

Soft Fiction: because we lived together...

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Soft Fiction. Políticas visuales de la emocionalidad y el deseo. Un homenaje al cine de Chick Strand (“Soft Fiction. Visual politics of emotionality and desire. A tribute to the cinema of Chick Strand”). Virginia Villaplana [ed.]. Bilbao, Consonni, 2016, 318 pages.

Juan Antonio Suárez, Paula Rabinowitz, Gabriela Golder, Virginia Villaplana, Angela Melitopoulos, Hito Steyerl, Habiba Djahnine, Marina Grzinic, Sandra Shafer, Montse Romani, Harriet Brown, María Ruido, Itziar Ziga, Caroline Betemps & June Fernández, Medeak, Ainhoa Güemes Moreno, Eduardo Hurtado, Mainer Zilbeti, Manu Arregui, Saio Olmo, Susana Talayero, María Díaz Merlo & Fefa Vila Núñez, R. Lucas Platero, Julia Morandeira, Natasa Sukic, Sayak Valencia and Guilles Deleuze.

“I need to speak to you, my love. I’m beside myself. We’re living in uncertain times. Not that I seriously think war is going to break out, but the world is blowing up”.

Sharon Hayes

“I don’t write to say that I won’t say anything. I write: “I write: I write because we lived together, because I was one among them, shadow in the midst of their shadows, body next to their bodies, because they left on me their indelible mark, the trace of which is writing; their memory is dead to writing; writing is the memory of their death and the affirmation of my life.”

George Perec

I *remember* the Sharon Hayes exhibition at the Reina Sofía museum in 2012: *Habla* [1], I remember those typed letters that were all jumbled up, perhaps jumbling us up, somewhere between personal storytelling, soft fiction, and the recounting of a political chronicle. I also *remember* the voices that read the letters aloud, in the middle of a street or a public square, ramped up with a megaphone. I *remember* Perec’s words, *je me souviens*, I *remember* these images, these voices, all mixed up now with other ones, with mine, with yours, with hers... when I open the book *Soft Fiction*, in such delicate moments as these in our political landscape, and perhaps, more often than not, in these worlds of ours that are described, somewhat crudely, as personal.

The crude, the coarse, that which manifests itself as rigid and immutable as a dam, seems to invade, more and more every day, our language, our images, our words and desires, clogging up the subtle, attacking the vulnerable; thereby perpetuating the patriarchal and neoliberal dichotomy of the private/personal versus the public/political which causes us just enough trouble to keep us together; getting in the way, therefore, of our power to tell stories, to tell our lives. *We write so that things may come to pass...* as Carmen Martín Gaité said [2], and the double meaning of *pass* here is loaded with

temporal uncertainty. This gives it the further meaning of being able to recount something, of being able to give shape to a porous, complex, innervated memory, with things possibly happening in a future; of imagining, of imagining ourselves as others, the potential forthcoming of things coming to pass. Because, as Villaplana, the book's editor, explains to us, thinking is learning how to think, and imagining is also learning how to imagine oneself.

I write because we lived together, wrote Perec, in turn, in his biographical experiment *W, or the Memory of Childhood*; an attempt, again, to imagine a memory which has been demolished. This passing of time, all *out of joint*, as Hamlet would put it [3], recalls this time which is *made* to pass, mixing up the past with the future. This is the kind of temporality that usually surrounds traumatic events and all the grief which, having been so repressed, comes back as a ghost, which Perec in fact discusses. The culture of memory is, in the proposal put forward by Villaplana in *Soft Fiction*, one of the book's main concerns: rethinking, together, different possible ways of elaborating *cultures of memories* in which other narratives may come to light, and which stop perpetuating the hegemonic ones. In this sense, we can understand it as a toolkit for generating practice, that is, to impel us to remember, to tell, to imagine... because we lived together.

Soft Fiction could be described in this way; rather than a book, it is more like a soft machine to learn about oneself through imagination. The cogs that Villaplana sets into motion with this choral device of hers bring together many voices that explore, like in Chick Strand's film – to which she pays tribute in the title [4] - the possibility of otherness, as with the vocal cords when they make a sound, when they find the voice to speak. Strand's films are connected with other filmmakers who work with the body and the word, or perhaps more precisely with the voice, from the sixties (Barbara Hammer, Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Rubin...). These women, among others, experiment with this capacity for interaction between bodies and voice, and the stories which emerge from both. Thus, bringing together dreams and memories, a past time and a potential future time, they activate the imagination via the softness of this interweaving that allows us, as Haug notes, "to get an idea of the possible, of change and of past resistance, and by doing so, to conceptualise the self" (Haug 2008: s/p).

The title gives us a clue as to the other big question tackled in this book: fiction, or more specifically soft fiction. This idea sounds odd at first, even today, when we often find ourselves expecting any given document to reveal the truth, to lay out the facts for us. These facts, in turn, acts as supporting evidence for a true story; they help piece together another History, which will invariably remain curtailed, due to its assimilation to the process and to the constrictions in the production of History, even if the story does appear to be distinct. The main issue, which is debated at length, is expounded clearly in Paula Rabinowitz's essay, and her intervention is crucial because it spans the entirety of Villaplana's project. In her article she looks into whether, referencing Strand's films, the ambiguity of fiction can be the foundation for other stories which then break with the tacit agreement of sincerity, of the recounting of the truth, something which came to be necessary in the emerging feminism of the 60s and 70s. Rabinowitz speaks here about the possibility of a posthuman feminism, which might stretch to fantasy, to exaggeration, and to the distortion of the crude concept of reality. And, of course, this kind of approach to the phenomenology of storytelling can also be extended to any one of those collectives who have seen their voices displaced by that of the dominating class, i.e. those who turn language, as Michel de Certeau deftly pointed out, into their tool for the production of meaning.

The insistence on writing in order to legitimise History and its accuracy will lead to a situation in which many of the attempts at autobiography will continue to prop up the question of how it is possible to write about a subject who has been deprived of writing. When one ponders this question and tries to subvert the dominant models, a whole range of

controversies come up, and this is partly what this compendium explores, in relation to memory, gender, subjectivity, the affects, the intimate, the political... Throughout the 20th century, many voices would suggest other ways of telling one's own story, i.e. autobiographical, and give subjects room to speak, to tell their own story, i.e. ethnographical. Those who spring to mind are Gertrude Stein, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha or Gloria Anzaldúa, who are well known by Villaplana and who, as with many of those gathered within this soft fiction, they reinvent liminal writing. We could call it non-writerly writing; that is, they return to a kind of writing which transcribes from the oral tradition, a tradition so despised by the patriarchal and heteronormative legitimisation of advancement, science and the truth. They also appeal, due to their speaking from such a borderline place – also at a geopolitical level – to the notion of transnationality in order to construct memory. These are contagious languages, of mixed lineage, and which are fundamentally conscious of the fact that the word inhabits the body. The same happens with Strand, who understands that the gaze is an action produced from the whole body, and the camera must have a connection with the body of the subject who registers the image, not restricting itself solely to peering down the lens.

«*Mind breathes mind*», a civilized man once wrote, «*power feels power, and absorbs it, as it were. The telling of the stories refreshes the mind as a bath refreshes the body; it gives exercise to the intellect and its powers; it tests the judgment and the feelings*» (Minh-ha 1987: 11).

And this *mind that breathes mind* seems to evoke the start of Strand's film, when in the first shots she invites us to *breathe in breathe out*, to feel that frontier between the subject and the world swirling in both air and words.

Regarding the reassessments of film and the ethnographic and feminist documentary, Strand's work is closely linked with that of Trinh-T Minh-ha, who works with the same insistence on oral storytelling. She emphasises how, therein, fantasy often prevails over facts, due to its power of contagion, and that it does not act just to maintain those collectivised stories and experiences. Instead, the transmission itself, the spreading and survival – in the sense of memory – is what affords it such force. There is also an expansive force in the idea of repetition, in the echo that rings around stories, amplifying them. In fact, the storyteller was traditionally seen as a person of power, who ensures that this power lives on, given that “their discourse is seen, heard, smelt, tasted and felt” (1987:12). Furthermore, these storytellers' words give consistency to the group, strengthening bonds between individuals, for other purposes which were previously associated with healing powers that, ultimately, would be equivalent today to the attempt to imbue our world with words, in order to deal with loss, grief, trauma, and furthermore to claim back the potential for pleasure, something which can dwindle following these situations. As Strand herself noted, for the five women who speak in the film, this act was an exorcism of experience [5]. The storytellers shown to us by Strand, Minh Ha and Villaplana express their *power*, which is the story's *power* for the weaving together of social fabric, tying it to the past and imagining other futures.

The book's structure opens out, making it clear that emotions are two-way, and that memory, fiction and the praxis thereof form a palimpsest, upon which we are encouraged to keep rewriting. In this way, we go from a first part which delves into *The experiences of narratives*, to a second which is built around *The narratives of experience*; from the gerund of filming memory, to that of filming fiction. We visit emotionality and intimate documents, to the reconstruction of desire, of listening, and the affects. Villaplana, in the first two parts, leads us in a game of mirrors with double meanings, in which the textual experience does not separate the analysis of politics from images, from the affects which are embedded in the text of every single one of the voices, while in the third part she forces us to put her imagining machine into practice. This is why, in the third part, she offers us several *mediabiographies*, elaborated in her workshops and described as: “desire and pleasure, practical methodology and story creation using personal-use technology”. This guide, or *Baedeker*, both tactile and visual, takes us on a trip through images and texts of fiction and memory, opening us up to the possibility

of autonomy in the use of the image and the word, of agency, to rethink ourselves and let us live and be in a state of pleasure.

The three parts are joined like a folding screen, using hinges titled *Image – Text*, which are used to move from chapter to chapter, and they are a reminder of the “art of losing oneself [6] from text to text, image to image, image to text, and they also serve to remind us to look into those ever-tempting gaps, to glimpse through, as with a real folding screen.

Finally, I should perhaps apologise for having taken various different paths in this review. I have taken on so many voices that I have felt bombarded by my evocations of what is on the other side, or perhaps on this same side of the folding screen. However, I think that is exactly what activates the encounter with this textual project, the echo of many voices and also one’s own, that impetus to keep telling life’s stories so that they may come to pass.

References:

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Notas

1 *Habla* (“speech”, “talk”) is the title of the Sharon Hayes exhibition which took place between the 30th May and the 24th September 2012, at the Reina Sofía museum.

2 Carmen Martin Gaité said, in *La búsqueda del interlocutor* (“In Search of the Interlocutor”) (1982), that: “when we live, things come to pass, but when we talk about them, we *make* them come to pass. And it is exactly there, in the subject’s taking of the reins, where the essence of all storytelling dwells, along with its appeal and also the heterogeneous nature of the events and emotions that are mentioned”.

3 This expression, taken from *Hamlet*, is included by Derrida in his book *Spectres of Marx*, to illustrate the concept of the *haunted*, that which pursues, traps, taunts, comes back as a spectre a ghost.

4 *Soft Fiction* (1979) is a film by Chick Strand (USA, 16mm, black and white, sound 54 mins.)

5 Quoted in Kinder, Marsha (1980) “Soft Fiction”. In *Film Quarterly* Vol.33, no.3, pp.50-57.

6 Here I am alluding to one of these hinge-chapters, in which Villaplana refers to a fragment from *One Way Street*, in which Benjamin invokes this “art of losing oneself” when one travels around a city, also setting up an analogy between the act of wandering around streets and wandering around books, text, images (Villaplana 2016:108).