

## Robert SUERMONDT or Cinema-Painting

« [...] *Un navire [...] à demi caché*  
*par les ouvrages avancés de l'arsenal,*  
*semblait voguer au milieu de la ville. »<sup>1</sup>*

Marcel Proust

Robert Suermond's painting practise irresistibly appears to me as a series of film shots. It "puts on an act" and invites us to put on our own in front of it. But it does so not at all according to freeze-frames: Suermond's painting-cinema is about the editing. It consists in time-material. The frame lies in space, as Suermond would put it, whereas Godard asserted that the frame lies in time. Who knows where time goes, where the movement occurs, what is inside it, what dashes away in this painting whose essential aim is to create catastrophes, creodes (series of catastrophes) and even to simply compose chaos. With painting, it is something like the fifty close shots edited by Hitchcock for the stabbing in the shower in *Psycho* (1960); or the fairground stall in which Orson Welles traps his heroes, making large mirrors fly around them (*The Lady from Shanghai*, 1947); or the insane editing of Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1967): Marina Vlady's blue pullover, a whispering voice, mechanical diggers, the break in the soundtrack, a black coffee gyrating into a cosmos...

Such images come to my mind when I think of Robert Suermond's paintings. Today's art can only benefit from seeking its materials outside itself, in fields external to its own medium. Moving off centre, art revitalizes itself. At the time when Matisse and Picasso would draw inspiration from *Art Nègre*, they were not yet recognized as major artists: they were mere exotic "curiosity" makers! Suermond's immersions into the cinema do not in any case lead him away from painting. He does not mean to betray, nor to lose, it. His work may evoke prestigious pictorial references, artists who were inspired by worlds exterior to painting, such as Rosenquist (advertising) or Caravaggio (opera).

Suermond engineers (makes) himself an editing, something baroque, in the sense that Baroque is an art of telescoping and overflowing, whose staccato he multiplies by putting together syncopations on various levels: beheaded portraits, coloured planes, spaces for drawing, neutral whites, heterogeneous materials combining on the margins, and so on. Baroque is a never-ending erratic line! Harming the percept, Suermond declares: "I like to make one's glance branch off as much as to turn round the images. [...] I painted, back when I was at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, "reversible" landscapes that could be read as such, hanging on the wall, as well as upside down. There is an idea of inversion which also hints at

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<sup>1</sup> À la recherche du temps perdu, tome 2 : À l'ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs, Gallimard, Folio classique, Paris, 1988. ["[...] A ship [...] half-hidden behind the progressing buildings of the dockyard, seemed to be drifting along in the middle of the city."]

some otherness”.<sup>2</sup> One can hardly help thinking of Kandinsky’s famous anecdote about one reproduction of Monet’s *Haystacks* fallen wrong side up in his studio – which created the very first abstraction. With Suermond, this turbulent abstraction machine is relentlessly at work. He knows that geometrical shapes haunt the images, or that there are, as he says, “geometrical echoes inside the images”. The **abstr-action / work of abstraction** is thus involved in the flesh of each and every image. There is the image and the form and the impulse. Those are three degrees of representation<sup>3</sup>. The point is to put them in phase so that they produce a rhythm, emit a frequency in order to shake the certainties of realism.

Since Degas, painting, in constant evolution, has forsaken its closed, centred frames to give greater place to those used in photography and cinema. The word “framing” only appeared in the dictionaries in the 1920s... It further conveys the idea of a “cutaway” in the flow of representation. Robert Suermond enjoys talking about framing: “I think we are still lingering over praising the frame, although we are in a civilization of framing. Any time you look at some ordinary newspaper picture, you can see the side aspects are excluded and even denied.” Now, how to counter our culture’s unflagging, nostalgic photo-centrism? One way is to multiply the cuts inside the painting, so as to prevent it from defining itself according to a single focal length. Something to do with Pollock or with Hermetic Cubism. Merce Cunningham believed that “any point on the stage must be equally important” to the dancer. But there is something more. Suermond knows that in order to trigger and maintain the viewer’s nomadic gaze (nomadism is “subversive”, he says), one has to bring in a breathing. So he envisages the folds of a fabric, a skin, an accordion, to stand for as much breathing in and out. The “fold” gives Suermond’s painting its oscillation, its baroque swing<sup>4</sup>. Each one of his pictures must be read as a curled, rounded, bended music, a curve where geometry becomes a breath. According to him, the breathing makes shapes porous and alleviates the metallic aspect that they otherwise assert. Moreover, the painting’s internal and external twists make it some kind of membrane where the scopic function loses its dominant strength. We are led from the retinal to the tactile, and even to the gustative. In his own words: “We could say that the tactile consists in a caress, although any desire implies a gap, a separation”. Still the same fold that divides and connects.

Secant framing, nomadic cutting, lateral telescoping or catastrophic zooming, baroque folding, the optical shifting to the tactile... It doesn’t take more to describe Robert Suermond’s painting as chaotic. That’s what painting has always been all about, some will say. Have painters ever been doing anything else than getting as close to chaos as possible, if not immersing themselves in it? That is one thing, albeit chaos can be conceived in several different ways. Hieronymus Bosch’s conception, involving the origins and the plague of Eden, is far from Turner’s, in raptures over the Brownian blazing of thermodynamics. Not all cultures invent their own Orpheus pursuing a Eurydice who is forbidden to look back. To reach the chaos and to come back, that is the question. Today, chaos should rather be described as the very turbulence of life grasped at its most intense level, where throngs of available meanings jostle and mingle with each other. And it is at that level that Robert Suermond explores it. He finds such a superabundance of simultaneous elements in the media. Indeed, cinema alone is not enough. He likes magazines. He cuts out from them

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations are taken from a conversation between Robert Suermond and the author at a *Néos* party, September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J.-F. Lyotard, *Discours, Figure, Klincksieck, Esthétique, Paris, 1971*.

<sup>4</sup> For further reading about the fold and the Baroque, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*, translated by Tom Conley, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1992.

hundreds of pictures. When invited to take part in *Unlimited* at Basel's art fair (2008)<sup>5</sup>, he exhibited a large mural made of photocopied bits of pictures. It all rushed towards one corner of the room. Or it sprang out from that corner. Whatever the case, what prevailed was an impression of such overabundant information that it engendered an immense noise, a clamour, a hail, a panic, a worship, a riot, a quarrel, a cartage. And thus the painting, already tactile, suddenly became full of sound. Much intensity and rigour is required to switch that way between the senses. Suermondt proved he dared confront the chaos at the same time as he composed a fresco within it. The corner of the walls was a bevelled edge, a double cut right in the chaotic flows of information – a successful attempt to cut into the hullabaloo of mass communication. A way to state that the painter is interested in the latter solely to shred it, to plunge it altogether deep in the noise, at the risk of getting lost in it.

There are painters whose approach of chance and disorder – of the formless, so to speak – drowns into dismaying confusions. The stains they make are mere echolalia of some outdated conception of chaos, something like the primal muddy matter before God buckled down to it. For some others (among whom is Robert Suermondt), the din of the formless sketches out the access to some clarity. Regarding these painters, we can speak of the “crystal” of painting: Vermeer, de Latour, Cézanne, Mondriaan, Klee... Then the eye and mind need to be linked to the visible in a great unfolding of sensation-thought. The word I have been looking for since I started writing this essay is “crystal”, along with its declensions: cuts, angles, bevelled edges, water, opalescence, the elemental intelligence of geometry. That is what seems nowadays to be neither beautiful nor ugly, neither major nor minor, but simply significant. It is indeed significant that any art form today no longer confronts its own finiteness (how pretentious!), but the finiteness of the Planet.

Good painting intrinsically calls for text since it is a texture, a textuality of the visible. Robert Suermondt's paintings are in the image of Marguerite Duras' phrasing: « Sur les planchers du pont, sur les parvis du bateau, sur la mer, avec le parcours du soleil dans le ciel et celui du bateau, se dessine, se dessine et se détruit à la même lenteur, une écriture, illisible et déchirante d'ombres, d'arêtes, de traits de lumière reprise dans les angles, les triangles d'une géométrie fugitive qui s'écoule au gré de l'ombre des vagues de la mer »<sup>6</sup>.

P. Sterckx

(Translated by Laurie Guérif)

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<sup>5</sup> *Through the intermediary of Gallery Catherine Bastide, Brussels.*

<sup>6</sup> *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord, Gallimard, Folio, Paris, 1993.* [“On the floors of the deck, on the squares of the boat, on the sea, with the route of the sun in the sky and that of the boat, a writing is taking shape and ruining itself with equal slowness, illegible and harrowing with shadows, edges, lines of light repeated in the angles, triangles of some fleeting geometry flowing along the shade of the waves of the sea.”]