everything around her, pushing the limit (my limit) of what's acceptable in

terms of filming in public space. I don't think I would have made this film without the love and at times frustration I felt towards Marker's work.

CB: Like Marker, language seems a very important component of your work, but unlike him, you seem to play more with the question of language and translation. *TOUCH* is largely in Chinese, *Former East/Former West* is in German, and *37 Stories about Leaving Home* (1996) is in Japanese. Were you thinking about translation?

SS: Making films in languages far from my mother tongue is a subspecialty of mine. It's a somewhat masochistic pleasure.

The character in *TOUCH* is someone who suffered growing up a linguistic outsider. As he says in the film he was "made fun of in two languages." He then grows up to become a librarian, a keeper of language. In the film he largely speaks Mandarin, then for a word here, a phrase there switches to Cantonese or English. At times he decides not to speak at all, leaving the subtitles to represent his inner voice or inability to speak certain words out loud.

The theorist Gayatri Spivak spoke at a conference on translation last year about *TOUCH* and how the film uses subtitling as a commentary on the place of translation, from the point of view of this man from the diaspora. She proposed that the character in the film stages the three phases of learning a second or third language: the withholding of translation, the having the ability to translate, and then forgetting to translate, or as Marx puts it "forgetting the language that was planted in you." She then puts forward that the subtitles in *TOUCH,* rather than performing the typical role of being there for "the English speaker's convenience," function as "a site to actively problematize translation."

I feel a different sense of responsibility when making interview-based films where people are speaking particular words to give voice to their ideas or experiences. It's ethically important to honor this voice as best as possible, at the same time acknowledging that translation can never be one to one. Meaning always escapes. When I work in a foreign language it's impossible to take language for granted, and this influences my approach when I return to my native tongue, English. Language is never transparent.

CB: Looking at the range of your work, would you say that rather than being connected to a specific style or genre, it's instead reconfiguring or exploring the spaces between genres?

SS: Yes. I'm always happiest between the cracks.

CB: And it seems that the crack you're interested in most is that connected to some kind of storytelling, hovering somewhere between fiction and nonfiction?

SS: My work has always played between these two artificial poles of fiction and nonfiction that have more to do with genre, language, and audience expectation than anything else. This preoccupation with genre, in part, comes out of my decade-

plus working as a video editor on everything from music videos to feature films to advertising to documentary. Now it's quite commonplace to mix genres, but I was at the forefront of mixing documentary with fiction. An example is my film *Meet the People* (1986), where, after a screening, audience members would be angry when they found out, in the credits, that the people who were talking, singing, and confessing directly to the camera (directly to them) weren't "real" but actors. PBS refused to show *Meet the People* on the grounds that it might "alienate" their audience. Amazing how things change.

My ongoing interest in fiction and the fabrication of a character and story is tied to the question of imagining change. How can we imagine a different future world, if all we see are carefully constructed status quo stories and images of the past and present? So many commercial films made by men—which is to say, most films—deal in some way with wish fulfillment. And the wishes they're fulfilling are most often . . . men's. A typical example of this genre is *Whatever Works,* the Woody Allen film that we see being filmed in Chinatown towards the end of *TOUCH,* where the skanky man pushing seventy, played by Larry David, is married to a woman who looks to be about seventeen. This is a story we see over and over—evidently it must be constantly reinforced. Women have rarely taken advantage of this genre of wish-fulfillment stories, and I think we should. I'm not saying we should make bad films with what amounts to a claustrophobic "happily ever after," but I do think it's time we start finding a way to use and abuse this form of storytelling. To make it our own. A great example of a film that does this is Lizzie Borden's astonishing *Born in Flames* (1983), a futuristic fantasy of radical female rebellion set in a post–socialist revolution America.

Fiction has the magic (and at times dangerous) ability to allow us to imagine and therefore make a future that doesn't yet exist. The man in *TOUCH,* as he reconceives his past, present, and future, is constantly fabricating the improbable, which he wisely mixes with the actual. At one point he says, "Words make the impossible imaginable, therefore possible. Improbability is the domain of all outsiders."

I'm interested in a different way of thinking about the future, starting with what should exist, rather than what does or has. You can't make a documentary that shows something that should exist but doesn't. Fiction is good at that.

CB: I wanted to get back to this idea of manufacture and machine. I was intrigued by the quote in *TOUCH* when he says he's building "a machine for looking . . . a machine to teach myself how to see." It seems that the machine is not necessarily the camera but what comes out of the camera. I assume that would include photographs and moving images. There is a lesson in how to see or look.

SS: This idea of a machine to teach someone to see—I didn't mean the camera—a camera doesn't teach anyone to see. It's a tool, a cog in a much larger machine, starting with the eye behind the camera, which draws a line through the camera

to whatever is within the view of the lens: the person, object, or place. I'd expand this machine to include the fabrication of the film itself: the thinking, writing, and juxtaposition of images and sounds that make up the editing. This is the machine the protagonist of *TOUCH* is thinking of, a machine in action, in process. He would also include the audience who will watch the film. The "you" and "us" that is ever-present in his thinking and speaking. This expands into the past, to the image-makers and viewers who have shaped our way of seeing. The future audience—that will continue the discussion long after he is gone—is also part of this machine.

> I have used the camera according to perceptual or cognitive models based on sound rather than light. I think of all of the senses as being unified. I do not consider sounds as separate from image. We usually think of the camera as an "eye" and the microphone as an "ear," but all the senses exist simultaneously in our bodies, interwoven into one system that includes sensory data, neural processing, memory, imagination, and all the mental events of the moment. . . . I happen to use video because I live in the last part of the twentieth century, and the medium of video (or television) is clearly the most relevant visual artform in contemporary life.
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> Bill Viola, "Statements for *Summer 1985*," 1985