



EX:CENTRICS

**PHILIPPE  
GRANDRIEUX**

SONIC CINEMA

GREG HAINGE

B L O O M S B U R Y

Philippe  
Grandrieux

**ex:centrics**

*Series Editors:*

*Greg Hainge and Paul Hegarty*

Philippe  
Grandrieux

Sonic Cinema

*Greg Hainge*

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# Introduction

In Shanghai Village Dumpling Restaurant, down an alley in Melbourne's China Town, between mouthfuls of xiao long bao, our conversation turned to Bacon or, to be more precise, Gilles Deleuze's book on Bacon, *Logic of Sensation* (2003b). 'That's the one,' said Philippe Grandrieux excitedly, stabbing the air with his chopsticks. 'That's the book where he [Deleuze] talks about the cinema more than any other.' This statement puzzled me for a long time; how, I wondered, could a book on a painter be considered more relevant to the cinema than, most obviously, the two-volume work that Deleuze had penned about the cinema, titled, appropriately, *Cinema* (1986b and 1989)? The answer to this question only really became apparent to me years later, in Le Havre, where I found myself to see the latest performance directed by Grandrieux, *Meurtrière* [*Murderess*], and this book is, in many respects, an attempt to unpack that answer more fully through a consideration of Grandrieux's entire artistic output to date.<sup>1</sup>

Philippe Grandrieux is, when he is known at all, known predominantly for his work as a film-maker, no doubt because of the acclaim that his films have received in some quarters and the success they have enjoyed at some major international film festivals, on the one hand, and the outrage and condemnation that they have sometimes elicited on the other. To think of Grandrieux as simply a film-maker, however, is misleading if for no other reason than that he has spent more years working in television (as a producer and director), video (as a practitioner) and photography than making feature-length films. What is striking in his approach across all of these different media, however, is the singularity of his vision, the consistent prosecution of a core understanding of the way in which art comes to be, of the conditions necessary for art to take place and of the way in which it reaches out to us.

What is at stake in Grandrieux's project has to do not only with the eternally vexed question of what the cinema is – as posed by

Eisenstein (1998), Bazin (2005), Andrew (2010) and many more besides – but also of what we are, for his is an artistic project in which the boundaries between different media, forms and identities no longer obey the axiomatics that would normally keep everything in its right place, a project which in many respects, then, operates in a mode to which our auditory sense is more habituated and attuned than our visual sense, to which Grandrieux's work would seem to appeal most forcefully – even if he claims that 'sound is much more important than everything else ... For me most of the images are coming from the sound, the sound brings me to the images' (Grandrieux and Baldassari n.d.). To consider the work of Grandrieux from a perspective more attuned to a mode of aesthetic expression that is characterized by a formal and material resistance to containment is perhaps necessary here not only in order to mark the ways in which Grandrieux seems always to contravene or transgress the axiomatics of all of the media forms that he works across, however, but also because so much of his work can only be apprehended in what we might call, for want of a better term, a musical mode. With regard to his feature-length films, for instance, there is arguably little point retelling their major plot lines when discussing them because those elements of his films that might normally coalesce into something that we would call a plot resist doing so, always remaining mobile, relating to each other on a constantly shifting ground that prevents us from fixing them into place, but also because to do so would be so tragically insufficient to the task of accounting, even partially, for what we see projected on the screen and hear resonating in the room. This, one might argue, is the case with every film, but it is all the more so in the films of Grandrieux where the story is arguably as relevant to an engagement with the artistic expression as it is when one listens to a symphony.

It would be easy to surmise from this that Grandrieux is an inheritor of the French Impressionist film-makers working in France in the period following the Great War (such as Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, Abel Gance and Jean Renoir). Impressionist film of this time, indeed, shared some commonalities with more abstract cinematic forms from this same period that distanced themselves from reality to head towards pure visual expression (Delons 1928, 11) while simultaneously conceptualizing of the cinema as a 'musical space' since for them the cinema could only

be conceptualized as ‘a living rhythm repeated across the film’s duration’ (Faure 1964, 25). David Bordwell has convincingly critiqued this assumption of Impressionist film theory, namely that ‘filmic construction should be based not on narrative but on rhythmic relations between images’ (1980a, 125) to contend, rather, that ‘Impressionist film style enriches the narrative by increasing the film-maker’s commentative role or, more often, our awareness of the character’s inner states’ (215). While there is perhaps then some resonance between Grandrieux and the Impressionists, there is ultimately more difference than similarity between them since the relationship between narrative content and filmic form in his work is far more complex than what Bordwell identifies in the work of the Impressionists both in regard to the relationship between the two and the philosophical affordances of this relationship. Indeed, what is at stake in the interplay of form and content in Grandrieux’s films has to do ultimately not just with the cinema and our relationship to it but, rather, life itself. As Marc Mercier writes, this is a cinema that escapes the subject/object binary and goes to the very essence of things, not so much filming life as *being* life itself (2005, 55).

To make this claim is to argue that the cinema, for Grandrieux, is not simply a means to tell a story and that its potential extends far beyond this. ‘The triviality of cinema is adamant’, he has said, ‘yet its apparatus is so powerful that we must not abandon it entirely to laborious narration and the feeble psychology of characters’ (Grandrieux and Copeland 2015, 121). This is not to say that Grandrieux’s films have no story or plot, even if he himself explicitly rejects a primarily narrative-driven model of film-making, saying in an earlier interview:

I don’t write a script that goes ‘interior, kitchen, daytime’, that’s so depressing, I’d shoot myself if I had to write like that. I write little fragments, notes, I look for a certain rhythm in phrases too. I also take a lot of notes on the actors, the light, the sound. (Renaud, Rioux and Rutigliano 1999; all translations from the original French are my own unless stated otherwise in the reference list)

While it is evident from the sentiment expressed here that Grandrieux does not predetermine every aspect of the narrative or even aesthetic progression of his films in advance, he does,

nonetheless, write extensive notes and texts in preparation for each of his film projects and later performance pieces. What is striking when one reads these texts, however, is the extent to which they do not resemble the final product, how little correlation there can (oftentimes) be between the written texts and the final product. Once again, this can be said of any film to a certain extent simply because there is a transformation that takes place in the translation of a written screenplay into an audiovisual form, but this logic is carried far further than this in the case of Grandrieux. In saying this I am not simply suggesting that his written texts serve a function more akin to a musical score whose complexity could never be fully apprehended outside of the act of translation into musical form, although this idea certainly takes us closer to the operation that we find here. Rather, I am suggesting that the base texts serve as a kind of abstract diagram, that they do not so much map out a narrative or formal structure as lay down a series of constraints, principles, codes and ideas from within which aesthetic expression emerges through a semi-improvised choreography that instigates semi-determined relations between all of the various components of the text in creation – be these the actors, crew, technologies, locations, sound or light environments, plot fragments or source texts. If there is in this approach something that comes close to a musical mode, this is because, in spite of the base text that operates somewhat like a score, this creative process resembles more than anything else a collaborative work of improvisation. And yet perhaps, as Grandrieux suggested to me in Melbourne, there is here also something incredibly painterly.

## Back to Bacon

In his analysis of the paintings of Bacon, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze describes what he considers to be the fundamental process in play in Bacon's paintings. This is a process in which – through a variety of different means, including the interplay of different chromatic zones and the inscription on the canvas of geometric lines indicating the flow of forces within the frame – the figure that appears in the painting is isolated in such a way that, from within the space in which that figure finds itself,

something happens within the Figure, a movement or sensation that takes the Figure beyond itself. For Deleuze, this process and the instigation of this movement are intimately linked to the birth of an aesthetic mode that distances painting from representation and narrative; yet this does not necessarily mean that painting falls back into abstraction – even if this is one of the possible paths open to it. As he writes in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

Painting has neither a model to represent nor a story to narrate. It thus has two possible ways of escaping the figurative: toward pure form, through abstraction; or toward the purely figural, through extraction or isolation. If the painter keeps to the Figure, if he or she opts for the second path, it will be to oppose the ‘figural’ to the figurative. Isolating the Figure will be the primary requirement. The figurative (representation) implies the relationship of an image to an object that it is supposed to illustrate; but it also implies the relationship of an image to other images in a composite whole that assigns a specific object to each of them. Narration is the correlate of illustration. A story always slips into, or tends to slip into, the space between two figures in order to animate the illustrated whole. Isolation is thus the simplest means, necessary though not sufficient, to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure: to stick to the fact. (Deleuze 2003b, 6)

We are here, I want to suggest, very close to Grandrieux’s attitude towards narrative, and an understanding of the opposing centrifugal and centripetal forces that bring about the isolation of the Figure and then a movement that takes the Figure beyond the boundaries of itself will be crucial for an understanding of the forces and modes at work in his artistic output. Indeed, what I hope to show in the chapters to follow is that the various figures and characters that move through Grandrieux’s universe are subjected to precisely this kind of isolation in order to enable within them an entirely new mode of relation to the world, to enable them to live (to modulate the title of one of Grandrieux’s films) a new life. What is more, this same movement is one to which we, the audience who find ourselves in front of Grandrieux’s work, are subjected also. In making this

claim, I do not wish to fall into the kinds of exercises in rhetorical excess that characterize most of the work in the area of applied affect studies or post-phenomenological film criticism critiqued by Eugénie Brinkema (2014, xiii). Rather, I will contend that we are subject to these same processes in very specific ways that vary in degree and kind depending on the particularities of the medium and situation in which we find ourselves.

Yet this is only half true or, rather, not true in the way one might imagine. For while I will carry out a close textual analysis of what we actually see and hear in Grandrieux's work and stick closely to the works themselves, it will undoubtedly be necessary in what follows also to approach his work from the side, via a route that may at times seem precisely *not* to attend to the specificities of the text. In saying this, I am recalling once again my prior contention that we need to engage with Grandrieux's work in what might be considered a musical mode due to its consistent resistance to containment. More than this, however, I am suggesting that in order to engage fully with his work we need, firstly, to understand how certain tropes and ideas have been reiterated differently across his career and across the different media he has worked in. In addition, I wish to propose that to approach his work in this way is to begin to understand his own method and way of working or, rather, the way in which his work comes to be.

This slight modulation in my last sentence should hopefully indicate already that this approach is absolutely not taken in a desire to write an *auteurist* study that would fall prey not only to the traps presented by the intentional fallacy but all of those other missteps that have been so roundly critiqued by scholars since the emergence of *auteur* theory in France and the birth of the *Nouvelle vague* – a movement which undoubtedly had a big impact on Grandrieux nonetheless. Indeed, if *auteur* theory has been considered problematic in more recent times, it is in large part because the cinema cannot be authored by one person alone but is necessarily the product of a technological and industrial complex, which is to say, as suggested of Grandrieux's work above, that it is born of a choreography that instigates semi-determined relations between its various components. In Grandrieux's work, this principle is pushed to its most extreme point, to the point that the distinction between form and process is eradicated entirely, a statement that needs to be applied not only to the creation of the

text but to its transmission also insofar as the forces generated by the work act upon the Figure of the spectator, problematizing her various bodies: bodies of knowledge and her corporeal being. To suggest this is not merely to reiterate a somewhat banal point since Barthes, Foucault and many more besides them declared the author to be dead; it is rather to say that in front of Grandrieux's work we are forced or asked to construct something new out of something that is in many respects entirely alien yet, at the same time, somehow strangely and deeply familiar, something that we are tempted to reject or abject in spite of – or perhaps because of – the fact that on some level it seems to speak to a part of us that has been so profoundly and thoroughly repressed or simply forgotten that it no longer seems possible that it once formed a part of us.

The mechanics of Grandrieux's aesthetic achieve this via a number of different means (psychological alienation, narrative estrangement, visual or sonic confusion ...) that have the effect of isolating us not only from our ambient reality but also from any anthropological or sensory reflex that we might use to try and orient ourselves within unfamiliar spaces, destabilizing what we take to be fixed forms in a desire to perdure within a knowable identity. The viewer of Grandrieux's work, indeed, like the characters she sees before her, is stripped back to a post-identitarian state – or perhaps, as becomes clearer in the latter part of Grandrieux's career, a pre-identitarian state – and forced to move beyond the bounds of the prior identity now lying in shards around her. Subjected to the same kinds of forces and figural processes enacted within the work itself, what is in play here is the conversion and subsequent transmission of perception, affection and meaning into, respectively, percept, affect and sensation that Deleuze and Guattari find in those forms of art that seek to undo form (1994, 174–7). For Deleuze and Guattari, the very aim of art is 'to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations' (167). This is the vocabulary that has been used most often in scholarly work dealing with the work of Grandrieux and, indeed, by Grandrieux himself when talking about his own work. To talk about sensation and affect in such general terms, however, and not via a close textual analysis of the specific mechanics that I am claiming to be in operation in Grandrieux's work, leaves one open to the charge

levelled by Eugenie Brinkema against scholars deploying affect theory – and Deleuzians, in particular. She writes:

There is a formula for work on affect, and it turns on a set of shared terms: speed, violence, agitation, pressures, forces, intensities. In other words, and against much of the spirit of Deleuze's philosophy, which celebrated the minor, the changeable, and the multiple, Deleuzian theories of affect offer all repetition with no difference. When affect is taken as a synonym for violence or force (or intensity or sensation), one can only speak of its most abstract agitations instead of any particular textual workings. (2014, xiii)

If this mode can be found in much of the scholarly literature published on Grandrieux that seeks to engage or evoke the 'sensation' of his work, however, the shortcomings of this work result (as intimated by Brinkema) from the ways in which Deleuze's ideas have been used rather than anything inherent to his philosophy. Indeed, the passage from *What is Philosophy?* quoted above continues: 'A method is needed, and this varies with every artist and forms part of the work' (167). It is this method that the chapters to follow will attempt to unpack through a close examination of Grandrieux's work across all of the media in which he has worked from the very start of his artistic career up until the present day.

At this point some may object that if the artist himself uses the very lexicon that I am to employ in talking about his work, there is little point in carrying out such an analysis, that the work should speak for itself. Leaving aside the difficulty of seeing much of the work that will be described in the pages to follow, this is perhaps a valid point and far from the only tension that arises in a book such as this. Indeed, others may protest that in offering a close textual analysis intended to shed some light on a body of work which is not known by many yet loved by those who know it arguably because of its darkness, a darkness both literal and figurative that seems to resist being brought into the light, I am spectacularly missing the point of what Grandrieux's work is all about and, to boot, attempting to account for its operations via a mode that is not its own and that can only then remain at a distance from it. To a certain extent this is true, for as Daniel W. Smith notes in his translator's preface to *Logic of Sensation* (in a comment that is equally applicable to all of the

artistic forms to be analysed herein), to talk about painting was, for Bacon, necessarily ‘only an approximation, as painting is its own language and is not translatable into words’.<sup>2</sup> As Smith also notes, this is a tension present in Deleuze’s own work and method when writing *The Logic of Sensation* for which he used reproductions of the paintings and Bacon’s interviews with Sylvester as source materials. As Smith puts it, ‘How does one talk in one medium (concepts) about the practices of another (percepts)?’ (2003, xi). For Deleuze – who did not believe that this tension required the philosopher to abandon the attempt to talk about different kinds of expression – the way out of this apparent contradiction was to use Bacon’s interviews not as ‘definitive statements on Bacon’s part but rather as the starting point for his own conceptual inventions’ (Smith 2003, xi). This explains why Deleuze’s readings of his philosophical forebears are often so controversial in the eyes of the inner circle of serious scholars who dedicate themselves purely to the thought of those philosophers to whom Deleuze turned his attention, for in each case his interest lay precisely not in explicating a pre-existing conceptual framework but in employing that framework in order to advance his own conceptual meanderings down paths he would not have discovered by himself.

For my part here, even though I shall, in the course of this book, formulate the concept of sonic cinema which is intended as an alternative or perhaps corrective to the idea of haptic cinema that has gained so much traction in recent work in film studies, I am not so vainglorious as to claim that this study treats Grandrieux’s work with a similar aim in mind. My explicit intention, indeed, is to remain as close as possible to his work, to account for his percepts with concepts, and while there is necessarily an irreducible tension in the attempt to do this, I believe that his works call for this move to be made. Indeed, just as some form of concept, generated oftentimes from a written text, is vital for the genesis of Grandrieux’s works, so, I believe, is a critical engagement with the work *ex post facto* a vital component of the way in which the work of art comes to be in the world – which is in part to say that while we are dealing here with affect and sensation, Grandrieux’s work necessarily brings into the fray a political and ethical dimension.

In saying this I am expressing an idea not dissimilar to that proposed by Andrew Benjamin in his work *Disclosing Spaces: On Painting*. Commenting on painting understood not as a

representational practice in which the work of art would always be beholden to a mimetic function, in thrall to an external reality that would always pre-exist it but, rather, as an expressive form capable of generating something new and specific to it, Benjamin writes:

Moving beyond the hold of exemplarity necessitates that it is the painting's work that figures. Work for the painting, because those moments in which what is displayed cannot be separated from its presence as the effect of painting, involves the painting's materiality. A materiality continually marked by an immaterial presence. Figures effected by the painting's work are – as a consequence – able to figure. (2004, 46)

Far from leaving the artwork subservient to the world in which it is situated, art's potential is, on the contrary, the capacity to interrupt that world, to intervene in the present moment – the political and ethical dimension talked of above. In order for this work of the artwork to be put into effect, however, something else is required. Benjamin writes:

Even though this potential is part of the definition of art, it still does not follow that art works on its own. The capacity is released. (This is what the presence of potential entails.) The moment of release occurs as the act of criticism. (2004, 3)

For Grandrieux this idea is modulated slightly and can be best understood not via Benjamin but, instead, through Proust's preface to his three-hundred-page essay *Contre Sainte-Beuve* [*Against Sainte-Beuve*] (1987), a text that Grandrieux has stated to be seminal for his own work.<sup>3</sup> This text is like an early blueprint for the kind of chance sensory encounter triggering an involuntary memory that would later become the hallmark of his writing thanks to *In Search of Time Lost's* madeleine episode. What we find both in this earlier text and *In Search of Time Lost* is an example of a specific configuration of elements that coalesce in such a way as to bring about in the subject who stands at the centre of this constellation an expression that is beyond both intelligence or the intellect and all intentionality. If the intellect is here left behind, however, it returns *ex post facto* in an effort to try and make some

kind of sense from this lived experience and, what is more, to attempt to comprehend those aspects of reality that such experience reveals. Indeed, intelligence and intention are here seen to cast a veil over reality, to cloak it in an image in which its every element would interrelate according to a schema at least partially (if not wholly) determined by what we think we know to be true. The potential of the kind of sensory encounter recounted by Proust is then that it permits access to a more direct form of encounter with the world that is not preconditioned by the biases, prejudices and habituated modes of a subject but in which, rather, the subject is conjugated as but one element of an assemblage that arises through a direct sensory contact with the world and its objects. The role of art is to give form to this encounter such that it might subsequently be transmissible to others, albeit in a modulated form – and this is precisely what would be referred to by Deleuze as a percept. For Proust, however, this is not all that is in operation in the work of art, for both in the primary creation of the work of art and, we can suggest going beyond Proust, in the activation of the potential of the work of art that enacts its work of figuration (which is to say in the act of interpretation, criticism or even just reception), intelligence returns. It does this, however, not in order to assert its own superiority once again and to reinstate the world order that has been disturbed and interrupted by the work of art but, rather, to realize its own insufficiency and incapacity fully to recuperate this lived experience. While this may then seem a somewhat futile exercise, a superfluous step, it is for Proust in fact vital since it is only the intellect that is capable of asserting that it is itself secondary and instinct primary. As Proust writes at the end of this preface:

Throughout the pages to come [we will] touch on some very important intellectual questions, perhaps the most important there are for an artist, which have to do with the inferiority of the intellect that I have talked about at the start of this text. Yet this inferiority of the intellect needs to be established by the intellect. Because if the intellect does not merit the crowning glory, it is only the intellect that is capable of discerning this. And if in the hierarchy of virtues it occupies only second place, it is nonetheless only the intellect that is capable of proclaiming that the instinct must take first place. (1987, 50)

Taking my lead from Deleuze's insistence that we listen more closely to what artists have to say (see Deleuze 2003a), I want to contend that this short preface by Proust is of great importance for an understanding of Grandrieux's artistic output and our engagement with it. Indeed, as will be seen in the chapters to follow, there is in Grandrieux's work across all of the different media in which he works a remarkably coherent conceptual approach that is meticulously formulated. What this conceptual framework is used to produce is the very kind of constellation of elements found in Proust's text, a situation in which there is no primary element, no superior intellect but merely a dynamic space within which the artwork comes to be. Conceptualized in this way, as an entirely heterogenetic process, Grandrieux thrusts us, the subsequent receivers of these works, into a space in which all of our prior codes, moral, cultural, anthropological and aesthetic, find themselves in crisis, unable to account for this experience or to reconcile what seem to be, from within an already established hermeneutic framework, contradictory forces.

To put this another way, what we are faced with in Grandrieux's work is an entirely immersive and immanent environment in which the events taking place are produced out of a logic entirely internal to the text itself. It is in part because of this immersive nature of the work that the term 'sonic cinema' is appropriate, since sound is an immersive medium that, what is more, stubbornly transgresses borders and attempted containment. In the spirit of taking seriously what artists themselves say about their own work, however, the term 'sonic cinema' is also particularly apposite for the work of Grandrieux since the director himself so often conceptualizes his own work in terms of sonic phenomena and/or states that the sound design of a film is oftentimes the most important or primary element. Having said that, it is important to note that in using the term 'sonic cinema', the intention is not simply to talk about sound in the cinema. This has been done very capably by many critics before me and there are now whole journals dedicated solely to cinematic sound or the soundtrack. The very term 'sonic cinema' has been used by Philip Brophy over a prolonged period to describe a strand of his own approach to film studies or, rather, 'audiovisuality' as he terms it. Like much work in this area, Brophy's approach explicitly focuses on the sonic in its most literal instantiation and sets out to engage with the cinema first and foremost through the soundtrack (2004).<sup>4</sup>

Another notable critic who has, across an entire career, argued for the importance of close attention to the role that sound plays in the cinema (precisely because it is so often forgotten) is Michel Chion (see for instance 2009), and another recent study whose title would seem to indicate that it has much in common with the present volume is Andy Birtwistle's *Cinesonica: Sounding Film and Video* (2010). Birtwistle's work undertakes a complex interdisciplinary analysis of the necessarily imbricated relation between image and sound in film and video and in doing so goes beyond the remit of much work in cinematic sound studies, yet ultimately does not, as here, attempt a reconfiguration of those realms through this relation, seeking rather to map a structural equivalence between the materiality of sound (arising from duration, development and rhythm) and the materiality of the relationship between sound and image more broadly (2010, 17).

In setting out to complicate the relationship between sound and image more than this, the use of the term 'sonic' here extends it beyond the realm of sound. The methodology employed thus approaches the cinema through concepts and vocabularies that originate in the realm of the sonic yet are by no means constrained by the sonic narrowly defined. Consequently, we will here analyse the cinematic image using terms such as 'accompaniment', 'harmony', 'resonance', and ultimately describe its geometry in rhythmic terms, arguing that it is only by doing so that we can describe something defined primarily by movement in time. This is done in part, as mentioned, because of the specificities of Grandrieux's work and the ways in which he himself conceptualizes his work, but also because of a sense that different kinds of approaches towards the cinema are required, approaches that do not take it for granted that the long-habituated sensory hierarchy of our own embodied selves can be unproblematically mapped onto the ways in which the cinema operates, given that it is constructed very differently – hence of course its attractiveness to Deleuze as a medium through which we might view the world outside of the very limited and situated scope of human consciousness or perception (see 1986b and 1989). In this regard, the approach taken here has much in common with recent work in film studies that seeks to analyse the notion of 'affect' in the cinema and, more specifically, work that attempts to undo this sensory hierarchy through the concept of the haptic. If here I use the term 'sonic cinema' rather than a pre-existing term such

as 'haptic cinema', however, this is in large part because of a desire to remain very close to the text, close to the cinema, to recognize that even though the cinema may be constructed very differently to us, its spectators, it remains nonetheless an audiovisual form that is problematically accounted for in terms of other sensory inputs.

What this means, of course, is that the idea of a 'sonic cinema' that is deployed throughout this book and explicitly unpacked in the intermezzo and afterword is one that could be mapped onto a consideration of any filmic text; it is though particularly appropriate for a consideration of the work of Grandrieux since, apart from all of the reasons already mentioned, the theory itself enacts the kind of reconfiguration that I have claimed is an essential component of Grandrieux's work. Indeed, if the very idea of the sonic invokes the spectre of an immersive medium that cannot be contained within the parameters of previously constituted forms, a space that is defined not by the sum total of the discrete objects within it but only by the events taking place within it, then we are very close to Deleuze's analysis of the forces in Bacon's paintings that instigate a movement in the figure that carry it beyond the bounds of the unitary, of a singular known or knowable identity, to create instead a dynamic zone of intensities, affects and lines of flight.

It is precisely such a space that is created in Grandrieux's universe in which we find ourselves face-to-face with situations that resist containment within the petrified limits of knowledge. These situations demand of us a different kind of engagement that is not premised on understanding and yet which, by the same token, brings intelligence back into the fray by making us interrogate the limits of knowledge or what it is possible to know. Given all of this, this book sets sail on its journey in the full knowledge of its own insufficiency in the face of its chosen objects of study and yet its concomitant necessity in relation to them.

# 1

## In the beginning

### *Via la vidéo [Via Video] (1975)*

While it may seem somewhat counter-intuitive or even perverse to begin this survey of Philippe Grandrieux's career by talking about somebody else, this is in fact what we must do in order to understand his first video installation piece from 1975, *Via la vidéo*, a work that significantly and counter-intuitively once again also requires us to think about a time-based audiovisual media form via painting. In this piece, Grandrieux films the creation of a work by Claude Viallat and, subsequently, the work itself, the creation of his own video documentation being in turn filmed by another camera. But before we turn our attention to the three screen installation work that this methodology produced, let us briefly consider the work of the artist who figures in this work.

Claude Viallat was one of the founding members of an artistic movement called Support(s)- Surface(s) – 'support' being the French word for an artistic medium or format. The movement took its lead in many respects from the short-lived Groupe BMPT, a group of artists comprising Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier and Niele Toroni who wished to present paintings that would not elicit any emotional response from the viewer and would express only the brute fact of their own existence. To this end, each artist took a simple motif and painted it onto an unstretched canvas, caring little for pictorial perfection. Buren painted vertical stripes, Parmentier horizontal ones, Mosset painted a black circle and Toroni a repeated pattern of dots. The group displayed its works in 1967 at the Young Painter's Salon, but then dissolved within a year. The basic principles of Groupe BMPT were taken up, however,

by the artists of Support(s)-Surface(s), the main members of whom were André-Pierre Arnal, Vincent Bioulès, Louis Cane, Marc Devade, Daniel Dezeuze, Noël Dolla, Toni Grand, Bernard Pagès, Jean-Pierre Pincemin, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi and Claude Viallat. All of these artists were similarly united by a common goal to create paintings and sculptures that were, as far as possible, eviscerated of any form of subject or subjectivity, that referred not to the psychology or characteristics of either that which was figured in the artwork or that of the artist but, rather, only to the work of art itself, which is to say the way in which the work comes to be as a particular constellation of pictorial or sculptural elements within its given medium. As some of the members of the group wrote in the catalogue for an exhibition entitled *Painting in Question* that took place in Le Havre in 1969, an exhibition that was to lay the foundations of the movement to come:

The object of painting is painting itself and the canvases on display relate only to themselves. They do not call out to an 'elsewhere' (the personality of the artist, his biography, the history of art, for instance). They offer no escape route, because the surface, through the ruptures created by forms and colours that are put into effect on it, prohibits the spectator's mental projections or dreamlike wanderings. Painting is a thing in and of itself and it is on its own terms that we must engage with it. This is not a question of a return to its origins, nor of a quest for an originary purity, but simply of a laying bare of the pictorial elements that constitute painting itself. (Bioulès et al. 1969)

While these principles remained an important aspect of the group's work as it gradually morphed into the Support(s)-Surface(s) movement a year later, a name adopted for a major exhibition in the Autumn of 1970 in l'ARC-Animation/Recherche/Confrontation (a research and exhibition space in Paris' Museum of Modern Art dedicated to contemporary artistic creation), it was the physical components of painting as a medium that were to become increasingly important. In different ways, each member of the group set out to reconfigure painting as a material practice, often dissecting the very material elements that lay behind the layers of paint generally considered to form what is termed a painting in order to perform a radical reconfiguration of the work of art, of what a painting was or

could be. For the group this was, after Barthes, an attempt to attain the 'degree zero of painting', a desire that led to various attempts to treat painting not so much as a representational practice but, rather, as a specific set of materials and gestural practices. As a result, Dezeuze would take apart his canvas' stretching frames and turn them into ladders or other quasi-sculptural objects; Saytour would fold and crease his canvases before applying pigment to them in this state; and Viallat would use a stencil to paint the same abstract form on an unstretched canvas, sheet or tarpaulin over and over again, the different material properties of the canvas and paints, dyes or pigments used producing different end results. As Viallat himself sums up these different approaches: 'Dezeuze painted frames with no canvas, I painted canvases with no frames, and Saytour painted the image of the frame on the canvas.'<sup>1</sup>

As well as wishing to reengineer precisely how a painting is constituted as a material object, the group also wanted to reconfigure the ways in which the painting as an object might connect with its viewers, as both a material and ideological object. Indeed, the practice of the group was deliberately low-tech and artisanal, an approach that tied into their anti-elitist, Marxist stance towards culture and the art market. Their exhibitions, meanwhile, contained works made of rope or stretcher frames that did not hang obediently flat against the wall but extended into the gallery space in unruly ways, forcing viewers to relate to them not as passive scenes to be contemplated via the gaze but, rather, as material obstacles to be navigated. Ideological obstacles eventually brought about the demise of the group when Viallat resigned from it in 1971 in protest at what he saw to be an overly politicized agenda, however, the whole movement then being dissolved in 1972 after a second collective exhibition in Strasbourg.

While the Support(s)-Surface(s) group was no longer in existence by the time Philippe Grandrieux made his own video work featuring Viallat, an understanding of the agenda and method of this group is crucial for a full appreciation of *Via la vidéo*, Grandrieux's first video work which, what is more, prefigures many aspects of his subsequent work across all of the different media he has worked in. Viallat's method had not changed much by 1975 (indeed, the working method employed for making his works has remained consistent well into the new millennium) as can be seen in one of the three black and white video segments of *Via la vidéo*. In this

we see Viallat creating one of his hallmark ‘bean’ canvases, laying out a large sheet-like canvas on the ground, carefully placing a broad-bean-shaped cut-out stencil onto the canvas, then using what resembles a wallpaper paste brush more than an artist’s brush to apply a liquid dye or pigment to the canvas through the stencil. We then see Viallat repeating this gesture again and again until the canvas is filled with the bean shapes, roughly applied yet gridded in a strict geometric arrangement. We then watch Viallat apply a lighter shade of pigment to the white, undyed areas of canvas between the bean shapes with the same brush and then, once the painting phase of the work is complete, carefully tear an inch-wide strip of canvas from the entire perimeter of the work before tearing this remainder in half again and again until it forms a long rope.

Throughout this entire sequence, we see only Viallat’s hands and feet as he crouches on the canvas and works its surface to create the work via a semi-automated procedure seemingly devoid of artistic control if not intent. Indeed, we do not have the impression of witnessing ‘the artist’ at work here (as is the case with documentary footage of Jackson Pollock at work, for instance) and rarely if ever catch a glimpse of the artist’s face. Rather, true to the agenda of the Support(s)-Surface(s) movement, we are witness simply to the coming into being of an image via a specific material configuration and repeated set of gestures. This decision to elide the identity of the artist to focus on the creation of the work from within is deliberate and consistent with Grandrieux’s understanding of Viallat’s method. Indeed, Grandrieux sees in the use of a stencil to produce an image constructed from the repetition of a single shape an attempt to empty the work of intentionality, to create the necessary conditions for the work to generate itself from the inside without the hand of the artist imposing any other form on it<sup>2</sup> – this being in some ways an extension of the chance operations and internal forces out of which Bacon’s paintings are generated. It is important to note also, however, that Viallat’s work here also comes into being within a constraint imposed on him by Grandrieux, namely to create a painting in an hour (a constraint we will see him impose on other artists for a film project later in his career), a requirement that undoubtedly imposed a certain concentration of activity and made image creation the sole object of attention.

If in this first segment we then see the production of a work via a set of repeated gestures and material practices, the second segment

of Grandrieux's work shows us, in effect, this very same thing, for in it we see Grandrieux himself filming a collection of Viallat's canvases (including, we suppose, the one whose creation we have witnessed) hanging in an exhibition space (see Figure 1). Filmed by a mounted camera that pans only slightly to follow Grandrieux's movements and zooms in on him even less, maintaining a medium long shot for the vast majority of the segment, we watch Grandrieux and two assistants (one holding a microphone on a boom close to Grandrieux's face even though he does not say a word, the other shining a portable spotlight on Viallat's paintings) as they slowly walk around the gallery space to film different works, all the while stepping over one of Viallat's rope works laid out on the floor. Each time the group moves, we see Grandrieux stoop to pick up the heavy reel-to-reel video tape case and then slip the strap over his shoulder before placing it back on the ground as they come to a rest again, filming all the while. While we do not actually see the work materialize before our eyes as we do with the first segment, here also we are effectively witness only to the gestures required to



FIGURE 1 Screenshot from *Via la vidéo*. Courtesy Philippe Grandrieux.

produce a work of art via a specific technological configuration, this time, of course, *Via la vidéo*.

In the third segment of the work, we see the work itself whose creation we have just witnessed or, rather, we see the works whose creation we have just witnessed, for we see the video that was shot through Grandrieux's camera during the second segment, a video showing close-ups of Viallat's painting that we watched come into being in the first segment. Yet if one were to ask if, ultimately, what we see here is Viallat's work or Grandrieux's, one would have to answer that it is the latter's because what we attend to in this segment is not so much the abstract shapes and shades of Viallat's painting but, rather, changes in light, texture and shade and the various forms of movement in the image created by the shake of a handheld camera, pans, zooms and (as we know from segment two) dips as Grandrieux bends to set his equipment down. Even this answer is only partially correct, however, for it should not be thought that segments one and two (as labelled here) are simply the 'making of' portion of a work constituted by segment three alone. There is really no strict chronology or hierarchy between these video segments, and while it is of course possible to reconstitute a linear narrative across them, this is confounded by their actual presentation in the gallery space. For *Via la vidéo* is not simply a video work comprising these three video segments but an installation piece that was exhibited in the Galerie Albert Baronian in Brussels that consisted of three television monitors, each of which played one of the three segments in a continuous loop and, at the fourth apex of the square formed by these elements, the actual canvas created by Viallat in segment one. Finally, in a move consistent with the Support(s)-Surface(s) group's desire to reconfigure the space in which the work of art is exhibited and the viewer's relationship with that space, the visitor entering into the space between *Via la vidéo*'s constituent elements would find herself walking through and thereby leaving a repeated pattern of identical shapes (à la Viallat) traced in this work's last element, white chalk powder sprinkled over the floor.

In pointing out the confluence between many aspects of Viallat's work and Grandrieux's approach and suggesting that this work could be said in many respects to perform an enactment of the core principles of the Support(s)-Surface(s) group via the medium of video rather than painting, there is no intention to claim that Grandrieux's work is derivative in the extreme. Rather, it is my

intention simply to suggest that in choosing to film Viallat and to use one of Viallat's art objects as the subject matter for his own work, it is undoubtedly the case that Viallat's approach is one that resonated strongly with Grandrieux. In spite of this confluence and resonance, however, what we ultimately witness in *Via la vidéo* goes beyond the principles laid down by the Support(s)-Surface(s) movement and Viallat, for this is a work in which there is not only a medium-specific operation and gesture that draws our attention to the materialities and material practices of the work of art, but also an intensification of the material and immaterial relations that are involved in the creation and reception (which is to say re-creation) of the work of art in a multisensory temporal art form. Indeed, in *Via la vidéo* we are invited to attend to the relations instigated between the original source text (Viallat's painting) and Grandrieux's final work, the relations between the members of the film crew and the subsequent interplay of light and movement produced out of their slow-motion ballet. We are invited to attend to the relational dialogue between light and recording technologies as different levels of lighting wash out the image in a brilliant overexposure or bathe areas of the image in darkness as the light moves away, or create brilliant points of white intensity that burn into zones of underexposed gloom when the camera faces into the light, leaving flares and halos in its wake. We are invited to attend to the relations between various segments of sequences that may seem to gesture towards some kind of pre-established narrative trajectory or teleology; yet, ultimately, they refuse containment within anything so facile, remaining constantly mobile in relation to each other. And we are invited to attend, finally, to our own embodied relation to the work of art we find ourselves faced with.

It is precisely these kinds of relations that we will be invited to attend to again and again throughout Grandrieux's career. This is not to say that he has spent his entire career making the same work over and over again, à la Viallat; on the contrary, this relational logic has played itself out in very different ways across Grandrieux's career as he has turned his hand (and eye and body) to different situations, different contexts, different media, different formats. In every case the work in question is produced out of a series of relations that is never reducible to Grandrieux alone but is rather the result of an active collaboration between source text, context, ambient conditions, technology, time, light, crew, actors