

# ERIC RONDEPIERRE OR WORKING WITH PHOTOGRAMS (BETWEEN SPOT AND TEXTURE)

by **PHILIPPE DUBOIS**

in

*ERIC RONDEPIERRE*, 1993, Bretigny sur Orge, éd. Espace Jules Verne/  
Galerie Michèle Chomette, pp. 28-35.

Photographs are truth, and cinema is  
the truth 24 times a second »  
Jean Luc Godard, *Le Petit soldat*.

## **Photograms in question**

That impossible photogram, as Roland Barthes said. An object which is not (even) an object, but at the same time is actually two objects. It doesn't (really) belong to the cinema or (simply) to photography ; it is more than a photograph yet less than a film. It is, therefore, a sort of axis or fold, the precise crossing point (*punctum*) between cinema and photography. Eminently paradoxical, the photogram is the touchstone of Eric Rondepierre's work which is acutely conscious of the delicate balance on the razor's edge where cinema meets photography in their most intimate specificity.

Eric Rondepierre's work always starts with a film, or more precisely with the image-matter of a film. Rondepierre is not interested in cinema as the reflection-projection of a film on a screen, in a consumer relation to what is watchable, with its imposed length and speed, uninterrupted flow, impression of movement, perceptive fiction, transitory illusion – in other words the magic of the large cinema-body on the screen. What interests him is the film as actual film strip, a material sequence of fixed images intimately and appropriatively related to its object. Film images that you can not only see but also touch, hold, manipulate and collect. In other words, Rondepierre aims at what is most authentically photographic at the very heart of cinema. This is of course profoundly contradictory. The photogram is an impossible object : it is both film's condition of existence and its total negation. Obviously a film consists only of photograms, yet seeing a photogram for what it is (the frozen image of a film) necessarily means not seeing the film, which can only exist fully as movement. Seeing a film flow past automatically implies not seeing photograms, nevertheless the very essence of a film since they disappear, absorbed into the projection process. Photograms are the only real images and the only invisible images in a film. This is the ontological paradox which makes photograms into cinema's blind « spots ».

### **Freeze-Frame**

Eric Rondepierre's first operation, then, is the freeze-frame. This is a strange, almost surgical operation during which the cinematographic body is sliced up into its smallest units, as if it were murdered. In a gesture resembling the initiation sacrifice, the photographic scalpel attacks the great movement-body to « take its cut ». Imagine what happens : you stop the thousands of film images flowing past at random or because you have an intuition. You then look at a fragment of immobility which stays on hold, something you've never seen *in that way* before. Observe, remark, and then begin again. Come and go. Look for the « right » image. First of all, a freeze-frame means looking for the right moment.

It can go on forever, until you find it, until you experience the pleasure of recognition, seeing suddenly in a *single* image what you've never before seen, while watching all the images. Adjust the input, forward a bit, back a bit, and « frame » your frozen image with maniacal precision (the difference between two consecutive 24ths of a second is amazing). Finally it is there, certain and definitive, exactly what you were looking for, without realizing it. You can't believe your eyes but there it is. All you need to do is take a photo of it, and you have the feeling that no one has ever seen what you have seen before. This is the pleasure of discovery, of being the first, like an archeologist after a long excavation revealing what until then had belonged to the unknown. Eric Rondepierre's dig is cinema. The treasures he brings back are discoveries of the invisible. Effect of revelation, of being absolutely dumbfounded.

### **The question of the spot**

What exactly is Eric Rondepierre looking for in this freeze-frame excavation ? Photograms, of course ; but not just any photograms. He's looking for those which are easy to « spot ». A sort of squared photogram (a stain of a stain) so much so that all photograms are by nature, as we have seen, in a stained or spotted relationship with film, something like the blind « spot » of the film. Its ontological invisible. The peculiarity of the photograms chosen by Eric Rondepierre lies in that they represent a spot. These are figurative (photographic) spots inside figurational spots (film). Rondepierre's photogrammatic pursuit uses the freeze-frame to bring *holes* to the visible surface of the film (holes which he calls « surplus images »), moments of visual abnormality, moments of failure (invisible to the ordinary viewer's naked eye) « accidents », « specks of dust », which are usually never noticed at normal projection speed though they are always present on the physical strip of film. These spots, these figurative holes, can be black photograms, for example, image-less (yet with sub-title inserts), as in the series « Plans de coupe ». Or with the « Annonces » series all developed from old trailers for classic American and French films, there are instants of slogan-text added *on top* of the image of the trailer film which cannot yet be read as text since they are still formless, appearing as a sort of blotch of varying size, an incandescent spot disturbing, masking certain parts of the image beneath it. A spot of light text (for b & w) or color text (for the color films) captured at the photogrammatic instant before it becomes readable (in the following photograms, the spot develops and changes into a recognizable, readable advertising logo, a real text). In this series of « Annonces », therefore, the spot principle affects both the visual and textual fields : artistically they are spots of light or color in an image (hence the painting effect I refer to later), while from the textual angle they are « meanings spots » since words have been captured at their undecipherable phase (hence the hieroglyphic or pictogrammatic effect).

By choosing to work exclusively on photograms (the infra-film level), and only choosing photograms which are visually abnormal such as « blacks » (at the infra-image level) or textually illegible (at the infra-text level), Rondepierre obstinately pursues the idea that representation must be grasped in a state prior to, or exterior to, its achieved form ; they must be apprehended in a sort of latent, hidden, buried state, before they have taken real consistency, at a state when all is still possible - the choice of the title of the series

« Annonces » and the singular corpus of trailers is explicit – standing apart, off the straight, out of line, remaining on the edge. Taking a continually displaced, oblique look (as relevant as it is impertinent, as deep as it is scathing) at what is usually thought of as art's centre. Rondepierre does not face things head on as they come at him. He starts from the negative (or even the latent image). He always works on the far hidden side, the unseen, the unheard and the unknown. Because there we find things which are unexpected, flabberghasting revelations. This is the main role of the figure of the spot, so omnipresent and essential to Eric Rondepierre's works. It performs an act of revelation on our blind viewing. Remember how central this almost philosophical figure of the spot is to Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow up*, a film which is the very model of relation between cinema and photography. The whole of Thomas' photographic quest, with its infinite series of blow-ups and his continual journey between reality and image, ends finally in the dissolution of any sense of certainty, of reliability of visual evidence. In the end there are just a few photogrammatic spots, like an abstract painting. Not a representation, but the imaginary existence of a representation.

### **The question of texture : transferred images**

Eric Rondepierre's work does not, however, stop here. The concept of spot grows more complicated in its subtle, variable game with the figure of texture. For him, there are three possible ways in which images move between cinema and photography. First, directly – when he photographs the photogram directly from the film strip. In this case, photography plugs directly in to cinema without any intermediate filter. Rondepierre's latest works in b & w taken from the French trailers come under this process : blow-ups show the very grain, the texture of the photographed photogram. The film material can be seen here in the granularity of the final image, revealing everything which makes it vibrate internally, giving it a slight virtual tremor as if each grain of the film photogram retained its specific temporal density after it had been transferred. The other two methods of moving from cinema to photography are indirect. They go through a series of intermediate states. Either via video (for the b & w series) or by means of the double intermediation of first video and then the pictorial (for the color series). Textures are multiplied. Texture is interstitial, slipping between the warp and the woof, holding the whole together. In this way, video texture is involved in all Eric Rondepierre's early work. He photographed a video cassette of the film rather than the actual film. They are 34 x 36 standard photos of the TV screen (with video freeze-frame), carefully finished printings. In the end, a photo image in which the video texture is plainly visible, especially on the lettering of titles and sub-titles ; on the image's light and grey areas there is a fine honeycomb texture. Only the black surfaces are completely black, without any trace of granularity. In these works (and the b & w makes a major contribution), we can read and see the clear effect of *image layers* with their background depth, basic images, mythological textures – these are cinema itself, with its full charge of evocation (a profile of Ingrid Bergman is enough for a whole word to exist). Above it, there are several superimposed layers ; first the text-spot of trailer advert-slogans, a layer of indecipherable writing which holes, deletes and burns away cinema's image-face in a streak of light (symbolically, it is always the face's orifices that get filled in ; the eyes are blacked out like Michael Strogoff's when the burning sword is passed in front of his eye to make him blind, and above all the mouth, the very source of speech, literally muzzled and silenced by white textual spots). Then comes the layer of video with its fine honeycomb texture spreading like a spider's web. This video texture has the effect of giving greater distance to the original film-image, which now appears submerged like Atlantis beneath the stained web of the ocean.

This enshrouding effect of successive layers of texture is most accentuated with color images. The first three strata are the same – a cinematographic base, a level of writing as textual spots,

and a video texture. But this video image on the screen is not simply photographed and then developed and blown up. It first becomes a color slide, which is projected onto a canvas covered with crumpled paper to give relief. This projected image is then minutely painted according to the format using acrylic. This calls forth the principle of pictorial relation, used by the American Pop Art and Hyperealist painters of the 1960s and 1970s, together with the retouching principle used in family portraits. But with Rondepierre, this slide-based painting is only a transitional phase, (indeed, the canvas will be destroyed later). A new 24 x 36 photograph reproduces the painted image, giving us the final work as it is exhibited, cibachrome prints. As we can see the color images of the « Annonces » series go through a highly complex layering process from one texture to another. This « overttexture » carries multiple meanings : on the one hand a certain intensification (with a derisive wink at the « media inventory » and « material madness » dimension) of the very idea of texture itself, which both plays on supposed distinctive specificities (cinema, writing, video, slides, painting and photography !) yet at the same time renders everything uniform by the end of the process so that the differences end up by canceling each other out in a sort of ultimate photographic nothingness where you can no longer see the cinematic or video texture, or even the brush strokes. Texture is flattened out into a sort of material no man's land. On the other hand, the successive transfers through which the images go represent artistic gestures, acts of appropriation (especially at the painting stage, which is there to inscribe the shift from public to private register, as if to say « I » and rework the colors « manually », playing perversely with the original/ copy relation, or even to produce a sort of distant visual seduction, since Rondepierre admits his pictorial partiality for Matisse and Rothko, etc.).

### **A metaphor for the psychic apparatus ?**

What strikes me most in all this is the principle of texture-filters which seems to me to operate in Rondepierre's artistic strategy like Freud's memory screen. It is a question of masks and shifts, in which the accumulated density of textures only reflects downstream the work that the spot principle has already performed upstream : burying and excavating part of what is invisible (part of the unconscious). Just as the concept of photograms revealed by freeze-frames can be interpreted as a figure of the revelation of film's unconscious. Photography and cinema are merely spots and textures. Don't believe too much in what you can see. Learn to not see what is displayed (and therefore which hides). Learn to see beyond, beside, across and beneath. Look for the spot in the image, texture in the surface, negatives in positives and latent images in the negative ground. Follow once more the route mapped out by the psychic-photographic apparatus, shifting from eye to memory, from appearance to unrepresentable. Dig down through the layers and levels like an archeologist. Photographs are only surfaces, they have no depth, only a fantastic density. Behind it, beneath it or around it, one photo always hides (at least) another photograph, or a film. It is a question of screens, and here you enter in a singular universe, the one of an individual by the name of Eric Rondepierre.

And in this lies one of the possible dimensions of his work – it operates precisely like a psychic apparatus, maybe like Freud's famous little *Wunderblock* the « magic notepad » which in 1925 Freud used as the ideal metaphor for the workings of the first topic of the unconscious : a question of levels, of transparent surface area upon which one writes, and a background layer on which the inscriptions are preserved in *absentia* even when they have been erased from the surface. Photography is the top surface, cinema the background depths and writing the displaced entity. The « Wunderblock » shifts from one to the other, a link, like the photogram which relates photography to cinema. The deep spot (the invisible, the unconscious, the buried object, the lost text) and the texture which brings it to the surface, visible and conscious (the layered pathway to visibility). Coming and going. Directly or mediated. And starting again from the beginning.

