



Montage with Images that Don't Exist: Interview with Artavazd Pelechian

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Montage with Images that Don't Exist: Interview with Artavazd Pelechian

François Niney

François Niney: The thing that characterizes your films is that they're composed like music. . . .

Artavazd Pelechian: I think that what you see, you must hear. And what you are supposed to hear, you must see. These are two different harmonic processes. The pioneers of silent film, like Griffith or Chaplin, were afraid that the coming of the talkies would destroy the cinema that they had developed. But I believe they were wrong. Those who were not afraid were wrong too, because they used sound badly; they were content with a synchronous cinema, as in life, of sonic illustration. No one noticed that sound could take the place of the image, and that then the latter could merge with the former.

Niney: Your cinema is also a cinema without actors and without words. . . .

Pelechian: I am convinced that cinema can convey certain things that no language in the world can translate. One can speak of things, but there is a threshold beyond which words do not suffice to get to the heart of the matter. The fact that the word appeals to a thought, to an analysis or to psychology contradicts my conception of cinema as intuition or emotion, as grasping what you see. The existence of the word comes from human relations, while our existence as human beings comes from nature. And as for me, I insist on dealing with our natural being.

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Niney: Does this mean that you believe that, in our forms of representation, the image precedes the word?

Pelechian: I don't want to get into conflict with the Bible [*laughter*]. The Bible gives a certain answer to this question. But there was the Tower of Babel: to punish men, God separated the people into different languages. I myself try to address the common domain that linked humanity before this separation, the domain of emotion. It's not a question of pretension; I believe that cinema as such, and not only my own, possesses the means to realize this ambition.

Niney: The paradox is that in seeing your films, one discovers this possibility as an obvious fact, one that's been forgotten since the pioneers.

Pelechian: I can't do anything about it if others haven't gone deeper into it [*laughter*]. An old Greek dictum says: "*To look at a thing is not necessarily to see it.*" This is what happened with the arrival of sound: it was taken as such, as accompaniment to the image, without it being realized that sound could be substituted for the image. This is what I've tried to put to work in my films.

Niney: In relation to contemporary filmmakers, with whom do you feel affinity? Or do you feel yourself to be isolated?

Pelechian: No, I don't feel myself to be alone, I like the cinema of Pasolini, Resnais, Godard, Antonioni, Fellini. . . . I feel, rather, that my path is unique. Only one other filmmaker is very close to this path: Godfrey Reggio, the director of *Koyaanisqatsi*. Otherwise, I haven't seen anything in recent cinema that is connected to what I call *montage at a distance*.

Niney: Can you explain your theory of montage at a distance, which is based, not on the bringing together of shots, but on the gap between them?

Pelechian: The originality of this theory lies perhaps in this: *a contrario* to montage according to Kuleshov or Eisenstein—for whom putting two shots into relation gives them a meaning—montage at a distance, in keeping apart two shots that speak to each other and have meaning, transmits their tension and makes them speak to each other across the whole chain of shots that links them. For example: Kuleshov-style montage would be a cannon blast followed by the explosion; montage at a distance would be a chain reaction. But there is something in montage at a distance that goes further than an atomic explosion, and that's retroaction, the reverse effect that fastens the sequence or the film onto itself. Flux and reflux. Movement from birth to death but also from death to birth: growth-decline, death-resurrection.

Niney: Is this why one of the central figures of your montages is repetition, the magic by which the same becomes other?

Pelechian: The stages of meaning and emotion are like when one observes an atomic explosion frame by frame, a progression that rises and evolves to a crest. I try to create these stages little by little and not all at once? The explosion takes place and the transformation is created stage by stage, evolution and involution at the same time. An image can be absent, but present by means of its aura. No one has yet done montage with images that don't exist. This is just what I try to do in the architecture of my films: make visible to the spectator images that aren't there. An absent representation can be even stronger. The possibility of the unreal existence of an absent image is what makes for the mystery of montage at a distance.

Niney: In your cinematic montages, the notions of beginning and end of shot, of cause and effect become fluctuating and permutable. . . .

Pelechian: Exactly. It's for that reason that montage at a distance doesn't obey the classical rules of montage: exposition, development, end. The culminating moment can be the beginning, the montage can refuse to obey any established law of progression of the tale. It's a question of circularity: from wherever you look at the earth it's circular, an image must also be that way and the film in its entirety too, in the manner of a holographic vision in which each fragment contains the whole.

Niney: Do you see a link between your cinema and modern physics, in which determinism is no longer absolute but relative and probabilistic?

Pelechian: Montage at a distance offers probabilities without end. We know that scientists like Einstein were strongly influenced by music, or by painting, in the discovery of certain things. The lifetime of the cinema is still short and I am quite convinced that if cinematic art evolves in a good direction, it will inspire scientists in the very explanation of the universe and the organization of life.

Niney: These are considerations that were very valuable in the era of Epstein or that of the surrealists for example, but that seem archaic today from the point of view of the almost exclusively distractive evolution of the cinema.

Pelechian: When I said that music had inspired scientists, I had in mind beautiful music, real music, not supermarket music. It's the same thing for cinema. It's become a commercial industry, but there are the jewels of cinema that can and will be able to be sources of inspiration and knowledge. Films that take cinema seriously can inspire serious scientists. But there is also the market of science. . . . I myself am also dependent on the cinema market, but there will always be people to fight for true cinema. What is required of cinema

today? Psychology, love, stories, because people don't imagine that cinema can go beyond that.

Niney: In order to go beyond that, is doing cinema without actors and without speech an indispensable condition for you?

Pelechian: It's important but it's not obligatory. Let's say that I have no confidence in words, I want to get to this side (*en deça*) of them. And a well-known actor hinders me, how am I going to make a common being of him? I speak of the whole world and to the whole world; the subject of my film is man, it's you, if it's a well-known actor, he'll act as a screen (*faire écran*).

Niney: That means privileging a documentary approach, even if it means making people play themselves (*leur propre rôle*)?

Pelechian: Yes. There is no need to make them play anything else. The important thing is to create the situation, and that they find themselves incorporated into it naturally. . . .

Niney: In this you're close to Vertov and his struggle against filmed theater. . . .

Pelechian: Yes. But I am also far from Vertov because he didn't want to organize anything, he didn't want to create situations, he aspired to seize reality as such, on the spot: *Kino-Pravda*, *cinéma-vérité*. On the contrary, in my films it's rather, as you have written (in *Cahiers du cinéma* June 1989), a "dismantled reality (*réalité démontée*)," a version of reality that's absent from reality, but one that has its own force of reality.

Niney: Your films incorporate original camerawork as well as archival images, direct sounds as well as music. How do you construct your work in concrete terms?

Pelechian: I have an idea for a screenplay and before everything I see the film in its entirety. The music is not necessarily determined in advance, but I hear its rhythms and tonalities. And when I sense that it fits, that it exists, I begin to write the script. But for me the film is already ready, only its technical production remains to be settled in order to convince other people that it can be made. It's a matter of recreating stage by stage—writing, shooting, montage—the film that I've already seen in my head. And there are very few things that can change, some details, but the composition doesn't change. Now, I've already seen the film, but I want others to see it too.

There is an internal, formal necessity in the choice and the arrangement of the different elements. If you break this dish on the ground, with the pieces you can only reconstruct this dish, or else a mosaic, a collage. My goal, when I use archival images, is not to set them out in pieces but to melt them into a primary matter in order to recreate a new form. The camerawork, mine or that

of the archives, becomes material; it's no longer the past or the present. One of the characteristics of my work is to abolish time, to struggle with time, to gain control over transforming it. In one point of montage at a distance you can bring the whole universe in. It's not realistic to think this way, but that's what I feel. Sugar dissolves in tea, you see the tea and you no longer see the sugar; but let's imagine the reverse, wouldn't you say that the sugar contains the tea? It's for this reason that I say that each point of montage at a distance can contain the absolute. The thirty minutes that the new version of *Notre siècle* (*Our Century*) lasts is the time of viewing, but it's not the time of the film. Our bodies are linked to this duration, but our thought, our faculty of representation and the cinema have means of escaping it.

Niney: How do you explain the fact that it has taken so long for your films to be discovered?

Pelechian: One has to believe that some of those in the Soviet Union who had seen my films had not wanted them to be seen elsewhere. Perhaps after seeing my children, the licensed doctors of social realism judged them to be abnormal. So they put them in a drawer. They grew up there. And then there are visitors who came to see these children and they found the children normal, useful to humanity. All I can say is that the pathologist was mistaken.

Niney: Are the pathologists in question still in office?

Pelechian: They change because time has gotten the better of them.

Niney: Your last film, *Notre siècle*, dates from 1982 in its initial version. Can you talk about your next film, *Homo Sapiens*, a project dating back to 1987? Will it resemble the others?

Pelechian: It's still too soon. It will have a cozy air, there will still be no speech, but it will not resemble the others. It's perhaps because we've talked too much about it that it's not yet made [*laughter*]. I can say one thing: its production requires means other than those available in the former Soviet Union, including co-production and special effects.

Translated from the French by Timothy S. Murphy

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