

IN MEMORIAM DAVID PERLOV

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The delicate motion, the dynamic balance, the play between freedom and control, between the little everyday chaos and the sense of order -- these are the first parameters of our visual reality. That visual reality can grant meaning without subjugating it to dogma, that it instructs empathy, that it helps us navigate between the "grand History" and the "little History" of our daily surroundings – this we still learn from the work of David Perlov.

A 1980 lecture in the form of a letter by Roland Barthes to Michelangelo Antonioni articulates precisely the subtlety of a filmmaker whose strength of vision was based in a willful vulnerability, whose grasp of reality was continually redefined, in repeated struggles, because of his reluctance – a reluctance of the true artist – to preach, to raise banners, to participate in any power game. It is not easy to observe a teacher, a master, a father, persist in that refusal of negotiation with power. In place of the facile oppositions of power, Barthes observed, Antonioni's sense of the modern "is on the contrary an *active* difficulty in following the changes of Time, not just at the level of grand History but that of the little History of which each of us is individually the measure." In every move, every decision, in the routines of working, teaching – but even in his way of walking, looking, seeing, being unable not to see, unable to forget any detail, unable not to place it in precise relation to those hundred other details, seemingly

surface occurrences that make up the fabric of daily life – in this Perlov was Historical. In the care and strength of his look was also his passion, and his intervention.

We learn from his *Diary* the weight, the gravity of surface forms. Cinema teaches us to draw the decisive links, to discern patterns, relations between people, between people and things: to return, to persist, even across diverse times and spaces, in the difficult yet daily questions of our place in the world. Is this a particularly Jewish question? Perlov gives it specificity, a completely personal turn which is at the same time emblematic. Material detail, movement, gesture, caught on film, acquire the responsibility which is now, as well, that of the filmmaker: the hands of one talking in a café, the hands of one sculpting in clay, the hands of one, dying, gesturing to the ceiling, the hands of one describing a fall, a death. At times, in the *Diary*, it is the camera's own gesture, tilted down, or the command of editing that discloses a burden of expression, turning to formal control and distance so as to maintain a coherent syntax.

To maintain a steady look, to invest full and serious interest in the anonymous exchanges between children in a street corner across from one's window. To return daily, with new questions, to the intersection of Ibn Gvirol and Shaul Hamelech Streets. No, it is not a transparent barometer of Israeli life; the intersection is opaque. But looked at from above, then from ground level, with a street sweep and with a bicycle rider, then in relation to interiors, to the television

screen – looked at with a well-articulated question (which is often the question of an editor) will yield a history lesson. The repeated, willful yet vulnerable look has positioned Perlov in an oblique relationship to the impositions of the fanatic glance, to the deafness of rhetoric, to the violent articulations and expressions of power. The rest of us resort to a more obvious argument, a verbal (and often verbose) extraction in the form of debate, a conclusion already projected in our first encounter with an image. Then we do not look again or, in any event, we do not see. Patience with the visual surface as it unfolds over time escapes, therefore, even the greater part of filmmakers who think they can rush in, through their “medium,” to a direct engagement. Perlov’s clarity is strong and subtle. Once extracted as a gaze, as cinematic form, its authority is decisive.

In the early 1980s Perlov was editing the *Diary*, a labor that demanded the concentrated efforts of memory, critically revised, the honesty and strength of intellectual elaboration without loss to the fragile expression, the passionate realization of something once captured by a camera. I consider myself lucky to have seen him at work in the course of one year accompanying him, as well, to some of his classes in the university. A diagram sketched on the blackboard, following Antonioni’s *L’avventura*, registered deeply in my way of seeing, fiction or documentary, thereafter. Perlov did not interpret, he described what we had seen: the island, a closed form sketched as a circle: that island where one girl disappears and another emerges within a wild natural setting that refuses to be fully comprehended or rationalized by the camera. A line extended from here

along the length of the blackboard to another closed form: this, Perlov suggested, is the built piazza, that architectural marvel that echoes and reverses the entity that was the island. I am quite certain that he meant the Piazza in Noto, that Baroque Sicilian town where we witness what is surely the undoing of the male protagonist. There are other spaces and digressions in *L'avventura*, but in identifying a decisive itinerary in that complicated film, Perlov showed that the cinematic conception of place, of the narrative threads that (even in a documentary) lead from one place to another, has a decisive bearing upon our conception of fallible human experience, configured in time, through which we first maneuver without certainty. That elegant formal chart, with the circles and the line connecting them, vaguely reminiscent of the film reels themselves upon a projector (in the old days when we still handled and learned from 16mm stock) also taught me to look at Perlov's *Diary*, with its recurring urban forms, its intersections, its symmetries with whose constrictive terror one must struggle – perhaps turning them to starting points for new departures.

These terrors and rewards of return, the circular draw of coincidence, the intersections of fate (marks on a tree, the shape of a bridge, of a staircase, the technical flaws that inscribe certain shots), the magical fascination with numbers and colors (two, three, white, black, red), the diverging itineraries of the twins, the eyes (two eyes, one eye, the ophthalmologist at work, the one-eyed subjects of Bonnard and Rembrandt), trains and train tracks, trams and tram tracks. Can an entire life experience – an unprotected childhood, a sequence of geographical displacements, the “dark landscape of European anti-Semitism,” and the searing

Israeli light – can all of these suddenly merge with shattering realization in an image? This is not “the banal, the minor, the everyday, the commonplace” documented, like a chronicle, in the raw. Rather, it adds up to systems of recognition and knowledge. In this way one man’s itinerary, one man’s Diary, becomes exemplary: in its surface forms the experience of peoples, cities, historical moments coalesce.

Aesthetics is not a decoration, not a luxury, it is not dissociated from the substance of things, from their inner logic and, indeed, from the ideologies that propel them. Because aesthetics has to do with choice, with judgment, it has a moral weight. Cinema grasps even the deepest relations as a visual surface in which choice and coincidence, determination and contingency oscillate at every turn. It teaches us to live in a world in which things persist and things change, in which some things must change; it offers us models by which to adjust our perception in the constant, active difficulty of time’s unfolding.

On the occasion of the first anniversary of his death, I see David Perlov’s *Diary*: it breathes, it thinks, it is altered by time. This is as it should be.

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