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# Time and the Image: *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes*

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"In these machines is contained the Dream." The mad scientist and the piano-tuner.

> These things never happen but are always. – Sallust
>
> The dead love the most, love the longest. – Malvina von Stille

* * *

*INTRODUCTORY*

Centuries of thought and imagination, mechanics and perversity have gone into the making of

the Quay Brothers' *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes* (2005). It is both pure *crystal* and corrupt *palimpsest*: as crystal, its facets and aspects are mutually illuminating; as palimpsest, its density of sources revel in a poetics largely derived from a pre- and early cinema era.[1] *The Piano Tuner is* – and this is the central thesis of this article – *a cinematic narrative that aspires, in an excess of a Baroque/cinematic stylistics of complexity, movement and illusionism, to the condition of a single image that will recur forever*. The film is all repetition and variation, part and whole, the many and the one, returning again and again like the image of the flywheel – *the animating apparatus* – we see in the opening credits [Figure 1] – all of it a set of images (all images the image[2]), characters, machines (*mechanical* yet (emotionally) *moving*): thus, the story will go on forever: the beautiful woman will be kidnapped; the doctor become a monster; his mistress abandoned; and the lovers will form a new kind of union, *an image hovering forever between stillness and movement* – in this strange and beautiful film that purposefully acknowledges its artificiality so as to that more forcefully declare its poetic/cinematic truth. All of which is to say (in the words of the film's epigraph): "These things never happen but are always"[3] – the very paradox of cinema, stillness and movement.


Figure 1: First flywheel, first image, first words

But to lower the temperature a bit: Following a brief résumé of the film's story, this article will begin with a look at the film as crystal via a few stand-alone images that recur and seem to reflect the whole, as well as five strange *creatures* – automata – that may be near-indiscernible but also drive the story forward. Then, as palimpsest, I will review the myriad of (largely literary) sources that the Quays have drawn upon to form their narrative. Finally, I will look at the larger question of "cinematic life" by again considering the role of automata in relation to cinematic history; the inanimate made animate necessarily requires too a look at the "characters" in the film. The article will close with a consideration of the final image of the film (*hovering forever between stillness and movement*), and its relation to contemporary theorization of pre- and early cinema.

*THE STORY*

But let us get our story bearings before we commence.

On the eve of her wedding, the singer Malvina van Stille (Amira Casar) gives a recital of music by her fiancé Adolfo Blin (Cesar Sarachu), who is also there conducting; suddenly she falls to the ground; a man who has been watching her from a private box comes to the stage and pronounces her dead. He orders his assistants to remove her body. (This is the prologue; the rest of the film occurs in the location next described.)

The piano-tuner Felisberto Fernandez (also Cesar Sarachu) arrives by train at the Villa Azucena on an island that appears to be located in the tropics. He is first greeted by Assumpta (Assumpta Serna), mistress of the man who declared Malvina dead, Dr. Emmanuel Droz (Gottfried John), an alienist ("a healer of broken minds"). Felisberto has been invited to repair six hydraulic automata; this is to be accomplished in time for an eclipse that is to occur within a few days. As he goes about his work he notices a lone, almost catatonic woman sitting on a bench overlooking the sea. We recognize her; she is Malvina. He attempts to speak with her, but she never responds; instead, she calls him by her fiancé's name. Assumpta explains that Malvina is there as the patient of Dr. Droz, whose therapy involves her *reliving* her trauma.[4] For this end, Dr. Droz is planning another recital; but this time Malvina will be singing the doctor's music. On the night of the recital, all of the automata are once again in working order; the eclipse takes place and at this very moment an earthquake also occurs, destroying the stage and ending the performance. Felisberto rescues Malvina, and the doctor turns into a monstrous insect he had spoken of earlier. Finally, Assumpta, in a small boat, travels to a grotto on the island and sees a new automaton, not quite in working order: it is a scene we have seen earlier: Malvina on her bench and Felisberto approaching her again and again.

Or: woman kidnapped by mad doctor with weird instruments is rescued by mechanic; island disaster destroys all, but man and woman get away only to be trapped in aspic.[5]

*I. FACETS OF CRYSTAL*

Ostensibly, the plot turns on the piano-tuner being able to *re*pair – *re*animate – the automata so that all will be in working order – and all, presumably, like some vast machine, working together – the night of Malvina's performance/*re*enactment – her "cure," her *re*animation. Assumpta says that Droz is attempting to help Malvina "*re*adapt" to the stage. But behind this motive lies another, Droz's desire for *re*venge: as he puts it, "I will, at last, revenge the stench of waving handkerchiefs at the opera houses that have denied my music." It is all these "*re*s-" that animate this cinematic representation: reanimation (of the automata, of Malvina); recurrence (the fresco, the insect); reproduction (performances, rehearsals): these are the strategies that sustain the reel and whorl, the conjunctions and correspondences[6] of the film as narrative and as image(s). And, for all this turning movement, there is yet a straight-ahead narrative, as well as a latent stillness that awaits its own resolution in a single image. The film moves forward as it circles around itself – things happen again and again – they "are always."

*FRESCO & INSECT*

But first, a picture and a story. Soon after arriving at the island, Assumpta shows Felisberto a fresco on the wall outside his apartment. [Figure 2] Various characters are gathered around a well; she points out to him no one less than the doctor, herself, and Felisberto himself. Wittily, the doctor's assistants, a group of six gardeners, are depicted as sheep. The painting is dated "Terrae Motus AD 1755" (a date we shall return to). Are we meant to be looking into the past here or into the present, or better, into both times at once, vacillating between the stilled past and the moving present? Though not quite a mise-en-abŷme – the characters in the fresco are not looking at yet another picture of themselves – the implication is clear: however the costumes may change, the fresco Felisberto is looking at and the filmed image that we are seeing, once again, "are always."

Figure 2: Assumpta and the fresco

A similar moment occurs when Droz tells – and as we shall see, foretells – Felisberto the fantastic story of the "Megaloponera feotens":

> It's an ant that lives in the Cameroonian rainforests. A forager of the forest floor, which from time to time becomes infected through inhaling the microscopic spore of a fungus that rains down from the trees above and lodges in its tiny brain . . . where it starts to grow. Troubled and disoriented, this ant is driven to leave the forest floor and starts to climb up the stems of ferns and creepers till it reaches some seemingly predetermined height, at which point, it clamps its mandibles onto the plant and waits there . . . until it dies. As for the fungus, it lives on, eating the dead creature's brain and infiltrating its entire nervous system. Until at length, some few weeks later, it excretes a sort of spike through the remains of the insect's head. And this rampant prong teems with spores, which, in their turn, shed themselves onto the ground below, raining down for the next unsuspecting floor-foraging ant.

At the end of the film Droz will become the very beast he has described. Too, as he describes this cycle of life, death and rebirth, we observe him in a perfectly fitting mise-en-scène: he is in a workshop where flakes of dust, like the fungus of the forest, are floating about, and he wears a visor that forms a sort of protuberance emerging from his head. In a word, he metaphorically embodies the image he will become. [Figures 3 & 4] So then, there are at least three copies of no necessary original: the spoken tale of Megaloponera feotens; its variant image in the workshop; and its "coming true" on the head of the doctor at the end of the film. (And too, Felisberto will dream of himself climbing an enormous phallic spike.[7])

Figure 3: Droz with visor

Figure 4: Droz with horn

*COMMUNICATING VESSELS*

No distinction then between image and tale; nor too any distinction between – especially – what we might call those existential categories that are normally antithetical but here possess continuity, like communicating vessels: the human and the mechanical, the natural and the artificial, reality and dream.[8] As Droz says in a wonderfully paradoxical speech when he shows Felisberto the first automaton: "In these machines . . . is contained the Dream. That of music. The most rational irrationality of all. Of which I, Droz, am the heart. Sheer artifice, Mr. Felisberto. And all this dependent upon nature." Examples of the continuity between these categories are seen throughout. At the very beginning of the film Droz *manufactures a lily* (whose smell disgusts Adolfo; and after which, of course, the Villa Azucena is named). In fact, the very second image of the film, following the flywheel, is a close-up of the not-yet-matured lily. Felisberto declares that he dreams "mechanically." The "gardeners" turn out in fact to be patients, wounded humans who move mechanically (like escapees from the Institute Benjamenta). And when Droz points out the Baroque grotto to Felisberto, the latter asks, "Is it real?", to which the doctor answers, "Do you think it was planned?" This is a lovely confusion in that the Baroque delighted in artifice, even constructing fake ruins and "natural" grottoes. Indeed, the film seems to delight in the look of its sound-stage artificiality. Three complex scenes in particular are perfectly planned to do away with the normal separation of those supposed oppositions.

The first is a stunningly disorienting scene that opens with what we take to be a full view of the third automaton: a calm yellow sea turns into bright blue waves; a decrepit rowboat sails along by means of two old, wooden hands (hands only: they are not attached to any arms or body). Cut to a door at one side of the automaton, a pattern of flaking paint, and what might be a large eye-hole bordered in green; the camera tracks forward again and again, each time it jerks back – the ever-present flywheel – to its original position only to track in once more, as we also hear a small plosive sound. Then the film cuts back and forth between the automaton space and Malvina's blue-tinted room (boat-like too with a round porthole window); we see her moving backwards as one hand uncontrollably flaps up and down in a sort of mock version of rowing. In a word, there is a boat with no rower and a rower with no boat. Who has infected whom here? Then comes a closer and deeper view of the automaton's interior. (Felisberto is watching all the while; later he will admit to Droz, "It feels like I'm living in someone else's imagination.") The boat approaches the door, one of the hands flies off from its oar and grabs the handle; it opens up and various instruments emerge seeming to attack the hand. An even wider view of

the room reveals a grated window above and a chair in the rear. A metallic phallus penetrates the chair seat; noticeably, it has little spikes on it that look like those of a player piano roll or early metal sound discs. This is probably not too far off as the automaton seems also to be somehow musical. Finally, Malvina – surely expressing our own feelings – falls to the ground exhausted.

The complex and deceptive space of the automaton – at first it seems to consist only of the rowboat and the door, but then it becomes broader and deeper with the chair in the background and a wall and window even farther back – becomes an analogy of the cinema itself, not only the apparatus but its elaborate and decidedly baroque possibilities of movement and temporality, sound and scale, the very stuff that cinematic dreams are made of. While it seems that Felisberto is looking at the automaton in diegetic reality, we cannot be fully sure. And what of Malvina? Does she dream of the automaton, or does it induce her dream? Reality and dream mutually infect one another. And what is the overall temporal relation here? We see the yellow-become-blue water, and then the film seems to jump forward a bit ("Three days have passed . . . nothing is as it seems," Felisberto writes), and the same scene seems to continue – but we are never certain. Felisberto's real-world assumptions are withdrawn – as are our own. While *The Piano Tuner* is not an animated film in the conventional (and syntactically passive) sense, it is a film that (actively) animates intellects and imaginations; it is very much a film about animation itself, in its many senses, from the mechanical to the philosophical. It is, to borrow Suzanne Buchan's phrase, a "metaphysical playroom" indeed (something that Assumpta seems to intuit anon).

A second, similar instance occurs at about the time Felisberto wonders to himself, "And that fresco? was it me stepping into a painting already painted?" "As in a dream," he is gazing on a scene of the gardeners and Dr. Droz emerging *backwards* from the sea as he, Felisberto, himself moving backwards, arrives at his bed – in the forest. He lies back on it – or, we might say, he dreams of falling asleep – as the others rush past him. (In a way, *he is being chased backwards*.) We then see him asleep in his real bed, and with a handkerchief in his mouth. After inserts of the mouth and tongue of what I take to be the first automaton, he wakes and removes the handkerchief. I think we are meant to take the machine-mouth as the dream equivalent for the discomfort Felisberto feels while sleeping with a handkerchief in his mouth (about which no explanation is ever offered). Next morning, he is walking with Assumpta, who recounts *her own dream* of the night before, in which she was being chased by dogs who eventually run past her too; she adds that he was there behind her, "completely rigid, asleep" – and with a handkerchief in his mouth. The questions then arise: 1) is this the case of a dream within a dream; and 2) was what seemed to be Felisberto's dream in fact Assumpta's all along – she dreaming his dreaming?

A yet more perplexing set-piece begins with Felisberto entering Malvina's room; the two are seen in double reflection. She tells him that Adolfo is "by the door" and goes on to describe the scene – a window, the door, orchids. He then enters the very area she has described – it is beneath the stage – and indeed finds the door, the round window and orchids. He comes upon what looks like a snow dome; intercut are shots of what we assume to be the doctor's legs turning the wheels of some machine; as Felisberto looks, there is an explosion and snow/dust scatters everywhere – but this occurs *outside* of the glass, leading us to wonder if the small glass is inside a large glass (as earlier there is a forest inside a forest). He rushes away. Then we see

another room, a door opens, and a large hand comes through it: the scale has deceived us, for in fact this is a miniature, a set, a dummy of a stage. (A stage inside a stage!) Droz then appears on one side of it; he flicks a switch – and, change of scene, chain of scenes – a column seems to crack and fall on the stage, the (boy, automaton) woodcutter takes a swing, and Felisberto (now in the forest) slips; he looks up and (from what seems his point of view) the woodcutter has apparently slipped too, for he has chopped his own leg! – there's even a pool of blood, turning this scene too into an expression of the continuum between the machinic and the organic. Finally, Felisberto runs to the glass-covered box and sees his own reflection – another shrill whistle and he falls again – but his reflection remains in the glass. He rises; the reflection seems to peer back at him. Droz appears. The box proceeds to swallow both Felisberto's whistle and his reflection. Everything in this single long sequence – from Malvina's room to below stage with the snow dome and miniature stage set, from the forest to the automaton box – is deceptive: scale, point of view, imagery, space – again, the cinematic animating machine creating poetry, philosophy, play.

*DARK DISCERNIBILITY*

And as if getting used to this quashing of contraries forever plunging us into perceptual mises-en-abŷmes were not enough, and although *The Piano Tuner* is always a fascinating film to watch, it is often difficult to see: the film is discerned darkly, distortedly. We are constantly made aware of our watching: "What was that? What did he say?" (For that matter, *what actually happens* at the end?) In the prologue Malvina is reflected in a mirror and at such an angle that her face/image seems to be cracked and doubled. [Figure 5] Certain low-angle shots of the island seem to be out of focus. Perception is made difficult even within the diegesis: Felisberto tries to watch Assumpta as she walks away, but Droz comes in and blocks his view. Dark discernibility is shattered by its opposite, that is, sudden bursts of light. As the opening concert begins, the lights come on, causing Adolfo to shield his eyes. When Malvina is ensconced in the Villa Azucena, there is a very dark shot that reveals only a table to one side and a thin slit of light alongside a door that is soon opened by a gardener, causing sunlight to burst in. Perceptual difficulty is experienced on the soundtrack as well. Viewers of the DVD might want to play it with the English subtitles on, largely because of Gottfried John's thick accent, which very often makes it difficult to determine his exact words. An instance of soundtrack indiscernibility happens when Droz and Felisberto are speaking while facing an automaton; they are shot from inside the box, and the viewer can only observe their muffled conversation. Another instance occurs when Assumpta informs Felisberto of Droz's instructions concerning the second automaton (the one for which he needs an ormolu magnet); as she leaves she speaks from the other side of a glass, making it difficult to understand her. Finally, I suspect that the Quays are well aware of the playful difficulties they put in the viewer's way: at one point, Assumpta remarks to Felisberto, "Don't look so serious . . . After a while, you get used to the confusion."[9]

Figure 5: Cracked Malvina

*II. PALIMPSEST*

As the density of its images, so too the density of *The Piano Tuner's* sources, overt or otherwise. From Sallust, already mentioned, to Dr. Droz's island that recalls those of *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933) and *Island of Lost Souls* (Pichel and Schoedsack, 1932),[10] and these probably based on Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead* (five versions between 1880 and 1886), further traces abound. An early obvious one lies in the date of the fresco, 1755, the year of the great Lisbon earthquake, which destroyed an estimated 100,000 lives. Was it a sign, philosophers wondered, of God's displeasure, Nature's indifference, or a terrifying vision of the Sublime? The mid-eighteenth century was also the classical age of automata. Jacques de Vaucanson (1709-1782) created his flute player (1737) and digesting (and defecating) duck (1738), the first two famous automata. Even better and far more complex, however, were those created by Pierre Jaquet-Droz (1721-1790) and his son Henri-Louis (1752-1791) – note the surname. Three of his masterpieces – the Scribe, the Musician, and the Draughtsman, created between 1768 and 1774 – still survive and can be viewed at the Museum of Art and History in Neuchatel, Switzerland[11] [Figure 6]; each contains thousands of parts, including early versions of what today we call programs. Though mechanical, they look like small, sophisticated, and particularly talented children; to watch them "perform" is to experience the uncanny, and to begin to speculate on the supposed divide between the human and the mechanical.[12] This very question was famously raised in 1748 by Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751) in his *L'homme machine* (*The Man-Machine*). "Nature" itself questioned by humanlike creatures, and a valorization of the machinic-human, are followed by a century of literary works that likewise feed – tangentially or directly – into *The Piano Tuner*. Amongst these are Heinrich von Kleist's 1806 short story "The Earthquake in Chile," obviously based on the Portuguese event (and like the work of Sade, it proposes an indifferent nature). Kleist's essay "On the Puppet Theatre" (1810) and Charles Baudelaire's "The Philosophy of Toys" (1853) both deal with the question of the soul of puppets and toys.[13] In the former, Kleist asserts that "there is more grace in a mechanical marionette than in the form and build of the human body . . . it would be quite impossible for a human body even to equal the marionette." "*Where is the soul*?", the child in the latter essay asks, as he destroys his toy in his metaphysical search. E. T. A. Hoffmann's well-known 1816 story "The Sandman" concerns a young man's mad love for a woman who turns out to be an automaton. (Hoffman's story is dealt with by Freud in his essay "Das Unheimliche" ("The Uncanny," 1919.) Villiers de l'Isle Adam's – the author of *Axël*, of course – *L'Eve future* (1886), a long and complex novel, also concerns the invention of a woman automaton.[14]

Figure 6: The Jaquet-Droz Automata (photo by author)

Three more works of literature are specifically cited as sources by the Quays in *The Piano Tuner* pressbook.[15] *Carpathian Castle* (1892, the time that cinematographic projection is being perfected, by Jules Verne, is about an opera singer, van Stille – again, note the name – who is kidnapped and then discovered, or thought to be, but it turns out that "she" has become a recorded and projected image and sound.[16] Raymond Roussel's 1914 novel *Locus Solus* features a series of curious and elaborate boxes that the Quays credit as being sources for *The Piano Tuner's* automata.[17]) Finally, there is *The Invention of Morel*, a 1941 novella by the Argentine writer Adolfo (and again the name) Bioy-Casares, one of the great unsung books of film theory.[18] Very briefly, the story concerns the narrator, a political refugee, who lands at what he thinks is a deserted island. But while there a party arrives, amongst whom is a woman, Faustine, and with whom, though from a distance, he falls in love. He watches her every day as she performs the same actions (walking to the rocks, gazing at the sun) – just as Malvina does; at one point too the narrator notices two suns, as does Felisberto.[19]) He attempts to gain her attention but fails again and again (as does Felisberto). He speculates on her failure to acknowledge his presence before her.[20] Finally, the party leaves the island and he is alone once more. He explores the buildings on the island and there discovers that their leader, Morel, had invented a kind of immortality machine:[21] he had recorded everyone's actions during their one week on the island and has left the images – which we can read as precursors of holograms – to now be projected forever after their departure and even after their deaths. The narrator thus realizes that none of the events and people he has witnessed were real. But still in love with Faustine, he turns the machine on himself, takes the photographed footage, and proceeds to "edit" these scenes into hers, to stitch or suture himself/his images seamlessly with hers, so that their lives – their images – will live – will be projected – forever.[22]

The connection with *The Piano Tuner* is, I trust, obvious. But there is more to the story than this. Bioy apparently[23] had been a longtime fan of Louise Brooks, and had so missed her absence from the screen that it is said that he wrote *Morel* not only in homage to her, but also to preserve, in writing, the memory of his desire. But desire for what? For Brooks's image and his yearned-for-but-impossible union with that image? But what a marvelous idea *Morel* embodies! After all, it is a *desire to possess forever the object of one's desire*, to possess, virtually, the power of creation over her: as the Narrator says, "that I could give perpetual reality to my romantic desire" (Bioy-Casares, 1964, 59). But the only means of achieving this would be to turn her – Malvina, Faustine, Brooks – and oneself into mechanical image-beings: for Droz, Felisberto, the

narrator, the certain route to immortal union.

Near the end of *Morel* the narrator says, “My soul has not yet passed to the image” (Bioy-Casares, 1964, 90). What is this “soul” that he speaks of? Some personal essence, something transcendent? And why “not yet”? Does he expect his soul to “pass to” the image? Better, can his image survive without a soul, and if so how? I would suggest that the image survives thanks to its animating – projecting, cinematic – mechanism – and if it possesses any sort of soul, that is it.[24]

*III. INANIMATE /ANIMATE*

*AUTOMATA*

What is the nature of life on film? Who are these creatures, this “canary” and piano-tuner (of earthquakes, no less!), this “doctor” (of what?) and his “gardeners”? What kind of “life” are they in possession of? And who this child woodcutter, and whose this enormous mouth, these hands without a rower? Whomever they may be, they all move mechanically like mechanical dreams, twenty-four frames per second, the souled and the machined, all of them (and us) inhabitants of cinematic technology.

Classical automata looked and acted like human beings (or animals), and their appearance and actions ranged from the cute to the uncanny. Automata form a significant part of the continuum that exists between science, magic and cinema. Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871), the “father of modern magic,” invented a number of automata for his stage act; and it was his theater that Georges Méliès bought, initially for his magic act and later for the presentation of his own films. Méliès’s turn from theatre to cinema represents both a dramatic change (from stage presence to screen projection) and a continuum (the presentation of attractions).[25] A continuum also exists between automata and cinema. Both are movement-and-illusion-making machines. But of course, automata are three-dimensional, “live” and “present,” while the film image is only two-dimensional and projected from a distance. Automata stand then between the cinematic image and the apparatus; their presence makes them worthy of being aligned with those marvelously named “philosophical toys” of pre-cinema – thaumatrope, praxinoscope, zoetrope, and so on – moving image apparatuses that could be held in the hand[26] – and the projected cinematic image. The films of the early cinema (especially Méliès’s) can be seen as automata writ large, or automata of a *different nature* – cinematic. Automata are cinematic in that they are a fusion of the mechanical (their “insides,” their apparatus; their movement dependent upon the precise working of flywheels, gears, cams. and so on), and the superficially human (the outer embellishments of clothing, body parts, props, and so on; images of actors are also without organs). Felisberto writes in his diary about Droz’s strange insect tale, about Malvina calling for a lover who is not there, and his own dreams, and he remarks, “Perhaps even these automata are not what they pretend to be.” But what can automata “pretend” to be?[27] Are they capable of projection? Perhaps they are just not what we believe (or want) them to be. Automata act humanlike (but without pretense).[28] They are cinematic beings, self-moving and self-projecting. Viewed from a reversed temporal angle, automata are pre-cinematic versions of the photogram made flesh. So once more, what is the nature of cinematic life? A quick flickering into existence, a brief span, and the mortal coil (reel) is no more.[29] Moving, human-seeming, but no more? It is all a matter of projection – image and desire writ large.

But again, what of the automata of *The Piano Tuner*? What are they: a mouth, a finger, an echo, a room with a pool, and a nasty boy; they are not "normal" automata (except, perhaps, that woodcutter); they are not "performers" (scribblers, pianists) in the manner of their classical ancestors, though they do "perform" in a manner of speaking (row, rub, chop). How they function in the diegesis is never explained. Are they mere disjecta membra from the Quays' workshop? Their circus-animal-sized cases could also be said to resemble oversized peepholes (they are not observed from a distance, but up close), and in this, again, they are aligned with pre-cinema philosophical toys, with a glass in between, but no distant screen. So what is their role in this film? How do events – the earthquake and eclipse, Droz's union with Malvina – depend upon their repair? Why this strange but necessary conjunction of the natural (earthquake, eclipse) and the artificial (automata)? Droz works on the soul, and Felisberto on the machine; like any film artist – or better, twin artists – together they create (or miscreate) the film's final image.

In the film's "prologue" Droz speaks to himself, "Malvina . . . nightingale . . . [who] will sing forever . . . in my cage." He seems to know her end already, the eternal life of a machine/image. (Assumpta calls Malvina "the Emperor's canary.") Too, following her initial collapse, we next see Malvina in a pool on Dr. Droz's island as he revives her, thus aligning her with the automata, which, as mentioned, are hydraulic. Soon enough we will see Malvina mechanically shaking one of her hands as if in a boat. And, compared to her perhaps more natural opening appearance,[30] at Droz's concert – and just before she does in fact become a mechanical image – Malvina does seem to achieve a near-mechanical puppetlike state when she appears on stage [Figure 7].

Figure 7: Puppet Malvina

The automata in the film are not the type of "self-moving machine that imitates life" (to use Minsoo Kang's concise definition, 309); rather, they are a variety of strange objects and beings – automata gone awry. The automata – Droz insists that they are "delicate and precious instruments" and are not to be called toys (though Assumpta does) – are thus:

1. A large, flat face, with a row of rotting, singing teeth, a thick tongue, and a set of organ pipes. But: as "real" as this automaton seems to be, we later realize that it is also a "double" of Felisberto's dream of sleeping with a handkerchief in his mouth.
2. We never see it but are only told that Felisberto needs an ormolu magnet to repair it, and that it echoes behind vibrating plates.
3. This is by far the most complex object of all. As described above as the first of the

"communicating vessels." All here seems to be (Duchampian) grinding – to no end.

4. The boy woodcutter; he looks at the world outside the box (and perhaps outside the screen, at us). He chops away at a tree, swings too hard, and strikes himself instead, creating a pool of blood at his feet. He seems a perverse image of childhood and evil.
5. The fifth is the most charming of all – even Felisberto smiles when he realizes how it works. Again there is a chair, and on it a hand with the index finger pointing forward. From the floor a brush rises and cleans the finger. Then a glass rises and spins itself round under the finger, making a ringing sound. Useless, lovely.

*CHARACTERS*

Who, then, are these people who walk backwards, sleep with handkerchiefs in their mouths, sprout spikes from their foreheads, and delight in the beautiful confusion?[31]

We return again and again to scenes of Felisberto working assiduously at the automata, or attempting to communicate with Malvina. But too to say Felisberto is to allude to Alfredo, whom he is made to double in the recital and for whom, Alfredo that is, Malvina continually mistakes him, that is, Felisberto. As played by Cesar Sarachu, Felisberto is mechanical-bird-like, his long thin neck twisting in curiosity; he may be excited by Assumpta's erotic teasing, but would never dare act upon it. His desire for Malvina seems chaste, and so their end – together but never touching – seems appropriate to both their characters. Felisberto's first view of her is from a distance. At the most, he approaches again and walks away – the music begins – and then he returns as the image goes black and white and he says hesitantly – it is the most he can assert – "I wanted to tell you about myself." (This is the image that will be repeated at film's end.) He remarks on the beauty of the view and departs. She lifts her veil [Figure 8] as the scene returns to color. Somewhat later he begins to understand the situation, that he must rescue "the innocent princess," and he hatches his plan. Believing that "Droz is laughing at me" (as the opera world laughs at Droz – thus aligning them both in revenge) and declaring that if he can tune the automata he can also mistune them; and that everything, including the coming eclipse, is all "timed to coincide with the opening of the door." (Presumably this is the door behind which Adolfo is being kept; though what all this actually means is never made entirely clear.) The "relationship" between Felisberto and Malvina consists simply of these brief meetings, sea views, short verbal exchanges that do not even achieve conversation, and mistaken identities; as well as a declaration of love, an embrace, an "end of the affair" (clinging to a reminder of the loved one, a single shoe). Little is said and nothing really takes place (forever): a man embraces a woman who hardly knows he is there.[32]

Figure 8: The lifting of the veil

And who is she, Malvina, forever twirling her finger round the torn knee of her nylon, alone at a sand dune gazing at the sea?[33] Contrary to the logorrheic Droz/Assumpta couple, and to indecisive and shy Felisberto, Malvina only maintains silence, stillness. Nowhere is this made clearer than in the music that accompanies her sand-dune appearances and that instills these scenes with deep emotion, that by Trevor Duncan and which was used in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), one of cinema's landmark meditations on cinematic time and the animation of the image. The allusion evokes the film – made almost entirely, of course, of still images – and acts thus as a hint that Malvina is destined to her final status of a single image, in slight movement perhaps, but never fully animated. She is, one might say, ready for automatization, or even cinematization, in her own semi-private peep-show box. It is also significant that the scene that will become that image turns from color to black and white, signifier here of the cinematic past. She thus embodies time itself, the singularity of the eternal instant. A photogram then, "Malvina never happens but is always."

Droz and Assumpta make a lovely couple. Their sexual bond is often referred to: he calls her the "illustrious whore"; she reminds him of sex games they have played in the past. *The Piano Tuner* is an intensely erotic film; only recall Assumpta's dialogue with Felisberto as she gives him a cone and reveals an armpit, challenging him to name the "true forest" (he wisely chooses her flesh). Or, her speaking with him about the tongue of her shoe (but not only that tongue); a moment later Droz enters and calls her "incorrigible" – and then asks the piano-tuner if he knows where her tongue is now! Assumpta plays with language: tongue (pun); violet and violence (association); forest within forest (spiral, mise-en-abŷme). Droz too exults in language as he pontificates in his own weird way: beside the tale of the Megaloponera feotens, the larynx/vagina speech also deserves to be quoted in full:

> I am like certain feminine opera fans who listen only with their clitoris. Look closely at that triangular muscle. These vocal folds, . . . [we see a drawing named "Human larynx" looking very vaginal] made up from nerves, blood vessels and membranes. Then imagine Malvina's. [Malvina's what?] As delicate as ripening grapes. A scent just waiting, anticipating, dreaming of succumbing to pollutions of mist and fogs upon the coolest slopes. Malvasia. Mammolo. Marzemino. And this sublime prolonged weight of her vocal cords around my music, slowly breaking the cap of its skin, . . . oozing swollen juices, crushed and glistening vanillas.

But this is not all there is to them, of course. Droz is both a scientist and an artist, possessing arcane knowledge. In one oddly distorted shot we see him surveying the entire scene, looking like the master of his universe. [Figure 9][34] He sternly reprimands Felisberto, "Did you not think me capable?" Assumpta seems to have been his long-time partner, in utter thralldom to his powers; "he understands the electricity in women."[35] Illustrious or otherwise, however, she knows and understands her own fate: she will, must be, cast aside for Malvina – though it is she who will become the sole survivor.

Figure 9: Droz as Master of the Universe

One last word regarding our principal characters and their combined personae. Felisberto and Adolfo are of course played by the same actor, and except for the latter's mustache, look exactly alike (twins again!). While Adolfo does not appear enough in the film for us to properly say that he possesses character, we can say that, sexually aggressive in the opening scene, he is unlike the shy and witty Felisberto. Being a composer, however, aligns him with (and against) Droz. Felisberto and Droz both seek revenge. Assumpta and Malvina are more clearly drawn. Whore and virgin, one is tempted to say, but too sharing a physical resemblance[36] – and thus perhaps, some electric exchange too.

*IV. RICH AND STRANGE*

> – It is found again!
>
> – What?
>
> – Eternity! The sea gone off with the sun.
>
> – Rimbaud

*The Piano Tuner* is not what most people probably think of as being "typically Quay," that is, an animated short that expresses some sort of Central European sensibility. Rather, it has a kind of "South Seas/Latin American hothouse decadent" quality. (Besides the films mentioned earlier, we could also include here Jacques Tourneur's classic *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943.) But more than this, I see it as Baroque in its stylistics,[37] extolling movement (narrative, camera, characters); illusionism and artifice (image, scale, sets); and density and complexity (the imagery, its metaphysical outlook, in which there are no contraries, only continuities). That density and its tensions lie in the relations between *time and the image*. The film unrolls in time (movement, its illusion), but time is stopped at the end to become story-less image. Can we consider cinematic narration – composed of hundreds of shots, thousands of photograms – as some sort of single great image, with each frame serving both to propel the narrative forward, while also possessing a non-narrational quality, outside of time? I am not saying that "narration aspires to the condition of an image"[38]; nor that a film unspools like a Japanese scroll painting (à la Mizoguchi) whose entirety we are meant to hold in our minds as if it were all a single instant.[39] Instead I am pointing to the tension that exists between certain single moments (images) in the film and longer stretches of time (the overreaching narrative). Some images – the fresco, Droz's tale of the megaloperna foetens, the child woodcutter, that strange third

automation – stand outside of the story (and outside of time), and do not necessarily add to the story's forward movement. On the other hand, they do form a part of the cinematic trajectory. And within the ostensible diegesis that we watch, they seem overall to be necessary to the making of the sixth and penultimate automaton, the final image.

What is the sixth automaton? [Figure 10] The sequence begins with Assumpta's approach to the grotto, its glass-fronted temple, and the oval-framed image: Felisberto steps up from below, places a hand on the bench while looking at Malvina, takes two steps forwards, and – swoosh! – starts again. But then the image takes up the entire frame as Felisberto goes back and forth another few times; however, the last time he lingers a bit longer, and Malvina raises her veil. But all the while the image is looping the soundtrack is a continuous voice-over by Felisberto and that accompanied once more – like an echo from a former time – by the music from *La Jetée*; and all of it finishing with Malvina speaking (to herself) "the dead love the most, love the longest." That is all: a single, brief, repeating image. But what kind of image? It contains movement, and so it is not photographic, not still nor past; it is cinematic in that it reanimates time and stillness. But in being so brief and narrative-less (or "de-narrativized" as David Forgacs would say (Forgacs, 2012); but even less than Peter Wollen's "minimal narrative" (Wollen, 1984, 109), it can also be said to stand outside of time (and hence, not cinematic). Though not "simply" photographic, it is uncannily somehow not quite cinematic either; if anything it might best, and perversely, be described as "pre-cinematic." (And in its use of miniatures, models, and machines, it is again aligned with Méliès.) No more than eight seconds long, and hence less than 200 frames, it is more akin to a "film" by Marey (and far less even than the Lumières' "Workers Leaving a Factory" (1895); but in Lumière style, we might call it "Man Approaches Seated Woman." Briefly flickering and then gone; filmic yes, but barely; more than merely photographic, but just so. Not the illusion of movement, but the putting into motion – the still images are "motioned" (as per François Alberra, 2012, 199) Hovering then not so much within the opposition of photography and cinema, stillness and movement – the focus of so much contemporary discussion[40] – but in this case actually between the two. It is a clip that loops, a looped clip,[41] an eternal moment then that will, it seems, continue forever.[42] Sallust again: the projection happens, but the projected event does not. Hollis Frampton could almost be speaking of *The Piano Tuner* (and even perhaps Sallust) when he theorizes "an *infinite cinema* . . . A polymorphous camera has always turned, and will turn forever, its lens focused on all the appearances of the world . . . A still photograph is simply an isolated frame taken out of the infinite cinema." (Frampton, 1971, 134; emphasis in original). Or Roland Barthes in his discussion of the relationship between a frame and an entire film, when he remarks that a still is "the fragment as second text *whose existence never exceeds the fragment*" (Barthes, 1970, 67; emphasis in original). Whole and part (as whole unto itself), then, the looped image bears a relation with the whole, but it is decidedly neither a conclusion nor a condensation of the narrative or of its images. Raymond Bellour too in his discussion of the presence of photographs in films – and acknowledging again that the sixth automaton is not a still, but is not quite wholly cinematic either – remarks that "the instant that stills the film bears a relation to the film as a whole" (Bellour, 1987, 140).

Figure 10: The sixth automaton. “Here . . . where I dream mechanically.”

No event, then, not even a symbol or myth, the sixth automaton might be seen merely as an expression of the fragile brevity of a memory of desire.[43] But there is another automaton too; the seventh, the one that we ourselves participate in and that is encased in its – our – own box (movie house, home cinema): this film itself, the machine of which we are a moving part. Like photograms awaiting their projectionist, the automata need the piano-tuner to put them back into working order; once accomplished they contribute not only to Droz’s spectacle but, presumably, to their own demise,[44] the result being the film’s final image.[45] The automata then become a kind of Lumière cinematograph – to mark that first set of cinematic twins, Méliès and the Lumière *brothers* – both camera (capturing shadows and whistles) and projector (making the show possible, animating it all), and as such they, the automata, are also metaphoric of the successful *projection* of this film, this automaton. But the projectors – Droz, Felisberto, and their desires; the automata and their conjunctions; the Quays and their cinematic imaginings; and finally the device that makes it possible for us to view the film – all revel in their reeling – they *flywheel!* – until they halt their animation: human and machine, time and image, sea and sun – “the dead love the most, love the longest.”

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* * *

*Note*: Unless otherwise indicated, all images are screenshots from the film or from freely available trailers on YouTube.

1. Despite the film's abundance of sources and references, it has not generated any of its own: that is, there is a dearth of commentary on *The Piano Tuner*. Even Buchan deals with it briefly as her interest is more in the Quays' animated short films. My own sources are many, but they are outside of the film proper; they are listed in the References section. [↩]
2. I take the phrase in reminiscence of Julio Cortázar's novel *All Fires the Fire*. [↩]
3. This Sallust is not the famous Roman historian, but the 4th-century philosopher (aka

Sallustius) and friend of Julian the Apostate; the line comes from his *On the Gods and the World*. [↩]

4. That is, by herself participating in its reenactment, as does the heroine of Léonce Perret's *The Mystery of the Rocks of Kador* (1912), who plays herself in its *cinematic reproduction*! [↩]
5. Or a silly old story, really, but a good cliché on which to hang images. [↩]
6. Another film that deals with similar subjects – that is, conjunction (of planets), living machines (a computer), and a hero (astronaut) who becomes an image (Star Child) – is *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968). And don't we see here another set of possible prefixes: conjunction, convergence, correspondence, cooperation, coexistence, and so on? [↩]
7. In a shot that seems to be an homage to Patrick Bokanowski's 1982 *L'Ange*. [↩]
8. Blake: "Contraries are not negations, contraries are positives." [↩]
9. A remark surely akin to Joyce's famous "Now patience . . ." speech in *Finnegans Wake* (p. 108). [↩]
10. The image of Droz as voyeur is also reminiscent of Peter Lorre in *Mad Love* (Freund, 1935). [↩]
11. On the first Sunday of each month. [↩]
12. Information regarding the history and meanings of automata can be found in Beaune (1989), Bedini (1964), Daston and Park (1988), Hersey (2009), Kang (2011), Stoichita (2008), and Wood (2003). [↩]
13. Baudelaire also writes of the pre-cinematic Phenakistescope in the same essay as a "scientific toy" (Baudelaire, 1965, 201). [↩]
14. A text that Annette Michelson claims has "the status of a greatly privileged instance in the formation of our arsenal of mechanical reproduction" (Michelson, 1984, 4); and Tom Gunning calls "the richest of these fictional anticipations of cinema" (Gunning, 13, 2001). Raymond Bellour (1985) also examines the novel in relation to the creation of a feminine android and the cinema. [↩]
15. As well as the name – so close to our hero's! – of one more author, the Uruguayan Felisberto Hernandez, who also wrote a doll-themed story, "The Daisy Dolls," and whose work inspired a later film, *Unmistaken Hands* (2013), which contains many motifs from *Piano Tuner*. Hernandez is also invoked by Felisberto when he asserts that he can hear anything "between a sneeze and infinity." [↩]
16. Weiss (2003) has a discussion of Verne's novel. [↩]
17. Coincidentally (?), one of the characters in *Locus Solus* is named Faustine, "celebrated for the beautiful harmony of her poses" (Roussel, 1983, 64). And there is an opera singer named Malvina. In fact, *Locus Solus* is another novel that should prove rich for film theory, not only for its sets and prop men, but also the many scenes of reanimation, reenactment, and projection. (Indeed, just as I have only scratched this film's rich surfaces, I suspect there is much more of Roussel's influence strewn throughout *The Piano Tuner* than the Quays have acknowledged and I can now only superficially detect. [↩]
18. One of the few references to it I have located is in Morin (43). [↩]
19. Three suns were reported in 1644. (See Daston and Park 1988, 333. [↩]
20. His conjectures: 1) he has caught a disease peculiar to the island, causing him to imagine all the events and the people; 2) the atmosphere has made him invisible and the people simply do not see him; 3) the people are French-speaking aliens who again do not see him: 4) as in

one of his dreams he is in an insane asylum, sometimes he is a patient, at others the Director; and 5) he is a traveller among the dead, like Dante or Swedenborg. [↩]

21. The narrator *discovers an invention*! As Bioy-Casares has invented the hologram. [↩]
22. Mention here should also be made of Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman* as another work of fiction that is redolent with film theory. Originally written in 1940 – around the same time as *Morel* – it was not published until 1967. Not only does it speculate on time and repetition, it also concerns the human-machinic as riders turn into their bicycles, features two-dimensional landscapes that look like billboard screens, and at one point cinema is misunderstood as a "tedious" projection of single frames, one after another. [↩]
23. While I have long heard this, I have been unable to discover any certain proof. There is a piece on the Senses of Cinema website (Beltzer, 2000) that offers some, but without citing a clear reference. The article is also riddled with errors, including (to name only one) calling Morel the narrator of the novella. [↩]
24. One is reminded of Godard's children's tale *Vivre sa Vie* (1962), about a bird that is "an animal with an outside and an inside. Tale away the outside and the inside is left. Take away the inside and you see the soul." Precisely: what soul? Or JLG again, from *Hail Mary* (1985): "Let the soul be body. Then no one can say the body is soul, since the soul shall be body." [↩]
25. Not dissimilar to Eisenstein's turn from theater to cinema. [↩]
26. Unfortunately, automata are mentioned only once in passing in Laurent Mannoni's history of pre-cinema. [↩]
27. By "nature," they pretend to be human. But think of Pris in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) in the scene where Deckard comes to hunt her down: in order to save herself, this automaton (android, replicant) pretending to be human must pretend to be an automaton pretending to be human! [↩]
28. If Malvina, Felisberto, Assumpta, and even Droz were to step out of their cinematic form and come to "real life," what form would they assume? Would they, as per *Morel*, become mere holograms, insubstantial ghost-images, moving about, their mechanisms kept from view? Or would they rather become automata, substantial, mechanical, and human-seeming? [↩]
29. And at the end, Malvina and Felisberto: as they become automata, do their souls pass into their images? [↩]
30. And think here of Kleist's puppets, possessing far more grace than any "natural" being ever could. [↩]
31. In reminiscence of Fellini's original title for *8½*. [↩]
32. Stoic and deadpan, Felisberto might be compared to Buster Keaton, one of cinema's great mechanic/piano-tuners. Recall that on his very first day of filmmaking, Keaton hauled a camera home and took it apart to see how it worked. (Meade, 1995, 63). [↩]
33. Not unlike the wife waiting among the sand dunes in Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), longing for word from her husband. [↩]
34. Not unlike the view of the Doctor's camera obscura of his "universe," his village, in *A Matter of Life and Death* (Powell and Pressburger, 1946). [↩]
35. As the Quays "understand the electricity" in their viewers? [↩]
36. Twins yet once more, a theme already mentioned in reference to Droz and Felisberto (though without the physical resemblance). Indeed, one could probably throw out the entire speculative apparatus I have assembled here in pursuit of a fully flowered twin

thematic running through *The Piano Tuner*; or, as already mentioned, an analysis based on the "co/co"' prefixes, making all of this begin to sound like a variation of *Morel*'s narrator's explanations mentioned in Note 17. [↩]

37. Or, given that Latin American setting, the contemporary Neo-Baroque, thus invoking Severo Sarduy, Alejo Carpentier, and supremely, José Lezama Lima. [↩]
38. Pater: "All art aspires to the condition of music." Mallarmé: "Everything in the world exists to end in a book" – for cinema, of course, all exists to end in an image. [↩]
39. Which might be an ideal; but it would be like being able to read Roussel's *New Impressions of Africa* (1932) straight through and hold all its parentheticals and footnotes together. [↩]
40. See especially Campany, Alberra, Braun and Gaudreault, and Guido and Lugon. [↩]
41. And barely a clip, really, more of a "clipped clip," or even a gif. [↩]
42. Looping itself being one of film history's eternal recurrences according to Faden. [↩]
43. Morel again: "that I could give perpetual reality to my romantic desire." [↩]
44. Or do they, now repaired, continue to work forever, though unseen, unappreciated? [↩]
45. Actually, it is the penultimate shot. The actual final image (aside from the credits) is in fact a view of the world outside of the sixth automaton in which we see Assumpta rowing away. It looks like a reverse shot, but is in fact perpendicular to the grotto. The film is thus turned over to the world beyond or outside itself – the world of the seventh automaton, the world of us the viewers. [↩]

Tags: experimental expressionism Surrealism

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