

The Death of the Reel: Harnessing the Image in Marc Lafia's Permutations

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1. Why the rules? Becoming the agent of the image

There are rules.

1. All images are created on the same day (in this case, an image is a video clip).
2. There is no post-production—no editing of the images, no sound added.
3. The artist chooses which images will appear in the final form; he is not obligated to choose all the images from that day.
4. The images are displayed in a grid of 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, or 12 screens.
5. While all the images move simultaneously, we only hear the sound of one playing at a time. When the sound of the first image is done, we hear the sound of the second; then the third, and so on. The film ends when the sound of the final image is done.

But why rules? The answer is simple: to render the artist a productive cog, a facilitator. Not so as to self-efface or deconstruct the artist's authorship but rather to allow the image its force, the force immanent to it. By following these rules, Lafia becomes the agent of the image and its momentum, power, consistency, rhythm, duration.

In A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari proffer three modes of artist production that correspond, more or less, to three historical eras: the classical, the romantic, and the modern.¹

The classical artist, they claim, is he who lends form to the formless, who forges the very world itself, Yahweh amidst the clay, artist as god. The romantic artist, on the other hand, speaks the forces of the earth: The mountains! The ocean! The undulations of this earthly world!

The modern artist, meanwhile, harnesses the forces of the cosmos. He stands amidst the fray of the cosmic winds, amidst the great swirls of galaxies just taking shape, at the limit of sense, at that precarious juncture of order and chaos. And rather than extending his will over this great

teeming, he proffers a gesture or two, hedging here and there, allowing these forces to express themselves within these or those stipulations. The modern artist remains at the periphery of this production, lending shape but not shaping, allowing a form to become, not forging the form.

This artist faces two risks. On the one hand, chaos: the production never comes to the fore as it is torn asunder by the very forces it seeks to harness. Look at Lafia's films: they are constantly on the verge of collapse, of veering off the screen and back into the teeming chaos of the cosmos (what Joyce and Guattari call "the chaosmos"). Each Permutation risks nonsense, pure babble, form never quite coalescing, no consistency ever getting a foothold, as it were. In fact, we might say that each Permutation slides here and there into the chaosmos as it takes its shape before our eyes, a relentless movement from nonsense to sense, from sense to nonsense.

The other risk of the modern artist is too much form, over-doing it, dampening or deadening the forces of the cosmos. Lafia avoids this risk by disallowing any post-production editing. And by the play of sound that persistently recasts each image: as the sound of one image plays, it inflects all the other images thereby letting this shape of the cosmos—this shape right here, before our eyes—emerge and play as it will.

Lafia, then, is not a filmmaker or photographer. He does not capture or create images; he accrues them. Lafia is an agent of the image; he does its bidding. He is not the embodied eye lurking behind or within the technology; he does not "use" the camera to express himself or his vision or the world. On the contrary, the camera uses him. Or rather, the image uses him and the camera is one component of the image. Of course, Lafia is not irrelevant; he is a productive cog within this image-making machine. After all, the images in Permutations are beautiful. Lafia has good taste, his eye and ear function as an effective screen, letting these images through but not those. The image might beckon but he gets to choose which will make its way—which is lucky for us.

But he is not the master. Lafia heeds the call of the image by putting the tools of imaging in play (his cameras and computer) and proliferating images. In the great horror film, The Ring, we hear a different call of the image. The image looks like us, it moves seemingly like us, it seems to have emotions—*and yet it has no body!* It just keeps repeating itself, demanding its own repetition. The movie ends with the protagonist finally heeding the image's call: Copy me! Copy me!

Lafia heeds a different call of the image. Not copy me, copy me but: Images! Images! Images! More images! Different images! The Ring and Permutations, then, offer the two different demands of the image, the two modes of the image's dissemination. On the one hand, a repetition of the same, copying to infinity, the same image again and again. On the other hand, the proliferation of images, a rain of difference—the image as a permutation and not as copy.

If we wanted to compare Lafia to a god-figure, that is, if we wanted to imagine him as artist and not just as agent of image, we would have to summon Leibniz's god. In the Monadology, Leibniz puts forth a universe with the greatest possible variety that still enjoys order. The god of this world, the god of the Monadology, is a most generous god: every second, he emits hundreds, thousands, millions of singularities: he rains monads. This is Lafia with his camera and his computer, raining singular images, a great baroque proliferation of difference, the greatest possible difference while still making sense, still enjoying order.

2. Why these rules? Imaging and the rise of the banal

What is the status of the day in this production? The images may all come from the same day but this is not a diary, this is not a capturing of the everyday, a recording of this beautiful life. The Permutations are not a testament or confession; they are not the expression of a person's life; they

are not a record. Just look at them. Images of The Matrix playing on a tv might help fix these films in time but when we see Taxi Driver as well, we are no longer in a given historical moment. A Modigliani painting as it lies in a book; shadows cast on some wall, somewhere; a black workman speaking French; disembodied hands scrubbing a wall: these are not markers of memory, records of events, but sense-affects.

And while there are images of children playing, bathing, talking, of parties and drinking and strangers on the street, the status of the image is only begged. These historical images are not the spine, the root, around which the other images revolve. On the contrary, the displacement or nomadism of the sense-affect images send the historical-familial images on their way, uprooting them, leading them outside their domestic fixity and into the world as image. And what we learn is that the banality of the image is not bereft of memory and its pathos but is one of its many affects. (The Permutations can be quite moving; the image, it seems, can be effective without reminding us of an event that was effective. The image itself is the moving event, even as it bares traces of past events, as it forges new ones, as it becomes.)

These images, then, are not mnemonics, even if they may occasionally and also function as such—that is the way of the image. Or rather, that is *a* way of the image. These images offer themselves, these modes of going, these assemblages of affect. They do not point to reality; they are not derivative; they are sites of difference, the world creatively repeating itself. Hence, the database: removed from so-called context, the database enjoys the image indifferently, without recourse to the real.

Why, then, the single day? *Because the image is an everyday event.* The image is relentless, pervasive, ubiquitous. And endlessly banal. The image is not a symbol of something else; that would be a symbol, not an image. And image is an assemblage of sense-affects. The

camera—and perhaps we're all cameras—does not look behind the world happening. How could it? It does not peel back the surface of the world to reveal what lurks below or within; it proffers the world precisely and solely as it appears. In this world of the image, all there is is what happens. The image is not a monumental event; it is an everyday occurrence.

Watch a movie, any movie. Look at what's on the screen: there all kinds of things. We don't just see the narrative or the character; we see some loose change, a pair of underwear, someone walking by, cars passing, a cup of coffee, some grime on the wall. The camera does not isolate concepts, despite the best attempts by classical photography. Think of still-life flowers on a black background; it is an attempt to put blinders on the camera, to avert its eye from the banal, to force it to capture pure concept. But the camera-eye sees what it sees; it sees what passes before it. It makes no distinctions, it introduces no categories. The camera-eye is thoroughly stupid, indifferent, non-sentimental and non-conceptual. The banality of the image does not stand in counter-distinction to the profound. To the camera-eye, all there is is the banal. *The images come from a single day because images are quotidian.*

But the single day rule seems to subscribe to the category of the day, a category that the camera itself does not know. That is to say, if the camera knows nothing, if it is so thoroughly stupid, how does it know what a day is, when it begins and ends? Or, for that matter, what a beginning and an end even are?

The camera is part of a machinery; it is one component within this imaging-complex. And this particular imaging-complex not only proliferates images into the chaosmos; it attempts to harness the force of the images it proliferates. This entails stipulations, the introduction of the hedge as a way to nudge these forces—the speeds and rhythms and consistencies and varied durations of

these images—this way and that so they can differentiate themselves. This hedging can happen in a variety of ways; the single day rule is one of these ways.

In some sense, then, it is arbitrary: it could have been every 74 hours, every 10 minutes, whenever the whim struck Lafia. And from the perspective of the viewer, it doesn't really matter—one day, 10 days, 14 hours, ten minutes. The rule is not a constraint on our viewing but on production. It places Lafia, the camera, and the image within a particular temporal architecture. And it's an architecture that seems to suit all parties. With the coming and going of light, images are born.

Does the grid seem too rigid? How else might the images be distributed? Certainly, each film could enjoy a different architecture, an architecture immanent to it—different screen sizes filling the screens at ever-differing angles. But that would move the artist from periphery to center as he would have to consider the weight of all the different images (even if he came to occupy the center of an ellipse, the weight of the images occupying the other center). The grid, in its clarity and stupidity, its rigorous indifference, fosters a kind of democracy that allows each image its day.

3. Sound, Space, Sequence and the Architectonics of Film

It is a mistake to assume that the image is visual. There are sound-images, smell-images, concept-images, touch-images, emotion-images. An image is a local assemblage of affect. Etymologically, there is no necessary correlation between the visual and the image. When we say, then, that Permutations harnesses the force of the image, we are not just speaking of what we see.

Sound plays a conspicuous role in the Permutations: it is the duration of this or that film (can we call a single "Permutation" a film?). In fact, if we are to say that these films have any sequence,

we would have to say that it is a product of the sound. The sound of the individual images play sequentially, moving from left to right along the grid; when the last image is done saying what it has to say, the film is done. If the stitch between images in most movies stems, if from nothing else, from the movement of the film through the projector, the stitch in Permutations between the different images stems, if from nothing else, from the sound.

But it is an odd stitch, forging an odd sequence. For while the sound moves linearly, the effect is anything but linear as the sound that nominally comes from one image might as well come from any or all the images. After all, the sound does not move from speaker to speaker; it shifts, morphs, an aural permutation. And as an image is at once visual and aural (as well as emotive, conceptual, affective, and so on), the linear trajectory of the sound finds itself ricocheting here and there, inflecting and deflecting the play of pathos and vision of each image as well as of the whole. The temporal movement of the sound, then, perpetually reshapes the space of the film.

But the relationship between the visual and the aural has already been severed then multiplied. Each image is aural; some are more articulate than others. But this sound does not function as a caption to the visual; the sound is neither explanation nor ornament. For instance, we see a page turning as we hear music: is there a relationship between the two affects? The music does not tell us how to feel; the visual is not an illustration of the music. The relationship is not one of conceptual conspiracy. And yet there is necessarily a relationship, between the visual and the aural in any given image as well as between the aural of one image and the visual of any other image. Hence, even without the sequence of the sound relentlessly shifting the inflection of each image, the conceptual collaboration between the visual and the aural has already been severed. Each film is already a permutation as its internal borders relentlessly shift.

But then how are we to watch these films? In the monolithic screen, we know just where to look: the screen is the stage where all the action unfolds before our eyes. But the Permutations scatter the gaze. Our eyes scan this way and that, at once focusing on particular moments, gestures, sounds, sentiments, while taking in the whole. The Permutations are not just gestalt (although the role and function and relative priority of the gestalt shifts from film to film, from Permutation to Permutation); the radical particularity of this or that image within the film belies a general consumption. We become fixed on this or that image, even as our vision is inundated from the periphery. Or else we keep scanning, focusing for a fleeting moment here then moving on, trying to get a perspective of the whole, a perspective that rarely coalesces (it depends on the film).

Permutations radically recast the architectonics of film. We are not confronted with a linear time, with a contiguous sequence *but with a spatialization of the moving image* (the phrase is the artist's). The reel has been consumed by the computational and splayed. Lafia's great discovery is that we don't have to run films through projectors, through a technology that begs for linearity. This is not to say that all projector-run films are linear, that there aren't great films that move in multiple directions even as they wind their way through their reel. There are hundreds of great examples, from Antonioni to Welles to Greenaway to Lynch. But Lafia's work marks a disjuncture, a lateral leap, a fundamentally different way of thinking film—its creation as well as its consumption.

By spatializing cinema, Lafia in fact rids film of its spatiality. This is a space that is thoroughly saturated with time, that is always and already temporal. Perhaps another way to say that Lafia spatializes cinema is to say he polytemporalizes it. The space of Permutations is, just as its title suggests, always in motion, always shifting, morphing. But we cannot measure the movement by the space covered. This is the computational, the algorithmic; movement is immanent to its space as its always sorting, making sense, making decisions (not choices). There is not space on one

hand, movement on the other: this is the pure moving image, the image that will always already have been moving. They are not going anywhere, there is no *telos*. As Bergson would say, these films *endure*, they are their respective durations. And, thanks to the multiplication of the screen, these images are allowed the chorus of their voices, the diversity of their temporalities. In the words of Deleuze, the Permutations give us images of time.

Of course, all images may very well be in motion. This is what Bergson and Deleuze tell us. But what Lafia does is explode the image, banishing the very possibility of the so-called still, allowing the image its temporal diversity. By killing the reel and multiplying the screen, Lafia becomes the image's most obedient agent. "Finally," the images in Permutations declare, "finally we can breathe, go as we go, along diverse temporal tracks, side-by-side, a simultaneity that is not spatially constrained, a contiguity that is not sequential. Here, we can play." It's as if the moving image wound out of its reel in order to forge a technology that suits it better.

4. Permutations, or Towards an Tropology of the Image

And so we return to our question: how are we to watch these films? So far, all we've discussed are the conditions of these films. These conditions are no doubt quite complex, fundamentally recasting the space, production, and consumption of cinema. They shape the work, inflect it, limit it, steer it: the medium is the message. But what of the films themselves?

As they are Permutations, there is no one effect or affect, no general claim we can make that will sum them up, put them in their place. Each goes as it goes. Taken together, Permutations forms a performative tropology of the image, showing the diverse ways images can go, the ways they participate with each other. In some sense, then, Permutations is an ethics or what Deleuze would call an ethology of the image. That does not mean Permutations proffers the ways images interact with so-called real life, as if there were life and then there were images. Rather, it is an

ethics of the image, of the way images interact with each other. Permutations is an on-going exploration into the limits of the image as it asks: What is an image? How can it go?

The madness of the image

The face of a woman, laughing on the tail of an event, approaching the camera: the image endures for maybe two seconds. And we see it maybe two dozen times. She comes to us, again and again, the same face, the same gesture. Of course, we only hear “her” laugh for a moment; the rest of the time she’s inflected by all sorts of sounds. And yet she keeps coming, the exact same face, the exact same gesture. This is the madness of the image, its demented repetition of itself, a repetition that rather than reifying the coherence of the image tears at its sense, makes it mad.

The baroque fabric

As a whole, it is one great fabric, an impossible fabric that somehow pulls it off: too many folds, too many pleats. But no: there’s always room, this harmony is infinite.

The cubist splaying

Four images of the same person, side by side, slightly different angles, slightly different moments: the temporality of the person spatially splayed for our viewing.

The never-still-life

An image in a book that, one thinks, should sit still. But it doesn’t.

Mutual animation

In one image, a silly little dog on the city street, a snippet of conversation with the owner. In the other image (there are only two here), Olivia, from the children’s book. A commentary, perhaps, on the real and the image but that is not interesting. What is interesting is the way the silly little

dog becomes Olivia, becomes this animated character and Olivia, in her turn, becomes this silly little dog.

The dim sum baroque

This time, it's not one great baroque fabric. Rather, a great dim sum banquet. And within each banquet is another banquet. Each is a discrete bundle of delicious yum, another dim sum banquet serving another dim sum banquet. Absolute discretion, then, each image going as it goes (rather than forging a coherent if multifarious whole). But each image repeating the other images, each in its own way.

Redundancy

Neo, from The Matrix, already multiplied as if to infinity, screen upon screen of Neo. And within each image, Neo amidst screen upon screen of Neo. Meanwhile, the Creator stutters: how else can one speak redundancy?

Variations

Six images, in each someone takes a plastic sword and commits plastic suicide.

Mirroring

Two images of the same person (whatever that means), side-by-side, a black workman speaking French. This time it's not a cubist splaying but a mirroring as the two images reflect each other (rather than revealing different angles).

The party effect, or What kind of drinks do you like?

The near-impossibility of all these people in the same place, conversations forming networks and links that at once bind and divide the space, the great teeming humanity of it all.

Color plane

A seeming indifference linked by brown: these images go as brown goes.

The nostalgia affect

The image may not first and foremost be a mnemonic but it bares its history, it bares history. The grain of the image tears and tears. Edith Piaf, of course.

Rhythm

Hands scrubbing in a time signature that emerges right then and there, a strange great modern dance. The body no longer as human but as movement.

Ze echo effect

Godard, of course: Who else? Bergson? Barthes? Queneau (for his own permutations, his exercises in style)? Yes: a call to the image that can't help but echo with a French accent.

Endnotes

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987: 310-350.