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Laurie Anderson's *Heart of a Dog*. A Post-Cinematic Meditation on Affection

Abstract: In this article, I analyze Laurie Anderson's hybrid film *Heart of a Dog* by contrast with traditional ways of making cinema and confront it with recent post cinema theories. Referring to a state of *in-between* and changing perception in an afterlife dimension, Anderson uses a multitude of combined visual techniques in order to reveal to the spectator a ghostly presence. Assuming that these techniques are susceptible of imprinting post-cinematic effects to this film, my article is an attempt to identify their functions in the structure of the film.

Keywords: surveillance culture, hybrid, post-cinematic effects, transitory imagery, data collection, technology, perception.

In her late film *Heart of a Dog* (2015), the American artist Laurie Anderson explores, in a particular mixture of cinematic narrative methods, the territories that are situated beyond the borders of physical reality, where communication and perception unfold in peculiar manners. At the same time, these ones are related to unexpected frames of personal and collective experience, so that a rich network of references is set to add rhythm to the visual tension. The most part of the moving scenes were shot with a variety of digital cameras, I Phones, drone cameras and GoPro, revealing Anderson's engagement with new technology and the circulation of language's power of expression between different types of media. In this film, she collects different perception angles offered by a range of devices which inevitably became part of our understanding of reality.

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My goal with the center section of the film, the scene that depicts the bardo or the Tibetan afterlife, was to juxtapose jarring, rapid-fire images – a cartoon dog, a train, a data collection center and several heavily processed scenes from the first half of the movie as a way of representing some of the ways we think. (Anderson, Press Kit of *Heart of a Dog* 2015, 3)

The post cinematic approach of Anderson's film consists of an unexpected combination of techniques that privilege the *perceptual technologies* as means of representation, as Vivian Sobchack describes them in her study, *The Scene of the Screen. Envisioning the Photographic, Cinematic and Electronic "Presence"*.

The cinema presents us with quite a different perceptual technology and mode of representation. Through its objectively visible spatialization of a frozen point of view into dynamic and intentional trajectories of *selfdisplacing vision* and through its subjectively experienced temporalization of an essential moment into *lived momentum*, the cinematic radically reconstitutes the photographic. This radical difference between the transcendental, posited moment of the photograph and the existential momentum of the cinema, between the scene to be *contemplated* and the scene as it is *lived*, is foregrounded most dramatically in Chris Marker's remarkable short film, *La Jetée* (1962). (Sobchack in Denson and Leyda 2016, 99)

The reference Sobchack uses in her argument, Chris Marker's film basically composed of filmed photographs and one short recorded scene, is a good example of mixture of techniques that point out at other means than those employed by traditional cinema. But the resources Anderson works with in order to stage perceptual experiences comprise more than this kind of combination: animated drawings, which replace fragments of filmed scenes, graphic animation, post-production graphic effects and collage techniques superimposed on fragments of filmed footage. However, even if the nature of the images differs in the two films, the voice over element is one of their common points, together with the collage technique, which dominates both of them. In *Heart of a Dog*, his visual structure's capacity of illustrating a possible dialogue with ghosts is more likely to be related with music videos than with traditional ways of making cinema. Laurie Anderson's career proves a familiarity with different types of moving images, taking into consideration other productions she created before, like the 1986 concert movie *Home of the Brave*, which gathered a range full of multimedia elements that orchestrated her performance. So why choose this time the form of a film to represent the intimate relationship with her animal companion and the questioning about death?

In *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of the Film Experience*, Vivian Sobchack considers that the frame "functions for the film as the field of our bodies does for us" (134). After the disappearance of the physical body of Lolabelle, Anderson might have needed such a visual extension to look at things she only could have imagined about a no longer perceivable presence and to events that she could only imagine

would take place on the other side of existence. As the film begins, she describes, in a surreal vision, her dream of her giving birth to Lolabelle, an imagined scene of a human bringing to life another species, pointing at the inextricable bound between them and their perception of reality, which could even be switched. Later on, when Lolabelle goes blind, Anderson uses the film frame to juxtapose photograph home videos of the dog with filmed memories that the latter cannot see anymore, creating a communication space between the two of them and the spectator.

The story of the film reveals the profound bounds between the artist and her Rat Terrier dog, Lolabelle, being exposed to transformations after the physical disappearance of the latter. As time passes by and these bounds are slowly effaced, the visual narration takes new forms which include filmed drawings and texts, photographs, 8mm home movies and a series of graphic animations that interfere with raw images and reconstructed filmed moments in order to express vibration and movement to an ephemeral inner space. References to classic painting are also included among the images which remind of Lolabelle's passage through existence. One of Anderson's favorite works of Francisco Goya, depicting the head of a little dog suspended in a vast golden space is examined in relation to the film's subject. The connection between the two dog figures is made obvious by the succession of images, where a photograph of Lolabelle being sick in the hospital immediately follows the dreamlike vision of a golden void in Goya's *Dog* painting. The latter belongs to the Spanish artist's so called *Black Paintings*, a sequence of murals on nightmarish themes, that he painted on the walls of Quinta del Sordo, a country house where he lived in the early 1820's. In Anderson's vision, the state of mind expressed by Goya in this particular work transposes in a visual key the fear and restlessness felt by her own dog, once the illness' presence became a fact.



Laurie Anderson, *Heart of a Dog*, 2015 (screen snapshot, min 35:46)

The desire to show what can be perceived beyond the material remains of a being reminds of photographer Duane Michals' work, where real images were combined

with text and dreamlike traces of imponderable presences within the frame of one same space, in order to explore emotion and philosophy. This use of elements opens the gate between the known world and other possibilities of perception, like, for instance, in Michals' sequence entitled *Heisenberg's Magic Mirror of Uncertainty* (1998), where the last fragment of text expresses the idea that unlimited experience becomes possible in the absence of absolute knowledge: "Uncertainty permits anything and everything". At the beginning of *Heart of a Dog*, Laurie Anderson examines the state of uncertainty and the dominant feeling of insecurity after the 9/11 destructive events in New York, condensing them in images of Lolabelle wondering with fear about an unknown threat that, this time, might come, like never before, not from the earth, but from the sky. The atmospheric inner landscape is visually based on videos of Manhattan after the dark days of terror and fragments of video recordings of her walks with Lolabelle on sunny weather, on California's Northern Mountains, near the seaside. The question raised by the artist impersonating her own dog opens the communicating dimension with other worlds, beyond the sky, which has now a double function in the film's space poetics: the wide screen of freedom and, on the other hand, a place that, inevitably from this point in history, can be the source of unsuspected harmful attacks. Following the same discourse, during the first part of the film, the surveillance culture that followed the fall of the two towers in New York is questioned by Anderson's voice about the government's obsession with data collection and linked to the cloud technology. The intertext created between the gesture of looking up, the vertical threat and a virtual storing information place becomes the ground for interconnected dimensions, in a space where the sky represents no longer a limit, but a gate to uncertainty. It is not for the first time that visual artists use recording devices in order to build a critical discourse on surveillance and mass media manipulation. In this case, Anderson's wondering about the data collection center and the general obsession with an unseen enemy, doubled by Lolabelle's experience with hawks, at another scale, raise a sum of questions for the spectator. Developing and maintaining the idea of being constantly seen or watched, her film uses all kinds of recorded images which explore all angles around its main character. Even the camera attached to a dog walking on the streets of Manhattan can be substituted to an observing machine, despite the unaggressive appearance of the situation.

The multitude of footage types and post-production effects used in Anderson's cinematic imagery conveys the spectator to enlarge his ways of looking at movies, but also at life and death.

"I ask the (viewer) to look at it through a lot of different eyes: from the perspective of a dog; the lens of a surveillance camera; purely floating around in the *bardo*," she says, referring to the Buddhist idea of a post-life holding state more akin to a chrysalis than a purgatory. (Ordoña, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5/11/2015)



Laurie Anderson, *Heart of a Dog*, 2015 (screen snapshot, min 19:27)

Heart of a Dog initially conceived as a narrative piece featuring voiceover, but came to include music and other ambient sounds. The return to the form of the musical performances Laurie Anderson got us used to seems to be one of the many turning back points of her film. Not only she revisits images from her past with Lolabelle, but she uses the same key to relate episodes of her childhood. Lolabelle's death provides a meditation state that functions in a similar way for her own existence and on historical events, in a larger frame. In this particular case, the post cinematic language allows the artist to visually express and experience once again a story that is not ended, the continuity of a relationship exposed to melancholy and to the unknown, once the physical strings are gone, rather than other forms of visual storytelling. Taking into consideration all the techniques as active parts of this project, the resulting film can be situated at the border between documentary, fiction and experimental video. It could also function separately as audio or video performance *per se*. That is why the superimposition of these two complex layers places it, in our view, in the field of the post cinematic productions. In his book *Que reste-t-il du cinema?* French film theoretician Jacques Aumont expresses the idea of a cinema that is capable of enfold on itself:

Cinema is now old enough to be able to enfold on itself, like painting did, like music as well. It constitutes a whole culture, both tamed and still unperceived in some of its bases. Everyone "loves cinema" and it's been a while since this is no longer differential, but the misunderstanding of "cinema" remains as strong as it was by the time of the oppositions between Hollywood and avant-gardes. (Aumont 2012,114)

Laurie Anderson's productions have the same capacity of enfolding and creating new objects that, in the eclectic universe she has already built, become self standing

and can bring to the light new forms of art. The creative mixture of materials in *Heart of a Dog* is expressed also in a metonymical way by the fragment that contains text insertions on black screen: "Mountains / They are places / that get mixed/ up together and / flow into each" (min. 13:30). The flowing forms of the techniques build another layer that makes Anderson's film a work of art, rather than a feature film. Beyond the meeting point between video art and cinema, she employs elements that interact with the spectator in ways that can be considered post cinematic.

The visual attraction that is created by hypnotic images of different types: electricity wires, doubled by the unique story of a man who used to repair them for free and keep the community from falling into darkness or from the collapse of communication with the external world, smoke that hides almost entirely the shocking state of the streets after 9/11, pure smoke that fills the gap between two consecutive sequences, the vibrating animation of the portrait of Anderson herself and that of Lolabelle in the space between the worlds and dimensions, the permanence of pulsating white scratches that accompanies the voice over during filmed sequences etc. The overall mixture of genres in the structure of the film transmits, at all levels, the state of mind generated by the atmosphere of a passage, of a last meeting, of the loss of borders between spaces and species, between image and sound, voice and background noises, film, graphics and music. They all flow into each other as the complex artist Laurie Anderson combines them to tell her story about Lolabelle, which at some moments becomes her own story or a story about humanity. The hybrid form of the film has also the quality of reiterating the narrative tension which otherwise could have collapsed at some moments, if we think of the incantatory sound of the voice telling rhythmically the words of the story in a key tone that doesn't change much.

Several film critics have referred to *Heart of a Dog* as an eccentric film essay, based on a leading memory discourse that evokes personal childhood anecdotes and awkward scenes of blind Lolabelle playing the piano. The notion of essay is not to be applied, in my opinion, only to the cinematic aspect of the production, but to its entire hybrid composition.

In *Video Essay: Chaos Cinema*, Matthias Stork discussed several types of video essays that could fit the cinematic field:

[...] I argued that chaos cinema represents a major trend in mainstream action filmmaking. It could be seen as the third stage in mainstream movie storytelling.

The first stage was *classical cinema*. It reigned supreme from the silent era until well into the 1960s. It emphasized spatial clarity, for the most part. The goal was to keep the viewer oriented and involved. You were always supposed to know more or less where you were, where the action took place, and who was involved. And this visual clarity was only disrupted at moments of high tension.

Then came *intensified continuity*. It favors velocity and increases the speed of classical cinema. It still keeps the viewer oriented, but it does so in a more compact form –

almost shorthand. The shots are more succinct, the cutting more aggressive, the camerawork more hectic. This is the old style, reconfigured in a new time.

The third and modern stage is *chaos cinema*. It makes the previous two stages look old-fashioned. The goal is total visceral impact. There is no clear axis of action that tells you where characters and objects are in relation to each other. The action does not have to be comprehensible. It has to be overwhelming. This is not the action that we have come to know in the cinema; it is the general *idea* of action. Chaos cinema is a vehicle for spectacle, a roller-coaster ride. It is designed to showcase *attractions*.

The three stages are by no means mutually exclusive. They are all interrelated and define what we see as the action film. (Stork, *Indiewire*, December 2011)

Stork's distinctions of the cinema stages find echoes in Laurie Anderson's film at several levels and function together the formal attempt to express and connect different stages of perception on the inner and outside reality. The third one however – the chaos cinema – seems more adequate the main structure of *Heart of a Dog* concerning the lack of a clear axis of action and the visceral, overwhelming impact on the spectator. The notion is also applicable to the film in the sense that Stork relates to cinema as a “vehicle for spectacle” and as a “showcase of attractions”.



Laurie Anderson, *Heart of a Dog*, 2015

(<http://europa.otroscines.com/alternativa-inunda-barcelona-cine-independiente>, 25/11/2016)

The spectators who are used to Anderson's performances, often accompanied by visual content could identify in her film compositional themes and recurrent techniques of cutting through narrative fragments, the artist generally using to challenge the public's sensorial capacity and emotional feedback. Chaotic links between the images used in *Heart of a Dog* represent a working method in this case, where logic seems to vanish progressively in after-life territories that Anderson attempts to describe in an imaginary journey of Lolabelle in the *bardo*.

The representation of the dog is a constant transgression from realistic filmed scenes to dreamlike superimposed images and drawn hypostases. The changing

aspect of the way her body is perceived tends to confuse the spectator, but results as a technique used mark the impression created by this character, which is at the same time present and absent. The frame above represents Lolabelle in at least 5 obvious embodiments, in simultaneous actions, angles and dimensions.

This mode of representation is not far from Anderson's performance productions, in which she used multiple screens and other technologies meant to show different sequences or frames at the same moment in time, that function like layers in a bigger temporal and spatial structure. Referring to a state of *in-between*, to Lolabelle's travel after death, these dense simultaneous representations belong to the range of post cinematic effects that Anderson imprinted to her film in order to transfer to the spectator the role of trying to identify a ghostly presence in a transitory imagery.

The Tibetan word for *bardo* is used to designate an intermediate state, a transitory or metamorphic condition. It can also refer to the state of existence intermediate between two lives on earth, like Anderson explains in her monologue which accompanies the train of visions in the film. According to the Tibetan belief, after death and before one's next birth, the consciousness is no longer connected to the physical body, so that the experience of unknown phenomena becomes possible. Anderson's assumed concern with this oriental tradition offers an important key of lecture for her eclectic cinematic production, which eludes, in this sense, the lack of a comprehensible map of relations between characters and places, described by Stork a feature of chaos cinema. Assuming that the technological perception is now part of daily existence and relation to the world, the artist uses it to equally explore after life contingency.

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