

Beatrice Gibson & Laida Lertxundi: Uncanny Resonances

The films by Laida Lertxundi (b. 1981, Spain) and Beatrice Gibson (b. 1978, UK) share a certain aura of mystery. 'I suppose I'm looking for the enigmatic, something that catches you, some drama, even a story,' Gibson says.¹ Similarly, Lertxundi's films present us with unexpected landscapes and inscrutable characters whose relationships to one another are made suspect by her idiosyncratic use of diegetic sound. Both artists propose films that read as open narratives, but emphasize the tensions between construction and reality inherent to the process of filmmaking.

Laida Lertxundi makes films in and around Los Angeles, the city where she studied under James Benning and Thom Andersen, and where she has been living and working for a number of years. Shot under the blue Californian sky, her films feature the same topography as Hollywood cinema. Appropriately, Lertxundi questions cinematic conventions of representation and storytelling in her work at the same time that she proposes new associations between sound and image. An ocean and a continent apart, in London, Beatrice Gibson — who rose to prominence in 2008 with her debut film *A Necessary Music*, not long after Lertxundi's breakthrough *Footnotes to a House of Love* (2007) — addresses similar formal and conceptual concerns, often shaped by the material constraints and aesthetic properties of working with 16mm film. Beyond the differences in the specific subjects of their films, the underlying themes in their work — speculative narrative, film as landscape, sound as material, the production process, collaborative practice — resonate in an uncanny way.

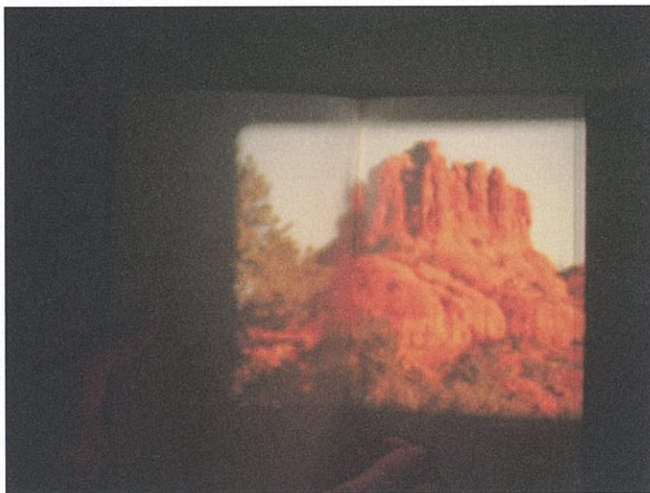
The Argentinian writer Adolfo Bioy Casares — a friend and colleague of Jorge Luis Borges — constitutes one of their many shared reference points. Gibson uses excerpts from Bioy Casares' novel *The Invention of Morel* for the narration of *A Necessary Music*, a science fiction film about modernist social housing on Roosevelt Island in New York. The influence of Bioy Casares can also be felt in the overall mood of mystery in *The Tiger's Mind* (2012), which was also filmed against modernist architecture, a Brutalist English villa by Denys Lasdun. The enigmatic building, the repetition of speech, the absence of actors, and the roles that objects (and place) assume

as protagonists, are some of the motifs that Gibson may have subconsciously borrowed from the novel.

While *The Invention of Morel* could be described as an abstract science fiction novel, *The Tiger's Mind* is an abstract crime thriller based on an experimental score by British composer Cornelius Cardew in which six characters (the tiger, the mind, the tree, the wind, the circle and a girl called Amy) interact with each other musically, according to the relationships outlined in the score. In Gibson's film, the six characters are represented by the props, the music, the foley, the special effects, the author and the narrator respectively.

For her most recent film *We Had the Experience but Missed the Meaning* (2014) Laida Lertxundi recorded one of her students in San Diego reciting passages from *Todos los hombres son iguales* (*All Men Are Equal*), a short story by Bioy Casares about an Argentinian widow who is having an affair with a young man. He begins to arrive later and later to their meetings, so she has him followed because she thinks he is seeing someone else. It turns out that he just prefers to drive the car that she has loaned to him. As the narrator in the book points out: 'Love ... among honest people is never innocent.'

Born in Bilbao, but formed as a filmmaker in the United States (first at Bard College where Peter Hutton and Peggy Ahwesh were her tutors, then later at CalArts), Lertxundi's work has gradually become more bilingual and more comfortable with its dual identity. *Cry When It Happens* (2010) also exists under the Spanish title *Llora Cuando Te Pase*. (In fact the film opens with the Spanish title and closes with the English one). Since then, Spanish has slowly gained importance in Lertxundi's films. In *Utskor: Either/Or* (2013) the sounds of 23-F, the 1981 attempted coup d'état in Spain, are immediately recognizable to a Spanish audience. Lertxundi, who was born two months after the failed coup, describes the film as echoing what she heard and sensed from her pregnant mother's belly, and even though it was filmed in Norway, it feels closer to her native Basque country than any of her American films. In *We Had the Experience but Missed the Meaning* (a phrase borrowed from a poem by T.S. Eliot), the title is English but the voice-over narration is entirely Span-



Top: *Cry When it Happens* (2010) Laida Lertxundi
 Middle: *Llora Cuando Te Pase* (2010) Laida Lertxundi
 Bottom: *We Had the Experience but Missed the Meaning* (2014) Laida Lertxundi

ish. *A Lax Riddle Unit* (2011) also has an English language title, though it is in fact an anagram of her name.

Both Gibson and Lertxundi appear in some of their films, although they are never centrally featured. As Genevieve Yue notes, Lertxundi is usually a fleeting figure in her films, 'crossing in front of the camera in one of the dilapidated rooms in *Footnotes to a House of Love* or staring out at the sea in *Cry When It Happens/Llora Cuando Te Pase* (2010).² Similarly, Gibson is one of the actors in *Agatha* (2012), and although more recognisable than Lertxundi, she is generally filmed as part of a group, and it is never clear whether she is the Agatha of the title. The filmmakers are also present in their films in other ways: Lertxundi often films in her own apartment, using her personal objects as props; and Gibson is the narrator of *Agatha* and *The Tiger's Mind*. Lertxundi and Gibson also both make films with friends, and although they are unequivocally the authors of their work, they are keenly interested in exploring the conditions and possibilities of collaborative practice.

An important point for Lertxundi is that the people that appear on screen are the same as those who create the film. She dislikes conventional film crews, preferring to surround herself with friends and those who work for her but will also have a good time while making the film. In addition, her actors also double up as technicians and production crew. Lertxundi keeps everyone busy: when they are not being filmed, they are creating sound, or preparing the subsequent scene. Lertxundi's collaborators have included Christina C. Nguyen, Laura Steenberge, Sarah Schipschack, Josette Chiang and George Clark, who also co-wrote Beatrice Gibson's *The Future's Getting Old Like the Rest of Us* (2010).

In many ways Gibson's *Agatha* (2012) is the film that feels closest to Lertxundi's practice and sensibility, largely due to its mode of production. Tired of big budgets, commissioners, and longer periods of development, Gibson conceived *Agatha* as an antidote to the extended gestation and ambition of *The Tiger's Mind*.

'I invited seven close friends to come away with me to Wales for a week, during which time we'd make the film, but really all that was to include, was doing the things we might do anyway, as a community of friends, in a rural setting. So in filming *Agatha*, there was no crew, or script but rather just a series of improvised situations outlined in advance and based around an idea of communal activity. It was a pretty utopian take on being together in a wordless way, let's say, building a fire, making a meal, going for a walk.'³

Gibson refers to *Agatha* as a footnote to *The Tiger's Mind*, which again chimes with Lertxundi's practice in so far as 'footnotes' are present across Lertxundi's filmography, from the evocatively titled *Footnotes to a House of Love* onwards.

Both *Agatha* and *The Tiger's Mind* draw inspiration from the figure of Cornelius Cardew, but of the two, *Agatha* may be a much more rewarding viewing

experience for the film spectator, perhaps as a result of its more spontaneous nature. Whereas *The Tiger's Mind* was triggered by a score of the same title by Cardew — elaborated upon by Gibson's research into how to adapt the compositional strategies of music to filmmaking — the starting point for *Agatha* was a dream that the composer had in 1967. The origin of the film is the story of Cardew's dream, involving a planet without speech in which inhabitants, indeterminate in respect to gender, make love through music, and where alternative forms of communication such as colour-changing or sharing liquids take the place of verbal language. The narrative in *Agatha* is partly what makes it a more accessible work. In contrast, *The Tiger's Mind* may only make full sense in the context of the larger project that it is part of. Initiated by Gibson and typographer Will Holder, *The Tiger's Mind* involved a process that used Cardew's score as a means of producing speech. Having invited John Tilbury, Jesse Ash, Alex Waterman, and Céline Condorelli to join them, the project developed, over a two-year period, in the form of three week-long conversations around ideas such as improvisation, speech as instrumentation or the application of a score to a conversation, which took place at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, Kunstverein Amsterdam, and CAC Brétigny.

The three conversations and the collaborative processes that they engaged resulted in a book (authored by Holder) and Gibson's film. In spite of Gibson's intention for the film to be both a departure from the score and from the production process, led with Holder and the others, the struggle to preserve some of its collaborative nature contributes to the difficulty of the film for the viewer not necessarily aware of its development.

Despite the hermeticism of *The Tiger's Mind*, Gibson's proposition is a generous one that invites the spectator to imagine the film that they are watching, and in doing so, emancipates the viewer from the interpretative tyranny of traditional cinema, and encourages their participation in the film.

'What experimental scores like *The Tiger's Mind* do, is offer up a kind of linguistic abstraction. Unlike traditional musical notation in which a certain symbol corresponds directly to a note, i.e. 'this means that', with experimental notation, 'this' could mean any number of things. Meaning isn't fixed. Rather it's up to the viewer, the reader, or the musician to decide. And I think as John (Tilbury) puts it, that's what *The Tiger's Mind* is all about: about using one's imagination. So I'm interested in how that might relate to my films and to narrative construction within them. I'm interested in how a certain linguistic ambiguity might be applied to their structure: going as far as the idea that one person might even see a totally different film to another.'⁴

Music is central to both Lertxundi's and Gibson's work, but whereas Gibson's interest revolves around experimental music notation, Lertxundi focuses on the idea of sound as a material element, working mainly with diegetic sound. Her films also exploit the emotional power of music, having a preference for Southern soul music (Hoagy Lands, James Carr, Bobby Bland) and songs that deal with heartbreak and

loss. As she explains: 'Since I am constantly emphasizing the presence of sound, this type of music is very fitting because it can't be used as background. It requires your full attention.'⁵

Unlike conventional narrative fiction, where songs, and music in general, tend to be part of the non-diegetic soundtrack, in Lertxundi's films music is diegetic and never simply treated as a background to the images. Lertxundi exposes the process of making a soundtrack, treating it as material, which is not only heard but is most often seen as well. The recordings are made live during the shooting, bringing together sound from a source such as a record player, a monitor or cassette player, with the sounds of that particular environment (traffic, street noise, birds etc.).

Sometimes music and image are synched, sometimes they are not. The status of the sound — synchronous/asynchronous, diegetic/non-diegetic — keeps changing. At the end of *My Tears Are Dry* (2009), after the image fades to black, you can hear someone walking to the tape player and turning it off, making the spectator suddenly aware that the music they'd been hearing was in the here and now of the image. This is Lertxundi's way of addressing the artificiality of sync sound in mainstream cinema, in other words, the amount of work that goes into making things look natural. This echoes the work of Morgan Fisher — a strong influence on Lertxundi's cinema — and in particular his film *Picture and Sound Rushes* (1973), as well as Peter Kubelka's ideas around the 'sync event', the meeting of image and sound, which he exposes in his 1966 film *Unsere Afrikareise*.

Lertxundi likes to define her films as 'landscape plus': 'the natural environments in my films are being altered by people and objects that operate as a kind of demarcation or interference in the land, creating an image of the filmmaker in the landscape.'⁶ As with music, landscape is never a backdrop in Lertxundi's work; it is always active. She develops strong relationships to the places she films, spending a lot of time in them. The sense of place is extremely important to her work, and reveals the influence of one of her mentors at CalArts, Thom Andersen, and of his teachings on the representation of Los Angeles in film. Lertxundi attempts to present Los Angeles as a lived-in space, at the same time that she is completely aware of her position as an outsider and of the significance of filming a city that is the heart of the movie industry: 'To shoot in Los Angeles, a contested space, is meaningful as a practice in itself. Even if I'm just filming a light post, it is exciting to me, because it is as if I am reclaiming this space.'⁷

Beatrice Gibson also thinks of her work in terms of landscape, but in her case it is in relation to the ideas of Robert Ashley. For Ashley — the recently deceased American composer who is also the narrator of Gibson's *A Necessary Music* — opera is defined as 'characters in a landscape telling stories musically', landscape being a character too. The strong presence of place is characteristic for all four of Gibson's films. *A Necessary Music* and *The Future's Getting Old Like the Rest of Us* were developed in response to very specific environments: the social housing complex in Roosevelt Island, New York, and four care homes for

the elderly in Camden, London. In her Cardew diptych, the locations strongly determine the atmosphere of the films; the modernist villa and the eerie beauty of rural Wales (standing in for a distant and mysterious planet) become characters in their own right.

Beatrice Gibson and Laida Lertxundi are part of a younger generation of 16mm filmmakers — together with Ben Rivers, Ben Russell, Michael Robinson, Mary Helena Clark, Marie Losier, Luke Fowler — who are alternatively described as filmmakers and artists, and who present their work both at international film festivals and arts venues such as Tate Modern, the Whitney Museum, Centre Pompidou, REDCAT or the ICA. In recent years many of them have gradually shifted from making single-screen films to specifically conceiving work for the exhibition space. Most are now represented by commercial galleries, but continue to circulate their work through established film and video distributors such as LUX, Lightcone or Video Data Bank. It is a generation that embodies the tensions between those modes of production that Jonathan Walley describes in 'Modes of Film Practice in the Avant-Garde'. In this essay, Walley outlines the historical differences — in terms of production, distribution, reception — between two bodies of filmic art: the avant-garde (experimental film and video makers), and artists' film and video, which is increasingly referred to as 'moving image art', particularly in the British context. Walley describes the avant-garde's mode of production as personal, independent, amateur and artisanal, whereas artists' film production is considered to be collaborative. For Walley, 'the distinction between artisanal and collaborative production extends to financing and the relationship of each to distribution and exhibition practices'.⁸ In this respect, Gibson's practice corresponds to Walley's characterisation of the production methods associated with artists' film and video. Her films are produced with institutional involvement and in the context of partnerships that expand to the presentation of the work. She is currently working on a new film in collaboration with LUX, which was one of four projects selected for the pilot edition of *On & For Production*. This new initiative launched by Auguste Orts⁹ in Brussels is intended to facilitate the production of artists' moving image by bringing together artists, producers, curators, institutions and collectors. Lertxundi, on the other hand, is closer to the self-production mode of the avant-garde, although in 2013 her film *Utskor: Either/Or* was produced in response to a commission by LIAF, a Norwegian art biennial.

Although Gibson could be regarded as an artist working with film, and Lertxundi as an avant-garde filmmaker, the orientation of their practices is not so easily distinguished. Whereas Gibson — who studied Philosophy at Manchester University and then went on to earn a degree in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths in London — has increasingly concentrated her practice around filmmaking, Lertxundi is slowly gravitating towards the art world. Her most recent project *We Had the Experience but Missed the Meaning* premiered at the Rotterdam International Film Festival but has also been presented in the form of a double screen installation in a solo show at Alhóndiga in Bilbao. She has also recently begun to be represented by a Spanish gallery, Marta Cervera in Madrid. This new approach to distribution and

exhibition could be interpreted as a way for Lertxundi to present her work in both the European and the American contexts; to affirm her double condition as an American filmmaker and a European artist.

Whilst young European artists such as Beatrice Gibson don't necessarily place themselves in the direct lineage of the filmic avant-garde, but instead regard film as a medium among others in which to develop their artistic practice, in the United States there is a much stronger sense of continuity. This may be due to the fact that filmmakers such as Thom Andersen, Saul Levine or Ken Jacobs continue to be active in teaching and inspiring younger generations, or were active until very recently. The intermediary generation, that of Peggy Ahwesh, Keith Sanborn, Lewis Klahr, Phil Solomon — those who were directly in contact with the likes of Brakhage and Frampton — are all involved in film education. Through them a sense of belonging to the American avant-garde is passed on to younger filmmakers such as Laida Lertxundi. Lertxundi openly acknowledges the influence of filmmakers like Bruce Baillie, Morgan Fisher, Hollis Frampton or Gary Beydler, often showing their films in dialogue with hers.

Just as the mere act of filming in Los Angeles is a way for Lertxundi to reclaim its public spaces and cinematographic representation, for the artists of Lertxundi and Gibson's generation, working with 16mm film is also a way of reclaiming and reinvigorating a particular tradition and history of independent filmmaking. Although they are moving away from the avant-garde mode of production by adopting the financing and exhibition structures of moving image art, their fidelity to 16mm serves to convey the history of that medium and to keep it alive. In an increasingly digital audiovisual environment, where the future of celluloid film is threatened, Beatrice Gibson, Laida Lertxundi and their contemporaries, enable the survival of 16mm as a medium and mode of artistic expression.

Notes

- 1 Amy Budd, 'Scoring Voices, Moving Bodies: An Interview with Beatrice Gibson', LUX Blog, 24 January 2013 <http://www.lux.org.uk/blog/scoring-voices-moving-bodies-interview-beatrice-gibson>
- 2 Genevieve Yue, 'Walkin' in the Sand: Interview with Laida Lertxundi', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 2 (Winter 2012), p. 35
- 3 Amy Budd, op. cit.
- 4 Eve Smith, 'Interview with Beatrice Gibson', The Showroom, London, December 2012 (www.theshowroom.org)
- 5 Genevieve Yue, op. cit., p. 41.
- 6 Dan Fox, 'Focus Interview : Laida Lertxundi' *Frieze*, London, issue 152, January-February 2013, p. 124.
- 7 Genevieve Yue, op. cit., p. 41.
- 8 Jonathan Walley, 'Modes of Film Practice in the Avant-Garde' in Tanya Leighton (ed), *Art and the Moving Image*, Tate Publishing and Afterall, London 2008, p. 186.
- 9 Auguste Orts is a production and distribution platform founded by four Brussels-based artists: Herman Asselberghs, Sven Augustijnen, Manon de Boer and Anouk De Clercq.