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Collaborative annotation and interactive film analysis:

from passive viewers to emancipated spectators.

The experiment of a digital tool within a university film workshop.

A project conceived by Alice Leroy, associate researcher at the French National Library and teacher at the University of Lille 3, with the help of Noémie Jauffret, librarian at the French National Library in charge of the Cinecast project, and the active involvment of the undergraduate students from the film studies departement at the University of Lille 3.

This mind map draws the outcomes of a film analysis workshop which consisted in the collaborative annotation of a corpus of films with a digital technology. During the first semester of 2013, it gathered nearly sixty students from the University of Lille (France) and aimed at documenting the collections of the French National Library by creating a mind-map of metadata which could later be enriched by other contributors. This workshop also took place in the larger context of a research project, the "Cinecast" project, a public-private partnership whose aim is to improve the use of digital technologies related to films and videos in scientific and educational contexts.

The two softwares that were used in the workshop are *Lignes de temps* and *Renkan* : they were both designed and developed by the Institute of Research and Innovation of the Centre Pompidou (IRI[1]). The IRI works in the field of digital humanities and has developed several digital tools intended to question our conception of knowledge and culture in the age of mass communication and digital media. *Lignes de temps* has been specifically designed for

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1 http://www.iri.centrepompidou.fr/

educational practice: it consists of an editing software look-like interface which offers the possibility of annotating and tagging video sequences. Within the educational context of film studies, it seemed that experimenting this digital tool in an academic workshop could lead to transform a literary exercise (the classical model of film analysis) into a critical and collective contribution on images themselves.

The film analysis workshop with digital tools had three objectives : first, it aimed at fostering a multimedia approach of films with a digital tool which would echo the intermediality of the film media today (most of my students watch movies in theatres, but also on their computers, iPad, mobile phones and so on). Second, this intermediality should lead us to question the relationship between text and (moving) image and how the exercise of film analysis – no matter if linked to the academic world or the film review practice – should be articulated with the experience of watching movies. Lastly, this was also to me an opportunity to redefine film analysis as a way to question our stance as viewers rather than only considering it as the acquisition of a cultural or technical knowledge. Turning students into active viewers, able to directly comment and add information on moving images, this workshop was intended as a collaborative writing process for documenting a corpus of films. At stake were both the result – that is to say the collective production of a body of annotations on metamorphosis in films – and the process – which was the way students would define their own methodology in order to use *Lignes de temps* and produce their analysis.

Methodology

Every group of students was invited to reflect on their own methodology of analysis, more or less discursive, keeping in mind that each group's work on a specific film would participate in a broader reflection on the aesthetic types and narrative stakes of metamorphosis in film. Thus, the students were not only commenting films, adding information or personal interpretations – as they usually do when reacting to videos on *Youtube* for example – they were inventing their own models of analysis. We had, however, defined a common vocabulary in order to describe the films sequences. This choice was a way to deal with an epistemological difficulty specific to the field of social sciences: the difficulty of delivering a scientific (or objective) discourse on phenomena – in this case, movies – which imply the

observer's subjectivity. On which criteria could a well-argumented analysis be based if not on the sole personal judgment of the viewer?

In order to avoid the characteristic simplistic judgment which qualifies the practice of annotating on social networks ("Like"/ "Dislike"), we agreed to base our analysis on a fine description of the film sequences. This marked the first step of the workshop, that of an exploratory process which led students to cross and combine different criteria of description in order to elaborate interpretations. These interpretations inaugurated a second step, which was less guided as students could create their own lines of analysis. If we consider film analysis to be a formalized reading of a film sequence through the formulation of assumptions based on descriptions, *Lignes de temps* offers the advantage of combining on a sole interface images, textual and graphic annotations. Nonetheless, students were asked to write a paper which synthesized their analysis and reorganized in a more literary way their interpretations and descriptions. These two types of work – annotations on *Lignes de temps* and written synthesis – are now available on the mind map which gathers in a same constellation the most remarkable projects. The pooling of the projects constituted the third and final step of the workshop: it consisted in mapping the different films of the corpus in a network of relations and stressing the links between them with the tags students had associated to their film. This mind map was created with another of IRI's digital tool, *Renkan* – which means "link" in japanese – which offers the possibility to aggregate and editorialize text, pictures, video and web pages.

Collective writing and editorializing

This film analysis workshop with *Lignes de temps* and *Renkan* seems a good example of the many links which connect amateur and academic cultures in collaborative practices of annotating videos. It engages us to rethink the conditions of the production of knowledge[2]. Whereas everyone today has the opportunity to annotate still or moving images on social networks and video sharing platforms, it is striking to see how easily students made their own use of these software. This self-definition of the meaning of their practice relates to Bernard

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2 On this subject, see my paper on *Le blog documentaire* :
http://cinemadocumentaire.wordpress.com/2013/05/16/lannotation-video-vers-un-spectateur-emancipe/

Stiegler's definition of *Pharmakon*[3], which in Ancient Greece could refer to a poison and a medicine at the same time. According to him, technologies, and digital technologies in particular, might as well be instruments of oppression as means of emancipation depending on the use we make of them.

Students used *Lignes de temps* as a notebook, an evolutive draft that could be enriched over time: as such, the platform became a place of discussion and an interactive draft where to test hypothesis and make corrections. *Renkan*, a mapping tool, was then used to elaborate a general representation of all films analysis. This mind map could only be achieved with the indexing work students had done in their synthesis: the tags associated to the narrative devices and stakes of metamorphosis in these films established the structure of the map.

This experiment of digital tools was also a process of collective writing, as each group's work would contribute to a common discussion. This interactive model thus broke with the one of a unilateral delivery of knowledge by a unique individual, the teacher, to a group of people, as the point was no more to pass on knowledge but rather to collectively develop it. Each one was to become his own teacher as each one had to define his own methodology of work on the platform. This appears to me as an interesting illustration of one of Jacques Rancière's most stimulating notion, that of an "emancipated spectator"[4], through which he means a viewer who would transform his vision of films and spectacles into a critical knowledge. In other words, to see is also to know and to act.

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3 http://www.arsindustrialis.org/biographybibliography

4 Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2008.
   For an English version : http://members.efn.org/~heroux/The-Emancipated-Spectator-.pdf