return

PROPOSITION FOR A STUDY OF CINEMA AS SNOW:
Immanence Deconstruction of Us (Rouzbeh Rashidi, 2011)

Read the original french version

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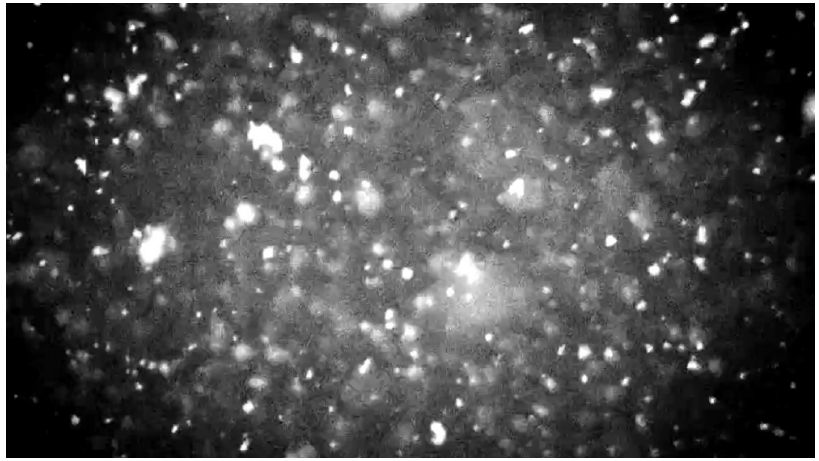
(May 2014)

"Beyond the drawing, take the dynamism of the miniature. What animation one gets from the story by following the small, the nascent movement of the minuscule being acting on the massive being!" - Gaston Bachelard [2]

"When, suddenly and for the first time, there are brought to light millions of fragments, flakes, roots, worms and small creatures previously buried." - Francis Ponge [3]



As we write the history of a mountain from a snowflake, so one might consider the study of a film from its smallest plastic unit - the pixel. A study of cinema as snow takes this tiny starting point for an interrogation of the medium.

In 1993, Jacques Derrida introduced the concept of hauntology to denote a new science that would *"combine ontology, eschatology and teleology."*[4] Starting with the statement taken from Hamlet that *"time is out of joint"*, he interprets it as *"time is out of joint. Everything, starting with time, appears disordered, unjust or maladjusted"*[5] to construct a reflection on the timeliness of Marxism. Hauntology comes to interrogate obsessive fear, phantoms, the spectres that cross centuries, the past come back to haunt the present, *"'experience' of the past as the future"*.[6] In the '90s, the term was taken up to designate an artistic current occupied with unearthing phantoms in art. A movement in music[7] came along to avail of this science of waking the dead. 'Hauntologist' musicians made music using old vinyl LPs and cassettes. Through working with the plasticity of recordings, they reveal the roughness, the imperfections and the degradation of the original material. They sought to bring forth the spirits that lay dormant in these works on the principle of *"deconstructing and reconstructing what is familiar and harmless to suggest that each detail of existence leaves fragments, invisible to the naked eye, that media can capture"*.[8] Voices are thus revealed, ghostly, as if returning from among the dead.

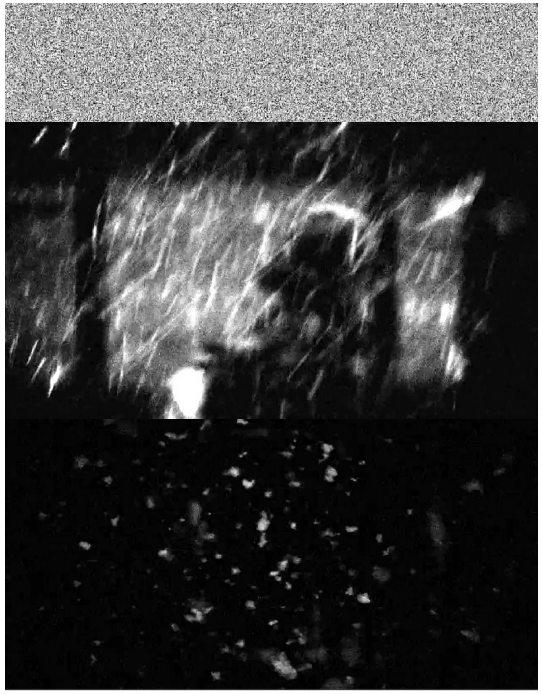
2

Born in 1980 in Tehran, Rouzbeh Rashidi emigrated to Ireland in 2004. At the head of Experimental Film Society[9], an organization based in Dublin dedicated to producing and disseminating experimental films, he champions a new digital cinema. A cinéaste plasticien or 'cinemist' like José Val del Omar, Rashidi has created a complex and protean body of work, poetic and mysterious, largely unexplored. An obsessive film practitioner, extremely prolific, he has already made some seventy films, thirty of them features.

In *Immanence Deconstruction Of Us* (2011), his tenth feature and only '*found*' film, he took images from home movies (about two thirds of the shots in the film) which he mixed with his own images shot in a snowy park (the remaining third). Starting from a visual game centring around a minuscule unit supposedly shared by the images (grain-noise-snow), *Immanence* proposes to decompose/recompose human bodies according to the technical possibilities of the digital medium. Meteorological time (the appearance of snow) allows the revisitation of the past buried in the recycled images.

A SYMPHONY OF NOISE - GRAIN IN THE SNOW

Mixing bodies and snow in a poetic dance, *Immanence Deconstruction Of Us* provides a choreographic variation around the notion of noise.[10] A formal complicity is immediately established between the snow falling from the sky, the grain of the home movies and the digital noise swirling in the image. From the credits on, times intertwine. The titles are inscribed on the snow of a television screen, then it snows in a park, and through analogy of form and movement, the snow fallen from the sky and the digital noise produced by the camera form dancing points in the image. Snow turns into noise and noise into snow. Rashidi films the snow flakes so closely that they blend into the grain of recycled images. The passage from his own images to those he recycles is less evident, the two image systems come to merge, past and present meeting in a symphony of noise, played before our eyes by a noise musician of images. To arrive at this confounding effect, Rashidi uses the techique of re-filming: he projects the images for the first time on a wall, then refilms from a TV, then he refilms them in conditions of under-exposure to push the whites into snow. Strictly speaking, it's noise that Rashidi describes as grain when he says *"I wanted an extremely grainy imagery and a very very low hum sound. The film is almost silent but not quite. Only in the last five minutes I have sound which I made it myself."*.[11] The camera becomes a snow gun and the technical possibilities of recording are pushed to their limits – Rashidi wants to *"push the camera's capabilities to their extremes"*[12], according to a principle equivalent to sound saturation in music. In this way, the medium reveals itself to itself – noise reveals the ontological nature of the digital camera.



Images contrasting snow and blacks.

But noise is also the noise of the soundtrack. Very close to so-called experimental music in the *'lowercase'* sense of the term [13], this consists of white noise (technically created by breathing on the microphone), enhanced by moments of light acoustic details. The sound of the filmmaker watching his images or the soft sound, like a sound smothered, of snow falling? *"The silence of the snow is so primordial that it launches the imagination towards 'the appalling silence of infinite solitudes' and the interstellar procession of cosmic images"* suggests Gilbert Durand in his Psychoanalysis of Snow: *"Snow is first revealed to the awakening city dweller as a deprivation, as a gene that steals the familiar sounds and transforms them by abolishing the soundtrack of the ordinary sound effects of the universe. Silence is deprivation in the monotonous and chatty sense of the world. That's why snow is so often compared to cotton, to something that absorbs and suffocates."*[15] Very low, the film's soundtrack is background noise, a slight rumbling that pushes us to turn up the volume to maximum. The amplified breaths eventually mingle: we no longer distinguish what comes from the movie from what is generated by our own speakers - the technical appliances are intertwined. This work of listening draws attention to the slightest murmur – visual and audible noise changes into a gentle heartbeat, the film's rhythm becomes our own rhythm.

Considered in terms of Marshall McLuhan's distinction between *'cool'* and *'hot'* media, digital cinema (at least as it is used by Rashidi) would be a very cold medium – and not only by way of preserving the analogy of temperature with snow. McLuhan distinguished media depending on the amount of information they provide to their audience. Media are *'cold'* when they offer very little information and require people to pay attention and listen carefully to *'complete'* the message.

"The hot media, in contrast," continues McLuhan, *"leave their audience with few blanks to fill in or supplement. Therefore, they discourage participation or completion while cold media, by contrast, favour it. Therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects to a cool medium like the telephone."*[16] This definition[17] may well suit the digital cinema of Rashidi: personal films, very hermetic, privilegeing the dreamlike to high definition images and remaining *'very cold'* towards the viewer who is engaged in the important work of deciphering. In *Immanence Deconstruction Of Us*, contrast, taken to extremes (very white

whites, very black blacks), finally provokes a struggle between immaculate whiteness and the darkness of the night, digital noise and the muteness of snow. It may be that this, *"plastic equivalent of silence"*[18], throws a deadly coldness on the passing silhouettes.

Anonymous hauntological bodies.

GHOST DANCE – HAUNTOLOGICAL BODIES

If noise is the breath of the camera, which gives breath to images and provides them with an inner life, this is perhaps to do with listening to the dead[19]. As provoked by Rashidi, it amounts to a deconstruction of images that finishes by rendering bodies ghostly. Breaking with the usual spirit of home movies: the wish to immortalize the image of a certain happiness, bodies floating, both present and absent, thrown into a disordered temporality. It floats. Derrida says, *"Es spukt. That is to say: it haunts, it returns, there's a ghost in there, it smells of the living dead – manor, spiritualism, occult science, roman noir, obscurantism, atmosphere of threat or anonymous immanence."*[20] The home movie thus finds itself by default taken by a process of throwing into doubt ordinary happiness[21].

Phantasmal body deconstructed and reconstructed around the pixel.
The low definition ends up diminishing the human in favour of the image.

Adam Harper, for whom *"hauntology is not an artistic or musical genre but an aesthetic effect, a way to read and give value"*[22] precisely distinguishes, in the spirit of Barthes[23], two layers of hauntological image. The first, which he calls *"idealization"*, is the image of a paradise (lost), the *"postcard"* view that suggests hope, trust, love, happiness, etc. But the second layer - the flip side of the coin - is the presence of obvious damage to the original image. This is the hauntological effect, which comes to contradict or break the original feeling of comfort. The first and second layers merge: the first level (the ideal) can only be seen through the second (the effect). Consider an example. This photograph [24] (below) could be the picture of perfect happiness: a family together, smiling children, a house in the countryside on a sunny day. But, on second glance, something hinders this impression, it becomes hard to believe in their peacefulness. Why? Because happiness (the first level of the image) is questioned by the manifestation of a hauntological effect (the

second level): the sun, shining through the branches, forms patches of light and shadow on each face; in addition, the photograph is poorly exposed and a defect in the film has caused alterations in the image. Thus begrimed, these innocuous faces become charged with a mysterious and accusatory sense. They are almost turned into grinning ghosts. In this case, the hauntological effect is contained in the same text (here a picture). This is an unexpected effect born of chance. But that magic power can also be sought out.

By adding noise to recycled images, *Immanence Deconstruction Of Us* works on the same principle - but this time the hauntological effect is '*called*' by Rashidi, who adds a second level of meaning to the image by its refilming. Thus repeatedly '*copied*', it loses its definition, especially as the pixels are mixed to noise. This technical interference confuses body and environment in comparing the narrative of the film with the technique of its production.

Images of vampires? Photograph of Rashidi in 2011 (above) and from Pere Portabella's Cuadecuc, 1971 (below).

The original merry bodies become strange, strangers to themselves, their gestures ambiguous, their identity uncertain. *"For there to be a ghost,"* said Derrida, *"we need a return to the body but a body more abstract than ever. We create a ghost by giving him a body. Not by returning him to the living body from which ideas and thoughts are torn but by incarnating these in another artifactual body, a prophetic body, a phantom of the mind."*[25] Thus refilmed, the bodies in home movies become artifactual bodies, transformed as if by a magic metempsychosis into rashidian bodies[26]. Figured as among humans, they are still unfinished bodies, floating and disappearing, as if thrown into a fuzzy, dreamlike world. The snow almost reaches the point of sublimation - the state in which the water becomes gas.

Ambiguity of bodies reduced to the state of dots.

In an astonishing paradox, digital air restores life to these archaic[27] bodies while causing their plastic disintegration. The sound infuses life into the images but recalls at the same time the bodies' condition of being images, their flesh defeated, reduced to the level of small dots. Deconstructed according to the logic of the pixel, they are nothing more than clusters of floating points on the surface of a photographic image, Rashidi's cinema becoming '*atomic*'. Among the shots of the snow in the park, one sometimes has the impression of no longer being able to properly distinguish these oblong shapes, vaguely anthropomorphic. *"The subject that haunts is not identifiable"* Derrida again remarks. *"We cannot see, locate, stop any form, one cannot decide between hallucination and perception, there are only displacements, one feels watched by that which we do not see."*[28] In freezing a frame (a freezing), one can only discern abstract forms, white and black spots cast on each other, but no more people. It is only in the movement that they come alive. Cinema articulates and feeds them. The bodies seem an entrenched part of their dynamic force, that which is transferred to the image by means of noise. In other words: life as manifest in the digital image may be cut off from the human body. Yet without images in movement they would not have any chance of resuscitation.

REUSE - REFILM - VAMPRISM AND REPETITION

Reuse - refilm, two gestures of reviving images. Reuse to summon up the memories of others, to bring back memories to the present. Refilm as if reiterating for a second time the memory; put a layer over the images, appropriating some of the body, but ultimately dismiss their previous life. The refilming is a vampiric gesture. A kiss on the neck ... that kills. Which kills and gives life. As the human bitten by a vampire is reborn in the guise of his murderer. The body dies to resurrect. Refilmed, the bodies of these home movies die to their former life and are reborn in a new form which is better suited to the eye and sharp teeth of Rashidi. There is something of the fantastique[29] in this work. It could even be that these cinematographic gestures are a form of exorcism. *"Exorcism conjures evil in irrational ways, and according to magical practices, mysterious or mystifying"*[30] says Derrida. But Rashidi's practice is somewhat mysterious. Comparing himself to Dr. Frankenstein who *"constantly experimented with his monster"*[31], he sees the cinema *"not only as images of memory, but also as memory images. I treat images as ghosts because I believe that cinema is nothing but ghosts, phantoms and spirits. "*[32]

Refilming reused images, somehow this is repeating again. To allow to re-see already dead bodies is to reactivate the memory of their death. We define hauntology as a '*science to wake the dead*' and Rashidi confronts the story of a mourning that never took place, that of images.[33] Derrida said: *"There is always a work of mourning in this incorporation of the interior, and death is part of the programme."*[34] However, the ambiguity of these bodies[35] is glaring – are they depicted as still-living, as departed or as ghosts? For Rashidi, haunted by the images, his own and those of others, are reusing and refilming gestures of conjuration or lament? Is it to exorcise the past in order to face the present or is it to obsessively repeat?[36] If by the apparition of a parasitic noise, the gesture of refilming helps to confuse bodies present with those past, to make ghosts of one as of the other, the question of the ambiguity of the living in Rashidi's cinema is posed.

Digital noise comes to intensify the feeling of nostalgia created by the snow. Derealizing the images, he finally lets them fall on the side of reverie. Rashidi creates a dreamlike world, away from the concerns of modern society, a world of *"prophetic bodies"* and *"phantoms of the mind."*

Floating, phantasmal bodies (reframed images).

Immanence Deconstruction Of Us precipitated the encounter between the weather and time. Weather (snow) queries technical time (expressed in the digital/analogue relationship) from an analogy of form and movement encountered between tiny elements: snow, noise and grain. The research of this noise image mixed with climatic conditions allows the film to achieve a digital poetry which endowed the new medium with a song of its own. Similarly, a study of film as snow would examine connections between images and films starting from their smallest common denominators - the pixel or grain, considered for their discursive virtues and considered in relationship with the world.

Immanence Deconstruction of Us **EFS Video-On-Demand**

1 This text follows a presentation created with Boris Gobin and Thomas Wahl as part of a seminar on the reinvestment in experimental cinema given by Nicole Brenez at the University of Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle.

2 Gaston Bachelard, La poétique de l'espace, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989. p. 154

3 Francis Ponge, *"Introduction au galet"*, in Proèmes, in Œuvres complètes I, Paris: Gallimard (La Pléiade), 1999, p. 203

4 Jacques Derrida, Spectres de Marx: l'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale, Paris: Galilée, 1993, p. 31

5 Ibid., p. 129

6 Ibid., p. 16

7 Readers might be particularly interested in the work of William Basinski, James Leyland Kirby alias The Caretaker, Boards of Canada or the labels Ghost Box Music and Mordant Music. To the best of our knowledge, there is no equivalent movement in cinema, nor is there a study that proposes the question of the existence of such a cinema.

8 Benjamin & Ulrich Fogel, *"L'hantologie: Trouver dans notre présent les traces du passé pour mieux comprendre notre future"*, in Playlist Society, June 2012, p.10 - http://www.playlistsociety.fr/2013/10/notre-essai-sur-lhantologie-en-telechargement-gratuit/19219/

9 Official website of Experimental Film Society: http://www.experimentalfilmsociety.com

10 The distinction between noise and grain is perhaps necessary. Noise is the appearance of parasitic information within a digital image; grain is the minuscule deposit of silver crystals on the surface of the celluloid image. With the terms thus defined, noise can only concern digital cinema whereas the word 'grain' is used for celluloid film.

11 Rouzbeh Rashidi, personal correspondence, January 26th & 27th 2014.

12 Ibid. *"In both of them I shot in a very under-exposed situation in order to put pressure on the digital and create more grain."*

13 Lowercase is an extreme form of minimalist music where tiny, very weak or often inaudible sounds are amplified to extreme levels (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lowercase)

14 The sound produced by the 'snow' effect on a television is a good example of white noise. The expression 'white noise' can also be a curious and beautiful name for snow.

15 Gilbert Durand, *"Psychanalyse de la neige "* [1953] in Champs de l'imaginaire, Grenoble: Ellug, 1996, pp. 12-13 And Veronique Martin, in the spirit of M. Durand, compares Rashidi's filmmaking to ambient music: *"What it does is that it tunes our ear to a lower level of stimulation and makes us actually much more sensitive to subtle changes and detail. Try to listen to silence, you'll understand. Rouzbeh Rashidi's film does just that. It removes us from the massive overload of sounds and images that a hectic life provides, from the ridiculous amount of stimulation offered by most types of entertainment — in particular by mainstream cinema. It effectively retunes us to a frequency that is closer to our deep, natural rhythm."* (Veronique Martin, Closure of Catharsis, November 3rd 2011 - http://rouzbehrashidi.com/news/?p=1864)

16 Marshall McLuhan, Pour comprendre les média. Les prolongements technologiques de l'homme [Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, 1964], trad. de l'anglais par Jean Paré, Paris : Seuil, p. 41

17 We are deviating somewhat from McLuhan's considerations but keeping the analogy of temperatures, while pushing digital into *'cool'* and film into *'hot'*. The crackling on the celluloid soundtrack, its deterioration with time and inflammability, can only extend to abysmal silence, the cynical and calculating chance of digital.

18 Ibid., p14

19 Derrida inscribed his work in the spirit of Benjamin: *"This being-there with spectres would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of heritage and generations (…) We must speak of the phantom, see the phantom and see with him, otherwise no ethics, no politics, revolutionary or not, would be possible and thinkable and just that don't recognize those who are no longer here or those presently living who are no longer here, who are already dead or not yet born. No justice appears possible or thinkable without the principle of a responsibility beyond one towards those presently living, concerning that which disjoints the living present, before the phantoms of those who are not yet born or already dead, victims or not of wars, political violence or exterminations carried out due to nationalism, racism, colonialism, sexism, etc, the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or all forms of totalitarianism."* - Derrida, op. cit., pp. 15-16

20 Derrida, Ibid., p.216

21 Such a work was already undertaken in a more radical manner by the American filmmaker Phil Solomon in two films made in the '90s: *Snowman* and *Remains To Be Seen*, which also use home movies. Solomon doubles the deconstruction of images with remarkable work on the sound, genuine hauntological music that mixes ghostly murmurs, gusts of wind and banging doors. In *Remains To Be Seen*, he succeeds in fusing images starting with the motif of grain, working on the body to create a pointilliste cinema in the literal sense of the term. In *Snowman*, the snowfalls mingle with faults provoked on the film itself.

22 Adam Harper, *"Hauntology : The Past Inside the Present"*, in Rouge's Foam, October 27th 2009 - http://rougesfoam.blogspot.fr/2009/10/hauntology-past-inside-present.html : *"Hauntology is not a genre of art or music, but an aesthetic effect, a way of reading and appreciating art."*

23 Roland Barthes distinguishes two levels in the photographic image: '*studium*' and '*punctum*'. He says: *"The second element (the punctum) comes to break the studium. This time, it is not me who seeks it (as my sovereign consciousness is invested in the field of the studium); rather, it leaves the scene, like an arrow, and comes to pierce me. A word exists in Latin to describe this wound, this piercing, this mark made by a pointed instrument: this word appears even better because it includes the idea of punctuation and the photographs I speak of are in effect as if punctured, sometimes even dappled, with these noticeable points: these marks, these wounds are precisely these points. The second element, which comes to destabilize the studium I therefore call the punctum. Because punctum is also: wound, little hole, little speck, little cut – and also a throw of the dice. The punctum in a photo is the chance which, in the photo, points at me (but also bruises me, stabs me)."* - Roland Barthes, La Chambre claire. Note sur la photographie, Paris: Gallimard, 1980, pp. 48-49

24 Anonymous photograph taken from the blog of Adam Harper.

25 Derrida, op cit,. pp 202-203.

26 Bodies of Rashidi's characters (not only in this film but in all of his cinema) are always ambiguous and enigmatic, caught up in a process of fundamental doubt at the level of their existence.

27 in the first place because Rashidi found these home movie images on the site archive.org and that without their prior digitization, they would no doubt be consigned to forgetfulness.

28 Derrida, op cit. p.216

29 Rashidi: *"I am really interested in creating another worldly universe, somewhere between dreams, nightmares, fantasy and the history of cinema which is nothing but ghosts."*

30 Ibid., p. 84

31 Rasidi, personal correspondence, October 6th 2013: *"I see cinema as a laboratory of experimentation so I keep on testing and make films all the time. Just like Dr Frankenstein and his monster."*

32 Rashidi, personal correspondence, January 26th and 28th 2014: *" I treat the images as ghost as I believe cinema is nothing but a ghosts, phantoms and spirits (…) basically cinema as not only images of memory but memory of images as well."*

33 Rashidi, *"Unfinished Films"* May 2014: *"I have always felt that the films I am making are so incomplete and unfinished; it is impossible to wash my hands of them. The footage and rushes I have accumulated through the years keep coming back and want to deceive me. There is no satisfaction with filmmaking and cinema (for me at least), you have to be tormented and haunted by the images you created for the rest of your life!"* http://rouzbehrashidi.tumblr.com/post/85054263184/unfinished-films

34 Derrida, op. cit., pp 202-203

35 We speak here of the bodies in the home movies as much as those filmed by Rashidi in the park.

36 Or in Søren Kierkegaard's terminology, are both reuse and refilming in the order of repetition and remembering? Because if they are both the same gesture, they go in opposite directions. Recollection goes towards the past whereas repetition is a way of living in the present and moving forward. Kierkegaard says: *"Repetition and recollection represent the same movement but in opposing senses; because when one remembers being, it is a backward repetition. On the other hand, when one remembers true repetition, one moves forward. This is why, when it is possible, repetition makes men happy and recollection makes them unhappy." "True repetition consists in seeing each morning the face of your spouse and experiencing the same feeling as the last time you saw it."* Søren Kierkegaard, La répétition. Essai de psychologie expérimentale [Gjentagelsen, 1843], Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003, pp. 15-31

Translation by Maximilian Le Cain
(May 2015)

return

Home