

The Optical Unconscious Matthias Gabi's stolen film images

The act of viewing films is based on a strange paradox: in order to detect movements on the screen, we are not allowed to see what they are actually made of. Or to put it even more radically: you can only see a film if you don't look too closely. If you inspect the film strip more closely, you see that there is no movement in the individual frames of the film strip. The figures in these frames are held in a succession of individual photographic images, permanently trapped in rigid poses. Though they differ from their predecessor and successor through minuscule nuances, each one of these photograms is static. Only by moving this strip of fixed images, sending it at a speed of 24 frames per second through the projection machine, and interrupting its projection by intervals of darkness by the shutter, does the cinematic image begin its semblance of movement on the screen. At a high enough speed, the fixed images begin to flow into one another, so that it appears to our lazy eyes, which can no longer follow the quick jump from one image to the next, as if the figures in the frames would start to move and run. It's all just an optical illusion: the magic of film is based on overlooking (literally) its individual frames.

The photographic work *Filmstill* by Matthias Gabi reverses this act of overlooking. By liberating individual frames from films, isolating them and allowing them to stand for themselves, he essentially exhumes that which was always buried and hidden within the motion picture. In the 1930s, the philosopher Walter Benjamin attested to the miraculous ability of the film camera's mechanical eye to show a reality different from the one we knew in everyday life. For him, the camera, with its ability to show things in completely new ways, presented us with an optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis draws our attention to the unconscious of the human psyche. Matthias Gabi's images, however, show us the optical unconscious of the film itself, those single static parts that make up the illusion of the motion picture, and which we never consciously perceive, and about which the film has always skimmed over in its frenzied speed. For Benjamin, the optical unconscious of film shows itself, when, through close-ups or slow motion, the most inconspicuous body movements and the slightest touches become visible – for example, when a hand reaches for a spoon and skin and metal come into contact. The movie slows down and magnifies its pictures until the micro level of our bodily sensations becomes visible. Matthias Gabi, however, slows the film even more, bringing it to a standstill, so that the film's smallest unit, its nuclear component, the rigid frame is revealed.

It is important not to confuse Gabi's *Filmstills* with the so-called *publicity stills* that the film industry produces for advertising purposes. In a *publicity still*, a photographer present on the movie set takes pictures of situations that occur during the shoot, and sometimes has the performers pose specially for the camera. Made independently of the actual film shoot, these photos already start circulating before the film they advertise is even complete. And later, we will see these *publicity stills* on display in cinema foyers or featured on movie posters. But it's obvious that these images never correspond exactly to what one sees in the actual film. Even when the

photographer forgoes the special poses and only takes pictures during the film shoot, the angle from which he photographs never captures the same perspective that the film camera does, and the framing is also different from the one that will later be viewed on the projection screen. Matthias Gabi's images, however, really do come from film material (or rather from the digital version thereof on DVD) from which he extracts them. And yet: although these isolated images are from the actual film, they are at the same time, paradoxically, much less representative. This is because the images obtained in this way were never meant to be viewed alone, but are actually part of a series, links in a pre-existing chain of images.

The artist isolates a single link from the film and claims this foreign material as his own. In doing so, he creates an odd ownership structure. Although he did not direct the film, from which the images stem, the pictures that he obtains from it seem very much his own. It's like an explorer, who marks out a territory and declares it as his property, despite it's being part of a larger topography.

Art theory refers to this artistic reconfiguration of foreign visual material as *found footage*. This term, however, is misleading. Instead of *found* one should rather speak of *retrieved, stolen, or appropriated* material. The artist does not merely find; he is a virtuous thief, who steals images that we never knew the film possessed. In his hands, an innocuous detail, a mere and literal interval of the filmstrip becomes elevated to a precious icon. The thief is thus also a magician, who creates his own treasures. It's only through the act of stealing that the stolen image is transformed into something new and valuable.

The scissors are a means of production, proclaimed the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein in the 1920s, referring to the editing-*together* of individual sequences into larger narratives. The scissors of Matthias Gabi, on the other hand, cut the film *apart*, dissecting the film body into partial objects. But that itself is no less productive. Detached from their original context, the images are given a life of their own. Only as an amputated limb, cut off from the rest of the film body, does the frame develop an entirely new, unforeseen vitality.

And yet, you can still sense the origin of these amputated partial images, like phantom limb pain, a faint reminder of their former existence. And it is certainly no coincidence that all the images the artist has tracked down and set free for our gaze are of people. Just as he brings the film to a stutter, pausing it and halting the flow of its images, so do the depicted people appear caught in a strange intermediate state, and – like a film strip in its projector – as if they had gotten stuck. They are absent, figuratively as well as concretely: cut off and isolated from their original film sequence, they seem to be in a mental and emotional limbo, lost in an in-between world. Their gaze looks into emptiness, an invisible space outside of the frame, and we can't know what is there, and even when the people look straight into the camera, we can only guess at what they see there.

If we could project the films from which Matthias Gabi retrieved his subjects, then they would show us who or what the gaze was directed at, and if they are indeed alone, as implied by the still image, or actually in dialogue with someone else. Could this be the reason why we remember

these pictures, because they were not created like other photographs, but are instead isolated film stills? Don't we instinctively sense that the pictures we see should actually be moving, continuing, in order to show us what they are about?

Filmstill by Matthias Gabi, however, resolutely denies us such closure. This is no film trivia quiz, where the individual images should be paired with their original source. It's not important whether we recognize the photographed people as movie stars like Tom Cruise or Clint Eastwood, nor that we know what film the images come from. Seeking such lines of descent leads down false trails, and distracts us from the quite mind-boggling insight that these images must be read anew, independently and differently than was ever intended by the directors and cameramen who originally captured them on film. By stealing these images from their films, Gabi also extricates them entirely from their interpretive authority.

Instead, the optical unconscious of film, the single frame, which it otherwise always overlooked, begins to tell its own, unknown story. Similar to free association in analysis, the unconscious begins to speak, if given the space. The extracted film still begins to tell a story, in dialogue with us who are looking at them. And so, from the found, fixed, isolated, amputated, stolen, seized, rigid, immovable single frame, there emerges once again a film. As we regard all these thoughtful characters, we start to link these images with one another, mentally. In our mind the chain of images starts to move, again. A new film begins, in our head. And now we probably comprehend where the enigmatic, blank gaze of the figures is directed: at us, their viewers. The pictures were always in dialogue with none other than ourselves, who see them. What is the images' unconscious? It's us.

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