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# Double Lives, Second Chances

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Translated from Spanish by Catherine Grant

*The Double Life of Véronique* (*La Double vie de Véronique*, Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1991) and *Inland Empire* (David Lynch, 2006) are two very important films for me. So it was already likely that I would eventually give in to my temptation to explore their connections in depth.<sup>(1)</sup> At a certain point in my adolescence, Kieślowski's film changed the coordinates of my relationship with cinema. Years later, the viewing of *Inland Empire* marked another turning point in my cinephilia, precisely because of the way Lynch took everything that had fascinated me about the earlier film to an extreme, with his story built on the figure of the double and the theme of second chances, his ramping up in intensity of film style, and his commitment to self-reflexivity as a tool for transformation and knowledge.

What I was not able to imagine, at least up until a few years ago, was that my project to explore these two films together could be presented in the form of a video essay. My experiment in this format is strongly linked to the birth of the website [Transit. Cine y otros desvíos](#). When my colleagues and I founded this Barcelona-based online magazine in August 2009 we decided to take particular advantage of its digital format in order to create a special section dedicated to audiovisual criticism. In this section, we invite our collaborators to make video essays accompanied by written texts (though occasionally we have also published works that combine photography and texts). At that time there were already numerous blogs, as well as some magazines, that worked with variants of traditional criticism, offering different combinations of text and image, giving the latter a role that went beyond that of mere illustration.<sup>(2)</sup> But, at least to my knowledge, at a national level here in Spain there was no magazine pledging such a strong commitment to the critical video essay by devoting this kind of space to it. There were, of course, a few such websites internationally, but we only knew about those afterwards.

However, I think our points of reference for this section came more from the cinema itself than from the ambit of online film criticism: split screens in the films of Richard Fleischer or Brian De Palma, analytical zoom shots by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, the superimpositions and associative editing used by Godard, Eisenstein's montage of attractions, the relationships between text, sound and image in Chris Marker's films, work with repetition and accumulation by Matthias Müller and Christoph

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Girardet ... These are just some of the examples that came to my mind when I started to think about making video essays. Can one articulate thoughts about films with the very tools of the cinema itself, with its own language? This is the challenge that, for some years now, has faced audiovisual criticism. But cinema itself — always way ahead — has long been showing us that this is possible.

In my short experience in this field I have experimented with a very particular video essay format, one based on editing together elements from several films in order to create a singular discourse about them. This is only one way of exploring films audiovisually, among many others, but, personally, I consider it very rewarding and I don't yet feel that it has yet revealed all of its possibilities to me as a method.

When it came specifically to this video essay, even before starting to edit the image tracks from both films, I already had going round in my head, in imprecise but still powerful ways, a series of spatio-temporal parallels between *The Double Life of Véronique* and *Inland Empire*, as well as some visual and musical textures that also indicated that the two films were linked. The first evidence of this is so obvious, and so slight, that it almost sounds like a joke: Poland. The two films unfold in geographical leaps and bounds, moving between two places which are very different and quite distant from one another on the map (France / Poland, California / Poland). The aura of Eastern Europe and of some of its dark mythologies surreptitiously colours both films. The materiality and colour of the transitional spaces (narrow streets, stairways, arches ...) which appear in the Polish part of *Inland Empire* are also remarkably similar to those shown by Kiesłowski in *The Double Life of Véronique*. In these scenes, music operates, almost subliminally, to connect both films. The score by Van den Budenmeyer — the fictitious 18th-century Dutch-Baroque composer and occasional pseudonym of Zbigniew Preisner, who created the music for Kiesłowski's film — is subtly, but intermittently echoed in the *Inland Empire* soundtrack composed by musicians including Polish avant-garde artists Bogusław Schaefer, Witold Lutosławski and Krzysztof Penderecki, and the Klezmer band Kroke.

But what prompted me to begin editing fragments of the films was a very particular visual motif which is treated in a strikingly similar manner in both films: the eye, filmed in close-up, directly from above, in shots used by both directors as a bridge leading us from one of their protagonists to her double (16 s.-37 s.). These were the first images that I edited together. They gave me the key to focus on what I was exploring through my linking of these two films: the representation of the double, or more specifically, the various strategies employed by each filmmaker to figure his female protagonist's discovery of and contact with her other self. In this regard it is interesting that both Lynch and Kiesłowski build their

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stories around journeys towards knowledge in mazes full of clues, concealed messages and hidden passages. It was while I was working with both films that I found an image that the two films share, near to their dénouements, which powerfully summarizes this idea: Laura Dern and Irène Jacob advancing along a corridor, watched by a camera moving tortuously between light and shadow, exploring space, leaving behind doors and abodes ... until the two women reach their destination (5 min. 55 s. - 7 min. 6 s.).

The films also share the need to make their heroines confront their condition as characters, so that they can come to know their other selves. It is especially in this respect that intertextuality becomes a key element in the transmission of knowledge. In *The Double Life of Véronique*, there are two moments in which the truth is, literally, revealed through an intertext: the first occurs during the puppet show, the second in the film's penultimate scene in which Alexandre reads Véronique his story about "two identical girls born the same day, same hour, in two different cities." *Inland Empire* is much more complex because, in it, the three protagonists (actress, character and spectator) form multiple pairs of doubles. This film turns on numerous intertexts. It merges itself so voraciously with them that it takes on the form of a titanic matrix, generating reflections with each small movement, with every moment of contact.

The simultaneous montage of sequences from both films featuring a vision of the other self (1 min. 36 s.-2 min. 56 s.) helps us to become aware of striking similarities between the two films, but also offers evidence of the singularities of each director's particular poetics of doubling. In Kieślowski's film, this scene takes in a square in Krakow, during a political demonstration. In an imposing circular shot, the camera watches Véronique as she watches her double board a bus. Žižek argues eloquently that in Kieślowski's film,

perhaps, we are not dealing with the 'mystery' of the communication between two Véroniques but with *one and the same* Véronique who travels back and forth in time. [...] The camera's circular movement, then, can be read as signalling the danger of the 'end of the world', like the standard scene from science-fiction films about alternative realities, in which the passage from one to another universe takes the shape of a terrifying primordial vortex threatening to swallow all consistent reality. The camera's movement thus signals that we are on the verge of the vortex in which different realities mix, that this vortex is already exerting its influence: if we take one step further — that is to say, if the two Véroniques were actually to confront and recognize each other — reality would disintegrate, because

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such an encounter, of a person with her double, with herself in another time-space dimension, is precluded by the very fundamental structure of the universe. (3)

In Kieślowski's film, circularity — not just in this shot, but also in the form of objects such as the ring or the rubber sphere through which Weronika observes the inverted landscape — is revealed as a symbol of these two parallel universes, which seem about to collide at the scene of encounter, but which finally don't go on to do this.

In *Inland Empire*, however, Lynch goes a step further: here, we do find that disintegration of reality Žižek speaks about, into a world that takes over and ends up devouring the other self. Lynch is a director whose work turns on cutting (4) and the surface separating the film's different worlds is constantly scratched, punctured. Formally, like Kieślowski, Lynch, draws on the curved aesthetic of convex vision. He uses inverted reflections to get us closer to the experience of the double — there are several examples of this in the video essay. But when it comes to representing contact or the encounter with the other a key figure for him is the tunnel: the hole in the sheet, the darkness that engulfs the protagonists and then returns them to the light in another time, another space. Both films deal in depth with the subjectivity of their female characters, but while in Kieślowski's film the journey to knowledge takes place in a borderland between emotion and intellect, in the case of *Inland Empire* it is an eminently physical crossing where all the convulsions and shocks that the story presents are engraved on the tortured bodies of its protagonists.

There is another fascinating aspect that links the two films: the presentation of the figure of the double as a benefactor, someone who makes way for the other, who is sacrificed and dies so that the other may live or be liberated. Thus, the protagonists have a second chance, their *free replay*, as Chris Marker might put it. (5) But every journey of knowledge is, in turn, a coming to awareness and an assumption of responsibilities. Nothing can exempt the characters from having to make decisions. Kieślowski explains it best: "Véronique's constantly faced with the choice of whether or not to take the same road as the Polish Weronika, whether to give in to the artistic instinct and the tension intrinsic in art or to give in to love and all that it involves". (6) If these films demonstrate anything it is that the free replay is not possible: paradoxically, nothing is truly free, or free of charge, in this new game. Marker already warned in his text: "The greatest joy [...]: a second life, in exchange for the greatest tragedy: a second death". (7) And, in *Inland Empire*, there is a phrase we hear repeatedly: "Acts have consequences". (8) I will not deny that part of the fascination I feel for the video essay has

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much to do with this idea of a free replay. In the end, re-editing existing film material also gives a second life to the images but in building new bridges, approaches and relationships between them we also alter their destinies. These images will never be the same for us.

Often, when thinking about video essays, Kent Jones's words at the conclusion of his essay 'Can Movies Think?' come to my mind: "We need to trust in our own intellects rather than in systems of thought, to stop thinking in terms of moral-aesthetic hierarchies, and to start letting Mizoguchi talk to Kurosawa, and letting *Zodiac* talk to *His Girl Friday* (1940). [...] In short, I think we need to stop thinking so much about this thing called 'cinema', and start letting movies think for themselves". (9) In fact, Jones's text, rather than simply a celebration of the new forms of critique fostered by the advent of the Internet, is a reaction against the pursuit of essentialism, the imposition of hierarchies and the assimilation of absolutist moral dogmas that, in many cases, strangle any other critical discourse.

Let movies think for themselves ... Is this the key notion, the great breakthrough that audiovisual criticism presents over written texts? I would be lying if I did not admit that, many times, I have *felt* that way, but at the same time I also realize that this is a completely unfair statement ... I believe if, in audiovisual criticism, we do perceive more strongly that it is the films themselves that are doing the thinking, it is principally for two reasons. The first is the degree of evidence afforded to us by working with the film's own images and sounds since, at the same time as we are creating a discourse about the audiovisual material, this very same material serves as its own proof. In other words, where written texts evoke, video essays invoke (and this is very useful for purposes of analysis, but not only for that). On the other hand, in video essays it is more difficult to discern or delimit where the films we are working with end and where ours begin, not only because we appropriate the images of these films, but also because in doing so we are using the very language and tools of cinema. This fusion, coupled with what Jones calls "a looser approach to aesthetics" (10) — an approximation which comes from the images themselves and which, therefore, frees them from the weight that these "systems of thoughts" project onto them — is what contributes to the impression that our discourse *comes from*, or *inheres in*, the images and sounds themselves.

The above particularities mark, without any doubt, important differences between written essays and video essays. But these distinctions operate in the field of emotions and perception, rather than placing a limit — in a restrictive sense — on the scope of either of these two forms of criticism. What is clear, however, is that in order to let "the movies think for themselves", as Jones argues, first we have to get them thinking. It is the

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action required to get this thinking started that should concern the critic; this action should be performed on all fronts.

I began this essay by saying that cinema itself has begun to resolve the great challenge facing film criticism, but perhaps it is time to say also that if we have so enthusiastically embraced the arrival of the video essay is because we started to create these in our minds long ago. One thing that most of us from the field of writing share is that when it comes to making video essays we are self-taught, with all the shortcomings and the discoveries that this implies. We are not usually professional editors, we have some obvious technical limitations. So it will take us a while to become fully familiar with this practice and to find the same fluency in it that we have in writing. Also, our readers — now also transformed into our spectators — will also have to become accustomed to the workings of audiovisual criticism, to get used to deciphering and decoding the discursive logics created from sounds and images (and, despite what some think, these can be as powerful as writing).

But I believe that this is something really important and seldom discussed: the critical video essay is not only a product of a new technical panorama brought into being by the Internet and digital platforms, it is also, and above all, a product of our desire. Before it was physically possible to create video essays, we imagined them and traced them out in our writing. I can say that, personally at least, the majority of the texts that interest me contain traces of this desire, as if they were omens of it. And I believe that this is due to the fact that, deep down, no matter how many differences each of these approaches present, the good critic is always going to seek out one thing above all others: the need to make things *appear*, to conjure them, whether in the mind of the reader or in the eyes of the spectator.

### **Endnotes:**

(1) The title of this text, and that of the accompanying video essay, was borrowed from Annette Insdorf's *Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski* (New York: Hyperion Miramax Books, 2002). A different, shorter version of this essay appeared first in Spanish (as 'Dobles vidas, segundas oportunidades') in *Transit. Cine y otros desvíos* on August 12, 2011. Online at: <http://cinentransit.com/inland-veronica/>.

(2) For a comprehensive overview of the changes that criticism has undergone with the advent of digital platforms I recommend the following discussion: Jose Manuel López, 'Internet o las nuevas fronteras tecnológicas de la crítica', *Transit. Cine y otros desvíos*, August 2011. Online at: <http://cinentransit.com/critica-digital/#puntoocho>.

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(3) Slavoj Žižek, 'The Double Life of Véronique: The Forced Choice of Freedom', The Criterion Collection, February 1, 2011. Online at: <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1733-the-double-life-of-veronique-the-forced-choice-of-freedom>

(4) For more on this idea see Paula Ruíz Arantzazu, 'Las Venus abiertas de David Lynch', *Transit. Cine y otros desvíos*, August 12, 2011. Online at: <http://cinentransit.com/lynch-venus/>

(5) Chris Marker, 'A Free Replay (Notes on *Vertigo*)', *Positif*, No. 400, (June 1994): 79-84. Online at: <http://www.chrismarker.org/a-free-replay-notes-on-vertigo/>.

(6) Danusia Stok (ed.), *Kieślowski on Kieślowski* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).

(7) Marker, 'A Free Replay (Notes on *Vertigo*)'.

(8) Many of these thoughts about responsibility were inspired by reading Slavoj Žižek, 'La teología materialista de Krzysztof Kieślowski,' in *Lacrimae rerum: Ensayos sobre cine moderno y ciberespacio* (Barcelona: Debate, 2006), as well as by an unpublished conference paper by José Antonio Palao Errando. Based on an analysis of *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and several films by David Lynch, Palao defends the interesting hypothesis that under the narrative construction of these films lies an 'ethical reaction to the interactivity and universal availability of the story'.

(9) Kent Jones, "Can Movies Think?" *Rouge*, 12, 2008. Online at: <http://www.rouge.com.au/12/think.html>. Originally published in Spanish translation, in *Cahiers du cinema. España* (October 2008).

(10) *Ibid.*.

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