

Aesthetics in the Present: Powers of the Moving Image

Jacques Aumont
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The Project

This project, put forward and approved in autumn 2019, was to be initiated in early 2020. For reasons that were both circumstantial (the COVID epidemic that was just beginning) and more fundamental (the intrinsic complexity of the approach), the idea of setting up a transnational group of experts to be consulted on major decisions was quickly abandoned, and management was consolidated around the project leader assisted by two younger, like-minded colleagues from Paris: Emmanuelle André, Professor, Université Paris-Cité, and Antonio Somaini, Professor, Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Apart from a few one-off grants to related undertakings, most of the funding was spent on two activities: recruiting post-doctoral students whose personal projects corresponded to the spirit of the overall project and organising a series of public lectures at the Jeu de Paume in Paris.

Research Undertaken by Post-Doctoral Students

A total of seven grants were awarded: two in 2020-21, two in 2021-22, and three in 2022-23. For the first two years, the grant was for one year; during the last year, the duration was reduced to eight months, in agreement with interested parties, to make it possible to recruit three candidates instead of two.

A brief report of the work completed by these seven young researchers follows, in chronological order, and for the most part taken from their own presentations of their intentions and results. One cannot help but be struck by the high level of diversity of their work, as well as their admirable level of commitment manifest in the subjects they proposed, which directly confront, on aesthetic grounds, contemporary ethical and social problems of great importance. This bears witness to the vitality and the capacity for reception of the aesthetic approach, for which the definition is here vastly extended – without, however, ever denying the tradition which is its own.

Four of these researchers concluded their research year with the finalisation of books or publications. For two of them (Brugidou, Grignard), it extended and further developed their doctoral work, which they thus made publishable. The other two (Anakina, Rotival) are original works that carry previous research further, but that owe a great deal to the Balzan Project grant year. In total, the results can be judged as satisfying, and the majority of these young researchers will continue along their chosen path.

Jérémie Brugidou (2020-21)

Heretical Phylogenies of Cinema: Some Natural Histories

What remains of the bioluminescent heritage in the ontogeny of the cinematographic image? In posing this question, the research starts with two hypotheses. The first: cinema is concerned with an epistemology of our relationship with living things and uses cinematographic means to give an account of natural history. Thus, it represents certain moments in natural history, including the discovery of bioluminescence, in particular in the abyss. The second: cinema is in itself also part of natural history and can be described as part of the processes of living things in their evolutionary dynamics. Therefore, it is bioluminescent in a way. This is what Brugidou calls *heretical phylogeny*, and he addresses the first dimension only insofar as it serves the purposes of the second.

He presents Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist, and Raphaël Dubois, a French physiologist at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, who introduced new imaginary worlds concerning body-environment relationships, which cinema also participated in when it began to emerge as a modern art form. On this basis, he explores the second dimension, which is more directly concerned with his point of departure: what is it about film images that irrevocably links them to the world of living things? He chooses to explore the role of light in this connection, through bioluminescence, while noting that this is not exclusive (sound – especially bioacoustics – could just as easily be studied in this sense).

It is therefore a question of a sort of biomimicry of images. In order not to rush into considering images as “alive” – which is difficult to define – it should be demonstrated that they manifest living proximities by biomimicry on several levels: formal (imitation of forms), functional (imitation of functions), and ecosystemic (imitation of relations). The images are *occupied* (preoccupied and inhabited) by living processes. The analysis focuses on functional imitations, which are mostly based on formal imitations, and sometimes lead to ecosystemic imitations. The starting point is constituted of the functions of bioluminescence as they are described by underwater ecologies; the term “function” should not be understood as implying a reductive determinism. Function remains a necessary condition, but never sufficient: it is the first stage in the transition from the functioning mode to the formation mode – in other words, the creation of form, or the inventiveness of appearances. With the notion of functions, the first analytical grid that biologists use to approach these light systems follows. Brugidou chooses not to limit function to survival (defense, consumption, reproduction), but to adapting to the life of forms; thus, functions of a formal nature, or functions that concern the ways in which we appear, disappear, and show through. He calls these *formations*, and then speaks of formations of *biomedialuminescence* in order to mark the aesthetic shift adopted: inspired by the functions of bioluminescence revealed by marine biology, he determines the aesthetic formations of biomedialuminescence, or in other words, bioluminescence as it is transformed by the processes of media biomimicry. He then defines four formational categories of biomedialuminescence: metamorphosis, contrail, metempsychosis, and dispersion.

Related Publication: J. Brugidou, *Vers une écologie de l'apparition : cinéma et bioluminescence*. Mimesis (2022).

Marion Grébert (2020-21)

Revealing Hidden Lives: Lessons on Disappearance in Moving Images

Grébert's research project is based on this proposal: in the context of our current ecological disaster, our relationship to aesthetics, considered both as a discipline and an ethos, would be determined by the collective conviction that beauty can only be found in what is hidden – camouflaged, invisible, or withdrawn. In the field of film and digital images, this contemporary feature can be seen in two major technological efforts: *filming at night*, or at levels of low light unprecedented in the history of the medium, and *filming the inaccessible*, both in conflict or war zones and in very deep or distant areas like the oceanic deeps or outer space.

Grébert has studied a corpus of experimental and documentary films employing the technologies of nocturnal vision, like *Il n'y aura plus de nuit* by Éléonore Weber (2020), *La Mécanique des flux* by Nathalie Loubeyre (2016), *Ni le ciel, ni la terre* by Clément Cogitore (2015) or again *La Terre, la nuit* (2020), an original Netflix production which is distinguished by its unprecedented use of nocturnal cameras to reveal behavioural phenomena never before observed in certain animals.

By way of example, one particular post-production choice has benefited from an in-depth study: when the sun sets in the savannah, the light is perceived as fading in time lapse, and the details of the environment suddenly become indistinct, as in a hallucination. But gradually, in the same shot, the image lights up and we are able to see it as if in broad daylight. This visual overexposure raises a number of questions, because it engenders an inversion of aesthetic values: during the night human vision is distorted (it is reconstructed during post-production), and the artificiality of filmic nocturnal vision, where all details become visible and digital noise becomes a landscape in its own right, transforming itself into our own vision, even though it is not the vision of anyone in particular. The result is an experiment in movement that becomes *enigma*, both on the technical and poetic level (as is often the case in animal films). Through the devices of the moving images, the powers of sensation and beauty – both of which define aesthetics – come together: it is in the never-before-seen anti-naturalistic animal movement produced by cutting-edge technology within a realistic documentary that we are granted access to a fantastic experience of living beings, in the generic as well as laudatory sense.

Thus, the work consists of making the following proposal more precise through an analysis of the *discipline* of moving images: filming devices, when they show what is empirically invisible to the naked eye or in a geographical position inaccessible without the mediation of a camera, give us *lessons in disappearing*, and these lessons, in our context of ecological catastrophe, can teach us how to live.

Marion Grébert's work has resulted in a final text that has yet to be published.

Alexandra Anikina (2021-22)

Procedural Images

As algorithmic processing enters higher levels of complexity, various operations of automation become more and more opaque, hidden behind the proprietary claims of the platform stakeholders. This brings with itself new questions on autonomy and agency that is contained, partially, or even just as an illusion or perception, within various algorithmic operations. As machinic epistemologies of pattern-finding and predictive analytics become inserted in the cultural production, delegating the decision-making to algorithmic processing, they are always hiding behind images – be it a convenient interface, a robot mascot, or photographs of your dog on social media. And while procedural generation of visual content (such as images produced with machine learning), has been the most publicly discussed example of the visual automation in arts and culture, it seems that the participation of images in the structures of power has been mostly discussed with the focus on their circulation and distribution, as the experiential and affective space of audiovisual consumption was looped into platforms and the algorithms of attention economy. This can be clearly seen in the audiovisual social media networks such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram or Snapchat that thrive by exploiting the audiovisual automatism, scrolling and autoplay functions that are built into contemporary interfaces. The image itself has been both fragmented (into pixels and discrete data) and multiplied (as a mass image).

Why call these images “procedural”? There are several reasons. First, that it highlights the image's algorithmic autonomy, opening it up for questioning and debate. Procedure appears as something that acts in and on the world; it *proceeds*, following its Latin root *procedere* (“to go forward, proceed”).

While any video file is already enabled by the various protocols and *procedures* that render it visible each time it is played, this rendering also has a great possibility of tension between the procedure and the perfect representation: lagging, glitches, compression artefacts. Procedural images underline that the algorithm bends the image to its operation rather than serving as a guarantee of perfect reproducibility and access, as a supportive infrastructure for its representation, expressed in high resolution, smooth playback, and absence of lags. Structuralist-materialist filmmakers, who attended to the experience of watching a film as a complicated assemblage of human and technological elements, already taught us that a change in the technical assemblage also brings change to the space of perception; that the moving image contains a multiplicity of various non-human agencies and forces. Procedural images, like experimental films, refer to, and continuously reconstruct the established modes of image-watching. Algorithmic autonomy, then, becomes one of the operations that challenge the centrality of the human subject by refocusing the experience of watching on material aspects of computation and on the temporality of algorithmic affect. The affective encounter of the human with the image thus constitutes the nexus of my argument. Where algorithmic autonomy enters the process of watching a film, of seeing an image, it also renegotiates the dynamics between the viewer and the image. In the context of the increasing automation of cultural operations, the question of affect in networks of media infrastructure, as well as algorithmic autonomy within vectors of algorithmic governance requires further discussion and an investigation of the political aesthetics of an extended procedural apparatus that involves algorithms, interfaces, temporalities, and software operations.

Secondly, the procedures hiding behind the image's surface include not only technical procedures, but procedures of governance, bureaucracy, surveillance, and other forms of control that assist the discretisation of the individual into a quantified 'digital subject'. As the processes of autonomy and automation attach themselves to images, the questions of governance turn towards the role of the images in the obscuration or misdirection of real-life agencies and powers. The black box of technology is not just an impenetrable cube; it is a clouded thing obscured by multiple layers of governance, networks, infrastructures, misconceptions, proprietary codes, datasets, and imaginaries. The images that serve as figurations for the black boxes are not just representations, but always an additional layer of obscuration and misdirection. That means that negotiating relations of power in the black box necessarily involves dealing with the imaginations, myths and anthropomorphic, racialised, and gendered narratives that surround images of technology.

Finally, and most importantly, procedural images reflect both the procedure and the possibility to break it. Seen through the lenses of artistic and experimental practices, where algorithmic autonomy is intentionally used as an aesthetic device, and where the critical questions are often asked early on, the automation of visual culture presents itself not just as a new model of production, distribution, and circulation, but also as a force that impacts the way human experience images. In the arts, in particular, procedural images that use automation as a deliberate aesthetic device, reveal the algorithmic procedures – either by concealing its automated nature or by revealing it.

The driving question of this project can be formulated as follows: how do we account for the processual, generative, and autonomous effects of algorithmic operation of images, for which representation is often no more than a side effect, yet which is firmly tethered to the human perception and attention, on one side, and to their commercial capture, on the other? Additional questions ensue: how do we discern multiple and ambiguous agencies within and behind the image, hidden in software and algorithmic infrastructures? How can procedural images help us better understand the stakes and the political urgencies of contemporary aesthetic production? What does autonomy bring into the dynamics of temporalities and durations in procedural images, and how are they built into loops of attention economy?

Related Publication: A. Anikina, *Procedural Images: Agency, Affect, Alienation*. Edinburgh University Press (accepted; in press).

Aurel Rotival (2021-22)

Filmic Lactations: Milky Details, Problems of Thought

The details of works of art have been at the centre of a veritable epistemological adventure that has made it possible to rethink the question of the origin of images, their powers, and their role within cultures and civilisations, first with Aby Warburg, and then with Erwin Panofsky. Cinematographic studies have not failed to rally around the methodological potential inaugurated by Warburg's thought, and by making film the successor of the phenomena of 'survival' as seen in painting or sculpture, have welcomed the formation of a disciplinary field in its own right: film iconology.

The first section of Rotival's project is analytical and aims to study the many cinematographic uses of one of these details: milk. From the milk separator of *La Ligne générale* (Eisenstein, 1929) to the nourishing trees of *Garçons sauvages* (Mandico, 2018), the white liquid is a detail that, in all its forms – stagnant, flowing, or gushing – crosses the history of cinema and goes beyond its boundaries, not only temporal, but also cultural and generic.

Beyond the heterogeneity of this filmic galactophilia and, in following in the footsteps of the other arts, the diversity of the chromatic, plastic, and aesthetic possibilities that cinema has offered this liquid, it is a question of postulating that the diegetic and formal narratives elaborated by films are superimposed on latent anthropological or theological scenarios, as also revealed by the survivals of images. The cinematographic recurrence of milky details authorises a formidable and arborescent variety of analyses: by filmmakers, by motifs, and finally by the problems of thought that the films more or less consciously revive in conjuring up this liquid. To graft cinema onto the vast project of cultural history that accompanies Warburg's development of the foundations of iconological analysis effectively suggests that the hermeneutic act of analysis neither ends with the discovery that the narrative, social, or romantic situation that the film documents, nor with the statement of the plastic and syntactic data of the setting in which the author's universe unfolds. The interpreter still has to identify how these details, motifs, themes, or figures are to be understood as the iterative coordinates of a problem to whose history the film is thus connected – and in light of which both film and problem become conceivable anew.

Milk seems to be the ideal detail or propaedeutic instrument for this double ambition, both analytic and methodological. Without a doubt, no other liquid has been interpreted from so many perspectives. As the primordial humour of the human body, it is charged with a strong symbolic meaning that can be found in all cultures and mythologies. Christianity, where milk is in turn a sign of divine mercy and sacrifice, has given this milky symbolism its fullest theological significance. And in borrowing some details from Christian painting, certain films also relaunch the coordinates of fundamental problems which superimpose on their diegetics and narratives a certain number of symbolic procedures which have not disappeared with the secularisation of modern societies.

But milk has also produced countless imaginary representations and social relationships that always construct and determine social connections, sexual differentiation, and the social status of women and mothers. In this respect, it also acts as the ideal detail for questioning patriarchal models of the gaze – cinematographic as well – and the misogynistic structures existing within contemporary societies.

This research project therefore requires a second theoretical and methodological section since it is firmly rooted in the crucial epistemological turn that has become established in film iconology. While the concepts furnished by Warburg proved to be highly operational, they came to us outside any methodological frame of reference. Thus, we still have to think about the mechanisms that instruct and authorise this link that, through singular image problems, goes from film to thought. This twofold research – theoretical and methodological – can draw on the theory of signatures in which Giorgio

Agamben brings to light the theological economy of mystery that the governmental machinery of political modernity has never abandoned, or again the work of Michel Foucault, discovering in the archive the law governing the formation of statements and in archaeology the gesture of method that restores successive problematisations. One can also look, for example, to François Bœspflug's "figurative theology" to find the conditions of possibility for cinematographic discourse which, although it borrows its moral, ethical, or spiritual statements from the literary theology of learned, patristical, or conciliar texts, is not an absolute copy. Or one could even obtain from the "cultural theology" of Paul Tillich data from the analysis of filmic representations which, while depicting cultural facts, are nonetheless modelled on a religious matrix that refers to an ultimate, fundamental meaning. Yet again, one could borrow from the anthropology of gesture crafted by Ernesto De Martino an idea that sees in forms and motifs of mythico-ritual phenomena the sedimentation and transmission of a set of survivals that reveal a certain understanding of the world.

The history of the cinema did not begin with the technical experiences that accompanied its birth at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, if this art owes its expressive and figurative potential to sources of much older historical and cultural reserves, it is also because the details that it elaborates are never only opportunities offered to the analyst as well as the spectator to rethink some of the major issues that have presided over the collective destiny of our species. What these case studies ultimately aim at – above and beyond the singularity of any given work – is to bring to light the methodological principles of a new analytic of the moving image, understood as a symbolic backdrop against which the great procedures that underlie the intelligibility – historical, social, as well as figurative – of the human condition are re-enacted.

Related Publication: A. Rotival, *Lactations filmiques* (tentative title), Presses Universitaires de Rennes (manuscript accepted for publication).

Louis Daubresse (2022-23)

Filmed Tattoos, Filmic Inscriptions

Daubresse's project resumes and further develops the beginning of research he carried out for an article for a journal in the humanities and social sciences, *La Peauologie*, where he addresses the following issues: the sociological dimension of tattoo wearers, who are often marginalised; the choice of framing and lighting as well as the positioning of inked bodies in front of the camera; difficulties in visualizing and describing the patterns drawn on the skin. His postdoctoral research worked on these different axes, but on a more general level, developed an overall vision of the presence of cutaneous inscriptions throughout the history of the cinema in order to consider the small, but logically increasing number of appearances over time as well as the variation of motifs (with some notable recurrences in different cultural areas). A course for undergraduates in film and audiovisual studies, "Enjeux théoriques du tatouage à l'écran", provided welcome support for this research. The course – and the related research – was developed in two stages:

1° The tattoo as a visual detail in cinema (a *detail*, according to Daniel Arasse's definition, is a small part of a figure, an object, or a whole). It remains to be seen what kind of totality it comes from. Is it the local fraction of a carnal whole, the specific fragment of a corporeal whole, the figurative trace of a more abstract whole (a character's experience, memory, psyche, or imagination), or of the film as a whole? The detail can take on an iconographical role, as in *From Dusk Till Dawn* (Robert Rodriguez, 1996), where a tribal tattoo representing flames covering the left arm and nape of the neck of the protagonist refers to the film's visual programme centred on the bursts of braziers or flames. It can also put the interpretation of a film into perspective, as with the motif of the white rabbit appearing briefly at the beginning of *Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), or embody the general scheme of a film as in *The Blade* (Tsui Hark, 1996). In all of these cases, tattoos play an essential role in understanding the work.

2° Sometimes in cinema, tattoos are charged with social meaning, notably recurring in a marine setting, and responding to collective expression and the life of a community (*The Docks of New York*, Sternberg, 1928; *L'Atalante*, Vigo, 1934). Seized by love-hate relationships in Japanese civilization, it frequently shows up in *yakuza* films (integrated with a romantic vision of the mafia in the *revolver-eiga* of the 1960s, becoming poetic expression in the cinema of Kitano before its symbolic properties are abused by a director like Miike) or in the *pinku-eiga* (instrument of beauty on essentially female bodies). Tattoos are equally essential in island environments of the Oceanic continent, as evidenced by some of the films studied – without ever losing sight of the initially aesthetic approach, staging, or telling the story of tattoos always involves an optical, or sometimes even haptic, experience.

During the term of his postdoctoral work, Daubresse proposed two events:

– At the symposium *Le Détail à l'écran : goofs, cameos, easter eggs et autres regards obliques* (Olivier Caira and Réjane Vallée, Université d'Évry), a paper dedicated to the appearance of real actors' and actresses' tattoos (Asia Argento, Danny Trejo) maintained for the purposes of certain films and thus revealing a part of the real within cinematographic fiction, and vice versa, to their disappearance in a process excluding them from films through clothing, make-up, or digital erasure.

– At a day of study entitled *De l'affiche au film, du film à l'affiche* (M. Gignac, L. Guido, J. Martin, Université de Lille), the examination of a certain number of film posters referring to tattoos. The goal was to think about the way in which the posters were organized (especially on the compositional and chromatic level) in terms of the inked-on motifs and to assess their fidelity to the content of the cinematographic works for which they are, in principle, a metonymic approach and/or a synthetic reconstruction. On the majority of posters studied, the back was the preferred bodily surface for cutaneous inscriptions and established itself as an autonomous presence as a support for images. On the other hand, the faces of the tattooed characters could clearly be distinguished, thus allowing the inked motifs to be linked to a physical site that could be more or less identified – never anonymous.

Related Publications:

- an article in *Imaginaires cinématographiques de la peau*, (D. Bracco, dir., éditions Brill) on the film *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000).
- an article in *Droits et cultures*, on criminal tattooing in American films and television series, (forthcoming).
- an article for the acts of the Évry symposium (cf. supra).

Daubresse also has plans for an essay questioning the use and the place of tattoos as a motif in film.

Éline Grignard (2022-23)

Ornament: A Beautiful Concern

To talk about ornament in cinema it is necessary to begin by distinguishing the *ornamental* from “ornament” or “ornamentation”, which refer more to the discursive and formal apparatus of a decorative programme that is anchored in history. On the other hand, the *ornamental* is distinguished from decoration as an ethical-aesthetic regime that determines the function of ornamentation in a relationship of propriety (referring back to the idea of *decorum*). The *ornamental* is first and foremost a dynamic force, or power that is expressed through the different forms it embraces.

The question of ornament has not been dealt with head-on or systematically in cinema; here the hypothesis of an ornamental dynamism to be fully actualized by cinema is put forward. As Susan Sontag noted about camp, studying this form of sensibility requires “a deep sympathy modified by

revulsion”.¹ Such is ornament; in this twofold impulse that it inspires, a critical, formal, and perceptive experience of ornamental forms is expressed.

Thinking about ornament in cinema is not self-evident, so much so that the history of the notion is marked by a phenomenon of marginalisation: ornament is often associated with the decorative, the feminine, the exotic, and the trivial – terms that imply aesthetical and political questions. In the past few years, the renewed interest in ornamental matters in architectural works and design as well as in academics and art history implies a new critical perspective that finds its way into film studies, at the crossroads of the arts.

Rooted in the issues raised in work for a doctoral thesis, the research aims to strengthen the argument on the aesthetic issues of the ornamental regime of images linked to the female figures who define ornament in cinema. Therefore, this research project examines the twofold aesthetic and political charge of ornament, which lies precisely in the problematic affiliation between ornament and the female figure, relegated to the margins of creation in the modern age. It was not until the 1970s, and especially with the Pattern and Decoration movement, that these ornamental practices were reread in light of post-modern feminist theory. By rejecting the strict principles of modernist formalism, women artists – starting with filmmakers – integrated non-Western decorative motifs and forms in their filmmaking practices. Feminist criticism sheds light on the implicit assumption that ornament, understood as a traditionally feminine domain belonging to the domestic or decorative sphere, should be rejected. The research mainly concentrates on the relationships between femininity and ornament in film, adopting an aesthetic, historic, and socio-political approach. By tracing a restricted perimeter around the relationships between decorative practices and femininity, the aim is to envisage a new, “minor” trajectory of cinema that is attentive to its margins.

Related Publication: É. Grignard, *Ornement cinématographique et féminité* (tentative title). Mimesis (manuscript submitted for acceptance).

Rémi Lauvin (2022-23)

The Fuzzy Image: Low-Definition Videosurveillance in Film

The study of the destinies of videosurveillance in film suggests that their lack of precision does not deprive them of creative uses – on the contrary. For example, Martine Beugnet considers the fuzziness of the electronic image as a new breeding ground for visual forms that do not work in a strictly operational perspective, but are aesthetically significant: “Instead of HD or 3D, would it not be in low definition, in the uncertain territories of grainy images that the true plastic richness and sensibility of the digital image unfold?” The work *Search Terms: Basse Def*, directed by Nicolas Thély, lists and theorises the relationships between the digital democratisation of ways of making images and artistic reappropriations of these images in art. In focusing on the use of images from private online communications (especially from webcams), the authors demonstrate that the apparent impoverishment of these images gives rise to a potential for the imagination and the emotions that is all the more important in that images from amateur production are concerned. Finally, very recently, in *La haute et la basse définition des images*, Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini have theoretically mapped the uses of digital images in the arts and other media. Witness to a revolution of the visible, the low-definition surveillance image is thus fraught with fruitful paradoxes: symbol of a digital panopticon *and* an imprecise device, witness to the condition of existence in a network of contemporary images *and* a technique that, made obsolete by algorithmic systems for identifying individuals, is already archaic.

¹ Sontag_Susan_1964_Notes_on_Camp.pdf (monoskop.org)

Building on the findings of a doctoral thesis on the shortcomings of the surveillant gaze in cinema, the aim is to go into greater depth and critique this point of view in light of works that deal with low definition as a poetic and political subject, and in doing so, explore the boundaries between digital art, visual art, and cinema. In fact, the shortcomings of the surveillant gaze currently present a thematic topic of the highest order, which questions issues of power in societies of control. If video surveillance is one of the domains where one can most manifestly observe the “power” granted to the moving image, artists verify, critique, and redirect these powers. Several works have recently suggested a turn in the aesthetic treatment of surveillance images. The films *Dragonfly Eyes* (Xu Bing, 2017) and *Ailleurs, Partout* (Isabelle Ingold and Vivianne Peremulter, 2020) are entirely composed of CCTV footage taken online. Each of these works takes visual approximation as the condition for the possibility of a story: since the video surveillance images are imprecise and reduce bodies to indistinct silhouettes, they make it possible to repeat narratives and take part in fables invented from their fuzzy visual nature. Blurred by the grain, the faces and bodies captured by video surveillance provide ambivalent material that readily lends itself to all of the reconfigurations constructed by editing and dubbing. Bing, Ingold and Peremulter thus demonstrate that these images are faulty because they are rough, in a pure perspective of identification, but vice versa, in the perspective of a formal or narrative invention, they perform well because they are rough images.

Other works support this point: *A Lack of Clarity* (Stefan Kruse, 2019), *Il n'y aura plus de nuit* (Eleonore Weber, 2020), *All Light Everywhere* (Théo Anthony, 2021), and *Nightvision* (Clara Claus, 2021). Each of these films bears witness to the fecundity of rough CCTV images. Kruse and Anthony show that although infinitely accurate on the surface, the cutting-edge equipment designed for night vision and facial recognition actually generates erroneous diagnostics: false recognition, non-detection of certain faces, confusion of identities, non-detection of certain faces, and confusion of identities. The neutralisation of variations between daytime and nighttime lighting, a common theme in the film of Kruse and of Eleonore Weber, suggests another form of confusion: if the gaze becomes more precise in appearance (vision is equally pervasive at nightfall), this nocturnal vision produces a strange derealization in the act of seeing.

It is a question of evaluating the challenges of this new “second-hand cinema” (Blümlinger, 2013). Each of these works actually reconfigures these largely ignored images and offers a new form of audiovisual production. The artists cited do not use the most striking moments of video surveillance (the instant when a device captures a theft or a decisive event) but rather dead time, non-events, images that are *a priori* insignificant. Playing on the torpor inherent in the device (continuous duration, fixed frame), these artists inject energy into images that are *a priori* inert. Accompanied by the artists’ own words (notably in interviews with Clara Claus and Stefan Kruse), one can evaluate the formal richness of low-definition surveillance in cinema.

Lauvin is the driving force behind an international colloquium (with S. Lefait, Université d'Aix-Marseille, and M. Perampalam, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), that aims to bring together researchers from different departments to study “surveillance cultures”. One of the aims is to encourage the encounter between the prolific production of Anglo-Saxon *surveillance studies* and a landscape of French university research that is very active but constellated by fields of visual cultures, civilisational approaches, sociology, and law.

Related Publications: a publication, a writing course studying exclusively videos found online.

Organisation of a Cycle of Conferences

The covid pandemic also seriously delayed the setting up of this “seminar”, which had been planned for the previous year. The seven conferences took place between September 2021 and May 2022, all under the general title **L’esthétique à l’heure du pixel (Aesthetics in the Age of the Pixel)**.

The programme:

The digital “revolution” may not have lived up to the many prophecies heralding the end of the era of cinema as traditionally defined. In fact, cinema has willingly embraced the increased possibilities offered by this transformation of the medium (the very long shot, for example), and people continue to see films, both fiction and documentaries, that are intended for audiences seated in front of a screen (also in the home).

Therefore, the pixel in itself has not upset the economy of film. On the contrary, it is undeniable that it has highly facilitated exchanges between the works of the film industry or experimental cinema and products from other sectors like advertising, the promo, or contemporary art, for example. The styles, forms of presentation to the public, intentions, and even the very material of the images have been expanded and renewed.

This series of seven evenings aim to reflect on this transformation (which is well underway and still in progress) and on what it brings to a rethinking of the aesthetic project applied to the work of cinema. In its most useful definition, aesthetics is not to be confused with a judgement on artistic value, nor with an exercise in taste (of an individual or of a milieu). It is a project of knowledge, which starts from the sensation to better understand what the image proposes, what it invents, what it promises, and what it achieves. It will be examined in this sense.

The seven speakers were selected primarily on the basis of the originality of their contributions. The aim was not to produce a didactic work that sets out already acquired ideas (as the Jeu de Paume museum regularly does), but to present research in progress by those who imagined and initiated it. The steering committee (Aumont, André, Somaini) thus took the responsibility for the disparate nature of the programme, which reflects the present dispersive state of film studies, in particular in terms of its subject matter (which was the aim of this cycle) – a small price to pay in order to be able to listen to cutting-edge researchers engaged in inventing new ways of defining the territory of aesthetics.

The topics covered in the programme:

1. Dysréalisme : le pixel perdu de l’espace latent - Dysrealism : the lost pixel of latent space (Grégory Chatonsky, artist and researcher)

Starting with *Entrée en gare de La Ciotat* augmented by AI, this intervention explored what inductive pixel processing does to the image and to “realism” considered as photographic since the Industrial Revolution. Artistic devices are used to trace the drift of this pixel between recognition, generation, and completion.

2. Cinéma Braille (Érik Bulloet, filmmaker, professor at Beaux-Arts de Bourges)

The principle of perforating analogue film can be linked to the history of codes and writing systems like Morse code, Braille, and player piano rolls – discrete unity of film elements. What about the pixel? Does it still belong to the history of perforations? Can cinema be seen through its code?

3. Sans maîtres. Animation et appropriation dans l’œuvre de Peggy Ahwesh – Without masters. Animation and appropriation in the work of Peggy Ahwesh (Erika Balsom, King’s College, London)

This talk presents recent works by the US filmmaker and artist Peggy Ahwesh. How has her critique of control and authority – long present in this “minor cinema” (as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) – persisted and been transformed in the twenty-first century in the face of digital technologies, but without denying her feminist commitment.

4. Esthétique du pixel et éthique médiatique – Pixel aesthetics and media ethics (Nathalie Delbard, Université de Lille)

In going back and forth between contemporary art and cinema, this session aims to examine the practices of artists who, using the principle of targeted pixelation as employed in the media, introduce the techniques of distancing, reversal, or rupture with news images. From blurring faces to guarantee anonymity to selective acts of violence, the aim is to study the way in which the relationship between the aesthetics and the ethics of images linked to events in recent history is reformulated.

5. L'autonégation de l'image: vers une an-iconologie – The self-denial of the image: towards an an-iconology (Andrea Pinotti, University of Milan)

Immersive virtual environments seem to challenge our shared experience with images: they deny the framework, the support, and the representation. Is one to think that they deny the image itself?

6. La preuve par le pixel – Proof by pixel (Abounaddara collective)

Images of the Arab revolutions have given way to probationary use while their digital origin tends to discredit them. The Abounaddara collective investigates this paradox in considering the future of the image of the Arab forged by the cinema in the age of the Lumière brothers.

7. Le trajet fauve jusqu'à l'image – The wild journey to the image (Jean-Michel Durafour, Université Aix-Marseille)

Cinema has worked on the basis of a twofold innovative understanding of the image (which has historically gone beyond the confines of the cinema): it is not a thing, but a relation. It is mostly situated beyond its relationship with the human being. However, the aesthetic theory of cinema has rarely ventured that far. Today, the digital pixel might be an *investigative tool* for thinking about what cinema has always done. This hypothesis is examined starting with the case of anima metamorphosis.

Specific Actions

A small number of ad hoc grants were provided to some project participants, including travel assistance to enable postdoctoral fellows to attend symposia. Assistance was also provided to the Archives workshop, in collaboration with the Cinémathèque Française and the Université Paris-Cité. The programme for these two years follows:

2020-2021

- 15 October 2020, Bérénice Bonhomme (Université Toulouse-2), *Sur les traces de Persepolis, le chemin des archives*
- 17 December 2020, Mariana Otero (filmmaker), *Regarder et filmer les œuvres, retrouver le regard et le corps de l'artiste*
- [4 February 2021: the lecture of Pierre Berthomieu was postponed due to the COVID pandemic]
- 18 March 2021, Elena Vogman (Berliner Akademie Weißensee), *La Danse des valeurs. Sergueï Eisenstein et Le Capital de Marx*

2021-2022

- 21 October 2021, Sylvie Lindeperg (Paris-1) « *Nuremberg, l'emprise du visible* »
- 16 December 2021, Gilles Mouëllic (Université de Rennes-2) and Antoine de Baecque (École Normale Supérieure, Paris), « *Godard Machine(s)* »
- 10 February 2022, Pierre Berthomieu (Université Paris-Cité), *Unité et accidents dans l'inspiration classique : l'expérience ultime de Duel au soleil (1946)*
- 21 April 2022, Viva Paci (Université du Québec à Montréal), *Archives du vivant 2 : cinéma et taxi-dermie*

Any remaining funds will be allocated for future editorial and publishing activities.