The visual thinking of Gustav Deutsch according to Livio Belloï

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Between montage and movement, overlapping views and resurgences, Gustav Deutsch’s monumental project, Film ist., attempts to write the history of cinema through its own material, at the intersection of early cinema, avant-garde films of the 1920s, and contemporary experimental cinema. In his book Film ist. La pensée visuelle selon Gustav Deutsch (Film ist. Visual thinking according to Gustav Deutsch), Livio Belloï seeks to better understand the magnum opus of an artist who defies categorisation.

While Gustav Deutsch caused a sensation at the 2013 Berlinale with his film Shirley, which transposes Edward Hopper’s paintings to film, he was also attracting attention in the realm of film theory as the subject of a new book by Livio Belloï, Film ist. La pensée visuelle selon Gustav Deutsch(1). Gustav Deutsch has already been the subject of other, mostly generalist books. However Livio Belloï’s book is the first to focus on Film ist., or rather one part of it. Deutsch’s original cinematic
œuvre is composed of 13 chapters (1-6, 7-12, 13), and lasts 4 hours in total. Livio Belloï’s 300-page book focuses only on the central part (7-12). According to the researcher, the reason is simple: "it appears fairly obvious that the central part is the most relevant to Deutsch's creation of a hypothetical definition of cinema itself; this is where his visual thinking reaches its pinnacle, where his artistry in harvesting film extracts and piecing them together crystallises into veritable analytical proposals."

In homage to Deutsch’s film, Livio Belloï’s book has the same structure and each chapter focuses on a series of questions about what we are watching. Seeing: this is one of the main themes of Deutsch's work. In this sense, Chapter 7 (and the first chapter of the film), is one of the most evocative: in segment 7.2, a man leans down to look through a keyhole, and the film shows us "the other side" through alternating countershots. Deutsch’s choice is not insignificant: the lock shaped a series of early films in many ways, establishing a logic of continuity in the infancy of what would become cinematographic language. One example is Par le trou de la serrure, a 1901 Pathé production that serves as an archetype of how early cinema tried to represent subjective vision. In the film, a room attendant observes, not-so-subtly, the eccentric behaviour of clients in their rooms. It's a form of experimentation, of course, but it represents above all the scopic drive, this need to see what we can’t normally see. The discourse is well known, but it nevertheless rings true: cinema is the art of voyeurism. This is exactly what Deutsch wants to point out: the filmmaker puts the viewer is the same position as the voyeur while playing on our perception of the world (and cinematographic language) by breaking the sacrosanct rule of continuity: images of a boat at sea, a North African landscape, the portrait of a young Asian woman, and a frightened actress being attacked by a snake succeed one another in no logical order, and with nothing in common other than their critical status as "objects of our gaze", "just" images.

In his work on the history of the gaze, Carl Havelange describes an "ancient order" and a "new order", with the latter based on a "third element" which mediates between the naked eye and the world. For more than a hundred years, the cinematograph has been such a mediator, this "third element": the images filmed by the Lumière brothers served no other purpose than to capture the essence of the world and offer it up for our entertainment. The beauty of found footage lies precisely in its ability to divert the logic of the gaze, as Livio Belloï reminds us: "the particularity of found footage is that it produces a film that is the sum of the gazes produced by others. Film ist. is not so much a film as an optical device." Much like the first filmmakers the Lumière brothers, Deutsch offers the viewer images of the world. He does this by eschewing oral commentary and verbal remarks, as he is not trying to describe "his" history of cinema (as did Jean-Luc Godard in Histoire(s) du cinéma) nor even a "history of silent film, but rather a silent history of cinema", as Livio Belloï explains at the end of his book.

As filmmaker Samuel Fuller once said, film is "in one word, emotions!" Fuller's definition is well known among cinephiles, and Livio Belloï believes that it reaches its fullest expression in Film ist. Throughout his film, Deutsch questions images, brings the reader along in his reflection without ignoring emotional impact: curiosity, strangeness, outrage, but also humour and tenderness, etc. The artist is on a veritable quest for visual expression, much like the avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s. At certain times, as when he plays with variations in the speed of the image, Deutsch seems to follow in the footsteps of those early filmmakers. Deutsch’s relationship with these avant-gardists vacillates between homage and continued
However, there is an ironic element: the researcher mentions Chapter 10.1, a surprising segment in which intertitles succeed each other in the complete absence of any image. In René Clair and Germaine Dulac's vision of "pure cinema", film should eschew any form of writing to focus solely on images, visual composition, and rhythm: a film without words. Deutsch, somewhat derisively, took the opposing view and made a film that could be considered "impure": a series of texts in the absence of a diegetic world; in short, a film without images. A bit of clever humour that is actually quite pertinent.
Given that it is structured in chapters that correspond to those in the film, Livio Belloï’s book cannot be summarised in just a few words given how many themes and ideas are covered. As with Deutsch’s film, each paragraph addresses a main topic that is the subject of a lengthy and thorough analysis, all while creating connections to other chapters. This is also the case with the relationship between Film ist. and contemporary experimental cinema, as connections are scattered throughout the book, offering a relatively broad overview of this ‘other’ cinema. Let us simply point out that Deutsch, who was born in Vienna in 1952, is part of a generation of Austrian experimental filmmakers who treated the image as both a historic and aesthetic subject. Martin Arnold is one example, but Livio Belloï focuses on Peter Tscherkassky, analysing how he and Deutsch address the question of dreams in cinema. For example, in Dream work (2001), Tscherkassky utilises endogenesis, or more simply an internal construction: in Tscherkassky’s work, dreams are represented as multiple layers within the same image, since the filmmaker manipulates the original filmic material. Deutsch, in contrast, uses exogenesis: dreams exist only in the shot of young woman sleeping, and serve as a rallying point to connect various images. This is just one of the many comparisons Livio Belloï makes between Deutsch and other experimental filmmakers, whether Austrian (Tscherkassky) or not (Bill Morrisson, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi). Deutsch and those artists share the same belief in the image as a narrative tool, and have the same need to shape it in a different direction, using a principle of exploration and montage that goes beyond the concept of the image as a singular object. For Deutsch, the image is above all one cell in the larger body of the film.
Visual Thinking according to Gustav Deutsch ends with a summary table and like Film ist., provides us with an opening: in seeking to create a history of cinema using its own images, Gustav Deutsch has perhaps come close to the Mnemosyne Atlas that Aby Warburg worked on until his death, in which he attempted to create a comprehensive figurative grammar of art history. In Deutsch’s work, we begin to question chase films, ethnographic films, and the development of cinematographic language thanks to a clever montage that is designed to go beyond simple questions of definition and encourage us to question our own gaze. Deutsch, who admire Warburg, may have brought an unsuspected encyclopaedic dimension to cinema, the impact of which will only become apparent once the project (Film ist.) is finished. As the work of a lifetime, driven by the intelligence and humour of an extraordinary artist, Film ist. may be one of the most evocative histories of cinema to date.

(1) Livio Belloï, Film ist. La pensée visuelle selon Gustav Deutsch, L’Âge d’Homme, Collection "Histoire et esthétique du cinéma, 2013.