

Le film sur l'art

Entre histoire de l'art et documentaire de création



sous la direction de
Valentine Robert, Laurent Le Forestier et François Albera

Histoire de l'art et films sur l'art : entretien avec l'historienne de l'art et réalisatrice Judith Wechsler

Nous ne pouvions prétendre à un état de la question sur le film sur l'art sans le témoignage direct des créateurs et conservateurs contemporains de cette production. Une table ronde réunissant les directeurs d'institutions et festivals qui collectent ou diffusent le film sur l'art a pris place à la Cinémathèque suisse le 16 avril 2011 (filmée et publiée en ligne en sept volets¹). La parole était donnée à : Gisèle Breteau Skira, fondatrice de la collection des films sur l'art du Centre Pompidou, de la Biennale internationale du Film sur l'art et de la revue *Zeuxis*²; Pascale Raynaud, responsable de la programmation des Journées internationales

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- 1 – <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iA74JhdaADM> (partie 1); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLKgtCsNnWg> (partie 2); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC1sltzTfPI> (partie 3); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kK9MsA0ss0> (partie 4); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZv27XaCNqM> (partie 5); http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hwP8Fxxv4TA (partie 6); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUfTM6nsCMY> (partie 7).
 - 2 – Cette revue, qui connut 33 numéros entre 2000 et 2007 (et une édition-recueil sous le titre BRETEAU-SKIRA G. [dir.], *Les Entretiens de Zeuxis : Peinture et cinéma*, Paris / Biarritz, Atlantica-Séguier, 2010), était conçue comme une continuation de la Biennale, en tant que plateforme de discussion et valorisation du film sur l'art. La Biennale avait elle-même été développée dans le prolongement de la publication de l'index raisonné de la collection de films sur l'art du Centre Pompidou : BRETEAU-SKIRA G. (dir.), *Abécédaire des films sur l'art moderne et contemporain 1905-1984*, Paris, CNAP / Centre Georges-Pompidou, 1985.

du Film sur l'art et cofondatrice (avec Philippe-Alain Michaud) de la collection des films sur l'art du musée du Louvre; Antonie Bergmeier, conservatrice et chargée de production au MAC/VAL, centre d'art contemporain qui coproduit des films de et sur les artistes, en particulier les films qui documentent et conservent les installations et les performances, et qui sont aujourd'hui presque consubstantiels de l'œuvre d'art³. Judith Wechsler, qui s'est jointe à la table ronde et qui a présenté ses films dans une séance spéciale⁴ de la rétrospective « Le film sur l'art. Approches d'un genre hybride⁵ », actualise un double statut particulièrement pertinent au regard de la problématique de cet ouvrage, étant à la fois historienne de l'art et réalisatrice de films sur l'art. Son témoignage permet, à l'issue de ce volume, de personnaliser et de donner corps à cette intersection entre histoire de l'art et documentaire de création.

Au gré d'une double carrière construite en parallèle et dans une interaction permanente, Judith Wechsler a exploré l'art aussi bien par les voies académiques que cinématographiques, qu'elle considère complémentaires. « Les historiens de l'art et les réalisateurs devraient développer une interface », écrit-elle en 1991 dans un essai retenu en introduction du répertoire de films sur l'art établi par le Metropolitan Museum et la Fondation Getty : « La rencontre des moyens académiques et cinématographiques donne la possibilité d'améliorer son "œil", d'aiguiser l'expérience visuelle et analytique. Le film peut offrir un chemin vers l'œuvre d'art plus immédiat que certaines publications⁶. »

• 3 – Freddy Buache, fondateur de la Cinémathèque suisse, était au premier rang des spectateurs et a contribué à cette discussion à laquelle avait également été convié René Rozon, fondateur du festival international du film sur l'art (FIFA), et qui fut modérée par le professeur d'histoire de l'art Philippe Kaenel.

• 4 – Aux côtés de l'artiste suisse Hannes Brunner qui présentait son film *Drivers Comment*, Judith Wechsler a montré et commenté des extraits de ses films *Jasper Johns: Take an Object. A Portrait 1972-1990* (coréalisé avec Hans Namuth, 1991), *Harry Callaban* (1994), *Honoré Daumier : il faut être de son temps* (1999) et *Le Dessin des Nymphéas* (coréalisé avec Jean-Paul Fargier, 2006). Cette séance était modérée par Gilles Mouëllic, et fut elle aussi filmée et publiée sur le canal YouTube de la Cinémathèque suisse en plusieurs volets :

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6Xcq_JzpLM (partie 1);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6dqB5E5Fplc> (partie 2);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRoKS1dU6oo> (partie 3);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6Ngg1C2XqQ> (partie 4);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPTd5dQ65Dw> (partie 5);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxeKVz5Af3g> (partie 6);

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUA9mag8_Us (partie 7);

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYIWIDQuhWE> (partie 8).

• 5 – Voir les détails dans la filmographie et dans les remerciements.

• 6 – « *Art historians and filmmakers need to develop an interface [...] in translating from one medium to another, there is the possibility of enhancing the experience of looking under different circumstances. Film can offer a more immediate conduit to the art object than can most publications* » (WECHSLER J.,

Elle expérimente cette comparaison des approches dès son premier film, réalisé sur l'objet même de sa thèse de doctorat : Cézanne. Cette complémentarité sera continuellement entretenue par Judith Wechsler, qui explore les mêmes objets à la fois par l'écriture et l'enseignement de l'histoire de l'art (qu'elle a notamment exercés au MIT, à Harvard, à l'université Paris X-Nanterre et à la Tufts University) et par la réalisation cinématographique (qui fut l'occasion de collaborations avec des cinéastes et créateurs tels que Hans Namuth, Charles Eames ou Richard Leacock). Le meilleur exemple concerne peut-être l'œuvre de Daumier, sur laquelle elle sort la même année un livre, *Le Cabinet des dessins Daumier* (Flammarion, 1999), et un film, *Honoré Daumier : Il faut être de son temps* (1999, 52'). La méthodologie croisée s'était nouée dès 1977, date qui la voit à la fois collaborer au film *Daumier, Paris and The Spectator* et présenter dans un colloque à l'université de Californie une conférence intitulée « Daumier and the Spectator ». Le dialogue ne s'est jamais tari, et sa conférence faite à l'INHA en 2008 intitulée « Filming Daumier » ou son article « Movement in the Drawings of Daumier: Still and still moving » (1993) expliquent combien la vision filmique a façonné l'œil de l'historienne de l'art. La réciproque est vraie et s'est cristallisée dans sa série de films sur l'art *The Painter's World: Changing Constants of Art from the Renaissance to the Present* (réalisée entre 1984 et 1989 pour les chaînes de télévision WGBH-TV [Boston] et Channel 4 [Londres]), pour laquelle elle a convoqué nombre d'historiens d'art en tant que conseillers (à l'instar de Leo Steinberg, Linda Nochlin, Henri Zerner, Daniel Robbins et James Ackerman) afin de mieux caler sa caméra sur le « stylo » de l'histoire de l'art⁷.

L'interview qui suit vise à approfondir notre connaissance de cette pratique croisée de l'historienne-réalisatrice, en partant de ces lignes qu'elle a écrites il y a dix ans et qui définissaient sa manière de concevoir les intersections et écarts qui conjoignent et séparent histoire de l'art et films sur l'art :

« Filmmakers convey subjects not only by the choice of images and texts, but in the “look” of the film – through framing the image, choosing details, pacing camera moves, and editing – all of which affect our perception of works of art. Technical issues have methodological and theoretical implications that lie outside the traditional practices of art history. Art history and film can intersect and overlap, but they represent distinctive conceptual modes. “Evidence” in film differs from that of the written tradition of scholarship. Some of the

« Art History and Films on Art », in COVERT N. [dir.], *Art on Screen: a directory of films and videos about the visual arts*, New York, Program for Art on Film, 1991, p. 7).

• 7 – Pour une biographie, une filmographie et une bibliographie complète de Judith Wechsler, voir <http://judithwechsler.com>.

usual apparatus of the discipline is not feasible: digressions can be confusing, arguments cannot be developed in detail, footnotes are impossible. In film, clearly the visual predominates; in art history, the word. [...] Should an exceptionally good film be regarded as an artifact or a work of art rather than a form of art history? Some filmmakers assert that a film on art is art and that their statements are potentially as significant as the subject/object of their discourse. Does this justify a filmmaker's ignorance of art? Should the filmmaker be seen as an artist whose films need to be deconstructed, or as an art historian who identifies the problematic? Film is an introjection, and the presence of the filmmaker changes the way the art object is seen⁸. »

Interview

Judith Wechsler, you made this statement twenty years ago on the interaction and differentiation between history of art and film on art. At this point of your remarkable double-career, how would you present your personal experience of this interplay? How much would you say your academic conceptions of art dictate your way of filming? Does your cinematographic work influence your methodological approach to art history?

Being an art historian has surely influenced my filmmaking. I try to be scrupulous in my research. I must justify any camera moves, editorial choices and of course, any narration or interview so that they communicate a meaningful interpretation. Reciprocally, working in film, and especially in the way I learned it from Charles Eames – the designer, architect and filmmaker who introduced me to filmmaking – with its primary concern with conveying the work of art in question, has influenced my methodological approach in art history. I am concerned, unlike many contemporary art historians, with the art object and its manifold meanings. I begin and end with looking at the painting, drawing and sculpture. Charles Eames had a very strong aesthetic sense. Filming objects entailed particular attention to detail, composition and light. If beautifully filmed with camera movements which bear intention, the object and the ideas it embodies or evokes can be compelling. I am wary of imposing constraints on other disciplines when they seem foreign to the study of the art object. Of course theory can enhance our modes of inquiry and comprehension. I believe in multiple perspectives and in questioning traditional interpretations. I think there is a reciprocal influence in my work as an art historian and as a filmmaker.

• 8 – WECHSLER J., « Art History and Films on Art », *op. cit.*, p. 7.

We read that in order to arrange the visual narrative of your films, you usually put together art works slides. What were your strategies to escape the methodological “habits” of art history, juxtaposing slides in a Wölfflinian way and verbally commenting them? How did you achieve something you have been calling the “visual evidence”?

Images inform. The juxtaposition of images can change their signification or implication. Wölfflin was working with binaries, oppositions. Sequences of images in film operate on different principles linked to time such as durations and transitions. The initial choice of the sequences in my films is not derived from a commentary. The sequence of images has to render meaning visually. The text of the film, the narration, commentary etc. comes later. My methodological “habits” were quickly overcome when Charles Eames took my first script for the film *Cézanne: the Late Work* and threw it in the wastebasket. “It’s not a film”, he said. “You have to make the arguments visually”. So using the light table I played with sequences of slides until I thought I had made the argument. “Now you have a film”, Charles said. His gesture was liberating. I began to think more visually. It also influenced the way I organized my thoughts for lectures. I’d first organize sequences of slides until they made sense visually and then compose my lectures. Obviously various conceptions underlay the initial selection but often ideas came through in the way one image informed another.

There was another significant influence that offset academic methods. My early training, experience and passion was dance. I studied and performed from age 9 to 24. The sense of movement, phrasing and rhythm comes from dance for me, in the choreographing of the camera moves, the sequences of images and the use of music.

You belong to the first generation of art historians that have used the media of film in teaching art history. What kind of films have you shown and how do you proceed in teaching? Do you pause the film and comment? Do you use your own films and fuse the two ways of presenting the artwork?

The films I used in my classes had to do with the subjects of the courses and the films’ approach to them. In teaching Abstract Expressionism Hans Namuth’s film on Jackson Pollock is particularly significant as it changed our understanding of the painter’s way of working. Di Antonio’s “Painter’s Painting” which includes interviews with Rauschenberg, Johns, Warhol, Motherwell and others is important in revealing artists’ intentions. However objectionable that idea is to certain theorists who believe that the author is dead, the artists are very much alive and it is not the interpretation of critics which render their meaning exclusively. The

films of Michael Blackwood are highly informative documentaries valuable for courses on 20th Century art.

I have used my own films on Pissarro, Manet, Monet and Cézanne (made with Eames) when teaching 19th Century French art which is my primary field. Films not only bring you visually “closer” to the work suggesting a way of looking, but can also set the work in context effectively. In my course on the popular arts in 19th Century Paris, I show *Daumier, Paris and the Spectator* which I made with Eames. This contains many wonderful caricatures, contemporary prints, maps, scientific and pseudo-scientific imagery.

In my classes I don't interrupt the films to add comments and I ask the students to not take notes but to look at the film carefully. Every second counts. In my course on Art on Film, I asked students to consider the different approaches taken in films on art as well as various art historical methods applied and what they bring to our understanding of art and art history.

In the 1980s, you joined Hans Namuth to create Jasper Johns. Take an Object (1991). This film seems to follow an unconventional approach compared to your previous films on Cézanne and Daumier. Was the experimental character of the film a deliberate choice or a product of your collaboration with strong creative personalities like Namuth, John Cage (who contributed to the soundtrack) and Jasper Johns himself?

In each film I try to work parallel to the artist and the work being filmed. With Jasper Johns the imagery was in part about fragmentation and the use and reuse of imagery. “Take an object”, the subtitle of the film, is the beginning of a statement of Johns, “Take an object, do something to it, do something else”. That adage guided us.

The idea of using in the soundtrack the mesostic reading of John Cage of Jasper Johns' statements, the words randomly reordered according to a chance procedure determined by a computerized I-Ching program, was the suggestion of Mark Rosenthal the curator of the exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, “Jasper Johns: The Seasons”. I asked Jasper Johns if it was ok with him for us to use this reordering of his statements to be read by John Cage. He was very positive about the idea. We then edited sequences of Johns' paintings to the elusive statements. As I was recovering from major surgery at the time we were editing and on a lot of painkillers it helped free my mind from its more conventional habits. The reordered statements made great sense to me.

With your films on the photographers Aaron Siskind (1991) and Harry Callahan (1993) you seemed to have come back to a more conventional but very sensitive kind of

documentary style giving a very intimate view of the artists and their way of working. Why was your presence as a director more discreet this time?

In those films (and actually, in all my films) I tried to get close to the style of the artists in question without interjecting myself in any obvious way. I thought that would be counterproductive. I wanted Siskind and Callahan to present themselves, as it were. Siskind had been asking me for years to make a film about him and when he was 80 we started. He became ill shortly after and died before the film was edited. I wanted his voice to prevail. Callahan had been reluctant to be filmed. When he turned 80 he said I should go ahead. He was a man of few words, much more reticent and retiring than Siskind. When the film was done he said, "It says just what I wanted to say".

In my most recent film, *Nabum Glatzer and the German Jewish Tradition*, my personal view is quite present. It is a film about my father and marks a departure from my films on art in many ways. I started out making the film about his life and ideas and then realized, I needed to make it more personal and reveal more about him and about my relationship to him.

In the article you wrote in 1991, you developed a critical view of what was then called "New Art History" and its influences on films on art leading to a loss of narrative and visual comprehension. However, could we say that the transdisciplinary approach of the New Art History has left traces in your cinematic production?

In the sense that I have always avoided the biographical approach as well as the Wölfflinian binaries, I have welcomed the broadening of perspectives which the New Art History has encouraged. My own interest in the popular arts in 19th century Paris, caricature, illustration, graphic art, photography, avoided the hierarchical approach and entailed science (criminology), pseudo-science (physiognomy), social science (Durkheim, Simmel), urban studies, demography. I am very much for a transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach in art history and filmmaking is a perfect way to materialize it.

My criticism of the avoidance of narrative and the disjunctive decontextualized juxtapositions of interviews, quotes and shots was focused on the series *State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980s* (created by Sandy Nairne, Geoff Dunlop and John Wyver, 1987). This "postmodernist documentary" concerned with New Art History developments in the 1980s made the work of art hermetic, inscrutable and hostile. However I praised the influence of the New Art History in the shift away from the traditional genres of biography, iconography and connoisseurship to Marxist, feminist, semiotic, structuralist and deconstructionist approaches.

Through the method of structuralism, frames of reference got much broader and multileveled. More kinds of experience and expression were introduced in film, sometimes in startling juxtapositions that can lead to new understandings and appreciations of the art object and of the artist. One of the most remarkable influences obvious in many films on art produced in Europe was the departure from the paternalist presenter or narrative voice telling us what to think.

What about today's art history? Would you say that the current tendencies in this field (often renamed "visual studies") favor the "visual evidence" you always praised for filmmaking?

My sense is, indeed, that art historians and filmmakers are beginning to question theory and are returning, in some measure, to the closer study of the art object. There is also a greater awareness of their own position in relation to the work. This "self-reflective" art history led to the creation of "films on art history", questioning art historians such as Ernst Gombrich, Jurgis Baltrusaitis, Charles Sterling, André Chastel, Francis Haskell, Richard Krautheimer and Hans Belting about their own authorial approach (see for example the series *Entretiens du Louvre*). Film-essays assuming a very personal perspective on the part of the art critic and filmmaker and challenging the authoritative interpretation were made possible in this context. Robert Hugues in *The Shock of the New* (1979) and John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1974) used film to renew art history.

In my own career, the confluence of art history and filmmaking born in part of circumstance and contingency (through the meeting of Richard Wechsler, Rosalind Krauss, Richard Leacock, Ed Pincus and Charles Eames) but the reciprocal influence has been constructive and truly inspiring. Making films on art broadened my world and afforded me a certain distance and liberty from normative academic expectations. Films became part of my methodology, a way of renewing my own "visual studies".

Le film sur l'art

Entre histoire de l'art et documentaire de création

Cet ouvrage dresse un état international des recherches menées sur ce « genre » cinématographique jusqu'ici peu étudié, hybride mais prolifique, au croisement de l'histoire de l'art et du cinéma documentaire : le film sur l'art.

Montrer l'artiste au travail, présenter la biographie d'un artiste disparu, sa vie intérieure, son œuvre, entrer dans la logique de celle-ci pour en déplier la thématique ou les narrations qu'elle contient, analyser sa construction formelle, aborder une période ou suivre des évolutions stylistiques : ce sont autant de démarches qui peuvent unir, selon des modalités diverses, un cinéaste et un artiste ou un cinéaste et un historien de l'art (Diehl, Schmidt, Cassou, Huyghe, Sweeney...) – quand l'historien de l'art ne se fait pas tout simplement cinéaste (Haesaerts, Ragghianti). C'est que, de Warburg à Panofsky, de Focillon à Elie Faure et à Malraux, de Longhi à Francastel et Damisch, nombreux sont les historiens de l'art qui se sont préoccupés de ce que le cinéma pouvait apporter à leur discipline, tant au plan de la simple documentation que du modèle de perception qu'il engage par le découpage – les détails, les changements d'échelles –, le montage, la mise en mouvement et la projection par transparence.

Quel bilan tirer de cette riche histoire du film sur l'art devenue quelque peu opaque (où sont ces films ? comment les voir ?) et que comprendre de l'histoire de ces productions qui, d'abord rattachées au documentaire, voire au cinéma pédagogique, ont ensuite trouvé une autonomie au sein du genre « film sur l'art » ? Quels liens furent noués entre historiens de l'art, critiques d'art et réalisateurs ? Quel apport à l'histoire de l'art cette production représente-t-elle ? Comment l'histoire de l'art et ses applications dans différents médias circulent-elles dans ces films, et quel effet cet intérêt pour l'art a-t-il pu produire en retour sur le cinéma « comme art plastique » ? Enfin, quelle est la situation présente de ce type d'approche ? Ces questions sont ici collectivement posées, débattues, développées.

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En couverture : Van der Keuken filmant et touchant une toile de Lucebert
(photographie de tournage de *Lucebert, temps et adieux*, 1994).

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