

Control, fracture, profanity, escape: the poetics of looking in *Gigante**

Controle, fratura, profanação, escapatória: a poética do olhar em *Gigante**

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ABSTRACT

The text combines with two axes: that of the interactions mediated by digital devices that classify individual typologies and that of their desecration, undertaken by discourses driven as self-reflexive operators of media action in a context of increasing personal imprisonment by technique – but also aesthetic fracture possibilities. The film *Gigante* (2009), questioning in the narrative field of cinema the invasive aspect called out by use of technology in contemporary life and so inserting the unpredictable in human condition, reflects about the importance of the image and the role of surveillance equipment, which loses its function of pure control to be converted into the path for escape possibilities.

Keywords: Monitoring devices, cinema, *Gigante*, fracture and aesthetic loopholes

RESUMO

O texto conjuga dois eixos: o das interações mediadas por dispositivos digitais de tipificação dos sujeitos e o de suas profanações, empreendidas por discursos acionados como operadores autorreflexivos da ação da própria mídia num contexto de crescente aprisionamento do indivíduo pela técnica – mas também de efetivas possibilidades de fratura estética. O filme *Gigante* (2009), problematizando no campo narrativo do cinema o aspecto invasivo acarretado pela utilização da tecnologia na vida contemporânea e aí interpondo o imprevisto da condição humana, reflete sobre a estatura da imagem e o papel dos equipamentos de vigilância, que perdem sua função de puro controle e convertem-se em possibilidade de escapatória.

Palavras-chave: Dispositivos de vigilância, cinema, *Gigante*, fratura e escapatórias estéticas

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THE WATCHFUL EYE – OBSERVANT, IMPOSING, AND DIMINISHING

THE MEANING BEHIND monitoring (retained in different uses of the word *gaze*) is symbolic of a society of vertical relationships which are developed visually and are present in intersubjective meetings, whether between people or between people and things. The one who monitors holds a position of privilege, not in terms of class or group, but of competence and knowledge. The extent of its gaze increases, even when restricted by space or a device, because it has a set of predefinitions and capabilities: approach, retention, extension, comparisons, and retraction. Furthermore, it is seen as being in the midst of a scenario in which actions and subjects are determined by certain normalities.

In this scenario, the one being watched has a naturally lessened role, not in terms of class or group, but as incapable of being the subject of a discourse, being referred to in the third person; whom you speak of and see is still removed from interlocution, interaction, and defense. These divergent looks do not shape mere disagreements; they establish spaces which are essential for communication between the exterior/interior, visibility/invisibility, mediations/proximity, and states of intense passion among mechanized and free acts.

Contemporary mechanisms of monitoring, surveillance, and control are more and more omnipresent and enhanced to routinely control and classify human beings as they go about their day-to-day lives. People are progressively being defined more and more as subjects with synthetic joints and abstract features. Mechanisms for detecting gestures, postures, movements and even hesitations or accelerations have become new, efficient, and sophisticated forms of structuring, building, and refining data banks for the purpose of attracting and keeping consumers, preventing crimes (even creating never-before-seen ways of committing crimes), controlling government politics, the economy and taxes, and defining more varied strategies for publicity and advertising.

As Giorgio Agamben (2009: 49) states, never before have humans, more adapted and accustomed to the current way of life, appeared so suspicious to police¹ as they do now; the way they quickly disappear into the crowd, the way they stop to look eagerly at objects on display in window shops, or the way they furtively go in and out of vehicles and buildings. It is important to highlight that programs and systems originally created in Israel for recognizing terrorists have been acquired and installed in shopping centers in upscale areas of large cities². This is an excellent example of systems which track the exact moment a subject enters a shopping center, then assigns a number to that individual as he or she passes by the same window shop many times or

1. "It is kind of paradoxical that the harmless citizen in a post-industrial democracy [...] is considered by the powers – maybe exactly because of this – as a virtual terrorist" (Agamben, 2009: 49).

2. This is the case of a sophisticated *shopping mall* in the city of São Paulo that installed a system that had originally been designed for recognizing terrorists.

stops and looks at it a little too long. Furthermore, devices and systems that can identify possible suspects through combinations of gestures and body positions have been developed more recently³.

The other side of this is that there is a chance the actual device could be reconfigured and provide new, loving relationships with two meanings: losing the ability to control someone and losing control of oneself, imprisoned to an object of desire. Even though it is only visual, this other space violates the lack of subjectivity of the previously mentioned surveillance equipment. It gives a body to the subject which is being watched, it makes its presence feel complete, although seen through a machine. At the same time, it establishes what it is seen as a subject of something, and not under someone's service⁴.

Therefore, it is in this space within a poetic film that an esthetic fracture⁵ becomes possible. The film *Gigante* by Biniez (2009) can be observed through this analytical framework and allows for an implicit reflection on the stature of images and the role of surveillance equipment – already considered to be horrible nowadays. They are like a prologue and starting point to a possible romance between a security officer and a cleaning lady, both employed at the same supermarket.

This article looks at two points: the interactions mediated by digital devices of subject classification and its limits as a self-reflective operator victim of technology's growing hold. Cinema reduces the breeding ground for this esthetic limit of devices through many of its current forms of expression. The objective is to study aspects of digital culture through the reflective eye of current cinematographic production. There are two levels of analysis here: the first one is for the film narratives, the second is the way the film is set out, both of which advance the poetic problem of control and surveillance. The methodology used separates and then joins these two levels together again in the end as conflicting manifestations of culture, using social semiotic contributions as a method of analysis.

As Bruno (2013: page 15) observes, “the subject who sees no longer originates from visibility but is a role derived from it, one agent among others”, not to look at people but at their features seen as a real anthropometric index for the classification of journalistic images such as those used by Landowski (2004: 40). This space shapes the uncertainty of both a careful and distracted eye because it focuses on appearances. This is why another person can see it, and even though it is not directed at the said person, it holds an attraction that can be summed up by the beautiful expression (and name of the book) from Didi-Huberman (1998): “what we see, what sees us”.

3. See Fernanda Bruno's text (2012) in the journal *Galáxia*. It is also worth noting the concept of desubjectivity from Agamben (2009: 47).

4. Obviously it does not deal with conscious limits, political characteristics in Agamben's terms, or a user manual for the devices according to Fernanda Bruno's perspective. It does deal with a fact that emerges from an interactional act and out of that the *aleas* character.

5. The concept is borrowed from Algirdas-Julien Greimas, the meaning of fractures that emerge unexpectedly in life and alter the sensitivity of the subject (1987: 13-68). Greimas refers to the possibility of a subject creating its small escapes of pleasure (Ibid: 69-99).

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This kind of watching without being seen is not just an extension of see and be seen, since what is being watched here does not know that it is being watched would have no reason to be watched, and would not want to be watched. Perhaps, room for new interactions emerges from this indifferent watching, a utopic place of neutral power beyond that of political questioning or conscious limits. The power in this case is esthetics. Parret (1997: 200-201) spoke of a political esthetic, something similar to the binding and emotional aspects of Kantian *esthesis* (2009, pages 45-145). Not esthetics as *modus poeticus*, but as a place where sensitivity is manifested in its full and spontaneous capacity of affection, where poetic forms of being and acting can emerge. The device loses its power of purely controlling and the images it captures possibly transform into something, something uncontrolled and not programmed; possibly affecting the subject.

Whether romantic, nostalgic, or esthetic, the film *Gigante* achieves its goal of questioning the increasingly invasive aspects of technology in contemporary life at the same time as it includes the unexpected component of the human condition.

CAMERA AND SCREEN, CONTROL AND CAPTURE: FRAMEWORK AND ENCLOSURE

Melancholic and minimalistic, *Gigante* is an atypical example of an unassuming and lyrical story of the times we live in⁶. It could almost be considered a silent movie, since there is practically no dialogue in the film. The film is highlighted by its esthetic work, its serene and effective camera work alternating between *plongées* and *contre plongées*. It has few close-ups and only a couple panoramic shots. The film has a linear development using whispering narratives and small details in scenes that stand out due to their simplicity. The diegesis alternates between black and white images while contrasting with color ones. The outside scenes and inside scenes work together; the photography enhances the realism and highlights the contrast of closed, darkened, or artificially lit spaces and environments with colorful street movements or the expanse of the beaches in Montevideo. The sparse selections of heavy rock and heavy metal as its soundtrack are unassuming, timely, and sequential.

The Adrián Biniez film tells the story of Jara (Horacio Camandule) through snippets of his daily life. It takes place in an environment where people are socially invisible and work in low-paying jobs just to get by. Men and women work in 24-hour establishments, have few recreational options, and romance

6. Shown to different publics in specific markets, Adrián Biniez's film got its start at the Berlin Festival in February of 2009. It was also shown at the Buenos Aires International Independent Film Festival. The production was extensive and immediately won an award. Before writing the screenplay and directing *Gigante*, Biniez – born in Argentina and based in Uruguay – directed and wrote the screenplay for two short films: *8 horas* (2006), and *Total Disponibilidade*, (2008). *Gigante* is his first full length film, coproduced in Uruguay, Argentina, Germany, and Spain, and is responsible for placing him as one of the great new minds in contemporary Latin cinema.

is a something of a rarity. They take on second jobs working nights and into the mornings in bars and nightclubs.

Jarita, as he is also known, is a tall man, slightly built and still young. He lives in a simple neighborhood in Montevideo working as a security guard in a supermarket, and also works as a security guard in dance clubs and night clubs on the side. His free time is divided between watching television and playing video games with his nephew. He monitors the supermarket's closed circuit television cameras, checking up on what all the employees are doing: the cleaning staff, shelf stockers, and bakery and butcher assistants. Jara has a kind of lackadaisical attitude towards his job, eating snacks and doing crossword puzzles while he periodically glances at one of the monitors, zooming in on any image that might happen to catch his attention. One such image is Julia (Leonor Svarcas), an attractive, young cleaning lady.

Both characters are developed through the film's ubiquitous cameras and monitors, and they are seen in contrasting lights: one is big and strong; the other is small, delicate and fragile. The gangly giant is paradoxically shown as subtle, sensitive, and delicate: his dialogue does not reveal his shy and introverted personality, or his repressed, pent up energy. The *formiguinha* (little ant), in contrast, has a peculiar energy, an unrestrained and casual attitude, always moving around, occasionally bothered by slight movements and clumsy or disastrous people.

The fixation Jara has for the cleaning lady borders almost on the point of obsession, but it highlights the woman's seemingly carefree and fluid movements.

Jara and Julia's names share some of the same letters. The first and last letters of Jara's last name are the same as the first and last letters of Julia's first name: J and A (Fabián Jara, Julia Rodriguez Cuello). Perhaps it is an allusion to the crosswords the protagonist enjoys? Is it a predetermined closeness; is it fair that they just cross paths in the corridors without exchanging more than a glance? The heavy rock and heavy metal playing in their Walkman alleviates the claustrophobic spaces each one inhabits. Letters, music, and solitude.

As he becomes more and more captivated by the woman, the security officer ends up following her every movement. In the beginning, he just watches her on the cameras attend to her daily tasks from the security office. But he soon starts to follow her around on the streets, inconspicuously, making sure to keep a safe distance and not approach her. Using the monitors, he is able to see her in any way he wishes: zoom in, freeze, zoom out, freeze again, repeat, observe details and nuances, increasing or decreasing the speed.

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Julia does not always appear comfortable in the supermarket as she cleans the floors and moves around between the shelves and counters, stacks of toilet paper and glass pots, like a kind of robot as she pushes her cart full of paraphernalia and cleaning supplies. The cart appears as though an extension of her body. She walks down aisles full of people who all seem to be interested in what she is doing, even though what she is doing is not anything extraordinary or special. Once free of the uniform and the cart, she walks down the street carefree, backpack on, headphones in, holding her mp3 player in her hands meandering in and out of internet cafes where she chats on dating sites and cinemas where she watches films about mutants, and also goes to her karate classes. Julia appears to communicate easily with others, even strangers and their dogs. Coming from the interior, she enjoys going to the beaches of Montevideo; the pollution there does not bother her.

Jara does not appear to be as lethargic or melancholy after seeing Julia on the monitor. When he leaves the security room he walks around with a jump in his step. Outside of work he now either plays outside with his nephew (maybe they have forgotten about the Playstation?) or follows Julia around on her animated wanderings.

Once in love with Julia, Jara starts changing his daily routines to coincide with hers. An interesting game is put forth here as tension and suspense build up.

As Jara spends more and more time following Julia around inside and outside the supermarket, he becomes the target of his object's attention: in more than one of the film's scenes he catches a glimpse of himself observing Julia, and later he realizes he is being watched by his object of interest. In this particular scene, he is watching Julia put on lipstick while she waits for the elevator. She unexpectedly looks at the camera, and he reacts as if she had seen him watching her, her gaze crossing with his (as if instead of a mere image, the camera was transmitting the real person, flesh and bone, and not just her features decoded into pixels). It is in scenes like these in which the photography switches between black and white and color, the surveillance screens are blown up to encompass the whole movie screen, either that or they are shown in multiscreen mode.

The possible awareness of the surveillance camera's gaze or of looking back at the camera and altering the power game leads to a playful relationship of knowing you are being spied on and then doing the spying yourself. This upsets the vertical structure and upsets the watcher's ease as he views this as losing his power.

While Jara seems to be motivated by his desire and infatuation with Julia, she seems to be motivated by the city life and expanding her horizons. They are united by this game of crossing glances and not always exchanged glances, by the game of hide and seek being carried out between screens, corridors, and sidewalks.

There is no gap in the images of the film as they come alive in the cinema. They break the monotony and provide alternatives.

FROM FRAMEWORK/CAPTURE TO MOVEMENT/HAPPENING: UNCONTROLLED POSSIBILITIES

The images from Adrián Biniez's film bring the round-the-clock surveillance devices and constant exposure into view, which stimulates discussions on this topic. *Gigante* breaks free from controlling framework and the limited and discouraging threat of the dishonestly captured images repeatedly shown throughout the diegesis. The use of numerous cameras and many monitors in the film give a real *Big Brother* feel to it; they end up being invalidated and reveal unexpected possibilities.

The same devices of control and restriction, which are an inseparable part of most people's contemporary lives, are the engines fueling the interest and desire Jara has for Julia: the cameras are like channels that foster contact, and the screens provide the platform for possible routes and ways out to take place. The images used in *Gigante* question the power of these devices and how effectively they distance or approximate people from each other, even when the cameras and screens act as mirrors and inhibit the actors' emotions, making them feel awkward.

However, the twist that came out of switching places opens up the interior space, removing the framework of what had been captured by the camera and making the exterior visible. This process does not occur all of a sudden, but rather successively within the narrative. The guard is caught on camera; two metaphorical roles unravel of watching and being watched at the same time. Subsequently, this person leaves the *inside* space when pursuing the object of desire and finds the unlimited *outside* space. As the film develops, Julia's search for Jara becomes intensified and is taken to the streets until the point that it is no longer confined to just cameras and screens. He looks for Julia in this new landscape⁷.

Many of Jara's workmates were fired due to their dissatisfaction and subsequent protests about the low salaries, and Julia was one of them. Enraged by the fact she was gone and her image had disappeared from the cameras, the security guard loses control, becomes aggressive, and ends up getting fired.

7. It is necessary to reference the work of the photographer Sophie Calle, which follows a man who takes up residence in Paris for the obsessive ritual of following her every movement, even outside of the city where she lives. However, it is necessary to shed more light on the type of bond between Jara and Julia. If in Sophie Calle's work the disappearance of the man being followed ends the stalking ritual (because the feeling is not motivated "by feelings, but by the actual creation of an obsession", as Sophie says), then the natural outcome for the film *Gigante* is the long-awaited meeting of the eyes that, up until that point, had been separated or mediated. A common aspect of both is: while following people, Sophie is trying to find out what her life is about, and through this she discovers it "through its journey and desires and energy which had alluded me" ("à travers leurs trajets et leurs désirs e leurs energias qui me manqueaint" – DVD, 2000.). Jara also finds a source of new energy in Julia.

Now unemployed and no longer subjected to the surveillance systems, Jara gains confidence and goes to Julia's house to speak with her. After finding out that she had gone down to the beach, he went down to the waterfront area where he used to always see her. As he arrives at the beach he sees her sitting there. He moves towards her and calls her name. When he reaches her, Julia is sitting down. She raises her head, turns her gaze upwards, and looks Jara in the eyes. There are no communication devices now, and having overcome the controlling obstacle of cameras and lenses, their eyes finally have a chance to meet. The way Julia smiles at him is a bit mysterious, after all, who is watching whom? In the last scene, Jara remains standing up for a few more seconds and then sits down beside Julia. While the two of them are talking, a couple enters from the left side of the screen and walk along the stretch of sand between the ocean and Jara and Julia. They walk across the screen from left to right. The end of the film shows Jara and Julia from a distance, sitting side by side with their backs to the camera, sitting on the sands of a deserted beach with the vastness of the ocean in front of them.

Gigante is not just a love story aiming to break the stereotypes of its genre. It experiments with the statute of images and strategies of looking at contemporary society. It shows how fascination and enchantment can develop under the watchful eye of surveillance cameras in unusual and unexpected places such as supermarket corridors. *Gigante* portrays the surveillance devices which depersonalize, classify, and subject the characters in various tones of color, shades of aspirations and necessity, and identity and desires.

The fracture in the visible order of things has a double meaning for visibility grounded in police actions, which promotes subjectivity (Marques, 2013: 251). The agent who operates the device is a subject who is cognitively and sensitively motivated by another's presence, experiencing difficulties, going from an active position to an acted position, and comes out as a subject who is an object affecting others. From a phenomenological point of view (Merleau-Ponty, 1984: 88-89), subjects and objects are just abstract in a relationship that should not be vertical; yet, they are parts of a continuous interbody. Another statute for the established connection included here is experience (Quéré, 2010: 19-38), which transforms the previous cultural roles and competencies into interchangeable positions that stimulate new views on social movements. This is not an obvious political action, since one of the factors of this experience does not consciously participate in the process. The other, the person who suffers the change, does not voluntarily make this change with the idea of reshaping the state of things under a critical eye. On the contrary, the passionate state is coincidental, which allows reality to be visible. This is why

a diegetic approach is used before an esthetic fracture is made, which could result in discussing the phenomenon on two points: the speaker in the film and the speaking, or how the film is produced and circulated.

Nevertheless, it must be clear that, although since the beginning the protagonist of the movie is a decent and well-meaning man, *Gigante* remains latent an evident feeling of uncertainty regarding the paths that might be followed by the progressive obsession of Jara in relation to his object of contemplation and desire – considering it is almost impossible not to think of how terrifying the outcome of an attraction that motivates constant surveillance and obstinate stalking might be.

What actually happens is that Julia's *modus vivendi* has the effect of a surveillance device acting as a mirror for Jara to contemplate and evaluate his own life. The monotone images on his surveillance monitor and his disinteresting work routine are in contrast with the young woman's life outside the supermarket, and make him think about himself, about how isolated he feels, immersed in days and nights of double shifts, television, and video games. This allows him to break out of the lethargic state he is in and transform the tedious into something exciting (it is not a coincidence that he is first shown reflecting on and being surprised at seeing his own image on other monitors he comes across on his outings through the city, then going on to work out, having an interest in how he looks). It is clear that one reality can be seen and dealt with in significantly different ways. In the hardships of real life there are gaps or fractures that offer up chances to break out of these hardships.

Other moments in which this fracture occurs are poetic-like in the way they show the audience a different way of how they live with surveillance devices. *Gigante* shows a real desire (Landowski, 2005: 27-30) aroused within an environment of controlled emotions, and is a kind of surprising, pleasing, and *worthwhile* inversion.

The film uses one of the countless products technology has to offer, but not direct control. A metaphor for this could be that if we see this vision machine as something greater than just a monitor, something that creates and transforms. It is not intended for any strategic or manipulative area, it is a symbol of something that makes things happen.

It is consisted of the limits of the device – in a political sense of reshaping the *status quo* of socially crystallized things – in the case of another vision machine that does not recreate but reduce the human being and its actions.

The device generates multiple spaces in which esthetic fractures and political limits may occur. The word political is used here as Marques (2013: 250)

describes it, from the singular articulation between esthetics and politics given by Jacques Rancière:

Politics [...] as experience, as something which determines the statute of what you see, say and do: a question about distribution of a set of relationships and ways they define a specific subject and structure common experiences. It is a kind of intermittent action that needs to be constantly renewed since it means polemic verifying of supposed equality/inclusion upheld by the police (Deranty, 2003b). The definition of politics that interfere with the police order of the voices in a community – meaning to identify equality in a scene of conflict – reaffirms its nature since this identification is situational and transforms what we understand by common shared by a community. (Rancière, 2013: 250)⁸

8. In Marques's text, the definition makes reference to the thinking of Rancière and the reinterpretation of Deranty (2003).

It is worth highlighting the difference between police and political. The difference is precisely in the transformational aspect of political, originally esthetic, in relation to the predefined set of competences, powers and knowledge of the police that are used to keep communities together.

The speaker's diction is creatively constructed: the passions of suspicion, of predisposition, and of authority are replaced by the emergence of untamed desire, the kind that is driven by the mere presence of another (Landowski, 2005: 27-30). One should not, however, consider that reality is inevitably faced with the magic of poetry. On the contrary, it is necessary to perceive the interactions of what is possible and the fascination of life's probabilities.

The double manifestation of esthetics as a strategy for feeling the sensitivity and the spontaneity of daily life are equally revealed, even in those moments that appear to have no poetic effect to them. **M**

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