CHRIS PETIT
ANATOMIES OF THE IMAGE

by Serafino Murri

*English filmmaker Chris Petit's work on image and sound falls
under the increasingly rare category of rebellious elusiveness.
A film critic for "Time Out" during the 1970s, he moved
behind the camera (like one of the last of the Mohicans of the
European New Wave) with the elliptical version of a road
movie, à la Hellman, during the triumphant Thatcher years
(Radio On, 1979), only to then push himself, with the support
of Wenders' Road Movies, towards a disquieting and ironic
blend of "lesser" genres like the thriller and noir. (The same
genres which, after having abandoned in his cinematic "fic-tion",
he developed as a writer in novels such as* The Psalm
Killer *and* Back from the Grave*). In the 90s, Petit finally rad-ically
mutated the proportions of the ingredients of his film-making,
thanks to the creative encounter (in the form of scorn-ful
conspiracy) with the highly talented writer Iain Sinclair
(one of the few, along with Ballard, who is capable of giving
new life to a genre like science fiction that has been rendered
lifeless by film itself). Petit reached the height of his visionary
talent honing a hybrid expressive voice of mystification/explo-ration
of the real, a kind of dramatic mockumentary that has
few elements to which it can be compared in contemporary
filmmaking. It is as if the spirit of Marker's* Sans Soleil *and* La
Jetée *were reincarnated with more advanced technology, the
same technology of music videos and advertisements – in an
eclectic mix of formats, techniques and filming solutions – to
return to discussing, with poetry and disenchantment, the
world's truth transformed into images of itself. The narrative
glue and climactic background to the films made in the last
decade with Sinclair is the hyper-realistic scenery, which evokes
something between science fiction and the "fake" of Wellesian
memory; in which the stylistic features of the medium most
responsible for the degrading common sense at the close of the
last century – television – are dissected and re-elaborated. The
result, especially in the last two acts of the Petit-Sinclair "tril-ogy",
made up of* The Cardinal and the Corpse *(1992),* The
Falconer *(1998) and* Asylum or The Final Commission
*(2000), is the description of possible worlds on the threshold
between the present and the future, with a sense of mystery and
counter-logic running through them that corrode the apodictic
certainties of our culture, revealing their unsteady absurdities
on the visual plane. Despite his uniqueness, however, it would
be wrong to call Petit an "underground" filmmaker. To under-stand
his attack of the current way of thinking one must not
forget that these films arise as an exploitation of production
funds of television channels like Channel Four, the same pro-ducers
who commissioned light, tasteful comedies ("social" or
otherwise) that sadly glut the British film scene. With caustic
lucidity, Petit inserted himself clandestinely in the "banality
factory", with his non-stories between documentary and fic-tion,
between electronic over-refinement and analogical tribal-ism.
He turns the narrative idea on its head with an aesthetic
surplus, and expands its meaning by inserting a disturbing
fusion of social repression, imaginary biographies, and recon-structed
"live" lives into it. Smoky movements that bring to life
an ambience half-glimpsed in the science-fictional episode that
opens* The State of Things *by the putative father Wenders, but
with a morbid attraction for death and degeneration, metasta-sis
and sickness, symptoms of the erosive process of a civilisa-tion
and its ways of life, which is matched only by the work of
another disquieting fellow countryman of Petit's, the no less
eclectic visual artist Peter Greenaway.
Truth and invention, real lives and fiction, become indistinct
and equal elements, merging with other people's work in the
found-footage style into a single fabric, to create a random*

*spontaneous expressiveness, not unlike the life that slides by in
front of a shop video camera. Each piece of film presents a clue
to a inextricable tangle to which everything in the world is con-nected
in its spider web of time, space and chance. The frag-mented
intimations (and their circumstantial methods) that
Petit uses to put obscure lives of an "off" artist* (The Falcone*r)
and viral diseases of television* (Asylum*) onto film, trigger a
plot of uncontrolled evocations, chain reaction explosions and
domino connections between the visual objects in the narration
that generate a dimensional multiplication of images. Time
breaks through the limits of the two dimensions as a visible
third dimension: a subdivided, corrupt time that passes by
simultaneously at its different levels in visual space. The mem-ory
and phantasmagoria are interpenetrated with current
events: the barycentre of time fluctuates, the chrono-logic
becomes a variant like any other that the image, with its repre-sentational
processes, moves forward and backwards as it pleas-es.
A factor of semiotic chaos even more marked by the use of
language, which enters domineeringly into the visual space in
all of its forms (written, spoken, seen) and that has the ability
to interact with the vision up until the point of even provoking
in it perceptive shocks. Often asynchronous in respect to the
image, the language in Petit's latest works bears testament to
the fission between expression and truth, appearance and
essence. The image zones are invaded by the written words,
which emphasise and render permanent the ephemeral vocal
fragments with stochastic speed in the linear chronological
dimension, joining the syntax of the music video with that of
the book and newspaper article, establishing the tangibility of a
private letter in the hands of a furtive graffiti artist on a city
wall. As the director himself explains it, it is a question of "con-verting
the writing into images, and not filming books".
Therefore, with Petit and Sinclair we found ourselves in front
of an upheaval of the "camera-pen" of the New Wave. The cam-era
is not used like a pen; rather the writing is made up of
images that, like hieroglyphics, cryptically design the mean-ings,
submitting them to continuous reinterpretation. All of the
phases of the image, from the design to the photograph to the
film frame, work together, flow into each other, contaminate one
another. In* Asylum, *the same images shot several times wear
themselves out, until their progressive blurring achieves in
denying the tightness and "objective" independence of the
image-form (one of the cornerstones of television ideology that
determines the visible and true). The visible is subjectified in a*

dimension that is intraocula*r, mental, an active (and not
descriptive) mimesis of the processes of memory and associa-tion.
The merging of refined gestures that appear random in the
flow of a life filmed live – with writings, maps and animated
designs in what is a masterpiece in its genre in all respects,* The
Falconer *(1998) – create a superimposition and audio-visual
coexistence of the foundations of an attack against narrative
violence as a movement that flattens any individuality and dif-ference
of what exists in a linear story which, unlike when it
happens in a real life experience, becomes universally "under-standable".
The same idea of documenting an irregular life like
that of Peter Whitehead's (flaneur, filmmaker, counter-culture
torchbearer of the "swinging London" years, mythomaniac and
alleged lover of numerous female celebrities) erases the bound-ary
between character and reality, and recreates a truth accen-tuating
the pertinent outlines in light of a global sentiment, of
an objectified emotion.
Just as in Ciprì and Maresco's work on idiots and the margin-alised
(or in Herzog's work with Bruno S. in* Every Man For
Himself and God Against Al*l), the aim is to push reality to
become even more real that it is. Whitehead is all of those things
(poetic and nefarious) that are attributed to him, and of which
he speaks in the interviews gathered by the two writer/film-makers.
But his prestige, for better or for worse, is elevated to*

the utmost power of aesthetic superfetation, which reflects the absurd occultist story to which the film's title refers. It is not surprising then that the real Whitehead, who even played along with the macabre joke in which he is seen as a superstitious rit-ualist and disturbed sexual maniac on the verge of death after a serious heart attack, felt hurt by the finished work, to the point of turning against its creators publicly. His life, rather than being rendered coherent in a story, was exploded into a thousand pieces, atomised, penetrated down to the most inti-mate nucleus of individuality. In other words, sweetly and deliberately desecrated, irreversibly bared in the might of the visible. Just like the written bodies that inhabit the film, and the faces that are designed and then disappear by the stroke of a pencil that would like to affix them, or the figures that dissolve, devoured by the blinding light of superimposition, Whitehead's life becomes a crystalline indication of the anti-method used by Petit and Sinclair: an anatomy of the image *that is resolved in a process of* dissolutio*n, that repeats the game of death at work, lurking in the deepest manifestations of life.*
The images that run on many levels through The Falconer *not only echo a Godard-esque knocking down of absoluteness of point of view, but lead to a definitive unveiling of iconic illu-sion. When an image appears on a screen and a second image, which is a back-lit or animated human profile, surrounds and contrasts the first fictitious "image" with its presumed greater reality, that which differentiates the image from the concrete presence is rendered palpable in a game of Chinese boxes (which ends only with the out-of-frame, with that which is* around and outside *the television screen). What is "shown" is the invisibility of the point of view, which vanishes in a perceptive, frame-less flood. The images orchestrated by Petit assault and condemn point of view; render the frame a dramatic element;*

pass by modifying themselves through countless systems of ref-erences and recording – eyes, instruments and perspectives that continually unveil the "most" of the instrument, and destroy at its foundations the illusion of an absolute, abstract and indif-ferent reality of the person constructing it. Numbers and let-ters, voices and animal designs, pass through the flat coldness of the digital medium, and make even the obvious seem dis-turbing and mysterious: a girl walking through a crowd or the most overused and ingenuous of the documentary-style travel-ling images – the car-camera outside the window of an auto-mobile. In the same way, the use of sound – the deep permeation of music and noise in the images – on the one hand seems to be an independent score that only occasionally coincides with the flow and sequence of the images. On the other hand, the dis-tinction between sound and light which the perceptive division renders evident, serves to enumerate the different speeds of the material, the slowness chronologically compromised by the sound, and the elusive and traitorous speed of the light as a visual given that constitutes the image. The alteration of the vision is thus used by Petit in an expressive fashion, as the out-come of the mental force of the gaze, with a subsequent multi-plication of the levels of interpretation. There is no video cam-era image that is not manipulated, corrupted and amplified in "sign-ness" and meaning by a stream of elusive codes, numer-ical and alphabetical, that create mystery, semantic attraction and inveigle one with the over-refined beauty of assemblage, sweeping away any remnant of narrative naturalism. There is always something barely decipherable and indisputably beauti-ful in adding an interrogative sense to these images, in denying the literalness of the meaning. Coloured blacks and whites, chromatic saturations, polarisations, blurring, the entire arse-nal of the most prosaic effects at the disposal of any simple handycam, here play a role that is demiurgic and stylistically precise; just like the found-footage television clips, real and sim-ulated, mixed with animation and the graphic manipulations of the images. Complex and anarchical aesthetic places, which are

explained only in light of the progress of the anti-narrative.
Playing with the reality of the personal information of the man
Whitehead, Petit and Sinclair create a short circuit in the pre-sumed
documentary truth of The Falconer*, rendering tangible*
the creative process of the legend and character in the moment
of his creation. With his narcissistic plots running counterpart
to the visual, acoustic and content-related metamorphic "exag-gerations"
staged by the filmmakers, Whitehead embodies a
culture (and a generation) that has lived creating and destroy-ing
people like abstractions created by life, personifications of
attitudes, radicalisations in standard images of behaviours
mutated into attitudes, transforming the spontaneity into a
language of gesture and the idiosyncrasies into distinctive out-lines.
Whitehead's meditation on death and the soul through the
mythical figure of the falcon, and his black magic rituals for
confronting the dark force of imminent death, that function as
a mysterious contextual glue in the narrative, are parallel
attempts by the filmmakers to surprise and to capture the
process of agony and relaxation in an existential moment when
vital energy is being dissipated as is it returning to the ecolog-ical
pyramid that has always contained only one form of ener-gy
in constant flux. The character's heavy box/dark object of

desire, which we are told contains his soul and the falcon's
mummified spirit, is used as a metaphor for life as it is seen and
represented in Petit and Sinclair's narrative mode. It exempli-fies
the contrast between interior energy and the casing that
entraps it in time; that accumulation of impressions that func-tions
from infancy to old age to form the sense of self.
Accompanying and helping a man recover and open the box of
life means rendering the synapses and connections of memory
and perception once again available; putting back into play that
complex and multi-form process from which the constellations
of impressions we call our ideas take shape.
In the trilogy produced by Channel Four, the language of the
video clips that merge persuasively on a daily basis with the
uninterrupted flood of media language – from the rhythmic
cadence of "live" television from which direction as "live edit-ing"
emerges, to the "real" and squandered time of "home-made"
clips, to the animation and sensationalism of advertise-ments
– are newly split, distinguished and charged with mean-ing.
The specificities of the filming medium pour into the cre-ation
of the message based on the Marshall McLuhan's age-old
formula, to the point where even Whitehead's face in The
Falconer *is charged with "private" emotions if shot with a*
handycam in a private house, and with "public" emotions and
attitudes when shot with public television means. The image
mutates into an anatomy of the body, into exploration and
amplification of the visible surfaces. Bodies that can be sensual
or deathly, repellent or seductive, constantly change meaning
and function, making the inherent contradictions in every form
of life (or potential death) apparent. The changes that the per-son
undergoes at the hands of the medium that engulfs or
records him are unveiled. The object of the fictional investiga-tion
is not so much the life of a man in a comprehensive and
chronological sense, but in the contextual and simultaneous
sense; his being as many lives as there are means to capture and
record parts of his "life time". And yet, the body alone is not
enough for Petit's vampirism: the interior life is the goal. This
is depicted in the more visionary moments, those (splendid)
moments of animation, that mould the visual material into
thought incarnate. Emotions are no longer depicted through
correlative objectives, but directly. The kiss that the angel-bat-woman
gives Peter Whitehead during an interview in a dilap-idated
post-modern television studio turns the realism into
something unreal and artificial. It invades the image, and solid-ifies
the mood of the character cut off from his composed image
according to the "official" codes of broadcasting. It is one of
those strokes of genius, those epigrammatic devices of a way of

making films that capture, in a single gesture and in a few
moments, the entire spirit of the work: its aesthetics-leaning
stimmung *and nostalgia of desires that the music and writing*
and suspended gestures accompany in the background, like
abstract dances, throughout the narration of the time of the
vision. A clearly spelled out aesthetic discussion is present even
in the short film Dead Tv, *the story of the last days of "televi-sional"*
humanity. The film is superimposed by a "Real Tv"
made up of the alchemist aesthetics with which Petit treats the
authentic, that even photograph the mechanics of the cathode
tube on the canvas of the screen like brush strokes of an arcane

language, entirely artificial and impossible to connect with a

pre-existing reality. What is narrated is once again the medi-um,
and not a story. The "Real Tv" of the "clandestine" Petit
is a visual aggression against the damage done by the many
"Junk", "Cheap" or "Laugh" Tv programmes whose sole func-tion
is to numb and regiment the conscience. It technically
analysed and molecularly took apart the images to, as
Fassbinder would say, "free the brain". That Petit's working
material is the image as the means and as a pure and inde-pendent
object, even before that which it represents, is made
evident even in the reverential tribute to one of the most mis-understood
geniuses of film criticism in the 1900s – the
American painter Manny Farber – in the film Negative
Space. *The idea that inspired this atypical document is the fas-cinating*
proof of Farber's intuition: the existence of a "negative
space" where the images emerge from nothing, from a kind of
black hole where they navigate, forever cut off from their origi-nal
matrix – life. America as the industry of the imaginary is
the open door into this incomprehensible black hole. The film's
soundtrack is a stream of memories of surrounding film, music
and dialogues, in a perceived but invisible space. Of Polaroid-paintings
inside which the space of vision is transformed: frag-ments
of films that are slowed down, altered, unwoven; move-ment
without reality captured in historical films, cerements of
an everlasting life that never was. A coast to coast trip across
America, the country of the Black Hole, creates a counterbal-ance
to all of this. It is a certain way of designing the move-ment
to give life to the images. For Farber, like for Wenders and
Petit, the relationship between movies and to move is essential.
Negative Space *is a* Personal Voyage *through American cin-ema*
that depicts, even more radically than the film by devoted
cinephile Martin Scorsese, Farber's axiom that what counts in
a film is not a film but several singular moments with which it
guides, as it progresses, the more often than not prosaic narra-tive
that we most regularly forget about: the "negative space"
of the few moments that are alive. Negative Space *gathers and*
re-works together the moments chosen by Farber: simple
milieus, gestures, spaces and expressions, not made to be
extraordinary or narrative, but fragments of truth captured
despite the fiction. When the critic appears in the film to
explain his "sentimental" idea, mixing together moments of
noir classics – from Godard, Rossellini, Fassbinder, and up to
the paradox of Michael Snow's Wavelength *– what is seen is*
the most essential of film's proprieties, that of cutting a space
and filling it with life. The game of rediscovering the moment
in the Black Hole goes on until the image is blown-up and
decentralised so much so as to capture its background frag-ments.
Where that which passes behind the objects brought to
our attention (for example, Ingrid Bergman's in a camera-car
inside the car in Voyage to Italy*) bears testimony to the exis-tence*
of countless other invisible films within every film; to the
imprisoned life that waits in a state of patient suspension to be
freed from the fog of negative space.
The trip is a trap then. But if the film image is a trap with a
beginning and an end, that nevertheless provides an exit, the
television image is a blind alley of experience. And this is what

Asylum *confirms, with its emblematic title that simultaneous-ly means shelter/refuge as well as mental hospital/constraint. A place where it is necessary to stay, out of one's own or someone else's will, from which, once entered, one cannot leave as one pleases. The point of no return is television, the means of Debordian fragmentation of life, which enchants and devours the personality, where there is no possible chance of reconstruc-tion. The necrophiliac-like vitality of* The Falconer *is reversed in* Asylu*m, where there is a search for life in a kingdom of death. It takes place in a viral era that is dominated by a televi-sion that is infected and invaded by inexplicable factions, sur-vivors of a catastrophe of the senses. Petit and Sinclair's devel-opment in* Asylum *can be categorised as iconic* regression *with its pattern of the electronic writing on the television screen that brings back an intricate and ancient dimension of sign violation reminiscent of Godard in* Ici et Ailleur*s. The image is dissolved and atomised into its fundamental impulses, and the interruption, the drop, the low definition and even the involuntary blurring of the camera's automatic focus all make up the expressive material. A sense of mystery emanates from the extreme enlargement of the magnetic image, that returns to its chaotic state of atomic composition in evolution, so different from that indefinable body of light, yet inseparable and caged in the film. Off camera voices guide the spectator in a journey through unidentified fragments. It is almost impossible to reconstruct the past meanings. They are almost always loops, false movements created with the indefinite repetitions of a rediscovered moment, that allude to a life in which it was still possible to understand and explain. It is visual degeneration. And parallel to it, we follow the images of a woman that, like the sound technician in Wenders'* Lisbon Stor*y, crosses the post-viral world to record the sounds of reality, trying to cap-ture in the ether the waves that still travel freely, without any instruments forcing her to use an infected method. The film is an after-flood that pitilessly mirrors our age of semiotic confu-sion; where there is virtual expressive freedom but a substantial servile dictatorship by those who produce images and mean-ings. The "viral" distortions that slowly overwhelm the film – disturbances that are irritating, not in the least bit aesthetic, that seem indomitable and disorganised, even damaged – in the end debase even the slightest possibility of visual pleasure. They slap the spectator-voyeur in the face, frustrating his or her ravenous indifference. And the disheartened image, in all its essence and falsity, irretrievably flutters before his or her eyes like a bag carried by the wind, that appears in the visual space at a certain point. The same bag whose unbearable beauty the boy in English director Sam Mendes'* American Beauty *prais-es for it harmonic, free fortuity.*