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Film-Letter: The Beginning, Exchanging and Narration in Jonas Mekas and José Luis Guerín's *Correspondence*

Abstract: In 2011, Jonas Mekas and José Luis Guerín finished their collective film project, *Correspondence: Jonas Mekas – J. L. Guerín*, a series of 'film-letters' between the two contemporary filmmakers. The film starts with Guerín (*Letter to Jonas Mekas no. 1*), and ends, also with Guerín (*Letter to Jonas Mekas no. 5*). The film includes nine film-letters between the two. The film is interesting, as it is not only a project across time and space – it took three years to complete, and the correspondences sent and received from numerous locations across the globe – but is also that rarest of filmmaking, so close to diary film and first-person cinema, yet with something different waiting to be discovered.

In this paper I shall discuss the following characteristics in the film correspondence between Guerín and Mekas, in order to give a clearer picture of what exactly is a film-letter:

- 1) When is the (real) beginning of film-letters?
- 2) The continuity and exchange of the filmed subjects and themes.
- 3) The narration: the use of images plus voice-overs in film-letters.
- 4) The question of audience.

Keywords: Jonas Mekas; José Luis Guerín; correspondence; film-letter; epistolary; diary film

What is film-letter?

The film-letter by definition is a correspondence, in the form of the exchange of film between two people, and through the epistolary structure "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning".¹ It can also be seen as a variation of the diary film, as it corresponds highly with personal means of expressions, and each film-letter can be seen as a diary entry, which simultaneously moves along with the time in terms of narrative structure. These characteristics are seen especially in the case of Mekas and Guerín, in which they record their daily life and thoughts and send them to each other. It represents a process of collective writing/filming and exchanging in which

¹ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolary: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 4.

the authorships were constructed in the correspondence. In this paper I shall discuss the following characteristics of the film correspondence between Guerín and Mekas, in order to give a clearer picture of what is a film-letter in terms of narrative approach and its relation to personal filmmaking.

The (real) beginning

Every narrative has its beginning, middle and end. This is also true in film-letters. In a traditional narrative scenario, the structure is clear, the story proceeds from the beginning to the end. However, in film-letter, I would suggest that the idea of beginning could be replaced by initiation. How a correspondence of film-letters is constructed could be more complicated than first thought. There's another mode that exists in film-letters, which is that the beginning of the correspondence narrative has to be initiated by someone, whether it is a proposing of a film-letter correspondence between two parties, or it is an actual sending of the first letter as the starting point. This initiation may be inside or outside the diegesis of the film-letters. After the initiation, the film correspondence commences as one sends out the first letter and the other party receives and responds to it. This mode of back-and-forth therefore constructs the entire narrative of the correspondence. According to Alain Bergala, in the transmission of film-letters, the narrative is like a game of tennis or chess, "how two letters linked to each other? This is a question that is as essential, in correspondence, as the question of how two hits are linked to each other for tennis. Or, in a game of chess, how two consecutive moves are linked."² Bergala focuses on the structure of the correspondence as a series of linked actions that keep the correspondence going. However, I'm more interested in how the narratives linked, continued, or digressed in a film correspondence between two parties.

There exists a rule of game, even though it based on the back-and-forth of two parties, there is always someone who must take responsibility to activate the narrative. Before sending the first letter to Mekas, Guerín kept thinking about which would be the first image of the first letter to send to Mekas. This explains the importance of the role of the initiator. The person has some kind of power; he or she can decide the tone, the topic and the style of the entire exchange. Of course this is not to say that the other person is less important. The receiver, after reading the first letter, also has a choice, the same as in tennis and chess, of responding or ignoring the things mentioned in the first letter. And of course, he can also bring up a totally different subject in the second letter. Hence, in a film correspondence, the relationship is built based on dialogues, responses and exchanges. Every narrative in a film correspondence has something in common: its either continues the previous topic and responds to it, or it comes up with a different subject and throws it back to the initiator.

² Alain Bergala, "I'm Writing You These Images..." *The Complete Letters: Film Correspondence* (CCCB, 2011), 261.

Although in the first letter we see that sending date is November 21, 2009, one may ask if it is the real beginning of the entire correspondence narrative? The answer might be no. In the first letter to Mekas, Guerín mentions: "I'm musing over your letter in a railway station bar." The letter Guerín refers to includes what Mekas said to him about his own filming approach: "I react to life." This voice-over is important in terms of establishing the real beginning of the narrative: It helps us to identify the initiation of the nine film-letters, and also demonstrates that, prior to the beginning of the correspondence, the two had actually met. This meeting appears in Guerín's other film *Guest*, in 2010. In it Guerín and Mekas sit together in a New York café, take out their cameras and film each other.

As mentioned earlier, in a correspondence it is important that the initiator decide the tone and topic of the exchange. At first glance, it seems that Guerín established the tone – cinema, filmmaking, and life – in the first letter of the correspondence. However, it appears that the real initiator of the of the correspondence was Meka, with his declaration "I react to life." In truth, his statement set the trajectory of the following eight film-letters, discussing life and cinema, which was initially raised by Mekas in 2010.

The continuation or changing of subject

For a correspondence to proceed and continue, there has to be something to ensure that. Whether it is through the acts of repeatedly sending and receiving between two parties, or it is through elaborating, developing or even changing the topics in the film-letters.

In the nine film-letters between Guerín and Mekas, we can observe many examples of the continuation of a similar topic, including the real beginning of the exchange in what Mekas says about the cinematic formulation: "I react to life". In the first letter, Guerín picks up this topic and responds to it. In the beginning of the first letter, as the airplane is landing, Guerín's voice-over begins narrating how he's sitting in a cafe at Gare de Lyon in Paris and observing passersby. We see Guerín's notebook on the table, and on the page there's the word "FILM". In this first letter, Guerín starts the correspondence by choosing, either on his own or as a means of responding to Mekas, by discussing cinema and life. Near the end of the first letter, he finds his answer on the revolving door in the railway station, with the images of passersby reflected on the glass. This cinema life theme is also continued in the second letter. Mekas responds to Guerín, where he shows him what his life is like in his apartment, where we see a cat playing with a cotton ball and people dancing for no specific reason.

In addition to cinema and life, the seasons also factor into these film-letters. At the beginning of the second, Mekas films the snowfall outside his window. Snow is riffed on again in the third letter, when Guerín and his friends visit wintry Lake Walden (an inter-textual relation here between Thoreau's *Walden* as well as Mekas's *Diaries, Notes and Sketches a.k.a. Walden*). However, as the letters proceed, the season

changes; in the fourth letter, Mekas also films the blooming tree outside his window and says: “last time I wrote you, it was winter. And now, the spring!” And then Mekas shows to Guerín his editing table at home, and his 30-year-old footage of friends and family. “Fading, my footage is fading,” he says.

This can be seen as a change of topic, from the four seasons to old footage and memories. Guerín, in the fifth letter, also responds to this sudden change and shows Mekas his footage too. Guerín videotapes his friend Nika Bohinc, a film critic killed in the Philippines in 2009, thus shifting the film-letter’s topic from memory to death. Death then centers the following film-letters, as well as life and cinema. And in the final letter from Guerín to Mekas, it transforms yet again to something else when he shows Mekas the footage he shot years previous in Japan, in the Kita-Kamakura cemetery where Yasujiro Ozu is buried. The big letter engraved on Ozu’s tombstone that says “Mu (nothingness)”, gives a closure to the final letter and lends to the ending a feeling of Zen.

Images versus words

Both Guerín and Mekas utilize off-screen narration in their film-letters. The use of the voice in first person filmmaking has become a common approach which not only incorporates the authorial “I” into the film, but also functions as a vehicle allowing the filmmaker to shuttle between filmed images and the voice-over, and to travel between the past and the present.

Gerard Genette raises the concept of “paratext” as “a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations”³ If we use this concept to understand the postcard or letters, we will find out that there’s a binary text-paratext situation underway. According to Genette, the function of paratext is to “display text, to make text present and to ensure the text’s presence in the world”⁴ However, in Jacques Derrida’s mind, the text/paratext, the front/back, the sequential order, and the relationship between sender and receiver, will not be a binary relation due to the transmission quality of the letters and the temporal delay and asynchronization caused by sending and receiving. In letters/postcards, these differences are meant to happen.

When we receive a postcard, do we behold the picture first or do we read the written words? Which side is the front and which side is the back? Derrida, when discussing postcards, raises a crucial concept. He says: “what I prefer, about post cards, is that one does not know what is in front or what is in back, here or there, near or far [...] Nor what is the most important, the picture or the text. And in the text, the message or the caption, or the address.”⁵ So the question now returns to images and words. Which one is the text and which one is the paratext? Does Genette’s concept of

³ Gérard Genette, *Paratext: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 13.

paratext really suitable for letters and postcards? Is it true that one is more important than the other?

Alain Bergala in his article "I'm Writing You These Images ..." mentions that in film- letters, there exists an "image plus words model"⁶ in terms of the relationship between image and words – a tradition that also comes from postcards. On the front there are images of an objective representation of the world, and on the back, there's someone's subjective written words. In Bergala's point of view, the importance of the image and written words are related to the issue of authorship. In a traditional writing scenario, authorship can be identified by words written by the writer's hand. However, in film, this identity has always raised doubts. Astruc's *caméra-stylo* does foresee the possibility that cinema will eventually become a means of personal expression through the act of writing "ideas directly on film"⁷. And yet we are also constantly reminded by Elizabeth Bruss' seemingly impeccable argument that "[f]ilm lacks the capacity for self-observation and self-analysis that we associate with language and literature."⁸ The issue of authorship has always been essential in first-person filmmaking. For there's no image that clearly says "I" due to the intermediary of the film camera between the author and the images filmed. However, in the film-letter, as Bergala argues, the "image plus words model" can somehow provide a different perspective of examining the issue of authorship, especially in Bergala's argument that the postcard is the combination of objective images and subjective written words. In film-letter, the "image plus words model" could also be considered as a new way of the registration of the authorship through the use of the voice-over.

Similar to the diary film, in film-letters the author sometimes utilizes voice-over to establish his or her authorial presence. This is quite obvious in the case of Mekas. This real voice of the sender can sometimes be so strong, that the presence of "I" in the voice is superimposed on the images, and in a certain way, "imprints upon them 'from outside' a subjectivity"⁹. When this (image plus words) happens, the "I" becomes something much more singular and physical. The strong presence of authorship in the voice helps the images connect to the author. And even sometimes when the author is absent from the image, this connection still lasts throughout the film.

The question of audience

The question of audience is also essential in first-person/personal filmmaking, including the essay film, the diary film, and also the film-letter. In essay film, according to Laura Rascaroli, a space or gap is opened to allow a dialogue or a conversation between the filmmaker and the audience. In the diary film, the filmmaker is making

⁶ Bergala, "I'm Writing You These Images..." 264.

⁷ Alexandre Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra-Stylo*," in *The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, ed. Peter Graham (London: British Film Institute, 2009), 32.

⁸ Elizabeth W. Bruss, "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 298.

⁹ Bergala, "I'm Writing You These Images..." 246.

films primarily for him or herself, while also opening a space for the audience to “enter or leave at will”.¹⁰ However, in the film-letter, there’s a slight difference. Unlike the essay film or film diary, the audience here is no longer implied or imagined, but an intended audience. From the very outset, it is very clear that it has taken the existence of the other viewer – the intended recipient – very much into account. For film-letter the position of the audience is somewhere between public and private: the film opens to a very specific audience (the recipient) but stays closed to other people. For example, Guerín sends his film-letter to Mekas, and Mekas responds to Guerín. This can be seen in the title cards in the beginning or the ending of every film-letter, (such as “Letter to Jonas Mekas”, “Dear Jose Luis”, “Dear Jonas, I’m sending you these images ...”).

The two filmmakers may or may not be close in the very beginning, however they share something in common. In the case of Guerín and Mekas, it is cinema. Here, it is a little different from the diary-writing situation, which the author only writes to him/herself. In the film correspondence, it begins with something the two have in common. And as the correspondence proceeds, they get to know each other more as they become confidants, or lovers. There’s always tension between sender and receiver. They find each other a person they can actually talk to, but at the same time there’s always misunderstanding, mistrust, anxiety, not only for the waiting for the other to reply, but also for that “a letter’s original meaning and intention are never completely received”.¹¹ This seems to be the original sin of the correspondence: the time difference between sender and receiver, the different geographical locations, and the excessive waiting.

Conclusion

After Mekas sends the eighth letter, on January 27, 2011, he waits anxiously for Guerín’s reply. On February 3rd, he writes, possibly by email, to Guerín: “Jose Luis, How’s our film coming along? Is everything going well? I’m eager to see how all the letters work together. We have a lot of snow here again! It’s fantastic. See you soon!”¹²

From Mekas’s letter we can see that, in film correspondence, especially in the case of Mekas and Guerín, even they already knew from the beginning that this project would have only nine film-letters, but during the process neither of them knew what the project would turn out to be. In correspondence, the situation is like a game of an add-on story. The sender and the receiver are supplementary to each other in the collective writing process, in what is essentially a two-person game. So, how does a film correspondence end? In Guerín’s final film-letter to Mekas, we see that he starts to summarize things mentioned in previous letters. And when he shows the engraved

¹⁰ Ming-Yu Lee, “Diary Film in America and in Taiwan: Narrative, Temporality, and Changing Technology” (PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015), 140.

¹¹ Bernard Duyfhuizen, “Epistolary Narratives of Transmission and Transgression,” *Comparative Literature* 31, 1 (1985): 5.

¹² Bergala, “I’m Writing You These Images...,” 279.

letter on Ozu's grave, it gives the film correspondence an open ending rather than a closure. As in correspondence, it has to stop at some point, whether sender or receiver like it or not. But, again, there will always something more to say.

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