

# Figures of Dissent

Cinema of Politics / Politics of Cinema  
Selected Correspondences and Conversations

**Stoffel Debuysere**

Proefschrift voorgelegd tot het behalen van  
de graad van Doctor in de kunsten: audiovisuele kunsten





## Figures of Dissent

Cinema of Politics / Politics of Cinema

Selected Correspondences and Conversations

*Stoffel Debuysere*

This thesis submitted to obtain the degree of Doctor of Arts: Audiovisual Arts

Academic year 2017- 2018

Doctorandus: Stoffel Debuysere

Promotors:

Prof. Dr. Steven Jacobs, Ghent University, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

Dr. An van. Dienderen, University College Ghent School of Arts

Editor: Rebecca Jane Arthur

Layout: Gunther Fobe

Cover design: Gitte Callaert

Cover image: Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (1977). Courtesy of Charles Burnett and Milestone Films.

This manuscript partly came about in the framework of the research project *Figures of Dissent* (KASK / University College Ghent School of Arts, 2012-2016). Research financed by the Arts Research Fund of the University College Ghent.

This publication would not have been the same without the support and generosity of Evan Calder Williams, Barry Esson, Mohanad Yaqubi, Ricardo Matos Cabo, Sarah Vanhee, Christina Stuhlberger, Rebecca Jane Arthur, Herman Asselberghs, Steven Jacobs, Pieter Van Bogaert, An van. Dienderen, Daniel Biltreyst, Katrien Vuylsteke Vanfleteren, Gunther Fobe, Aurelie Daems, Pieter-Paul Mortier, Marie Logie, Andrea Cinel, Celine Brouwez, Xavier Garcia-Bardon, Elias Grootaers, Gerard-Jan Claes, Sabzian, Britt Hatzius, Johan Debuysere, Christa Deplacie, Christoph Lesaghe, and all those who have joined me in the ventures of *Figures of Dissent*.



HoGent



# Content

Preface	5
Correspondences	
<b>Evan Calder Williams</b>	10
<b>Barry Esson</b>	36
<b>Mohanad Yaqubi</b>	66
<b>Ricardo Matos Cabo</b>	112
<b>Sarah Vanhee</b>	176
<b>Herman Asselberghs &amp; Pieter van Bogaert</b>	208
Afterthoughts	241
Notes	255
Conversations	
<b>Jacques Rancière</b>	270
<b>John Akomfrah</b>	288
<b>Pedro Costa</b>	302



## Preface

How can the relation between cinema and politics be thought today? This question was the starting point for *Figures of Dissent*, a research project that was initiated in February 2012, with the generous support of the Arts Research Fund of the University College Ghent. In an attempt to tackle this vast conundrum, which has been pondered and pontificated upon since cinema's beginnings, an extensive series of public encounters and screenings was organized in various locations in Belgium and abroad. The principle aim of this series, which came about by dint of a broad network of organizations and institutions, was not to define or illustrate a singular theory that could somehow shed light on this cumbersome relationship, but rather to give impetus to a culture of exchange that would allow for a variety of views and insights to be shared. The challenge taken on was thus not so much to determine how cinematic forms might be able to measure up to political ideas or ideals, but rather to create resonance spaces that could give expression to the infinity of resistant emotions, perceptions, movements, gestures and gazes that the universe of cinema has to offer. Not in order to learn how to decipher and calculate the meanings that might inhere in them, but simply to bring about a circulation of sense, a circulation of fictions and frictions that might have their own role to play in the rearrangement of our sensible world.

This project came into being at a moment when a wave of collective mobilizations erupted on the global political landscape. The year before had started off with the Arab Spring and had culminated in the Occupy Wall Street demonstration, shortly to be followed by protests in Bulgaria, Sweden, Turkey, Brazil and elsewhere, as well as manifestations of movements such as Los Indignados and Aganaktismenoi, to name but a few. In conjunction with this wave of insurgency and the growing concern with emancipatory thought and practice, more and more artists seemed to take upon themselves the responsibility to fill the void created by the consensual practices of governmental politics and attempt to invent new forms of intervention and participation. This so-called "political turn" could to some extent also be felt in the world of cinema, not only in a retrospective fascination for the past ventures of "militant cinema," but also in the endeavours of numerous contemporary artists and filmmakers to give cinematic expression to the injustices and inequities perpetrated on a global and local scale, as well as the struggles aimed to defy them. In light of these invaluable efforts, *Figures of Dissent* could not pretend to offer anything but modest echo chambers which allowed for some of these efforts to find a multiplicity of resonances and dissonances, whether in the form of appearances or in the ring of words. The dozens of public showings and exchanges that were proposed did not profess to be able to directly participate in the much-needed organization of collective political dissent – they merely sought to bring about communal situations where time and attention could be paid to remote figures brimming on the surface of the screen.

How to make sense of these “figures”? Do they bespeak the represented characters and embodied emotions that invite immediate identification, or rather the mute shapes and flickering shadows that tend to resist identification? Do they denote the material presence of bodies and objects or the apparitions and operations that tend to diverge from this presence? The forms of life that appear in front of the camera lens or the forms of art that are produced by the filmmaker? And what about the “figure” of the artist as producer of aesthetic appearances, as author of the work carrying her or his signature? Oscillating between the personal and the impersonal, resemblance and dissemblance, the polysemy of the word “figures” seems to underscore some of the fundamental ambiguities and paradoxes that are inherent to the art of cinema, as well as the political promises and efficiencies that have been ascribed to it. Are political effects to be located within the cinematic work itself, in the intention of the filmmaker(s) or rather in the subjectivity of the spectator(s)? Can a film have a dissensual potential in and of itself or is it contingent on a broader disposition of sensible experiences and historical positions that give these experiences their force? How to negotiate the relation between appearance and reality, between recognition and disruption? How could the mediation of cinematic appearances possibly make a difference in light of the immediacy of the real? Trying to come to terms with how these questions can be dealt with today cannot but lead to an inquiry into the ways in which they have been met in the past. That is why, from the outset of the *Figures of Dissent* project, it was clear that tackling the conundrum of cinema and politics required a deep plunge into the topographies of positions and arguments that have attempted to define the capacities and incapacities of cinema and those of its spectators for making sense and significance.

The writings that are assembled in this publication are a tentative outcome of this plunge. They have taken the form of seven letters addressed to seven people whom I have met or worked with in the context of the *Figures of Dissent* project. Each letter was written as an exploration of certain shared paths through the landscape where the territories and geographies of cinematic appearance intersect and collide with those of political actuality. The first letter, addressed to Evan Calder Williams, was written as an intuitive inquiry into some of the questions and confusions that had remained lingering in me after having organized *The Fire Next Time* conference, which was set up as a revisitation of the practices and theories of “militant” cinema, in particular those that were associated with the upheavals and movements that swept the world in the 1960s and '70s. What were the conditions that made these particular modes of thought and action conceivable and effectual? What makes something thinkable in one era but inconceivable in another? These questions were refocused in a subsequent letter to Mohanad Yaqubi, in which I tried to figure out some of the changes in form and attitude that can be discerned in cinematic engagements with political struggle, in particular those that have been dedicated to the Palestinian struggle. Central to the investigation is a film that Mohanad and I had been discussing in the course

of earlier encounters, a film that returns in several of the letters: Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *Ici et Ailleurs* (1976). My writing to Barry Esson too was triggered by an impression that one particular film had made on me, an impression that caused me to rethink my work and role as a so-called "curator." I saw this film, Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977), as part of one of the "Episodes" that Barry has been organizing with Arika, a Scotland-based political arts organization devoted to the cultivation of a collective practice of study. The letter was composed as an attempt to make sense of this experience while at the same time questioning expectations of what cinema can do and what we can do with cinema. I was inclined to engage with this challenge once more after meeting with Sarah Vanhee, who spoke to me of a "crisis of the spectator." She was speaking from her experience as an artist who tries in her own way to create modest fissures and fractures in the texture of the sensible landscape by disputing widely held antinomies between art and non-art, activity and passivity, activating and spectating. I responded by coupling my own wrestling with these antinomies with my impression of a film I have been regularly showing in the past years, *Handsworth Songs* (1986) by the Black Audio Film Collective. A fifth and sixth letter were drawn up in reaction to the perception of yet another "crisis," which a friend has referred to as the "depression of fiction." Why is it that the traditional forms of cinematic fiction seem to have trouble to give expression to the injustices that haunt our times and the struggles that aim to defy them? Which network of expectations, arguments and paradoxes underlies this perception? These questions, which enkindled a fragmented journey through the history of the meeting grounds of art, cinema and politics, were first addressed to Ricardo Matos Cabo, whom I have been exchanging thoughts with ever since we met in the company of Pedro Costa, a filmmaker who takes up an important position within these writings. The concern with fiction is also at the heart of the letter written to Herman Asselberghs and Pieter van Bogaert, in which I have tried to dislodge a wide-held suspicion towards representation and at the same time understand some of the shifts and transformations that have occurred in cinematic fictions that deal with conditions of precarity and exclusion. Finally, a last letter was added in the form of "afterthoughts," in which I followed up my correspondence with Barry Esson with a general reflection on the *Figures of Dissent* project. The issue in particular that elicited this addendum was a demand addressed to me which has for some time taken me aback: a demand to clarify my position as "spectator" or "producer."

Some of these letters, complemented here with a sample of resonating conversations that took place in the course of this project, found their motivation in the experience of specific film works, others tried to work their way through an entanglement of discursive strings. Some set out to untangle particular knots that bind the forms of a cinema of politics with the outlines of a politics of cinema, others zeroed in on the challenges and ventures of curatorship or spectatorship. Some might have a more intimate and even emotive ring to them than others. But all of these letters have in their own way sought to give resonance and



continuance to unfinished conversations and dangling thoughts, without any certainty of outcome or response. Far from being the result of well-planned journeys, these writings have unfurled as aleatory trajectories that join a variety of impressions, associations, derivations, convulsions and digressions. Rather than the accomplishments of a determined search for certainties, they remain speculative forms of study that stem from the wanderings of a bricoleur who has attempted to put things into play and construct a meaningful meshwork of thoughts and half-thoughts, interpretations and misinterpretations. Their zigzagging and meandering motions, with no appropriate destinations in sight, bear witness to the development of an erratic learning curve, one that has by no means reached a finality. Like the many encounters that have been made possible over the past years, the writings that have accompanied them are but provisional explorations of an inexhaustible question which provides for a multitude of departures, junctions and disjunctions. Like messages in a bottle launched into the vast expanse of possibilities, they are merely waiting to be furthered.

# Correspondences



**Evan Calder Williams** was a guest at one of the events that was organized in the context of the *Figures of Dissent* project. Entitled *The Fire Next Time (Afterlives of the Militant Image)*, this conference took place in Ghent in April 2014. The talk he presented was based on the dissertation he'd just finished, *The Fog of Class War: Cinema, Circulation, and Refusal in Italy's Creeping '70s*. He is the author of several books, including *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (2011) and *Roman Letters* (2011), and writes the blog *Socialism and/or Barbarism*. At the time of writing, Evan was working on several new projects, including a history and theory of sabotage.



Brussels, October 2014

Dear Evan,

I have fond memories of meeting you in Ghent at *The Fire Next Time* conference, where you presented your research on the Italian Newsreel Movement of the 1970s. I remember being quite impressed with your presentation, not in the least because of the fierceness I detected in your voice. It reminded me of what I miss all too often: the sense that cinema is something to be reckoned with, that it has a stridency that can stir up fires and desires. This fierceness is also what appeals to me in your writing: it has a wayward and hard-edged quality to it which, for me, conjures up the spirit of the music scene where I dwelled for some time. It was a world where, for the first time, I could feel the vibrant noise of the scatted and the scattered, a way of being together in restlessness and brokenness, a way of confronting the trouble with beauty, the troubled and the troubling, the dissonant and the atonal. I have been looking for this noise ever since.

The other day I found myself invited to propose a selection of films for a program of screenings and discussions dealing with “the return to Marxism.” How can one who has never actually read the work of Marx attentively respond to this kind invitation? It is true that the visions of Socialism and its avatars seem to have gained a new force of attraction and legitimacy these days, even—or especially—for those who have come long after the insurgence and the subsequent dissolution of the emancipatory movements in the fabled period of the long 1968. Yes, even for some of those who have decided early enough in life to dedicate some humble time and energy to the cultivation of cinema, this bastard art that Lenin once proclaimed to be “the most important of all arts,”<sup>2</sup> it seems that the time has come when, for them too, politics becomes the order of the day. How does one who has always preferred the darkness and safety of the cinema space to the crepuscularity and incertitude of that strange place called society deal with the realization that this constant struggle which is politics concerns him, and has perhaps always concerned him? You do what you can: you feel your way through the mistiness and relate everything you don’t understand to what you know and love. And even when so much of what you thought you knew starts crumbling down on you, and your whole worldview with it, the love does not wither. It only grows stronger.

The invitation didn't really come out of the blue. Some time ago I initiated a project called *Figures of Dissent*, which mainly consists of a series of film screenings and conversations dealing with the relation between cinema and politics; or rather between politics as emancipatory response to situated injustice or wrongdoing on the one hand, and the politics intrinsic to cinematic practices and modes of aesthetic production and sensibility on the other. How do these realms of "politics," in their multiple dimensions, cross, segue, intertwine or interlace? The topic is vast and the prospect of attempting to deal with it has been pretty daunting, I admit, but honestly I prefer it that way. What I am interested in is precisely how this relationship can be thought of—how it has been thought of in the past and how it can be thought of today. I just wanted to take the plunge in these deep, dark waters in the hope of creating some small ripples, or at least of finding a current or a rhythm that could carry me along for a while. You see, what has triggered this project in the first place is not a well-defined line of questioning but rather a general sense of frustration, one that has to do with an apparent difficulty to find words and assemble thoughts to transmit and further something which is sensed in front of cinematic appearances today, particularly those that have an aspiration to represent social struggles or stir up the political imagination. It is an aphasia which perhaps resonates with the tangible experiences of indignation and disorientation that occupy the lives of many. It's as if, in times of intense desire but little direction or confidence, language and speech become temporarily unavailable. As if the habituated practices of forming thoughts are somehow corrupted and disabled, stuck in a sort of transitional regression in which language subjects itself to being tilled and drilled, before there can be a chance of a renewed spirit of words. Oftentimes it feels like we inhabit one of Gramsci's interregnums, in which the vocabularies and articulations through which new possibilities might be thought are by no means clear. But the idea of something being not quite sayable or transmittable also carries its own charge: I like to think that it might not only be accompanied by a smothering sense of exasperation but also by the possibility of a rousing sentiment of excitement—excitement over the idea that something might be in motion, changing tracks, opening up new perspectives and associations, allowing for the emergence of dialogical zones, against the overarching imposition of monologism.<sup>3</sup> It is this sense of uncertainty, as a possible condition of discovery and multiplicity, that has struck me in the current climate of thinking and writing about cinema and politics, and it is something I wanted to address by creating some kind of unsteady, inconstant discursive workspace that might serve as a catalyst for public exchange and dialogue.

We need a breath of fresh air. As you know, there has been a notable resurgence of interest in notions and practices of what is called “militant cinema,” mostly referring to the works that were considered as tools to bear witness to and intervene in the various political upheavals and liberation movements that shook the world in the 1960s and ’70s. Over the past few years, a rash of art and film projects have scoured the surface of this not-so-distant past in an effort to retrofit this particular culture of revolt and militancy, stemming from a time when there was ostensibly still something to fight for, and images were still something to fight with; a time when radical film culture and radical activism coincided, well-known filmmakers took on the role of activists and anonymous militants took themselves for filmmakers. What remains of this unassailable alliance between cinema and politics? After the flames had died down, once the smoke had cleared, all that seemed to be left was a wreckage of broken promises and shattered horizons. Today it feels like we have been living through a long period of disappointment, while the sense of something lacking or failing is spreading steadily. An overwhelming melancholy seems to have taken hold of our lives, as if we can only experience our times as the “end times,” with our confidence in politics being as brittle as our trust in images. The crises we are currently facing also turn out to be crises of the imagination: as many have pointed out—and as the current landscape of mainstream cinema, brimming with dystopian teen flicks and apocalyptic disaster movies, seems to illustrate—it is much easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine an alternative for today’s dominant world order.<sup>4</sup> In this tragedy of interminable repeat, things only seem to change so that everything can remain the same—or, as the old French proverb puts it: *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*. In recent years, however, we have witnessed, after a long hiatus, the reemergence of a global resistance to capitalist hegemony, at least in its neoliberal guise. It feels like we have entered into a period of possible recomposition, both for emancipatory political thought and for those effective activist forces that correspond to it. This might partly explain the tendency to look back at past models of theory and action, as potential sources of vibrant inspiration that might steer us away from the sweeping sense of sterility, or as historical poems that could give us a much needed sense of confidence. After the long period of pathologization that we have gone through, it is certainly significant that former utopian futures and emancipatory moments are revitalized in the hope of shedding a new light on our perceived dead-end present. As you have mentioned, Evan, one way to clear the ground might be to salvage scraps of antagonistic histories and have them come to bear on this present, as a redistribution of what might be thinkable and



doable amidst this mess we're in. But, at the same time, I find myself grappling with the bitter feeling that this tendency to reawaken militant dreams from their slumber all too easily leads to nostalgic commemoration—or worse: resentful condescension—of times that are definitely past and futures that can or should no longer be imagined, rather than an actual reflection on how a culture of dissent could be evoked and prolonged today. Particularly in the worlds of contemporary art and cinema, I see many works that tend to focus on the residual, rather than on the emergent, and merely refer to acts of rebellion without actually conveying a sense of rebelliousness. Looking back at the history of militant thought and practice then risks affirming the contemporary bent towards musealisation and necrology, implying that every form, every belief, has a particular time and place which is no longer ours. Rather than adhering to the separation of past and present as a principle of impossibility, couldn't we try thinking of new possibilities of framing our present? How could cinema possibly contribute to this framing?

What is it that makes something thinkable in one era, but inconceivable in another? Quite a few artists and researchers, including yourself, have been spending time browsing through the archives, in an archaeological quest to excavate the weavings of practices, concepts, arguments and judgments that have shaped the various ententes between cinema and politics in the short 20th century. But what if not only the responses to political challenges have changed, but also the challenges themselves? We are said to be living in an age of consensus, in which the twin logic of global capitalism and liberal democracy paradoxically has become the utopian endgame of which Marx had only dreamt of. Contemporary politics postulates to have undone its shackles and freed itself from the weight of the old utopias that were keeping it from getting in tune with the rhythms of the globalized world, with the buzz of economic activity and the flow of capital, information and desire. It has taken upon itself, with governments acting as prudent administrators, to fully embrace the waves of progress, pacify or vilify any eruptions of antagonism and steer us towards a future that can be nothing but an expansion of the present—although, regrettably, the voyage is occasionally interfered with by painful but “unavoidable” crises that can only be overcome, necessarily, by way of requisite austerities. Where does this state of affairs leave the narratives of vindication, liberation and redemption that have undoubtedly contributed to the presumed efficacy of the various forms of militant cinema? After all, the aspirations to produce a new gaze upon the world and mobilize the energies to transform it relied, to a great extent, on the apparent evidence of a clear division of the world into antagonistic forces and the faith in the historical victory

of one camp over another. But in the wake of the global political and cognitive shifts that have taken place in the past decades, the emancipatory salience of these forms and their underlying principles seem hardly maintainable. Some observers, notably Jacques Rancière, have even gone so far as to suggest that some of the critical procedures of consciousness-raising, torn from their anchorage, have eventually turned on themselves and have become completely disconnected from any perspective of emancipation. According to this observation, the Marxist impulse to probe the reality lingering behind appearances and to unveil the machineries of domination has unwillingly morphed into the disenchanting and fatalistic idea that everything is appearance and appearance is everything. The cult of suspicion, reducing all imagery and imagination to the level of illusion (following Marx's motto *De Omnibus Dubitandum*—"doubt everything"), led to the foregone conclusion that everything potentially subversive is not only recuperated, but even preempted and pre-incorporated by the dominant order, suggesting that every act of resistance can be nothing else but a spectacle, and every spectacle is part and parcel of the reign of consumption.<sup>5</sup>

It's a striking overturn, isn't it? Yesteryear's bourgeois anxiety regarding the growing access to new forms of cultural circulation and consumption of thoughts and appearances has taken on the form of a paternalistic concern for the dangers of that same consumption, which is supposedly restricting us from getting in touch with our true condition. Whereas the young Marx, on the brink of the 1848 Revolutions, blamed the bourgeoisie for drowning all human relations in the icy waters of egotistical calculation, replacing the exploitation that was previously veiled by religious and political illusions with a downright, unashamed and brutal form of exploitation, blame is now laid on those who have fallen victim to both the nihilism of the consumer society and the manipulation of belief in the name of spiritual values.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the focus was once put on the capacity and the potential to break with the order of domination and exploitation, it has altogether shifted towards the incapacity and impotence to make any consequential difference. So many illusions are said to have fallen, including the belief that a situation of injustice can give rise to an action capable of modifying it. How to get out of this *catch22* culture of skepticism that has tainted our relation to politics, but also to cinema; both of which have professedly come to an end, by now barely a memory?

Could it be that the declaration of "the end" is just another way by which dominant opinion regimes secure their authority? Could it be that the main challenge today might not be to reach a clear horizon towards which emancipatory history is imagined to be moving, but rather to refuse the drift into fatalism and nihilism and

to put our confidence in inventing something that is as yet unclear? How then can cinema and its culture of spectatorship align itself with the interruption of the logic of resignation, as evidenced by recent uprisings and rebellions?

“We can not continue much longer on the way of disillusion,” wrote Serge Daney towards the end of his life.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, he knew better than most how this *cul-de-sac* had been reached. After all, he was part of the second generation of French cinephiles at the helm of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* who, confronted with the struggles of the 1960s and the Marxist theories that were meant to give them sense and direction, changed their focus from a *politique des auteurs* to a science of the hidden, devoting their energy to lifting the veil from deceitful images and exposing the real state of the world. The art that had once started out under a sign of enchantment, underpinned by a belief in its power of magic and wonder and the sacred union of science and utopia, turned into an object of obsessive disenchantment and distrust. With time, the task of demystification was also taken up by cinema itself, notably in the work of filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard whose “blackboard films” were all about learning how to see through the deception of appearances by creating disjunctions between words, images and words as images. Daney, however, has suggested that the “radical regressism” that took the famous “one divides into two” seriously (as opposed to the infamous “two merge into one”)<sup>8</sup> and aimed to surgically deconstruct the various elements of cinematic production and signification, actually already announced the bereavement of cinema. According to him, what was meant to disrupt the circulation of images was annexed by that same circulation: “sampling, autonomization, interruption, humor,” once the main tools of critical cinema, lost their bite and eventually became the favourite toys of the “infinite games of the media,” which might have taught us to “read” better, but led us to “see” less.<sup>9</sup> This observation led Daney to elaborate on the idea of post-cinema and its cultivation of the “visual,” this ubiquitous self-reflexive cliché that, in contrast to the cinematic “image,” no longer shows anything but merely signals meanings, emotions and experiences that have already been produced elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> Surely, this idea of “brand images” (*images de marque*) occupying the media sphere as part of an endless chain of interchangeable signs was nothing new. As Daney himself gladly admitted, the direct inspiration for the disenchanting theories that he developed from the 1980s onwards was provided by one of the films that we watched together in Ghent, the first film that Godard made with Anne-Marie Miéville: *Ici et Ailleurs* (1976).

If this remarkable film still resonates with us today, I think it’s precisely because of its sense of vulnerability. It feels like an open wound, festering with

loss and guilt—the loss of hopes and dreams of change, the guilt of not being able to interrupt the infinite flow of words and images which cancels out all signs of difference and dissonance, only to verify the operating systems of power. Faith turned bad, and mourning has taken its place. However, for all of its melancholic pedagogism, pending between the mission to lay bare illusions and the lamentation of its own illusion, we shouldn't forget that this film came about as a provocative reaction to a certain militant film and media culture of that era which, thriving on the remains of the uproars of 1968, found itself trapped in a cycle of oversaturated signs and recognition effects.<sup>11</sup> At the time, Jacques Rancière wrote that the film might be considered as a response to “the great Brechtian myth: to redeem words and images from their exchange value (into power) in order to return them to a new use (towards freedom).”<sup>12</sup> The challenge that cinema has to take on, he argued, is to invent forms that not only divide, but also produce images and fictions that could somehow condense the “here” and “elsewhere.”<sup>13</sup> Perhaps now, more than ever, even in the awareness that Brechtianism has known its best days, we should take up that call to freedom again, go beyond Godard and Daney's discourses of mourning and loss, stop thinking in terms of unbounded “enchaining” effects and start putting our trust in what we might be able to do with those cinematic forms of condensation that will always be somewhat unstable and unreliable. In the end Daney too, despite his disillusion with the supposed dissolution of the cinema that he had so much cared for, still put his wager on possibility:

*Between the spectacle and the lack of images, is there a place for an “art of living with images,” at the same time demanding them to be “humanly” comprehensive (to better know what they are, who makes them and how, what they can do, how they retroact on the world) and keep at their core this remnant that is inhuman, startling, ambiguous, on the verge?<sup>14</sup>*

How to live with images? How to attend to their intrinsic tension between the “human” and the “inhuman”? Like the dreams we have or the animals we keep, images don't let themselves be wholly captured or domesticated. The way we deal with their versatility depends largely on what we expect from them. Usually we expect images to guide and inform us, to clarify at once the ambiguities and paradoxes of the world and how to come to terms with them. Throughout its history it has been assumed that the art of cinema could have an emancipatory effect by giving rise to a new consciousness through the presentation of a certain strangeness and the intelligibility of a revelation. Think of Eisenstein's “montage

of agit-attractions” or the application of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, both of whose supposed efficiency relied on an operation of disruption, with the aim of activating the radical imagination. In the Marxist film culture of the 1960s, which drew inspiration from the work of Eisenstein and Brecht, common sense was considered as the product of the dominant ideology equating the real with the visible. This meant that the conjunction between “I see” and “I understand” had to be disrupted in order to make the viewer reconsider what is given as self-evident. At the time Jacques Rivette wrote that “films that content themselves with taking the revolution as a subject actually subordinate themselves to bourgeois ideas of content, message, expression.”<sup>15</sup> Displaying images and stories of struggle was deemed not in itself enough, there was also supposed to be a break with dominant norms of naturalism and suture: the cinematic form itself had to be made into a struggle. As the darkness of the cinema space came to be increasingly associated with obscurantism, preventing the spectators from seeing the truth of the world, suspicion settled down in the very place that used to promise pleasure and edification. Unfortunately, this suspicion also tended to drown the strangeness of those images that precisely attested to the contingent or intolerable conditions of the world order. Images were put under such great pressure to reveal their hidden meaning that they ended up becoming devoid of any sense at all. Insofar as the critical suspicion asked viewers to uncover the signs of domination behind the surface of the everyday, it ended up being “inscribed in the perpetuity of a world in which the transformation of things into signs is redoubled by the very excess of interpretative signs which brings things to lose their capacity of resistance.”<sup>16</sup> At least this is the argument put forward by Rancière, whose counter proposition wishes to do away with the worn out culture of critical skepticism. According to him the emancipatory potential of cinema is not to be found in the purposive reparation of ignorance or production of consciousness, but in the possibility of reframing the field of subjectivity, by creating small shifts in the way we can perceive the coordinates of the given. The idea of displacing and reshuffling dominant views is still central here, but Rancière prefers to call it “dissensus,” which he defines as a reconfiguration of the predominant landscape of perception and its corresponding conditions of possibility, thereby displacing the boundaries of what is sensible, thinkable, and possible. In contrast to the vertical logic of the critical tradition, generally based on a hierarchy between appearance and reality, knowledge and illusion, he prefers to think in terms of horizontal topographies as configurations of systems of possibilities. Instead of looking behind the surface of images, he prefers to return them to the fragility of their surface, which he

considers as a “distribution of the sensible,” a space of mediation that allows for a process of transformation that can restage the overall shape of making sense, by modifying the positions constituted in a sensible universe. It implies that the conditions of distance, illusion and imposition that are inherent to the cinematic *dispositif* are no longer thought of as something to be exposed and denounced as producers of “ideological effects” and “impressions of reality,” but simply to be accepted.<sup>17</sup> True enough, the screening conditions of cinema are completely authoritative, but, at the same time, its mode of attentiveness allows for those who are supposed to be suffering this imposition to appropriate for themselves what is happening on the screen. Politics is then not considered as something hidden behind or within images, as if the only political exchange at stake is lodged in the ability to decode the meanings and symptoms that inhere in them.<sup>18</sup> Rather, it is to be found in the possibilities for appropriation by all those who find themselves in front of those images. Following this line of reasoning, the question then should not be: what kind of political message or affect is communicated through cinema, but rather what kind of forms of perception and experience are shimmering on the cinematic surface and how do they resonate or dissonate within us? It is not a question of identifying and validating the reality of what is shown, but of deciding for ourselves which reality we are willing to give to what we see, prolonging its movements and sensibilities for ourselves. However frustrating Rancière’s proposition might be for some, due to its unwillingness to give strategic prescriptions or directives, we cannot deny that it does invite us wholeheartedly to rethink the expectations we have in regards to cinema, encouraging us to rearrange its realm of possibility away from the logic of pedagogy and authority, to which I myself have always been so allergic. Since I’ve plunged myself into the expanse of thoughts and practices touching on cinema and politics, it is this current that I’m tentatively trying to explore; a current that develops out of an uncertain search for a sense of affirmation, rather than from an infinite employment of denunciation.

I remember being touched by one of the first pieces I read by Rancière. It was an intimate reflection on Roberto Rossellini’s *Europa 51*, a film he—like many of his contemporaries—has been struggling with ever since he first saw it in the 1960s, when he was still part of the *clique* of cinephiles who were glued to the screens of the Parisian cinemas. In the essay he recounts how, at that time, his Marxist-inspired critical expectations were frustrated by the second half of the film in which the main character Irene—played by Ingrid Bergman—appears to retreat into religious idealism. By contrast, the first part of the film, in which she is confronted with the reality of the class struggle, presented itself as a perfect

marriage between Marx's historical materialism, which provided the theoretical foundation of the struggles of the time, and the materialism of the relation between bodies and spaces that defines the film's *mise-en-scène*. It took almost three decades for him to see the film in a different light, and perceive Irene's act of conversion no longer as stemming from a lack of consciousness, but a departing from it; leading her towards places where she is not supposed to be, towards a world without coordinates where all certainties are put into question and nothing coincides any longer.<sup>19</sup> By making Irene dismiss all the lessons that are given to her, Rossellini derails all the straightforward courses that have always already been laid out for her, at the cost of hurling the character into a void that undoes all points of reference. The body of Irene becomes a foreign figure, a destabilizing force that at the same time resists its accorded sensible universe and the call to the void coming from above. This aptness to throw off preconstituted modes of framing and forces of necessity is a theme that runs through all of Rancière's work ever since he parted from the Marxist science that aimed to make knowledge out of what others do not know. By immersing himself in nineteenth century workers' archives, he learned that emancipation does not begin by pointing out the truth behind appearances but by rejecting the dominant configuration which states what pertains to the true and what is merely appearance, who is capable of seeing and acting and who isn't. For him, emancipation does not rely on a culture of distrust that will always need enlightened spirits who claim to see for those who do not see, but in a confidence in the capacity of all to deviate from the trodden paths and challenge the allotted system of positions, identities and capacities in which we find ourselves. Today, I can't help thinking that it is this confidence that we need more than anything else. Confidence in what we see and what lays before us. Confidence in our capacity to reconsider where we are and invent something without knowing where it may lead. Perhaps it is "no longer knowing what to do," as Michel Foucault once wrote, that can open up a much needed space of reflection and action, where "the acts, gestures, discourses that up until then had seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult, dangerous."<sup>20</sup>

Considering the possibilities for dissensus in today's political and sensible landscape might mean that we need to embrace and encourage the foreigner's gaze. Not the view of those who decide to stay on safe grounds, who cease to put their trust in what they see and sense, but a wandering and wondering gaze that undoes the certainty of planned trajectories and fixed identities by exceeding everything that they are supposed to be one with. It entails a way of getting lost by becoming foreign to ourselves, by venturing into the unknown and embracing

what is uncertain, not so much for the purpose of understanding, but rather for the sake of taking a path that allows us to construct a world from a decentred point of view, other than that of the mere impulse to re-affirm one's own identity. The purpose would not be to discover what we are but to refuse what we are, and start imagining what we could be. I'm reminded of a passage from a letter that Gilles Deleuze wrote to Daney, in which he suggests that in a world that has come to feel more and more like a bad movie, optimism may lie in a new kind of voyage where one throws out one's compass and adopts Proust's motto that the true dreamer is the one who goes out to verify something which is not guaranteed, and will perhaps never be. This may be what is lying ahead of us: a voyage without maps or charts for which we need to somehow find the confidence that something else can be done. "Something possible," as Irene exclaims in the film, "otherwise I will suffocate."<sup>21</sup>

How could cinema contribute in making "something possible," now that we are experiencing a lack of clear horizons and enlightened paths? What could be not only a cinema of actuality—as André Bazin once referred to Rossellini's films<sup>22</sup>—but a cinema of actualization, of inventing gazes that are no longer contained within given logical possibilities? We know there is no shortage of self-proclaimed "political" films these days, whether they are aimed at examining the aporias of emancipation or making visible the class struggle that is buried under the doctrine of "capitalist realism"; whether they are analyzing the systems that are producing the violent excesses of neoliberalism or documenting the recent collective movements and experiments that have shaken up the common consent. It has also become clear that the most invigorating propositions in recent times have been coming from the domain of "documentary" and even more from the forms of such that defy the exhausted borders between narrative fiction and documentary chronicle. Strangely enough, the cinema that is avowedly dedicated to the real often appears to be capable of more powerful fictions than the cinema that remains committed to the artificial development of dramatic actions and interactions. As if the forms that have traditionally been developed in line with Aristotle's precepts of dramatic unity, characters, plot, exposition and resolution, have great trouble accompanying our current era. As if the fictional forms that typically play with the dynamics between fortune and misfortune, ignorance and knowledge, based on a logic of means and ends, causes and effects, grapple to deal with the processes of social reality, while the common order of reality increasingly imposes its own laws on the fictional. On the one hand, the tradition of social cinema appearing in the footsteps of Jean Renoir seems to experience difficulty



in challenging the dominant sociological imaginary and tends to get stuck in stale configurations of sociopolitical stereotypes and dramatic clichés that dabble in safe familiarity. On the other hand, the old fables of innocence and guilt epitomized by Fritz Lang's films, or the morality tales of grace and redemption (and capital as evil) exemplified by the work of Robert Bresson, find themselves replaced by grim tales of "infinite justice" and "the evil within," in which innocence can no longer be distinguished from guilt, lies are deemed necessary to uphold order, and evil can only be repaid by evil. Violence is no longer put forward as a manifestation of a conflictual reality—the violence which liberates in opposition to the violence which oppresses, as famously put forward in Jean-Paul Sartre's comments on Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* or as summed up in Brecht's adagium "only violence serves where violence reigns."<sup>23</sup> Instead, the struggle between political forces and classes has shifted to the ethical conflict between Good and Evil. Think of the current wave of catastrophe films: don't they ultimately provide a face to the terror of an absolute Evil which permits no escape, an enemy which no longer has the face of an alternative political order, but of an irreconcilable otherness that imperils our very identity and survival, a borderless threat which has no cause but itself? Amidst the chaos of our days, governed by the law of the jungle and the law of the market, we ought to feel lucky to be alive.

Couldn't the growing interest in the border-blurring explorations of documentary fiction or fictional documentary be a response to this strain in finding dramatic models that diverge from the calculated staging of the familiarities of the everyday—life as it is—and the intensities of the exceptional—life as it could be imagined? And couldn't this fictional difficulty be somehow related to the political difficulty we are facing today: that of challenging the consensual conceptions of the order and disorder of our world, oscillating between sociological determinism and ethical ideology, both of which tend to cancel out all possibilities of inventing new political subjectivities and symbolizations? Confronted with this disposition of the real, limited by this double logic of reasonableness, isn't it any wonder that it is so hard to find breathing space for fiction, let alone margin for political thought and action? Isn't it any wonder that we turn to cinematic forms that are exempt from the requirements of having to attest to the real in order to be attested by the real in turn? Forms that still offer possibilities to unsettle and reinvent the real, so that it might no longer recognize itself? Against the verdicts of those who continue to bewail the reign of the visual and the spectacle, perhaps it is not the experience of the real that is waning, but the possibility of fiction, of inventing worlds of shared appearance that don't have to answer to the consensual laws of the real.<sup>24</sup>

In cinema, the possibility of reinventing the real depends on the production of discrepancies between what is seen and what can be said and thought about it; between what is expected and what meets or fails to meet expectations; between what is considered appropriate and what confirms or questions this appropriateness. In contrast to the art of literature, however, where the power of words opens up a necessary gap between representation and represented, what the filmmaker sees in the lens is also, more or less, what we will see on the screen, and how we comprehend what we see tends to be provoked by a certain identification with the commonplaces of social imaginary. It is according to this logic of identification that cinema so easily assumes the properties of what is presented: cinema is said to be “social” when it plunges us into the margins of the global socio-economic order and it is supposed to be “committed” when the filmmaker takes us into the heart of the battles against injustice. But why would the political commitment of a filmmaker automatically result in a “committed” film—what could that possibly mean anyway—or generate commitment on the part of the spectator? And hasn’t Brecht already pointed out that images of factories say nothing at all about the social relationships that manifest themselves within the walls of these factories?<sup>25</sup> Daney used to say that there is always something in cinema that *resists*: the traces of the real which it contains don’t let themselves be reduced to causes served or statements held, nor do they offer an exact representation of the world. Let’s remember the old axiom of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*: “Cinema has a fundamental connection with the real and the real is not what is represented.” Due to its photomechanical nature, cinema produces an immediate identification with what happens on screen, but at the same time that identification is suspended and deflected by the particular attention that is given to form, frame, rhythm, gestures and sounds: on the surface of resemblance there is always already a dissemblance. The task of the filmmaker is to play with variations of resemblance and dissemblance, proximity and distance, presence and absence, all the while negotiating between the dangers of cliché-ridden conformity on the one hand, and the escapades of infinite flight on the other. Robert Bresson might have been right when he said that cinema is not supposed to give us anything to “understand,” in the sense that there can be no simple decoding of an absolute truth that is embedded in its images and sounds.<sup>26</sup> This doesn’t mean, however, that there is an essence of cinema to be found, as Bresson claimed, in the search for a formal purity cleansed from the old norms of representation, verisimilitude and plausibility, but, rather, that the particular force of cinema lies in the ways it is able to both adopt and thwart the properties that make something understandable or plausible.

As an art of appearances, cinema offers no less than a continuous enquiry into the relation between the identifiable and the as yet defined, between the apparent and the real. Which implies that the world that is staged always, to some degree, swithers and dithers as to the reality it refers to and the common sense that defines the consonant entente between the perceptible and the thinkable, between what is sensed and how it makes sense. Like dreams, like poetry, like politics, like everything that shrouds time, cinema resists complete objectivization and rationalisation, precisely because it is in itself not an established language; because it escapes any systematic order of methodized knowledge. In defiance of the paradigms that ground their supposed efficiency in a causal connection between the readability of a film and rational judgment, between its affectivity and political action, holding on to cinema as a form of art means that it will always be to a certain extent embroiled in what Deleuze called “zones of indiscernibility,” where the swerve of atoms and voids composes new figures and intensities at every moment. It is precisely this tension between cinema as a form of calculable representation and cinema as, in Godard’s words, “a saturation of magnificent signs bathing in the light of the absence of explanation”<sup>27</sup> that allows for a space of play which can unsettle the dominant framework that we use to make sense of our world. Isn’t that how cinema might be able to offer possibilities for dissensus: by proposing sensible realms that can open up into the offbeat, the syncopated, the dissonant, and offer new sensible configurations of the logic and illogic, the rational and irrational, the tame and the strange?

But doesn’t it also depend on how we, as fellow spectators, are willing to give sense to its appearances and resistances? Isn’t it ultimately the state of politics, or what we define as political, that provides the conditions that make cinema’s dissensuality operative at a certain moment in time? Doesn’t a sense of urgency or efficacy come from outside rather than from within the world of appearances itself? It seems to me that this might be where our current problem lies. Today we are far from the great constructivist dreams of art having the potential to shape a new society, or the idea of montage as a language that could construct the sensible reality of communism. We are far from the revolutionary promises that gave direction to the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles, and gave credibility to the films that strove for a common cause. Now that our world is no longer divided by promise, in a time when the end of the “myth” of class struggle has been loudly trumpeted and yesterday’s exploited are said to have made way for today’s outcasts, there no longer seem to be clear collective forms of political antagonism that can link cinema to a model of political efficiency. It’s not that

there are no manifestations and mobilisations of protest and rebellion—quite on the contrary—but they nevertheless appear to be divested of a certain constancy and consistency, which gives critics all the more reason to denounce them as “inconsequential,” be it for a lack of strategy or for an absence of realism. This might mean that, if we don’t want to remain disarmed and disillusioned, we need to rethink our expectations and reconsider the way we deal with the tension between schemas of progression and instances of suspension, between the traditional model of cause and effect and a model based on interruptions which could open up towards different realms of the sensible. This goes for our ventures in the political landscape, but also for those through the landscape of cinema. We have seen how, with the collapse of a certain layout of historical evolution, the very cinematic strategies and *dispositifs* that were previously used to expose a reality framed by antagonism have started to turn on themselves in an endless vicious circle in which the power of the dominant order is shown to be no longer distinguishable from the power of its denunciation. That’s what Rancière meant with the unfortunate turn of critical culture: whereas a clash of heterogeneous and incompatible worlds was once supposed to disclose and counter the hidden truth of one of those worlds, all heterogeneity is now shown to be subsumed into a nihilism of equivalence. This revelation of the process of homogenisation, effacing any difference into sameness, pretends to show us the omnipotence of the reign of the dominant order and the powerlessness of any manifestation of dissonance or any form of political symbolization, which can be nothing else but another illusionary appearance. How do we get out of this cycle of criticism and complicity which can only conclude our impotence?

Strangely enough, this schizophrenic cycle—which can, I think, already be felt in *Ici et Ailleurs*—is something that I have recently been struggling with when confronted with a film which seems to pimp up capitalism’s excesses to the point of delirium: Harmony Korine’s *Spring Breakers* (2013). I think this candy coloured bubble pop experience is a thoroughly ludicrous and vulgar film, a mess without a clue, a manifest for absolutely nothing. But, at the same time, it appears to have struck a chord with quite a few of the students and filmmakers I’m working and studying with. Listening to their arguments, it appears as if the film manages to bring something to life of a certain death drive that lingers at the heart of our contemporary emotional state—not a desire for death, but a combustible tension which persists and insists beyond and against the nirvana principle of total inertia. Could it be that, in this deranged wasteland of frozen imagination and thwarted desire, the punk spirit of “no future” is no longer embodied by mohawks

and greasers moshing to explosive anthems of rebellion, but by Disney starlets wearing pink ski masks who, on the tones of a mawkish Britney Spears song, are determined to go out with a bang, all the while evoking the infamous words of Pere Ubu: “I changed the rules: simple innit. I’ll make my fortune, kill the whole world and bugger off”<sup>28</sup>

I suppose this question is meant as a provocation, not in the least to myself. In truth, I fail to feel any affiliation with *Spring Breakers*, nor with the theories that the film has been associated with, according to which, in this age of total rationalisation and subsumption, the inner tendencies and extravaganzas of this monster called capitalism have to be pushed to their extreme limits, intensified, exaggerated and accelerated to the point of irrationality and dissolution.<sup>29</sup> I fail to see how entering “the belly of the beast” by magnifying popular commonplaces can get us out of the circulation of these commonplaces. It seems to me that an over-affirmation and spectacularization of stereotypes with the intent of criticising them remains caught in this cycle in which criticism and complicity merrily join up with one another, conforming to the dominant discourse of impotence according to which all acts of subversion are denounced as “unrealistic.” But at the same time this strange fascination with the film does remind me of something that Fredric Jameson, in a provocative piece on “Wal-Mart as utopia,” has termed the “dialectical ambivalence” of fascination and distancing that is felt towards the swag and swank of capital.<sup>30</sup> This ambivalence (which also brings to mind the megalomelodramas of pop culture icons like Kanye West or Young Thug, who wear the paradoxes and impasses of “living without limits,” of hedonism and anhedonia, like a fashion) might give us a clue as to why *Spring Breakers* is one of the most debated films in the classrooms where I spend some of my time. It is as if, from inside its seductive fluorescent bubble, the film tunes in to this state of undecidability and confusion that we are dealing with. Seemingly unable to escape from the monotony of the present or the fallacy of false choice, sensing that capitalism has almost completely colonized our dreaming life, it often feels like we can only stage our own little customized micro revolts. Some rage. They rage all the more because they don’t know what to do with their rage. They don’t know how to use it to make a difference. They don’t even know who or what it is they are raging against, causing them to feel that they themselves might be the source of the wrong being inflicted on them. Some retreat. They decide to create islands for themselves, or make themselves into islands. But I also see people around me, some of them in the same classrooms where I dwell, who manage to reshape this sense of drift and ambivalence, accepting it as an invitation to test their own capacity for invention.

They are not “post”-anything. They are, and continue to be, without a clear break or horizon, insisting on study and motion, beyond the either-or fallacy of complicity and flight. They are done with the doctrine of spectacle and the tyranny of irony, they see and see through the evidence of mass incapacity, cutting through the despair it breeds. Escaping from the pull of relativism, nihilism, learned helplessness and reflexive impotence, against the acute paralysis of will and sheer vacancy of imagination, they are inventing their own subjectivity, finding their own way of being in the world and translating that in their cinematic and intellectual adventures. Oftentimes it involves intense explorations of their intimate, conflictual surroundings; but rather than complying to the current preoccupation with “sincerity,” they prefer to act out the insincerity of form, opening up to more destabilizing sensible worlds, as if taking to heart Kafka’s advice: “The world is uncommonly various; this can be verified at any time by taking a handful of world and looking at it closely.”<sup>31</sup> They know they have to get out of the position of fixity and repose, this security and base that is asked of them and sometimes imposed on them. They know that they have to start imagining that they can be more, that they can do more, that they can change, that they can be changed. Time and again, they are haunted by uncertainty and confronted with precarity, forced on the defence and pushed towards the margins, but they’d rather fail at making something out of desire than remaining captured in the endless, self-regulating circuits of drive. One step at a time, in their stuttering and stammering, they are slowly gaining the confidence to let go of what keeps them at bay and head in a direction which no-one can know how it will turn out. In the face of indifference and at the risk of incomprehensibility, they continue to fight to come to exist, to be the future that happens.<sup>32</sup> Watch out, they have barely begun.

This search for confidence, you’re right, might also involve “salvage” operations, wading and sorting through the flotsam and jetsam of past adventures; not to treat them as testimonies of all that was other or all that has come to pass, but as sensible worlds that might still be taking shape, alive with sensation, affect, thought, which could make us feel alive in return. In those classrooms, while browsing through the 1970s issues of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Screen* or *Filmkritik*, with all their dubious jargon and declamatory dogmatism, we are struck by the erstwhile conviction that cinema and politics were worthwhile thinking about—thinking hard about. While reading the writings of filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, Glauber Rocha, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jean-Marie Straub, we are astonished by the vigour with which they shared and disputed their films and thoughts with one another, as members of a self-made internationalist community of cinema activists.

Whether in awe or frustration, we keep on discovering the work of various film communities and collectives who considered exchange and dialogue as an inherent part of their interventions in the politics of representation and the representation of politics. For a while these cinematic microsystems seemed to closely resemble their time: burning with desire, brimming with resistance. Even though we often feel their sense of restlessness echoing with ours, we know we have to search for other models of thinking and doing. We know that cinema is no longer the noble popular art it used to be, that it has been cast out by television, hollowed out by publicity, bought out by the dream machine, walked out on by its audience. We know it is no longer the medium that captures the imagination of the masses, that it has been captured by the logic of the market; that we, as spectators, hardly ever feel addressed any more, at least not as individual human beings (all the more as cultural consumers), and that it has become rather difficult to attribute a cinematic work to a desire (all the more to a strategy). We know that cinema has sought refuge elsewhere and that it has been increasingly compartmentalized, musealized, formatted, fragmented, dispersed over different spaces, contexts, platforms and networks. And it might be true that it no longer has the power to generate the intense debates that it once did. But rather than infusing ourselves with a disenchanting loyalty to all that is lost, rather than subscribing to the tiresome sermons of the “end of history” and the “death of cinema,” perhaps we need to approach cinema in the same way as we ought to approach the world, that is: armed with a passion for the impossible.

In this era of consensus, with its effacing of public space and inventiveness, with its smothering of dialogism and other-voicedness, I can't help thinking, or dreaming, that cinema can be what we are so eagerly looking for: a space of experience that can at the same time unite and divide, not a space for phatic communion but a *lieu de partage* that is both a place of possibility and a place of the unknown, a place where figures of dissent are made to resonate and reverberate. “The only role of cinema,” Jacques Rivette once said, “is to derange, to contradict preconceived ideas, all the cut and dried ideas and even more the mental schemas that precede these ideas: to make cinema uncomfortable.”<sup>33</sup> Perhaps cinema can help reaffirming the possibility of a community of sharing, which is, at the same time, a site of reconfiguration, against the hierarchies of consensus and the drives towards exclusivity. Perhaps cinema can be a space where we can face the fear that many of us are experiencing, a fear that is caused by that which we are told we do not have and can never have, a fear so great it freezes us away from the things we care for the most. Perhaps through cinema we can make common cause with our

sense of disorientation and trepidation, as something that can draw us away from the logical and the logistical, the envisioned and the positioned. Not as an escape, exit or exodus, but as what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have called, in their wonderful book *The Undercommons* (2013), a “being together in homelessness,” as a state of dispossession and unsettling which can give impetus to radical imagination.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps that is what is meant with the reference, in that same book, to what Jay-Z and Kanye West have called “no church in the wild”: now that sacredness and religiosity are reemerging in all their different guises, from religious extremism and New Age paganism, to the emerging religious sensitivity within cultural and political theory, cinema can be one of the collective ways of exploring the gap between trust and faith, without being burned too much by trust or relying too much on faith. No preaching, no teaching, just paying heed to what is sensed individually, reinventing it in the direction of our desires and transposing it into a language so it can be shared collectively. To connect a capacity for sentience to a capacity for exchange. This might be how cinema can truly participate in the constitution of a new collective sentiment, a fabric of experience made of intolerance for the dominant order and, at the same time, of communal trust amongst ourselves, not simply based on a sentiment decrying the absurdity of the world, but the sentiment of a sensible world to be shared. If there’s one thing that we lack, it’s not dreams or ideals, it’s the confidence to conceive collective forms of subjectivity that could invent “something possible.”

We should get rid of the *idée fixe* that we are destined to live with the sad remnants of futures past, as claimed by those who endlessly mourn the passing of a time when events still had a place in the great order of things, those who retrospectively prophesize the beginning of the end, as fated destiny of a history in ruins that has perpetually been piling up wreckage upon wreckage. We should get rid of the idea that we are living through the end of time, bound to wait for an improbable insurrection to come, as prophesied by those who present us with the enigma of a new interminable future, as the horizon that will violently awaken us from the slumbering sleep that has prevented us from fulfilling the promises of the past. Is that really where we find ourselves now, roaming in the twilight times between regret and expectation, between the time of an end on hold and the time of a new dawn in infinite suspension? Forever haunted by the ghosts of what should have been, hiding in the shadows of what will be? With all these comings and goings between past and future, are we not at risk of losing sight of our present? Is it not possible to rather think of our time, this time, as a continuous exploration of the present moment, to the beat of our own drum, in the confidence



of our own gaze? Without a beginning to contemplate or an end to anticipate, without a point of departure or point of closure, where would we go? Are we going somewhere at all? We all know what they say, those prophets of disaster and redemption: there is no use in trying to deviate from the path of historical necessity without map or guide, there is no point in questioning the naturalness of the structure of our lives without the perspective of a time to come. How to fully inhabit a time that never arrives and half a project that never resolves itself?

Glauber Rocha liked to recite a strophe of José Régio's poem "Cântico Negro":

*Não sei por onde vou,  
Não sei para onde vou  
—Sei que não vou por aí!*

*I don't know which way I'll go,  
I don't know where I'm going to,  
—I know I'm not going that way!<sup>35</sup>*

Perhaps that is the choice we are trying to make: in the absence of alternative horizons, we need to leave the safe grounds and start trusting in what we see in front of us, even when shrouded in darkness. It means that, in putting our confidence in what we see and do in the present moment, we must also try to invest in its prolongation, in the belief that there are presents that actually do create possible futures, that there are actions and perceptions that create their own horizons. "Apart, we are together," a poet once wrote. Perhaps, amid our division, in our inbetweenness, we are bound by the fragility of what we are bearing together: in the face of the intolerable present and the as yet unimaginable future, we all feel vulnerable. So what do we imagine we are able to do together?

Not so long ago, I found myself in the company of a great filmmaker who reminded me that it's alright to let yourself be vulnerable, that it is something to work with. He pointed out the need to invent worlds that embrace and empower that sense of fragility and uncertainty, to take risks and explore pathways that might enable us to rise, to exceed our limitations and suppressions: in life, as in cinema. He expressed his love and admiration for two other filmmakers who have persevered in doing so, creating an exceptional cinema that makes us perceive life in all of its possibilities, makes us feel the torrent of the world in all its intensities. A cinema that confronts us with the sense that, as Luis Buñuel once said, we do not live in the best of possible worlds. A cinema that reminds us that

our greatest challenge is not the sense of nihilism induced by the devastations of late capitalism, but the savage forms of exploitation and injustice that capitalism has imposed on us since its inception. It is the work of these filmmakers, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, that I finally proposed for that program on “the return to Marxism.” Not because of their reputation as radical Marxists or loyal Brechtians, not because a famous philosopher has once referred to them as “probably the greatest political filmmakers in the West,”<sup>36</sup> but precisely because of their refusal to comply—or non-reconcile, as one of their films is titled—with the culture of distrust and the faith in historical necessity that used to be associated with Marxism and has now become part of the dominant mindset under capitalism. Against the grain, they hold on to the emancipation hypothesis, which is first of all a hypothesis of confidence: a confidence in the capacities of all to appropriate for themselves what is given to hear, see and read. A confidence in the power of transgression, of displacing the identities and boundaries that are imposed on anyone of us. What their films propose is a tremendous attention to all things equally, an attention that goes beyond recognition or identification, one that resolutely withstands the shopworn culture of skepticism and the pervasive sense of the exhaustive and the exhausted. The filmmaker who expressed his esteem for their films told me that they have always reminded him of the post-punk music he used to love: immediate, resilient, intransigent, both energetic and sensual, both violent and gentle. A true poetics of dissent. And I agreed. Amongst the films I presented that night there was one titled *Umiliati* (2003). It’s one of their most beautiful films, but also their saddest. It’s a film that speaks of the experiences of all those who feel out of place, undignified, exploited, humiliated, insulted and injured, of all those communities that are under siege from the forces of evolution and decay. But what the film transmits is not a sense of powerlessness or impossibility, but a sense of dignity and possibility. In the face of those who give them lessons on the laws of progress and judge them for their unwillingness to comply to those laws, the members of the community are shown in their determination and capacity to take charge of their own destiny. Even when the community in the end falls apart, resilience prevails. In the last shot, we see one of the characters sitting in desperation on the doorstep of one of the houses that have been abandoned by those who have answered the call of progress. Her head is resting on her arms. Suddenly, with a last cry and gesture, she passes from resignation to ultimate affirmation. Her stretched hand does not—will never yield.

When I watched *Umiliati* together with this filmmaker who I spoke about, Pedro Costa, I didn’t know yet that the film he was working on would capture

a similar sense of disquiet. “I am now making films to forget, no longer to remember,” he told me, “to forget the life that was before, perhaps forget so to be able to start again...”<sup>37</sup> The film which he describes making is called *Cavalo Dinheiro* (2014). It turned out as a delicate tone poem dealing with the anguish that is felt by those who are trying to come to terms with the prolonged fallout of imperialism and the collapse of revolutionary struggles. The characters are murmuring and whispering their stories in an attempt to carve themselves out of barren space, to reinforce their existence as something other than wretches. Their battle with the demons of history and the injuries of the presence does not simply amount to a lamentation of brokenness and failure: it becomes a way of reclaiming and restaging their own lives, which already acts as a means of transforming it. They become “glorious bodies,” assuming the dignity and grandeur they are usually denied. The film makes me think of films such as Ritwik Ghatak’s *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (1974) or Glauber Rocha’s *A Idade da Terra* (1980). As disparate as these films are, for me they all speak of lost hopes and crushed dreams. And, at the same time, this vulnerability to the whims of the world opens up zones of the unmoored, the dislocated and the delirious, revealing a restlessness that matches and opens us up to our own. “Losing, too, is still ours,” a poet once wrote, “and even forgetting still has a shape in the kingdom of transformation.”<sup>38</sup> It is up to us to make common cause with the desires and positions that seem no longer imaginable, irrational, outlawed—refuse that which was denied to us, and in this refusal, reshape desire, reorient hope, reimagine possibility. The last shot of *Cavalo Dinheiro* is a close-up of a set of knives gleaming in the moonlight. The reverse shot is up to us to imagine. Something is at stake, and there is something to be done. “In the darkest night,” noted Foucault, “the glow of the dream is more luminous than the light of day.”<sup>39</sup> Today it feels as if a sense of disorientation and disquiet is shared by many, but we are beginning to understand that the narratives of lost illusions and shattered dreams which have been passed down to us no longer say much about our world. And it feels as if, for those who do not know how to live in this broken world, to act has to become a matter of putting trust in what is uncertain, in what resists us, in those unknown spaces of possibility for which we desperately want to take responsibility. Realising that, if we don’t find that trust, our anxiety will get the better of us. To act can no longer start with projecting an ideal destination in some faraway future, but with producing a suspension in the present juncture, a shift in how we choose to perceive its coordinates. We need to find an impossible point to hold on to and organize its consequences, without needing to account for the whole of the situation. Without maps, without a dictionary or directory

to guide our search, perhaps we should look towards the life of forms that might contribute to us imagining different forms of life, rather than contenting ourselves with the visual evidence of the state of the world as we know it. This is, perhaps, how cinema can give us courage: by proposing sensible worlds that refute the pronouncement of the futility of all action, by participating in the constitution of a new collective sentiment that can allow us to think about the possibility of the impossible. What else could we ask for, what else could be asked of us, if not the impossible?

No, cinema has not given up on reinventing the world. “Cinema is immense,” Bresson said just after finishing his last film, the devastating *L’Argent* (1983), “we haven’t seen anything yet.”<sup>40</sup> Cinema has never stopped offering us challenges to what is, essays of refusal, forms of non-reconciliation, manifestations of the scattered and the scattered, axes for the frozen sea within us.<sup>41</sup> If it is to become one of the polemical spaces of shared experience which we need so badly today, perhaps we need to invest in it exactly what it has been lacking: confidence. Confidence in what we see and sense, but even more in what we can do with it, apart or together.

Yours sincerely,

Stoffel



**Barry Esson** is, together with Bryony McIntyre, responsible for Arika, a political arts organization based in Scotland. Since a few years, their practice has manifested itself as an ongoing series of “Episodes,” which progress as sites for collective study, investigating interlinked themes which develop from one Episode to the next. Their work, which I have been following for the past decade, has always greatly impressed me because of its thoughtfulness and generosity. At the time of writing, I had just been to *Make a Way Out of No Way*, a three-day Episode consisting of screenings, performances, talks and discussions aimed at exploring ideas of waywardness and fugitivity in response to the criminalization of communities.

Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep* (1977).

Courtesy of Charles Burnett and Milestone Films.



Brussels, January 2015

Dear Barry,

I hope you and Bryony have found some rest since we last met. On the last evening of the *Make a Way Out of No Way* event, at the end of that wonderful weekend in September, I could see the exhaustion etched into the lines of your faces. And I could see your thoughts hovering between confused reflection and anxious anticipation; between “what just happened?” and “what happens now?” Well, let me tell you, something happened all right. Something that will stay with me for times to come. Something that I and many others who were present, I’m sure, are bound to take with us whenever, wherever we choose to embark on the adventures that are calling us forward.

Care. We talked about care, remember? For me, before anything else, the whole experience was about caretaking and caregiving. It was this sentiment of care that we could feel rubbing off on us, and the effect was shattering. Perhaps because we had forgotten what the word means. Perhaps because we are not accustomed to situations of togetherness in which we can feel a shared sentiment of caring and being cared for. A sense of being together in brokenness and vulnerability that allows us to explore our differences and collectively search for questions that are left unwritten. If the experience taught us anything, it’s that these situations are all too rare, and that we have a responsibility to make them possible, time and again.

You told me that Fred Moten—this fearless jazz freedom fighter who, for me, managed to vocalize and galvanize, in that deep, parlous voice of his, so many of our concerns during the weekend—has pointed out that the verb “to curate” is actually derived from the Latin “curare,” which traditionally designated a practice of care. A quick online encyclopedia check tells me that the term dates back to the Roman era, when the title of “curator” was given to the administrators of public institutions and services, but also to trustees who were appointed to look after the interests of those who were considered inept of doing so themselves. Later on, the role of the curator veered more towards the ecclesiastical, as the term came to refer to the clergies who were supposed to administer the cure of souls. One could say that what is called “curatorship” has always oscillated between bureaucracy and advocacy, between caretaking and caregiving. What strikes me is that it has never been so much about performing an authority to judge or enlighten, but about



receiving and taking on a certain trust. A trust to provide care, a trust that has to be constantly earned, which can only be done by instilling trust in return.

For some time now, I can't help noticing that the meaning of the word "care" has increasingly been carried over to the domains of regulation and supervision, where it has taken on a patronizing tone. Just consider how it has become part of the contemporary medical and pathological lexicon that is fervently used by those who profess to be able to cure the world of its abnormalities and inefficiencies, those who claim to have at hand the all-powerful remedies to get rid of the lacks and wrongs that threaten our society. Care is staged as the responsibility of those experts who diagnose every crisis as an excess in the logic of the dominant order, an excess that calls for drastic measures aimed at destroying everything that stands in the way of that order's natural functioning. Conversely, some of their critics are eager to explain how the system actually manages to profit from crises and traumas, using them to submit entire populations to shock therapy, forcing the acceptance of structural reforms and testing laboratories where measures are pushed to their limits. We are told that crisis is the very drive of the dominant order, its deep-rooted virus, its "permanent revolution." By some of these accounts, our society is sick to the core and all we can do is play our part in the cultivation of its illness. In doing so, we can either affirm its inevitability and the naturalness of its causes, or bring the illness to its tipping point, so that the whole social body can be finally purified of the darkness that has petrified its soul for so long. Where there was once a search for symptoms that could signal a moment to be seized, it now seems to have evolved into a form of symptomatology that deciphers everything in terms of helplessness and catastrophe. What was once diagnosed as a sign of critical dysfunction is now designated as the general pathology of our world.

It appears as if we all need care badly, and art is summoned to provide it. On the one hand, art is put forward as a social lubricant: "to stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race and sex," as Susan Sontag wrote. On the other hand, it is prescribed as an edifying form of awareness raising: "to raise or educate people to a new consciousness."<sup>1</sup> According to some, it should serve as an analgesic treatment against the psychopathologies that progressively have a hold on our lives as a result of the intensifications produced by the flux and flow of capital and information. According to others, its role is to induce an analeptic upper that ought to re-sensitize us from the banalizing and anesthetizing flood of images and commodities that endlessly flow through our digital hall of mirrors. Either we are told that we are in need of some Aristotelian catharsis that could purge us from anything that threatens the social bond, or we are urged to follow some Artaudian

or Brechtian shock and awe treatment that could restore us to our senses, reawakening us to those things that once mobilized us. Either way, art is prescribed as remedy: give the needy their fix and their cravings will be cured, even if just for a while. Is that the role that curators are supposed to play today: to act as fixers, to provide relief and assistance, to deploy the forces of art as antidote to whatever is said to plague our society and its future? The artist as symptomatologist, as Gilles Deleuze once suggested, and the curator as health manager? Isn't there a way of reinventing the curatorial work of care?<sup>2</sup>

\*\*\*

Although I'm occasionally asked to, I have to admit that I'm not very fond of referring to myself as a "curator." Most likely because I feel that the status of the term has gravitated towards the principles of specialization and edification: somewhere along the line custodianship seems to have evolved into connoisseurship. Sometimes it appears as if art curators have not only taken on the role of parish priests who like to preach healing and ever so often deliver sermons with the protective crucifix of political correctness, but even more that of tastemakers and taste-chasers who vow to be in the know of the sense and significance of works of art. As credentialized experts, they tend to claim the authority to speak for what is mute and elucidate how and why it should be understood and valued. This position of mastery has never appealed to me, probably for the same reason that I also hesitate to call myself a teacher. You see, teaching has never been a calling. I guess I am just one of those people who goes around life as some kind of everlasting student and whose precarious professional fate, as a strange consequence, is to tutor others. But I don't think I have ever really come to terms with being in the position of someone who is expected to enlighten people and explain things. Nor as the imparter of knowledge, standing in front of classrooms or exhibition spaces with the responsibility to prescribe and assign meanings to sounds, words and images. I hate to see the notion of study solely tied up with the dominant idea of pedagogy and the doxa of knowledge production, this doxa that posits curriculum against research, achievement against play. Study, for me, is not something that starts or ends in those spaces. That's why, in whatever I set out to do, I try to create environments and situations that avoid conforming to the order of explication and submerging study into knowledge—contexts in which there's no "calling to order," as Moten would have it. I attempt to work out propositions and constellations that create room for resonance, but beyond that, I

can only say “well, here we are now, what is it that we can do, apart or together?” It might boil down to a simple question of trust, really. I cannot but start with the assumption that it’s up to everyone to appropriate the proposed worlds of words, images and sounds for themselves and construct their own world of resonances from it. I cannot but take it as a given that it’s up to everyone individually to “learn something and relate everything else to it,” as Jacques Rancière wrote in regards to Joseph Jacotot’s theory of intellectual emancipation<sup>3</sup>—“en Râ-cha-chant!” as Ernesto cries out in Marguerite Duras’ children’s tale.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, I feel that one can never be a teacher without being a student at the same time—one can only acquire as much intelligence as the intelligence one grants to others.

Instead of curator, perhaps terms like “bricoleur” or “amateur” might be more appropriate. For me, they bring to mind a way of learning that hinges on tinkering, improvising, relating, scrambling, translating, transmuting, instigating a kind of *pensée sauvage* based on a cobbling together of divergent ideas and forms, dabbling on the crossroads of various types of experiences and discourses. The project I’m currently grappling with, *Figures of Dissent*—an exploration of how the relation between cinema and politics can be thought of—is nothing but an application of this cut-and-try approach. At some point I decided to take a plunge into this vast, bewildering swamp of practices, theories, concepts and approaches, knowing that I would have to find my own way through it, by intuitively and tentatively tracing lines between disparate fields and objects without being necessarily bound to authorized maps or programmatic routes. I must say that I feel fortunate that this amateurish way of going about the world has allowed me to cross into unfamiliar territories without actually holding a legitimate passport. That’s pretty much how I got involved in the academic world where I’m currently dwelling, a world that fascinates me even though it tends to inhibit the notion of amateurism—increasingly, I have the feeling—in favor of a logic of productivity, efficiency, and professionalization. I don’t think I’m overdrawing when I say that curatorship, after having emerged as an art-institutional powerhouse in the mid-1990s, has gotten somewhat trapped into a similar logic. One that favors having one’s own enlightened voice over listening to the voices of others, entrepreneurial networks over intimate connections and, perhaps most of all, management over passion. It’s not that I want to dismiss the managerial side of curatorship—not at all, your work is an astounding example of how organizational skill and productional finesse are an integral part of “caretaking”—but there’s a difference between seeing it as a constructive means and considering it as an end in itself. As I see it, the position of the amateur, which I think you share, precisely

embraces this passion that Moten has called “duty beyond duty,” that which surpasses competence and functionality.<sup>5</sup> Surely, this kind of passion might not offer an appropriate response to the overhanging demand for evermore functional knowledge, for what is calculated in advance by rules of rational common sense or what is justified a priori by norms of efficiency or classification—but it might just allow for an experimentation of research as a form of madcap encounter, as that which makes possible ways of thinking and doing that doesn’t confirm an image of itself but can open up modest pathways to what is left unsought. Certainly, it might very well be that taking unfamiliar paths will lead nowhere at all, or merely to places where others have been before, but isn’t study first of all a matter of going to see for oneself something that one doesn’t understand?

It could be that I’m deluding myself, but I like to think that it is this passion of the amateur that keeps on drawing me towards this art called cinema. After all, in contrast to what is often assumed, there is no need for any particular expertise or specialized knowledge to appreciate the appearances that make up cinematic worlds. Each act of watching and listening to moving images flickering on the screen and sounds emanating from the speakers constitutes an experience of a more or less aleatory, ephemeral apparition—which is maybe what Godard meant when he mentioned that cinema is neither an art nor a technique, but a mystery.<sup>6</sup> Precisely because cinema cannot be reduced to a body of knowledge that arises from systematic reasoning, cinema is “learned” by widening and furthering one’s scope of perception, emotion and interpretation, built around what we intimately know and care for. We all hear, see, feel, and understand a film in as much as we compose it into our own cinematic poem, by mixing our own singular perceptions with our fleeting memories and wandering dreams. That’s what the cinephiles who passionately started studying cinema in the 1950s and ’60s already understood: these self-proclaimed amateurs didn’t need any system of rationality and legitimacy for them to set out on their own adventurous paths through the cinematic landscape, exploring and multiplying it by continuously expanding its borders, beyond the perimeters set by hierarchies, disciplines and norms of taste, unhindered by any hint of academisation or institutionalisation. Their passion simply consisted in considering the metaphoric powers of this impure art of cinema by negotiating unsought connections between the multiplicity of worlds to which it pertains—the worlds of entertainment and art, narrativity and plasticity, aesthetics and politics, the unfathomable splendor of light and shadow and the recognizable world of struggle and strife. In its prime, cinephilia was first and foremost a passion to prolong, displace and reinvent aesthetic experiences and

cinematic emotions, one that often, coincidentally or not, coincided with another kind of indeterminate passion, that of politics.

\*\*\*

I could feel the passion rising after the screening of Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977), on that memorable first evening of *Make a Way Out of No Way*. The experience left me devastated, but that was not only due to the greatness of the film itself—I had seen it before—but because of how its experience resonated in the thoughts, words and gestures of all those who spoke up that same night and in the days after. Why is it that this film somehow struck a chord and set the tone for what was to come? After all, Burnett's portrait of life in the black ghetto of Watts does not offer any pedagogical fiction aimed at uncovering a hidden reality that lies beyond the obvious, nor does it simply pertain to the paradigm of cultural ethnography with its vocation to give voice to the voiceless and making the unrecognized recognizable. The film does not profess to disclose secrets beyond the surface of what is present. Instead, it rather makes sensible what is too close up to see: the internal ghetto of emotional devastation, suffocation, exhaustion, trepidation, disorientation. Nor does the film align with the search for counter-narratives or positive images—based on the idea that the negation or reversal of stereotypes could bring us closer to an understanding of “home.” Rather than reaffirming a desire for a domesticity that will always turn out fraught, it relays a sense of distress and restlessness, or what Moten calls “homelessness,” echoing both the Freudian concept of “unhomeliness” and the Brechtian aspiration to make the “homely” strange.<sup>7</sup> If home is where we supposedly belong, where we are recognized and confirmed in our identity, where we are comforted in knowing all that there is to know, then, according to Moten, we need to embrace what is not locatable and adaptable, what is off-track and off-kilter, the spaces where orientation and identity become unbound. To escape the frame that encloses us, to decenter the image that is imposed on us: isn't that the primary condition for any process of subjectivization or dis-identification? Like Moten wrote: “Fuck a home in this world, if you think you have one.”<sup>8</sup>

In *Killer of Sheep*, it feels as if desperation is always round the corner. We are taken down the corridors of everyday lives, where past and future memories of riots are festering, where the brightest light seems to be coming from the shimmers of the “no way out” signs. This sense of futility and fatality is condensed in this heartbreaking Sisyphus-like scene where we see Stan and his friend Bracy making

the effort to carry a car engine down a hill to put it on their truck, only for it to crash on the ground. But just like in the blues lullabies that drift in and out of the frame, oscillating between grief and promise, there is resilience to be found in vulnerability. Remember the scenes with the children—the same ones who helped out making the film in the first place—horsing around in the dust of the terrain vague, jumping over rooftops and playing their improvised games, without being completely resigned yet to the laws of violence that adulthood will likely bestow on them. Remember that terrific moment when a group of teenage girls kick a boy's butt when he tries to boss them around. And who can forget Angie, dear Angie, this girl who seems to see and understand it all before anyone else: the way she moves around the house, wearing her dog mask, singing along to the tunes of a weeping world. You just know she will grow up wayward. Seeing the film projected up there on the screen of that Glasgow community centre, Angie's waywardness reminded me of a character in another magnificent film, or rather a series of films, made by a Scottish filmmaker named Bill Douglas. Around the same time as Burnett started working on *Killer of Sheep*, Douglas was finishing his debut film, which was to become the first part of a trilogy (1972-1978) portraying the life of Jamie, a boy growing up in an isolated, poverty-stricken mining village in post-war Scotland.<sup>9</sup> Like Angie's, the figure of Jamie stubbornly refuses to follow the paths and confirm to the identities that are assigned to him. His body, its actions and gestures become material forms of resistance that produce a disturbance in the game of social identifications and conventions, disrupting the layout of the never-ending cycle of habituation and repetition. On that day, thinking about Jamie and Angie, it felt as if both of these figures, each in their own way, were able to testify to the ability to escape—not without pain, insecurity, fear—from the slipstream of the settled, by diverging from what is charted and controlled, into the drift of the unmoored and dislocated. All of a sudden, between the suburbs of Los Angeles and the outskirts of the Scottish Highlands, between here and there and then and now, there appeared to be a way of being together in homelessness.

What is it that these film works have in common? Not unlike these other great poets of British cinema, Basil Wright (who was one of Burnett's teachers) and Humphrey Jennings (whose work was epitomic for Douglas), Burnett and Douglas both appear to have explored a certain aesthetic freedom which cinema allows for. A freedom that rejects the authority of the representative logic, typically articulated in dramatic stories of endeavors, obstacles, successes and failures, and instead constructs a poetics that is comprised of sensible moments and small ruptures. Rather than being constructed as coherent progressions of actions, they

are made up from figures of condensation and blocks of duration, creating affective resonances that cannot be simply reduced to the feelings experienced by the characters. At no moment are we told how to read and interpret their life stories, but it might be precisely this untold-ness, this refusal to apprise and narrate that creates affect. While Wright, Jennings and the other filmmakers of the so-called British Documentary Movement of the 1930s and '40s searched for an integration of lyricism and pedagogy, drawing inspiration from both the German Romantic thinkers and the Soviet revolutionary filmmakers,<sup>10</sup> the films of Burnett and Douglas are devoid of informative lessons. There are no predetermined schemes of cause and effect here, no rousing calls for empathy or pity, no scenarios or lessons that can show a way out, no road home. There are only situations composed of interweavings of glances and gestures, times and spaces. The often hailed “realism” in Douglas and Burnett’s films is not so much about painting a realistic picture of the place of individuals in a given society as it is about taking distance from the schemes that supposedly make up reality. They delve deep into the interior of the situations themselves, there where the events of the world become sensible as affects, enclosed in mute faces, mobilized in silent movements, expressed in spare words and songs. Perhaps what touched us so much that night is what remains lingering in this world of untold affects: the possibility of another life, and the strength and dignity needed to pursue this life, which includes bearing its disillusionments and disappointments. Maybe this is how cinema can offer us this sense of the homelessness that Moten speaks about: by steering us away from this reality where everyone—as the films’ characters are told time and time again—is bound to a sole place and destiny.

\*\*\*

Serge Daney once made a beautiful statement about the way cinema resonates in our lives. “The mind,” he wrote, “is like a second projector that allows the image to continue flowing, letting the film and the world continue without it. I can’t imagine a love for cinema that does not rest firmly on the stolen present of this ‘continue without me.’”<sup>11</sup>

How do we continue with the phantoms and traces of cinematic experiences? How do we appropriate and further the sense of appearances, individually and collectively? And what does all of this have to do with curatorship? What I’m trying to figure out is what happens in cinema, what cinema allows to happen, and how we can make something happen. What meaning do we take from it

individually and how can we make it mean something collectively? I know I'm drifting, as I tend to do, but please allow me to drift a little further. Let me go back to *Killer of Sheep*, and to the question of what might have made it resonate so powerfully with us. It's true that Burnett never set out to make a film that would reveal the reality of exploitation and domination, and point out the ways to overcome it. "Life is not an object lesson of the type  $A + B = C$ ,"<sup>12</sup> he once proclaimed. What he was trying to achieve was, in his own words, "to go beyond information and convey a feeling for how these people lived and how they felt," without "manipulating things" or making himself a "spokesman" who takes on the role of speaking on behalf of a community.<sup>13</sup> The one major source of inspiration he mentions time and again is not a film, but a book that was written around the same time as the British Documentary Movement came into being, James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Burnett particularly likes to allude to Agee's self-aware role as an outsider who was sent to the American South to document the lives of the sharecropper families and aesthetically capture a situation he was foreign to; a role that made him constantly anxious about the dangers of exploitation and misrepresentation. In the first pages of the book, Agee immediately points out the dangers of "prying intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings... for the purpose of parading the nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings."<sup>14</sup> Agee didn't want to have anything to do with the patronizing reportage style that was customary in the Great Depression-era, and neither did he want to adhere to the documentary realism that was favored by the left-wing culture at the time, characterized by gritty naturalism and authorial earnestness, combining sociological observations with a subjective perspective. Instead, he set out to evoke the art of life as accurately as possible by meticulously describing the trivial components of impoverished lives, these "great tragic poems" that he felt needed to be respected in all their majesty. His approach earned him harsh accusations of gratuitous frivolity; but for Agee, respect could only be achieved by fighting the desire to impose meaning and striving to absolve his work of authorial intention, allowing himself to surrender to the reality of an existence in all its details and subtleties, gathered in the intertwining between human beings, places, events, and things. "An effort in human actuality," he called it.

But no matter how Agee—who would later earn a living as film critic and writer of screenplays—sought to experience these lives first hand and share his experiences with his readers, he could never find the words to fully embody these experiences and do justice to these lives. He could never find a way of bridging the



gap between the words that he wrote and the ideal of words writing themselves, embodying in themselves the reality of deprivation and dispossession. For him, only a camera would be able to capture “the cruel radiance of what is,” by means of this bodiless, mechanical eye that is “incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth” and reproduces experiences “for their own, not for art’s sake.”<sup>15</sup> Agee’s view was echoed by Walker Evans, who repeatedly expressed his admiration for Gustave Flaubert, in particular regarding the idea of the non-appearance of the author, which he wanted to apply to his own photographic work. However, one look at Evans’ pictures which accompany Agee’s words in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* immediately seem to problematize the view of images as evidence of absolute truth, as intrinsic, indivisible traces of the real that exceed the interventions of art and the limitations of discourse. While taking in Evans’ images, are we really able to make out whether they are “truthful” embodiments of reality or “artful” compositions of forms, lines and spaces? Similarly, when we think of the experience of *Killer of Sheep*, does its force stem from its voracious emittance of “the exalted spirit of the actual,”<sup>16</sup> as Agee once described Roberto Rossellini’s work, or rather from its permutations and transmutations of the actual, its “sliding away from the proposed,” as Amiri Baraka so beautifully wrote about John Tchicai’s reed playing?<sup>17</sup> How do we deal with this ambiguity, resulting from the conjunction of the mechanical eye that captures and a human gaze that directs, the conscious and the unconscious, the personal and the impersonal? In cinema, this tension has been inscribed in the use of the term *mise-en-scène*, an enigmatic concept that has traveled many waters throughout the past century. The first wave of French cinephiles were able to smooth over the contradiction between the autonomous and the heteronomous by relying on an unbridled interpretation of phenomenology which allowed them to ascribe the formal singularity of a film, freed to a certain extent from the industrial norms of representation, to a unique vision of the world. But around the time when *Killer of Sheep* was being made, when the air was filled with the rumble of political upheavals and the cinephile passion found itself caught up in the rationalisations that aimed to give direction to these struggles, the *mise-en* aspect of the *mise-en-scène* became considered as something to be unveiled, something that was masked by the illusionary consistency of the *scene*. In the throes of structuralist theory, the focus was no longer put on the author’s point of view but on the blind spots of ideology, no longer on the position of the filmmaker but on what this position tends to obscure: the place of the camera, the ideological positioning to which it assimilates itself, and the operations of the off-screen. It was no longer deemed appropriate to innocently ponder the surface of cinematic

worlds: one had to pierce through it, uncover its veil and expose the blind spots where the power of the unseen lies, in order to reveal what films have to say within what they leave unsaid. Dealing with the ambiguity of images was then no longer a matter of linking their autonomous power to the expression of a relation to the world, but of laying bare the presence of heterogeneous forces and unconscious determinations underlying the deceptive integrity of their surface appearance. Meaning, it was said, is never where we take it to be.

The end of the 1970s brought yet another change of heart. We can think of Roland Barthes's curious shift from his 1957 *Mythologies*, which famously proposed a science of signs in view of the demystification of the commonplaces produced by society, to *Camera Lucida*, which was written two decades later.<sup>18</sup> In this melancholic elegy for his departed mother Barthes forwarded the non-amenability of the *punctum*—the image in all its self-evident glory, irreducible to any transmission of information—as antidote to the platitude of the *studium*—the culturally coded information inscribed in the image. The only reason why an image could engender true affect, he argued, is the very absence of reason. In hindsight it's hard to imagine that this was the same Barthes who introduced the ideas of Bertolt Brecht into structural theory. Brecht's fusion of behaviorism and Marxism was, after all, grounded in a pursuit of “decisive influence” and “foreseeable effects” on audience behavior.<sup>19</sup> It's not that Brecht didn't take into consideration the unconscious affect of art, it's just that he imagined it as something problematic; something that had to be rendered visible by manifesting its workings as part of the work itself. He was not simply opposed to affect; only to the kind that kept the spectators from creating their own thoughts. Just like he wasn't opposed to illusion, but only to the kind that kept spectators from reflecting on their own situation. The idea behind the notorious *Verfremdungseffekt* was not to completely destroy illusion or smother affect, but to keep them both in check, to put a brake on empathy and to raise the spectator's consciousness. Barthes and the structuralist movement of the 1960s took up Brecht's ideas to further the idea that spectators were victims of the illusory effects produced by the ideological camera obscura—from which they had to be awoken. By revealing the systems of meaning underpinning and organizing seemingly natural appearances, pointing out how order hides disorder, laying bare the logic hiding the illogic and the rationality which is simultaneously irrational, spectators were called upon to retrieve a hidden reality steeped in contradictions. However, when the dialectical promise of the resolution of contradictions turned sour, the overdose of semioclastm turned, in Barthes work, into a revalorisation of the image as a self-affirming sensible presence, as the Real

in its indefatigable expression. It's almost as if, in order to redeem himself from the sin of having wished to strip the visible world of its glories and transforming its spectacles into a great web of symptoms, Barthes converted images into icons of a pure and unique presence, which can only make sense in the silent intimacy of the private gaze. The obsessive scavenging for hidden meanings toppled over into the dream of an exemption from meaning. The search was no longer for significance, but for an affect which cannot be verified objectively or communicated with others much at all: isn't one person's *punctum* another's twaddle?

While the science of signs and the symptomatology of the unconscious went on to become integrated in academia, in cinephilic circles the mission to decipher ideological vehicles was dismissed in favor of a certain re-evaluation of the *politique des auteurs*. So the notion of the *mise-en-scène* fell back on a formal singularity, associated with the idea of a personal style and signature, of which Hegel has already shown that, in the end, it is bound to bring back a work of art to where the artist is, or believes to be, the only master of the matter at hand and the means of shaping it into a form.<sup>20</sup> Hegel was one of the German Idealists who probed the constitutive paradox of the aesthetic sphere of experience, which Kant before him had described as “a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever can be adequate.”<sup>21</sup> After Kant had broken with the *idée-fixe* of a normative bondage between the content, form and effect of works of art, by defining aesthetics as a sphere of indecision between form as a means to an intended end and its experience as “finality without end,” Hegel further demonstrated that the very principle of aesthetic experience can be found in the unresolvable tension between the figures that make it possible to produce an artwork and the ones it produces as an object for our appreciation; between how and to what end a form is given shape and how it can actually be received and appreciated. It was Hegel who suggested that the gap between heteronomy and autonomy—art as thought outside itself, and thought in and of itself—can only be bridged at the price of being reduced to either the demonstration of a specific virtuosity, the product of a unique signature, or to the impasse of being caught in an infinite game of self-reflection between form and meaning, where one is never more than the echo of the other.<sup>22</sup>

How do we make sense of aesthetic perceptions and emotions that are grounded in an irresolvable tension between mediated creation and non-mediated presence, between an expression that asks to be interpreted and a mutability that cannot be reduced to communication or information? How do we deal with this disassociation between the intention to give expression to ideas and emotions

in a suitable form and the reception that remains indeterminate, allowing for a multiplicity of resonances? In search for something to fall back on, many have turned to the work of Gilles Deleuze as a restaging of the overall shape of making sense based on sensation and affect. Deleuze was fascinated by Kant's view on aesthetics, but criticized it for clinging on to the idea that there was still a common sense that made it possible to universally validate and judge aesthetic experiences. In his own way he tried to "save" Kantian thought by taking up the notion of the transcendental, stating that every faculty should be taken beyond its limits where it is subjected to a violence that forces it to exert itself. It's on this basis that he defined the potential force of cinema, as a form of thought outside itself which can compel us to think anew, by leading us beyond "what everybody knows" to the unthought lying dormant at the back of thought. According to Deleuze, the old dream of cinema as an art capable of creating a shock that could elevate the spectator into conscious thinking crumbled as soon as the intolerable was no longer experienced as an exceptional injustice, but as a permanent state. As soon as we stopped believing in the association between man and the world, there occurred a rupture in the link between perception and action: what was seen could no longer be recognized as something to act upon. But in the Deleuzian logic of sense, the loss of adherence to action does not necessarily lead to passivity or resignation. On the contrary, the thought of the intolerable can force us into thinking anew. Once faced with its own impossibility, thinking reaches its greatest power. That's how the art of cinema would be able to act as a vital force of "resistance" which can confront us with the unthinkable and liberate the forces of life; by no longer pursuing the redemptive possibility of another world, but the possibility of reimagining our belief in the one world we have, as the only thing which can reconnect man to what is seen and heard.<sup>23</sup>

\*\*\*

Art as resistance? Surely, this is an idea that has long been incorporated into the art world, in line with the commonplace image of the artist as free thinking rebel. Strangely enough, the word resistance has, for a long time, held a positive connotation while so many other words that are bound up with the process of emancipatory struggle have long been divested of credibility. I'm thinking of revolution, proletariat, class struggle, all words that were once believed to bear a future but no longer trouble or divide anyone. In recent times, however, even the interpretation of "resistance" has started to show signs of wear and tear. The term

is actually ambiguous to start with: it designates both a force of sovereignty by way of passive perseverance and a force of transformation by way of active opposition. It refers to the stubbornness of remaining in place and refusing to budge on the one hand, and the boldness of engaging in a struggle to change things on the other. Looking at our contemporary political landscape, it's not that difficult to see how the annotation of the word is swiftly carried over into the first meaning whenever signs and attitudes of rebellion are dismissed as inconsistent interferences with progress. In that sense, it actually mirrors another popular term: "reform." It is the word that today is most often used to sophisticatedly pinpoint the necessary "change" that has to be imposed on the social landscape, not in the least the systematic deconstruction of social protection and inclusion policies, as well as educational and health services. It's no secret that slogans we see so often used in elections, such as "change to improve" used by the Flemish N-VA party—synthesizing neoliberal and nationalistic tendencies—are in reality revampings of the infamous TINA-mantra of the Thatcher era. "There is no alternative" now means, more than ever, "our way or no way." By all appearances, "reform" now means "adapt," just as "resist" now means "stagnate."

The inherent ambivalence of "resistance" is more and more used to ridicule the posture of those who are ostensibly claiming to oppose the state of things, but do not have the consistency or strategy to really upset it or the vision to formulate an alternative. When any form of opposition is thought to be submitted to the order of domination and exploitation, how could resistance be anything other than an empty gesture? This sphere of defeatism has taken a hold of our mentalities, not least in the contemporary art world where there is a tendency for artists to call for resistance, only to declare it impossible; asserting their artistic authority by demonstrating the superior strength of the market and the spectacle, to which art cannot but be complicit. Art as autonomous space of resistance, holding up a mirror to society and defying the status-quo? Those days are behind us, so it is claimed. An article in a Belgian newspaper recently declared that art is now behaving like the catholic church: desperately holding on to its own myth.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, a well-known art critic and historian wrote that "any redistribution of the sensible through contemporary art is a mirage and, when pitted against the capitalist 'transformation of things into signs', it is little more than the opiate of the artworld left."<sup>25</sup> An old dispute rears its head again. At a time when the weakening of the political theatre is forcing art to take the stage of politics, at a time when art is increasingly under pressure to make itself useful in light of the local and global struggles that are raging all over the world, we are once again confronted head on

with some of the fundamental challenges surrounding the tensions between art and life, appearance and reality.

The problem has been roaring ever since the likes of Kant and Hegel defined the paradigm of aesthetics. “In how far is appearance allowed in the moral world?” asked one of their contemporaries, Friedrich Schiller, in his endlessly inspirational *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*.<sup>26</sup> Disenchanted with the French revolution and its failure to deal with social inequality, he proposed another revolution: a revolution of the sensible. For him, the banishment of the hierarchy of classes, founded on the domination of the men of culture over the men of nature, manifested itself in the aesthetic experience. It was through this experience that the partition of the sensible sustaining this domination could be dismantled, giving way to a new kind of equality: an equality in the realm of the sensible, an equality that could ruin all hierarchies between matter and form, passivity and activity, feeling and thought. That’s how Schiller actually politicised Kant’s ideas, by defining aesthetic experience as an unprecedented sensorium in which all hierarchies are abolished. The political potential of art, he argued, is not based on its alliance with reality—how art could affect reality and the other way around—but conversely on its independence from it. Against the critics who, even then, complained that all solidity had disappeared from the world, that all reality had dissolved into appearance, he answered: the power of art can only be fully appreciated as long as it is first and foremost considered as appearance, not because it is held to be something that could supplant or influence reality. It can only be experienced as such as long as we stop looking for ends and means, as long as we do not grant imagination a prescription of its own. Schiller thus bid farewell to the idea that art could transmit political messages by way of appropriate forms. Art, for him, is that what suspends any kind of appropriateness, giving way to other sensible relationships which cannot be reduced to the transference of knowledge or the realization of will. But in Schiller’s account, the promise of “granting freedom by means of freedom” involves a strange paradox. On the one hand, art is put forward as a sphere of autonomy and self-containment indifferent to any association of cause and effect, an embodiment of freedom unassignable to any single aspiration or interpretation. On the other hand, it is through the experience of “free play” before the “free appearance” of art that another promise is made: that of another form of life. The solitude of art, claims Schiller, bears within it the promise of a “new art of living,” the promise of a new humanity. In other words: the gap between art and what it actually says and does is precisely what makes art unceasingly project its forms and figures onto the process of

a world in the making. It is this entanglement of autonomy and heteronomy, both identifying and disidentifying with forms of life, that can be located at the heart of art's paradoxical potential to "resist," a potential that has been given a variety of shapes and has undergone many transformations, eventually leading to contradictory interpretations: from the German Idealists' aesthetic programme which laid the foundation for the conception of the human revolution that the young Marx opposed to the political Revolution and the Constructivist project of Soviet artists, to the theories that have insisted on the self-containedness of the artwork or the experience of the sublime. On one hand, art is said to resist by way of its participation in the concrete transformation of everyday life. On the other, art is supposed to resist due to its very detachment from the taint of the everyday. The accomplishment of the radical promises of aesthetic appearances, by way of their transformation into reality, implies the suppression of their autonomy, while holding on to their promises is grounded in the radical separation between appearance and reality. Either way, the space of play between heteronomy and autonomy, as possible condition for a reconfiguration of spheres of experience, risks being subdued.

\*\*\*

All this amateurish dabbling with aesthetic theory to suggest that the ambivalence associated with the word "resistance" is not only a matter of linguistics. The ambivalence is in fact at the heart of the relation between a certain idea of art and a certain idea of politics: the autonomy of aesthetic experience holds at the same time a promise of emancipation. At least, that is what I picked up from my grappling with the work of Jacques Rancière, who is undoubtedly one of the contemporary thinkers I feel closest too (not in the least because of his cinephile passion). He is the one who has pointed out that the politics of art can be considered as a constant negotiation of the fundamental paradox of aesthetics, which posits its autonomy from any external regulation at the same time as it abolishes the rationales that distinguish between the sphere of appearance and that of reality.<sup>27</sup> The paradigm of what is traditionally called "critical art," for example, typically combines aesthetic strangeness with political explicitness in view of provoking a break in our perception and mobilize our political energies. It is a formula that was adopted in the golden era of Brechtianism, but is still very much on our agendas today, in so far as that the idea of art as instrument for revelation and confrontation is repeatedly used as a fetishistic argument for

legitimation. At the same time it is clear that the formula has lost much of its juice, not because there are no more forms of domination and oppression to oppose—on the contrary, as we all know—but rather because the antagonistic worldviews and emancipatory perspectives that nourished the traditional critical modes of art have been divested of their credibility. The breach in the connection between forms of art and forces of mobilisation might explain why it has become so easy to denounce the “resistance without resistance” of aesthetic appearances, which are suspected of no longer being able to make a difference. For a while, there was an attempt to cover up the disappointment in art’s potential with a cult of irony by magnifying the suspicion towards appearances and identifying it as a revamped form of criticism on the ubiquity of the spectacle. Whereas earlier critical strategies were generally predicated on the effort to reveal the lies of appearances in the name of some underlying reality, these forms thrived on the reasoning that everything has become appearance and that resistance is just another word for consumption. That period might be past us—mercifully. Today the air is thick with claims that, after having spent some time in the grip of irony and relativity, art has “returned to politics.” The critical agency of art is reclaimed as a responsibility to resume its place in the real world, to leave behind its habitats, let go of appearances and directly intervene in the social texture (all the while documentation of these interventions is still being shown in art spaces). Here and there one can pick up echoes from Deleuze’s call to restore belief in this world, echoes that have come to resound like vitalist appeals for art and its audience to participate in the creation of new forms of collective agency, composed as a great fusion of material and immaterial production, knowledge, culture and communication, all caught up in a circulating energy of intensities without subject. Once again the politics of art is identified with the romantic dream of a sensible revolution as the impetus for a new non-hierarchic community based on a collective faith that needs to be refound. In order to reach this dream, art is asked to break free from its chains and participate in the becoming of new forms of life.

I admit it is very tempting to look for relief in Deleuze’s refusal of the paradoxical destiny of art. For him, artists and filmmakers have to create their work in view of a horizon that transcends it: “in view of a missing people.”<sup>28</sup> Art is supposed to address itself to the future of a people to come by transmitting sensations of struggle that can be transformed into revolutionary vibrations, capable of perpetuating life as movement and change. In this regard, Deleuze puts himself in that long line of artists and thinkers who claimed that art might be better suited than politics to promote a new community of people united by the bonds of



lived experience. That's also how he, in a way, "fulfils the destiny of the aesthetic," according to Rancière, by fostering the idea that art's content and form, as pure processes of expressive matter, can directly create a difference in the sensible tissue of the world. This is at variance with what, for example, Theodor Adorno proposed when he found himself confronted with the downfall of the Soviet revolutionary experiments, the increasing power of reification in consumer society and the aestheticization of life in the throes of capitalism. Art's only political function, he claimed, is precisely not to have one. From the German idealists, Adorno borrowed the idea that no intention is assured of being realized by a work of art: artists can only say something through the form itself, not by letting that form deliver a message. Against Brecht, he stated that a work of art can only be committed when it abandons every commitment to the world. In order to save art's political potential, it had to be radically severed from politics: "the more heavily social conditions weigh, the more unrelentingly the poem resists."<sup>29</sup> Deleuze, in his compulsion to give art an affirmative power, ardently opposed this thought paradigm, but could only do so at the price of having art become life itself. It was not enough for art to offer the promise of a people, it had to constitute its very own reality, as a sensible, egalitarian world of percepts and affects that could liberate the forces of life that has been imprisoned by men. It's according to this line of reasoning that he wrote about the work of Charles Burnett and the so-called L.A. Rebellion movement of the 1970s and '80s, which according to him was a response to the collapse of the American dream and its narrative of "the birth of a nation." Standing out amidst the rubble of a lost utopia of a society that stood for fraternity and solidarity, the work of these filmmakers represented for him a search for forms that could express the intolerability of living under domination. No longer by proposing narratives of consciousness and change, but fragmented forms constructed out of "pure" images and sounds and acts of "fabulation" whose political impact is "immediate and inescapable," constituting the prefiguration of a people to come.<sup>30</sup>

But how could a community of people be founded on the communities of percepts and affects that constitute a work of cinema? Here's where Rancière has intervened. According to him, art does not produce forms of metaphysical metamorphosis from one world to another, but metaphors, forms that articulate an "as if." While Deleuze tends to think in terms of becomings, Rancière prefers to think in terms of alterations and displacements, without something becoming other than what it is. Both thinkers expand on the Kantian definition of art as a singular sensorium that has the potential to break with norms and hierarchies of making sense. But while for Deleuze this is a matter of ontological difference,

for Rancière there can only be poetic or pragmatic differences: artists construct the ontology that sustains their own propositions, an ontology that remains a fiction. Deleuze summoned art to breach the laws of representation and invent a new fraternity based on the lawless circulation of intensities and haecceities, a molecular world in which the sensible is constituted through the holding together of what differs in kind. Rancière, on the other hand, keeps stressing the inner dialectics of art: the dialectics between self-sufficient autonomy, its independence from any outside laws, and its opposite, the heteronomous fabric of life. By wanting to completely suppress representation in favor of pure material expression, he argues, Deleuze ends up venturing into the realms of ethology and the ethical becoming of life, thereby suppressing the fundamental paradox of art itself.<sup>31</sup> When Deleuze writes about fabulation, which would make possible a transference of the power of art to the political invention of a people, his main points of reference are, not coincidentally, the *cinéma du vécu* of Pierre Perrault and the *cinéma vérité* of Jean Rouch, in which characters are captured in the speech act of “inventing a people.” Fabulation then turns out to be the identity of the power of art and the power of life, suppressing all gaps between form and content.<sup>32</sup> For Rancière, on the contrary, the forms of community that cinema invents—joining and disjoining times and places, images, sounds and words—will never in themselves lead to the invention of political communities that could rearticulate a sense of the common. Art does not reach into the “real,” it invents fictions that can reframe the given order of things that define what is “real,” composed as a singular conjunction of heterogeneous sensible worlds. A screen is not a membrane that is capable of producing new cerebral circuits and revitalizing the link between man and the world, but a surface that can offer a multiplicity of small variations, negotiations between the recognizable and the dissimilar that propose new modes of visibility and affectivity. This surface, he says, “is not the amorphous destiny of things—it’s a process of art that changes the coordinates of the given.”<sup>33</sup> Between the two poles of the universal consensus of sense on the one hand, and on the other, the radical mutism of non-sense—where one tends to be called upon as response to the other—Rancière proposes something else: the possibility for art to rearrange the relation between the perceptible and the intelligible, between the apparent and the real. Which means, as I understand it, that art may help us to dislodge and reconfigure the framework of consensus, without necessarily having to traverse the desert towards the purely sensible.

\*\*\*

How do we make sense of the world of appearances, I asked. If we for a moment give some thought to the idea that the appearances of cinema are not simply opposed to the real, or outside of it, but a way of reframing the givens of the real and the borders between the inside and the outside, then where does that leave us: spectators, amateurs, bricoleurs, curators? If the politics of cinema is indeed founded on a kind of “resistance,” in its expression of a thought that remains foreign to itself, in a matter that withstands it, how do we build upon this resistance? If we are willing to assume that political effects are not situated in an artwork itself, nor in the intention or commitment of the artist, but that it is rather by not assigning a specific role or destination to a work and leaving it to its own idleness that it may become susceptible to unforeseen appropriations, then, the question remains: how do we attend to the “indifference” of what is proposed? The issue at hand is then not whether the work that artists and filmmakers do can be considered “political” or not, but rather what work we can do with it as political subjects, how we can transmit and amplify the potentials for thought contained in their work. It’s not about how art could directly intervene in the social world and construct better relations between existing communities, but how it can shape new communities of sense that can put to work a new sense of community. What happened in Glasgow reminded me of the importance of creating spaces that embrace distance—between what is presented and what is perceived, between the sensible and the intelligible, between appearance and reality, between the screen and the gaze—as that what allows to coalesce the communities that art has to offer into a wider community of thoughts and actions, of call and response. Spaces where we can face up to singular appearances that affront our particularities and dislodge our subjectivities, and extend these moments of displacement by way of our own particular inventions. Not by simply judging but by giving life to forms, not by multiplying opinions but signs of existence. Wasn’t that what happened with our experience of *Killer of Sheep*? Perhaps its force did not reside in the “purity” of its non-narrative forms, galvanizing an energy that opens up to thought’s difference to itself, but rather in its power of suspension and its deviation from the consensual framework that tends to prescribe how certain life conditions and social identities ought to be represented and interpreted. Instead of being bound to recognisable identities and dramatic plots, the figures on screen are given the time to exist in all of their fragility and resilience, entrusted with a force of endurance without a certainty of resolution, without a fixed “way out.” But instead of enclosing these figures in a ring of despair, where time is lived as endless repetition, the film is able to produce affects from the way gazes of wonderment and gestures of play

create divergences from the dominant frame of expectations, evoking the sense of possibility and the capacity to pursue it, even if it means bearing their illusion. Wasn't it this attention to these existences and the circulation of these affects that resonated throughout *Make a Way out of No Way*, an attention and a circulation that were somehow extended in the forms of exchange that developed? In our turn we were able to take the time to verify in common what we had seen and heard, how we might think about it and what there was to do in response. In our turn we were entrusted with attention which prompted us to attend to what was proposed and counter-proposed. The reconfiguration of a common time and a common attention, affirming the capacity of everyone to further and foster the resistances of aesthetic experience, allowing for collective leaps of the imagination: this is, I think, what your work of care has made possible. For all this and more, I will never forget that long weekend in September.

Hannah Arendt once suggested that what makes contemporary society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, but the fact that there is a world between them which has lost the power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them.<sup>34</sup> I feel that, in these times of consensus, increasingly governed by conformity and contempt, we need to search for ways to reaffirm the possibility of shared spaces which leave room and time for the construction of both distance and association, both individuality and collectivity. The art of cinema might just be one of those forms of mediation that at the same time creates a commonality and allows us to interrogate what exactly it is that is common. A space of appearances which, in all their metaphoric force, allows us to ask questions such as "What are we looking at and listening to?" and "What can we say and do about it?" To paraphrase something Agee wrote in *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*: Who are you, who will study these appearances, and through what cause, by what chance, and for what purpose, and by what right do you qualify to and what will you do about it?<sup>35</sup> Rather than clinging to the ubiquitous idea that we are always passively planted in front of spectacles, perhaps we should continue to create situations for ourselves in which distance is not abolished, but employed in its potential to invite and cultivate new ways of seeing and feeling, new relations between oneself and others. Rather than adhering to the waves of anti-aestheticism that are currently overtaking our cultural mindset, branding aesthetic contemplation as an activity without purpose or interest other than itself, perhaps we should ask ourselves how to make forms of aesthetic experience circulate, how to circulate among them, and how to keep that circulation going...

Can't this circulation of experiences be a way of gaining what we need so badly these days, namely, confidence? What *Make a Way Out of No Way* made me realize, Barry, is that confidence is intimately bound up with a sense of care. It was care that made us all listen carefully to what was being said, look closely to what was being shown, move undauntedly with what was being performed. It was this care that urged us to unsettle the barriers between thought and motion, active and passive, tending and attending. It was this care that gave us the confidence to reclaim meaning and agency and act both as addressee and addresser. *Make a Way Out of No Way* made me see that the work of care has never stopped being at the heart of curatorship. Contrary to what the current tendencies may indicate, its task may not be one of prescribing healing remedies or bringing about revelations, but one of instilling and cultivating confidence. A confidence in the capacities we all share.

\*\*\*

In my own endeavour to produce forms of circulation, I went back to basics. *Figures of Dissent* is first and foremost a modest attempt at finding words and sharing thoughts, an attempt to create an alternative to the culture of skepticism that seems to have silenced the battleground of cinema and politics. This series of screenings and conversations is grounded in the observation that there's not only a difficulty in speaking about this turbulent relation today, but also of associating words to experiences. Some might connect this aphasia to our mind-scrambling culture of fragmentation, distraction and attention disorder, others might bring to mind the loss of a certain interpretative legibility, which has led to what Eve Sedgwick has strikingly called the "kinda hegemonic, kinda subversive" rut of much criticism, making any political evaluation of art both uniform and wishy-washy.<sup>36</sup> Be that as it may, I decided to try out what seemed both very obvious and very absent, at least here in Belgium: to study cinema and politics by way of dialogue. Because films were never meant to finish as soon as the words "The End" scroll by—on the contrary, that's when their lives begin. I found inspiration in the cinephilic tradition, which was always based on the prolongation of cinematic experiences through words. Words were a way of setting up a playing field, not only to play games of serve and return between spectator and filmmaker, but as a public, polemical space, shared and divided at the same time. For a while, the association of seeing, listening and talking was connected to a counter-cultural network of various local spaces in which "bands of outsiders" could utter thoughts and arguments that were not on the level of explanation but of exchange. These spaces

were even present in the arena of mass media: I still vividly remember discovering the recordings of *Microfilms*, the radio program that Serge Daney hosted on *France Culture* between 1985 and 1990. Almost every week he invited a guest to converse about cinema. For one hour, uninterrupted, improvised, casual—you can hear them smoking and drinking in the studio—just like in the *ciné-clubs* and film societies that were so foundational for the cultivation of the various cinematic new waves. Looking back, the termination of that radio program in 1990 seemed to chime with the end of a certain cinephile culture altogether, coincidentally, or not, around the same time as countless proclamations could be heard about the “end of politics.”

In the same period when I started listening to *Microfilms* (late, as always), I also read a series of invigorating letters between film critics and curators from all over the globe, all of them enthusiasts who were anxious to share their thoughts about what cinephilia could mean in the 21st century. These letters, which were bundled in the book *Movie Mutations*,<sup>37</sup> inspired me to somehow try to rekindle the cinephile tradition of sharing thoughts, in the form of both talks and letters—this writing being one of them. At the same time, they made me aware of the need for fresh perspectives on what we can do with cinema today in light of the persisting atmosphere of disillusionment and consensuality. Even at the start of the project, about two years ago, I knew that I was going to have to row against the tide, against the common sense opinion that cinema is no longer a crusade that has the force to convene and divide, as Daney and many others have bitterly remarked towards the end of the previous century. But since then, I can't shake off the nagging feeling that film culture is increasingly being torn apart by the age-old enmity between popular culture and “art for art's sake,” between the mainstream and the margins. On the one hand, I see some film buffs infusing themselves with a disenchanting loyalty towards what was or what could have been, rather than a tormented passion for what is and can be done. On the other hand, I see film scholars and critics surfing the mainstream in search for symptoms of our zeitgeist, interrogating films on what they show and hide from us, all the while dismissing everything that is regulated to the margins as self-absorbed forms of art that only serve the privileged few. The other day, one of those critics cheekily told me that the obscure film festivals and art spaces where some of these films are shown are nothing but “ghettos for intellectuals.” The argument is well known: all forms that do not seem to comply to popular tastes are suspected of “aestheticism.” Better to leave the “aesthetic” to the cinephile snobs and turn to “democratic” works that appeal to the average spectator. Or better yet to directly produce a new experience of relationality, rather than rely on works that will only appeal to lovers of aesthetic appearances. How to break with

the logic of classification, which increasingly tends to consider film works as social phenomena which can be reduced to codified systems of representation, expectation and distribution? How to avoid the dangers of tautology that can be found in the reasonings that ground the value of art in the anticipation of its efficiency and its audience? Isn't it necessary to create spaces where these borders are blurred, where works of art are not restrained to specific publics and particular functions? Spaces that welcome what Kant called the "disinterestedness" of aesthetic judgment and allow each spectator to create his or her own poem? In order to diverge from the common sense that says what is valuable and what is not, what some people can relate to and others not, shouldn't we try to construct different communities of sense, modes of circulation that trouble our vision, upset expectations and recalibrate experiences? Uncertain communities that both break with the multiplex logic of segregation and the institutional policies of inclusion and participation that are no less grounded in a certain distribution of roles and capacities? Zones of indetermination that, not unlike the culture of cinephilia, steer clear of processes of legitimation and canonization? In many ways, that's what *Make a Way Out of No Way* was to me: a resonance chamber of images, sounds, gestures and words that blurred the common distribution of places and competences, but also the very borders defining its own activity. Precisely because its experiences could not be pinned down, it engendered a form of curiosity that made us re-attend to the world of appearances, to our dealing with the world and our modes of studying and living with other people, appearances and senses.

\*\*\*

Speaking about curiosity, I recently bumped into this quote from an interview with Michel Foucault that seems appropriate:

*Curiosity is a vice that has been stigmatized in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science. Curiosity is seen as futility. However, I like the word; it suggests something quite different to me. It evokes "care" ; it evokes the care one takes of what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality, but one that is never immobilized before it; a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and singular; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way; a passion for seizing what is happening now and what is disappearing; a lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and essential.*

*I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means; the desire is there; there is an infinity of things to know; the people capable of doing such work exist. So what is our problem? Too little: channels of communication that are too narrow, almost monopolistic, inadequate. We mustn't adopt a protectionist attitude, to stop "bad" information from invading and stifling the "good." Rather, we must increase the possibility for movement backward and forward. This would not lead, as people often fear, to uniformity and leveling-down, but, on the contrary, to the simultaneous existence and differentiation of these various networks.<sup>38</sup>*

Have I mentioned that "curious" and "curator" have the same linguistic root, "cura"? Curiosity, care, consideration, attention, passion: aren't these the things that we need to work on?

\*\*\*

There was something else that was, to me, key to the whole experience of *Make a Way Out of No Way*, which has to do with the relation between vulnerability and agency. We know that vulnerability is most often considered as a sign of weakness or as an existential disposition that is reducible to "bare life." It is looked upon as a state of passivity that renders us powerless in the face of the dominant technologies of power, against which we prefer to see ourselves as active and acting, rather than acted upon. But so much of what could be seen, heard and felt during the weekend disrupted this common sentiment: Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten's thoughts on fugitivity and waywardness as the refusal of what has been refused, Reina Gossett and Michael Roberson Garcon's testimonies of some of those who take the risk of asserting their existence by exposing themselves to force and violence, M Lamar's songs on dreams of flight in the hold of the slave ship, Miss Prissy's krumping body and her heavy breathing resounding through the space long after the last notes of Phil Collins' "In the air tonight" had faded away, the smoldering feelings of fragility and urgency triggered by the death of Michael Brown, the heart-warming account of a visitor from South-America telling us that she couldn't believe that she had to come all the way from the other end of the world to find a frail sense of belonging. But also the long and tender scene of Stan and his wife slow dancing to Dinah Washington's version of "This Bitter Earth" in *Killer of Sheep*. And of course Angie, sweet Angie, whose cinematic presence made us feel that possibilities of life are not limited to the ones that are declared "realistic." In the midst of a world buzzing with nihilist sermons lamenting our inevitable becoming of Nietzsche's "last man,"



deprived of all constructive passion and creative possibility, bound to live the rehearsal for a foreshadowed revelation, *Make a Way Out of No Way* showed us that there are ways out of the parade of dead-ends and final judgments.

At one point during the weekend, Fred Moten said that “the position of safety is just as delusional as the appeal of the real.” The real is always the object of fiction, and we all have a stake in it. The oppositions between appearance and reality, passivity and activity, receptivity and responsiveness are nothing but part and parcel of the dominant consensual fiction, which stages every form of resistance as inactivity and every act of imagination as futile. *Make a Way Out of No Way* managed to displace that insidious fiction by showing us that words, sounds and images are, in their own way, also realities that map out possibilities of commonality, and that vulnerability can also be a vital and enduring force of agency: one that can stand up against the nihilism of our day and age. Here, vulnerability did not come about as a mode of defensiveness or a sign of authenticity, but as a way of being, neither existential nor masterable, in which receptivity and responsiveness could bear upon one another. It came about as a sentiment that should be embraced rather than vanquished, precisely because it constitutes a way of sharing. Now that it has become clear that the critical logic of unveiling has drowned itself in a deep well of fatalism, it appears that there is more ground for hope to be found in the constitution of a new collective sentiment; one that is based on a shared sentiment of vulnerability and, at the same time, of a communal confidence amongst individuals. The greatest challenge for the work of care that is at the heart of curatorship may be to invent new resonance chambers of broken appearances and lived realities, forms of study and circulation that can open up ways of being together in our precarity and incite and nurture confidence in what we see, say and do. It might not bring about a revolution of any kind, but it could perhaps give manifestations of struggle their proper resonance, and bring local and singular forces that are dispersed all over the place closer together. Finding a way out of no way may, after all, not begin in dismantling the appearances that shield us from the truth of things, but in taking apart everything that limits our ability to find one another.

A lot of gaps, a lot of questions. I hope we can catch up soon.

Yours sincerely,

Stoffel

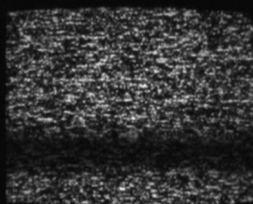


EN RE  
PENSANT A

CELA : ICI  
ET  
AILLEURS



APPRENDRE A  
VOIR  
PAS A LIRE



Like Evan, I met **Mohanad Yaqubi** for the first time when he was in Ghent for *The Fire Next Time* where he presented the work he has been doing as a member of Subversive Film, a research and production initiative that aims to cast new light upon historic cinematic works related to Palestine and the Middle East. At the time of writing, Mohanad was in the process of finishing *Off Frame*, a documentary film dealing with the history of Palestinian militant cinema, focused on the efforts of the Palestine Film Unit (PFU) and their relationship with various international networks of filmmakers and activists.



Brussels, June 2015

Dear Mohanad,

Did you ever get in touch with Godard? I wonder: what would you want to ask him? Would you ask him how he lives with his ghosts? How to live with yours? Would you ask him how he has come to terms with memories of missed chances and failed expectations? Has he ever taken leave from the task of mourning? Have we?

It's been over a year since we last met in Brussels. I remember us talking about your endeavour to complete a project you've been working on for some time now, a film in which you're trying to document the work of the Palestine Film Unit and their role in the Palestinian revolutionary movement. I remember us sharing a concern for the question of how to somehow make sense of the legacy of what is called "militant cinema," this stubborn relic from a time when identities and energies seemed to be bound up with utopian aspirations and emancipatory desires. And I remember us trying to get our head around a question that many of us are facing today: in which moment do we live now? How are identities and energies reconfigured in the absence of clear visions for another world, at a time when desires for emancipation seem to have lost all forms of stronghold and orientation? And how do we relate ourselves to the promises that the world of cinematic figures once was supposed to activate and legislate? How do we live with these ghosts? In our tentative search for some answers to these questions, it felt as if we had at least two frames of reference in common. One being, however trivial, the generation we are both part of—variously called Generation Y, Echo Boomers, Millennials, whatever name we have been given over the years—and the other being a film that dazzles and baffles us both, a film that might have watched us growing older as much as we have watched it growing stronger: Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *Ici et Ailleurs* (1976). I like to think there is something in this shared entanglement in the snare of history that might help us to orient ourselves in our wary ventures. This "something" is what I'd like to explore in this writing, hoping that my thoughts might somehow reverberate with yours.

I was born a few years before you, around the time when Godard and Miéville were putting the finishing touches to the film that would become *Ici et Ailleurs*. It was a few days before Pier Paolo Pasolini was left for dead on the beach of Ostia, just prior to the release of *Salò*, which turned out to be his own personal cry of desperation in the face of what he saw as the rise of a new global

order of exploitation and commodification. “The fireflies are disappearing,” he wrote in one of his last articles, as if there were less and less sparks that could illuminate the falling night, as if all bodies, desires, images and imaginations were being swallowed up by a looming darkness, led astray by the deceiving glare of new myths and visions.<sup>1</sup> Serge Daney has described Pasolini’s untimely death as a symbolic moment when cinema stopped being a site of confrontation, a space where political divisions could be played out before they were drowned in the consensual mediocracy we know all too well today.<sup>2</sup> It was the same Daney, one of Godard’s loyal fellow travellers, who described the production of the project that resulted in *Ici et Ailleurs* as the last time a well-known filmmaker joined forces with a political cause. “A long period of film history came to a close,” he wrote sorrowfully.<sup>3</sup> Flames had been raging, but there were no more traces left burning. Indeed, it is tempting to consider the film as a marker of the end of the so-called leftist decade, this illustrious era of passions and struggles whose decline was so emphatically documented in Chris Marker’s *Le fond de l’air est rouge*. Marker’s sad elegy, which came out barely a year after Godard’s, lets us witness how socialist movements all over the globe, from France to Portugal, from Chile to Grenada, fizzled into rupture and defeat. How in Italy, Germany and Japan, the hopes of the radical Left collapsed into sectarianism, violence and despair. How anti-colonial utopias gradually withered into postcolonial nightmares, sinking away in a morass of exhaustion and corruption. How mourning began, mourning for failed hopes and lost horizons, mourning for possibilities that had turned in on themselves, mourning for an aspiring sense of togetherness that had somehow collapsed into contorted factionalism. A mourning of which we might not have seen the end yet.

Browsing through history, looking back at the time when *Ici et Ailleurs* was unleashed onto the world, it feels as if so many opinion paradigms were being revised and replaced. In the wake of the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, Simon Leys’ *The Chairman’s New Clothes* and François Ponchaud’s *Cambodia: Year Zero*, not forgetting the emergence of the first reports on the Ethiopian Red Terror, all regimes pertaining to the “Red Menace” were now suspected to have given way to the establishment of authoritarian tyranny and the collapse of history into an enormous catastrophic ruin that had perpetually been piling wreckage upon wreckage.<sup>4</sup> The gruesome series of events set in motion by the kidnapping of Hanns Martin Schleyer by the RAF and the hijacking of Lufthansa Flight 181 by members of the PFLP completely destroyed whatever was left of the myth of leftist heroism. In claiming to be able to deliver us from the fatal abstractions inflicted by radical ideologies, Western capitalism and its political

system of democratic parliamentarianism presented itself as a universal shield protecting us from all forms of terror and totalitarianism. In some parts of Europe, the whims of revolution were denounced by some of those who had once embraced them as nothing but carnivalesque eruptions of a fundamental narcissism that was underlying the stubborn demand for a confirmation of a hope that was no longer in sight. It turned out that the “counterculture” of yesteryear had countered nothing at all: all that the spoiled “children of Marx and Coca-Cola” and their foolish actions had accomplished, so they argued, was to pave the way for a rekindled, irrevocable brand of capitalism; allowing our societies to become free aggregations of unbound molecules, whirling in the void, deprived of any affiliation, completely at the mercy of the laws of property and capital. It was only a matter of a few years before Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US started to pursue vigorous reform programmes of neoliberal economic policy and regressive social agendas, thereby inaugurating the austerity drive that would gradually bring deprivation and humiliation to every corner of the Western world and beyond. The dismantling of the welfare state and the privatization of public functions and services were justified by the reputed necessity of adapting local economies, administrations and legislations to the new world order, which was now arising as our only plausible horizon, as natural as the air we breath. The rise of the world-wide triumph of neoliberalism as well as the systematic dismantling of the Bandung project and the Non-Aligned Movement stamped a new rhythm on the geopolitical landscape, giving way to neo-colonial relationships and dependencies across the boundaries of nationhood and region. Creating and sustaining a global economic order and a civilised world safe from harm became an imperative that had to be pursued by all means necessary, barring any attempt to invent new forms of dissonant thought and action. Soon enough it seemed as if all possibilities for political dissent were little by little neutralised and orphaned, as if all faith in history was drowned in “a sort of sorrow in the zeitgeist.”<sup>5</sup>

This was the period when André Glucksmann declared the impossibility of all revolutions and Bernard-Henri Lévy bid adieu to emancipation and reason. Jean-François Lyotard first announced the deterioration of grand narratives and Jean Baudrillard pronounced the death of reality, irrevocably doomed to become substituted by a hyper-reality that subsumed everything in a state of simulation. Marguerite Duras proclaimed that it was no longer worthwhile to pursue “a cinema of socialist hope” and Susan Sontag bewailed that the growing deluge of images ended up “anesthetizing” their viewers. The Sex Pistols gave voice to the “No Future” generation and Throbbing Gristle stated that all war had become



“information war.” Apple marketed the first personal computer and a French government report promulgated the “informatization of society.”<sup>6</sup> While *Star Wars* marked cinema’s spectacular entrance into the blockbuster supermarket and *Saturday Night Fever* heralded Hollywood’s gleeful ostracism of the class struggle, two of the greatest cinematic chroniclers of human resilience in the face of tragedy, Roberto Rossellini and Charlie Chaplin, passed away almost unnoticed. At the same time as Chris Marker presented his requiem for the revolutionary era, Robert Kramer documented the derailment of what was arguably the last socialist revolution in 20th century Europe (*Scenes from the Class Struggle in Portugal*) and Robert Bresson made a tormented portrait of the generation of post-May ’68 (*Le Diable Probablement*). Rainer Werner Fassbinder described this particular generation as one for whom commitment was merely another pastime without real consequence. He said: “For the film’s young characters—whom Bresson seems to understand so well—commitment is mainly an escape into an ‘occupation’ which keeps that commitment alive, an escape from the awareness that everything goes on regardless of you and your commitment.”<sup>7</sup> A year later, Fassbinder paid homage to Bresson’s film by creating his own vision of this “third generation,” coming after the one that had foolishly dreamed of changing the world and the one that had fanatically descended into violence. A generation “which simply acts without thinking, which has neither a policy nor an ideology, and which, certainly without realizing it, lets itself be manipulated by others, like a bunch of puppets.”<sup>8</sup> After the collapse of passionate rebellion into desperate dystopia, all that seemed to be left was an overwhelming sense of bitterness and guilt. Nothing but lost illusions, utopias gone wrong, ruins amidst the ruins. As if despair, as Godard mentioned in *Numéro deux*—partly made in tandem with *Ici et Ailleurs*—had become “the ultimate form of criticism.”

This sentiment of sorrow, despair and guilt is what I feel echoing in *Ici et Ailleurs*: the sorrow of broken promises and failures of what may have been, the guilt of having chased dreams of revolution, of having assumed the powers of cinema to be able to contribute to the accomplishment of these dreams. How did everything go so terribly wrong? In 1969, when the film was initiated, the sense of possibility must still have felt unbounded. In France and Italy, a wave of strikes and occupations had taken hold of factories and universities, coming to a head in the events of May 1968 and the hot autumn of 1969. In the US, the large-scale civil rights protests that had been gathering steam since the end of the 1950s boiled over when the surge of demonstrations against institutional racism and the Vietnam War led to violent uprisings, escalating in the 1968 Chicago riots. The clashes with

police and army troops in Chicago painfully chimed with another event that had happened just a few days earlier, when Russian tanks brought winter to the Prague Spring, brutally crushing the reverie of a “socialism with a human face.” But in spite of signs of wear and tear, voices of dissent were still able to draw energy from the decolonisation struggles and liberation movements that in their turn found inspiration in the Chinese and Cuban revolutions. Che Guevara’s 1967 call to “create two, three, many Vietnams” was taken to heart by movements all over the world: guerrilla groups such as Uruguay’s Tupamaros and Chile’s Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria were sprouting throughout Latin America. Independence campaigns were gaining ground in Portugal’s empire. Post-independence movements in the Caribbean and Africa opted for the revolutionary overthrow of existing neo-colonial regimes, and left-wing rebellion was proliferating in various Asian countries, from India and Nepal to Malaysia and the Philippines. All this had as effect that the conscience of the European Left, as the belief in the possibility of a revolution in industrialized countries was waning, gradually shifted its focus from the socialist-communist program to the revolutionary movements that arose in the “Third World.”

In Palestine too, in the wake of the Six-day war of 1967 and the Battle of Karameh, the resistance against Israeli colonialism flared up and spread its call all over the world. I’ve only recently understood to what extent the West was, up until then, blinded by the historical sentiment that the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 was an absolute good to repair an absolute evil, a just and adequate response to the horrors of Nazism (which is still the sentiment underlying *Description of a Struggle* (1960), Chris Marker’s documentary account of the “miraculous” survival of the state of Israel, twelve years after its founding). In a dialogue with Elias Sanbar, Stéphane Hessel—who was involved in the UN-led negotiations prior and during the events of 1947-1948—has recounted how the Zionist shibboleth of “a land without people for a people without land” was generally accepted at the time: the idea that the inhabitants of Palestine—then commonly designated as the “Arab problem” or “population problem”—were deprived of a land that was their home just didn’t occur at all.<sup>9</sup> When the Palestinians initially refused the principle of partition, they were accused of being chauvinists who were stubbornly unwilling to give the Jewish victims a small portion of their territory. This meant that they had to suffer the harsh consequence of their choice: forced expulsion. It wasn’t until 1969, when Yasser Arafat was appointed president of the PLO and entered the international stage to say, “we, the Palestinians,” that they—or should I say “you”—were finally beginning to be

seen, in Western eyes, as a people rather than a population, and Palestine was considered as a country rather than a territory. When it became more and more clear that, even after the ratification of the post-war UN Resolution and after the PLO's declaration that they wished to establish an independent democratic and secular Palestinian state side by side with the state of Israel, when the latter kept on accumulating *faits accomplis* on the terrain without international sanction, the Palestinian struggle for the repossession of their land and name became one of the main symbols of the anti-imperialist, Third-Worldist movement.

You've mentioned that you are in the course of documenting how, at that time, a wave of filmmakers from all over the globe travelled to the Middle East to capture the interior of the Palestinian struggle. Like Johan van der Keuken, the Newsreel Group, Groupe Cinéma Vincennes, Ugo Adilardi, Luigi Perelli, Masao Adachi, Kôji Wakamatsu and many others, Godard—then working with Jean-Pierre Gorin under the moniker of the Dziga Vertov Group—responded to the PLO's appeal to support the revolution.<sup>10</sup> I'm sure you already know the back-story, but I need to recount it once more, if only to make it somewhat coherent for myself. As we hear Godard himself saying in the beginning of the film, the project initially bore the title *Jusqu'à la Victoire*. The filmmakers started off by putting together a storyboard of detailed sketches that systematically laid out the preferred scenario: the people's will + the armed struggle = people's war + political work = the education of the people + people's logic = the prolonged war, until victory. This was the calculative path that was supposed to represent the political line of the PLO, the path that had to be paved with a succession of images and sounds to be filmed and arranged in that particular order, as if to fill up a pre-established chain of empty containers. When shooting began in November 1969, Godard and Gorin found themselves in unknown territory, faced with language barriers and under the strict guidance of representatives of the PLO's information department who were making sure that the political line was followed through. But Elias Sanbar, who was then acting as interpreter, has noted that Godard became more and more irritated with the oppressive effects of the conventional slogans that tended to cover up what was being said and the dogmatic rules of representation that tended to render unsighted what could be seen.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the shoot, in August 1970, a sensible tension was mounting between two seemingly irreconcilable attitudes towards the film: was it supposed to be a form of consciousness raising, in line with the filmmakers' sympathy for the Palestinian cause, or could it rather offer a deconstructive critique, in line with the filmmakers' Maoist leanings? The tension became unbearable when, merely a few weeks after they had returned to France,

following the hijackings of four planes by the PFLP and the foundering of the relationship between the Palestinians and Jordan, the latter's King Hussein decided to forgo his earlier declaration of solidarity and launched an attack to drive the Palestinians out of his kingdom. A fight between Jordanian security forces and PLO fighters in the streets of Amman resulted in the death of hundreds of Palestinians, many of whom Godard had met and filmed. After Black September and the ensuing civil war—a real turning point in the history of the Middle East, as it would turn out<sup>12</sup>—Godard was forced to rethink the film; a challenge that became even more daunting in light of the dreadful events that took place during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich. For many of those who had latched on to the conviction that the future of emancipation lay with armed struggle, the murder of the Israeli athletes undoubtedly marked a turning point. “I'm sure there was something else to be done,” we hear a voice saying in *Ici et Ailleurs*.

*Take advantage of the fact the world is watching to say: 'show this image (of the Palestinian camps) from time to time.' If they refuse, take advantage of a worldwide TV audience to say: 'You refuse to show this image.' At each final, for example. Ok, we'll kill the hostages and be killed afterwards. And for them as for us, it's silly to die for an image. And we're a little scared.*

I admit this scene never fails to bring me to tears.

In the end it took Godard and Miéville over five years to find a configuration for the images and sounds they had gathered: five long and turbulent years to come up with a response to the question of how to make sense of the gaps between intention and reality, commitment and failure, then and now, here and there; five years to come to terms with the demise of so many dreams and the death of so many people. If 1970 marked a moment when Godard, like many other activists and filmmakers, could still feel committed to the revolutionary cause and the effort of making and showing films in its service, this confidence now seemed shattered beyond repair. If the Middle East conflict was once considered as an exemplary historical lesson in revolutionary struggle, it then felt completely submerged in excessive and irrational violence. “I now have the feeling,” wrote Johan van der Keuken in a reflection on his own film about the Palestinian struggle, *De Palestijnen* (1975), “that there are regions where thinking, speaking and filming ought to come to a stand-still. Regions where reigns a deep irrationality, which exists in all of us.”<sup>13</sup>

Godard, who in the meantime had disbanded the Dziga Vertov Group and started working with Anne-Marie Miéville, did what he had always done: taking

his hesitations and limitations seriously by putting them at the heart of his film. That is how *Ici et Ailleurs* turned into a lament on the futility of the gaze—of those making images and those watching them—that always arrives too late, the propensity of words that tend to speak for others and the impossibility of escaping from the endless, numbing and blinding chain of images and sounds in which we are all caught up. In the form of a vigorous *auto-critique*, Godard bemoans how self-proclaimed and good-willed militant films tend to “put the sound too loud,” covering up the voices emanating from “elsewhere” with the noises of others coming from “here.” Central to the critique is a scene in which a group of Fedayeen can be seen talking to each other. In the initial version of the scene their words were subdued by the revolutionary rhetoric of a PLO spokesman. It was only several years later, after having asked Sanbar to translate what was spoken, that Godard came to realise that his own dogmatism had rendered him deaf for what the men in the background were actually saying: in speaking about the death of their brothers in arms, they were foreshadowing their own. The film then amounts to a restitution of what has been suppressed all along in the service of a relentless revolutionary vision of history. “Learn to see here, in order to hear elsewhere” emerges as the film’s fundamental lesson. In line with the Brechtian theme “underneath the rule discover the abuse,” it exposes the trickeries and rhetorics by which we just love to be fooled: how images always tend to deceive us, how words obscure and manipulate what there is to see, how too much noise makes it impossible to hear. For example, how the Palestinian militant who is professedly willing to dedicate her unborn child to the revolution was actually a Lebanese actress who was not at all expecting a child. Or how the Fedayeen who we see studying Mao’s little red book were actually not at all seeking to bridge revolutionary theory and practice, but were likely led astray into the circuits of words coming from elsewhere, drawn into the discourses and schemas of class struggle and cultural revolution in order to give them an identity which they were supposedly unable to create on their own.

Godard has always claimed that it is cinema’s prime mission to make us see and hear what we can’t spontaneously see or hear for ourselves. No wonder he was so eager, at the time when Marxist science was infused with new life, to take up Louis Althusser’s call for art to “make us see and therefore give to us in the form of seeing, perceiving and feeling—which is not the form of knowing—the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes.”<sup>14</sup> Learning to see, listen, perceive all over again: this was the inclination that was feverishly developing among many French filmmakers and

critics at the end of the 1960s—the post-*Nouvelle Vague* moment of structuralism. As cinema was considered an expression of the prevailing ideology, merely reproducing the world as it is experienced when filtered through this ideology, the challenge was to break through the surface of the seemingly self-evident and uncover the unconscious *mise-en-scène* that precedes any cinematic *mise-en-scène*. This logic of suspicion and regression is what drove Godard's films of that period: not to simply create or represent an alternative worldview, but to investigate and deconstruct the whole process of signification out of which worldviews are constructed. In order to wake the spectator from mediatic slumber, the scenographic setting is turned into a classroom, the dialogue into a recitation, the voice-over a lecture, the shooting an object lesson, the filmmaker a schoolmaster. In short, cinema comes to adhere to the logic of school. It is still this logic that has eventually won out in *Ici et Ailleurs*. Carving out the visible, questioning it, violently turning away from it in order to reveal the blindness at the heart of seeing, the deafness at the heart of hearing, to finally be able to see again: Godard's quest not only led him to destroy the cinematic forms he had grown up with, but also the new forms he had developed while trying to get rid of the old ones. After having shaken up the cinematic codes and having liberated sounds and images from their moorings as one of the forerunners of the French *Nouvelle Vague*, he ended up turning the screen into a blackboard and turning cinema on itself, rendering its mechanisms visible, exposing its inadequacies and delinquencies.

But I can't help thinking: hasn't Godard's zealous call to learn to see and listen anew come at a severe price, one that we are still paying today? Haven't Godard's boundless provocations, as Pasolini once suggested, led to some kind of suicidal intoxication and didactic self-exclusion, veering violently towards the negation of cinema?<sup>15</sup> And isn't there, beyond the seemingly positive lesson of going back to "zero" and rediscovering the world and its images with a "virgin eye,"<sup>16</sup> a sense of culpability that threatens to overwhelm any search for affirmation? Have we ever left behind the sentiment of guilt, the guilt of taking images and making them lie, the guilt of turning them into emblems of power, organizing them into stories and, and even worse, believing in them?

Perhaps at that point in time *Ici et Ailleurs* could still be thought of as a necessary wake-up call, at least "here," in the part of the world from where I'm writing. With time I have come to understand that the film was made in a period when the Left in Western Europe was crumbling under the weight of the legacy of May 1968 and the ample expectations associated with the "second revolutionary wave." By revealing that the struggle of science against ideology was in truth a

struggle against the potential power of mass revolt, the May explosion had radically overturned the Marxist schemas of class consciousness and mobilisation. When those who had lived with the confidence that revolution was not only possible but that they were in the process of making it happen, when they were confronted with its endless deferment, they found themselves questioning its mere possibility. In France in particular activists went through a profound *crise de conscience*, which led, as a consequence, to the rediscovery of “the people,” an undertaking that was often accompanied with its identification as a homogeneous populace that conformed all too well to its roots and essence (as exemplified by the resurgence of interest in popular memory and the proliferation of “retro-cinema”<sup>17</sup>). But this crisis also led to a suspicion towards former dreams of social justice, coming to a head in the mid-1970s when self-proclaimed “new philosophers” set flame to their militant past and, by pointing to the bloodshed that every revolutionary upheaval to date had led to, violently rejected Marxism in all its guises as a “philosophy of domination” that inevitably leads to totalitarianism and terror. This rage against the “tyranny of thought” found its most mediagenic advocate in Bernard-Henri Lévy who argued that the only revolutions he knew were “the Nazi plague and red fascism” and that emancipatory politics had to be superseded by “ethics and moral duty” as the only remaining modes of resistance in the face of radical Evil.<sup>18</sup> But already before this sermonizing, reactionary development, there had been a growing suspicion towards ready-made theoretical explanations and forms of totalizing or teleological thinking. The events of 1968 had decisively brought to attention that any form of collective explanatory discourse thriving upon the same order which it aims to disorder merely leads to the self-confirmation of those in the know and the suspension of any alternative. There was no denying that, for a short while at least, there had been forces at work that could not be represented by the political theatre, before they were once again captured by the political and discursive machines of representation which callously levelled them out into relations of exchange. It then became clear for some that what either sustains or rebels against a social structure cannot be simply thought of as an effect of that structure itself, and that what has to be taken in account are the effects of power and desire. Throughout the 1970s these two notions would increasingly become the focus of vivid debate, especially galvanized by the work of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Jean-François Lyotard. It is the work of the latter that Godard appears to have sampled in *Ici et Ailleurs*, in particular his *Économie Libidinale* (1974), a book that reads away like a spinning and spitting work of mourning and desperation that is clearly made to settle scores with the author’s former self as militant Marxist.<sup>19</sup>

It doesn't take much to imagine that this is precisely what would have attracted Godard to Lyotard's work, at a moment when both of them seemed so tired of their own dogmatism and voluntarism.

Having not only abandoned the hope that capitalism would eventually give way to an alternative, but to a greater extent the whole idea of revolutionary politics that was endemic to the West since before the French revolution, Lyotard asserted the inescapability and indestructibility of the capitalist economy of exchange. If there had been, even after experiencing the devastating ruins of the two world wars and the horrors of the Holocaust, some hope for change projected in the Socialist revolution, then this last remnant was cruelly liquidated by the totalitarian experiences of Stalinism and Maoism. The only thing that survived the ruin of Western societies was "the system," a system that regulates the entry, the distribution and the elimination of the energies of all its participants: "A vague and complicated system", we hear Godard stating in *Ici et Ailleurs*, "that the whole world is continually entering and leaving." According to Lyotard, these energies have all been oriented towards a certain sense of lack. But the desire to fulfill the lack, made possible by representations of fantasies, devalues the world at the same time as it renders it knowable, locatable, predictable. Against this backdrop of absence, things and events are reduced to signs that are in turn integrated within a network of information that is easily communicable and consumable; up until the point that there is nothing left but signs, one replacing the other. Adding more elements to the flux and flow adds up to nothing: stripped of all difference and rendered exchangeable, they only contribute to an ongoing zero sum game. Like capital, like political discourse, all signs and images are turned into cultural commodities, adapted to the operations of the system, absorbed into cyclical voyages leading nowhere. "Since our dreams add up mostly as a series of zeros," says Godard, "one has to say that the images of the totality have nothing to do with the totality of images." The question is then: how can images be liberated from this self-enclosed system of exchange, repetition and circulation over which we seem to have lost all control? How can they be extracted from the endless parade of clichés that only serve to stimulate immediate recognition and reproduce the already known; those "brand images" as Godard calls them, that continuously take up their place as another link in an endless chain preventing all other images from being seen? Breaking up the parade: isn't this what Godard literally does in *Ici et Ailleurs*, when he lets us see a line of people moving past the camera, each holding up an image, each taking their turn, one after the other, as if to break down the ever-expanding circuit of reproduction in which images and individuals are all caught? But if there



is no longer an alternative or outside to the capitalist economy of exchange; if capitalism places everything within representation, only presenting itself to itself, as Lyotard claimed, then what can still resist?

Curiously, unknowingly, Lyotard was actually more or less tracing a path that another thinker had forged some years before, someone who is also evoked in *Ici et Ailleurs*, be it in a rather ghostly manner. It was Irmgard Emmelhainz—whom we’ve both met in Ghent—who drew our attention to a mysterious presence in the film, one that I honestly hadn’t noticed before.<sup>20</sup> It can be seen in the scene in which the father of what represents a typical French working-class family (the “here” in the film) comes home after having unsuccessfully spent the day looking for a job. He finds his daughter doing her homework, who asks him: “Can you explain this to me dad? I don’t understand.” He answers: “No, I don’t have time, we’ll see later” and walks out, leaving the girl with a visible sense of frustration. On the wall behind her hangs a copy of a painting that, at first sight, seems strangely out of place: Picasso’s *Guernica*. According to Irmgard, Godard has likely set up this montage to evoke the crisis of militant theory and action in the wake of 1968. As the models of explanation and legitimation started to spin around themselves, only confirming the authority of their spokesmen and endlessly deferring the idea of revolutionary change, the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the subsequent oil crisis caused unemployment to soar and hope to slump. All the while, television reports kept on “covering” the injustices roaring all over the world. The scene can be said to allegorise this contradiction between the idle noise of discourse and the deafening silence of images showing shattering torment and destruction, as if to evince how the rubble of lives and homes was covered up by the rubble of words that housed nothing anymore. But the presence of *Guernica* also brings to mind a well-known discussion between two thinkers: Jean-Paul Sartre, the committed existentialist who at one time had a profound influence on Godard, and Theodor Adorno, the disenchanting Marxist who, not unlike Lyotard after him, found himself exploring the possibility of resistance after the collapse of revolutionary hope. In his musings on the possibility of commitment in art, Sartre questioned whether Picasso’s depiction of the bombing of the town of Guernica had “won a single supporter to the Spanish cause,” since it merely transformed cruelty in fragmented figures without effectively addressing the political issue.<sup>21</sup> Opposed to the intransitivity of poetry, Sartre positioned the transitivity of prose writing, which for him still offered possibilities for direct engagement with reality. While in the first, he argued, words were merely deployed as autonomous things without political usability, in the latter they could be used as tools of communication, committed

to creating awareness of the world's injustices. To this, Adorno responded that art could only have a political function when, on the contrary, it liberates itself from the clutches of communication. The power of Picasso's painting did, for him, not reside in its depiction of suffering or its capacity to incite empathy, but precisely in its rejection of the conventions of representation. Against Sartre, Adorno suggested that artworks which strive to be socially useful have the effect of, as he put it, "preaching to the saved" and trivializing injustice by imprisoning it with meaning. The only way not to betray the memory of struggle and catastrophe is to keep it from being tainted by the norms and conventions of the culture industry and the commodity market. Adorno not only condemned the aestheticization of politics that he saw as one of the key characteristics of fascism, but also the politicization of aesthetics that developed in response. In his view, art can only have an effect by its radical opposition to instrumentality and narrativity, empathy and identification; when it does not constitute a mediation of representation of violence but an affective event that inflicts its own violence, creating an "aesthetic shudder" that *compels* a change of attitude which typical committed works merely demand. It is up to art, Adorno claimed, to disrupt the totalization of consciousness and perception. It is to art "that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics."<sup>22</sup>

However wide the gap separating Lyotard from Adorno—the first took the latter to task for hopelessly clinging to the structure of negative dialectics—they do have something fundamental in common: they both waged war on totalizing reason.<sup>23</sup> Railing against the oppressive forces of cultural standardization and political dogmatism infecting everything with sameness, they both dedicated themselves to rescuing alterity from the violence of capital and discourse. Addressing the crisis of meaning and representation, they both found solace in the gleaning of moments of interruption, moments when easy recognition and assimilation are thwarted. As opposed to the imperialism of discourse, which tends to segment and dictate the meaning of reality, it is the world of pure perception that is cherished anew, a world that can never entirely possess its object as it is in itself. Invoking André Breton's dictum that "the eye exists in a savage state" and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's inclination to uncover our mute contact with things, Lyotard considers the obscurity and opacity of perception not as something waiting to be illuminated by intellection and narration, but rather as constitutive of a form of vision, a form that draws on the very uncertainty that always inhabits our hold on things, a form that can make new possibilities appear. "The given is not a text," he wrote, "there is within it a density, or rather a constitutive difference, which is

not to be read, but to be seen, and that this difference, and the immobile mobility which reveals it, is what is continually forgotten in the process of signification.”<sup>24</sup>

Resisting generalization, gregarization, banalization, by destroying the illusion of unity and coherence, and relearning to see things in their difference: isn't this also the mission that Godard has taken up in *Ici et Ailleurs*, a mission he would continue in his later work? “Learn to see, not to read,” we read on the screen-as-blackboard. More than learning how to decode what is given to hear and see as a sequence of coded elements, as a transmitter of anticipated effects and calculated revenues—and thus an instrument of power, for power—Godard urges us “to cleanse the eyes,” as Mizoguchi once said. Instead of abiding the theatre of signification where everything is considered as a sign, we are asked to re-engage with the vain intensity—or “stupidity,” to cite a Flaubertian term—of images. What Godard proposes, against the law of equivalence and the fallacy of the zero sum game, is an operation of differentiation in an attempt to re-introduce heterogeneity into a putatively homogeneous unity. His strategy consists in breaking down the audiovisual flux, disjoining words, sounds and images from their bondage, and combining them with their “others.” Not to simply overthrow representations, but to reconfigure them: a necessary defiguration as prerequisite for refiguration, for the regeneration of the ability to figure differently, or think figuratively. An intercutting to undercut the system of exchange, an undermining to reopen the possibility of mining. To “dispossess the space of fulfilment,” as Lyotard wrote, “fantasy makes opposition out of difference, poetics remakes difference with this opposition.”<sup>25</sup> Godard has always claimed that “and” is the true title of *Ici et Ailleurs*: here AND elsewhere, fascism AND socialism, the Jewish issue AND the Palestinian issue, Jew AND Muslim. It is just “too simple and too easy to simply divide the world in two,” he says. The mentality of the times: as the belief in authority and totality as entailed by the self-sufficiency of discourse and the coherence of grand narratives went into crisis, so did the logics of diacritical opposition and dialectical sublation. Around the moment of *Ici et Ailleurs*' release, another French thinker, Roland Barthes, proposed the term “neutral” to define that which outplays the simplistic forms of ideology critique that depend theoretically on the existence of a certain truth located outside of ideology. Parallel to Godard's trajectory, the same thinker who once fiercely denounced what he called the *Critique ni-ni*—the “neither-norism” of neutrally telling both sides of any story—now found himself inclined to challenge the dominant paradigms whose meaning rested on conflict with the idea of a structural creation that would defeat, annul, or contradict their implacable binarism by means of a “third term.”<sup>26</sup> “Films should be neutral,”

echoed Godard, “neutral means being run through both poles, otherwise there is no current,” and “the image is the ground—what I like are two images together for there to be a third—like the justice system: prosecution and defence and then the jury.”<sup>27</sup> As conflict and hierarchy get replaced by parataxis, the “good” is put on the same par as the “bad,” with montage acting as the scales of justice.

How is the relation between images measured with the scales of montage? Godard loves to quote a passage from a short text by surrealist Pierre Reverdy:

*The Image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison, but from two realities, more or less distant, brought together. The more the relation between the two realities is distant and accurate, the stronger the image will be—the more it will possess emotional power and poetic reality. Two realities that have no relation whatever cannot be brought together effectively. No image is created. An image is not strong because it is brutal or fantastic—but because the association of ideas is distant and just.*<sup>28</sup>

Godard believes in a mode of judgement that doesn't rely on a predetermined system of meaning, one that invites to see and reflect for oneself. But how can an association of ideas, grasped in their maximum distance, be considered as “just”—in terms of both justness and justice? Godard has been known to say that he likes to “confound” things. But to the word “confounding” correspond at least two meanings: it is both a method of argumentation, and a form of amalgamation. To confound means throwing things into confusion and dissolution, in the interest of dialectical exposition and deliberation, but it also means to muddle and jumble, up to a point of irresolution and indecision. Godard has always played with procedures of juxtaposition that call attention to hidden connections and contradictions. But when everything is suspected of being subsumed to a logic of equivalence and exchange, how can these procedures still bring out differentiability? The problem rears its head in one of the most striking sequences in *Ici et Ailleurs*, one which is constantly cited by those who, then as now, seem so eager to brand Godard as an “anti-semitic”—a reputation which was violently asserted when, on the day of the film's premiere, a nail-bomb was found in one of the two Parisian theatres where the film was supposed to be shown. The sequence that caused so much consternation starts at the moment when a portrait of Hitler obtrudes on an image of the leaders of the French Popular Front. The raised hands of Léon Blum and his associates are reframed in such a way that they are transformed into national-socialist salutes, while the word “popular” flickers on the screen. Then an image of

Lenin appears while we hear one of Hitler's speeches, in which we can discern the word "revolution," before being interspersed by an image of a May '68 protester and an image of a victim of Black September. The suggestion seems clear: the images signifying the October Revolution of 1917 + the Popular Front's victory in 1936 + the uprisings of May 1968, when all added up, still amount to the image of death and defeat in 1970. A bit later, we see the figure of Hitler facing an empty part of the screen that is soon filled with the image of Golda Meir, right at the moment when we hear him saying that "a second Palestine should not be permitted to arise." It appears as if both of them exchange looks, almost as if he was awaiting her. She, too, raises her hand in a gesture that resembles a Nazi salute while the word "Israel" flickers as if emanating from both of their mouths, before being gradually replaced by the word "Palestine." On the soundtrack we hear a Jewish Kaddish prayer voicing the names of death camps and an Arab text lamenting the Palestinian victims.

What does this montage make us see? What happens when these images and words, in all their apparent divergence, get to approach one another? Doesn't the series of shots and reverse shots threaten to throw everything into a muddle: fascists and antifascists, Hitler and Lenin, Léon Blum and Golda Meir, the Jews and the Palestinians? Godard, however, immediately complicates things with a *coup de théâtre*, by cutting this montage, in turn, with its reverse shot, showing the French family watching the same images on television, while we hear the filmmaker's voice lamenting how all images are enslaved to an uninterrupted chain of brand images, making up a globalised and totalising system that has gradually taken a hold of our lives and dreams. The montage then lets itself be interpreted as a kind of Lyotardian critique on the cynicism of a system that reduces the heterogeneous to homogeneous totality and absorbs any subjectivity, any capacity, any experience into its circuit, to which there is no exteriority. At that point, the film seems to touch upon the dead-end of its underlying logic: the necessity of critique runs up against the inevitability of its failure. To all appearances, critique has now become an integral part of the system, and all attempts at differentiation are doomed to be drowned in a pool of sameness.

An echo from another film springs to mind, a film that came out the same year: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Fortini/Cani*. In the film we see Franco Fortini reading out loud passages from *I Cani del Sinai*, his passionate response to the Western reception of the Six-Day War of 1967. He reads these harsh words:

*Vietnam is talked about like one talks about Nazi crimes, and Nazi crimes are talked about like the Israeli war, and the Israeli war like a famine in India. At the*

heart of it is a single hard, brutal news item: 'You are not there where what decides your destiny is taking place. You have no destiny. You have not and you are not. Instead of reality you have been given a perfect appearance, a well-imitated life.'<sup>29</sup>

In his text, Fortini, too, criticised the indifference with which world events came to be treated in the stock exchange of images called "the media," reducing events to products to be consumed from a distance. He speaks about the revival of interest in past catastrophes, particularly the horror of the Holocaust that, according to him, increasingly appears to stand in for every other case of persecution and oppression, nullifying all their historical specificities. Countering this nihilism, for Straub and Huillet as for Godard, means that the illusion of unity and coherence of the information machine has to be disrupted, that words are to be separated from what they make us see, that images have to be disjoined from what they say. In *Fortini/ Cani*, the loneliness of Fortini's voice is brought to bear on the absence of what his words describe, while they linger over the traces and ruins of past injustices. In *Ici et Ailleurs*, Godard resorts to a strategy of association and dissociation, which, however, always seems at risk of sinking in the kind of undifferentiated totality that is so harshly criticized by Fortini. Think of the scene in which images of Holocaust victims are shown, while the voiceover recounts how Jewish deportees in concentration camps, on the verge of dying, were called "musulman." This was the moment, Godard wrote in a posterior letter to Sanbar, "when the war in the Middle-East was born."<sup>30</sup> Since the age-old image of the Jewish people as exiles from the "promised land" was, in itself, not enough to have their right to a land of their own legitimized, a second, horrible image was needed: that of the German madness. According to this much repeated argument, the conflict between Palestinians and Israeli has its foundations in Europe, and the Jewish are now doing to the Palestinians what the Nazis have done to the Jews. Godard has put forward the same argument again and again in subsequent films, notably, thirty years later, in the lecture scene in *Notre Musique* (2004), in which Godard shows two images of concentration camp victims, labelling one with the word "Jew," another with the word "musulman." "At the time," he said in an interview, "I said that Beirut started there. Today, we can say that Sarajevo also started there."<sup>31</sup> In the same scene, he demonstrates the impossibility of identifying the place and the time where an image of war rubble has been taken: the image of the destruction of the American civil war could just as well have been showing Stalingrad, Sarajevo, Hiroshima, or Beirut. He demonstrates that "truth has two faces" by showing a photograph of Israeli arriving in Palestine and a photograph of Palestinians leaving their land,

describing them as “The Israeli walk into the water towards the promised land, the Palestinians towards drowning.” In a conversation with Stéphane Zagdanski, Godard pressed his provocative rapprochement even further by making an association between the “six million Jewish kamikazes” and the suicides committed in the service of the Palestinian cause.<sup>32</sup> Godard claims that montage is supposed to act as the scales of justice, calling for a reflective judgment that does not rely on narratives that sum up the truth, but doesn’t his calling to the stand of all of yesterday’s calamities and conflicts to bear witness to our history of catastrophe add up to a radical inability to differentiate between injustices? By subsuming their specificities into his very own historical theorems, doesn’t Godard come dangerously close to the kind of nihilism that, by endlessly comparing the evils of past and present, ends up erasing all difference?<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, we are no longer dealing with a dialectical conception of the march of history, which would advance through conflict, towards emancipation. Nor are we any longer dealing with the belief that there is a reality of contradictions hidden under the surface of things that could be recovered by way of a dialectical process. By the mid-1970s, not only the idea of revolution was abandoned, but also the promise of another world, of the historical possibility of change altogether. And as the critical dialectical procedures were suspected to contribute to what they aimed to denounce, they seemed to start spinning around in circles, uncertain of what or how to reveal or demonstrate. With the collapse of all sense of emancipatory futurity and finality came a mournful reflection on the ruins left behind by failed endeavours. This was “a present of desertion,” wrote Fortini in a letter to Straub, “not so much from ‘politics’ as from any finality: and which translates itself into a telescoping of any prediction, in a refusal of project, in short, in a fascinating contemplation of death, both one’s own and that of others.”<sup>34</sup> Isn’t it this contemplation of death that we find at the heart of *Ici et Ailleurs*: a historical contemplation that is no longer turned toward a horizon of emancipation that lies before us, but towards the catastrophe that lies behind us? “Godard goes forward while looking backwards, apprehensively, towards what he is leaving behind,”<sup>35</sup> Daney wrote in reference to Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, the angel who propels helplessly and blindly towards an unknown future, his anguished gaze fixed on the ruins of the past. Decades later, Godard’s meditation on the history of catastrophe would eventually find its definite form in a project that was conceived right around the time when *Ici et Ailleurs* was released: *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988-1998). What started out as a joint project with Henri Langlois turned into a series of classes, which eventually, twenty years later, took the form of an 8-part,

266 minute long requiem of the past glories and lost causes of the 20th century and the cinema that accompanied it. If Godard once believed in the promise of a possible future and cinema's role in constructing that future, then *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* is the ultimate elegy for the end of this promise. Godard, once more, confesses himself guilty of having assumed the power of cinema to write history, guilty for trying at a time when it was already too late. Cinema is deemed guilty precisely because it misunderstood its own capacities and responsibilities, because it betrayed its historical calling by not answering the present when it was most needed: at the time of the Holocaust.

Godard is certainly not alone in his proclamation of the Holocaust as the pivotal event of the 20th century. But it is remarkable that this particular historical account, which tends to place the Nazi massacres within the register of the "sacred," gained prominence towards the end of the 1970s.<sup>36</sup> It's as if the crumbling of the vision of a history divided by the prospect of revolution gave way to the vision of a history retrospectively split in two by the unspeakable horror of the concentration camps. Against the traditional modes of historical interpretation that insert political and social phenomena inside a chain of causes and effects, an irreducible event is brought to bear for which no forms of explanation or representation are considered adequate or appropriate. It is in this context that the infamous debates between Godard and Claude Lanzmann, the famed filmmaker of *Shoah* (1985)—whose filming in fact began in 1976—came to the fore. While the first has declared cinema guilty of not having taken images of the Holocaust, the latter has condemned cinema for attempting to present images of its horrors, even going as far as stating that he would prefer to destroy any existing footage. Godard has criticized Lanzmann for his decision to avoid historical documentation of any kind, claiming that *Shoah* "showed nothing at all,"<sup>37</sup> a "nothing" that has found an echo in Lanzmann's claim that he himself, after years of research, had "understood nothing" about the Holocaust.<sup>38</sup> As the event exceeds all human understanding, reasons Lanzmann, it could and should not be represented. In that way he has taken up Adorno's much-touted claim that "it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz," suggesting that any form of representation would inevitably result in trivialization and that cinema necessarily fails to consider horror and suffering due to both the exuberance and the inadequacy of images. Godard's suggestion that all images, in one way or another, evoke the history of catastrophe, the Holocaust in particular, is thus contradicted by Lanzmann's statement that no image is capable to represent the event. Any depiction or fictionalisation, as he said in regards to the American television series *Holocaust* (1978), could only "destroy the unique nature



of the Holocaust.”<sup>39</sup> But that the border between the declaration of the impossibility of representation and its prohibition is very porous was illustrated by the polemics around Eyal Sivan and Michel Khleifi’s *Route 181* (2003). The film was vehemently attacked by Lanzmann and a few of his befriended intellectuals—the same ones who, today, are keen to charge the Left with the responsibility for the terror haunting the French streets—who accused the film of profanation. In particular, they alluded to a scene in which a Palestinian barber recounts the massacre of the Arabs of Lod during the 1948 war, a scene which resonates with the famous barber scene in Lanzmann’s *Shoah*. They blamed the film for drawing an analogy between the fate of the Jews under Nazism and the fate of the Palestinians from 1947 to the present day. This analogy, they claimed, subverts the uniqueness of the event, to which only the *mise-en-scène* of Lanzmann’s film is deemed adequate: only through the suspension of representation can its single truth be conveyed, only through the words and silences of the witness can the lie of the image be overcome. To the unicity of the Real can only respond the ethical law of the unrepresentable.<sup>40</sup>

It would seem that the skepticism towards images, as it was omnipresent in the 1960s and 1970s, took a new turn in the decades that followed: in the absence of clear measurements to consider and dispute the legitimacy or illegitimacy of representation, the question of the unrepresentable came to the fore, as did the biblical prohibition on representation. This thought movement—from “Mao to Moses,” as a French newspaper once jocularly put it—can also be traced in Lyotard’s work, whose affirmation of intensities and opacities, cut off from the world of representation, has been recast as a testimony to the immemorial and the unrepresentable, to that which cannot be brought to presence. In Lyotard’s thinking, the forceful rejection of the axiomatic of representation, which for Adorno was still a way to hold on to the promise of emancipation, slipped into the religious universe of unrepayable debt. The catastrophes of the 20th century are presented as the fallout of the Western project of emancipation that has denied the dependence of the “soul” on an unattainable Otherness. In spite of this denial, the ethical debt to the Other still makes itself felt as a feeling of lack, a traumatic call that cannot and should not be turned into an object of visual knowledge or aesthetic contemplation. The task of art is, therefore, not to represent the Other, through which the debt and obligation to the Other would be cancelled out, but to touch upon its call by creating an experience of the sublime. It appears that Lyotard tried to escape the problem of indifferentism that he ran into in the mid-1970s, when he conveyed the bazaar of intensities where everything is equal to anything else, by turning to the ethical in search for a traumatic “founding

event,” an event beyond thought and politics which accounts for “the constitutive infirmity of the soul, its infancy and its misery,” an event which he identified as the Holocaust.<sup>41</sup> For Lyotard, no form of representation is adequate to what remains “after Auschwitz”—with the notable exception, he adds, of *Shoah*. The void left behind can only resonate in the silence that now seems to be the only possibility left to create an ethical bond with the Other. Given that our moral compass has apparently lost its orientation, only the imposition of sensation through silence would be able to prevent a recurrence of the horrors. The political and aesthetic stakes of yesteryear thus found themselves transformed in a mournful testimony to endless evil and unrepresentable catastrophe. As the horizons of emancipation were being foreclosed, the attention resolutely shifted towards an immemorial past which never comes to pass, epitomised by irredeemable histories of atrocity, war and genocide that seem to reflect the inescapable reality of our world, which can no longer be folded back into any rational narrative leading towards emancipation.

Godard too has continued in the slipway of the dream of art’s silent purity. In contrast to some of his contemporaries, however, he came to reassess the value of images, which are for him not forged duplicates but imprints of true presence. Which implies, indeed, that cinema cannot but be guilty of not having provided images that testify to the presence of the camps. Because the camps existed, there must be images of them. But this could also be interpreted the other way around: there must be images of the camps so that the very truth and power of images can be verified. So on the one hand, Godard affirmed the integrity and self-sufficiency of images, and on the other hand he also substituted the failed promise of dialectical logic for the promise of redemption, which he found encapsulated in a sentence from Saint-Paul: “the image will come at the time of the Resurrection.” Throughout *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, he opposes this promise to the original sin that has devastated cinema and its force of revelation: its submission to narrative and discourse. Godard presents himself as the preeminent witness of cinema’s childhood, when it still didn’t know yet that it was condemned, and shows us what cinema has not been able to become with the testimonies of what it has been. If Images are born free and equal, then films are the history of their oppression. In a heroic attempt to salvage images from their demise, Godard aims to return them to their innocence, as if to purge them from all of their attachments to commercialisation and narrativization, exemplified by Hollywood and television, and reinstate them to their pure splendor and pictorial glory (not coincidentally, *Guernica* is a major point of reference in *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*). Godard thus manages to escape the indefinite, inexhaustible task of demystification that *Ici*

*et Ailleurs* has brought to an impasse by reaffirming the power of the image as a pure presence, and reviving the old dream of cinema as a mystical art that could bring out the sensible energy of the Spirit. In order to counter the paralysing effect of distrust, he re-establishes the utopia of exempted meaning, distinguished by the purity of epiphany. It's noteworthy that one of Godard's subsequent—but failed—projects took him to the newly independent Mozambique, a country, he said, “that wasn't swimming in images yet”<sup>42</sup> and had to, like himself, start anew by untangling images from the primacy of signification and narration, and learning to see and hear again. Like a child that learns to walk, relying on one's own eyes and ears, rather than in the words of others. In *Passion* (1982), a film that reflects Godard's interest in the pictorial genealogy of cinema, a character says that “one has to see what will afterwards be written” instead of the other way around, but that it's “hard to see things before talking about them.” In the accompanying video *Scenario du film Passion* Godard likens “voir” to “recevoir”: looking means receiving, coming before words. To show things before they are named and fixed in a hierarchical order, before the name comes to stand for the thing itself: this is the challenge that Godard has taken upon himself in the wake of *Ici et Ailleurs*. Like a return of the repressed: the suspicion towards signification and representation and the impulse to liberate images from sedimented knowledge led to a renewal of trust in images, albeit in the guise of a paradoxical salvage operation.

The paradox is of course that the process of making images into icons of pure, unmediated presence is itself only possible by virtue of its opposite: the possibility of creating new connections and combinations between all the fragments of the world, enclosed in images, sounds and words that can be made to appear, disappear and reappear like musical themes and motives. This assumes the existence of a boundless world where all these fragments coexist, where they can all be taken and combined ad infinitum in order to tell the truth about a century and its cinema.<sup>43</sup> That's how the operation of interruption and demystification that was central to *Ici et Ailleurs* is complemented with an additional operation of remystification and communalization, reviving the “silent” images that have been taken out of their narrative context as testimonies of a common history. This double operation brings into view another strange overturning: if the strategy of fragmentation, of breaking apart corresponding elements or bringing together incompatible ones were once thought to be able to provoke subversion and division, they now engender exactly the opposite. With the demise of the vision that considers history itself as a dialectical process, the creation of unforeseen juxtaposition of contrary worlds no longer results in a subversive clash, but rather in a form of affinity that attests to

both the autonomy of the world of images and its potential to create a new sense of fraternity among them. The cinema that had at one point wandered off track by assuming the task of disrupting the illusion of unity and commonality, now returns to its earlier vocation as the supreme symbolic expression of integration. It is as if the end of the possibility of division has given way to the need for a collective ethos of co-belonging, a renewed ethos that had to be forged on the ruins of history. Disconnected from any horizon of emancipation, the same strategies that were once believed to cause upheaval and produce a new kind of awareness are thus redressed in at least two different tendencies in Godard's work: the confrontation of disparate realities is either reduced to a vertiginous manifestation of undecidability, endlessly punctuating the commonplaces of discourse with forceful images and undercutting visual clichés with poetic words, or they are seamlessly fused in a great *musée imaginaire* that is held together by what Godard calls the "fraternity of metaphors." In both cases, it is the voice of the filmmaker himself that brings order in the chaos.

We have come a long way since *Ici et Ailleurs*. In time, Godard has come to position himself as the melancholic memorialist of great hopes that have come to pass and the redeemer of a cinema that can only be saved by returning images to their innocence. Like the last of the Mohicans, he casts a disenchanting eye over a world engulfed by horrors and calamities, confronting traces of struggle with their gaping void, and memories of horror with their enduring violence. The overall sentiment that resounds is one that haunts our times, which is one of melancholia, the intuition that it might actually be impossible to change the ways of a world that has become entirely liquid, lacking any solid point for opposing the reality of domination. Wanting to believe has taken over from believing. If the critique of the theatre of representation and the totalization of grand narratives, its questioning of every memory and every image as a possible decoy, once held a polemical force, then it seems to have gradually been taken over by the perils of irresolution and ethical modes of thinking that either attest to lost forms of commonality or irredeemable catastrophe. Twenty years after *Économie Libidinale* and *Ici et Ailleurs* made their appearance, their authors each resorted to their own theology: one by proclaiming the end of cinema and looking towards its past in order to shed light on a ruinous present, the other by proclaiming the end of politics and finding recourse in the ethical debt towards the otherness of the unrepresentable. In both cases, what is suggested is that we have lived the end of a certain vision of the world, associated with the pursuit of emancipatory dreams, mirrored in a cinema that wanted so much to activate these dreams but ended up denouncing them as illusions.

This is supposed to be the time in which we have come of age: a time after, a time which forecloses one essential venture: the creation of dissonance. This is, I fear, what constitutes the ideological configuration of our present, a present that is distinguished by a tight bond between radical new forms of world domination and the disbarment of all forms of criticism that pretend to have their measure. It says that, whatever differences of opinion or belief we might have, they all pertain to the same self-evident way of dealing with our world, the same way of interpreting and evaluating the things as we perceive them. It says that we have reached the end of politics, at least the politics that gives itself the task of emancipating the oppressed, and that policies should be focused on keeping up with the rat race of global capitalism and securing the protection of our civility, at all costs. As the principles of political division have all been pronounced dead, conflicts are stripped of any means to take the measure of “otherness” other than **the absoluteness**, and the remaining energies are invested in the treatment of social ills and the reconstruction of forms of commonality that are under threat. All acts of dissent are then denounced as either defensive and archaic obstinacies that only stand in the way of progress, or manifestations of radical otherness that are bound to incline towards terror or trauma. This is the state of things as it is, the only reasonable one. All we are asked to do is consent.

This cartography of perceptions, descriptions and interpretations of our world, the one we are given to orient us in our lives, is called “consensus.”

\*\*\*

It’s been just over ten years since I first saw *Ici et Ailleurs*. I didn’t see it in a film theatre, but in a contemporary art museum, where it was on show as part of an exhibition created by three Belgian artists and critics—Herman Asselberghs, Els Opsomer and Pieter Van Bogaert—who had traveled to Palestine to explore in their turn the proximities and distances between “here” and “there.”<sup>44</sup>

I remember that, as I watched the film, it felt as if it was speaking from one dark time to another. At that time, images of 9/11 and Abu Ghraib were still smouldering on our retina. Our screens were feeding us daily doses of news bites from Operation Iraqi Freedom. I remember defeatism settling in after it dawned on us that even the biggest and most widespread collective protest the world had ever seen had not been able to prevent the “coalition of the willing” from embarking on their holy crusade. Everything had changed, and nothing at all. News reports from Palestine were still showing us images of armed resistance, death and suffering. We saw

kids throwing rubber bullets back at the same Israeli soldiers that previously fired them. We saw an extensive matrix of checkpoints, earth mounds, trenches, gates and roadblocks, restricting the movements of almost four million people. A huge concrete wall, separating the weak from the mighty, the dispossessed from the prosperous. Refugees who had been living in “provisional” camps for over half a century. Families who were unable to leave their homes, while armed forces were stationed on their roof. Dried up lands that were no more viable today than the South African Bantustans were yesterday. Bulldozers demolishing homes, uprooting orchards and destroying crops. 1.4 million people, mostly children, piled up in one of the most densely populated regions of the world, with no place to run and no space to hide. The world’s largest prison, cut off from all essential supplies, bombarded by a barrage of lethal missiles for the sake of the “War on Terror”. At the same time we could still recall watching, ten years before, Rabin and Arafat shaking hands on the lawn of the White House. From that moment on, no one could deny any longer the existence of the Palestinians as a people living under occupation and in exile. Here in Europe, many were acknowledging and supporting the Palestinians’ right to independence and return, all the while witnessing how the Israeli government was incessantly violating international law with impunity, gradually sweeping away whatever remained of the promises outlined in Oslo, slowly strangling the Palestinian economy, continuously taking land, building new settlements, pressuring inhabitants to abandon their home, stripping them of the right to live where they were born, all this supported by a Kafkaesque maze of legal regulations. It was clear to us then, as it is clear to us now, that a grave injustice is being done to the Palestinians. So why does it continue to be so difficult to give a form of political visibility to this injustice?

In *Notre Musique*, which happened to come out the same year when I saw *Ici et Ailleurs*, Godard points out that the Palestinians’ image is that of the “others” of the Israeli. “Do you know why Palestinians are famous?,” asks Mahmoud Darwish in the film. “Because Israel is our enemy.” Is the visibility of Palestine then bound to be tied up with the history of the Jewish people and the geopolitical status of the state of Israel? How to escape the clutches of Manichaeism that holds each one in place as the hostage of the other? How to thwart or—to use Barthes’ term—“outplay” a conflictual relationship between seemingly irreconcilable one-sided positions, each claiming an exclusive legitimacy and intelligibility, each holding on to their own image?

Elias Sanbar, whose work has greatly influenced *Notre Musique*, has recounted how, in the wake of 1948, the main challenge for the Palestinians was to reaffirm their visibility after having their existence denied and their lives fragmented. It

was a matter of reclaiming the name of Palestine, whose villages, roads, streams and hills were all renamed after the proclamation of the state of Israel.<sup>45</sup> I'm reminded of one of the films that you have recently helped to bring to light. A film which was made as a response to Golda Meir's infamous speech in which she denies the reality of Palestinian lives: *They Do Not Exist* (1974) by Mustapha Ali (who was also one of Godard's collaborators in Palestine). You told me that making films like these, providing an image of Palestinian life and resistance in which Palestinians could recognize themselves, was only possible after 1968, when the PLO established the Film Unit. Up until then, images of Palestine—under British Mandate, the rebellion of 1936-39, the Nakba and its aftermath, the 1967 war and the fall of Jerusalem—were likely to be recorded by the British authorities or the Israeli colonizers. However, Sanbar has pointed out how, soon after their struggle finally gained international presence, the Palestinians found themselves trapped in another reductive image: no longer that of nameless absentees but that of guerrilla fighters and lawless pariahs. An image, as *Ici et Ailleurs* suggests, that lost all of its positive connotations in the mid-1970s. It was only after the revolutionary generation found itself in a crisis, especially after the Camp David Accords and the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, that other forms of visibility were making the scene. I'm thinking of the first films that Michel Khleifi made in Palestine, a decade after the impact of Black September made him leave his hometown of Nazareth for Brussels. Rather than conforming to the common images of internal homogeneity and external manicheism, films such as *Fertile Memory* (1980) and *Wedding in Galilee* (1987) managed to re-envision Palestine as a heteroglossic multiplicity of trajectories traced by individuals who, in all their fragility and contrariety, manage to lift their thoughts and efforts to meet the challenges and violences inflicted on them. I remember Khleifi stating that these films were heavily criticised in most Arab regimes, precisely because they didn't resemble the expected unanimist "brand image." Instead, he had chosen to show a Palestine where the life of its inhabitants is not detached from contradictions, where the Palestinians are not a monolithic entity, at once considered as an "other" and yet entirely knowable, but a community of people who try to apprehend an identity by questioning the ones that are imposed on them. Recall, in *Fertile Memory*, this tender portrait of two Palestinian women who carry the weight of a double occupation: not only do they struggle with the burden of Israeli domination but also with the restrictions imposed on them by the patriarchal society. The film is not concerned with victory or defeat, antagonism or compromise, but rather with the construction of a new space, a space that disrupts the structures of authority and hierarchy. Isn't that how cinema

continues to pose possibilities of resistance: by displacing the dominant fictions and representations of a situation and its disposition of identities and possibilities? By unsettling, for example, the commonplace notion that only the traditional form of documentary chronicle suits the Palestinians, while the dramatic form of fiction is reserved for the Israeli, as Godard remarked in *Notre Musique*. This would imply that the only suitable representation of the Palestinian struggle is the one that we often get to see in the flow of gritty images ensnaring Palestinians in the position of victims struggling for survival or resorting to desperate acts of violence. In other words: the position of those who do not have the capacity to rethink or reinvent their own lives. Doesn't resistance begin when this positioning is contested, when capacity and possibility is affirmed, but also when the very relationship between the apparent and the different, the same and the other, is unsettled? "Like a child's quest for identity," Khleifi has said, "we need two levels: reality and dream."<sup>46</sup> The tension between these two levels is also what has struck me in another film of that period, one we have been briefly discussing in Ghent: Mohammad Malas' *The Dream* (1987), a film that painfully resonates with *Ici et Ailleurs*. Like Godard, Malas too found himself paralysed with anxiety and anguish after he shot the material for his film. Malas too needed five years to come up with a form for his images and sounds, five years to come to terms with the horrendous death of hundreds of people whose testimonies he had captured in the months leading up to the massacres of Sabra and Shatila. In contrast to Godard, however, Malas was never interested in illustrating the slogans of nationhood and revolt, but rather in showing the everyday conditions, thoughts and hopes that lead up to the slogans. In the film, dream and reality, the intangible and the concrete, find each other in a space of possibility, a space where the other can be the same and the same is itself other. Ultimately, however, we cannot but realize that even the resilience brimming on the screen cannot trump the powerlessness of cinema in the face of death. An image remains but an appearance, the screen remains but a surface.

Can appearances still make a difference? This question acquired a new sense of urgency during the Persian Gulf War, which came to be known as the first real televisual war. This was a conflict, noted Serge Daney—clearly inspired by his persisting fascination for *Ici et Ailleurs*—that was basically a faceoff between two ways of *not* making an image, as both camps pulled back to their own brand image, their own "visual" as Daney preferred to call it.<sup>47</sup> Shots without reverse shot, visualizations without information, winners without losers: nothing but an optical verification of power. On the one hand, the Iraqis offered an emotional, all-purpose image of the "Arab world." On the other hand the Americans and



the coalition created an image of a police action aimed at restoring stability in the Middle East. Having learned valuable lessons from the Vietnam experience, US military authorities did everything in their considerable might to avoid any interruptions in the dominant narrative that identified justice with the necessity of creating a new global order, something that, of course, only an enlightened, hegemonic power could ensure. This fantasy of enkindling a rational harmony between the interests of universal stability and the requirements of international law was expressed in the ubiquity of images that filled our television screens day and night, showing abstract light traces piercing through the night sky and operational maps on which little icons and captions stood in for places and people, objectified and dehumanized as military targets. The war was staged as a seemingly seamless and surgical realisation of reasonable objectives through an instrumental set of actions that didn't meet any resistance or suffer any setback. What we didn't get to see, as Daney remarked, were the eyes of "the other." And as Harun Farocki—surely one of Godard's kindred spirits—has shown, the more images become the result of inhuman calculation rather than human vision, the more readily they lend themselves to inhumane acts.<sup>48</sup> This was the war as it was portrayed in the Western mass media: a video arcade game showing faceless foes marching in anonymous ranks to be vaporized by superior automated weapons from a safe distance. This particular "visual," according to Daney, was matched with another one, manifested in the grotesque propaganda attempts that pitted the resolute and loyal Iraqi warriors against the Western crusaders. The construction of both "visuals," however opposed, ultimately served one and the same goal: the reduction of all gaps between a mode of presentation and a mode of interpretation. By asking us to "read," they left us nothing to "see." Daney already warned about the danger of this form of consensualism back in 1978, when he reported back on his visit to Damascus, where he was invited by Mohamad Malas who, together with Omar Amiralay and Ossama Mohammed, ran the local *ciné-club* there. In response to the censoring of some of the films he had brought with him to show—including *Ici et Ailleurs*—he wrote about the tendency of subjecting images to a "model thinking," in the sense that they are not judged according to their singularity but for their adherence to a certain predetermined paradigm.<sup>49</sup> When everything is automatically recognized and reaffirmed, nothing can be problematized any more. When the possibility of dissonance is ruled out, what disappears from the picture, said Daney, is "otherness," and with it all possibility of creating a space that is shared and disputed—which is, after all, above all, how we take measure of proximities and distances between different worlds.

Is it any wonder then, being confronted with the pervasiveness of “visuals,” that a new generation of artists and filmmakers from the Middle-East took up Godard’s mission to deconstruct representations of political struggle? In some films *Ici et Ailleurs* is even referenced explicitly. In *Homage by Assassination* (1992), Elia Suleiman deals with the difficulty of measuring the distance between “here”—a New York apartment, where the filmmaker spends a long night during the Gulf War waiting for news about his Palestinian family—and “there”—Palestine, where he was born and raised. At one instance we see him watching images from *Ici et Ailleurs* while listening to a message from a friend updating him about the situation in Palestine and telling a joke about the Palestinians’ status in limbo (“On judgment day, God can’t decide whether to send them to heaven—after all, they’re terrorists—or to hell—after all, they’re victims—so he ends up saying, ‘well then, let’s build them a camp!’”). The rhetoric of armed struggle and the prolonged war in Godard’s film is contrasted with the actuality of dispossession and suspension. The dreams of nationhood and the right of return are reframed as a Palestinian flag on a TV screen and the “return” key on a computer keyboard. The war Suleiman watches unfolding on screen “never took place here,” a text says, echoing the much-maligned statement of Jean Baudrillard.<sup>59</sup> How can images still stand out as differential forces amidst the deluge of repetitive and self-contained information, recasting experiences of violence and injustice as commonplaces? These questions, so topical at the time, are also implicit to *All is Well on the Border* (1997), Akram Zaatari’s critical investigation into the representations of the occupation of Southern Lebanon, prior to the Israeli withdrawal in 2000. Composed as an overt homage to Godard and Miéville’s film, the film operates as a deconstructive critique of the dominant images of Islamic resistance and heroism that were circulated in the Lebanese media by Hezbollah. Against these consensual images, Zaatari offers testimonials and letters of people who have been left out of the official narratives, particularly those who joined the secular resistance but were captured and imprisoned. In time, however, it appears that the ones we see narrating the stories are not the ones who have lived them, and that they are merely acting. The final scene shows a boy reciting a militant poem in a theatrical setting, clearly hinting at a scene in *Ici et Ailleurs* in which a young girl recites a poem by Mahmoud Darwish amidst the ruins of Karameh. Evidently, in a world where everyone has a part to play in the political theatre and its construction of “visuals,” images cannot but be complicit to the great lie.

By the time I got to see *Ici et Ailleurs*, the exorbitant suspicion towards images was part and parcel of the common sense. The proliferation of voices lamenting the crisis of cinema and the death of images, smothered in the stranglehold of

the spectacle, clearly indicated that yesterday's battle, fought over the promises of emancipation and the illusions and disillusion of history, was being continued on the terrain of art and cinema. In hindsight, I can see how the logic that drove the criticism of images in the 1960s and 1970s faded into the disenchanted discourses that became ubiquitous in the decades that followed, stemming from those who lamented that there were no more images or, conversely, that there was nothing but images left. Daney spoke of "the visual," Baudrillard of "hypervisuality," Lyotard of "figure foreclosed." In any case, it appeared that we were being invaded by visual information bits that were no longer showing anything of the "other," but only selling more of the "same." The critical paradigm that was aimed at revealing the reality behind deceiving images turned into the assertion that images have been completely integrated in the democratic reign of information as the ultimate form of opium for the people, either submerging us with their sensory power or anesthetizing us by their sheer indifference. Images, we were told over and over again, had become drained of their force or, contrarily, had become so forceful that they ended up de-realizing the world under cover of illustrating it. The same images that were once believed capable of provoking disturbance and arousing indignation were now said to be drowned in an endless flood of clichés overflowing our gazes. "There are no more simple images," we are told in *Ici et Ailleurs*, "only simple people who are forced to behave—*sage comme une image*." I can see how the weakening of dissensual thought and action helped to create a rupture between a certain faith in the power of images and the conviction that this power could be deployed to further emancipatory struggles. I can see how this faith turned into deep rooted suspicion, leading to endless demonstrations of the illusions of a world in which all images are absorbed into the daily media circuit and all forms of subversion are swallowed up by the holy alliance of spectacle and commodity. Showing the unbearable *in* the image, once considered as an incentive for consciousness raising, now shifted to lamenting the unbearable *of* the image. In the end, critical discourse turned into a resentful and nihilist denunciation of a world reigned by commodity culture and mass individualism, exemplified by the cattle of docile and passive consumers who no longer feed themselves on beliefs, but on images of fantasy and caprice. In line with this opinion regime, self-proclaimed critical art took on the melancholic undertaking of baring the powerlessness of images, taking recourse to the task of frustrating our voyeuristic habits by reducing the lure of the visible, or else to the plain abolition of images in favor of a return to the "real." Three decades after its release, it seemed that *Ici et Ailleurs* had finally caught up with us.

How to refrain from this suspicion that threatens to drain all images of their potential dissonance? Let's take a step back: what Godard was suggesting was not that there are too many images, but that there are too many images that are anticipated by their meaning, reduced to illustrations of the words of those who decide which images are valuable and claim the authority to explain what they mean. They eliminate everything that exceeds the redundancy of their meaning by organizing the way they are staged and trapping them in discourses, slogans, headlines, captions. It is words that can make us see one thing in another or for another. It is words, more than anything else, that have the power to determine what can be said and thought about what is seen. When the images of the brutal killing of Muhammad al-Durrah on the second day of the Second Intifada were circulating around the world, it only took a barrage of words to instil doubt and undermine the legitimacy of what could be seen. An investigation concluded that there was no evidence to assume that the boy and his father were hit by Israeli bullets. Some commentators went further and casted doubt upon the authenticity of the scene itself. Some said that the boy was killed by his own people, others suggested the boy was still alive. Some argued that everything was staged from beginning to end, others gave the idea that the images were tampered with. Confronted with the undecidability of images and the difficulty of making them reach any conclusion—as Godard has come to understand all too well—it is the weight of discursive authority that makes them speak, repudiating the visible and installing deniability or, conversely, endorsing the invisible and promoting believability. When Colin Powell presented his PowerPoint presentation before the UN Security Council in an initial bid to get international authorization for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, he couldn't leave the images to speak for themselves, he needed to speak for them. He needed to name what could not be seen; he needed to claim authority and invoke an antecedent—the revelation of the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba—to lay claim to evidence. Apparently, seeing images is by itself not enough to provide the impetus to transgress established laws. It was necessary to instil fear and designate the threat to veil the dubiousness of images and impose the existence of something that did not exist at all. It turns out that images are never simple realities: their life depends on their relation with other images, words and affects, and their place within the network of existing expectations and significations that defines a common sense.

By a strange coincidence, another act of veiling preceded Powell's presentation: just hours prior, UN officials were instructed to cover up a reproduction of a painting which is usually on display at the entrance of the

Security Council. It was fully hidden from sight with flags, as if to displace all disturbing visibilities with the obdurate force of the emblems of state identity as the guarantor of symbolic order and universal values. The painting in question was Picasso's *Guernica*.<sup>51</sup> It would appear that an iconic painting showing the dread caused by an aerial bombing could not be brought into association with the noble ventures of the world's most powerful nation, which was about to bomb another country to hell. It would appear that there could be no allusion to this war, which was not only the first war to be covered by way of images, but also the first war in which civilians were relentlessly slaughtered from the air, at least in Europe (we tend to forget how Iraqi villages were attacked by the Royal Air Force ten years before the Spanish Civil War). In the media circus leading up to the invasion of Iraq, there was no place for images which could remind us of the cruelties of war. It's not that this war was "pre-censored," as was the case with the previous Gulf War whose media coverage was tightly filtered; it was rather "pre-mediated," as the mass media took up an important role in installing and cultivating a palpable sense of insecurity and inevitability, in consonance with the doctrine of pre-emptive warfare.<sup>52</sup> While the media provided us with non-stop non-information about a non-encounter, they didn't seem to be bothered to recall the cause of the supposed threat and to verify whether the intervention had warranted it. What mattered was the urgency of the threat and the necessity of the response to the threat, expressed 24 hours a day. In a speech before Congress, a few days after 9/11, Bush had already established the ideological framework that remains with us up until today: either you are with us or you are with the others, that is: the "terrorists." Even though it soon became clear for everyone that the Bush administration had perpetuated a tissue of manufactured evidence to persuade the public to support its agenda, the war against terrorism became part of the "new normal." The saga of a world split in two became a war against terror. Human Rights became the privilege of the avenger. In the name of infinite justice against the axis of evil, any discussion about the legitimacy of such a draconian deployment of power was foreclosed. All juridical and political measures were exceeded by the infinite war of good against evil, the upholders of freedom and democracy against the bastions of fanaticism and intolerance. All principles and distinctions that were once used to establish justice now collapsed into indifference: public sanction was confounded with private vengeance, wars were carried out like police operations, politics and law got tangled up with morality and religion. As the political stage was gradually waning and political law was increasingly outstripped, ethics ever more firmly established its reign.<sup>53</sup>

In order to try to grasp the shift from politics to ethics, we need to go back to 1977, the year when *Ici et Ailleurs* made its entry on the international stage. That year began with President Carter's inauguration speech in which he invoked human rights as the guiding principle of American foreign policy and came to an end with Amnesty International being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In September of that year, the "New Philosophers," at the height of their popularity, were featured on the cover of *Time* magazine which carried the headline "Marx Is Dead." In the article, these philosophers ardently argued for a return to humanitarian values as a substitute utopia for the terrorizing utopianism of revolutionary Marxism. This appeal to human rights was also taken up by a variety of dissident movements, notably in the Soviet Union and Latin America, to openly protest policies of repression and discrimination carried out by their own governments. But, around the same time, a new generation of humanitarian organizations stood up, who found in direct action and high-profile campaigns the answers to their dissatisfaction with the neutrality of organizations like the Red Cross, that they blamed for keeping silent about the Nazi concentration camps. In their view, one could never again stand by silently and allow genocides to take place: in the name of protecting human rights, liberal democracies not only had a right but a moral duty to override the principle of sovereignty to stop mass persecution. It was this doctrine of "humanitarian interventionism" which in time came to be invoked to justify interventions that range from the imposition of structural adjustment programs which forbid "competition distorting" social welfare programs, to the military campaigns in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Sudan, and Iraq, to name a few. A shift had occurred: the rights of man were no longer called upon to expose the tension between a people and "the people" purportedly embodied by a state power, but to bring relief to faraway victims who were unable to enact any rights or any claim on their own behalf, implying that their rights had to be upheld by others. While earlier struggles were largely based on the denunciation of the gap that could be discerned between the principles proclaimed by the ruling powers and the reality that saw these principles being subjugated to their interests, this new worldview was based on the figure of the absolute victim, obliging infinite reparation. The sense of the "wretched of the earth," formerly the name given to an emergent revolutionary agency, has been inverted, transferring all agency to the Western heroes who are meant to speak up and rescue suffering victims from dictators and catastrophes. As early as 1977, Deleuze rejected this "martyrology" that "fed off cadavers" for its morality of resentment and its censorious paternalism, for its way of imposing itself on the public sphere and defusing the power of affirmation

of the victims in question. “The victims had to be people who think and live in a completely different way,” he wrote, “only then could they provide a basis for the actions of those who are now weeping in their name, thinking in their name, and handing out lessons in their name.”<sup>54</sup> This martyrology not only helped to fill the political vacuum left behind by the demise of revolutionary projects but also allowed to further dismiss the moral vacuity of any polemic over the means and ends of these interventions, all in the name of “infinite justice.” Gradually, the focus shifted away from a critique on the structural violence of capitalism towards humanitarian outrage against violations of human rights, displacing the principles of dissident politics with those of a new ideology of worldwide consensus: humanitarian moralism.

“The world is now split in two,” we hear Godard saying in *Notre Musique*, “between those who line up to voice their misery and those for whom this public display provides a daily dose of moral comfort to their domination.” According to Lyotard, humanitarian interventions were necessary to palliate the collateral effects of the system according to the principle of “lesser evil.” In his view, the destruction caused by the system cannot be eliminated, only alleviated, because any recipe for a cure would doubtlessly bring more destruction, as witnessed by the disastrous attempts in the 20th century to foster a utopian idea of the egalitarian “god.” All these attempts had by now been subsumed in the totalizing category of totalitarianism, the catchall for political otherness. That’s how the so-called democracies in the West and their relations with the rest—commonly associated with threats of ethnicism, fundamentalism and terrorism—came to be enclosed in an ethical framework: the world of lesser evil, standing and fighting for freedom, versus the world of absolute evil, where justice can only be brought by way of necessary violence. As a commentator wrote: “we must be intolerant in order to defend tolerance, or unkind in order to defend kindness, or hateful in order to protect what we love.”<sup>55</sup> This framework has not only been used to justify the application of measures beyond all formal norms from above in the name of some cynical realpolitik or some national or mystical delirium, but also to delegitimize all counter-movements from below. Of course, it’s no secret that, more often than not, these measures are taken to carry out agendas of imperial expansion and domestic repression, in view of seizing control of oil reserves or testing out new weapons. But even knowledge of these gaps between declared principles and real aims, between law and fact, doesn’t seem to make a difference. After all, “Freedom’s untidy,” spoke Donald Rumsfeld after the fall of Baghdad, “and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things.”<sup>56</sup> The price of our

freedom is eternal vigilance towards terror, which is the inescapable condition of our world of which we all cannot be but guilty.

Today, “terror” is still one of the predominant consensual frameworks used to describe and apprehend our world, no less after the euphoria of the Arab Spring descended into disappointment and disarray. Just consider how easily the worldwide responses to the Charlie Hebdo killings were absorbed in the plot that postulates the world of democracy and free speech against the world of terrorism and intolerance. While conveniently passing over the fact that Western democracies have been waging a systematic assault on free speech under the guise of the “War on Terror,” the notion of “freedom of expression” was used as an impetus to induce, on the one hand, a new sense of communal unity amongst those who supposedly adhere to universal values and, on the other hand, aggravate the sentiment of contempt against those who supposedly don’t—even pushing the principle of freedom of expression as far as controlling and restricting what people wear on their heads. This suffocating framework of terror, in which “the Muslim” is painstakingly constructed as the new adversary within and outside of the Western borders, has also had a grave effect on the perception of the Palestine-Israel conflict. Just before he won the recent election, we could hear Netanyahu say: “I think that anyone who moves to establish a Palestinian state and evacuate territory gives territory away to radical Islamist attacks against Israel.”<sup>57</sup> Just the other day, he even refuelled the “Islamofascist” narrative—circulating heavily in American neocon circles—by blaming a Palestinian Grand Mufti for the Holocaust.<sup>58</sup> Hardly anyone around here blinked. “Radical Islam” has become part and parcel of the newspeak and doublethink that has been devised to shamelessly exploit the sentiment of fear and prevent any principled consideration of the dispossession and subjugation of the Palestinians. “Palestinians don’t exist” has become “Palestinians are fundamentalists with whom there is no negotiation possible.” Tangled realities behind the events shown on television have become subordinated to a manipulative terminology that is shamelessly taken over by Western media: “evacuating” a territory, rather than imprisoning a people; “asymmetric conflict” rather than imbalanced warfare; “security fence” rather than segregation wall. The Israelis picture themselves as a “villa in the jungle,” an island of rationality surrounded by an ocean of irrationality, as the reasonable and enlightened—and thus Western-friendly—nobles who are willing to make realistic concessions, if only the Palestinians weren’t so unreasonable. But even if we know by now that the peace-process that was started in Oslo was never meant to reach a solution but only to perpetuate a situation of no solution—a status quo that allows Israel



to grab more land, annex more space, build more colonies or “mow the lawn” as they so horrifyingly put it—Israeli policies are criticized timidly if at all by the governments in Europe or the US, while the regime and ideology that produces these policies are left untouched. Israel continues to circle its wagons, fending off all forms of criticism as unrealistic at best or anti-Semitic at worst—accusations that are meant to discredit and delegitimize all manifestations of criticism (as Godard, Sivan and many others have experienced). Yet today it is hardly a secret that Israel is a state that openly segregates, separates and discriminates on the basis of ethnicity, religion and nationality. It is easy to discern the discrepancy between the rhetorics of peace and the “two-state solution,” and the daily implementations of colonialism and dispossession. It is easy to see the indulgence of a state that considers itself above the law, qualified to transgress international laws on the grounds of “exceptionality.” But again, “seeing” does not seem to be enough to make a difference: while we were watching on our screens the destruction and carnage left behind by the Israeli assaults on Gaza, Israel announced its largest appropriation of land in the West bank in over thirty years. All the while it remained awfully quiet in the Western sphere.

Confronted with an opinion regime that continues to conceive our world in terms of unremitting banality or inconceivable terror, and continues to annihilate the constitution of collective subjectivity by dividing up the world in righteous states on the one hand, and malicious gangs on the other, political dissent undoubtedly finds itself in a difficult situation. Caught between the logic of identity and the logic of radical otherness—both logics that have made headway since the end of the 1970s—it is a daunting task for us to find the kind of courage and conviction that we tentatively sense in the memories and images that stem from a time when there was still an entente between historical hope and political will, now that the first is no longer available. In its absence, dissent is either boiled down to an expression of difference amongst the many tiny differences that ultimately can't make a difference, or it is subsumed to the vision of a world structured by absolute otherness and endless conflict. As we are coerced into making a false choice between “good” and “evil,” many take recourse in their own “visual,” containing a fantasy of the enemy and a fantasy of the homeland, one affirming the other. While the pull of conformism and resignation can be felt all around, the sentiment that arouses the most collective passion is the one we dread the most: fear itself—the fear of terror, the fear of crisis, the fear of catastrophe, the fear of the other. Being taught that safety always lies with sameness, our obsession with fear wards off all forms of otherness and diverges our attention to external security

and internal order. In the name of economy and security, all distinctions between fact and law are subsumed into a systemic logic of necessary “lesser evil” and all divisions are replaced by a rationale of calculation. Bereft of maps and scales, devoid of any direction other than the path that is laid out for us, we tend to resort to rearguard actions and defensive mechanisms. And not knowing what exactly we are struggling for, it may be only logical that we don’t know very well anymore how to invent an image of struggle that is contemporary to us.

In the beginning of the 1970s Godard could still answer the question “What is to be done?” with “We must make films politically.” He could still respond that it was no longer a matter of choosing a path, but to determine what to do on the path that history had already laid out. To the question “Where are we now?” he could respond that it was up to filmmakers to open up a space to examine and rekindle the history of revolutionary cinema.<sup>59</sup> Barely five years later he declared the end of this particular history of cinema, before lamenting, almost two decades later, both the failure of revolution and the end of cinema. Today, to the question “What is to be done?”, the voices of reason answer: economic liberalism, globalisation, austerity, terrorism. To the anguished question of where we are now, the answer we get is: nowhere! To all appearances, the world upon which we gaze, from within the historical experience of our time, is a disenchanting world; a world of aftermaths, defined by the loss of promises of change. For those who hope for a compass that can guide us to a certain future, for those who expect finality, definitiveness, instant return, for them nothing awaits but disappointment. This might sink in as bitterness, cynicism, and defeatism. We live in a world where anguish trumps desire, fear trumps affirmation, threat trumps promise. In the realm of cinema, too, questions about purpose are likely to end up in disenchantment. When Ossama Mohammed, in his recent *Silvered Water, Syria Self-Portrait* (2014), asks “What is cinema?”, his response is embalmed in a coffin of images showing horrendous scenes of humiliation, torture and death. Like *Ici et Ailleurs*, *Silvered Water* unfolds as a dialogue between here and there; between France, where Mohammed lives in exile; and Syria, his country of birth that he can only revisit by watching the images he finds on the Internet and those sent to him by Wiam Simav Bedirxan, a school teacher who has committed herself to documenting the daily struggles for survival in Homs. But the potential force of the online exchange between the two filmmakers, one here, removed from what is happening over there, where the other documents her presence, is completely overtaken by funereal manifestations of suffering and powerlessness. If Godard’s film can still be considered as a gesture of restitution to the dead, then here every

sign of endurance is submerged in a pious testimony to never-ending catastrophe and atrocity. It's as if cinema can now only face up to reality by appealing to its horrors and drowning its spectator in pools of blood and tears. As if the image of the "deep irrationality" that Johan Van der Keuken spoke about all these years ago no longer allows for a reverse shot.

Isn't cinema supposed to lay bare the painful truths of reality, however daunting and intolerable? Undoubtedly. But don't we also need fictions that are able to unsettle the image of a world in ruins, a world ruled by catastrophe and impossibility? Rather than reproducing reality or revealing the real beyond the false, isn't the main challenge of the art of cinematic appearance today not one of constructing a world that can destabilize and stand up to the dominant image of reality? We know that the inclination to make an absolute distinction between reality and appearance, between deception and truthfulness, has led to all kinds of destruction of icons and idols. In the name of either faith or science various upsurges of iconoclasm have criticised, erased and defaced images, before the passion for images has eventually been regenerated in other guises. Think of the reversal in Godard's work, accompanied by the proposition that images, cleansed of the ambiguities of narrative and discourse, cannot lie. Can we go beyond this cycle of fascination, repulsion, destruction, and atonement that is generated by the obsession with the truthfulness of images? Perhaps, rather than framing the question of cinema in terms of a duplication of the real or a vocation of presence, we could try to think about it in terms of its metaphorical power. We could ask ourselves: how is cinema able to displace the real? How can it, with its dual power as mode of documentation and form of aesthetic transmutation, rearrange the coordinates of what is deemed possible and provoke a kind of consideration that does not pertain to the dominating forms of fear, contempt and commiseration? To be sure, asking these questions inevitably implies that we have to confront our expectations towards cinema. Not in the least the expectation that exposing the intolerable will lead to both a new consciousness of the reality that is its cause and a decision to act in order to change it. "Today, the assholes are sincere," Godard says in *Film Socialism* (2010). Our problem is no longer one of consciousness. On the contrary, there is more than enough cynical insight to go around. All forms of power are said to have been unmasked to no avail. All forms of critique are assumed to be prone to reification. We are told that believing is no longer an option—except, of course, when it comes to religion. How can we, having learned to be suspicious of everything, then still take images seriously? Perhaps we have taken them all too seriously and read too much into them, having criticized them

so much that we don't know any longer how to care for their sense. Perhaps, coming after Fassbinder's "third generation," ours has become so prone to resisting manipulation and sentimentality, so savvy of how images are made and how they can be engineered (aren't we all Brechtians these days?), that it has become all too easy to dabble in excuses. "Images are not to be trusted. What is in the image is always past. It's too late to do anything anyway. There's nothing that can be done anyhow." Are images acting as an alibi, swimming along in the deep end of cynicism and resignation? Could it be that the atmosphere of distrust and suspicion inherent to the tradition of criticism, as a result of the increasing concern with exploitation and manipulation, has become a hindrance to actually engaging with what can be done with images? Could it be that we have settled into an all too congenial relation with a dominant order whose messages have no more secrets for us? Doesn't the sheer weight of culpability and impossibility prevent us from turning our attention to what still poses possibility?

At the same time as *Ici et Ailleurs* came out, Susan Sontag called for an "ecology of images."<sup>60</sup> She argued that, even though an event known through images certainly becomes more "real"—bringing reality up closer—than it would have been had one never seen these images, their overexposure in the mass media also makes it less "real." In other words: flooded with images of the sort that once used to create shock and arouse indignation, our capacity to pay attention and respond to what is given to see is doomed to wane. "Our enemy," she said, "is this consumer society, this freedom that devalues everything."<sup>61</sup> Twenty five years later, however (the year of *Notre Musique*), in the book that would turn out to be her last, she denounced her own critique as "conservative," as it merely came down to a defence of the dominant reality and the imperilled standards for responding to it. Even worse, as she observed with a heavy heart, this critique had radicalized into a form of cynicism according to which, in a world of spectacle and simulacra, there is no reality at all left to defend. But where is the evidence, she asked, that images have a diminishing impact, that our media culture has neutralized their power, or ours for that matter? Perhaps, she suggested, it is not so much the amount of images that is the problem, but the way they are used, the way they are commonly embedded in an image-flow that renders them all indifferent. And perhaps it is not the surfeit of images that tends to install an atmosphere of passivity, but rather the sphere of consensuality and impossibility that has pervaded our lives, barring us from translating the affects that have been aroused and the knowledge that has been acquired into action. If we could do something about what images show, she said, we might not care as much about issues of unrepresentability or indecency. A

quarter of a decade after she had called for a restrictive ecology of images, Sontag admitted that “there isn’t going to be an ecology of images.”<sup>62</sup> Our question is then: how to live with them? How do we create new configurations and circulations that could give rise to new forms of curiosity and attention? How can they help us to cultivate a sense of possibility rather than one of general impotence?

Maybe thinking of cinema as a way to put “the possible” back into “the real” entails that we need to rehabilitate images against the critical tradition, which is prone to merely demonstrate its own virtue by way of endless suspicion and condemnation. Maybe we should not be asking of cinema to open our eyes to a reality that is always already incomplete, but to help us imagine something different. That is why we need to recognize and cultivate cinema as an art of appearance, an art that can confound, distort or dispute the reality that it refers to. Which is precisely why we need cinema more than ever. Now that we are all submitted to a sense of reality that is so constraining that we can’t even imagine going beyond that constraint, we are in grave need of a radical imagination that can reopen possibilities. Now that any given situation is objectified in such a way that it can no longer lend itself to an act of political division, we need fictions that can frame other senses of reality, made of other connections between visibilities and words, between times and spaces, between here and elsewhere, now and then. It’s what I see, at moments, in the later work of Elia Suleiman (*Divine Intervention*, 2002), who found a way of redressing the Palestinian tale of dispossession and despair in the form of dark and fractured comedies that constantly play around with the identities that the Palestinians have been bound up in. It’s what I see, at moments, in Avi Mograbi’s latest film (*Once I Entered a Garden*, 2012), in which a family tale on the possibility of crossing borders in the past develops into a story about the possibility of crossing identities in the present. Against what is considered as impossible, fantasy and memory are used as prisms to think about other possible realities. Instead of dwelling on the disparity between a past time of historical faith and the present time of widespread disillusionment, a time when the belief in change has ostensibly lost all salience, these fictions manage to create small cracks in the inevitable and the obvious. It might not be much, and it sure isn’t enough. We might be dealing with moments rather than movements, but at least in these moments, through these appearances, we are acknowledged and called upon in our capacity to give voice to new realities. The question is not how “real” images are, but which reality we are willing to give to them.

It might be that the rehabilitation of images also entails that we need to look for them in other places, within other kinds of circulations. Think of the images of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements that have appeared all over the

Internet in past years, coming from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park. Unlike Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică, who claimed, in *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), that the televised images shot during the Romanian uprisings in 1989—the same year the World Wide Web was launched—were able to create the event rather than merely record it, today we cannot claim to know to what extent the images of protest posted on the Internet have actually been able to “write” history. We have learned to be wary of the kinds of Panglossian optimism that hails the radical potential of the global democracy of networking. We have learned that our online experience is driven by convenience rather than commitment, and that it tends to cultivate forms of reflexive communication. We have also seen how the circulation of information has been heavily exploited for all kinds of propaganda uses. But there was a moment when we could actually experience moments when images floating around on the Internet were able to overcome the dispersiveness and fragmentation of particular local struggles and participate in the creation of a kind of shared determination “not to be governed thusly.” In moments like these, one could feel that images can play an important role in the construction of a sentiment of confidence and affirmation, as opposed to the prevalent morose rumination on the terrible chaos of our world. In moments like these, one could sense that what binds us is the knowledge that uncertainty is our only certainty, the desire to battle the fears with which we have grown up, the need for something to hold onto and something to hold us. That is how images, in all their forms, might still matter to us: not in confirming what we already know or casting a judgment upon the world, but by sharing points of possibility which open towards other ways of seeing our predicament and its cracks, points of possibility from which we can imagine we can be more and do more.

If we, we who have come of age in the “time after,” surrounded by an atmosphere of mourning and guilt, if we want to rid ourselves from a common sense that denounces images for their impotency or accuses them for their profanity, we have to accept that images will always be partial and fissured, just as we have to accept that cinematic fictions will always be unreliable and paradoxical. Cinema is “the most beautiful fraud in the world,” as a character in one of Godard’s films says.<sup>63</sup> In recent times, the insistence on an absolute distinction between truth and appearance has led to both nihilistic demonstrations of the dulling permeability of images and, on the contrary, a renewed faith in their vibrant consistency. Godard, having exchanged iconoclasm for a renewed iconophilia, has chosen to believe in a commonality that is only possible by reaffirming images in their consistency and restoring seeing to its purity. But at the same time his

work manifests how images don't simply speak for themselves. Just as there is no pure way of seeing, there are no pure images. An image is more than a figure of substitution or an icon of presence. It is always part of a system of relations between what is visible, sayable and thinkable and the way in which this system affects our lives. Don't images, in their multiplicity of identities, offer an immense reservoir of modalities to explore new relations between the apparent and the different, between reality and appearance, between what is and what could be? Images are not some dead objects to behold in their sterility, nor are they living organisms that are brimming with desire. Images in themselves do not desire anything. They do not by themselves aspire to affect change. What they might be able to do is help us to open up spaces of transformation and disidentification, invite us to pay attention and reorganize our thoughts, strengthen us in our conviction that the world as it is still deserves to be examined, narrated, and discussed. But if we want their help, we might need to let go of the ghosts of their former selves as weapons in struggle and calls for action, and accept that their meanings and effects will always remain indecisive. Then, perhaps, when looking at them, in all of their fragility and undecidability, we can decide that it is above all up to us to invest them with desire and resolve. Who knows, in doing so, we might even find ourselves capable of seizing those qualities for ourselves.

Signing off for now.

Yours sincerely,

Stoffel







**Ricardo Matos Cabo** is a film programmer with whom I have been exchanging thoughts and ideas since we first met at the International Film festival in Rotterdam in January 2015. He was there in the company of filmmaker Pedro Costa, about whom he has compiled the edited collection of essays *Cem Mil Cigarros* (2009). A cinephile *pur sang*, he has developed a variety of wonderful film programs over the years, notably in the framework of Doc's Kingdom: International Seminar On Documentary Film that has taken place in various locations in Portugal, as well as for the Essay Film Festival in London.

John Ford, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Courtesy of 20th Century Fox.

Pedro Costa, *Juventude em Marcha* (2006). Courtesy of Pedro Costa / Contracosta.



Brussels, October 2015

Dear Ricardo,

*Ma io, che posso più dire?*

*Che posso più dire?*

There is this scene from Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Umiliati* (2003) that has haunted me over and over again these last couple of months.

After having witnessed the persecution and humiliation of his community by those arrogantly laying out the inevitable course of progress, reducing the words and actions of its members to nothing but eruptions of anger and gestures of impotence; after having seen his community torn apart by those incessantly sowing discouragement and planting disappointment, mocking the “backwardness” of whoever misses out on “the train of history”; after having finally been abandoned by friends and foes alike, Ventura collapses in his bed, his determination broken, his hopes shattered. “What more can I say? What more can I say?” he sighs, realizing that the spirit of solidarity and collectivity that underpinned the struggle for sovereignty had not been able to withhold the unforgiving laws of global necessity.

How could the cruelty of this scene not resonate with how we are experiencing the recent developments in Europe? Surely we are far removed from the time when Elio Vittorini wrote the book which informed the film, at a time when the initial enthusiasm of the years after the Second World War shifted towards disappointment in the face of an encroaching counter reformation and a collapsing resistance.<sup>1</sup> But I can't help feeling that the world its narrative evokes closely resembles ours: a world where everything and everyone is led to submit to the one sole possibility that we are supposedly left with. Seeing what is happening in Greece, I think we have never before witnessed with such clarity the ruthlessness and vindictiveness of the imperious logic that this supposedly lone possibility has fomented, a logic that stops at nothing to impose its laws, and apparently so easily gets away with it. Never before have we experienced so palpably the brutal repression of a country so close to us, its government “waterboarded” into submission, its people humiliated for all to see, made to suffer as a warning to others who might decide to step out of line. How could one not feel utterly appalled by the arrogance and contempt with which the non-elected few have treated the many who dared to voice their opinion? How could one

not be shocked by the creeping awareness that those who wield real power over our lives do not answer to anyone? Who was not left flabbergasted by the flaunt comments that the media were happy to transmit by a Belgian politician—former president of the European Council—who proclaimed that only pragmatic realism could overcome ideological blindness?<sup>2</sup> Or by the head of the IMF who urged the Greek rascals to “wise up” if they wanted a place at the “grown-up” table?<sup>3</sup> Is it not precisely those condescending preachers themselves who are so eager to refuse anything that might obscure their vision? Isn’t it them who have shown an uttermost disregard for the deafening “no” that was voiced against austerity policies? Isn’t it them who have willfully chosen to ignore the destructions such policies have already caused in Latin America, East Asia, Africa, where recessions were systematically turned into endless depressions?

Alas, for all the displays of criticism and roars of outrage directed against the oligarchs of the Troika and the technocrats surrounding them, it didn’t take long before everything seemed to go back to business as usual. Today, it feels like an eternity since we could feel that slight sense of euphoria in the air, that cold night in February when I met you and Pedro in Rotterdam, the very night when Syriza won the legislative elections. Today, the smug are unabashed in their triumphalist self-congratulation: “You see, there’s only one world,” they keep repeating, “and whoever stands apart misses the train.”

What has become of Europe? The endeavour that was given birth to—around the time of Vittorini’s writing—by a treaty that established an aspiration for a “community amongst peoples” through the “merging of their essential interests”<sup>4</sup> seems to be steadily turning into a playing field for a political and financial elite that has no scruples to reach its goals, even if it means that democratic principles are ignored and norms and rules are imposed by putting the fear of God into everyone who dares to question their reasoning. While ever more cuts in social care and public services are being implemented and the most vulnerable are being increasingly discriminated and stigmatised, the most wealthy receive more and more benefits and incentives: everywhere in Europe we see the emergence of a vision of a world in which progress is driven by the continued prosperity of the prosperous, a progress that is purportedly parasitized by a flock of profiteers who do not care to adapt to the long-term interests of their community because they can only think of protecting their short-term interests. Against the “privileges” inherited from past struggles, against all those inconsiderate commoners who are deemed incapable of seeing beyond the horizon of their own present existence, the barons of Europe pit the necessity of the march of time, which is enforced

in the guise of “reforms.” And as they are less and less able or willing to impede the devastating effects of the free circulation of capital, they increasingly direct their efforts towards what has become one of their main means of legitimacy: the circulation of people. The same borders that have been disregarded in favor of the unlimited expansion of capital are being fortified to keep out all those “outsiders” who threaten to disturb the wellbeing of the community. One of the most popular politicians here in Belgium recently used the term “straitjacket” in reference to the Geneva conventions, implying that state governments should increase the control of identities and restriction of movements of those who aim to benefit from its services. We ought to close down the Schengen borders, he said, and cast off this “annoying burden” that is Greece.<sup>5</sup>

Is this what has become of the venture of democracy, now that political and economic liberalism seems to have been embraced as the obvious conclusion to the historical march of civilization? The transformations that occurred towards the end of the 20th century—those that marked the coming of age of our generation: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the implosion of Third World Socialism—appeared to leave the congruity of capitalist economy and formal democracy as the only viable option still standing. We were told that we could finally leave the counter-narratives that professed to make sense of the world of conflicts and the movements of history behind us for good. Liberal democracy regained the historical ascension over its discredited rivals, preposterously assuming it could survey the world with an absolute sense of entitlement. With this shift also came a re-definition of “social progress.” What used to be understood as an idea of a collective responsibility in social and economic life that could bring prosperity to the many, tied up with a historic development that would lead to a just partition of wealth, received a different meaning: social solidarity and collective action were now pitted as obstructers of economic development. But who today is able to believe that this new interpretation of “social progress” has given rise to a rekindling of democracy and a reduction of inequality? Don’t we all know, all the more since Thomas Piketty’s writings have been added to our bookshelves and bookmarks, that what surrounds us is instead a proliferation of inequality? A dilution of democracy that is exclusively concerned with the management of the effects and defects of a global economic logic which is accepted as the main drive of historical progress? Nowadays it seems as if the only concern of our current governments is to reach a consensus on the protection and distribution of the community’s interests, carried along by the ebb and flow of the free market, against which all forms of opposition are stigmatized as outbursts of

juvenile and self-absorbed follies or security threats obstructing its inescapable course towards the future.

How do we make sense of our lives from where we are, confronted with a future that can apparently only be imagined as a mirror image of the present, bereft of all clear convictions that other and better realities may lay ahead? What fictions do we use to frame a time in which a future of change has ceased to be a source of longing?

A friend recently suggested that we might be dealing with a “depression of fiction,” a depression which he particularly discerned in the world of cinema. His statement certainly rings true when considering the rise of certain themes of drift, mourning and trauma in today’s film productions. For some of us here in Belgium, it has become something of an—admittedly silly—running joke to make fun of the ongoing parade of homebred films in which we get to see self-tormenting characters aimlessly wandering through desolate landscapes, unable to relate or communicate, twisting and turning their bodies in search of a place under the sun, without having any grip on the events that descend upon them. Time and again, these films are carried along by a succession of self-aware beautiful shots, spatial voids, hollow phrases and *temps morts*. Their fuzzy atmosphere of disorientation and aphasia, loneliness and emptiness, often underscored by an eerie haze of meditative tones and sustained drones, appear to evoke an inner world of deep-running fear and anxiety reflecting an outward environment of despondency and despair. The characters are survivors and surveillers who do not budge or derange anything, at loss in an unfathomable and unhinged society that merely serves as an atmospheric decor. It’s as if they are suffering from a trauma for which there is no definable cause or cure. As if there is no healing from the fate of being born into this troubled world, no rational account that could make sense of their disposition, no horizon that could provide orientation. We might identify them as lesser derivatives of Gus Van Sant’s great “Death” trilogy, whose refusal of the traditional plots of cause and effect in favour of a suspension of causes appears to have struck a chord in contemporary cinema. Surely one could say that the renewed popularity of this romantic model, whose sensibility is grounded in the neutralisation of explanations, responds to the search for ways out of the stereotypes and clichés of the sociological imaginary. And, undoubtedly, it makes quite a few certified guardians of film culture happy to be able to proudly praise the resistance of “art” cinema in the light of the overwhelming MTV-ization and McDonald-ization of culture. But doesn’t this inclination to create de-dramatized and psychologized worlds of masterly crafted absence and innuendo—in which so much of the tension depends on a painstakingly built up atmosphere of distress and restlessness, tying together an arsenal of floating

images—in the end conform all too well to the dominant conception of our times, where everything is considered equivalent to everything else, leaving no more space for friction? Isn't this refusal of reasons and causes at risk of turning images into blank slates that allow us to read anything we want into them, giving substance to whatever meaning we'd like to assign to them?

Besides, haven't we grown tired of the old theme of alienation by now? Haven't we heard more than enough sermons bemoaning that we have all become estranged from reality, drifting further and further away from the shores of the real, after having lost all faith in the possible affirmation of the impossible? In the current moment we can no longer imagine a future, Franco "Bifo" Berardi stated some time ago. If there is any hope left, it is only for some great catastrophe, after which possibly, maybe, everything might change. Since we can no longer think of projecting ourselves forward in time in any meaningful way, the only radical gestures left to us are self-mutilation and self-destruction. The same thinker described the characters in Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), with their "neurotic mumbling, anorexic hystericisms and relational incompetence," as incarnations of the spreading psychopathology of the first post-alpha generations, those who "have learned more words from a machine than from their mother."<sup>6</sup> It is no longer the replacement of symbolic exchange through the language of things that causes emotional and relational deficit (the alienation once captured by Michelangelo Antonioni) but, on the contrary, an overload of symbolic exchange. The explosion of the info-sphere, the excess of hyper-visibility and the post-Fordist fractalization of time, so goes the argument, have divested us of our capacity for sensibility and empathy. Overwhelmed as we are by accelerations and intensifications, wading amidst an endless flow of banality and apathy, all our energies and desires sucked up in the maw of self-help and self-enterprise, we are said to have numbed ourselves to the point of no longer being capable of experiencing "otherness." In our servitude to the world of spectacle and semio-capital<sup>7</sup>, it appears that we have callously participated in the colonisation of our own lives, which has steered us into an infernal spiral of depression. This is after all, some say, the downside of living in a liberal democratic society: the trouble is not so much that we would be unable to adapt to the global rhythms of the free market, it's that we adapt all too well. By internalizing its freedom, greedy as we are for consumption and entertainment, we have ostensibly submitted all of our desires and passions to the reign of mass individualism.

Listening to the opinions of those who claim to know what's wrong with us, it would seem that we are battered with opposite diagnoses. Some like to say



that we are too backward or foolhardy to be able to keep up with the pulse of the contemporary world. Others blame us for immersing ourselves too deeply in its rhythms, surrendering our ideals and values to satisfy our narcissistic needs. In any case, we are deemed guilty: it is not the system that is in crisis, it's us. Crisis seems to have become the general pathological state of the world, maybe of all of humanity, from which we desperately need to be alleviated. Since we are all regarded as disempowered in the face of the prevalent menaces that imperil our very survival, and since we ourselves are reckoned to be in dire need of protection from our dangerous reactive inclinations, the only ones who might come to our rescue are those who have the mastery to decode the magical formulas that could lead us out of the chaos and, if needed, lead us to the stars. Isn't that the world we get to see in *Interstellar* (2014)? In Christopher Nolan's space exploration epic, our planet is irreversibly doomed by a catastrophe whose imagery inevitably brings to mind the Dust Bowl that ravaged the Southern plains of the US in the 1930s. But the film not only refrains from giving any reasonable cause, but also any possible resolution to the devastation. It is as though our world is beyond saving, no longer worthy of our efforts. As though there's no further point in trying to figure out how to live in it. On the contrary: its destruction might give us yet another chance to be truly all that we can be. Since the planet has been exploited and abused to its utmost limits, all there's left to do is to head for the next final frontier, leaving behind everything unsalvageable. After all, as the Cooper character says: "We are explorers, pioneers—not *caretakers*." Those who, against all odds, stubbornly decide to keep on struggling will inevitably wither away in the rampant dust, while those who want to prosper are asked to put their absolute faith in the pioneers who promise to provide remedies for mankind's precarious predicament. While these enlightened spirits are busy solving the crisis by overcoming the forces of the universe, the populations on the ground are supposed to "adapt" and tolerate their time, no longer in wait for tomorrows that sing, but for an improbable salvation carried out by the upholders of our species' future. Impossible? "No," we are told, "it's *necessary*." Rage, yes, but rage not against the machine—rage against the dying of the light.

Isn't that also the morality which we take away from the slew of catastrophe films that have appeared over the last decade or so? All these tales of extra-terrestrials, mutant viruses and ecological anomalies spreading death and devastation: don't they ultimately provide a face for the rampant fear for invisible and omnipresent threats, supporting the legitimate exercise of power by those who have taken on the mission to restore balance? When we do hear a call for "revolution" resounding on our screens, it is either claimed by terrorists resorting

to tactics of scorched earth and radical cleansing, or directed against totalitarian regimes run by power-hungry dictators and their corrupt bureaucracies who suppress our well-earned liberties with brutal violence. Obviously what poses a danger to our wellbeing is not the inequality that is claimed as natural necessity, but those forces of destruction that threaten our security. The society that needs fighting for is the one we should be lucky to inhabit: one in which all the mad delusions that might lead to terror are permanently held in check, which can only be assured by the continued upholding of security and order. As it is in vain to look for the causes of evil, the least our governments should do is control their effects—and don't desperate times call for desperate measures?

Are these really the dominant narratives we are left with? The only plots that can help us to define our place in time? Either, it seems, we find ourselves arrested in suspension, in limbo of a present that has nowhere left to go, or we find ourselves trapped in a downward spiral towards self-destruction—for better or for worse. Either way, we appear to be deprived of all sense of possibility: the only viable alternative for the tragedy of imminent disaster seems to be the eternal repetition of things as they are. It reminds me of something Pedro remarked, that afternoon when we met again in Ghent. “Today everybody is reconciled with reality,” he said, and cinema is losing the “fight with reality.”<sup>8</sup> How are we to understand this melancholic lament? Whatever happened to the fictions of non-reconciliation? Perhaps, in order to be able to get our head around this perceived “depression” haunting the fictions of our time, we need to try to come to grips with how cinema has given sense to the present in the past, and how the associated modes of intelligibility have changed over time. If we follow Aristotle's founding definition of poetic fiction as a structure of rationality which, rather than recounting what actually has happened, relates what *might* or *could* happen—which is to say, starting from possibility—then what do our fictions have to say about the way we make sense of our time? Now that the future appears to be increasingly foreclosed, couldn't we at least try to learn something by looking back at some of the fictions that ostensibly still allowed for the possibility of change?

In this attempt, with this writing, I'd like to do precisely this: tentatively, speculatively, erratically try to map out a trajectory through a landscape where some of the cinematic fictions that we love so much converge and diverge with political fictions; a lateral and necessarily lacunary trajectory made up of a handful of historical scenes, consisting of sensibilities, discourses, arguments and positions that might give us some clues as to how to make sense of this drifting, mysterious, deceptively simple word “today.”

1.

In contrast to what Nolan's emulation of the Dust Bowl might suggest, the Great Depression of the 1930s was not caused by a natural disaster. It was triggered by the Stock Market Crash of 1929 that brought the Roaring Twenties to a grinding halt, giving way to a period of social and economic turmoil. That man-made catastrophe led to a mass migration when over a million farmers living in the Southern Plains of the United States were driven off their land and forced to head west in search of a better life. This was a time when discontent was prevalent in every part of society and the feared "Reds" came in from the margins, often to join forces with a variety of left-leaning efforts. Identifying the deep-rooted cause of the crisis as the capitalist culture of uncontrolled grabbing and expanding, these insurgent movements spoke out against the chronic disorder ruled by greed and fear, and instead embraced a spirit of collectivity in order to assert their demands for radical change. During these Dirty Thirties, the ethos of solidarity gained international traction with the short-lived elective victories of Popular Front governments in Spain and France and a common cause against Fascism. This broad social movement was the ground on which new cultural alliances could be founded, comprised of artists and writers who aimed to give voice to the disempowered and the dispossessed, traveling around poverty stricken countryside and city suburbs to gather testimonies of social misery and document the lives of farmers and workers. Cinema too, while still shaken up by the introduction of sound, claimed its part in the struggle. While, in Europe, Jean Renoir mythologized the life of the working class (*Le crime de Monsieur Lange*, 1936) and Joris Ivens documented the Spanish Civil War (*The Spanish Earth*, 1937—narrated by Renoir), in the States, Charlie Chaplin took up the red flag (*Modern Times*, 1936) and King Vidor praised the merits of collectivism (*Our Daily Bread*, 1934—championed by Chaplin). However, the credence of these fronts started to show irreparable cracks with the reports of the failed Popular Front governments in both Spain and France, and the devastations caused by Stalin's regime in Russia. Gradually it was revealed that the political and economic experiment that was installed in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, which for a while aroused worldwide hope and inspiration, had ushered into oppression and purge. The alliances further crumbled with the defeat of the Spanish Republic, the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, which allowed Hitler to invade Poland, and the subsequent onset of the world war. The accumulation of these and other events would bring the red years that had given birth to revolutionary Russia, and a broad and multifaceted resistance to inequality across the capitalist world, to an end. But for all the growing disillusionment with the Communist project, hope for change was not altogether abandoned, and many

still held on to the idea of a historical design according to which the Depression could be identified as the long-predicted collapse of the capitalist order. It might be telling that, in the year of the war's outbreak, the images expressing emancipatory hope in the process of collectivization and industrialization, as shown in Soviet films such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Old and New* (1929), Aleksandr Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930) and Dziga Vertov's *Enthusiasm* (1931), received a new connotation. In John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), adapted from John Steinbeck's eponymous account of migration during the Great Depression, the tractor is no longer monumentalized as an anthropomorphized symbol for socialist construction, but as a monstrous machine of capitalist destruction. While in *Old and New* we see a tractor crashing through the fences that stand in the way of the course towards collective agricultural productivity, here we see a Caterpillar tractor demolishing the house of farmers who have been expropriated from their land. Its driver is no longer a farmhand at the service of a collective effort, but a muscle for hire working in service of the banks, trying to feed his family at the expense of dozens of other families. When the man who faces the demolition of his farm and the disowning of his land asks who he needs to confront to get his land back, he is told that there is no-one left to fight with: there can be no brushing up against an "invisible hand." As it happens, the character whose anguished vision expresses the collective experience of dispossession and expulsion, Muley, is played by the same actor (the great John Qualen) who played the immigrant worker cultivating collectively owned land in *Our Daily Bread* (1934)—King Vidor's own variation on Eisenstein's hymn to the organic harmony between man, work and earth.<sup>9</sup> And Henry Fonda, who previously played the farmer-turned-combatant who ends up holding an impassioned plea for a new internationalist conscience in *Blockade* (1938), made by German exile and anti-Nazi activist William Dieterle, now finds himself wandering a world where farmers and workers have been scattered and forced into precarity.

Perhaps we can consider *The Grapes of Wrath* as a swan song of a period when the politico-economical landscape allowed for manifestations of counterweight from *within*; a period when this landscape still allowed for a negotiation and enactment of otherness by way of polemical practices and procedures. If one film might have contributed to the polemics, claimed Joseph Losey, it surely was *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>10</sup> And Edmund Wilson—whose *To the Finland Station*, a stirring account of the history of Socialism, came out a few months before Ford's film—wrote that it was "probably the only serious story on record that seemed equally effective as a film and as a book."<sup>11</sup> But what is it that makes this film "effective" as a fiction of its time? How does it make sense of its present? Ford, who

has been known to describe himself as a “liberal democrat—and above all a rebel,”<sup>12</sup> has never been considered as part of Red Hollywood. Neither has he—unlike Joseph Losey or Nicholas Ray—been directly involved in any of Roosevelt’s New Deal programs that were meant to relieve the hardship caused by the depression. If Ford had any progressive credential, it was mainly due to his support for the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League and the cause against Franco—a credential he lost decades later when he supported Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War. It should come as no surprise then that he and scriptwriter Nunnally Johnson have been repeatedly accused of having toned down the militancy of Steinbeck’s tragedy about the forced migration of Tom Joad and his family. But despite the omission of some combative speeches, the rearrangement of the plot’s trajectory and the much-discussed change of the ending,<sup>13</sup> the backbone of the film’s narrative is still formed by Tom’s coming to consciousness to the reality behind the façade of the American dream. Ford hasn’t abandoned anything of the book’s rendition of the class violence that accompanied the economic upheaval, from the exploitation of migrants who are made to work for starvation wages in work camps run like prisons, to the brutal crushing of eruptions of organized resistance by police forces working in the service of landowners. To enhance the truthful appearance of the film, Ford even sought the advice of Tom Collins, a manager of a relief camp run by the New Deal’s Farm Security Administration (FSA), while also drawing visual inspiration from the photographs that Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Walker Evans and others had made in service of this Administration. The film also preserves, even if sensibly restrained, Steinbeck’s allusions to the transcendentalist legacy of William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman. This is most clearly incarnated in the character of Jim Casy, the doomed messianic prophet who trades in his lost faith in God for the new religion of Socialism, quoting from one of Blake’s poems that “all that lives is holy” and preaching to anyone who will listen that “all souls are just a small portion of a larger soul.”<sup>14</sup> At first sight it would seem as if Ford, who avowedly recognized in the fate of the Okies during the Great Depression the fate of his own family and all the other farmers who had fled the Great Irish Famine, has crafted a straightforward narrative of exodus and awakening. So it is that, towards the end of the film, we find Tom Joad, after having grown painfully aware of the reality of the class struggle and the injustice of capitalist exploitation, heading expectantly and radiantly towards a horizon of change, firmly committed to the struggle for social justice and a common future.

But John Ford, as you well know, never had much liking for narratives that meekly follow the logic of cause and effect. As fellow Ford aficionado Peter

Delpeut and Mart Dominicus have remarked, the filmmaker has always tended to thwart the course of the plot with narrative deviations and visual defections that at the same time suspend and refuel the central storyline.<sup>15</sup> As an example, they mention the notable birth scene in *Stagecoach* (1939), which plays out like a story within the story. It is a moment in which the hazardous voyage through the desolate desert is suspended while another temporality makes its way into the narrative, a time of waiting and anticipating, filled with sparse words and exchanged glances that say nothing and everything. One could also bring to mind, as Louis Skorecki has,<sup>16</sup> the moments in which we see the young Mr. Lincoln, in the eponymous film of 1939, absorbed in thought while lying on his back with his feet up—because only when he’s lying down, says Lincoln, his mind is standing up. It’s as if the somewhat maladroit, eccentric position of this tall man, who constantly needs to untangle his long arms and legs, literally lies in the way of the plot’s straightforward progression. As if his body, with its slow gestures and awkward leaps, functions like a stumbling block that explodes the frame and bars any smooth continuation of the main storyline. One could say that, like Lincoln’s body, Ford’s stories are always on the verge of collapsing. Their apparent steady coordination of movements and continuity of actions is always under threat of being subtly interrupted by incongruous, sometimes even contradictory manoeuvres that compose a pattern of their own through the sensible landscape that the film, as a whole, brings about. In *The Grapes of Wrath* too, Ford couldn’t help constructing almost unnoticeable sidetracks that stray from the linear course of the plot as derived from the book. They can be traced in some specific moments where the filmmaker had to transmute Steinbeck’s words and invent his own cinematic condensations in order to give expression to irremediable experiences of injustice and grievance. In these moments, Ford could make us see the sense of deprivation reflected in the hallucinative glance of Muley’s eyes, gleaming in the glimmers of candlelight, while he tells his story of disownment, echoing the story of many, before receding from view as mysteriously as he appeared, never again to be seen or heard. He could make us hear the roars of indignation resound in the exorbitance of Casy’s speech, reverberating in the deceiving silence of the night, while he oracles the virtues of learning instead of preaching (“A preacher’s gotta know. I don’t know. I gotta ask.”), before he is literally beaten to death by the system that he opposes. And Ford could make us feel the fire of rage flaring up in the glow of Tom’s face, when he promises to be “all around in the dark,” on the lookout for the world’s injustices, before his silhouette finally disappears into the shimmering twilight of the morning sky. This last scene was, after all, the ending

that Ford had foreseen for the film, before producer Darryl Zanuck stepped in and decided to add the famous scene with Ma Joad's "We are the people" speech, at the same time satisfying the upbeat demands for a Hollywood ending and underscoring the transcendental communitarianism that Steinbeck accentuated in his novel. I think Ford's first choice would have made much more sense, not only because it mirrors the opening scene in which we see Tom's silhouette coming down the road, but also because it comes forth as the denouement of these particular twilight sequences that seem to form a thread of their own throughout the film. It is as if these condensed moments of grievance and dissonance evoke a voyage through a ghostly spirit-world, a mythological realm of apparitions roaming from one night to another, bearing with them the histories of all the dispossessed, all those "people living like pigs and good rich land layin' fallow." Seldom have characters in a Ford film been submerged in a world so unreal, a realm awash with deep elongated shadows and eerie appearances that bring to mind Fritz Lang's expressionist compositions of the Weimar years. Purposefully photographed in black and white by the unsurpassable Gregg Toland (who would also make his mark on *Citizen Kane* the year after), these nightly scenes form a stark contrast with the sequences that make up the dominant plot of the film, which bear recognizable traces of the FSA documentary tradition, showing a world of concrete struggle and violence, tainted by a growing disparity between the rich and the poor, and an open hostility towards migrants and "troublemakers."

When the film came out some critics maligned the unworldly beauty of some parts of the film, notably the nightly scenes, for being too "artistic." Those scenes, they argued, contrasted too much with the film's overall "newsreel quality" and interfered with the "simple story of simple people."<sup>17</sup> But doesn't *The Grapes of Wrath* work precisely because of, rather than in spite of, the tension between different modes of sensibility and imagery, which defies the film's simple reduction to a straightforward plot of coming to consciousness or an unflinching propagation of New Deal policy?<sup>18</sup> In defiance of the pull of narrative identification, what we actually see unfolding on the screen is not simply a linear passage from obscurity to limelight, but rather a constant chiaroscuro between light and darkness, between a recognisable world of tragedy and redemption, and a mythological world of ghosts and hauntings. These intertwined modes of sensibility can also be considered as different modes of temporality: as a time that moves forward towards its destiny, creating a continuity of actions driven by probability and possibility, and a time that mysteriously suspends this continuity and dismisses the plot that moves towards the promise of liberation. In other words, what is transmitted is a sensibility of

time that is capable of integrating in its very continuum forces that interrupt it, a sensibility that allows for heterogeneous worlds to be subtly brought into tension.<sup>19</sup> It is as if, somehow mirroring the configuration of the political landscape which still seemed to be able to serve as a legible space for negotiation between heterogeneous social forces, the fictional structure of *The Grapes of Wrath* is grounded in the possibility of balance by way of imbalance. Might this be what Pedro was referring to when he spoke of the “balance of things” that he finds in Ford’s films, the kind of balance that he misses so much in contemporary cinema? Could this balance also be what Eisenstein was alluding to when he praised the “nearly classical harmony” of Ford’s films? However far removed from his own search for a cinematic language of symbols based on a montage of discordant elements, Eisenstein saw in Ford’s cinema an “astonishing harmony of all its commonest parts,” reflecting the possibility of unity through division, of homogeneity through heterogeneity.<sup>20</sup> It is certainly not unreasonable to assume that Eisenstein, devotee of Hegelian dialectics, had in mind the harmony that Hegel has described as characteristic of classical art, breaking with the principles of the symbolic art that searches for a pure form of expressing itself. According to Hegel’s triadic conception of art forms, this harmony which finds idea and form adequate to one another is bound to be disrupted by a will to release form from its constraints: form eventually abandons the external world in order to take refuge within itself so that idea and form once again go separate ways. This withdrawal, says Hegel, implies the loss of innocence. We know that this schema would also be applied to the history of cinematic art: it wouldn’t be long before cinema’s “classical” era—the time when the traditional powers of narrative fiction were able to strike a balance with the new powers of the moving image—was thought to have had its time.

2.

When Ford’s version of *The Grapes of Wrath* came out, opinions were as divided as they were on the original book, not least on the left side of the political spectrum. One popular line of criticism suggested that the film offered too much style, but too little politics; too much artifice, but too little documentary. Pare Lorentz and Edwin Locke, for example, who had both worked on several FSA-sponsored photography and film projects documenting the devastation caused by the Great Depression, applauded the film for its “honesty” and its fidelity to the spirit of the book. But while the first criticised its inability to capture “the feeling of the sky and land,” the latter complained that “Ford’s sense of environment has not come through as well as his sense of people.”<sup>21</sup> Among the film’s fiercest critics was a



young writer who would later stand out as one of the sharpest American film critics of his time. When he saw Ford's film, he was just putting the finishing touches to a book that he had been working on for over four years, a book that in many ways formed a counterfoil to Steinbeck's. Although he also aspired to document the devastation wreaked on the settlers of rural America, this writer was never able to stomach the typical New Deal art, with its recourse to sentimental or melodramatic treatment of the wretched and the destitute. Neither did he particularly like the reportage style that became well-established throughout the 1930s, which he found to be overly drenched in enlightened humanism and didactic naturalism. No wonder he considered his own work as "a swindle, an insult, and a corrective" to the dominant models of representation, which he loathed for their promotion of the earnestness of the author and their easy provocation of empathy. The writer's name, as I'm sure you've guessed, was James Agee. The book that would eventually come out, barely a year after Ford's film, under the title *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), yields an account of the summer that he and photographer Walker Evans, commissioned by *Fortune* magazine, had spent with three Alabama tenant farm families—roughly around the same time as Steinbeck spent travelling around rural California. The resulting text reads like the work of an anguished writer who feverishly tries to respond to the perversity of "parading nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives... for money, and for a reputation for crusading and for unbiased."<sup>22</sup> It seems to incarnate the torment of a documentary account that wears its own failure on its sleeve. There is no straightforward plot or chronology, no attempt at explaining causes, giving answers or wheedling the reader into identification or compassion. Instead, the book is carried along by a delirious stream of confessional reveries, poetic meditations and meticulous descriptions of sights, sounds, smells and tastes, ricocheting at an almost breathless pace without distinguishing between the significant and the insignificant, the extraordinary and the trivial. This refusal to choose, at the likely price of getting lost in excess, seems to testify to Agee's desire to erase every trace of his intervention in the real, every trace of what could assume the authority of a point of view. At the same time, the fragmented way of processing what he encounters, giving all things the same attention, seems to respond to an attempt to withstand any particular account of poverty and injustice that might be assumed through the agency of any particular narrative aimed at an apprehension of the real. Agee's reaction to *The Grapes of Wrath* is undoubtedly tainted by this resistance to precepts that rely on authoritative and instructive identifications between a perception of injustice and a model of intelligibility. Prompted by Edwin Locke's article, in particular by the

latter's praise for Ford's "honest" depiction of "real people," which he contrasted with the artifice of *Gone with the Wind*, Agee scorned the lenience of the standards used by left-wing critics who celebrated the film for its "realism." In response, he wrote in his notebook:

*I submit that there is quite as much unreality in The Grapes of Wrath as in Gone with the Wind (sight unseen), and that it is of a far more poisonous order, being more near the centers of human living, pain and dignity, and therefore more insulting to them, and being also so successfully disguised as "reality," that it deceived even its creators. I suggest that it is virtually worthless in any direct way, but endlessly interesting as an encyclopedia of flaws, substandards, inadequacies, self-deceptions, deceptions of the public, opportunities impaired for the future, and, at very best, of painful disappointments. It may be well more interesting, for those with the special taste for it, to watch and analyze as an elaborate, flawlessly false and logical and vulgar, collective dream: general America's dream of a lot of things about itself.*<sup>23</sup>

Although Agee—who, by the way, had hoped that Fritz Lang would use an early draft of *Let Us Now Praise* for his never accomplished sharecropper film—continued to believe in cinema's power to capture the oscillations and contingencies of reality, he had no patience for narratives pretending to represent reality with uncomplicated sentimental plots or portray "real people" with well-known, high-paid actors. In one of his most revering pieces of film criticism (on Georges Rouquier's *Farrebique* (1946), as it happens—this magnificent portrait of peasant life that you and Pedro led me to discover), he laments how "so-called simple people, fictional and nonfictional, are consciously and unconsciously insulted and betrayed by artists and by audiences."<sup>24</sup> For Agee, Hollywood had become a dream machine that consistently corrupted the audience's vision and betrayed the fundamental promise of cinema: the promise to capture "the cruel radiance of what is." After all, he claimed, the camera was the central instrument of his time, able to do what nothing else in the world could do:

*To record unaltered reality; and it can be made to perceive, record, and communicate, in full unaltered power, the peculiar kinds of poetic vitality which blaze in every real thing and which are in great degree, inevitably and properly, lost to every other kind of artist except the camera artist.*<sup>25</sup>

If he could, Agee claimed, he'd do no writing at all. He would use images. He considered the filmmaker's challenge as the opposite of the one facing the writer. While the latter, he argued, is embroiled in the painstaking task of bringing words as near as possible to the illusion of embodiment, the first has already been granted the power of illusion due to the reproductive process of photography. The challenge for the filmmaker was then to retain respect for the appearance of the real world in order to be able to lay bare the exalted spirit of its actual experience. His or her task was not to alter the world as it is seen and change it into a world of aesthetic reality, but to perceive the "aesthetic reality within the actual world, and to make an undisturbed and faithful record of the instant in which this movement of creativeness achieves its most expressive crystallization."<sup>26</sup> By the time Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* came out, however, Agee was close to giving up on cinema's potential to capture the living splendour of the actual world, which he admired so much in the work of Griffith, von Stroheim and Chaplin (especially Chaplin, who he would befriend and defend, and for whom he would even write a screenplay).<sup>27</sup> Although he kept on the lookout for fresh signs of life, one can feel the desperation gradually seeping into his writing at the beginning of the 1940s. More and more movies were being made, he sighed, that do all the work for their audience: the seeing, the explaining, the understanding, even the feeling. And the more the audience was being spoiled, the more it was being deprived of the experience of the real. It was only a few years later, shortly after the war, that his pessimism would give way to flashes of optimism, when he encountered cinematic fictions which he saw able to play against and into unrehearsed and uninvented reality. He didn't find them in the old Hollywood, but in the new Europe.

3.

Georges Rouquier, Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, André Malraux, Humphrey Jennings: these were some of the filmmakers who, according to Agee, were able to oppose the propensities towards the shallow refuges of "kitsch" and "good taste"—the latter said to be merely serving to rectify and perfect the first. At last, he cheered, cinema had regained a sincerity and immediacy that was not bogged down in a form of "rigor artis" or the "mural sentimentality and utter inability to know, love, or honour people to which American leftists are liable."<sup>28</sup> Having undone itself of the chains of dramatic emplotment and pedagogic transmission that had fettered it, the art of cinema, he said, had finally discovered its true essence: cinema as a window onto the soul of the world, allowing the essence of reality to imprint itself on the sensitive surface of the celluloid film strip.

This newfound aesthetic and moral respect for reality is summarized in Roberto Rossellini's well known adagium "things are there, why manipulate them?" a credo which would be firmly embraced by another film critic, who in many ways shared Agee's views and preferences: André Bazin. For Bazin, amateur of phenomenology and existentialism and one of the instigators of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the essence of the cinematographic art was to be found in the very opposite of what had previously been identified as *cinéma par excellence*, epitomized by the work of the Soviet montage filmmakers and the German expressionists who had put their faith in the "image" rather than in "reality." Cinema's essence, claimed Bazin, was not to be found in what is added to a given reality by using the qualities of montage and plasticity, but in what is revealed of reality and the preexisting relations embedded within it. It's within this logic that he praised *Farrebique* as an "ascetic enterprise whose purpose is to deprive reality of all that has nothing to do with it, especially the parasitism of art."<sup>29</sup> Against those critics who, at the time of its release, trashed Rouquier's film as demagogic crap dressed up as pure cinema or as a worthless depiction of events unworthy of cinema, he answered that it responded to the need of a new revolution: a realistic revolution that could retrieve reality from the drowning pool of art. Against those who only granted the fundamental realism of cinema the status of art inasmuch as it would be artificial, he replied that reality could never be completely submitted to artifice or narrative. Reality, he stated, as if echoing Agee, exists above all for itself, and it is the task of cinema to reveal it as nothing but itself, in all its mystery, cruelty and ambiguity. If Bazin, in contrast to Agee, did speak out in favour of *The Grapes of Wrath*, it was because he was pleasantly surprised by its scarce use of music and the "truthful" appearance of the cars and clothes used in the film. In what must have been a moment of rarity, he wrote, Hollywood technicians appeared to have been left to their own devices, unbothered by the jurisprudence of established conventions that are commonly used to impose meaning and elicit predetermined emotions from the spectator.<sup>30</sup> It was too little, too late however: for Bazin, even moments like these—in which mercenaries working in the service of big studios were able to show some sensitivity to the appearances of things and people without subordinating them to well-worn dramatic structures—could not prevent the downfall of the scenario-driven Hollywood model. According to him, 1940, the year of Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, marked a point beyond which new developments within the language of cinema were inevitable. In the preceding decade, the cinematic art had found its perfect balance of form and content, image and sound—a harmony and maturity, as he wrote about *Stagecoach*, that was "brought to classic perfection"<sup>31</sup>—but it had

also turned its back on its real vocation, to which it desperately needed to return: that of “realism.”

The renewal of realism as that which allowed for an *a posteriori* establishment of meaning, in response to yesteryear’s plot-ridden stories and well-edited spectacles that constructed meaning *a priori*, is something that Bazin particularly found in the work of two filmmakers: Orson Welles, whose work he admired for its disruption of the narrative montage tradition with the use of deep focus, and Rossellini, whose films he praised for their “respect for the global unity of reality,” without relying on artifice or ornament to bolster their vigour or well-wrought plots to boast their complacency. Freed from the influence of Hollywood, owing nothing to theatre and literature, providing no delight in beauty or exegesis through analysis, Rossellini’s films offered a world of pure acts, he wrote, “preparing the way (as if unbeknownst to God himself) for the sudden dazzling revelation of their meaning.”<sup>32</sup> His unconditional admiration led Bazin to charge to Rossellini’s defense when the filmmaker found himself accused of having irretrievably lost his way, after having allegedly abandoned his neorealist portrayals of the people’s struggle in *Roma città aperta* (1945) and *Germania anno zero* (1948), for the erratic narratives and Catholic sermons of *Stromboli* (1950) and *Viaggio in Italia* (1954). One film in particular was treated exceptionally harshly: *Europa 51*, Rossellini’s response to what he saw as a “tragedy of conformism” in “a world consumed by ideology,”<sup>33</sup> which came about around the same time as Vittorini’s disillusioned saga of post-war communal living. Like Vittorini, Rossellini was wary of the idealisation of belief that grew out of the increased intensity of the Cold War and the growing orthodoxy and dogmatism within the Italian political landscape. When he found himself attacked from all sides, either standing accused of blasphemy, of not fulfilling the people’s need for bread and circus, or of not conforming his films to the exigencies of the revolution as demanded by the doctrine of Socialist realism, he responded by making a film about what is vacated by the orthodox claims of possessing the truth: the venture of seeking truth for oneself.

Inspired as much by Rossellini’s avowed bent for the stories of Saint Francis and Saint Joan—both of whom he would later dedicate a film to—as by his discovery of Simone Weil’s *Attente de Dieu* (1942), *Europa 51* tells the tale of a drift into the unknown, triggered by a desire to know. The drift begins with the most traumatic event imaginable: the death of a child. While in *Germania anno zero*, another child’s death occurs at the end of the film, here it marks the beginning of a journey. Overcome with the unspeakable grief caused by the suicide of her son, Irene, an American bourgeois migrant, looks for answers by turning to her cousin

Andrea, a communist writer who brings her to the other side of society, to the world of the Italian working class. The answers to the horrors of the world can be found in *consciensa*, he repeats over and over again: only when class consciousness is achieved can the wounds of society be healed. Only Marxist science, he says, can provide meaning to those who are drifting and dreaming. But instead of following the road mapped out by science, Irene decides to look for herself. She wanders ever further away from the trodden paths where things can supposedly be healed and revealed by the rules of knowledge, further down the shores of the river towards the barren wastelands where she starts nursing a tubercular prostitute, towards the cement factory where she takes the place of a worker, gradually collapsing in a void where all coordinates of meaning lose their bearings. Irene does not find answers to her questions in ideology, but rather in a new faith, which the representatives of society take for insanity: a faith in the shared equality of all. “Illusion,” says Andrea. “Reformist,” cries the priest. “Anomaly,” diagnose the scientists. To all those who want to give sense to her actions and call for *consciensa*, she answers *niente*—the “nothing” that resonates throughout the film, that which escapes the call for order and rationality. To the complacent certainty of those who claim to know what’s good for others, she opposes a stubborn faith, a faith in the possibility of sharing with others. Bazin recognized this “conversion,” which has been criticized by some as a capitulation to Catholicism, as the act of revelation of the Spirit of Grace, in opposition to the Spirit of Law. Eric Rohmer, Bazin’s closest disciple at that time, described *Europa 51* as a new version of the trial of Socrates in which a new incarnation of the figure of Joan of Arc is condemned for “opposing to the world’s grimace the grace of her vocation.”<sup>34</sup> In following Irene’s path towards sainthood, cinema realizes its own vocation, forcing reality to reveal its inner Truth by sole way of appearances. What both Bazin and Rohmer saw transmitted was no less than the spiritual essence of mankind itself, the human soul revealing itself in all its purity, liberated from the doctrines of knowledge and the rules of common sense. Rossellini’s film was considered as an expression of a “revolutionary humanism” that, through the realization of cinema’s autonomous vocation for realism, exposed “the hidden meanings in people and things without disturbing the unity natural to them.”<sup>35</sup> To those Marxist critics who denounced the film for its Catholic values, its “moral deafness” and its lack of scientific analysis and social engagement, Bazin and Rohmer retorted that they must be blinded by their insistence on content, failing to take into account the *mise en scène* that gives it meaning, neglecting to see how it showed, with dazzling clarity, “the presence of the spiritual in human beings and in the world.”<sup>36</sup>

A shift in the expectations and approaches towards the fictions of cinema is starting to make itself clear to me, one that finds an expression in the title of an article written by another critic and future filmmaker who would become involved with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jacques Rivette. “We are not innocent anymore,” he wrote in 1950.

*We wound up with a cinema of time, where nothing exists except for the pure duration of successive acts without density or reality: the birth of the dangerous, and entirely gratuitous, notion of rhythm and speed—trying to throw us off track by replacing existence and presence by accumulation, hoping to create a prey from the frenzied multiplication of fleeing shadows. A cinema of rhetorical discourse, where everything has to conform to formulas—ordinary, polyvalent, and stereotyped for every usage: the universe is captured and destroyed by the trap of formal conventions.* <sup>37</sup>

After having lost its innocence in the prison house of signification and systematization, after having seen the tragic regression of its radical promises towards prefab mediocrity, cinema had to be resurrected in its power to unveil the world’s intangible signs of grace, an unveiling without mediation, without descriptions or explications enclosing them in a system of reference. In place of the structures of social causality, historical necessity and tragic transcendence that cinema inherited from Aristotelian drama was proposed a poetics of revelation, seeking to reveal that which is more true than the real, not as knowledge but as the pure experience of the Event in which the physical world coincides with Being itself. To the cinema of narrative continuity, which organizes scenes according to a dramatic law to which they have to submit, is opposed a succession of autonomous slices of life, one not more important than the other. “In this century,” wrote Rohmer, “such a reversal has taken place in the hierarchy of aesthetic values that situations or intrigues that our forebears would have presented as the simple outcome of the natural progression of passions, are now denounced as melodramatic.”<sup>38</sup> It would seem that the grave disappointments triggered by the growing hegemony of the models of Hollywood and Mosfilm, and the growing critical contempt for dramatic and psychological verisimilitude nurtured a new dream of cinema: a dream of an ontological realism that would reject cinema’s metaphorical and narrative properties and restore reality to its primal ambiguity and unity, ruling out any desire for systemization or imposition of opinion, or any form of abuse of consciousness by way of fragmentation or manipulation. In

Rossellini's terms, cinema's role was to be one of *monstrare* rather than *demonstrare*: a showing grounded in an act of faith, holding off any form of prejudice or judgement and leaving it up to the spectators to observe, choose and reach their own conclusions. Like Irene in *Europa 51*, filmmakers and spectators were asked to take up the role of witness and seek a sincere and curious attitude of being-in-the-world, allowing them to reflect on the ambiguous nature of reality. Only in being faithful towards the material surface of the world and stripping appearances of all that is not essential could cinema bring out the spiritual soul of Being. Only in seeking to tackle the impossible task of dissolving the screen and conveying the continuum of reality without mediation could cinema reach its absolute goal: to recreate the world in its own image, an image "unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time."<sup>39</sup> Only when it would no longer claim to be an art of reality and rather become reality made art, cinema would finally fulfill its true destiny.

4.

Parallel to this paradigmatic shift in the world of cinema, a no less important one occurred in the visual arts. Around the time when the likes of Agee and Bazin started advocating cinema's ontological destiny as asymptote of reality, the inclination to consider art as a manifestation of its own inner necessity and specificity also led towards another horizon, one which turned aside all assertions of "realism." It would be called "Modernism." But this particular interpretation of modernism could no longer be associated with the heyday of Soviet revolutionary art, when the dream of a new cinema was aligned with the utopia of a new world where all injustices and inequalities would find themselves dissolved in a reign of bright energy that would electrify souls and bring triumph over darkness. All this was now considered as belonging to a horribly failed ideology: no one dared to think any longer of cinema as a communist symphony of coordinated movements, as Vertov did, or as a mind cultivating tractor, as Eisenstein once described it. The dreams of creating socio-influential constructions and uniting the power of a new medium of expression with that of a new society were said to have been brutally crushed by the demand for "Socialist realism" that was launched in 1932, bringing to conclusion the radical promises of an aesthetic revolution. What remained of these dreams was nothing but "kitsch," wrote Dwight Macdonald. One of Agee's closest friends and co-worker at the *Partisan Review*, Macdonald analysed the decline of Soviet cinema at the same time as Agee was working on the first draft of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The resulting series of articles provided an



account on how Stalin's installment of new cultural directives had led to a regime of ruthless repression, which involved an onslaught against "intellectualism" and "formalism" that forced artists and filmmakers like Eisenstein and Vertov to repudiate their own work.<sup>40</sup> The bold experimentation of the revolutionary Soviet cinema, which Macdonald considered as the major art form of the century thus far, was completely swallowed up by the demand to depict "real people" and "true reflections of life," which ended up approaching the prefab sentiments produced by this other dream factory: Hollywood. But the question was also raised whether the decline of revolutionary cinema could only be explained in terms of state control, or whether Stalin's followers actually had a point when they insisted that the Russian masses were too "backward" to be able to grasp aesthetically "advanced" art. Maybe, it was suggested, they had been right all along to argue that democratic art was bound to be simple and vulgar. Perhaps the cinema of kitsch was so successful because it actually found a response in the masses that revolutionary cinema couldn't. After all, MacDonald pointed out, even at the height of the great period of Soviet cinema, Hollywood movies were still infinitely more popular. Why did the masses prefer *The Thief of Bagdad* to *Potemkin*? Why did the films of Vertov or of Eisenstein, which hoped to reach the many, only appeal to the heroic few? To what extent was the expression of popular taste in Russia spontaneous or conditioned by official policy? These questions were picked up by another self-appointed Trotskyist, who wrote a response to Macdonald in the form of a letter, which was later expanded upon in an article entitled "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939). Indeed, Clement Greenberg's illustrious piece was published just a few months before Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* was released.<sup>41</sup> In his essay, Greenberg argued that the rise of kitsch was not at all the result of "conditioning" but the natural outcome of the mass desire for mindless entertainment, which had taken the place of religion as the favorite opiate of the 20th century masses. It was not Stalin's policy that drove them to see kitsch—the Red Tsar merely gave them what they wanted. The fact is, claimed Greenberg, that High art has always belonged to the cultivated, while the exploited, deprived as they are of cultural exposure, have always had to content themselves with rudimentary culture. The desire to bring art to the masses could only lead to its vulgarization because it would inevitably become mired in the populace's regressive sensibilities. That's why, in order to protect itself from the harmful contagion of mass culture, art needed to retreat and close off its borders.

Greenberg's defensive position ought to be considered in light of the trauma of the Popular Fronts, at the moment when, on the eve of a second world war,

Fascism and Stalinism—both castigated as forms of totalitarianism on the pages of the *Partisan Review*—conjointly seemed to be heading for triumph. This was also a period when modern art found itself caught in a struggle for survival, as it was being assailed from both the Left and the Right for its elitism. For Greenberg, art's only possibility of survival lay precisely in its radical detachment from society, in its exile from the values of mass audiences, where it could be left untainted by the reign of mercantilism—as embodied by capitalism—and instrumentalism—as exemplified by Fascism and Stalinism. He would find the epitomization of this vocation in Abstract Expressionism, in particular in the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, which for him indicated a return to the freedom of “art for art’s sake,” as a departure from the unfortunate involvement of artists in the Popular Fronts. The dream of uniting art and life that once drove the experiments of Soviet art, and the preoccupation with popular culture and social art that permeated the era of the New Deal, gave way to the idea that the breaches in the borders between High and Low, just like the eruption of the masses onto the political stage, could only result in disaster. Both the admission of the uncultured to artistic aspirations and the desire of artists to visit destitute neighbourhoods to gather testimonies of misery and injustice were said to have led to art’s demise. The only way to put a halt to the process of vulgarization, which merely contributed to the pacification and exploitation of the masses and the reinforcement of the rule of the dominant class, was for art to turn its back on the representation of reality and call attention to itself rather than conceal its artificiality.

What Greenberg could not have foreseen was that his article laid one of the foundations for a regained critical tradition, one which would endlessly rework and revise the Marxist *idée fixe* that all individuals are part of a system of cultural practices that partake in their exploitation, in order to demonstrate how the process of mass commodification and the world of appearances continue to colonize their lives and dreams. One of the critics, for example, who adopted Greenberg’s High-Low distinction, and the historical account that went along with it, was Dwight Macdonald. For his post-war elaborations on the deadening effects of middlebrow culture, he did not only find support in Greenberg’s work, but also in the theories of the Frankfurt School, particularly those of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. During their exile in the States, Adorno and Horkheimer had come to see what they called the “culture industry” as an instrument of indoctrination and social control through which “the totally administered society” came to dominate the individual. Drawing lessons from their experience of the American market system, as well as from the devastations

caused by Fascism and Stalinism, they considered mass culture—and cinema in particular—as a form of mass deception aimed at inducing consent, breaking down all individual resistance and incorporating all deviations. After having witnessed the destructions produced during the Second World War, it was no longer possible to think of large-scale industries, which once stood as symbols of a new society, without thinking of large-scale manipulation, intoxication and destruction. The project of Enlightenment, bound up with knowledge as a form of mastery, was thought to have reached its culmination in the rationalized exterminations in the concentration camps, after which the world, dominated economically and culturally by the United States, continued to grow more and more into a mass society of passive, uniform consumers. Dictating its consumption through pre-digested forms and programmed effects, leaving no scope for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, the suggestive power of industrial cinema was thought to force its victims to “equate it directly with reality,” reducing men to objects in such a way that they came to enjoy their own dehumanization as something human. By emphasizing “acts of sympathy” and “hearts of gold” in the face of suffering, Hollywood fairytales such as *The Grapes of Wrath* merely impelled individuals to accept their fate. Against the totalizing character of this cultural-industrial system, even the rebels and mavericks who dared to go against the grain could not make a difference: in the end, their mutations were doomed to only confirm the validity of the system.<sup>42</sup> Strengthened by Adorno and Horkheimer’s denouncement of mass culture and their call for art to liberate itself from from the experience of aestheticized life, Macdonald continued to discredit mainstream cinema as a commodity form that aimed to hegemonize the daydreams of its spectators. While the cinema of the twenties, he claimed, still contained traces of avant-gardism (Griffith) and Folk Art (Chaplin), the coming of sound had completely degraded cinema to a mode of imposition of the dominant ideology on passive consumers. Cinema was now considered nothing but a phony people’s art, merely masquerading as representative of popular taste; a decadent Ersatz culture sold by the bourgeoisie to a proletariat which had lost its folk traditions, bringing consolation to the masses who had nothing else to console themselves with.<sup>43</sup>

By 1947, the socially committed cinema that had prospered during the Red Years was only a shadow of what it had been. As a countermeasure against the “sizable doses of communist propaganda” that Hollywood cinema had ostensibly fallen victim to, the head of the Motion Picture Association of America vowed to “have no more *Grapes of Wrath*.” “We’ll have no more films that show the seamy side of American life,” he asserted. “We’ll have no pictures that deal with labour

strikes. We'll have no pictures that deal with the banker as villain."<sup>44</sup> In order to dispense with the threat of moral corruption coming from the "Reds," the MPAA distributed the *Screen Guide for Americans*, written by Ayn Rand—indeed, the high priestess of unregulated capitalism and the virtue of selfishness, whose acclaimed writings can today be found on the nightstand of corporatists and politicians alike. Under broad headlines, the guide preached "Don't Smear the Free Enterprise System," "Don't Smear the Profit Motive," "Don't Deify the Common Man," "Don't Glorify the Collective," and "Don't Drool Over Weaklings as Conditioned 'Victims of Circumstances'"<sup>45</sup> That same year, Rand also gave a disturbing testimony before the infamous House Committee on Un-American Activities, where she dismissed the Hollywood movie *Song of Russia* (a bland melodrama made in the context of the wartime alliance) as communist propaganda, because it showed too many Russians "smiling." This hysterical anti-communist witch-hunt and ensuing blacklisting spree, which had started to rear its ugly head at the end of the 1930s<sup>46</sup> would persist until the end of the 1950s, when McCarthyism collapsed into a farce under the weight of its own excesses. But the discrediting of the tradition of socially engaged cinema, and the involvement of artists and filmmakers in the class struggle also came from another direction, from inside James Agee's milieu of cultural critics. In the accounts of Greenberg, Macdonald and others, the Red Decade to which *The Grapes of Wrath* had provided an arguable endpoint, was depicted as an aberrant moment when the arts had been captured by politics, and artists had abandoned their true craft to do political work. At the time when the isms of socialism, collectivism and communism were considered suspect, a New Criticism emerged which rejected the judgment of art according to its involvement in the class struggle and its approach to the everyday, and rather championed art which excluded anything outside itself, especially anything that could be read as explicitly political. Given that any kind of resistance in the form of a political message could only fall prey to the all-encompassing power of reification, art was propelled to withdraw into what Hegel had called the "resistance of matter." The excess of the idea over its own representability was now conceptualized as the necessary "autonomy" of art, resisting the impurity of cultural forms that were ostensibly tainted by the standardization and manipulation of the audience's sentiments. It was this reinvention of Modernity as the conquest of artistic autonomy by taking note of its own materiality and expressivity that would contribute to the rise of a reawakened "avant-garde" cinema.<sup>47</sup> What we see taking shape then is another cinematic ontology: one that didn't seek the soul of cinema in the impression of the real, like a veil of Veronica pressed to the face of human existence, but rather in

the material properties, processes and structures of cinema itself. In the attempt to escape the threat of reification and restore a sense of purity, the essence of cinema was not only found in the impression of the world outside itself, but also in the demonstration of the world enclosed within itself.

5.

While some responded to the growing suspicion and distrust towards political fictions by either calling for a phenomenalist realism of cinema or by drawing attention to the artistic medium as the resistant other,<sup>48</sup> the concern with art's political effect also took another turn. A few months after James Agee put down his comments on *The Grapes of Wrath*, another artist-writer scribbled some thoughts on the film in his journal, amidst a maze of notes in which he tried to tackle the problem of "the social effect of works of art."

*You can still see that it must be a great book, and the entrepreneurs probably did not want to 'take all the strength out of it.' So they stew the subject in tears till it is tender. Where 'suggestive acting' does not predominate, there are powerful effects (tractors as the farmers' tanks, the camp of the fascist blacklegs, the car journey right across the states in search of work, the old farmer's funeral). The whole thing is an interesting mixture of the documentary and the private, the epic and the dramatic, the informative and the sentimental, the realistic and the symbolic, the materialistic and the idealistic.<sup>49</sup>*

As is typical of any product of entrepreneurial Hollywood, the writer reasons, the film attempts to incite empathy by enwrapping its subject in pathos and relying on the artifice of suggestive acting, but luckily it has some powerful effects that ultimately save it from being completely drowned in tears. The writer in question is Bertolt Brecht. Surely few have been more occupied with the effects of art as a material force in history. Art, for him, was first of all a science that needed to be developed through in-depth research and translated into applicable theories and methods. That's why artists, he suggested, could learn a thing or two from the science of advertising and the study of behavioural effects. This prioritizing of political effect over artistic autonomy led Adorno to accuse Brecht of authoritarianism; but from Brecht's perspective, the role of artists was to turn the techniques aimed at controlling effects against their inventors and retool them in order to shake up the consciousness of the public. Brecht distinguished this task from what he understood as the "suggestive" use of effects, which was meant

to cast a spell over the audience, putting them into a state of passive receptivity which suspends all critical consciousness. In that regard he especially targeted cinema, which for him was—at least since sound had entered the picture—the most “blooming branch of the international narcotics traffic”<sup>50</sup> in the business of inducing the spectators with cooked up doses of entertainment in order to transport them to Neverland, where they are kept in a state of apathy and passivity, as helpless victims of an indifferent lurching of their emotions. He illustrated this effect when he described his experience of watching *Gunga Din*, George Stevens’ 1939 adaptation of Rudyard Kipling’s eponymous poem. Brecht wrote how the film’s affective power “weakens the good instincts and strengthens the bad, it contradicts true experience and spreads misconceptions, in short it perverts our picture of the world.”<sup>51</sup> Although he completely disavowed the imperialist depiction of British India, with Cary Grant and Douglas Fairbanks as heroic soldiers fighting off the attacks of the Indian brutes, he claimed he couldn’t help identifying with the protagonists. All of Brecht’s work was precisely aimed at disrupting this disarming logic of identification and empathy, in order for the audience members to be able to decide for themselves and actively take matters into their own hands. The problem with films like *Gunga Din*, he claimed, was that its emotional responses were fail-safe and predetermined on the basis of culturally normative behaviour. But since effects of this kind were inevitable, in art as in life, they needed to be constantly neutralized, and this could only be done by making the release of these effects part of the expressive problem of art itself. The point was to introduce reason into affect and demystify the illusions of the spectators. These illusions had to be made visible by both citing them and making them “strange” at the same time, highlighting both their absurdity and the social conventions that inform them. If Brecht made so many allusions to Chaplin’s work, it’s precisely because he admired the way the filmmaker was able to use gags, jolts and jerks—what Brecht called “gestus”—as the very means for drawing attention to the changeability of characters, rather than simply exposing them “to the inclemencies of the world and the tragedy.”<sup>52</sup> Chaplin’s films, with their episodic structure and focus on gesture, strengthened his conviction that in order to wake up the spectators it was necessary to establish a logic of shocks and distances rather than obeying the unspoken rules of narrative drama.

*With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to “tried” rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use*

every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master.<sup>53</sup>

A new form of “realism” was deemed necessary to generate a knowledge of reality, not a realism that promised a truthful reflection of reality, but one that would be capable of countering both the naturalistic depictions as demanded by the Socialist officials and the traditional plots grounded in laws of probability and necessity.<sup>54</sup> If the exploited and oppressed were to change their situation, they needed to learn that reality is palpable and changeable. They needed to be awakened from the fatalist claims that “unhappiness falls like rain, nobody knows where from, and that suffering is their fate and a reward for it awaits them,” as the missionaries of the Black Straw Hats orate in *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* (*Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, 1929-1931). In this particular text—Brecht’s first openly Marxist piece, written in response to the Wall Street Crash of 1929—the awakening consciousness is embodied by the figure of a young woman whose revolutionary impulse is expressed in the demand “I want to know.” In Brecht’s very own interpretation of Joan of Arc’s “fool for Christ” theme, set in the Chicago stockyards and stock exchange during a labor dispute, Joan—not unlike Irene after her—decides to share the suffering of the destitute in an attempt to alleviate their misery. But in time, albeit too late, she learns that gestures of compassion and the spiritual search for salvation do not lead to liberation from servitude and exploitation. Her faith turns out to be nothing but an illusion. As she passes away, she realizes that “only violence helps when violence reigns.” If violence was deemed necessary, it was not only as a direct weapon against the oppressive and destructive system of capitalism, but also as an instrument that could reveal what is hidden under the guise of its inescapable necessity. It was this violence of revelation, which is supposed to lead to a transformation of the audience into a community of action, that is at the core of Brecht’s pedagogy; a violence that had to be imposed by disentangling everything that is taken for granted, including the workings of art itself. As Walter Benjamin put it in his 1939 text on the work of his good friend Brecht: “Instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function.”<sup>55</sup> Instead of merely reproducing the appearance of things as obvious and unquestionable, Brecht’s work aimed to lay bare its underlying conditions by using *Verfremdung* techniques, notably in the form of episodic compositions and commentary interventions. With his “epic theatre” Brecht thus attempted to integrate—like Vsevolod Meyerhold and others before him—the fragmented and self-explanatory qualities of popular cultural forms such

as music hall, cabaret and circus into a dramatic framework, while simultaneously devising it as an instrument to denounce the dominant order. By breaking up the sequential trajectory of narratives and interrupting the paths towards empathy and catharsis, so argued Benjamin, Brecht's "non-Aristotelian dramas" managed to create fractures and fissures in which Truth revealed itself (a potential, by the way, that Benjamin also recognized in the art of cinema, before he started blaming the commercial ascendance of the talkies for having ruined everything). In Brecht's work, the repeated interruptions and discontinuities, along with the emphasis upon artifice and the adoption of the gestural, were ostensibly able to shock spectators into awareness, allowing them to reassess both the circumstances laid bare and their own position and responsibility in the face of history.

The artist becomes a producer of critical knowledge, bringing life to the motionless bodies gazing at deceiving appearances, activating the passive spectators who have their eyes open but fail to see. Art is considered as a form of knowledge production rather than as a sensible mystery: it should not lapse into a wide-eyed presentation of things as they are, but rather let conditions confront each other, so that they can reveal, as if illuminated by a flash of lightning, "dialectics at a standstill." This idea of interruption as a way to "blast open the continuum of history" would also become central to Benjamin's own understanding of history: the obstruction of the flow of things which makes itself felt as a reflux, such that, in the tension created, an image of Truth appears. In his essay *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (*Theses on the Philosophy of History*), written in 1940 in response to the deteriorating situation in Europe and the Left's smug, complacent affirmation of history as moving inexorably towards Socialism, he claimed that "catastrophes is progress; progress is catastrophe."<sup>56</sup> In Benjamin's Messianic vision, a classless society could no longer be thought of as the ultimate goal of progress in history but rather as its rupture, which would function as a "leap in the open air of history" in which past and present meet. The dominant narratives of history, he argued, are always written from the perspective of victory, engendering empathy and sympathy for the victors, leaving no room for alternatives, residues, indeterminacies, unfulfilled potentialities or meaningful resistance. The task of critical art then becomes that of re-opening possibilities by making an authentic image of the past shine in the present and shattering the undialectical notions of progress, in favor of an exposition of contingency that could open historical time to the possibility of change: "It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way."<sup>57</sup>

Benjamin himself would never escape the shadow of fascism: soon after writing his theses, he took his own life in flight from the Gestapo, while attempting



to cross the Franco-Spanish border. As Brecht was mourning his friend's death and was preparing to go into exile in the US, he directed the first performance of his new piece *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (*Mother Courage and Her Children*, 1939) which eventually premiered barely a year after *The Grapes of Wrath*. Written in a blaze of anger, in direct response to the submissive behaviour of the German workers in the aftermath of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact and the invasion of Poland, *Mother Courage* stages the story of a mother who haggles her way across a violent, war-torn Europe in a vain attempt to protect her family from harm. In line with Brecht's dialectical approach, the play is composed as a knot of contradictions: between the desire for profiteering and the race for survival, between undaunted pragmatism and the obtuse refusal to learn, between the course of history and those passively undergoing it. Brecht's principle of contradiction is said to work along the lines of Eisenstein's montage theories, which had inspired him greatly. Opposing forces are brought together in order for them to collide and stir up contradictions within the spectator's mind, which is presumed to raise a new consciousness. The difference, however, is that Eisenstein replaced the dramatic identification with represented actions and characters with an immediate identification with calculated affects, while Brecht wanted to disrupt all form of identification and dismantle the effect of illusion by breaking the course of action and performance. While the first—fond as he was of quoting Marx's dictum that the point is not to understand history but to change it—thought of montage as a primitive language of ideograms that could organically synthesize and communicate the rhythms of new society, the latter staged a network of dialectical relations to allow for an understanding of History as the collusion of visible appearances and hidden reality. In sharp contrast with Eisenstein's aspiration of creating an art of sensation that could "send the spectators into ecstasy,"<sup>58</sup> Brecht proposed a critical art, aiming to produce an awareness of the contradictions of the world. Unlike Saint Joan, however, *Mother Courage* never reaches an epiphany that would make her aware of the oppressive reality of the capitalist logic of profit and exploitation. Even after having sacrificed her family to her commercial instinct, she fails to learn her lesson. While she remains passively in the throes of History, crushed by historical circumstances she is not able to fathom, it is the spectator alone who is called upon "to learn how to see and not to gape. To act instead of talking all day long."<sup>59</sup> It is up to the onlookers of the spectacle to draw their own conclusions and either passively continue their drift on the road of History, or rather set out for the roads *not* taken. "If Courage learns nothing else," wrote Brecht, "at least the audience can, in my view, learn something by observing her."<sup>60</sup>

6.

Fifteen years later Brecht's words found an echo in an enthusiastic review of his play: "Because we *see* Mother Courage blind, we *see* what she does not see."<sup>61</sup> At that moment in time its writer, Roland Barthes, had only published one book in which he reflected on the relation between literature and political commitment and the responsibility of artists before History. His criticism on the well-behaved naturalism of the so-called "realist" mode of writing, which according to him merely signified a content through a form that identifies with it, kept him on the lookout for forms of art that would be able to disrupt the harmony of content and form that confined art to mere communication and expression. A solution came to him when *Mother Courage* was performed for the first time in Paris in 1954, an experience he would describe as "a sudden illumination." In sharp contrast with committed artworks which tended to show revolutionary subjects already engaged in conscious struggles, giving an account of a political reality with no disruptive aesthetic force whatsoever, it was Brecht alone, he wrote, who "has glimpsed the necessity, for socialist art, of always taking Man on the eve of Revolution, that is to say, alone, still blind, on the point of having his eyes opened to the revolutionary light by the 'natural' excess of his wretchedness."<sup>62</sup> Subsequently Barthes would not only dedicate a variety of articles to what he hailed as the "Brechtian Revolution," he would also assimilate the playwright's critical position into his own work: the position of a "Marxist who has thought about the sign." As he became more and more concerned with the naturalness with which the media, art and popular culture dressed up a reality which was determined by history, he aimed to track down the ideological abuse underlying the mythologies that tended to confuse Nature and History. In the resulting book that would launch his fame and influence, Barthes dedicated himself to the task of unmasking the sign systems that structure the *what-goes-without-saying* that glosses over history's inherent contradictions. One of his targets, for example, was *On the Waterfront* (1954), Elia Kazan's rollick with the ghosts of McCarthyism, which was revealed as an instance of mystification whose sole aim was the orchestration of the "restoration of order" and the "passive acknowledgment of the eternal boss." He particularly focused on its final scene in which, after having exposed the violence and the corruption of the workers' union, Marlon Brando's character decides to go back to work and give himself over to the exploitative system. Barthes wrote:

*If there ever was one, here is a case where we should apply the method of demystification that Brecht proposes and examine the consequences of our*

identification with the film's leading character... It is the participational nature of this scene, which objectively makes it an episode of mystification... Now it is precisely against the danger of such mechanisms that Brecht proposed his method of alienation. Brecht would have asked Brando to show his naïveté, to make us understand that, despite the sympathy we may have for his misfortunes, it is even more important to perceive their causes and their remedies.<sup>63</sup>

In counterweight to the mystificatory mechanism of *On the Waterfront*, assigning meanings to human misfortunes without examining the reasons, Barthes argued that *Mother Courage* was able to suspend the logic of identification that favors the complicity between History's victims and its witnesses, by opening up a distance for the spectators to be able to judge by themselves the historical reasons and remedies of social evil. Instead of being swept away in Mother Courage's own sense of hopelessness, spectators are made aware that war is not a fatality but a man-made phenomenon whose consequences can be abolished by attacking its causes. Mother Courage lives her historical reality as an indisputable fatality because she is so entirely subsumed by it that she fails to see the light: she remains unaware of her own capacity to bring her miseries to an end. She sees nothing, but we see through her. We come to understand that Mother Courage is the victim of what she does not see. Or, as Barthes wrote elsewhere: "To see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of what he does not see."<sup>64</sup>

We see what others don't see by seeing that they don't see. This striking formula could also be applied to sum up the logic of a certain interpretation of Marxism that made its way onto the political scene of the 1960s, a logic that can be distinguished in the writing that one of its main thinkers, Louis Althusser, devoted to *Mother Courage*, a few years after Barthes. Brecht's play, Althusser stated, is based on an internal dissociation of non-coincidental forms of temporality: on the one hand there is the time of illusion and on the other hand there is the time of reality, which underlies the other and awaits its recognition. According to the philosopher it is the asymmetrical, de-centered structure composed of overt and covert rhythms, by which Brecht interrupts the totality and transparency of the dominant ideological myths, that allows for a move beyond illusion towards reality. But this move is only possible because the relation between illusion and reality itself is latent, only visible to the spectators in so far as it remains invisible to the characters. The relation can only be made visible "in the mode of a perception which is not given, but has to be discerned, conquered and drawn from the shadow which initially envelops it, and yet produced it."<sup>65</sup> The traditional coming-to-

consciousness model meant to activate the passive spectators—“on the stage the image of blindness, in the stalls the image of lucidity, led to consciousness by two hours of unconsciousness”<sup>66</sup>—was not considered sufficient to enlighten those who are, like *Mother Courage*, immersed in obscurity: they had to be made aware of their own blindness by directing their attention to the shadows that envelop them.

This paternal logic gradually established itself at the heart of the newborn Marxist science of historical materialism that tried to make sense of the uproars and tumults caused by the intense wave of anti-colonial conflicts, workers struggles and student uprisings of the time. Taking cues from the linguistic turn and the growing popularity of semiology and psychoanalysis, this paradigm of thought displaced the earlier focus on economic analysis towards concerns with alienation and subjection. Denouncing Marx’s early account of alienation as a form of dispossession and separation from human nature, Althusser furthered Marx’s later focus on the structural processes underlying alienation, which can only be grasped by way of scientific study. Traditional interpretations of ideology in terms of “false consciousness” and “manipulation” gave way to a deliberation of the unconscious effects of ideological myths, which settle an imaginary relationship between men and their living conditions to the profit of the ruling class. Men’s belief that they could in any way act of their own free will was uncovered as mere illusion and self-deception: far from being responsible agents, people were said to be subjected to ruling ideologies to which there is no outside. Furthermore, as every aspect of culture in capitalist societies was thought to be completely determined by a systemic structural domination, social formations could no longer be identified as processes with a homogeneous temporality and a common destiny, but rather as being uneven and heterogeneous, consisting of distinct evolutionary rhythms of different structural levels and class elements. This non-teleological conception of materialist dialectics challenged the view of history as a process that is in itself oriented towards emancipation, and conceived of history as being steered by the specific contradictions between different levels of production within society. The task that Marxist science set itself was to analyse these contradictions and differences in rhythm and expose the invisible times concealed beneath the surface of each visible time. Within Marxist thought thus two contradictory ideas came to the fore: on the one hand, it offered the conditions for the possibility of a future of emancipation, grounded in the certainty of the destruction of the dominant order; on the other, it defined the conditions of its impossibility, grounded in the skepticism towards the ideological entrapment that keeps everyone in their place. The same science that promised the liberation of History through a raising of

consciousness was also the science that interpreted History as a process of social evolution which endlessly generates its own dissimulation. By focusing on the veil of ideology that confines historical agents to ignorance, emancipation was no longer identified with the construction of new abilities that would enable these agents to turn the necessity of the system of domination into the possibility of its destruction. It instead became identified with the promise to reveal the truth of domination on behalf of those who lack the capacity to do so on their own.

Isn't this view essentially a new take on Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in which the imprisoned are consigned to remain ignorant because they are tantalized by deceitful appearances and beautiful lies? Those groping in the dark, mistaking shadows for reality, are deemed to remain in their place, doomed to endless repetition, because they do not know how to see things as they are. Unaware of the ultimate truth that lies outside in the light, they must be given the proper tools to guide them. That is why Marxist science, advancing structure over subject, was convinced it had to undertake the mission of unmasking the myths and decoding the representations that keep individuals shackled in the cave of ignorance. To all those roaming in darkness, to all those unable to understand and transform the realities of their world, the science of the hidden was to bring the light. Cinema was asked to contribute to the same goal: rather than merely serving as a mode of expression, which would only confirm and reproduce the dominant ideology, it was called upon to produce historical knowledge and signify the reality hidden under the surface of appearances. In order to unearth the real relationship of individuals to their conditions of existence, cinema was to participate in the discovery of "the meaning of the 'simplest' acts of existence: seeing, listening, speaking, reading."<sup>67</sup>

7.

Within the climate of confrontation and upheaval of the 1960s, not only Brecht's work regained currency after a period of relative obscurity, but Agee's as well. After having sold only a few hundred copies at its initial publication, two decades later *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* re-emerged as one of the Holy Grails of the American civil rights and antiwar movements. As activists who aimed to bring about a culture of action and participation retraced Agee's steps in traveling to the south of the States, the book became recognized as an important precursor to New Journalism, with its typical emphasis on individual rebellion and self-reflection. Agee's anxiety about his inability to convey the reality of the people about whom he was writing seemed to chime with a newfound obsession with "authenticity" and an inherent suspicion towards the idea that art could redeem a socially

repressive order by offering an imaginary transcendence. Critics now rushed to judge New Deal era films such as *The Grapes of Wrath* as high-water marks of uncritical positivism and passive quietism. Andrew Sarris reviled Ford's film as "New Dealish propaganda" that "has dated badly."<sup>68</sup> Pauline Kael called the film "all wrong—phony when it should ring true," recalling it as "a blur of embarrassing sentimental pseudo-biblical pseudo-documentary, a perfect representation of what Bertrand Russell called 'the fallacy of the superior virtue of the oppressed'"<sup>69</sup> In lieu of Ford's middlebrow humanism and sentimentalism which was no longer considered credible, Kael saw something contemporary in another film, one that self-consciously appropriated the iconography of the Great Depression: Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Penn's film even pays recognition to *The Grapes of Wrath* by including a scene that takes place in a camp of Dust Bowl migrants. But if the Okies are given a short appearance, it is only to contrast their immobility and frailty with the mobility and vitality of two rebellious and mediagenic gangsters who make their way through the Southwest with the police hot on their trail. And if, like in Ford's film, "the road" is marked out as a metaphor for crisis-ridden America, this time it doesn't lead towards the possibility of a new life, but towards the certainty of death, which appears as the only possibility left for those with nothing to lose, trying to escape from the rat race of the American dream and the authoritarianism of the Establishment. Here is a film, Kael wrote, that is not staged as a moralistic indictment of the dominant order or as a willful generator of social consciousness: hardship is not given as a reason for violence, but merely as its excuse. Moreover, she argued, the film doesn't tell the spectators how to feel, but puts them on the spot, constantly keeping them off track. As spectators have become all too aware that chosen effects already include their responses, and as their dominant view of the world has gone beyond "good taste," they have no more patience for fancy lyricism. Instead, they need their disbelief to be thrown back in their faces, the hardest way possible: by rubbing their noses in the bloody reality of violent death. Times and tastes have definitely changed, reckoned Kael, since the classical era of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *You Only Live Once* (1937), Fritz Lang's crime drama inspired by the lives of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. It's not only that the audience can no longer relate to the stories of innocent outcasts struggling against the cruelty of a society which denies them the right to live, it's that "we don't take our stories straight anymore."<sup>70</sup>

But the derailment of "straightforward" courses didn't originate in the New Hollywood. Several decades earlier, numerous artists had already chosen to break with the constraints of the narrative order in their desire to express the disorder of

a world in the grip of class struggle. The failure of the model of action, conditioned by the logics of cause and effect and means and ends, was not only taken up as subject matter, it also affected the very structure of fiction. Yet it was only at the time of the restlessness of the 1960s that mainstream cinema adopted strategies of fragmentation and erraticism, in defiance of the dominant dramatic formats and their traditional distribution of roles and routes. As we know, this aesthetic mode was first popularised by the work of the critics-turned-filmmakers of the *Nouvelle Vague* who rebelled against the legitimacy of the *cinéma de qualité* by producing their own idiosyncratic mutations of American genre movies. It is no coincidence that *Bonnie and Clyde* openly declares its kinship to Jean-Luc Godard's *A Bout de Souffle* (1960) by replicating some of its scenes, in particular the scene in which the fugitive lovers hide from the police in a movie theatre where the film playing happens to touch upon their own situation.<sup>71</sup> Godard's debut film served, in fact, as one of *Bonnie and Clyde*'s blueprints. Moreover, Godard was initially offered to direct *Bonnie and Clyde*, as was François Truffaut. When both refused the offer, Godard went on to make his own interpretation of the fugitive-couple drama, which became the wonderful cinematic feast called *Pierrot le Fou* (1965). In contrast to Penn, however, the iconoclast cinephile was never interested in overhauling the gangster genre and the iconography of the 1930s to make them appeal to the counter-culture growing at the time. His approach was rather to appropriate all the generic genres and cultural icons he could get his hands on, to separate the images, sounds and words that were generally used as vehicles for storytelling from their narratives and endow them with a will of their own. If *Bonnie and Clyde* appears to free itself from the conventions and authority of dominant narrative procedures, it only does so to yield to those procedures, just as its characters are doomed to yield to the social order, which condemns them to a gruesome death in slow motion. In Godard's films, narrative order remains subordinate to the concatenation of instants that are left free to interrupt, digress, skip forward or linger on. The cynicism with which Penn orchestrates the play between violence and attraction, identification and distance, is lost on Godard. Instead, he courts the tradition of romanticism to its limits, not only in its depiction of an untethered, disaffected youth on the wane, but even more in its expansion of the artistic movement that developed as a reaction to the discipline and containment of classicism. In that sense, the film that perhaps resonates the most with *A Bout de Souffle* and *Pierrot le Fou* is not *Bonnie and Clyde*, but another version of the story of doomed lovers on the run, made by one of Godard's great heroes, Nicholas Ray: *They Live By Night* (1948).

In his first feature film, Ray drew from another Great Depression saga, Edward Anderson's *Thieves Like Us* (1937), as well as from his own experiences of working with left-wing theatre groups and travelling through 1930s rural America, to re-create a world of shabby small towns and abandoned farmlands in which two children of the American dream gone sour restlessly search for a place called home. Contrary to Penn's film, which is constructed as a calculated crescendo of bloody confrontations between the renegades and the social order, *They Live By Night* refuses to become wedged in a cycle of crime and violence. The adolescent lovers are not enclosed in a fatalistic universe where all hope is foreclosed from the start, as was still the case in *You Only Live Once*, in which Fritz Lang—not unlike his good friend Brecht, who would soon join him in American exile<sup>72</sup>—callously pits naïve beliefs in goodness and justice against the cruelty of a society ruled by injustice and moral corruption. In *They Live By Night*, the voyage of Bowie and Keechie into the dark, cold night of the American heartland does not unfold as a linear and calculated path towards an inevitable fate. Until the end, they remain a pair of childlike dreamers who, as the opening lines state, “were never properly introduced to the world we live in,” and desperately try to hold on to their innocence. What sets Ray's film apart from Anderson's literary world where the place and fate of Bowie and Keechie seems to be written in stone, is precisely the inaptness of these two sensitive youths who find in each other a fleeting solace from a drab world, creating an intimate world of their own that, in a sense, suspends the doomed unwinding path. Who can forget the heart-rending scene showing the two young lovers nestling by the flickering light of a fireplace in a cabin in the mountains, a scene that seems to exist as a moment out of time, a moment that is brutally interrupted when reality comes knocking on the door. As soon as they step into the daylight, into the arena of society, the adolescents who are craving to live like “real people” can not help but look and feel out of place, unfit for a society that constantly imposes roles and rules upon them.<sup>73</sup> It is this fragility, captured by a film director who has never stopped believing in the strength of youthful puerility, that was associated with “dated thirties attitudes” in the text of Pauline Kael. She opposed the “passivity” of couples like these, trapped by their naivety, never really knowing what they are doing or where they are heading, with the “activity” of another couple who know all too well what they are up to and get their kicks from dramatizing their own lives. And yet, isn't this ineptitude derailing the plot's conventional course precisely what has been radicalized and systematised by the likes of Godard? Isn't it this strangeness and detachment that sets figures apart and adrift from their environment that has been furthered by the filmmaker who



went on to irrevocably separate and isolate moments of suspension from the straightforward time of narration? When we see, at the end of *A Bout de Souffle*, the famous close-up reaction shot of Patricia staring at us, it might remind us of Irene's farewell gesture in *Europa 51*, but what shimmers through most of all might yet be another unforgettable image: that of Keechie turning to face the camera as she reads Bowie's letter of goodbye and mouths her own pledge of love before being finally swallowed by darkness. Perhaps in this returning image we can see the face of a loss that was written in the stars: the loss of innocence.

The moment when cinema started mourning the irremediable loss of its naivety was also the moment when it started to accentuate its intrinsic heterogeneity. Remember what Godard has Anna Karina's character say in another riff on American gangster flicks, a film he dedicated to Nicholas Ray, *Made in U.S.A.* (1966): she "has the feeling," we hear her saying, "of being plunged into a Walt Disney film but starring Humphrey Bogart—and therefore a political film." The fastidious clash between divergent elements, the insouciant play with tones and themes, the disavowal of narrative unity and resolution, the disregard for continuity and causality: all the old securities and hierarchies were now violently thrown aside by the new waves that were spreading their wings all over the global cinematic landscape. Even Adorno, in a rare moment of mildness, spoke up for this new generation of filmmakers whose "unprofessional cinema, uncertain of its effects" he considered as liberating, writing that "in them the flaws of a pretty girl's complexion become the corrective to the immaculate face of the professional star."<sup>74</sup> From Rossellini these filmmakers learned to embrace the contingency of location shooting and improvisation, instead of banking on the safety of studio shoots and fixed scripts. From Brecht they learned to experiment with incongruity and dissociation, rather than relying on models of coherence and consistency. Like Ray, they refused to obey the authority of reason and tradition that claims to know what is "proper". And like Agee, they resisted the threat of rhetorics by taking recourse to a labor of self-reflection and auto-critique. Jonathan Rosenbaum has pointed out a certain resemblance between *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Godard's films of the end of the 1960s, which he saw as similarly anguished and open-ended works that tend to annihilate their subject in the search for a new truthfulness.<sup>75</sup> Godard himself has repeatedly described them as "attempts at cinema" and films "in the process of being made." Instead of depicting characters questioning each other about their ways of making sense of the world, as in *A Bout de Souffle*, these films began to self-consciously reflect on cinema itself as a sense-making device. The ultimate movie, claimed Godard, would show the camera filming itself in the mirror. The quest to

come to terms with a lost innocence led cinema to peer deep into the looking glass, only to find out it was not what it thought it was.

Paradoxically, at the same time as Agee's book came to be hailed as a masterpiece, his views on the ontological realism of cinema increasingly tended to be disbanded as idealist. The work of André Bazin, the theoretician of the "seamless fabric of reality," became discredited for its faith in cinema as a transparent and neutral window upon the world, unfettered by the materiality that sustains and surrounds it. The belief in the camera's ability to produce an asymptote of reality was said to rest on a delusion: the camera cannot reveal the truth of the world as some divine creation offering itself to be filmed, because there is no truth waiting to be photographed. What is captured by the camera is always already a *déjà-vu*, and the filmmaker's operations of *mise-en-scène* are always already implicated in an unconscious *mise-en-scène* determined by ideological interests and values. Furthermore, the cinematic apparatus was itself suspected of working in the service of the dominant ideology, by not only giving the false impression of representing reality transparently and continuously, but also by its correspondence to the system of empirical knowledge as criticized by Althusser.<sup>76</sup> From an Althusserian perspective, the illusionary unity and self-evidence provided by cinema implied a naturalization of class interests and power relations. If Bazinian criticism called for a phenomenological attentiveness to what was once present to the camera, then a new criticism was called upon to make legible the procedures that escape the layman's attention, by revealing the symptoms indicating what the dominant ideology sought to repress or marginalize. Hence, in an influential text on Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* that was published in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the film was "saved" by demonstrating the fault lines in its ideological firmament: beneath its supposedly transparent surface, it was argued, an internal, unconscious criticism was taking place which cracked the film apart at its seams. In spite of its homogeneous appearance and regardless of the filmmaker's intentions, the film could not help crumbling under the weight of the constitutive contradictions of the ideological myths that it tried to convey. This is how film criticism took to heart the call to "learn to see anew": by devoting itself to the task of laying bare "the unsaid included in the said and necessary to its constitution. In short, to use Althusser's expression—'the internal shadows of exclusion'."<sup>77</sup>

This mission to break the illusionary self-evidence of cinema's appearances and unravel its real material conditions and contradictions was taken up by filmmakers as well. The tendency to foreground cinematic heterogeneity, against the homogeneity and illusionism of the hegemonic system of representation, then

came to waver between two poles. On the one hand, it became associated with the Greenbergian idea of art as autonomous development of its own inner necessity, which Barthes connected with structural analysis in envisioning the artwork as a semiotic machine in which each piece has a definite place and function. On the other hand, it became embroiled with the Brechtian idea of critical distanciation, which Althusserianism connected with the science of the hidden, aimed at the exposure of the veil of ideology that blinds the agents of history to the ignorance of necessity. While the first strand devoted itself to the search for the particularity of the cinematic through self-referentiality, the other aimed to join in anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggles under the banner of scientific experiment and ideology critique. In any case, it appeared as though all those roaming in the night of illusions, confined in cabins of shallow dreams, had to be woken up from their hallucinative slumber and made aware of the reality that underlies the world of appearances.

8.

As cinema became increasingly implicated in the battles and revolutions shaking the world and tore itself ever more away from the constraints and conventions of the industry, filmmakers were no longer content with breaking apart narratives. They distanced themselves from their images, listened again to their sounds, separated sounds from images, voices from their bodies, all in order to learn to see anew. Following Brecht's principles, the distanciation and estrangement of the familiar was supposed to provoke a break in the dominant perception and reveal a reality marked by antagonism. This undertaking to expose existing contradictions and divisions is summed up in the title of the first feature of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet: *Nicht versöhnt* (*Not Reconciled*, 1965). Standing out because of their rigorous beauty, Straub and Huillet's films undoubtedly offer the most systematic cinematic expansions on Brecht's work, an allegiance which is conformed by *Nicht versöhnt*'s second title: "only violence serves where violence reigns." For Straub and Huillet, non-reconciliation means "dividing one into two" rather than "fusing two into one"<sup>78</sup>, and this is apparent in the *mise-en-scène* of their films, which are constructed as condensed arrangements of gaps and distances that are meant to undo the naturalness of appearances and allow for an understanding of History as a dialectical process. In *Geschichtsunterricht* (*History Lessons*, 1972), for example, they adapted Brecht's unfinished novel *Die Geschäfte des Herrn Julius Caesar* (*The Business Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar*, written in 1938-1939, just before *Mother Courage*) to point out the perverse laws of capitalist political economy as they were already triumphant in imperial Rome. By eliminating all its anecdotal and psychological elements, the

filmmakers trimmed down Brecht's text to four testimonies by contemporaries of Caesar which testify to the contradictions between the overarching narratives of progress and the realities of self-serving greed and imperious power-lust. We see the historical characters in their antique togas being interviewed in German by a young man who is dressed in modern clothing, intercut by long shots of the same man driving through contemporary Rome. By creating this oscillation between past and present and foregrounding the very materiality of the words, the undemonstrative voices reciting them and the spaces the actors find themselves in, the film's "history lesson" defies all suggestions of historicism: as the illusory unity of the present is unravelled, the attention is drawn to the one and only history of mankind, which is of all times: the history of class struggle. The same year as *Geschichtsunterricht*, another Brechtian lesson was given in *Tout va Bien* (1972), the last feature film that Godard made with the Dziga Vertov Group.<sup>79</sup> As if to immediately scrape away all varnish of artificiality, the film starts off with an inventory of its very conditions of production: the money, the stars, the technicians, the story—a love story, resembling the ones that Godard made previously, featuring a Him and a Her swept up in the whirlwind of their times. But if the format of the romantic drama is adopted once more, it is only to reveal how it is codified by the social production of reality and to figure as a backdrop for an exposé on the contradictions underlying the class conflict and the role of intellectuals within the revolutionary struggle. It is no coincidence that the protagonists of the film—a French filmmaker and an American reporter caught up in a factory strike—are played by Yves Montand and Jane Fonda: not only do they serve as a corrective reprise of Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg's roles in *A bout de souffle*—which Godard himself came to criticise for its naive idolization of Hollywood cinema—they are also chosen as paragons of "committed" artists-intellectuals who are, as Godard considered himself to be, torn between serving the revolutionary struggle and selling out to the capitalist spectacle. Filmmaking and advertising, actors and workers, the bourgeoisie, the proletariat and the intelligentsia: the whole film is based on the juxtaposition of heterogeneous practices and discourses, in view of laying bare their hidden connections and contradictions. At the end of these dialectical demonstrations, we are invited to become, like the two lovers who have gained a new consciousness from their experience of the popular struggles, our "own historian" and recognize the fundamental historicity and thus changeability of reality.

In short, cinema becomes a space for pedagogy, a space where spectators are called upon to sharpen their gaze and see with new eyes the dividedness of all that is. It becomes a place for dissociation and comparison, where homogeneity

is broken up to reveal its hidden contradictions and heterogeneous elements are put side by side to highlight their secret alliances. It becomes the place for demonstration and revelation, where we are taught not to take appearances at their face value and shown how to dismantle the process of signification out of which they are constructed. Watching the screen-as-blackboard we can learn, for example, that a photograph showing a celebrity actor during a visit to North Vietnam is nothing but a brand image that doesn't reflect anything but itself. We are thought to do so by comparing the film star's facial expression with that of her father who played in *The Grapes of Wrath*, thereby exposing their similarities as manifestations of the same tragic "New Deal look" that only says "how much it knows," emphasizing an emphatic commonality that glosses over the true contradictions of the world. This lesson could lead us to conclude that cinema has, in fact, betrayed its emancipatory promises when the talkies destroyed the mute materialism of silent cinema and became an ideological device in the service of American imperialism and New Deal humanism. We are taught all of this via the Dziga Vertov Group's *Letter to Jane* (1972), a cinematic epistle addressed to Jane Fonda which was devised as a companion piece to *Tout va Bien*. But I wonder: while being taught how to read the true meaning of these images, doesn't the truth ultimately get reduced to the voices of those who know why and how we are all lured and duped by images? Aren't the arguments which aim to teach us to stop looking at surface appearances and start seeing hidden realities bound to reach an impasse, where the gap between the images that are not to be trusted and the words pointing out their fallacy is permanently held in check? Why else are we, who are to be made aware of our illusions, still presented with images, if not to delegate authority to the voices and arguments that explain us what and how to see?

Remember Barthes's strange statement about *Mother Courage*: we participate in her blindness, he wrote, at the same time as we are made aware of it. But is it really because we see her as blind that we see what she doesn't see? How could anyone be able to see what someone else doesn't see, if one wouldn't already know what to look for? How could anyone be able to recognize the traits of her blindness in the first place, if the evidence wasn't already given? In fact, in the play, *Mother Courage* has never been blind. On the contrary, one could argue that she sees very well, that she is all too aware of the capitalist law of profit and the economic logic of war, which she cynically turns to her own advantage. In that sense, *Mother Courage* is not the "negative, villainous character" that Brecht saw in her, but a realist who vigorously tries to adapt to conditions beyond her control. Perhaps, then, what is really asked of the viewers is not to recognize and act upon

the cruelties of capitalism, but to morally judge this character who tries to survive in a world filled with madness and injustice, one whose real blind spot might be another vision that could propose a world where justice can be reclaimed. What if it is this “realist” knowledge that we share with Mother Courage, rather than her supposed blindness? Moreover, what if the people “know perfectly well, without illusion” the workings of the world, for which they don’t need the guidance of the enlightened, as Michel Foucault observed in the aftermath of the events of ’68, which effectively refuted the learnings of Marxist science?<sup>80</sup> What would be the point of fictions that aim to reveal the reality hidden behind appearances if there is nothing to reveal? Could it be that the logic that was supposed to make us see the dialectical nature of reality, this logic that tried to make sense of the ideological struggle in terms of oppositions such as apparent/real, latent/manifest, visible/non-visible only made sense as long as it was supported by the evidence of a dissensual world in the first place? We’ve seen what happened to this logic when this evidence started to crumble and the fictions that were meant to illuminate the necessity of change were confronted with a growing suspicion towards the possibility of change altogether. The model of dialectical demonstration proposed by Brecht then collided with its opposite: the dialectics proposed by Adorno and Horkheimer, based on the idea that attempts at enlightenment are doomed to become instruments of mass deception. At the time, Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry was given a new life with Guy Debord’s critique of the spectacle, which was posited as the inescapable process by which the essence of man is projected outside himself, a process which leads to a reversed world where even knowledge of the reversal can’t change anything about it. The only thing to do, Debord tells us, is to oppose the passive consumption of the spectacle that alienates and separates us from life with the active construction of situations that could lead to revolutionary change; yet at the same time he forewarns us that we will never act since we are condemned to remain enclosed within the spectacle.<sup>81</sup> Once again, it is given to those in the know to demonstrate the fallacy of appearances and the culpability of consumption. As soon as the criticism of the illusion of appearances merged into these melancholic discourses which revealed the promise of political and aesthetic emancipation as just another illusion, the logic that aimed to close the gaps between appearance and reality, pedagogy and production, interpretation and transformation, dwindled down to an endless reiteration of the gap which underlies all the other: the gap between those who are blind and those who can see. In the end, what prevailed of the idea that a clash of heterogeneous forms of temporality—the time of illusion and the time of reality—could awaken the

capacity of spectators to get a grip on History, was the idea of an unbridgeable distance between two ways of living through History: between those who live in the time of knowledge, and those who live in the time of ignorance.

“For a Ruthless Criticism / of Everything Existing.”<sup>82</sup> What has become of Marx’s famous credo that has been the core principle of the critical logic which has driven the fictions of non-reconciliation in the 1960s and ‘70s, when filmmakers took up the lessons of Marx, Brecht and Barthes? Hasn’t this ruthlessness, opposing the deception of appearances with the rigor of revolutionary theory, come at a harsh price? Hasn’t the consistent application of this logic led to the conclusion that the one thing we can do is realize the lies and wrongs of the world? Hasn’t this logic, after its disconnection from the horizon of change that made it work—at least imagined—as a weapon in struggle, rather than having made us aware of our blindness, been at risk of sliding into cynicism? In Godard’s *Ici et Ailleurs* (1976), a scene in which we see a woman speaking about her absent child, bringing to mind Irene in *Europa 51*, is presented as just another lie that is part of the deception of everyday political theatre. In Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), the slogan “we are the people,” put forward as an invigorating call for struggle in *The Grapes of Wrath*, is unveiled as just another platitude in a never-ending stream of platitudes amidst a post-Watergate, post-Vietnam, crisis-ridden America. On the one hand, the labor of demystification led the cinema of iconoclasm to take refuge in its own negation, eating away at itself by endlessly lamenting a world where every narrative and every appearance is subsumed into the spectacle. On the other hand, the self-destructive drift of Bonnie and Clyde was radicalized by setting the theatre of political rhetoric at odds with a chaotic world of naked violence and aimless wandering, a world devoid of rational meaning or sense. But if all appearances are considered to be part and parcel of the reign of the spectacle, rendering anything commensurate with its appearance and classing all appearances as lies; if truth and illusion can no longer be opposed, they are free to swap places. In “the age of total neutralization,”<sup>83</sup> to use Adorno’s expression, the difference between commonplaces and what is supposed to oppose them then finds itself vanishing into an indifferent universe of equivalence, where criticism on the chaos of the world becomes indiscernible from a nihilism that considers criticism, itself, part of that chaos, and the power of the spectacle can no longer be distinguished from the power of its denunciation. As appearances are pronounced unsuitable for criticizing reality, as cinema is deemed incapable to put to the test the shortcomings of the dominant order, the only critical gesture left is to malign its total victory. Now it appears that cinema has no other choice than to measure up to its own powerlessness and

testify to the end of illusions, as if to say “here is the proof that what you talked about (without having seen it) has indeed existed: it is shown to you only because it’s over.”<sup>84</sup> It seems that it then falls to cinema to retain the trace of that which has no future: a melancholic mission indeed.

9.

To all appearances, it would seem as if a time of revolutionary promise has come to an end, and the promises once invested in the art of cinema have gone down with it. In light of the supposed reign of the spectacle, some have deemed it necessary to revive Greenberg’s protectionism and shield cinema from contamination, granting the masses who are glued to their domestic screens their right to “bad taste.” Others, on the contrary, have denounced cinema’s “cult of ambiguity” as nothing but a cavern where a small cinephilic elite take shelter, in an attempt to comfort art in its role as resisting force, knowingly covering up the death of utopias and the failed promises of aesthetics. And then there are those who have recognized in cinema’s new technological ventures an opportunity to resume the suspicion of derealisation and malign cinema as a technique which, while feigning life, is nothing less than the oculus of death. The century-old art of moving shadows, it is generally agreed, has irrevocably drawn back from its radical promises. The time of a cinema balancing between popular culture and art, between the powers of narration and those of aesthetics, is now purported to belong to the past. The days when cinema could not only be considered as a form of art, but also a way of life and an object of belief, are said to have given way to a culture of commodification and aestheticization, in which cinema has substituted itself for life and belief has been equated with illusion. Aside from being the cherished object of some stubborn dilettantes, cinema is said to have lost its social function and become commodified like everything else. Even the rebellious postures and strategies of yesteryear are suspected of having been annexed by the very spectacle they sought to defy. Fragmentation, once cultivated as a method of subversion, has become part and parcel of the language of advertising, exerting its brutal force through a perpetual blizzard of commodified particles. The art of irony, once used as a defence mechanism against the threats of sentimentalism and moralisation, has fallen into a sinkhole of relativism and cynicism, merely fuelling the castigation of any expression of conviction as a mark of naivety and delusion. The self-reflexive impulse to bare the devices and mark the position of the author, once believed to have a critical ability to create a shock effect and generate a new awareness, has become ubiquitous in a media sphere brimming with reality shows and behind-the-scenes reports. Within this absolute spectacle,



to which cinema has ostensibly been the greatest mentor, images no longer refer to an outside, because there is no longer an outside: the world had disappeared behind its images. The logic of criticism which considers everything from the perspective of its role in the reproduction of the dominant order, has finally reached its logical conclusion: the illusion of images has become the illusion of reality, and the ultimate hidden secret turns out to be nothing but the omnipotent mechanism of the capitalist machine itself, a mechanism that is perpetually fed by mindless consumer drift. Freed of utopian futures, History is reduced to an endless present in which Capital can only represent itself to itself, as ensnared in a cycle, like an endless film in loop. The record has been set straight: the historical time which was oriented by a future of change is no more. Our time, we are told over and over again, is that of “the end of grand narratives.”

The end of political illusions could now be called upon to retroactively illuminate the end of aesthetic illusions. In an era when the aesthetic has been commodified, and the commodity has been aestheticized, art is said to have devolved into postmodern pastiche and schizophrenia, or it has been subsumed into a Disneyfication of the world, or else it is expected to isolate itself from the everyday and dedicate itself to the task of testifying to the unrepresentable. In any case, what has emerged is an understanding of art that is little more than a testament to its own failure. While the continuance of the modernist ideology of autonomy mutated into lamentations over art's demise due to its inability to separate itself from heteronymous forces, the disappointments over cinema's unfulfilled potential opened up a pathway towards various nostalgic rewritings of its historical saga. Godard has tried to come to terms with his own disappointment by furthering the old claim that it was the stories invented by the dream factories of Hollywood and Mosfilm that had led to the corruption of his beloved art of moving images. Taking up Benjamin's call to break down History into fragments, while breathing new life into Bazin's emphasis on the phenomenological vocation of cinema, he went on to free images from the clutches of rhetorics and narrativity to restore them to their innocence as non-mediated sensible presences, testifying to the intertwining of the history of a century and the history of cinema. This retrospective history of lost innocence was moulded into another narrative by Serge Daney, who proclaimed that it was precisely the deconstruction of classical stories that had unwillingly led to cinema's downfall. According to him, modern cinema, in its glorious thirty years stretching from Rossellini to Godard, had saved cinema from the theatre of collective destiny and remedy. When cinema's dream of harmony and unity was realized by the *mise en scène* of totalitarianism,

when all that there was left to see behind the scenes was the horrors of the camps, the cinema of scenography, with all its “secrets behind the door,” was annulled by a desire to expose the screen as a surface without depth.<sup>85</sup> At this time the cinema of homogeneity, showing characters as conjunctions of body and voice following a straight line towards their destiny, found itself replaced by a cinema of heterogeneity, a cinema of zigzags and disjunctions, separating bodies and voices, disjoining images and sounds. But this tendency to flatten the image and uncover its operations also caused the demise of the cinema of trauma and cruelty, when it found itself automatised and standardized by another medium: television. With the annulation of depth and the revocation of illusion, cinema eventually turned into a mere display window for banalities and commodities, reconciling itself to its initial vocation: the presentation of things. With classical cinema having turned into a sad object of nostalgia and modern cinema having become a harmless manifestation of endless mourning, mannerism took over, resulting in a cinema in which “the background in any image is always another image.”<sup>86</sup> Now, the spectator was no longer offered a window or a door, nor a surface or a mask, but a rink on which images glide alongside and over one another. In this age of “pre-visualization,” as Daney described it, nothing happens to human beings anymore, everything happens to images. As the real could no longer be captured, cinema started to feed on itself, quoting itself, browsing through its history as if it were a catalogue of prefabricated shots and easily verifiable clichés that could infinitely be reprogrammed in new constellations. In this cine-world, cinematic fictions had nothing left to show, nothing left to promise us except for the comfort of being all-knowing experts who can no longer be fooled by mirages and illusions and excel at ridiculing conviction and mocking sentiment. This is, according to Daney, what we are left with: “filmed cinema.” We are no longer adventurers caught up in a tangle of belief and doubt, but savvy decoding consumers who are assured that we know all that we need to know.

The melancholic monodies of Godard and Daney have found an echo in the work of Gilles Deleuze, who in his turn took up Bazin’s intuitions to propose yet another periodization of the history of cinema marked by the madness of the 20th century. For Deleuze, modern cinema emerged from the profound crisis of belief that was caused by the trauma of the Second World War, which was experienced as a gulf between humanity and the world. In contrast to the classical narratives of action and redemption, such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, which were capable of expressing a movement of collective forces, modern cinema was forced to confront its own powerlessness. In a time out of joint, the intolerable could no longer be seized in the name of another world. On the contrary, it is because the world is fundamentally

intolerable that thought can no longer conceive of a world. What might compel us to think is no longer the emergence of awareness, but rather this impotence of thinking. As we can no longer believe in another world, nor in cinema as a way to elevate the spectator to a new consciousness, cinema is asked to film not the world but a belief in this world, the belief in the impossible, the unthinkable that cannot but be thought, which is the only way to reconnect man to what he sees and hears. Deleuze saw modern cinema as transmitting sights rather than motivating actions, a cinema of wandering in which characters stray from the trodden paths without obvious destinations or motivations, only to encounter something too powerful or too unjust, before which they are left unable to coordinate gaze and action. He saw this cinema of the “time-image” exemplified by the films of Rossellini, in particular *Europa* 51. At the end of Irene’s wandering, writes Deleuze, “she sees, she has learnt to see.”<sup>87</sup> But Irene has more than an epiphany of conscience: confronted with a situation to which she no longer knows how to react, in spaces she no longer knows how to describe, her seeing touches upon its limits, reaching what cannot be seen in normal vision, pushing thought beyond itself, beyond everything that makes sense. Irene then becomes the emblem of the filmmaker who is struck by something intolerable in the world, coming back from the experience with “bloodshed eyes” and surrendering to a vision that is no longer in accordance with the conventions of common sense. And the film itself becomes an allegory for cinema’s mission to create a path towards “madness” as an expression of intensities without rhyme or reason that cannot be captured by the order of knowledge and representation. In contrast to the social function of mass media, which uses images as mere information in the service of power, cinema is asked to fulfil its aesthetic function to the service of the will to art, to that which escapes all forms of doxa. If there is still hope for cinema, claims Deleuze, it has to be found by venturing into the nomadic desert, in order to reach the pure sensible that lies beyond the realms of common sense.

The repudiation of the obsession to consider cinema in terms of representation has thus, in Deleuze’s work, resulted in a radical dismissal of representation altogether. Rather than representing reality, cinema is asked to create its own absolute reality, as a living tissue of experience and belief shared by anyone alike, a pure process of material expression freed from the relation of time to action and consequence. As a film can no longer evoke a linear evolution from the old to the new, it rather constitutes a co-penetration of past and future times within the image itself. Lost in the space between images, characters and spectators are “acted” by the junctions of time and called upon to make sense of “optical and sound situations” that resist assimilation within measurable time. These situations never spring into

action, they remain arrested and isolated fragments, where time, in all its purity, rises up to the surface of the screen. The problem with Deleuze's propositions, as Jacques Rancière has pointed out, is that these so-called pure situations which are said to result from the collapse of narrative structures, are still part of a set of specific operations that constantly negotiate between narration and suspension, between expectation and deflection. According to Rancière, the situations created by Rossellini are not expressions of disorientation in view of the intolerable, nor are they modes of orientation directed towards some narrative finality, but procedures by which the filmmaker "superimposes onto the normal movement of narrative continuity another movement directed by a fable of vocation."<sup>88</sup> The force of a film such as *Europa 51*, argues Rancière, is grounded in the tension between different movements that create a differential within the same continuum. Just like he questions the modernist narrative of reversals and ruptures, he refuses to identify a strict distinction between movement-image and time-image, or between images as matter and images as form, as configurations of light and as figures of thought, on the ground that these modes ceaselessly intertwine with one another. Cinema appertains to both the regime of aesthetics, associated with the interplay of the eye of the machine and the eye of its operator, and the regime of representation, linked with the logic that organizes actions according to principles of mimesis. Unlike Godard, Rancière refuses to deplore the overturning of the old promises of aesthetic liberation which was supposed to release matter from its subordination to formal constraints, by restoring the laws of cinematic representation which put form once again in command of matter. Instead, he argues that the singular power of films stems precisely from the way they are able to operate the fundamental ambiguity of cinema and thwart the customary representative logic by way of displacements and improprieties. In variation with Deleuze's notion of the image as absolute reality, which has become some kind of straw in the wind for today's cinephilia; and Barthes's insistence on the rhetoric of the image, which remains one of the models for today's cultural criticism; Rancière proposes to think of the image as an operator of difference, both a self-imposing presence and a discursive element, both a mute power and a signifying force, that can open up to a plurality of transfigurations, alterations and fissures between one sensibility and another. The different potentialities of the image have been brought together in seemingly homogeneous forms, as in a certain "classical" Hollywood cinema, and their heterogeneity has also been heightened, as in a certain "modernist" cinema, where the presence of the image is played out against the course of the narrative. But cinema has always continued to invent new transpositions of its inherent

contradiction between cinema as an artificial organization of appearances and cinema as witness of non-manipulated presence. Godard, for one, has remained loyal to the game of heterogeneity, but at the same time he has, notably in *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, radicalized this contradiction by foregrounding the iconic power of images against their integration into stories, while paradoxically demonstrating that all images, however distant from each other, can be organized in a multiplicity of new orders. But what is neglected by simply opposing the power of the image to the constraint of the plot is the way cinema works by virtue of intervals: between one image and another, between showing and signifying, visible and invisible, seen and heard, present and imagined. It is due to these intervals that cinema is able to take distance and call into question the established order of visibilities and abilities, by proposing new trajectories and movements between what can be seen and heard, and how it can be regarded and interpreted. Hence, according to Rancière, Irene's "conversion" in *Europa 51* is not a revelation leading to a reconciliation of all that is divided or a miraculous evidence of the secrets of being, but a deviation from the envisaged trajectories that leads her to venture into unmapped worlds. What is at the heart of the film is not the Socratic trial that Rohmer saw in it, exemplifying society's condemnation of everything that escapes its reasoning, but a Socratic atopia, a wandering off track that originates in a resistance to the dominating order, undoing the certainty of given identities and destinies by exceeding everything that they are supposed to be one with. In its deviation off course, Irene's figure becomes a destabilizing operator that derails the straightforward courses that have been pre-established, unsettling the system of coordinates that determines the proper places to occupy and the proper paths to follow, at the cost, perhaps, of entering a world where all familiar reference points have lost their hold.

If we want to apprehend the state of our fictions, there is, I believe, much to follow up on Rancière's proposal. For him, the plots of historical evolution based on a succession of forms of life, consciousness, and action constitute an act of legitimization, not of the history of the rulers and the victors, as Benjamin claimed, but of the knowledge that dictates what and who does or doesn't make history. Calling into question the dominant narratives and historical telos that are used to think about politics, art and cinema, which have largely evolved towards sentiments of failure and powerlessness,<sup>89</sup> he tries to bring out new topographies of the possible, by insisting on the idea that "every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification."<sup>90</sup> Between the melancholic mission of saving the art of moving images by casting it into the realm of the pure sensible and the critical task of

decoding its representations in order to identify the symptoms of a society gone wrong; between the inclination to revalorise images as icons and holding on to its promises of iconoclasm, he points the way to another way of thinking about our cinematic fictions: one that gives prominence to the possibilities that they still offer us to make sense of our time. Cinema might not be an art of visual evidence or pure sensation that can make us miraculously pass over to the other side where one might assume a truth of Being to reside. It may not engender a new non-hierarchical community based on a collective faith that needs to be refounded. But perhaps the associations and dissociations, additions and subtractions, that are at work in cinema might allow for a displacement of the familiar framework that defines the way in which the world is visible and intelligible for us, and which possibilities and capacities it permits. Couldn't cinema's negotiation between the classical model of action, where events are ordered in view of an outcome, and instances of suspension and condensation which disrupt the order of things, have something to say about the possible fictions of our time? Even if cinema may not be able to illuminate the paths towards tomorrow, couldn't it, in its own modest way, help us to rupture the consensus that precludes all forms of atopia?

10.

How much space for atopia are we left with today, now that every digression from the beaten path seems to be preceded by its delineation? Now that the sense of the possible is ever more enclosed within dominant fictions that assert an infinite repetition of the existing necessity, only challengeable with the promise of complete rupture, can we still think of deviations that could remap the layout of paths and traces that make up the common sense? How can heterogeneous worlds still measure up to one another when the consensus that governs us pretends to verify only what can be perceived and interpreted by everyone alike? While, at the time of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the political landscape was capable of straddling different worlds, we now seem to find ourselves fully trapped within a consensual topography which presents itself as the one irrefutable reality that everyone has to reconcile with, regardless of one's opinions. The time of class struggle and socio-political conflict is presumed to be superseded by a common view on the world which is defined by, on the one hand, the law of the market whose necessity is regulated by an entente between economical and state powers and, on the other hand, the paradigm of insecurity which has become a normalized mode of governing. But precisely when alternative political models are in ruins and the conditions for collective action are being gradually dismantled, what emerges

stronger than ever is the skepticism towards political fictions promising justice and equality. We can see this skepticism already seeping through in a film that has recently resurfaced, a film that has often been considered as the end piece of the New American Cinema that *Bonnie and Clyde* inaugurated: *Heaven's Gate* (1980). Made at a time when an American mythic cowboy catapulted the neoliberal doctrine to unseen heights, Michael Cimino's revisionist western was considered by some as a representation of the "Death of a Nation" as opposed to the dominant myth that was once given cinematic form by D.W. Griffith.<sup>90</sup> The fiction of the glorious "Birth of a Nation" is here transformed into an episode of ferocious class struggle in which a rising bourgeoisie employ a gang of gunslingers to get rid of poor settlers. Those who initially boast about their imperative duty to hold up the law and cultivate the uncultivated end up abusing the law at their command to get rid of the miserable "anarchists" menacing their property. Under threat of terror, the community of settlers, along with the promise of a society in which otherness is accepted, disintegrates into betrayal and calamity. As if doubling the fate of the community, the structure of the film offers none of the comforts of a narrative form that could evoke a sense of unity or necessity. Instead, it presents a dispersive mayhem of set-pieces depicting the settlers piled up in narrow barracks with choreographies that join them in boisterous jamborees and rowdy brawls, before everything collapses into an expansive explosion of brutal violence. The aesthetic formulas of dispersion and carnivalization that were once thought capable of criticizing the disorder of the capitalist order now seem to express a Dionysian chaos that subsumes everything in its way. In a sense, one could say that *The Grapes of Wrath's* story of class violence leading to a commitment to collective justice is radically reversed here; revealing all promises of new forms of collectivity as delusions, and plunging all claims of justice into a whirlpool of blood and fury. The dismissal of the old narratives proclaiming the triumph of law over injustice and the possibility of solidarity against inequity, is here translated into an epic fiction declaring the ruin of law and justice and the dead-end of solidarity, at the price of rebuffing any possibility of political subjectivation and denying the characters almost any possibility to stand out from the monumental decors. What is set up as a reprimand against the deceptions of political fictions promoting "liberty and justice for all," holds at the same time a reprehension of all endeavours to politically rationalize the reality of violence that underlies these fictions.

Two decades later, the defeatism felt towards liberal humanism and the ideals of equality and emancipation were given another face in Lars von Trier's *USA: Land of Opportunities* series, in particular *Dogville* (2003), a film that offers a new

transposition of the figure of the good-hearted stranger (an American bourgeois, like Rossellini's Irene) who, during the time of the Great Depression, travels to the margins of society to share the fate of the destitute. Like Brecht's Saint Joan, Grace comes to realize that the benevolence of good intentions cannot change the malevolence of the world, which demands for actions that go beyond moral reformism. But von Trier's self-proclaimed Brechtian fable can no longer be inscribed in a framework that pits the violence of emancipatory struggle against the violence caused by the logic of profit and property. There are no stockyards or commodity markets in *Dogville*, there is only a community of families and individuals who are trying to get by. Grace no longer represents the gentle soul who ventures off track to cure the suffering of the destitute with the innocent grace of her vocation, like Irene. She is just the outsider who seeks to be admitted into the community, whose members first treat her with suspicion before submitting her to ruthless exploitation and abuse. Economic and social injustice cannot account for the unbearable evil that Grace encounters. Evil is not caused by the structural ills and aberrations of the social order, it is inherent to the nature of mankind itself: the downtrodden simply kick downwards, the exploited become exploiters, to whom, in turn, the enlightened become complicit. When Grace realizes that the suffering inflicted on her does not result from the weakness of the victims of society, a weakness which she strove to forgive and endure, she reverses her verdict and chooses the most radical response possible, a response necessary "for the sake of humanity": total annihilation. In the end, the Brechtian credo "only violence serves where violence reigns," erstwhile one of the favored slogans among the demonstrating students of 1968, becomes radicalized into another doctrine, reminding us of the arguments that were used to justify a war waged by another American cowboy president who set up an international posse to defeat a reputed evil outlaw around the time when *Dogville* came out: evil can only be defeated by evil. When, during the end credits, a montage appears of Farm Security Administration photographs and more recent pictures depicting the American homeless, accompanied by the buoyant cadence of David Bowie's "Young Americans," we are left wondering whether these pictures are there to bring to mind a history that no longer offers possibilities for change, or to point out that the Okies of *The Grapes of Wrath* have become the depraved "white trash" of heartland America who are beyond saving.<sup>92</sup> The old secular humanist faith in man's capacity for tolerance and justice as far as man's fallibility and frailty are recognized ("From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs"), the humanism that still, in one way or another, found a form in the cinema of Ford and Rossellini, has turned



into the nihilist constataion that the omnipresent and triumphant evil no longer allows for claims to tolerance and justice. In a world gone mad, the blame can no longer be attributed to the perversion and violence of the “system” that, hidden under the guise of economic necessity, corrupts justice and oppresses individuals, as in fictions such as *They Only Live Once* or *The Grapes of Wrath*. Instead, now that economic necessity is accepted as historical Law, the blame has shifted towards the perversion of the individuals themselves, to which no-one can claim innocence.

Confronted with the effacement of the fractures of social division and political antagonism by the ethical fictions that divide the world between good and evil, virtue and terror; and the consensual fictions which partition communities according to the allocation of inside and outside, included and excluded, it appears that today’s cinematic fictions have great difficulties to find forms that could reconfigure the landscape of social forces and unsettle the hegemonic hold over the horizon of possibility. Where are the fictions capable of embodying the struggles that arose in the aftermath of the bank failures of 2008, whose cataclysms and devastations even exceeded those of 1929? Where are the fictions that could testify to the resistance against the growing inequality that has resulted from the process of financial deregulation and social retrenchment that has started in the 1980s and accelerated after the fall of communism left capitalism without a rival? How come that, instead, so much attention has been given to the revelation of the scandals of looting and corrupted traders, bankers and politicians, if not to give us moral lessons that locate the cause for our predicament in the deviances that tend to certify the new normal? Martin Scorsese might have claimed that *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) exposes the excesses of a financial system spun out of control, but one could just as well argue that the film merely offers a cynical look on the un-refrained debauchery and unscrupulous immorality of those who use the system to their own advantage. Isn’t Scorsese’s film basically a revision of the old plot of the small timer making it big in the racketeering business, as another courageous “realist” who is able to endure in an era of self-destruction? The difference could be that criminals are no longer characterized as tragic losers embodying the contradictions of capitalism—as in the gangster movies of the 1930s that Brecht loved so much—but rather as zany chancers who have the balls and the wits to take the advances of capitalist deregulation as far as they can, to the disadvantage of the naïve and the duped. At those times when attention is actually given to the fate of the disadvantaged, the likely moral of the story is to take the crisis as an opportunity to carve out a more responsible future for self, family and country. That’s what Alberto Toscano has pointed out when he was here in

Brussels to talk about the cinematic responses to the ongoing economic turmoil. All the fiction films that he had seen, he said, “testify to a world whose imagination is stripped of collectivity and riven to a narrow horizon of finitude, in which the best one can imagine is more family and less greed, fewer commodities and more stability.”<sup>93</sup> The dimension of collective politics, which shadowed earlier figurations of crisis like *The Grapes of Wrath*, appears to have gone missing. Perhaps that’s what Rancière meant when he mentioned that “something has happened to the real.” “It is not we who no longer tolerate politics,” he wrote, “it is politics which no longer tolerates the remnants of the real of fiction.”<sup>94</sup> It is as if today’s cinematic fictions find difficulty in dealing with a social reality that does not allow for deviations and mis-directions, while reality increasingly imposes its consensual law and cynical outlook on fiction. It’s as if the difficulty of finding spaces for antagonism has made it hard for cinematic fictions to find forms that would be able to detach themselves from social objectivity and disrupt the dominant imaginaries of “capitalist realism” and “the age of insecurity.” If something has happened to the real, it might not be because it has disappeared, but because the opinion regimes that define the common sense of the real have made it difficult to dislodge and reconfigure its coordinates, which are constantly being readjusted to make us recognize that there is only what there is, and all else is mere illusion.

Everywhere in today’s fictions, you can sense a trouble to find a measure of entanglement between the aesthetic, the narrative and the political. In response, the balance between the imperatives of dramatic fiction, the possibilities of aesthetic freedom, and the topography of the class struggle that was struck in fictions such as *The Grapes of Wrath* seem to have shifted towards a quest to revive a certain childhood of cinema, when the plot was still subsidiary to the sensations and intensities that could be found in the passion of gestures and reflection of faces. It is not so much a longing for the lost paradise of silent film or for Eisenstein’s language of sensations, as it is a quest for another form of mutism: one that could oppose the deafening silence of a world without possible social refiguration with the sensation of the deaf speech that mute things carry with them. Some filmmakers have responded to the suspicion towards political narratives and representations by creating distant views onto wide open landscapes which form the backdrop for disjointed drifts of characters who are plunged in an abstract magma without cause or effect, held together by background noise and background scenery rather than by a structure of rationality. Others have chosen to neutralise the threat of sentimentalism and moralism, for which we no longer seem to have patience, by confronting the viewer head on with the brutal jolts and

jerks of everyday hardship. We see this, for example, in the work of the Dardenne brothers, who seem to have attempted to escape the grasp of social and narrative codification by responding to Deleuze's call for a will to art that undoes itself from a will to meaning. In *Rosetta* (1999), we get to see what appears like a young heir of Mother Courage scrambling for her life, struggling to reach the bottom rung of the ladder of success, after which she hopes to be able to lead a normal life. Terrified that she will plummet into the abyss, like her mother, she wages a purely instinctive battle to lift herself out of the lowest depths of the social order, a fight for which all scruples are abandoned. But in place of the dialectical lessons that once pitted the need for political consciousness against the traps of morality, we are now asked to judge the dignity of the struggling young woman rather than the social circumstances that underlie her struggle. The camera follows closely behind her while she defiantly charges through a round of humiliations and setbacks, plunging us into the thick of her struggle. It is as if, now that we have hardly any more lessons to learn about the brutality of capitalism, friction can only be created by submerging us in a visceral roller-coaster experience of relentless movement, haptic close-ups, violent blows and clamorous sighs. It is as though the real can no longer be understood as an effect of representation, but only as a traumatic event, marshalled against a world of fantasy now felt to be compromised by consumerism. As though the scepticism towards representational identification has prompted the adoption of an aesthetic of immediacy, abolishing space and creating affects through the twisting and turning of suffering and exhausted bodies, allowing spectators to feel their intensities within their own bodies. But isn't there a price to pay for accentuating the mute force of intensities and desires? Doesn't *Rosetta*, in its vigorous attempt to construct a sensorial singularity that can not be easily subsumed in the matrix of social identities and the flow of exchangeable images, in the end, come close to identifying with the stubborn commonplaces that it tries to exceed? Doesn't its immersion into a world of noise and fury, in order to burn all traces of calculated representation "in the fire of the film,"<sup>95</sup> risk conforming a bit too well to the stereotype of the barely socialized sub-proletarian immersed in the sheer materialism of the everyday? Doesn't this identification with survival, manifested as a vital life force clawing at the soil of life with nothing but primal instincts to go on, step into the breach left behind by the curtailment of political subjectivation? It seems as if, however rigorous and committed the search for a shift in the balance between the verisimilar of representation and the mutism of aesthetics, at the same time wanting to assure us of what we perceive and displacing the expectations and interpretations that come with this perception,

there's always the incalculable risk that it will end up in the consensual circle where fiction attests to the real, only for it to be attested by the real in turn. In how far can cinematic fictions still thwart the powers of identification and get out of this circle where explanation anticipates perception?

11.

Could it be that the consensual order is aesthetic as well as political? Isn't the aesthetic difficulty found in negotiating between the verisimilar and the dissonant convergent with the political difficulty found in negotiating between social identification and political subjectivation? We have witnessed in recent years how the objectivization of any collective situation and the destruction of all spaces for political exchange have impeded counter-movements from radically breaking the imposed homogeneity of the political landscape and inscribing themselves within the landscape as a consistent force of collective subjectivation. As a result, they often seem to resort to the creation of temporary autonomous zones, powerful local and symbolic occupations that may have the capacity to subvert a given order of spaces and times, but nevertheless appear to exist out of time and out of space. Recently, Rancière has pointed out that this wavering between the heteronomy of forms of life and the autonomy of forms of self-activity is also something we can discern in some of today's documentary fictions.<sup>96</sup> Think of Sylvain George's portraits of migrants in Calais, *Qu'ils reposent en révolte (Des figures de guerres)*, and *Les Éclats (Ma gueule, ma révolte, mon nom)* (2010-2011), in which the depictions oscillate between the everyday and the mythological. The characters come about as both identifiable figures who are enduring intolerable hardship and as resisting bodies that are able to shed their skin, as it were, in order to thwart the identificatory control imposed by the state. "Neither dead or alive, neither human or animal, but something in between," as one of them says. In these films, the migrants do not simply correspond to the status of "bare life"; they rather become epic figures who travel between different worlds, bearing the capacities to voice their own destiny and raise their thoughts and wits to meet the violences imposed on them.<sup>97</sup> I believe we can discern a similar tension in Pedro Costa's work, which has increasingly ventured into abstract realms where the quotidian and the fabled intertwine. In the series of films that he has made in the Fontainhas neighbourhood of Lisbon, we no longer see farmers and workers who are heading for a better future, like in *The Grapes of Wrath*, but slum dwellers and outcasts who seem to be entrapped in murky ghettos and poorly lit chambers without a foreseeable horizon of change. In one of the films we saw in Ghent, which is

undoubtedly one of Pedro's greatest films thus far, *Colossal Youth* (2006), we do not see tractors figured as snub-nosed monsters destroying farmhouses in the service of greedy landowners and finance companies, but we hear bulldozers tearing down the old clandestine neighbourhood houses to make room for new flats as part of a reformist housing project. Instead of Tom Joad and his family drifting through the Midwest of the States heading towards a horizon of expectation, we get to follow the frail figure of Ventura wandering between the remnants of his destroyed neighbourhood and the sterile structures of the new ghetto, in search of his lost "children" who are scattered across a new landscape of precariousness. Unlike Tom, the inhabitants of Fontainhas are not seen taking a stand against the powers that expel them from their home. We don't get to see the exploitation brought about by the economic system or the repression carried out by police forces. There are no signs of class struggle here, no will to know and to ask, as expressed by Jim Casy, no need for an explanation for the ongoing predicament, no unmasking of its hidden causes. In Pedro's films, the characters are not asking for anything, they just say what they know, recounting and restaging their own lives, which might, however, already entail a means of transformation.

Pedro has claimed that *Colossal Youth* is a kind of remake of another film by John Ford: *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), which tells the story of a former slave who enlists as buffalo soldier in the US Cavalry, only to be humiliated and persecuted. One could say that in both films enigmatic strangers are called upon to stand tall for all those who have suffered debasement. Just like Sergeant Rutledge is more than a criminalised and marginalised outcast fighting for his survival, Ventura is more than a wretched migrant whose mind and body is broken by illness and loss. In the film, he takes on the posture of a majestic wanderer somewhere in between King Lear and Tom Joad, who, by acting out his own life and memories, becomes an actor attesting to the capability of reshaping his own life. This cinematic quest to verify the dignity of men is bound to bring to mind the work of Pedro's greatest paragons, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, who have never ceased to call attention to the capacity of anyone to invest the most arduous words with the greatest possible intensity. But rather than showing us the everyday hardships of today's wretched, they have chosen to capture fabulous bodies in the course of reciting, as if in an antique amphitheatre, existing texts with the utmost care and diligence. In their more recent work, the Brechtian "history lessons," aimed at revealing the contradictions underlying the class struggle, have altogether given way to a more lyrical form affirming the enduring capacity for the construction of a new sensible world. The objective is no longer to unmask the sordid reality

of the “business affairs” of the privileged, but to make sensible how commoners deal with their own affairs. In *Operai, contadini* (2001), the companion piece to *Umiliati*, specific episodes from Elio Vittorini’s account of the workings of a sovereign community in post-WWII Italy are isolated from their narrative and condensed into moments which seem to take place outside history. And if *Umiliati* does seem to contain some history lessons, it is only to immediately denounce them. Set up in the form of a tribunal taking place in the woods, the *mise-en-scène* of the film refutes the teachings on economy and history that are given by those judging the cooperative labour of the wayward community. When a man who appears to speak in the name of the State Administration, teaching the members of the community about the laws of property which are supposed to provide the ground for their disownment, his reasoning is met with words and gestures of disdain. The community’s refusal to be treated like fools is heightened by the contrast between the dispassion in the man’s voice and the stubborn gesticulations of dismissal which do away with all totalizing arguments claiming necessity. Even when, after having been once more denigrated by young militants spelling out the irrevocability of the brave new world of specialisation and commodification, the community is finally disbanded, resistance still endures. The moment which keeps haunting me, showing community leader Ventura—yes, this other Ventura—at his wits end is followed by another final shot in which we see his companion, Siracusa, sitting on the doorstep of her house with her head in her lap. Her determination appears to be broken, but then she straightens herself, after which the camera lowers and remains lingering on her hand that has become a fist. A last gesture of resistance, amidst the play of light and shadow, the movement of the wind and the sounds of buzzing insects and lapping water. The dream of a community to come no longer finds its agency in the dialectical pursuits of yesteryear, but in the commonality expressed by the recitation of words imbued with historical experience and the sensible intensity of gestures of life and forces of nature. Instead of Brecht’s call for dialectics, what resonates now is Deleuze’s call to give us back belief in the world. And instead of the communism of Soviet planners and engineers, it is another communism that is called upon: one that is grounded in a sensible equality that affirms the enduring capacity for the construction of a new common world, a community of sense.<sup>98</sup>

In *Colossal Youth*, there is no appeal for new forms of communality, neither in the past, nor in the future. The capacity and dignity of the marginalised and defeated is not affirmed by elevating them to the status of tragic orators who defy the course of history and proclaim the promise of a new world order. The dwellers

of Fontainhas remain outcasts who cannot help being haunted by a past marked by irremediable loss: homes left behind, lives perished on the building sites of Capital, families torn apart by the violence of deprivation and repression, revolutions gone awry and struggles coming to nothing. But at the same time they also take on the postures and gestures of haunted figures that appear to come straight out of Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau's universe of shadows, as trembling and drifting bodies who carry with them the deep scars and broken memories of all those who share their plight as castaways in contemporary Europe. When we see, towards the end of the film, this impressive scene where Ventura meets Lento in a burned out flat whose scorched walls seem to enclose a twilight world between life and death, we cannot but be reminded of the presence of this other dispossessed settler, Muley. As Lento speaks about the accident that has led to his death, an accident that has in reality happened to someone else in the neighborhood, he too achieves the stature of a ghostly figure plunged into a borderless night, bearing with him testimonies of agony that testify to the experiences of many. He too becomes a fathomless phantom who returns from the shadows to speak for the departed. But in contrast to *The Grapes of Wrath*, here this betwixt space out of time doesn't have a place within a narrative continuum.<sup>99</sup> *Colossal Youth* does not follow the conventional narrative logic that represents the actions of men according to the laws of probability or necessity. The overarching temporality is rather the one that Aristotle opposed to it, the one that Althusser contrasted with the dialectical time of History: the "chronicle of wretched existence."

*A time in which nothing happens, a time without hope or future, a time in which even the past is fixed in repetition and the future is hardly groped for in the political stammerings of the labourers building the factory, a time in which gestures have no continuation or effect, in which everything is summed up in a few exchanges close to life, to "everyday life", in discussions and disputes which are either abortive or reduced to nothingness by a consciousness of their futility. In a word, a stationary time in which nothing resembling History can yet happen, an empty time, accepted as empty: the time of their situation itself.<sup>100</sup>*

In *Colossal Youth*, the "emptiness" of non-dialectical time seemingly disallows any horizon of collective redemption. The slogan that gave the film its original title—*Juventude, em marcha!*—is no longer connected to the project of a revolutionary history. But nonetheless, the characters do not simply find themselves in the state of passive submission and illusion which Brecht was so eager to

counter with the activity of consciousness. They are not merely passive figures who are acted upon by events beyond their control, living their suffering as if it is their unchangeable and inescapable fate. On the contrary, they are actors who are able to reinvent their lives and continue to circulate between the repetitive time of their everyday situations and unsettled time zones where they, by acting out experiences of violence and trauma, come to symbolize a collective capacity to confront injustices suffered. This mythic dimension of collective destiny is no longer ingrained in a narrative of struggle that unwaveringly heads for a future of change, but it interposes itself on the chronicle of the real. The interposition doesn't lead to a revelation of the causes and solutions of the state of dispossession that is pictured. Illusion is not opposed with the real: the world of the real itself is infused with another world that exceeds it, breaking it apart from the inside. Immobility is not countered with movement: all straightforward movements are rather suspended by way of enigmatic condensations that occupy the fabric of the real. With Rancière we can say that what appears is an indeterminate space of appearances, circulations and transmutations that both unsettles the certitudes of identification and brings about a new topography of possibilities, visibilities and capacities.

In defiance of the arguments that bemoan our incapacity in dealing with time and history, and the failure of art and cinema to construct representations of our current experience, there still appear to be cinematic fictions that manage to say something about the state of our world and the possibility of resistance. They may not offer an orientation towards a certain future or an explanation for the present. No horizon of change and no appeal to struggle. But perhaps, in an era that is supposedly stripped of all convictions of a future that does not resemble our present, it is no longer in rational scenarios of necessity and plausibility that we ought to look for possibilities for transformation, but in the invention of new spaces of coexistence and exchange whose outcome will always remain uncertain. Perhaps, in defiance of the stubborn perception of their "depression," this is what has become of our fictions: addressing today's conditions of precariousness and uncertainty might have come at the price of foregrounding the uncertainty of fiction itself.

Does all of this make sense to you, Ricardo? Let's speak soon.

Yours sincerely,

Stoffel





**Sarah Vanhee** was introduced to me by a friend who suggested that we had quite a few interests in common: in particular, the role and responsibility of the “spectator.” Sarah’s artistic practice, of which I have seen several instances, is not situated anywhere near the domain of cinema, but rather takes up concepts and strategies from performance, visual art and literature to create contexts that allow for interruptions and eruptions in the uniformity of the common sense. How can we think about contemporary art’s potential of defamiliarization in light of the shift of focus from the representational to the relational? Where does the spectator come into the picture?



Brussels, January 2016

Dear Sarah,

You told me you're always looking for some kind of "third element." Something that would be able to disrupt the all too simple oppositions between fiction and reality, imagination and reasoning, private and public, art and non-art, inside and outside. Something that could possibly bring about a momentary state of suspension, throwing expectations and explanations into disarray and thereby opening up spaces of reconfiguration where experiences could be renegotiated. You've been seeking to establish those spaces beyond the confinements of art institutions and performance venues which, according to you, tend to keep things and people in their "proper" places. With *Untitled* you've aimed to breach that containment by organizing visits to private homes whose residents could propose their own selection and definition of art. With *Lecture For Every One* you've tried to break the insularity and unanimity that you consider typical of art gatherings by presenting your concerns to assemblies of "unlike-minded" individuals. In both cases, the third element seems to constitute a presence or a discourse that engenders an instance of uncanniness or out-of-placeness which is meant to somehow introduce difference into sameness and adjourn conventional modes of social behaviour and reasoning. Contrary to what has been often said about your work, it appears to me that it doesn't so much attempt to give rise to ambitious new models of collective living or an emergence of civil consciousness, as produce modest and momentary interruptions to a shared conformity, creating the possibility for unforeseen encounters and unimagined connections that might shake up the patterns of common sense. I must confess that this notion of a third element, as a mediating instance that defies unanimous identification and allows for a multiplicity of displacements, highly appeals to me. The difference, however, is that I am trying to think about this notion in relation to an aesthetic form that is often thought of as antithetical to the modes of art that privilege inter-subjective and lived encounters over detached viewing; that of cinema.

A lost cause, some may say. Indeed, it seems as if, in this time of smothering consensus, with its accruing annulment of possibilities for political contestation and creativity, art has valiantly taken it upon itself to surpass this consensus by foregrounding palpable presence and action, insisting on immediate intervention or integration rather than distant mediation. Confronted with a growing scepticism

towards the idea of an art that solely revolves around itself, the kind of art that has allegedly become increasingly alienated from the convulsions of the “real” world while at the same time completely embroiled in the capitalist system, many artists have been seeking to take up a new, or rather renewed role; one that re-articulates their engagement with the social and political struggles of our times. In an attempt to escape from pressures to become neo-managers at the service of the creative industry, some have chosen to explore strategies of exodus, leaving behind the institutional safety zones to create their own enclaves where they can experiment with new forms of life, production and exchange. In the presumption that art and culture have a considerable role to play in the care of souls and the staging of desires, others have ventured to transform institutional and public spaces into micro-utopias, battlefields and playgrounds where interaction and participation are encouraged. In one way or another, wavering between art as social practice and art stepping outside itself, today’s committed art is expected to oppose the ruling skepticism of our day and activate spectators, encouraging them to get involved in communicative and collaborative situations which could relieve and resolve insidious anxieties by turning them outward in shared, symbolic acts. Ostensibly these situations are not to be found in dark chambers where viewers are asked to remain seated in front of static screens flickering with distorted images of our world. Cinema, it is often said, is a place for reveries, where bands of estranged recluses convene to marvel in nostalgic bliss at the shadowy remnants of a once glorious past. It is also a place of bad faith, where cultural consumers gather like sheep to willingly surrender their minds to the box-office successes of the day, factory-made for maximal audience appeal, which means maximal inoffensiveness. Cinema as a hall of debate, as a place for collective intimacy where experiences can be shared and thoughts exchanged? If it ever existed, so it is said, it is certainly not like that today.

Yet it doesn’t seem so awfully long ago that the dream of making art “active” in order to transform it into political activity appealed to filmmakers as well. A while back, for instance, I came across a statement that was written thirty years ago by a collective who expressed their quest to “de-mystify the process of film production” and “collapse the distinction between ‘audience’ and ‘producer’.”<sup>1</sup> I’m guessing that these ideas sound pretty familiar to you. In the performing arts, as far as I know, the objective of closing the gap between active producer and passive consumer has since long become an accepted truism, manifesting itself in a variety of forms that aim to transform the stage and auditorium into a participatory agora where spectators are encouraged to free themselves from their state of apathy and

immobility. This is perhaps where performing and cinematic arts find a common ground: the fundamental passivity of the spectator is a concern that is as much imbedded in the critical perception of cinema as it is of theatre and performance. After all, what better illustration of Plato's Allegory of the Cave as an obscure space where viewers are chained to their place, subdued to an illusory world of projected shadows that prevents them from escaping their state of subjection? In the 1940s Bertolt Brecht summed up what he considered to be the elemental weaknesses of cinema by pointing out the rigidity of its *dispositif* ("we see nothing except what the single camera eye has registered") and the immutability of its offerings ("everything tends to present itself as a finished result, constraining, unchangeable")<sup>2</sup>. Decades later these arguments were echoed in the words of Robert Smithson: "Going to the cinema results in immobilisation of the body. Not much gets in the way of one's perception. All one can do is look and listen."<sup>3</sup> Around the same time, various film theoreticians linked the obscurity of the film theatre, the immobility of the spectator, and the hypertrophy of visual experience to condemn cinema as an agent of profound ideological mystification, enabling a process of uncritical identification with both the spectacle itself and the ideology staging the spectacle.<sup>4</sup> In short, spectators are considered as "captives of sloth," as Smithson wrote, caught in a state of lethargy and regression, "hermits dwelling amongst the elsewheres," foregoing the salvation of reality.<sup>5</sup> Or, as the French say: *Sage comme une image*.

Cinema as opium of the people, as ideological instrument in the service of the dominant class, as producer of an impression of reality that is mistaken for reality, as artificial spectacle taking the place of the real, as a form of hypnosis that eliminates all possibility of thinking for oneself: the critical traditions of the past century have invented countless variations to condemn cinema as a totalitarian force that feeds itself off of the unconditional submission of the spectator. It is this suspicion that has given birth to the aspiration to break with the paradigm of cinema as a secularized cathedral where viewers, as if in a state of religious ecstasy, gawk at an intoxicating spectacle of shadows and reflections. In the past, this aspiration has, broadly speaking, provoked at least two different, even contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, cinema has sought to reveal the mechanisms and contradictions that are hidden below its appearance of transparency and continuity, in order to awaken the onlookers from the grip of illusion and identification—the Brechtian impulse, let's say. On the other hand, cinema has endeavoured to break the blocked vision of its *dispositif* and grant its spectators a new freedom of action, either by urging them to reclaim the powers of cinema that are used against them or by remodelling projection spaces into platforms for collective manifestation

and mutual interrelation.<sup>6</sup> So spectators are summoned to exchange their role of passive subjects for the role of rational observers who, instead of being captured by images, are able to learn from them the secret truth of things, or to completely abandon their role of immobile observers by recovering the vitality that images have seized from real life.

Both of these tendencies have gained traction among the culture of politically committed cinema, or so-called “militant cinema,” in particular the manifestations that saw themselves as part of a broader project of national and international socio-political transformation in the 1960s and 1970s. Prolonging a debate that had already been initiated in revolutionary Russia, some critics and filmmakers stressed the need to create new forms that would demonstrate revolutionary theories and produce a new consciousness, allowing spectators to apply to reality what they had learned from the screen; while others considered cinema as an effective pretext for gathering a broad audience whose members would be jointly able to recognize and identify with what is shown. The objective to take apart the division between expert and amateur, producer and consumer, was also apparent in a number of projects which provided those who usually remained without a voice with their own means of cinematic representation, in line with the arguments that real knowledge of exploitation could not be derived from vanguard theories coming from above but could only be developed by way of first-hand experiences on the ground. The latter task was famously propagated by the Medvedkin Group who, under the auspices of Chris Marker, fostered a *cinéma ouvrier* that could express, as Marker commented, a “change of consciousness,” incited by a desire “to learn how to see.”<sup>7</sup> This led to a series of films in which workers at the Rhodiacéta factory in Besançon documented their own struggles, in an effort at self-representation whose model would soon spread to other places in France and beyond. For others however, such as Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin’s Dziga Vertov Group, “learning to see” meant that the deception of mediation had to be exposed by drawing attention to their underlying conditions and contradictions. In one of their films they stated that “it is not enough to do what Chris Marker did at the factory of Rhodiaceta—what The New York Times and Le Monde call ‘information.’ We must rise above sensible knowledge and fight to make it rational knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> In other words: cinema was supposed to support the revolutionary movement by making spectators aware of the reality hidden under the self-evidence of the sensible surface, which would prompt them to act upon this knowledge. By deploying a wide range of Brechtian *Verfremdung* or distanciation strategies—the systematic displacement of narrative causality into dialectical structures, the

interruption of the cinematic flow by commentary and analysis, the mobilization of contradictory quotations and references, amongst others—the spectator was asked to take distance from what is seen in order to arrive at a detached and critical consciousness of the historicity and thus changeability of reality.

In any case it was agreed that a true cinema of subversion would have to be radically extricated from the braces of artificiality, mystification and consumerism and oppose, as a well known 1969 manifesto written by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino stated, “the colonisation of minds” with “the revolution of consciousness.” In doing so, it would “dissolve aesthetics in the life of society.”<sup>9</sup> As a radical example of this desire to pull apart mediations, I remember a galvanizing moment in Santiago Alvarez’ *79 Primaveras* (1969), where images of the Vietnam war depicting violence shift to being subjected to violence. We see Alvarez brutalizing and vandalising the film strip, ripping and tearing it apart into shards of matter and pulses of light, as if anxiously hacking away at anything that stands in the way of immediate action. This literal iconoclasm was also characteristic of the work of the Lettrists and the Situationists, who put their call for the destruction of the cinematic spectacle into practice by carving and scratching film images or reducing the field of the image to blackness and blankness. But even when Guy Debord, in the beginning of his first film, *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952), declares the end of cinema and states his wish to put a halt to the screening, the film still continues, even though we only get to see vacant images against the background of a chorus of scattered voices. And when, in his film version of *La Société du Spectacle* (1973), we hear Debord feverishly pleading for the abandonment of the passivity of contemplation in favor of the activity of action, he can’t help adding force to his argument by showing image-scrapes of General Custer fearlessly charging his cavalry into the plains of Little Bighorn, as if urging the spectator to take up the represented action, break out into the open and assault the world of commodity and spectacle dominating all that is lived.<sup>10</sup> The cinema that Debord once described as “a passive substitute for unitary artistic activity” used by the enemy as a “spectacle of non-participation” was to be liberated from its functionalism and re-activated as a constituent element of participatory action.<sup>11</sup> By inviting the spectators to identify themselves with the warrior blazing forward, they were supposed to recapture that which had been hijacked by the enemy—the sensation and freedom of life itself—and use it as a weapon against the tyranny of the spectacle. At first glance, Debord’s method of *détournement* appears to constitute the opposite of the Brechtian method of *Verfremdung*: while the latter is aimed at widening the distance between the image and the spectator, the former is



aimed at annulling it altogether. But at the same time they both work on the same presupposition: cinematic mediation has to suppress itself in order to activate its spectators. Either by recapturing the throbbing vibrancy of life or by learning to see the real ways of the world, spectators are supposed to become actors in the arena of revolutionary struggle.

But how could the experience of an assemblage of images, sounds, movements and words result in the creation of a new assemblage of people based on a shared knowledge or vitality? Who fails to see that, for all their vigor, images of action do not directly topple over into action, just as the art of cinema does not dissolve into the art of life? Don't images invariably end up on the surface of the screen, where they remain at an unbridgeable distance? Couldn't it be that this presumption of continuity between perception, consciousness and collective action was only credible because the forms of consciousness and the political movements that it aimed to support were in themselves strong enough to carry and even preempt this notion of efficiency?

We have seen what happened with this presumption once the revolutionary struggles lost their bearings: in absence of an evident connection between the appearance of reality and the reality of appearances, the disappointment over failed revolts passed into a mourning over the failure of appearances. If general Custer once more makes an appearance in *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978), Debord's final film, it is no longer to watch him break through the ranks of the opposing infantry, but to see his troops being ambushed and murdered to the last man. If images are still shown, it is to underscore the mastery of the voice lamenting the deception of images and the spectator's fault in watching them, to which action can no longer respond. On the soundtrack we hear Debord reminiscing about the heroic charges of the past that might have led to another world and to another cinema, if they both hadn't become so banal that it hardly matters anymore if one is substituted for the other. Once the smoke had cleared, he sighs, many things appeared changed—an age had passed.

Unfortunately, what didn't come to pass was the idea of spectators as “mediatic sheep” who are collectively spellbound by simulacra.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, the weakening of the practices and scenarios of emancipatory politics seems to have thrown more fuel on the fire, stoking tireless suspicion into bitter contempt. Just recently I stumbled upon a book in which a critic takes up Debord's attacks on the spectacle that separates us from life to dismiss cinema as a death technique that has prepared us all along for our current age of cloning. Cinema has never been a form of art, the critic argues, it has merely served as an ancestor to today's

unlimited reproducibility that abandons all singularity and creativity, condemning reality to the false life of death.<sup>13</sup> The criticism of the illusion of images has thus merged into a criticism of the illusion of reality: images, according to today's critic, have "annihilated" reality, making it impossible to think of an outside to our contemporary cave of illusions where images are taken for reality and ignorance for knowledge. The more its prisoners imagine themselves capable of constructing their individual and collective lives differently, the more they are liable to sink into the absolute servitude of the cave. Debord's often cited assertion that "in a world that is really inverted, the true is a moment of the false"<sup>14</sup> has turned into a declaration that even knowledge of the inversion permeates the inverted world, and that acts of rebellion are condemned to become cogs in the machinery of the spectacle. The critique aimed at laying bare the hidden structures of power and the complicit ways in which appearances contribute to reproducing the spectacle has devoured itself by concluding that there is nothing else left but the spectacle, cancelling out all differences between dissent and complicity, between art and commodity. As viewing images is no longer thought to be able to make a difference, all that remains is the demonstration of guilt and impotence. This terrible trap of a criticism that has become fixated on the grandiose blending of everything into one common bubble has undoubtedly strengthened the idea that art has to provide more than artificial forms of mediation, more than images served for the pleasure of passive spectators, more than representations that merely reproduce or replace already existing situations. In Debordian terms: the world has already been filmed, now it's time to transform it. In view of a society where everybody is expected to be active, an art aimed at transformation can no longer be thought of as an art that reveals and debunks, pulling the rug from under the feet of naïve believers by way of self-suppressing images: it has to be an art that assembles and directly engages with the "real" world.

There have, of course, been many attempts to save cinema from the gloomy throes of skepticism. There's a remarkable piece that Roland Barthes wrote in the mid 1970s in which he ponders the problem of how to become "unglued from the mirror" when going to the cinema. His solution to loosen the glue was to temper the inescapable fascination for the projected image with a fascination for its surroundings. "Whenever I hear the word *cinema*," he wrote, "I can't help thinking *hall*, rather than *film*."<sup>15</sup> Remarkably, the same thinker who had always vigorously cultivated the task of unmasking mythologies, warning spectators against the collective lure of images and encouraging them to arm themselves with the discourse of counter-ideology, all of a sudden directed his attention to the deeply

intimate and anonymous experience of the darkness of the theatre, the grain of magnified sound and the dancing cone of light piercing through the blackness. It's as if he attempted to revoke yesteryear's repudiation of viewing pleasure and the accompanying cult of demystification—which, according to him, had in itself become a mythical doxa—by fetishizing the erotic appeal of being immersed in the cinematographic cocoon and its “festival of affects,” which he pitted against the tamed familiarity and banality of the television experience. What is striking about that piece is that Barthes never, not once, mentions what actually takes place on the screen. As he revamps the critical distance into an amorous distance, he turns his attention away from the allurements of on-screen appearances to the exceptionality of the pre-hypnotic “cinema situation,” from the image to everything that exceeds it, which means everything that cannot be captured by ideological systematisation and explanation. With this shift towards the situational, Barthes seems to suggest that if the spectator can become emancipated in the cinema, it is precisely because it offers a shelter from overfed representations and diseased signs, as a utopia of stifled meanings and mute affects made possible by the bliss of discretion.

This salvaging of cinema by displacing the attention from what happens on the screen to its surroundings has lent itself to various interpretations and permutations in the past century: from the 1920s calls for distraction, in order to “rivet the viewers’ attention to the peripheral, so that they will not sink into the abyss,”<sup>16</sup> and the explorations of expanded cinema and projective installations in the 1960s and ’70s, to the cultivation of the white cube model that currently still occupies our museums, galleries and biennials. The spatialisation, multiplication, serialisation and rotation of projections and screens of multiple shapes and forms has been considered by some as liberating in its invitation to “participation, movement, the sharing of multiple viewpoints, the dismantling of the single frontal screen, and an analytical, distanced form of viewing.”<sup>17</sup> Some have even seen in this model of spectatorship a return of the Baudelairean flaneur, engendering a new kind of fiction contingent upon the viewer’s self-directed wanderings.<sup>18</sup> The shift from contemplation to circulation, from a fixed temporal dispositif and frontal perspective to discontinuous and multi-dimensional spatial experiences is thus supposed to engender a lively field of exchange and activity. The constraints of the traditional cinematic *dispositif*, bound to the order of linearity, the confinement of the frame and the position of immobility, are left behind in favor of situational, dispersed, contingent spaces of infinite potential, bringing to mind Debord’s call for “the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.”<sup>19</sup> It is this call for art to provide

“ambient” environments and return to a primary evenementality, allowing for playful creations of an active life as prefigurations of a utopian remaking of social relations threatened by the reign of the market, that has eventually morphed into the paradigm of “relational aesthetics.” Once again art is asked to suppress its distance and propose a real form of life, seeking to mend the cracks in the social bond and establish a new sense of kinship. If moving images are presented within these situations and environments, they are often seen as part of “laboratories” of social exchange that simultaneously offer an experience of cohesion and dispersion, erasing perceptual hierarchies and decentering attention. To the spectator then is ascribed the role of “co-producer,” tasked to cast aside the passivity of unidirectional aesthetic contemplation and instead participate actively in the assembly of a new commonality. *What* is shown hardly seems to matter: what counts is the revival of a “lost horizon” of collective experience, in view of forging a “politics of relationality.”<sup>20</sup>

Others, on the other hand, have lamented this shift from temporality to spatiality and from contemplation to diffusion as a symptom of a prevailing reversal from immobility to mobility: spectators are less and less immobile before moving images and tend to move more and more before images that are increasingly immobile. Writing at the end of the 1980s, Serge Daney argued that cinema had lost its validity as a space where stationary, attentive spectators could become sensitive to the mobility of the world, having irrevocably regressed to the function of a lighted billboard, exhibiting objects and messages that were instantly readable and consumable, only asking the spectator to verify what had been seen.<sup>21</sup> It’s not only that more and more people refuse the imposition of blocked vision, he claimed, it’s that cinema itself had lost its differential force and had increasingly come to rely on clichés whose meaning was pre-established, in short: immobile images. We know that this melancholic wariness over the breakdown of the relation between images and spectators in a culture overwhelmingly dominated by the visual has in its turn spawned countless denunciations of today’s youths whose short-spanned attention culture, virtual mobility and insatiable info-lust has reduced their communication to simple and quickly codified signs, which they look for in comfort zones where they only hear the echoes of their own voice and see the reflections of their own faces. Needless to say, all this is supposed to imply that today’s spectator no longer waits around for the traditional experience of cinema, bound to a dark space of mutism and immobility that allows for encounters with alterity. Instead, cinema has subsumed to the all-encompassing wave of cultural tourism and social communication, no more offering the promise of a voyage but

merely the thrills of exotism, the consumption of glints of sights and sounds that are collected from a variety of surfaces in passing. As if seen out of the corner of the eye, densities are navigated, signs deciphered and textures acknowledged, calling for no other response than “reception A-OK.”

If we are to take these opinions at face value, spectators seem to find themselves in a double-bind: either they are in urgent need of mobilization, or they have become way too mobile. Is this maybe what you meant when you spoke to me about “the crisis of the spectator?”

In response to this double-bind, some voices have been arguing that we have somehow gone wildly off track by treating the position of the cinematic spectator as a problem. Following on from Barthes’s thoughts, Raymond Bellour has argued that the hypnotism of cinema makes for “pensive” spectators who are both active and passive, both alienated by the flux of moving images and emancipated in their capacity for attentive judgment.<sup>22</sup> At variance with the arguments that have emphasized the “distraction” inherent to the experience of cinema (whether lauded for its emancipatory potential, or maligned for its effects of dispersion), he has paid tribute to the singular mode of attentiveness specific to theatrical projection, inviting, before a film that demands it, the spectator to engage with the totality of what happens on the screen. The reservoir of nameless emotions, commotions, suspensions, interruptions, associations, recalls and returns that constitute a film enters into resonance with a depository of personal impressions and memories, which means that each viewing amounts to a singular reinvention of the film, inviting a multiplicity of elaborations and extensions. As I am sure you are aware, a similar argument has also been brought forward by Jacques Rancière. He in turn proposes to accept the conditions of distance and imposition as modalities for the appropriation of the gestures, movements and transformations that unfold on the screen. In his polemical advancement of the idea of the “emancipated spectator,” he has argued that the inclinations to annul the distances between the active and the passive, between knowledge and ignorance, might in effect be constitutive of that same distance.<sup>23</sup> It’s one of the basic paradoxes that animates his life’s work, in reaction to the Marxist science that he departed from: the logics that aim to activate the passive tend to endlessly reproduce the presupposition of their passivity. In order to reduce the gap between passivity and activity, its presupposition has to be continuously reinstated: some are capable while others are not. In contrast to the exhausted and exhausting paradigms that uphold the suppression of this distance, he advocates cinema as a form of mediation that is able to challenge spectators to act as interpreters who invent their own

translations and counter-translations, connecting the film experience with their own musing and reminiscences. What constitutes a potential for emancipation, according to Rancière, is not the programming of situations or appearances as to produce a specific kind of efficiency, but precisely the possibility given to the spectator to construct that efficiency by him- or herself, without having to rely on any prescription of interpretation. Against today's inclination to occupy art spaces with concrete presence and action—at the risk of tautology—rather than with remote shadows and echoes, he pleads for a new sense of distance, which is not to be reduced or rationalised, nor eroticised, but affirmed in its possibility for appropriation, a capacity that belongs to each and every one.

Certainly, given its origin as popular entertainment, it has been tempting to salute cinema as a great collective ceremony or as a symphonic mode of expression offering itself for unanimous acceptance by the multitudes.<sup>24</sup> In the past, this salute has also been turned into a warning, in particular in the aftermath of the Second World War, when cinema was accused of having been complicit in the mass deception of the Fascist spectacle. But one has to wonder whether cinema has ever reached the same power of aggregation that can be evoked by the bodily performativity of theatre or the eloquent muteness of music. One can arguably imagine, as Antonin Artaud did, performances as communal events where the audience is somehow bound together by circular flows of bodily energy and sweeping affects of sound and rhythm. In cinema, for all the collective labor that might have gone in its production process, the result is still experienced “together alone,” as a singular perception of appearances projected on a flat surface. The cinematic experience might not put us directly in contact with the unseen vibrations of life, as Artaud once hoped for,<sup>25</sup> but it constantly vacillates between recognition and estrangement, between the identification of what resembles reality and the sense of unreality that is summoned by ephemeral forms and motions that can never be fully grasped in their meaning. Indeed, cinema offers “distorted” images of the world, rendering subjects unrecognizable or, contrarily, making them resemble something they don't. But this means precisely that cinema does not simply consist of concrete sensible presences or forms of existence that stand in for others. The potency of cinema instead rests on the operations that thwart the simple relation between original and duplicate, by playing with analogy and difference, figuration and defiguration, appearances that show something happening and manifestations of what happens to appearances. Expectations are fulfilled, betrayed, transformed, which also means that there doesn't have to be an evident continuity between the intention and the form of a work, between the

form and its efficiency, between the performance of living bodies on the screen and its effect on the bodies in front of the screen.

It seems to me that it is this space of play and differentiation that is rejected by those who zealously wish to replace the relation between spectators and a surface of appearances with forms of non-mediated inter-subjectivity and being-together, as well as those who advocate a cinema of collective mobilization in view of uniting the cinematic world with the immediacy of the real world. In defiance with the logics of identification and calculation, with their economies of similitude and effect, Rancière argues that the irreducible gaps and distances, suspensions and expansions, which are at the heart of cinema are able to grant spectators a freedom of play, making it possible for them to make cinematic worlds resonate with their own worlds of perceptions and affects, as part of a permanent struggle to confront and enlarge existing modes of perception and interpretation. It follows that the power shared by cinematic spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective body. Instead, it is the power each of them has to interpret, evaluate, translate or mistranslate what he or she perceives in her own way, by associating it to his or her own unique intellectual adventure, making everyone equal to anyone else inasmuch as each adventure is not like any other.

Could it be that, if cinema were to have an emancipatory role, it should not be sought in its powers of illumination or unification, in its ability to gather “those who feel identified with the struggle”<sup>26</sup> or, conversely, to radically “divide rather than reunite,”<sup>27</sup> but rather in its potential to inspire a community of translators, held together to the extent that they are apart? Could it be that it should not be sought in its promise to reclaim life and dissolve into reality, but in the solitude of its experience that holds reality at a distance? Not in the inclination to look for truth behind its surface, but in the appropriation of the recalcitrancy of expressions, gestures and shadows whispering and shimmering on the surface of the screen? Is this so utterly naïve? Perhaps. True enough, the old dream of an aesthetic revolution that could engender new forms of emancipation for all alike has lost its bearings a long time ago. Today it seems that the ancient myth of the cave still has a hold on the judgments and evaluations that consider cinematic appearances as either forces of deception that undersell or undermine reality, or forces of stultification that invade our lives and minds. As unreliable shadows that invite sly manipulation or dubious models that invite thoughtless imitation, they hardly seem suited to encourage political imagination. It’s even harder to give credence to the idea of aesthetic forms that could abolish the hierarchy between a “cultivated” sensibility and a purely “instinctive” sensibility when we witness more

and more ramparts being constructed between the “lowbrow” and the “highbrow,” between mindless entertainment for the “uncultured” and dazzling enlightenment for the “cultured”. Idolatrous spectacles for some, artistic creations for others: everything has to have the right form exhibited in the right place for the right audience.

I admit, confronted with this common distribution of appearance and reality, capacity and incapacity, suitability and unsuitability, it is undoubtedly naïve to think of the surface appearances of cinema as potentially subversive forces that could somehow unsettle the notions of consensual communion and interpretation. It is doubtlessly foolish to think of cinema as a shared but mediated experience that could offer a multiplicity of displacements of the sensible world—indeed, as a kind of “third element” that could allow for distances to be measured and negotiated rather than suppressed. It might be silly to imagine cinema as both a dark chamber and a hall of debate that could provide some counterweight to the dominant fictions that weigh so heavily on our imagination. But then again: at a time when the noise of these fictions is so overbearing that it threatens to drown out all imagination, at a time when these fictions propose an assuredly unshakable reality that brings to heel all possibilities of transformation, couldn’t there be, against all odds, something to gain by turning to the world of appearances?

\*\*\*

I tried to tell you all this, in more or less hesitant wordings, when we met. Seemingly puzzled, you asked me for an example of something that has given me some confidence, something that keeps me searching. So here’s my attempt.

“What have they done with our dreams?” a voice says, “Where is our hope?” A haze of plangent tones and bruised echoes elongate a sense of mourning, a mourning for a history that has gone terribly awry. Blue tinted archival images show people arriving in the slipstream of the Windrush, sharing dreams of industrial development and economic welfare, chasing promises of belonging and homeliness. A series of photographs on display provide an intimate portrayal of the lives of African Caribbean settlers, establishing themselves in the cities of their new world in the 1960s. Shards of poetry, songs and folktales evoke intimate memories of all that has been left behind, voicing collective hopes for all that lies ahead. But this sensible landscape resonates and dissonates with another one, summoned by images of urban uprisings, escalations of violence, bursts of anger, scenes of



disappointment and disillusionment. Outtakes from television and newspaper reports depict a society torn apart by disorder and mayhem. Politicians' speeches condemn all that threatens the security of the community, deploring all that is strange to the unity of the nation. Testimonies testify to structural inequality, violent oppression and bigoted hatred, making the dominant status of history and identity feel all too precarious. It is clear that something has gone wrong. Aspirations have been abandoned, giving way to sorrows of defiance and tears of rage. Amidst the ruins, ghosts are rising, hovering over the ashes of times past. But where does the past end and the future begin?

The film I am describing is called *Handsworth Songs* (1986). It was the first film made by the collective I referred to in the beginning of my letter: the Black Audio Film Collective, a group of young filmmakers, artists and critics who set out to intervene in the cultural debates around identity and representation that were raging all over Britain in the course of the 1980s. This was a moment of political and economic decline in which policies were increasingly dictated by a forceful blend of conservative values such as nation, family and authority and the aggressive themes of a rekindled neo-liberalism: individualism and self-interest. "There is no such thing as Society," Margaret Thatcher proclaimed, "There are individual men and women and there are families."<sup>28</sup> The governing words of that period were "realism" and "law," indicating an alliance between the realist pragmatism of negotiated consensus and the rational administration of economic interests on the one hand, and the absolute rigor of law and order as the principal basis for morality on the other. After all, wasn't it an utter contempt for law and a stubborn blindness to reason that had driven the utopias of the past to their catastrophic demise? Wasn't it due to a lack of collective discipline and social bond that the future of democracy had come under threat? Following this argumentation, the only way to regain stability and oppose tyranny was to rely on the wisdom of realist politics and the reign of civil law. "We are reaping what was sown in the Sixties," thus spoke the Iron Lady, "The fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated."<sup>29</sup> And so the freezing Winter of Discontent of 1978-1979, which saw the largest uprising of the British workers' movement since the 1920s, made way for the long-awaited "winter of common sense."<sup>30</sup> "I believe people accept there is no real alternative,"<sup>31</sup> she stated, meaning the time for foolish dreams and misguided actions was over. What was said to be dead and buried were the narratives that contained a historical faith in a possible transformation of the dominant world order, and the credibility of the theoretical models that sustained this faith with

the promise of providing both the means to entangle the workings of the lived world and the weapons in the struggle for a new one. What broke down was not so much the logic of these narratives but rather the sense of possibility they dwelled on. At the end of the day, the schema of historical necessity still remained in place as what, up until today, underpins the frame of our present: it's just that what was once claimed as the necessity of the process leading to liberation and emancipation has been revamped into the necessity of the evolution leading to the triumph of the global free market and democratic governance, endorsed by the enlightenment of Western reason.

While those in power started to install vigorous reform programs, some of those who lost their bearings blamed the “bloody-minded” and “selfish” commoners for having invited the ravages brought upon the dreams of another future. As the memories of struggle were being rubbed out by an endless recital of the narrative promoting an inescapable historical evolution, ever more counter forces retreated to a defensive position of protecting the freedoms and entitlements that had been acquired with so much grit. Around the time when *Handsworth Songs* saw its release, one of the largest miners' strikes that Britain had ever seen ended in bitter defeat. As political movements continued to fizzle into bitterness, the sacralisation of consensual politics and the celebration of the “third way” led to the blurring of the borders between the traditional modes of Left and Right. Hence the conformist and uncritical embracement of technocratic socialism, the liberal discourse of the free market and the themes of tradition and nation. The “melancholy of the Left,” diagnosed half a century earlier by a thinker who abhorred the apathy and despondency of his colleagues,<sup>32</sup> now gained a stranglehold on the established left-wing forces which became attached to their own inaptness, left wandering aimlessly amidst the ruins of post-socialist and post-colonial futures past.

In the thick of these aftermaths, in which the present seemed stricken with immobility and wreckage, new movements started to occupy the spaces that the traditional counter forces had excluded and abandoned. The rise of a new feminism, manifestations of ethnic and sexual minorities, demands for respect of alterity and difference: from that moment forward, political action was no longer dominantly defined in terms of class struggle—once heralded as the promise of a grand realignment of global forces—but as action designed to advance the interests of members of particular groups sharing common goals or aspirations, or those whose rights, recognition and representation were being denied. For many, it became increasingly clear that the plural and diverse character of these

social struggles could no longer be accounted for by the classical discourses which saw society as a community of universal, homogeneous subjects with an undifferentiated identity, built around a single History that was moving transparently and teleologically towards a determinate order.<sup>33</sup> At a moment when the future appeared to have lost all promises of change, and the past was largely thought of as a wound that refused to heal, there emerged a desire to create new spaces for memory, a desire to uncover the ghosts of history and sift through the debris and detritus of past events for traces of stirring phantoms. Perhaps that is also why, for those who felt stranded in a time of temporal incertitude and political disorientation, there was an impetus to create new fictions of time, in view of a rewriting the past as a revived promise towards the future.

It was amidst the emerging landscape of consensual realism, of a common sense with “no alternative,” that the collective made *Handsworth Songs*, which was directly instigated by some of the events that sent unsettling ripples through this landscape: the uprisings that swept through England’s inner cities throughout the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. From the Notting Hill Carnival in 1976 and the riots which ignited nationwide in 1981, to the uprisings sparked in response to the shooting of Cherry Groce in Brixton and the death of Cynthia Jarrett in Tottenham in 1985: these were the events that painfully exposed the gap between the dominant discourses on “Britishness” and what was intimately experienced by the children of the Windrush generation, those whose parents formed the first mass wave of migration from the Caribbean, the Indian Subcontinent and Africa during the 1950s; those “bastard children of 1968” who came of age in a Britain that still carried with it so many unresolved ghosts from its colonial past. These were the events that crystallised what was felt by many: a sense of discrimination and marginalisation, cultivated by a state power deciding who belongs and who does not, who is the same and who is the other, who has the right to speak and to be heard, and who merely emits senseless noise. At the heart of liberal realism, supposedly freed of archaic impulses and immature passions, in which the rationalization of social roles went hand in hand with a propagation of a certain multiculturalism, a new racism reared its ugly head: one propelled and maintained by the state itself. Who could forget the words of the infamous speech given by the Iron Lady in the run-up to the 1979 election, stating that the once so proud empire “might be rather swamped by people of a different culture,” upsetting the hearts and minds of its hard-working people?<sup>34</sup> Who could forget the sight of this haughty MP on the set of BBC’s *Panorama* studio, disdainfully gesturing at the screen behind him showing footage of the “civil disorders,” and saying, “If you look

at their faces... I think they don't know who they are or what they are. And really, what you're asking me is how the hell one gives them the kind of sense of belonging young Englishmen have?"<sup>35</sup> These are the words that, according to John Akomfrah, the main director of the film, marked a whole generation: one that felt trapped in history and was anxious to reclaim a counter-memory that could intervene in the official versions of historical continuity and national identity.<sup>36</sup> These are the words that were taken to heart and acted upon by many affiliated with what has come to be described as the British Black Art Movement, including film collectives such as Ceddo, Sankofa and the Black Audio Film Collective, for whom memory became the privileged informer in a search for transgression, as the impelling force for any act of "naming things anew."

When I spoke with Akomfrah, he recounted how for many of the young migrant children who were coming of age in the England of the 1980s, those who were painfully confronted with the complacency of a dominant order that contended to have history on its side and the contempt of an imagined community in which they did not seem to have any part, the forage into counter-memory was not only a way of undoing the complicity of past, present and future, but moreover of the distribution of allocated places and roles that defined "Britishness." The organization of representations and reasonings that shaped this reality had to be challenged and displaced by way of forms and narratives that could somehow express the uncertainties and anxieties that affectively contradicted the common sense. These forms and narratives had to defy the official scenarios of a present that could not be disputed and a past that was best left behind—scenarios that were meant to defuse all gestures of recalcitrance—by constructing connections between the present and a past that had not only produced oppression, inequality, exploitation and discrimination, but had also grown inward: a haunting, unbinding past that had inflicted agonizing wounds and bruises to the sense of identity and collectivity.

At a loss for a future to hold on to, the past was no longer something to be overcome, but to be excavated. On that account, the narrative could not be one according to which History rides a triumphant and seamlessly progressive rhythm towards an inevitable horizon, but rather one in which the past is intertwined with the present, and myth is entangled with reason. And the form could no longer be one that conforms to the certainty and hierarchy of representation and the established relation between the real and the apparent, but one that engages with the contingency of the real, one that is able to construct new connections between words and things, times and spaces. In other words: what was needed were new fictions. As Rancière has reminded us, constructing fictions does not necessarily

mean telling tales, it first of all means undoing and rearticulating the trajectories that frame the existing landscape of reality, and redrawing the topography of places, roles and competences inscribed in it.<sup>37</sup> This might also involve upsetting the normative expectations and presumptions that underpin the conventions of cinema and the practices of filmmaking. This is why the first films of the Black Audio Film Collective were often considered as misfits in a film culture dominated by social realism, video activism and structural-materialist theory, and why they were often received with hostile and violent responses. It might also be what constitutes their force and relevancy, up until this day.

To a certain extent, the groundwork for the collective's cinematic explorations was laid by *Expeditions (Signs of Empire / Images of Nationality, 1982-1984)*, their very first project, undertaken while its members were still studying at Portsmouth Polytechnic. At a time when mainstream films such as *Ghandi* (1982) and *A Passage to India* (1984) seemed to engage in a re-mythification of the great British Empire, the collective chose to appropriate the imagery of the colonial past (portraits of colonisers and colonized, depictions of imperial statues, as well as details from maps, children's books and postcards) in order to tackle the mythologies around which national identity was solidified. The result was a 35mm slide-tape text based on images that were re-worked, re-photographed and re-framed according to the principles of Russian Constructivist photography, notably based on the work of Alexander Rodchenko. But while this former collaborator of Dziga Vertov used dislocating angles to distort the bodies and movements of Soviet workers in view of constructing the surface of a radical, communist equality of art and life, here these unusual angles seem to displace the memories inherent in the colonial archive and superimpose them onto a fragmented and ambiguous world, a sentiment that is underscored by the brooding soundtrack, consisting of layerings of tape loops and snippets of political speeches (including the aforementioned declamation of MP Sir Ronald Bell, which haunts the piece like a mantra). We couldn't be further away from Rodchenko's days, when cinema was disentangled from its conventions of popular entertainment and bestowed with a new promise in line with the mystical marriage between poetics and community, to which the October Revolution gave its concrete embodiment. All this, however, has been said to belong to an archaic and outdated ideology which was first violently suppressed by the demand for Socialist realism and dismissed a second time when Modernity was reinvented as the conquest of aesthetic and artistic autonomy, before it ostensibly gave way to postmodern hybridization.

In variance with this narrative, the constructivist compositions of *Expeditions*, now disjointed from their utopian references, might remind us that the work

of this avant-garde has always thrived on the tensions between formalism and lyricism, between the construction of a distinctly visual language—what Sergei Eisenstein called the “organization of the surface”<sup>38</sup>

—and a sensory fabric of indistinct intensities and impressions that speak for themselves, circulating independently of any predetermined relationship of address. It is this dualism between the image as insignificant presence and the image as signifying being that has been dismissed by Barthes and the semioticians of the 1960s, who restored images to their signifying materiality, allowing them to unveil their hidden messages and disclose the power at work below their surface splendor. But at the same time as the demise of this golden age of structuralism and semiology announced a melancholic declaration of “post-cinema,” the Black Audio Film Collective refused to mourn “the end of images” and instead deployed their polyvalence to unhitch them from old chains of signification, dispensing with the idea that there is a sort of wholesomeness to the image and that the response to dominant imagery has to be found in its antagonistic double. Precisely because something in the image always resists: something that escapes the intention of the beholder handling the camera and the powers guiding it, something that goes beyond the inherent inequality between those filming and those being filmed. The lens captures all without conscience or calculation: the powerful and the wretched, the intended and unintended all share the same image. It is this undecidability that allows for a change of view that is also a refiguration of the possible: each representation of a world holds another world.

This brings us back to *Handsworth Songs*, whose framework is constructed through the prism of the riots that broke out in September 1985, when roughly three hundred residents of Birmingham’s multi-ethnic suburb of Handsworth came into violent contact with the local police force. Unsurprisingly, the violence was presented by the government and the official media as a solely criminal event with racial overtones, as yet another manifestation of the disintegration of consensual norms regarding “law and order” into a debauchery of “disco and drug trade.”<sup>39</sup> Confronted with the rhetorics surrounding these events, the challenge for the collective was then to find a form that could address and problematize the dominant representation of the riots in particular and the figuration of race and ethnicity in general. But they didn’t look for a critical response to cultural and socio-political commonplaces in the language of binary oppositions and substitutions, as it was cultivated by the arguments on ideological stereotyping, nor did they rely on the paradigms of cultural ethnography, with its vocations to represent the inner workings and the stifled truths of a community’s experiential

reality. For them, the problem did not lie in simply reversing the stereotypes and opposing the rhetorical messages disseminated through mass media or in, as Salman Rushdie suggested in his vexing critique on the film, “giving voice to the voiceless” by making their authentic colourful tales heard.<sup>40</sup> The problem was to be confronted by questioning what Akomfrah has called “the regime of representation”—the way forms, images and meanings are interwoven into common sense. The accounts of the Handsworth events were just another manifestation of how the information machine tends to rely on a logic of interpretation and explanation: events are explained as symptoms and are given meaning by way of interpretations that are always already there. This logic also accounts for how the dominant order legitimises itself: with the diagnosis preceding the disorder, it can naturally present itself as a healthy family structure whose leaders and thinkers are meant to act as responsible “doctors” who can name and attend to the symptoms, with the purpose of curing all the deviant diseases that could possibly jeopardize the collective health. The task is then to disrupt the rhetorics of the machine and distort its familiarity, by separating words from what they make us see, uncoupling images from what they say, and composing them in another fabric of sensibility. As Stuart Hall has remarked, one has to go *inside* images and open up the very practice of representation by which sensible presentations are tied to forms of meaning, to the social recognitions and interpretations that are invested in imagery.<sup>41</sup>

That is how *Handsworth Songs* makes use of the undecidability that is at the heart of cinema: contrary to the dominant modes of fiction film, which often tend to attest to what is already given as real by conforming to the stereotypes of the social imaginary, or the traditional documentary forms, which are attached to the search for a certainty of knowledge, the film unbinds the multiple meanings of images, captured through the lenses of the BBC and other newsreel units, and repositions them in an indeterminate space that exists in the gaps between the real and the fictional, the historical and the allegorical. It is in this space of fiction, interweaving archival footage and news fragments, images that speak and voices remaining mute, words that conjure up ghosts and sounds accompanying their appearances and vanishings, that the experiential state of uncertainty is given its density and resonance. It is this space that allows for distances to be measured, not only between what is commonly said and what is intimately felt, but also between living experiences of violence and fear and lingering memories of hope and confidence.

What resonates most deeply throughout *Handsworth Songs* are not the outbursts of violence and the cries of fear, not the pompous headlines speaking

of “anger, frustration and destruction,” nor the images of politicians denouncing the “senselessness” of the events. The film does not assume an upfront posture of urgency and emergency, as is typical of the manifestations of militant cinema that wish to stand up for those considered as “surplus,” nor does it strive to awaken a new political consciousness, as was the case with some films of Horace Ové, Menelik Shabazz, or Franco Rosso, who each in their own way attempted to express the sense of anxiety and disquiet that gripped the black community in 1970s Britain.<sup>42</sup> Instead of soliciting effects of recognition or distanciation, the film rather creates a space inside the distance where the familiar and the detached join and disjoin. “There are no stories in the riots, only the ghosts of other stories,” a voice says: surveying the distance means conjuring up the ghosts, embracing their foreignness, assessing the difference with what is not. Instead of a call for arms, what is felt is a mourning for abandoned dreams and aspirations, a sense of sorrow for what is lost, for all that was certain. The film takes on the tonality of an allegory, choosing the fragmentary and the incomplete over the symbolic and the whole, choosing mournful monody over dramatic discursiveness, the expression of sorrow over the rhetorics of *agon*. The sense of loss that perspires is a loss of place and time, of history and identity, a loss that can not be recovered but leaves behind its traces in images of arrival and words of longing. Caribbean migrants stepping off the SS Empire Windrush, their faces brimming with hope and aspiration: taken from the annals of post-war newsreels, these images are awakened from their archival slumber and their impending insignificance, opening out onto a secret history of disappointment. There is also something else that remains vacated, an absence that haunts the lives of those portrayed: that which Orlando Patterson has called an “absence of ruins,”<sup>43</sup> the lack of official memorials or libraries that could legitimise the existence of those anonymous lives, of those who wither in the cracks of history, by never being allowed to go behind the definitions that others made of them, by not being allowed to spell their proper name or recount their own memories. What is felt is a melancholic agency which cannot know its history as the past, cannot capture its history through chronology, and does not know what it is except as the persistence of a certain unavailability and unavailability that keeps haunting the present.

Something is founded on this place of loss and absence, on this void that “signifies precisely the non-being of what it represents,”<sup>44</sup> something that is animated by the past as promise and as agony, evinced in intimate portrayals of those left behind by the age of civilization, echoing in songs of rootlessness and restlessness, borne by poetic phrases that bring to mind forgotten journeys,



washed away by the sea of time. Most modernist narratives would see this as a place of separation and individuation, where any notion of subjectivity becomes unhinged from its collective fabric. But what transpires here instead is a place where the sentiment of loss allows for a shared vulnerability, where an absence of ruins is reclaimed and reimagined as the presence of a possible commonality. The singularity and the solitude of the film is grounded on the construction of a sensible community of images, voices, faces and words that weave together a mythical elsewhere and a violent here, unrecoverable pasts and an untimely present—an uncertain polyvocal community that allows for dreaming of something beyond itself. The emptied dream is exposed, but in its place is suggested a new one: “demand the impossible in order to wrestle from it that which is possible.” A dream responds to the loss of another, a fiction of the possible responds to a fiction of the impossible.

Perhaps this expression of loss and absence, rather than of desire and certitude, is something characteristic of our era, when memories of lost futures are felt looming over a present that seems to be caught in an endless refrain of failure and catastrophe. “History throws its empty bottles out the window,” a voice laments in Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1983), undoubtedly one of the main precursors to *Handsworth Songs*. Mourning the passing of Amílcar Cabral’s revolutionary dreams, the voice says: “History has only one friend, the one Brando spoke of in *Apocalypse Now*: horror.” When Chris Marker made the film, just before the Black Audio Film Collective made theirs, it had become clear that the legacies of the Bandung moment and its varied postures of nonaligned sovereignty had effectively come to an end, and the narratives of revolution and overcoming, as well as their underlying mythologies, could no longer hold the salience they once had. What history bestows on its recruits, we hear the voice saying, is nothing but “an amnesia of the future.” This sense of failure also had an effect on the militant models of cinema, particularly those categorised as Third Cinema, an ambiguous term that referred to the forms and practices that were cultivated as weapons in the process of decolonisation. “Inscribed in the militant and nationalist pretensions of the term ‘third cinema,’” Akomfrah stated, “is a certainty which simply cannot be spoken anymore. A certainty of place, location and subjectivity. What now characterizes the ‘truths’ of cinema, politics and theory is uncertainty.”<sup>45</sup> In times of disappointment and uncertainty, in which time seems stricken with silence, it seems as if one can no longer hold on to narratives of salvation and redemption, depending upon a utopian horizon or a prospect of homogeneous collectivity towards which the emancipatory history is imagined to be moving towards. In

times such as these, wrote critic Cyrille Offermans in reference to Michel de Montaigne's essays, other fictions tend to be created, reports of wanderings without preconceived maps or destinations, forms of inquiry that are not in search for the one and only Truth, but for a sincerity of small and local truths: fictions that embrace the unknowing and oppose the view of history as a chain of events on a road to salvation with that of a discontinuous drift through mythical territories and forgotten histories.<sup>46</sup> In those fictions, it seems, it is no longer the promises of the future that stand in need of liberation from the present, but the ghosts of the past.

We only need to look at the work that Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard have been doing in the slipstream of *Handsworth Songs*, to see how these fictions of memory have been accounting for the transformations of our time. Both filmmakers have created fictions by interweaving shards and scraps from the history of the 20th century and the history of the cinema that has accompanied it: the first by constructing a multi-faceted portrait of the saga of the rise and fall of communism (*The Last Bolshevik*, 1992), the latter by knitting together a tissue of innumerable outtakes from cinema's past to create a new kind of "imaginary museum" (*Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, 1988-1998). By making use of the versatility of the images, signs and traces left behind, and stitching them together into new constellations of documents and monuments, the significant and insignificant, the personal and the communal, history is fictionalized, allowing for it to be rethought. Whilst both filmmakers crossed paths at the intersection between the history of emancipatory politics and the history of cinema, Marker and Godard ended up on different tracks: while the first exchanged the *cinéma ouvrier* of the Medvedkin Group for an exploration of specific instances and encounters within that historical intertwining of history and politics, the latter exchanged the Brechtian exercises of the Dziga Vertov Group for an infinitely recombinable assemblage of fragments from an entire century. But, although one dreamed of a world in which every memory would create its own caption, and the other sought to pit the force of the image against the lure of narration, both relied heavily on commentary to create consistency: it is the voice of the commentator that holds the fabric of detached and dislocated fragments together, telling us where to look, how these sights relate, which ones to remember, what they say, how to see, how to see anew in order to find out if we can see at all. In *Handsworth Songs*, however, the constellation of heterogeneous moments is not given meaning by the authority of a single voice-over. Instead, an ensemble of anonymous voices reciting equivocal meditations are interwoven with an extensive sound composition of seething tones, shimmering loops and echoing utterances. A composition, reminiscent of some of the sound

collage work that came out of the post-punk movement, that is given so much weight, as Akomfrah has said, “because there is so much we can’t say without it.” The images are not given consistency through guiding words, they are made to resonate with wordless pulses and elegiac wordings, at the price perhaps of venturing into a melancholic flow of deterritorialized intensities. But maybe that’s the price to pay for creating a cinema of uncertainty that gives resonance to a state of unsettledness and disorientation, while at the same time trying to avoid the traps of nihilism and resignation. A cinema of restless quietude that uncovers the fractured wounds of history while defying the amnesic wave of commemorations that aim to rebury the times when history contained a promise to the future. We may no longer believe in these promises, but we are still indebted to the past—a past that persists in the present and insists on its presence, even if it appears like the distant roar of an indiscernible thunder.

\*\*\*

By the time I got to see *Handsworth Songs*, more than two decades had passed since its first release. I came upon it almost by accident while drifting through the hallways and side rooms of Tate Modern, which had, so it turned out, just added the film to its collection. For a long time, it had been gathering dust in the archives of Channel 4, which was able to commission the film by virtue of a handful of reforms enacted in the early 1980s in view of stemming the growing class, racial and generational fractures in Britain.<sup>47</sup> When these agreements were dissolved, the film soon disappeared from sight, all the more so when the collective decided to dissolve itself. Eventually the film made its grand reappearance as part of the 2002 Documenta XI in Kassel, where it was hailed as a “succinct articulation of the dialectic of crisis and difference.”<sup>48</sup> Political cinema, so it seemed, no longer found its prevalent place in factory spaces and underground venues, but in the halls and cubes of contemporary art. But perhaps it’s also not so much of a coincidence that the interest in the film reawakened at the beginning of this century, at a time when the fantasy of the global triumph of consensual harmony that had fully cemented itself after the collapse of communism was being ripped apart by eruptions of violence and xenophobia. This was at a time when the events of 9/11 and the subsequent war against terror made insecurity more than ever a main principle of the government of collective life. Not only was the motive of insecurity at the heart of the infinite war of good against evil that George W. Bush had initiated, it also became increasingly embedded in the governmental logic of the European states.

Converging with the intensification of the neoliberal demolition of collective systems of social protection and inclusion—to which the Iron Lady had already opposed the pursuit of individual responsibility and self-reliance—a form of government was established that made state power accountable for the protection of their community against all possible threats, not least the ones identified with immigration and terror. In this version of the “security society,” the more social safeguards are diminished and precarity increases, the more resources are allocated for measures to maintain law and order which are supposed to protect those already within the community against omnipresent threats—threats for which there can ostensibly never be enough defense. This continuous play between these two modes of safeguarding has not only made insecurity a normalized mode of governing, it has also made precarity a normality that brings with it new inequalities, giving all the more impulse to the destructive communality of “us-versus-them” that was already at the heart of Thatcherism.

At that time it became clear that ubiquitous terms such as “democracy” and “human rights” were being increasingly degraded to mean the opposite of what they were once meant to signify. Instead of suggesting the possibility of staging dissent and allowing for differing voices to make themselves heard, these words came to frame a world that had no more place for other-voicedness and political alterity. Slowly but surely these two terms, “democracy” and “human rights,” have become associated with two other words: “community,” the watchword for the consensual logic of identity, and “terror,” the catchphrase for the logic of absolute otherness. We could experience the converging of these two logics in some of the comments that were uttered in the aftermath of the urban riots that broke out in France in 2005 and later again in Britain in 2011. Once again politicians were eager to criminalise specific parts of the population, just as critics were quick to point out that the havoc was not at all a cry for justice or a raid against the injuries of structural inequality, but an inevitable outcome of the mass hysteria that gripped all those “democratic” mass consumers who reject anything that stands in the way of their right to lessen their limitless thirst for equal consumption. More often than not the same critics were also keen to associate, in the same breath, the riots with what they revealed as the secret sin of Western democracy: the rise of terror. That way two targets were struck with one blow: the philistine fanatic and the self-indulgent consumer, the great conspirators against the civilised values and cohesive bond of the community. The critical logic of “enlightenment” that was previously deployed to unmask the ugly truth about the dominant order was now used to unmask an even uglier truth: the undeniable complicity between democracy,

consumption and terror. Once more it became clear that the “doctors” who are out to identify the symptoms of the state of our world no longer do so in wanting to heal the disabled, but to point out the world’s irremediable diseases for which enlightenment itself can no longer provide a cure. All this makes it all the more easy to point fingers at those cretins who still believe there might be something to do to make a difference, or at those outsiders who are suspected to spread the “contagions” that threaten the wellbeing of the community.

I was confronted head-on with the resonances and dissonances between the post-20th century world and the world evoked by *Handsworth Songs* when I showed the film in a small art centre situated in the eastern suburbs of Paris.<sup>49</sup> As it was the first time the film was shown in France—having created new subtitles for this occasion—we were unsure whether it would find an audience and how it would be received. I was aware that barely three years had passed since the death of two young boys hiding from the police in an electricity substation in Clichy-sous-Bois had triggered weeks of unrest in Paris and other French cities, but still I couldn’t have imagined the intensity with which the film stirred anxieties, memories and counter-memories. At that instant, the continuities between different times and places seemed to impose themselves with great force. Not only were the events in both Britain and France triggered by police interventions in stigmatized neighbourhoods; also, on both occasions they were denounced as senseless acts of destruction infected by an “epidemic of negativity,” or as purely criminal acts without any impetus other than degeneracy and debauchery. According to these commentators, these cataclysms could have nothing to do with politics or racism, since these were only relics of a bygone era. The indignation triggered by these comments made itself felt after the film screening, which turned the space into a resonance chamber where fragile connections and vehement disagreements were exchanged amongst the disparate members of the audience. Overall the responses did not concern so much the agenda of the film itself as how its experience resounded with individual impressions, questions, frustrations, and with the disjunctions between promises of social and economic equality and experiences of dispossession and humiliation, between the attitudes towards immigration and the regime of transnational labour, between the accusations of alienation and the attempts at refiguration. It was as if the experience of watching the film had freed up the ghosts lying dormant within them, as if its arrangement of resonating moments found unimagined resonances beyond the screen.

How come *Handsworth Songs* was able to generate these responses, decades after its advent? It can’t be only because it depicts scenes of unrest and violence

that resemble the ones we might have seen on our streets and on our screens. Numerous other films have documented the riots in Britain and in France, numerous reports have voiced the disenchantment of both the dissenters and the authorities, both the inner circle and the outside experts. The film also does not align with the models that present cinema as the privileged form to create an unmediated identification of art and life, or those that devise cinema as an instrument that could incite a critical understanding of History by demonstrating its dialectical character. Even if the Black Audio Film Collective has been associated with the rise of community-based art practices in response to the waning of the social welfare state; even if, as they announced in the statement that I quoted earlier, they aimed to “de-mystify the process of film production” and “collapse the distinction between ‘audience’ and ‘producer;” the film in itself is far removed from both the fetishism of action and the fetishism of knowledge. It does not tell us what to feel, how to react, what to find out, what to believe, what to distrust. It doesn’t want to give us any lessons, nor does it want to produce a new political awareness or mobilise action for a specific cause. It does not offer us an image of a history to be transformed. Quite the opposite: it undoes the knots and plots through which dominant histories are transmitted and the hierarchies of knowledge that keep them alive, tearing us away from the memories that these histories have engraved on things and within bodies. Far from the dreams to create a fusion of art and life, or the dialectical constructions soliciting a new critical consciousness, the film manages to compose a twilight world between heterogeneous temporalities and realms of experience, situating itself in the wrinkles that join and disjoin present pasts and past futures, memories of struggle and struggles for memory.

Perhaps there’s a condensed expression of this twilight world to be found in a sound piece that is at the heart of *Handsworth Songs*, Mark Stewart and the Maffia’s interpretation of William Blake’s “Jerusalem.” A millenarian poem of promise once converted into a national hymn of praise is here spread out over a vast sonic landscape of peaks and trenches, creating a new map of time, telescoping one promise into another, reopening time as the site of the possible. The promise of a time when a community would find its appropriate, prefigured forms of embodiment, is suspended, its potentialities multiplied into a myriad of movements and displacements between one time and another, one identity and another, one dream and another. What materializes is a space of routings and re-routings, associations and dissociations. It is a space of uncertainty and vulnerability, not because it is prompted by a loyalty to a world of lost ideals or a helplessness in the face of catastrophe, but because it coincides with a resistance

to closure, finality and fixation. Could it be that it's precisely because the film doesn't "want" anything in particular, because it doesn't assign any particular destinations to the images and words that it assembles, that it allows for a multiplicity of appropriations? Could it be that it is this multiplicity that allows for another kind of assemblage: an assemblage of individuals who might want to share fundamental questions such as "Where are we?"—"What do we see and what can we say about it?"—"What is it that makes us a 'we'?" I don't mean that the film is able to necessarily bring about a homogeneous community united by a common vision, a community identical to itself where everyone is in their appropriate communal place. On the contrary, I believe that an assembly of spectators will always be precarious, unstable, momentary, together only to the extent that they give attention to the appearances and stories unfurling in front of them, but also to the stories that reverberate with them once the appearances have turned into a multiplicity of expansions and variations. The cinematic surface does not dissolve into reality, nor does it rekindle a disintegrated social bond, reinstating spectators as members of a lost community. But maybe what it can do, as a kind of "third element," is to invite inventions and interventions that give a new force to the capacities of perceiving, translating and transforming, that appertain to all.

There are other examples I could offer you, dear Sarah, but they would all lead to the same suggestion: cinema is not the lost cause some would have us believe. Those who cling to the idea that we are inertly planted in front of appearances have nothing more to prove than their own proficiency. So let's break the endless argument cycle which keeps on demonstrating our impotence and say that we are not in front of appearances, but amongst them. And if they remain at a distance, it is only for them to become part of a more expansive resonance chamber of voices, gazes and thoughts that could awaken and further the ghosts within them. The challenge for us is to get these ghosts to circulate ever more widely. If we have something to prove, it's that these distant shadows dancing on the surface can still deliver that wonderful surprise which the forces of cynicism begrudge us—that which is still possible.

Looking forward,

Stoffel







It's fair to say that the *Figures of Dissent* project would not have been instigated if it wasn't for the work that **Herman Asselberghs** and **Pieter Van Bogaert** have been doing for over two decades now, both together and independently. Working as critics for *Tijd Cultuur*, a now defunct cultural section of a Belgian newspaper, and as curators of numerous exhibitions and performances, they have encouraged me to explore the work of many of the artists, filmmakers and theoreticians featured in this publication. In particular *Time Suspended*, a collaborative project with Els Opsomer which I was happy to see exhibited in Witte de With in 2004, has opened up many challenges which I have been trying to grapple with since — some of which have found a place in the letter to Ricardo Cabo Matos included here. *Time Suspended* also comprised Herman's very first work as an audiovisual artist, the starting point of an enduring trajectory which has led him to co-initiate the production and distribution platform Auguste Orts. Pieter, for his part, has continued working as an independent critic, writer and curator. Both have taken up positions as teachers and mentors. It's only logical then that they were the first ones to come to mind when I was asked to invite members to be in my doctoral commission. Thankfully they both accepted.

Charlie Chaplin, *A Dog's Life* (1918).

Kelly Reichardt, *Wendy and Lucy* (2008). Courtesy of Kelly Reichardt / Oscilloscope Laboratories.

Kelly Reichardt, *Certain Women* (2016). Courtesy of Kelly Reichardt / Oscilloscope Laboratories.



Brussels, June 2017

Dear Herman,

Dear Pieter,

How does cinema think “our time”? Where is the cinema that can take the measure of our present? Those were, I believe, some of the questions you both had in mind when we last met up. Pieter, you recommended to look beyond the conventional manifestations of the so-called seventh art and direct our attention towards the possibilities opened up by new image media, mentioning as a model example the work of Hito Steyerl. You told us that there might be something viable in her explorations of the socio-technological conditions of the “wretched of the screen” and the “post-representational” status of images within the digital world, which is said to be characterized by intensity, velocity, spread and flow. In line with her reasoning, you seemed to imply that cinematic politics might need to go beyond the exhausted tropes of representation and investigate new models of post-production and circulation, which could be employed by post-representative militias and open source insurgents as possible tools towards the demystification and alteration of existing relations of production. To look at what media *do*, as Steyerl suggests — rather than at what they *show*.

From your side, Herman, you proposed to take recourse to the potential residing within the bastion of “mainstream” cinema, exemplified by Adam McKay’s *The Big Short* (2015) which you praised for its ability to communicate complex information about the causes and effects of the 2008 financial crash in a digestible form. With some goodwill, the film could indeed be considered as an updated response to Bertolt Brecht’s quest to blend pleasure and pedagogy, in the guise of a cinematic adaptation of the “true story” of a handful of outsiders who stood up to the titans of Wall Street by capitalizing on what was always clear to see, at least for those who cared to look: the complete fraudulence of the financial system of capitalism that has imposed its logic on our economies and societies. It certainly seems as if Brecht’s famous motto: “What is the crime of robbing a bank compared with the crime of founding a bank?”<sup>1</sup> has fully broken into the cinematic mainstream, an accomplishment which has inspired some enthusiasts to hail the film as nothing less than Hollywood’s very own “Occupy.”<sup>2</sup>

\*\*\*

All the while I couldn't help thinking: what about fiction? I mean, where are the forms of fictional existence that are able to tear themselves away from the dominant modes of illustration and demonstration by which a society is summoned to hold up a mirror to itself? Where are the cinematic worlds that are irreducible to any order of a given reality, with its common sense of what is possible and impossible, plausible and implausible, necessary and contingent? After all, however entertaining and educational *The Big Short* might be, doesn't its fable basically operate as a slick blend of a morality tale and a journalistic report, in which a calculated selection of well-recognizable phenomena and enthralling features serves to display the signs of our times? In this case, the main characters, assembled from Michael Lewis' investigative exposé with the same title, have the merit of functioning both as symptom-bearers, whose traits and manners typify a contemporary way of being, and as examiners who take us for an expeditious ride through the hustle and bustle of the financial market, cleverly identifying and explaining its contraptions and deceptions along the way (notice how many of their exchanges are actually interviews and lectures!). In what can be considered as an overhaul of the well-known fable of mavericks taking on the corrupt establishment, the petty underdogs standing up to the giants of high finance are depicted as finance-savvy geeks and freaks — today's stereotypes of cool quirkiness and creative expertness — who manage to exploit the flaws of a system which has been blinded by greed by placing their bets against it. In spite of the fact that these audacious investors and fund managers have in reality hugely profited from an economic failure that had harrowing consequences for millions of people, we cannot but sympathize with these misfits whose poorly-socialized personality tics and emphatic back-stories make them appear like either Cassandra figures doomed to witness the forecasted self-destruction of the financial system or ethical crusaders eager to set it ablaze. We cannot but share their skepticism about an entire system that has turned into a painful farce, from the cynical dealmakers of Wall Street and the financial agencies that turn a blind eye to their scams to the lawmakers, the government and the media who fail to interfere. While watching the film I was reminded of a scathing moment in *Force of Evil* (1948), when the main character, a Wall Street lawyer, tries to justify his complicity in the corrupt banking system to his ill-fated brother: "What do you mean 'gangsters'? It's business!" The short-lived era of "Red Hollywood" and the ensuing blacklisting spree might now be long behind us, but Abraham Polonsky's razor-sharp dissection of the damage inflicted by the organizational consolidation of capital in the aftermath of the Great Depression that followed the 1929 banking crisis seems to resonate more

than ever these days.<sup>3</sup> Only now, amidst the so-called “Second Great Contraction” in recent capitalist history, the webwork of bankers, controllers, collectors and runners operating in the twilight zone between the underworld of organized crime and the upper world of official governance have become their salaried professional-managerial equivalents in the legitimate business economy, whose culture of greed seems to be beyond reprimand. At the end of his phantasmal descent towards the bottom of the world, the corrupted lawyer in *Force of Evil* is violently awakened to the evils of a system that drowns all human relationships in the “icy waters of egotistical calculation,” with a sense of deep guilt that topples into a tacit spirit of revolt. In *The Big Short*, the feeling of guilt that comes with the notional knowledge of the suffering caused by the system’s paroxysm does not prevent the characters from profiting off of it, while at the same time allowing them — particularly one investment maverick who also happens to be haunted by the memory of his brother’s death — to find redemption. When, in the film’s epilogue, we are sardonically reminded that the economic breakdown was followed by a swift return to business as usual and that the institutions that enabled the disaster to happen were essentially rewarded for their failure with huge bonuses and bailouts, paving the way for austerity and growing inequality, who’s not overwhelmed by gut-wrenching sentiments of exasperation and frustration?

Indeed, it might be precisely the expression and extension of these sentiments that Adam McKay’s film has in common with today’s arsenal of artistic and journalistic works that set out to scrutinize the perversions that are concomitant with the grand capitalist utopia of the market. It would seem Brecht’s mission to “make visible the element of crime hidden in every business enterprise”<sup>4</sup> is once again taken up in full earnest. In line with the Brechtian tradition, *The Big Short* even winks at the use of *Verfremdung* strategies in its deployment of fourth-wall dissolving moments and celebrity cameos offering mini-tutorials about derivatives and other financial instruments that pierce through jargon-infused obscurity. Surely, this attention called to the film’s self-conscious cleverness and nobody’s-fool rebelliousness, recalling McKay’s background as a writer for *Saturday Night Live*, has by now become standard in mainstream satire — in the film factory of Hollywood as well as in the meme factory of 4chan — which seems to ever more rejoice in pointing out the vapidness of every spectacle and the artificiality of every fiction, in front of which every spectator is bound to remain riddled with passivity and frustration. Remember the scene in Martin Scorsese’s *Wolf of Wall Street* (2014) in which the main character, setting out to explain the structures of finance, suddenly interrupts himself with a “who gives a shit?” knowing wink to the audience. Our

willful ignorance and annoyance in the face of an explanation of the workings of the market is basically performed *for us*.<sup>5</sup> But is this irreverent signaling of our indifference towards rational expositions and our pathological gravitation towards shallowness supposed to “activate” us, as Brecht and his followers may have believed, or does it merely come down to a cynical ascertainment of our impotence, while at the same time allowing us to congratulate ourselves for getting that the joke’s on us? It’s as if feigned disbelief has become our preferred mode of belief: if we merrily consent to roll with the punches, it’s not because we’re duped, but rather to prove that we’re not! That’s maybe why, in *The Big Short*, the disposition of a plot whose characters serve to diagnose the symptoms of our time — hardly clashing with the discourse that the world of domination conducts about itself — is strategically counterbalanced with a brand of self-conscious irony that slyly sidesteps the risk of standing accused of overcredulity or naivety; the naivety, that is, to still believe in fairy tales with heroes and happy endings. “I can feel you judging me,” the slickest of the featured traders tells us straight off when we see him receiving his fat bonus check, “but, hey, I never said I was the hero of the story.” It’s as if we hardly need to believe anymore in fiction to submit to it: on the contrary, we only seem to do so to the extent that it offers the possibility to disparage it. Over two decades ago, this “mood of rebellious irony and irreverence” was already identified by David Foster Wallace in fictions that took on a self-congratulating pose of being audacious enough to acknowledge that their own artificial trickery is ludicrous and point out how foolish their spectators are to fall for it. According to Wallace, this ground-clearing strategy could at one time be considered useful in its capacity to reveal a disturbing truth hidden under the cover of common sense, be it that this usefulness rested on the assumption that “diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom.”<sup>6</sup> But over time, as the prospect of effective remedies against the sweep of totalizing systems became uncertain, it turned out that the same strategy that was used by self-appointed rebels to expose the enemy with the weapons of critique only served to insulate themselves, holding on to a critical posture while being unable to propose alternatives. Without believable counter-forces to sustain it, how could a reliance on irony and irreverence show itself capable of evoking anything that could displace the hypocrisies and spectacles it debunks? With the truth wide open for all to see, allowing us to incessantly recognize and disavow it, is dismissive knowingness not in peril of settling into what Wallace has called a “cynicism that announces that one knows the score”?<sup>7</sup>

\*\*\*

Hence the question that stirs in me: where are the forms of fictional existence that do not merely contribute to the task of diagnosing and debunking the “capitalist realist” state of things, but are capable of drawing out as yet uncharted worlds of shared experience? Perhaps we should follow your intuition, Pieter, and lodge our hopes and dreams in the dark matter of the “post-representational”? The question of fiction, it’s true, has all too often been tied up to the problematic of representation, which is usually regarded as the imperative of verisimilitude and decorum. As a consequence, the concept of fiction has generally come to imply the fabrication of imaginary fantasy worlds which are set in stark opposition to the unadorned fabric of reality. This *idée fixe* has recently found an echo in David Shields’ often-cited notion of a “reality hunger” that has supposedly effected contemporary art and literature, as it manifests a growing yearning for an experience of the unrehearsed, unsimulated real in response to the tiresome artificiality of contrived plots and fabricated scenarios. The inventions of fiction, Shields claims, are no longer appropriate to deal effectively with what is already an “unbearably manufactured and artificial world.”<sup>8</sup> It is to this theory that Jacques Rancière has responded during our recent conversation in Ghent: “fiction is everywhere,” he stated, “everywhere where a sense of the real must be produced.”<sup>9</sup> Tracing back the Western conception of fiction to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he has reminded us that the notion has at the outset not been defined as the mere invention of imaginary and illusory worlds but as a structure of rationality that lends visibility, intelligibility and consistency to a reality that exists outside of it. In contrast to the ubiquitous claim that everything is becoming fiction, he suggests that there is fiction whenever an intelligible structure is proposed which identifies and relates subjects, forms, actions, events and situations in a way that makes sense. The representative mode of fiction that has been dominant since Aristotle — fiction arranged as strategic patterns of causes and effects, ends and means — is merely one possible model of framework to define a shared world of experience, albeit one that continues to underlie the principles of most fictions that aim to make sense of our time by creating credible narratives of social necessity. In that regard, not only writers and filmmakers but also politicians, journalists and critics make use of this model whenever they set out to describe a given situation, explain the reasons behind it and draw consequences from it. We can find it, for example, in the argumentation of a politician who has explained how certain countries are in debt because they have been living beyond their means, an extravagance which can only be regulated by imposing necessary austerity measures; or in the causal connection that a filmmaker has exposed between the conformism of our time and the culture of individualism and self-expression that has detached



us from reality, playing right into the hands of the perception managers of our post-truth world. But we can also find this equation of credibility and necessity in the theory that plays off our hunger for the messiness and rawness of the real against the fabrication of artifice, which finds itself grounded in a particular fictional framework that has become well-established throughout the past century, one that threatens to devour all others: that which reduces all phenomena to the reification of our experience, gradually subsuming us to the reign of spectacles and simulacra that have less and less of a relationship to an outside “reality”. This longstanding fiction obviously brings back to the fore what Aristotle railed against in the first place: the Platonic denunciation of the intoxicating and manipulating shadows that keep reality at bay — a denunciation, as we know, that is necessarily founded on a knowledge of the reality that is dissimulated by appearances: to be able to expose the shadows one must already have broken away from the cave where its prisoners are bound by the chains of ignorance and false consciousness. Only now, since the reality that was assumed to be hidden has in many ways become all too apparent, it is revealed that reality itself is dangerously collapsing into a make-believe world, which is manifested in a growing indiscernibility of real and unreal and an undecidability of true and false.

We can find numerous echoes of this powerful theoretical fiction in today’s critical common sense, not in the least in the proposals that encourage us to “withdraw” from representation. When Hito Steyerl, for example, writes that cameras are no longer tools of representation, but tools of disappearance, since “the more people are represented the less is left of them in reality,”<sup>10</sup> doesn’t she also deploy this fictional framework that associates the loss of the real with the entrenched dominion of simulation? Isn’t her likening of digital images to “dangerous devices of capture”<sup>11</sup> that drain away human life, turning us all into free-floaters in a fleeting world of appearances, essentially a reboot of the age-old scenario that denounces the coldness of reproductive machines that threaten to extinguish all human warmth and subjectivity?<sup>10</sup> Isn’t the suspicion towards images and fictions that pour across screens and networks, invading our lives, fully capturing our imagination, attention and productivity, another extension of the Marxist theme of reification? From this widespread interpretation of the evolution of our society, we know that critical art has drawn various conclusions, each delineating a certain set of suitabilities and limitations. On the one hand, art has rooted its politics in the revelation of its hidden structuring aspects and material relations, which are primary to any representational content. The strategy of breaking through the fourth wall that holds up the pretense of dramatic action

as reality in its similarity to itself can be seen as belonging to this critical mode. Instead of presenting itself as an imagist creation that is separated from its means of production, art strives to make legible the conditions and procedures that go into its making, as well as the mechanisms that underlie the production and exhibition paradigms that occupy the art field, which Steyerl describes as “site of condensation of the contradictions of capital.”<sup>12</sup> It has, for example, become common by now to point out how the art circuit has become the flagship store of cultural industries, sustained by the hypermobile logic of financial capital, which has taken the initiative to dismantle factories, relocate industries and put old warehouses and breweries at the disposal of art production and exhibition, in order to raise speculation value and reinforce the neoliberal cult of creativity. Taking this critical attitude to its logical deduction, self-styled critical art has unmasked itself as complicit to the structures of exploitation and inequality that it aimed to expose. At this point, the growing awareness of the mirroring of the global financial market in the art market and the limitations of demystifying devices has led to an appeal for art to practice the change that it preaches and substitute the forms of representation that routinely package situations of injustice and destitution with direct interventions in those situations. In prospect of a re-humanization of societies that have been rendered numb by the capture and deception of fictions and illusions, art has taken on the mission to reclaim its autonomy from “liquefied” institutional structures and market imperatives and re-knit the tangled fabric of the social bond. Reversely, art has also come to embrace “hyper-realist” strategies of over-identification with the market system in view of producing material rather than merely symbolic change. Either way, what remains at work as justificatory argument is the great fiction that reduces every phenomenon and every situation to a symptom of an undeniable truth: that of the totalisation of the world by the logic of capital, which has a way of subsuming everything in its path. In light of that line of argumentation, works of cinematic fiction too tend to be considered as mere reified commodities that participate in mass-market rationality in the service of the industrial entertainment complex, nothing more than “stimulus packages to buy new televisions, home projector systems, and retina display iPads,”<sup>13</sup> determined by material expenditure, big budgets and marketing strategies. “All you see”, Steyerl once said, “is the 35mm film rolling through the camera and wasting all that money.” When all there is to see is the unassailable truth underlying all appearances, then, why watch at all, if not for the sake of critical posture?

\*\*\*

In light of the overarching fiction which makes it possible to read in everything the effect of the domination of capitalist reification, it appears that it is not enough to simply experience a film: it has to be *interpreted*. The association of fiction with the traditional representationalist principles — considering fictions as organic ensembles whose constituent parts are given a functional order in an arrangement of causes and effects and means and ends — has meant that the fictions of cinema tend to be deciphered as tailored expressions of the commodity logic, ostensibly repressing every anomaly to preserve its appearance of consistency. Some critics still try to uphold the possibility of resistance by way of a practice of “symptomatic reading” that seeks to bring to the surface the slippages where the work of fiction breaks down, contradicts itself, stumbles over its inconsistencies. The politics of a fiction is then brought back to its “unconscious,” which can only be identified by delving under its surface in search of what it seeks to repress or omit. This line of interpretation that locates the real meaning of a film beneath its surface level allows, for example, for a reading of *The Wolf of Wall Street* as a utopian critique of the present, revealing behind the surface depictions of excess, debauchery and misogyny on the margins of Wall Street, the coming into being of a new class: the wolves are actually pirates whose operations constitute nothing less than an enclave of hope.<sup>14</sup> Everything we perceive then turns out to be standing for something else, something that can only be deciphered by way of an interpretative grid that reduces every appearance to a symptom that has to be encoded. What is dispensed with is even the slightest possibility that appearances can produce experiences that escape any kind of grid. Inversely, an opposite tendency shines through in the recent attention dedicated to the “sensory” in cinema, countering the focus on the hermeneutical deciphering of signs by returning to the quest for an art beyond interpretation and representation, an art of the senses that precisely defies assimilation within a common sense perceptual framework. The main point of reference in this quest, as you know, is undoubtedly the work of Gilles Deleuze and his appeal for art to not only break with the world of representation as an “imitation of life,” but also with all forms of consistency that would make its structure intelligible. Against the organic model that governs the representational order, which for Deleuze only imprisons the force of life, he proposes a body without organs, a purely intensive vitality differed by axes and vectors, gradients and thresholds, displacements and migrations, zones of intensities in a continuous process of becoming. What is opposed to the laws of representation is the world that resides beneath it: a molecular world of multiplicities and haecceities, of thought without body or image, undetermined, un-individualized, coming before

the very principle of rationality. An a-signifying and undifferentiated world that directly expresses the potentialities of life, which are no longer narratable as arrangements of necessary or credible actions, but awaken the “spiritual automaton” in us through vibrations and affects. Hence Deleuze’s fascination for forms of cinema that spread out what he has called an “experimental night,” forms made up of “dancing seeds” and “luminous dust” that give birth to an “unknown body which we have in the back of our heads, like the unthought in thought, the birth of the visible which is still hidden from view.”<sup>15</sup> In those forms Deleuze detects the possibility of new modes of perception, which he has termed fluid, liquid or gaseous, in which images flow across or under the frame, part of a “matter-flow” that is open to all directions. One of Deleuze’s primary examples to attest to this potential is Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and his theory of the kino-eye, which for him bears witness to the cinematic mission to carry perception back to things, putting perception into matter, making it possible to liberate vision from the coordinates that ground it and relate any point whatsoever in space to any other point. Beneath the order of bodily states, of the relation of cause and effect that characterizes relationships between bodies, cinema is able to institute an open “plane of immanence” where forces of pure intensity, snatched from plots and characters, ceaselessly flow and converge. What is being represented is of little consequence: everything is put at the service of a system of perpetual interaction of particles of matter that are “luminous by themselves without anything illuminating them,”<sup>16</sup> derailing perception from its stable centre and thereby giving rise to a new way of seeing. The work of Vertov par excellence comes to testify to a conception of an image that is not a reproduction of things, but a thing in itself: luminous matter in movement that is not of the world, but that directly *forms* the world.

What is at stake is never “reproducing the visible, but rendering visible,” as Paul Klee puts it in a phrase that Deleuze often cites. For Deleuze, cinematic fictions are able to redeem themselves from the laws of representation that subject the world of matter and energy to the order of causes and effects and means and ends, through the virtual conjunction of non-subjectified affects and percepts that constitute the genetic and immanent elements of a new life. However, images understood as pure processes of expressive matter, in defiance of appearances of resemblance and figures of discourse that would have it express a meaning, still need to be represented to give them sense. Here’s where a striking paradox in Deleuze’s theory makes the scene: in his attempt to make manifest the struggle against the world of representation in view of a horizon of total immanence,

he actually comes to rely on a description of the struggles of the represented figures themselves.<sup>17</sup> His quest for impersonal forms of individuation seems to lead him back to the actions of characters who are portrayed as both the driving forces and symbolic effigies of this search. In likening the operations of cinema to the operations of its characters, the focus is then again diverted towards the representational givens which come to allegorize the workings of cinema itself. As if Deleuze can only respond to the quest for an art that aims to project itself beyond representation by making art into something like an allegory of itself. Thus, in Rossellini's *Europa 51*, Irene becomes a figure who loses all sense of direction and ventures towards a space that can no longer be anything but the desert of the purely sensible. In Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, Jeff's plastered leg symbolizes the paralysis of action, indicating the crisis of the sensory-motor system. And in Jean Rouch's *Les Maitres fous* the characters engender a process of becoming-other by way of acts of fabulation which, in repudiation of every existing imperial and deterministic narrative, contribute to the invention of a new fraternal people. In the last instance, it turns out that what is really opposed to representation is not the indifferent swirl of particles of matter, but fabulation, as an act of fictional invention that directly conveys the powers of cinema to the fabled people. In the quest for liberation from all forms of totality, befitting a world where faith and confidence in representation are said to have disappeared, Deleuze ends up identifying the inventions of cinema with the forces of life itself. The affects and vibrations that constitute the populations of art turn out to be nothing less than the direct embodiment of the "constantly renewed suffering of men and women, their re-created protestations, their constantly resumed struggle."<sup>18</sup> The attempt to counter the reification of the molecular world into the schemes of representation leads to the annulation of all distinctions between form and content, aesthetics and politics, in a grand ambience of collective belonging. But, at the same time, the Deleuzian fiction draws us back to the schemes of representation. In his endeavor to suppress all the representative properties in favor of pure material expression, he is forced to draw from the former to give sense to the latter. Everything plays out as if the discourse that hails fictions as compounds of pure percepts and affects, blocs of sensation that cannot be captured by representation and directly identify perceived with perceiver, only makes sense at the price of contradicting itself.

\*\*\*

Thinking about this paradoxical to-and-fro friction between the organic and the non-organic, between the sensorial and the discursive, I can't help being reminded of one of your works, *Herman*, a video work that avowedly grapples with the state of "our time" and the possibility of resistance: *After Empire* (2011). In your undertaking to give cinematic existence to Michael Hardt en Antonio Negri's notion of the "multitude," whose contours you saw emerging during the anti-war protests of 15 February 2003, you sought in your own way to establish an anti-representational statement, one that pitted texture and rhythm against figuration, non-organic life against the organicity of narrative structures, the ungraspable noise of pixilated apparitions against the generic legible images that populate the global spectacle. As radical alternative to reified media forms and instantly readable commonplaces — which you find exemplified by the iconic images of 9/11 — you present us with "images in the process of becoming", as you call them, inviting us to enter a kind of Deleuzian "smooth space," a zone of indeterminacy where there are no faces to recognize, characters to identify with or plots to carry us away. In your endeavour to "render the familiar strange,"<sup>19</sup> you end up approaching Mallarmé's blank page, which you (like Godard) often refer to, as an imageless palimpsest waiting to be filled with new inscriptions. Here action consists exclusively in the continuous movement of errant and itinerant presences appearing, fading, and intermingling on the surface of the screen, allowing them a virtual potentiality that is neither pre-existent nor stable. They correspond to what Steyerl has called "poor images" or "lumpen proletarians in the class society of appearances,"<sup>20</sup> captured with lo-fi cameras or lifted from the infinite repository of the Web, filtered through a mesh of algorithms, dematerialized into bits. The process of dematerialization seems to carry away all form, advancing the powers of chaos against the human figure, who seeks to break free from itself so as to become a body without organs and take flight in the realm of the non-organic. In this world of pre-individual or non-individual singularities, bodies are not represented: they are as if made out of grains, as Deleuze would say.<sup>21</sup> Amidst the moving blur of ghosts of images, awash in a perpetual twilight, we can still discern the visual specters of anonymous protest movements buried under black veneer or the distorted phantoms of an Apple screensaver transformed into a delirium of shapes and colors. But these apparitions are no longer definable by any kind of genealogy or hierarchy: they all fuse into an undifferentiated continuum that is seemingly exempted from the laws of representation. When at a certain moment the notice "Media Offline — Picture" appears, it might recall the way Godard once filled image spaces with the words "usual illustration here," but the image to fill in hardly

stands out: like all other appearances, it dissolves into a homogenous landscape of images that never come into full existence.

The oversignification of informational doxa that add up to nothing then finds itself opposed with the a-signification of a flux of hues and tones — or “ambient,” as Pieter once referred to your film — that brings to mind the symbolist vision of sheer music clothing the idea in sensuous form. Isn’t this flow of vaporous images that doesn’t want to identify or state anything in tune with the symbolist model of art, that is: one that works through suggestion and evocation rather than narration? Isn’t this “imageless” art of shapes and colors, stripped — or “evacuated,” as you prefer to say — from the weight of singular bodies embodying thoughts and sentiments, consonant with this “pure milieu of fiction” that Mallarmé wrote about — this particular kind of fiction that operates through a “perpetual allusion without breaking the ice or the mirror,”<sup>22</sup> invoking a sensitivity to the traces of presence whose mystery testifies to the “dark and confused unity of the unseen world”?<sup>23</sup> What strikes me is that this evocation finds an attestation in the echoing *monologue intérieur* that occupies the soundtrack, amongst a shifting sea of corrosive distortion and washed out tinges, carried by an enigmatic voice that speaks about “phantom shapes and ghost events,” “the ephemeral world of connectivity” and “a love parade” of miscellaneous participants marching as one. “October never comes,” the voice says, but there is another future in the making, a future “after Empire” which is in the hands of the Multitude that holds power, is power. The disembodied voice — whose words we can also read in the book that accompanies the film — does not explain what we see.<sup>24</sup> Instead, it seems to certify the force of what the visual backdrop evokes without ever showing it: the inorganic power that lays behind the world of representation, the music of indistinction seizing all singularities within the same tonality. The vast flux of abstract manifestations that are produced through the action of digital waves and particles appears to find a correspondence in the narrated vision of a new collective body without organs that escapes the stranglehold of Empire. The perpetual metamorphosis of immaterial matter, where images and sounds appear to dissolve into their primal unity, then can be seen as an evocation of what Hardt and Negri term the “plastic and fluid” terrains of Empire, on which the Multitude is in the midst of making itself in a heroic combat to overcome the order that limits its true force. The ambient of mute signs is affirmed as a hymn intoning the becoming of a new collective body, the movement of life itself drawing out the rhythm of an unknown world to come. It is as if the operations of the audiovisual form nurtures the discursive framework that takes its cues from the work of Hardt and Negri, while this framework itself serves

as an allegory for these operations. As if the flow of fugitive atoms in the process of becoming, without pre-determined routes or fixed identity contours, can only gain sense through the grid of a frame of intelligibility that relates all things perceptible and tangible to the commonality in which they participate: that of a community possessing the spirit of its material life. Once again, it seems that the more art tends to approach the purely sensible, in which representation is supposed to vanish into a flow of unbound affections and perceptions that are assembling and separating as perpetual vibration, the more it tends to be accompanied by a symbolical or allegorical interpretation.

\*\*\*

I can see how Hardt and Negri's theory of the Franciscan communism of the Multitude, implemented through the irresistible power of the global network that is nevertheless capable of exploding the clutches of Empire, has provided an inspiring response to the call for affirmation, at variance with the critical tendencies that keep on lamenting the loss of the real or the grand catastrophe of our present. But isn't it striking how this fiction that finds hope in the ungovernable currents of energy and creativity circulating through and beyond established social divisions also reintroduces the century-old dreams of new forms of life, blending all that is material and immaterial, conscious and unconscious, art and politics, into a boundless fabric of common sensible experience? Moreover, doesn't the fascination with the metamorphicity and immateriality of all that is digital bring about echoes of the era when the art of cinema was inscribed in the vision of a new circulation of energy and immaterial matter dissolving the burdens of the old order, when the enthusiasm over the transformative power of electricity chimed with an enthusiasm for the "electrical vibrations of light" produced by the new seventh art?<sup>25</sup> Just recently I could hear another echo of this enthusiastic vision resounding in an interview with Hito Steyerl in which she proposes to "think of the image not as surface but as all the tiny light impulses running through fiber at any one point in time." By partaking in the circulation of "energy imparted to images by capital", she says, "people participate in this energy and create it."<sup>26</sup> According to Steyerl, cinematic tools should no longer be used in the sole service of representation; they ought to be considered as "means of creation, not only of images but also of the world in their wake."<sup>27</sup> In the era that is considered to be characterized by general intellect and immaterial labor, the dream of Dziga Vertov seems to have gained a new swagger: the exalted dream of "the combined



vision of millions of eyes,” replacing the representations and fictions of yesteryear with a symphony of moments and movements that would constitute the sensible fabric of a new common world. This dream of a truly universal language of images and visual bonds that would connect all the workers of the world finds a new incarnation in what Steyerl describes as a “coming common language, which is not rooted in the hypocrite presumption of a unity of humankind, but in a much more general material community.”<sup>28</sup> To engage with these images that are flowing around our networks and traversing our bodies is not a matter of representing but of “presencing”. It is not a matter of picturing reality, but “ripping off large chunks to incorporate it.” In this post-representational vision, the image is no longer thought of as something to identify with, but to participate in, as “a shared ground for action and passion, a zone of traffic between things and intensities.”<sup>29</sup> No longer as a space of mediation, but as a container of energy that is constantly in motion, always being remade, reformatted, rewired. No longer as a form of representation, but as a fragment of the world spreading beyond screens and networks into different states of matter, “a thing like you and me” incarnated as pixilated missiles and hi-res brands invading the offline and the offscreen.

Affirmation at a time when “there is no more outside”, following the demise of the old aspirations of class struggle and the redefinition of labour, is thus found in the emergence of a distributed network of common creativity engendered by the cognitive artist-workers of the Post-Fordist era — “Today, almost everyone is an artist,”<sup>30</sup> writes Steyerl — in which artistic creation and mechanical reproduction become intertwined; an emergence that is presented as a demonstration of the connection between two essential theses of the Communist Manifesto: all that is solid dissolves into air, and capitalism will eventually dig its own grave. In line with the vision of a productive multitude that grows within the bounds of Empire, the erstwhile call of Walter Benjamin to liberate the tools of cultural production from the claws of capitalism in order to realize their emancipatory potential finds itself updated in the idea of a new form of positive “barbarism” that is at work in the immaterial, intellectual and communicative processes that shape our globalized world of production. In his time Benjamin particularly put his confidence in the potential of cinema, whose role he considered as similar to that of Brecht’s Epic Theatre: to encourage a form of learning that hinges on observing, playing and discussing; a form that would give spectators access to the meanings hidden under the surface of the perceivable and encourage them to seize the means and products of mass technology for themselves. Since the experience and tools of cinema were becoming available for everybody, claimed Benjamin, the distinction between

actor and spectator, consumer and producer, was about to lose its validity, which would surely play a role in the upsurge of class consciousness. Hence Benjamin's admiration for the work of Vertov and other Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, who not only cast aside star actors by replacing them with "extras" who were asked to portray themselves, but also advocated a demystification of film technology by bringing it closer to the audience. In this way spectators could become artist-engineers, whose mission consisted of replacing the images of yesterday with "things" that enter directly into production in common, which is the production of common life. It is this aspiration of using the means of cinema to participate in a collective mode of productive existence, rather than to produce commodified products for the consumption of passive onlookers or the enjoyment of Bourgeois aesthetes, that seems to be given a new cachet in the work of Steyerl. To the extent that "people are increasingly makers of images — and not their objects or subjects," she writes, "they are perhaps also increasingly aware that the people might happen by jointly making an image and not by being represented in one."<sup>31</sup> For her, the models of cooperation and circulation made possible by the ubiquitousness of digital production and network technologies respond to the promise of an "imperfect cinema" as described by Juan García Espinosa in his 1969 manifesto.<sup>32</sup> Today, Steyerl suggests, this promise of an alternative audiovisual economy and ecology that accentuates playful creativity rather than artistic mastery, open-ended process rather than narrative closure, active participation rather than passive contemplation, has taken the form of a decentralized and global circulation of anonymous "poor images" that are constantly in motion, available for anyone to appropriate, modify and recombine into a multiplicity of variations that compose a new symphony. The force of this ever-evolving symphony is not based on the representative capacity of images but on their circulatory power, to the extent that they have become "images without viewers" that freely flow into our life montage,<sup>33</sup> images that are no longer validated for their originality, quality or legibility but as material realities themselves, within which we are deemed to participate.

\*\*\*

If art is asked to withdraw from representation, it is no longer to break the illusion of consistency and wholeness and point out the reality behind appearances — as in the Brechtian logic — but to participate in a global, non-hierarchical "circulationism" in which the boundaries between reality and appearance have evaporated. Acknowledging that there is no more outside, no more distance,

Steyerl suggest that it is only by participating in this circulationism that we can live productively with the streams of images that surround and threaten to overflow us, these unending streams that are characteristic of the condition that is said to define our contemporary historical moment: the condition of “liquidity”. In her video installation *Liquidity Inc.* (2014), she attempts to testify to this condition by drawing upon the polysemy of the liquidity metaphor to weave analogies between liquefied financial flows and weather patterns, between the fluidity of labor markets and the flux of algorithmic trading, between the fluctuations induced by corporatization and the fluids of corporality, between the circulation of capital and the migration of people. Footage relating the story of Jacob Wood, a Vietnam-born Wall Street investment banker who became a Mixed Martial Arts professional after the bursting of the housing bubble, morphs into staged weather reports delivered by meteorologists in balaclavas against a green screen showing flashing tumblr images of Hokusai’s *The Great Wave* and maps of trade winds and data clouds. An auto-tuned mantra of Bruce Lee uttering that “Water can flow or it can crash” echoes with snapshots of floods and tsunamis inlaid into iPhones or television screens, which are interchanged with images showing Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* and interest rate graphs, while members of a variant on The Weather Underground warn us about the storms blowing people back to their homes and back into the past. Backed by the bubbly polyrhythms of Arthur Russell’s “Let’s Go Swimming!”, images portraying the hybrid fighters of MMA flash by while Jacob Wood’s remarks on the growing demand for adaptability and flexibility merge with the words of a financial expert explaining the necessity to build up liquidity in order to avoid disaster. A series of popping up Messenger windows display a multiplicity of conversations in which the artist communicates with her globally dispersed accomplices about the austerity measures which have left her on the verge of a nervous breakdown, while a digital animation shows human figures drowning. Corporate graphics, CGI animations, text messages, clipart pictures and art historical blips float across various screens as matter in motion, mutating, intersecting, looping, morphing into a fluid continuum of digital mash-up whose form seems to match its content.

This hyperlinking of heterogeneous elements in a seamless expanse of co-belonging might faintly bring to mind the Vertovian constructivist undertaking to compose diverse gestures, actions and activities into an indissoluble organic whole, amounting to a great egalitarian communist symphony. Only here the commonality that is asserted through the arrangement of disparate entities, which are readily betraying their allegiance to the reign of artifice, is that of

the “liquidity incorporated” that runs through our networks, screens, eyes and veins. While Vertov’s attempt to affirm the living reality of Communism relied on a performative montage that rendered fragmented movements and patterns derived from all strands of life together into in common rhythm, here a sense of commonality seems to be created solely on the basis of analogy and homonymy. From the omnipresent animations of water to the liquefied design of text and the discourses on the fluidity of labor and capital; while Vertov sought to express the global movement of a new life by tearing images from their representative order and bringing into play the dynamism of their movements, *Liquidity Inc.* articulates an interrelatedness of seemingly disparate flows by drawing upon wordplays, double-entendres and conceptual correspondences between various visual, auditive and discursive elements which find their common denominator in the idea of liquidity. The lexical ambiguity of water becomes a semantic rhizome through which Steyerl’s fiction knots and furls, evocative of a world in which “everything flows,” from the global unregulated flux of financial speculation and the torrential circulations of digital imagery to our amorphous subjectivities swimming in the endless depthless river of capital. Paradoxically, just like Deleuze demonstrated the invention of liquid images through the manifestation of images of liquid, Steyerl’s appeal to “become water” and actively disperse into the post-representational flux where object and subject dissolve into one another, is given sense by relying on elements that indexically, iconically or symbolically represent water. In other words, the demonstration of the liquefaction of everything, to the ruins of representation, rests solely on the conceptual sense of images rather than on their affective force. Moreover, the call for participation in the undifferentiated circulation of poor images ends up differentiating itself in the same spaces that it opposes: in the sanctuaries devoted to “auratic” art, where its manifestations are exhibited in high definition quality and imbedded in specially designed environments, where they are more often than not accompanied by wall texts where we find written the affirmation of its concept. Once more, it is as if the logic of anti-representation, pushed to the point of undecidability, can only be given sense by drawing from what it rejects.

\*\*\*

So it appears that today’s urge to withdraw from representation stirs up quite some echoes from cinema’s childhood, when a scepticism towards the conventions of the representative order coincided with a call for art to do away with mediating

distance altogether, inspiring both the symbolist dreams of an imageless art that could directly realize ideas in material form and the Soviet program that identified the operations of cinema with the energies of a world in flux. But those who continue to oppose the organic consistency of representative fiction with the fluidity of images that are either commonly dissolved in a cloud of luminous matter or brought down to the common identity of particles that are infinitely malleable, transformable and recombinable into new arrangements, seem to bypass a tension that lies at the heart of cinema: the tension that exists between the movement of sensible forms open to transformation and the deployment of semblances in a rational arrangement. In a way, *Man with a Movie Camera* epitomizes the utopian aspiration that this tension has awakened: the quest for a performative form of cinematic movement that connects all other movements, configured in an impersonal dance of atoms that does not differentiate between the motion of productive energies and the semblances of society. But ultimately this quest for a free movement of matter can not be fulfilled: every shot in Vertov's films finds itself pointing back to the omnipresent representations of the all-seeing camera-apparatus, of its operator with his camera-eye and the editor with her cutting machine who master the visible and give direction to the choreography of movements and intensities. And we shouldn't forget that the film begins and ends in the film theatre where we see its images being shown to the actors themselves, who are supposed to overcome the division between art and life and participate in the construction of a new world. In giving prominence to their faces gazing in reverie at the screen, the symphony of movements intent on mobilizing energies seems to highlight its own contradiction. It is only by refraining to linger on what is given to see, or by plainly refusing to look, that the cinema-machine can be unequivocally identified as an undiscerning transmitter of pure energy waves that call on participation and interaction — which is exactly what finds symbolical expression in the film's recurrent images of a telephone transmission network, connecting a tangle of activities and actions into a grand symphony of interweaving melodies.<sup>34</sup> It's this irresolvable search for cinematic forms that are grounded in the pure power of movement, rather than in the traditional causal logic of representation, that also animates the response to the work of Charlie Chaplin, that great admirer of Vertov who created the epitome of international working-class humanity with the figure of the Tramp. If his films were a major source of inspiration for those who wished to celebrate cinema as a new art capable of adapting to the rhythms of the new world, it's because its dynamisms could be identified with the dream of creating a universal art of movement that could not be

brought back to the fabrication of sentimental stories or the mere concatenation of autonomous images. In light of this dream, Chaplin could be acknowledged as a master choreographer who managed to break with the conventions of theatre by composing a play of pure forms and automatic movements, which for some commentators epitomized art's operation of "ostranenie" or defamiliarization.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, he could also be praised for his capacity to efface himself from his creation, to disappear in his own body which he stripped of all expressiveness and psychology. But what makes the operations of the eccentric figure of the little fellow with the bowler hat and cane so resonant might not simply be his paring down to the outlines of a popular archetype or to the basic mechanisms of an automaton, but rather his astounding paradoxical performance that continuously turns into its opposite, at the same time based on an automatization of gestures and giving rise to surges of emphatic emotion. And this performance is only possible due to a fictional framework that makes the actions of the Tramp as committed to swift inventiveness and machine-like precision as they are vulnerable to contingency and failure. For all his mechanical performativity and repetitive behaviour, there's always the unforeseen and the errant peeping around the corner. For all his passion for orderliness, there's always his innate rejection of authority. How many times have we seen him, when confronted with the violence of the world, erupting into contorted violations of the established order before readapting his imperturbable figure and burlesque mask when confronted with a representative of this same order? Without ever exposing the reasons for his actions or drawing any consequence from them, the adventures of the Tramp unfold as a perpetual swirl of transformations where things metamorphose endlessly, constantly alternating between movement and suspension, order and disorder.<sup>36</sup> In such a way, he can perhaps be seen as another incarnation of the street magician that Vertov self-consciously integrated in *Man with a Movie Camera*: the illusionist performing a series of singular metamorphoses that bring about a multiplicity of displacements and reversals that expresses nothing but the field of its own possibility. And isn't this precisely what is all too easily set aside by today's hailers of post-representation: this game of metamorphoses which allows cinema to exceed its plots and concepts?

With the advent of the talkie, around the same time as the economic crisis erupted in the US and the work of both Vertov and Chaplin started to fall out of favor in the USSR, cinema stopped being the flag bearer of anti-representative art, but that didn't put a halt to the cinematic play of transformations. Instead, it found its way into the old art of storytelling, where it continued to join traces from

popular forms of entertainment— vaudeville, circus, pantomime — with sparks of the mechanical dream. I'm thinking of a remarkable comedy of manners I watched the other day, one that, like *The Big Short*, deals with the relation between property and theft by putting on show a charade of illicit trades and exchanges. The film has recently made its grand reappearance after being lauded by the likes of Slavoj Žižek, who called it “the best critique of capitalism,”<sup>37</sup> and Aaron Schuster, who described it as “perhaps the ultimate comedy for times of austerity.”<sup>38</sup> I'm referring to *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), one of the first American ventures into sound film by Ernst Lubitsch, who took his friend Chaplin's *A Woman in Paris* (1923) as a model to create his own brand of marivaudage set among the posh and wealthy. If this film offers a portrait of our times, writes Schuster, it is because it shows the spectacle of a world where “everyone is stealing, and no one is punished.”<sup>39</sup> Somewhat redolent of the favorite themes of fellow Hollywood émigré Brecht, the plot sketches out how self-made tricksters and imposters pretending to be upper-class types steal from the wealthy who cynically let their own stealing be organized by the ruling system of exploitation and accumulation. The lavish spectacle that Lubitsch has devised is a sarabande of deceivers and deceived, seducers and seduced, who constantly change masks and make their way through opening and closing doors leading to destinies we are left to imagine. It is this game of doors that has been alluded to by Jacques Rancière in reference to a particular scene in which we get to see the sole revolutionary in the film — scolding a rich heiress for indulging in wealth at a time of crisis— make a short entrance before being thrown out the door.<sup>40</sup> It's as if Lubitsch meant to stress that cinema has no need for a demonstration of the truth that is hidden behind appearances, no need for a mirror in which onlookers are bound to recognize the realities of life. After all, isn't cinema itself a marvelous piece of fraud, as fervent Lubitsch-admirer Godard once suggested — an art of imitation and impersonation that thrives on a game of appearances, offering a world of shadows where the real and the illusory can freely exchange assets and liabilities? Many have remarked that one encounters in the work of Lubitsch, fascinated as this tailor's son was with sensuous surfaces and frivolous textures, an emphasis on style and artifice that comes at the expense of content and narrative, leading Susan Sontag to famously count *Trouble in Paradise* “among the greatest Camp movies ever made.”<sup>41</sup> It is indeed striking that the phrase “in times like these,” which runs like a refrain throughout the film, never does more than suggest the Great Depression that engulfed the capitalist world in the 1930s. The outside reality of precarity and inequality seems to leave the film, just like its main characters, completely indifferent. The entrance of the

raving champion of class struggle can therefore only be short-lived: the dissident, along with any critical demonstrations of the misery and injustice underlying the character's follies and vices, has to be put at the door, removed from sight, for the marvelous performance of swindle and seduction to take its course. What drives the film is not the confrontation between deception and the truth that unmasks it, but rather it is the dramaturgy of derivations, bifurcations and inversions that constantly upsets the relation between what is expected and what is visible, between words and their effectiveness. Lubitsch doesn't offer us a fiction based on connections of cause and effect, quite the opposite: he only introduces causes or effects the better to displace or contradict them.<sup>42</sup> Telling a story doesn't interest Lubitsch half as much as the play of exchanges and interactions whereby the theft of a pocketbook equals the stealing of one's heart: the swindler's words of deceit are at the same time expressions of love and the victim's intimations of naivety are at the same time gestures of complicity. Awareness of the pretense and make-believe doesn't stand in the way of seduction, on the contrary: it allows us to fully savor the pirouette of words that say something other than what they appear to say and the trade-off between the real and the illusory that unremittingly switch places. According to Rancière, the force of this world of appearances is precisely sustained by the evidence of the world of conflict lingering outside: as long as the naked truth of the class struggle roared behind the door, there could exist some kind of solidarity between the magician of illusion and the guardian of truth. The ambiguous web of appearances crafted by the first could just as well be identified by the latter as a symptom of the unreproved bourgeois propensity to drown all social relations in the icy waters of egotistical calculation and the indifference of capitalist equivalence. But what happens with this dialectical relation between social reality and cinematographic appearance when the guarded truth underlying appearances is known to anyone and the movement of history that guaranteed the traversal of appearances is suspected of being an appearance itself?

\*\*\*

When the history of domination can no longer be taken for a world of appearances doomed to dissipate to the benefit of the naked reality of class struggle, the argument is no longer that appearances conceal secrets which are no longer secret to anyone but rather that nothing at all remains hidden anymore. I believe it's this critical common sense which allows Žižek to explain the contemporaneity of Lubitsch's work by calling him "the poet of cynical wisdom," who acknowledges



that society is held together by semblances which we shouldn't take for real while secretly continuing to transgress them in the interest of pleasure. The fictional game of appearances and the derangements of the relation between reality and illusion in Lubitsch's work then turns out to attest to the truth of our time, which finds expression in a phrase that Kafka penned down a century ago: "the lie made into the rule of the world."<sup>43</sup> But the crumbling of the theoretical scenarios that made it possible to diagnose the intolerability of the injustices produced by the dominant order, and the identifiable movements that reacted against it in practice, has also resulted in a growing suspicion of mimetic artifice. Rather than fictions, that is to say rational arrangements of actions, events and situations that principally owe no explanation for the truth of what they show, cinema is considered to be made up purely of simulacra, which cannot but remove what is represented from its weight of existence. With its supposed causal link to awareness and action severed, the representation of the intolerable then collapses into the intolerability of representation. We can think back to the violent reactions directed at Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) and Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), which have both been retrospectively criticized for their inappropriate representation of the Nazi regime and the figure of Hitler. The mixing of fancy and fact, of farce and disaster, for the sake of entertainment was considered incompatible with the gravity of the reality it referred to. In contrast to Godard, who has presented the films of Chaplin and Lubitsch as illustrations of cinema's announcement of the impending catastrophe before renouncing its responsibility to bear witness to reality and subsuming to commodification, these critical arguments reject the right of cinema to integrate and assess even the most overbearing realities in its fictions. One of the most well-known criticisms undoubtedly comes from Theodor Adorno, who has chastised *The Great Dictator* for its trivialization of the experience of the horrors of the Nazi period.<sup>44</sup> Strangely enough, Adorno has on other occasions described the "constellation animal/fool/clown" as "a fundamental layer of art," lauding Chaplin's clown-figure for its primitive mimetic energy in which he found a renunciation of all that belongs to the "purposeful grown-up life... and indeed the principle of reason itself."<sup>45</sup> In a sense, Adorno could have just as well evaluated *The Great Dictator* in the same way that he had appraised the earlier work of Chaplin, but at this particular point in time, tainted by the memory of destruction and suffering and an increasing suspicion towards the reification of consciousness imposed by dream factories, he chose to condemn the film for its indignity and profanity. In light of reality at its grimmest, the chain of metamorphoses between the Tramp, the barber, Hynkel, Hitler and eventually Chaplin himself — at the high cost of

sacrificing the iconic figure of the Tramp — where we don't exactly know who is who and who imitates who, is responded to with an denunciation of mimesis altogether. At a time of disappointment over the failure of the proposed wedding of art and life and a waning confidence in the transformative power of images, Adorno became one of the most outspoken detractors of cinema's reproductive realism, in particular when he found its semblance of immediacy amplified by the introduction of sound, which he felt left no more room for imagination or reflection on the part of the spectators, who find themselves forced to equate representation directly with reality. By exploiting its mimetic qualities and tailoring them for maximum efficiency, cinema was considered as an instrument of the totalizing regime of domination which applied its "fairy-tale glow" to accustom the audience to its brutalities, to the extent that "reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication" and "the image turns into immediate reality."<sup>46</sup> With cinema understood as the flagship of the coercive and commodified forms of cultural mass reproduction, turning man into a subject and the world into an image, it became common to regard the traversing of the borders between art and non-art and reality and illusion as highly suspect. Following that logic of suspicion, it would only be a matter of time before the warnings against the elimination of the gulf separating art from life would mutate into the by now all too familiar declaration that art, now undone from its power of illusion, has morphed everywhere to become embedded into everyday life. "Nowadays," Hito Steyerl writes, "the invasion of art is not the exception, but the rule" while the area of art itself has "incorporated all that it broke from."<sup>47</sup> With art exposed as no different from anything else and real life deemed indistinguishable from the movies,<sup>48</sup> hasn't it become all too easy to cast aside cinema's fictional operations, those alterations and transformations that makes the art of cinema a privileged site for exploring the relationship between the order of the real and the appeal of fairy-tales?

In light of those changed sensibilities towards the relation between the appearances of cinema and the demands of the real world, Chaplin and Lubitsch's fictional play of metamorphoses that draws its force from its subtraction from the exterior weight of the real no longer seems to measure up to the requirements of "our time." Instead, we often find ourselves in front of mirrors in which mimesis is reduced to a display of identities, attitudes and signs that invites us to recognize the real of the social imaginary, or otherwise we are taken up by calculated panoplies of haptic affects or "panic-images" denying recognition in favor of a sensory experience of immediacy.<sup>49</sup> And having grown weary of pathos or sentimentality, we have come to prefer the gratification granted by the deconstruction of the lure

or the clever game with codes, showing that we are not taken in lightly by the tricks of illusionists. To all appearances, in a world where the borders of social division can no longer be symbolized, the capacity of the marauders of yesteryear to turn around every situation has altered into an inaptitude to thwart or overturn any position altogether. The alienation of factory life and the mobilization of workers that animates the Tramp in *Modern Times* (1936) have virtually disappeared from view in the contemporary Western world of financial capitalism and delocalized material production, where collective spaces for conflicting forces are becoming rarer by the day and the commonality of the workplace is superseded by the individual management of flexi-jobs and “human capital.” Without the reality of work as a common world and a collective force of struggle, without dissenting figures plausible enough to embody the truth of social violence, cinematic bodies often seem to float in mid-air, at loss for words that could set them in motion or actions that could turn things around. How many of our contemporary fictions do we find populated by solitary mute bodies with faces expressing the inexpressive and movements suspended in time, struggling to strike a resonance with a sense of commonality? In an attempt to challenge the all too familiar fictional forms based on functional situations and well-ordered sentiments, while at the same time reclaiming the pure enchantment of cinematic appearances, many of these fictions seem intent on autonomizing the force of immobility that is inherent to the movement of images. It’s what I see, for example, in the work of one of the filmmakers I discussed with Rancière that afternoon: Kelly Reichardt. If the companionship of a vagabond and a dog in Reichardt’s *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) reminds us of Chaplin’s *A Dog’s Life* (1918), it also highlights the immobility of its world, where stealing a piece of food in a time of crisis no longer erupts into a clash with police officers who act as the preeminent guardians of class division, but only affirms and deepens the spiral of social exclusion and isolation, which does no longer seem to allow for fictional transgressions. Instead the suspension of movement of the irretrievably broken down car that prompts Wendy’s drift seems to spill over into the whole film. The perturbing body of the little fellow living hand-to-mouth and scrambling for survival against all odds, bearing witness to the violence of the world while simultaneously making it into a game, has become a wandering figure who circulates from one furtive chance encounter to another without being able to transform anything. She too doesn’t fit in with the established order, but the organized anarchy that the force of the Tramp was able to wreak upon that order, as rigorous as it was pointless, has been cancelled out, while his ludic capacity to take over any identity has been petrified in the identity

of the “outcast,” fallen by the wayside and relegated to the margins of society. Reichardt herself has described her films as “just glimpses of people passing through.”<sup>50</sup> In Deleuzian fashion, we could also describe the situations of the young woman stranded in small-town Oregon in search for her lost dog as “pure optical and sound situations” in which the character does not know how to adequately respond and becomes instead a witness to time passing.<sup>51</sup> Bereft of immediate direction, she sets out on a “stationary voyage” through the “any-space-whatever” of a former industrial town that has yielded to wear and ennui, a world riddled with blandness and fleetingness where a sense of lasting connection can apparently only be found in the companionship of animals. The heartbreaking moment when Wendy finally finds Lucy but decides to leave her behind where she can still be taken care of also brings back the film to its starting point, to the suburban train yard where the presence of hobos and vagabonds conjures up images of the Great Depression. When we get to hear the whistling of the train that Wendy leaves on, it does not resound anything like the call of the wild but rather like an echo from a half remembered past when the great departure could possibly still look forward to a horizon of change.

\*\*\*

Seeing a train cut across the frame in the opening shot of Reichardt’s *Certain women* (2016), it is as if the same train on which we have seen Wendy depart has come back down the track — bringing with it the same actress whose character continues to struggle with exhaustion and isolation. In fact, all the main characters in the three episodes that constitute *Certain women* are inspired by a kind of quiet desperation as they go about their daily chores, grappling with immovable barriers that they can’t seem to dislodge. Set against the Big Sky of the Montana Rockies, the vast, landlocked landscapes that the characters traverse appear to accentuate the difficulty of bridging distances and finding connections. Laura, a small-town lawyer, struggles with the indifference of the men around her while dealing with the stubborn grievances of Fuller, an increasingly exasperated client who is desperate to be heard but remains deaf to her appeal. Gina is deeply invested in the building of a new house with old sandstone blocks that she hopes to buy from the lonesome Albert who pays no interest to her, all the while she grows more and more estranged from her family. Jamie works as a seasonal ranch hand at an isolated horse farm where she goes through the motions of her day to day tasks, only finding companionship with the farm animals. In her undertaking to bring

out the poetics of everyday life, in each subsequent film Reichardt manages to strike an increasingly delicate balance between a remarkable attentiveness towards the aesthetic splendor of places and landscapes and a rigorous respect for the mundane experiences of singular characters whose faces are made to speak not through expressions signifying sentiments, but through the time taken to linger on their quiet moments of indecision and contemplation. The landscapes, with their majestic outlines and ochre shades, do not serve here as a backdrop for the characters' actions, nor do they conjure up the humanization of nature or reveal structures of domination. Rather, they come across as what resonates with human figures, something which we particularly find evoked in the recurring images of windows in which gazing faces intersect with the reflection of the surrounding scenery. These glass surfaces that draw attention to the fragility of human actions and connections in the face of natural forces without rhyme or reason are also what mark the women's moments of separation: Laura when she watches the pensive face of the arrested Fuller through the window of a police car, Gina when she salutes Albert who looks back from behind his window without responding. Peering through these surfaces, as if keeping us from getting too close, we are reminded of an America that exists disconnected from the "liquefied" world of global mobility and immaterial labor; a world of non-places and non-events where — as one of the songs we hear on the radio goes — "precious days roll in and out like waves" and echoes of unspoken histories linger in silence. It is only in the third episode that something unexpected happens, an occurrence that, even if momentarily, drives a crack in the universe of repetition and separation. When Jamie, one evening, offhandedly steps into a classroom and takes a seat in the back, she finds Elizabeth standing in front of the class, a law graduate struggling with her student debt who has taken on an adult education teaching job for which she has to commute hundreds of kilometers. Jamie, instinctively deviating from her existence of daily routine, drawn into a world that is not deemed fit for her performance, is taken in by Beth's presence like a butterfly fascinated by the glare of an unknown light. Divided by class, by distance, by hierarchy of knowledge and economy of impermanence, these two figures appear to have nothing in common. Still it is at the moments of their encounters in the local workaday diner that they start visiting after class that a sense of wonder and vitality imbues the frame of the real. Sitting quietly across from Beth at the table, Jamie's open, radiant face displays an unbolted receptivity towards anything that could be shared by this "worldly" woman. There are no expressions of sexual desire or codes of romantic seduction here for us to interpret, no possibility to integrate this exchange of

timid gazes and diffident gestures in any identifiable logic of intentional action or habitual repetition. It is as if, almost imperceptibly, a gap has opened up in the confines of the everyday, enkindled by the motions of a body that don't lead anywhere determinable and the articulations of a face that don't say anything measurable. When Jamie one night decides to take Beth to the diner on the back of her horse, the aura of the street lights illuminating the silent night ride intensifies the impression of having entered a space of reverie, a space out of time where life is enabled to unfold in all its virtualities. This space of reverie cannot be brought down to the naivety of believing in fairy tales while remaining blind for reality, nor to the slumber of passivity paralyzing all active capacity. It rather calls into question the very boundaries between appearance and reality, passivity and activity, between the inner current of fascination and the outside world in which it produces its effects. Jamie's gaze may no longer be linked with adapted responses, yet it is neither passive nor resigned. The lack of a finality for which movement usually serves as a means does not prevent her from deciding to verify for herself that the lie is not the rule of the world, that there is a possibility of sharing a world beyond the pervasiveness of competition and isolation. In setting with her own force of determination the stage for her metamorphosis, her body sheds the outlines enclosing it, yet it does not sink away in the chaosmosis of non-organic forces. If the multiplicity of virtualities opened up in the space of reverie does not dissolve in an ocean of indifferent waves, it is because it is embedded in a framework which allows to bring out the mute force of small moments of encounter with singular beings whose faces bear an unvoiced history and the exchange of gazes and gestures that open an infinite horizon in the time and space of the everyday. In other words, what is created is a fiction.

I'm sure you have noticed, too, how many of the cinematic fictions dealing with today's struggles against precarity, seclusion and alienation are not defined by an order of action in which events unfold in accordance with the rules of causality, but rather by what this order shoves aside as insignificant: the fleeting passages in the uncertain lives of those who are unable to distinguish themselves from the ordinary through grand actions. Unlike the "active men" who prove themselves in tune with their time by enacting or simulating their capacity to project before themselves the ends of their actions and speculations, they cannot do otherwise than allow things to happen to them. The possibility of them coming together is not grounded in the preexistence of shared spaces or common causes that could give direction to their actions, but manifests itself in uncertain encounters between singular bodies and gazes whose future does not

exceed the immanence of their present — an always already present future that is at the same time a precarious present. That's why, in *Certain Women*, the space of reverie that exceeds the frame of the real can only be momentary: when Beth one night doesn't show up for class, Jamie decides to take the four hour drive to look for her, only if to see her one more time. Their story ends like that of Wendy and Lucy: after hesitantly saying goodbye and catching a last glimpse of Beth behind the glass door of her work place, Jamie returns to the cycle of everyday routine. The desire for a sense of commonality, of sharing the same world, is not allowed to settle in the image of the happiness of togetherness. But the cancellation of the fictional model based on well-formed chains of actions leading to happiness or misfortune does not mean that the time of narratives has had its day or that fiction has made way for "reality hunger". It merely means that other forms of fiction are invented to give sense to our present, forms that resist the primacy of action as a way of understanding the relations between people, their environment and their history. The logic of action requires a finite world with determinate possibilities and capacities, calculable models of causality and assigned agents that move towards a finality. None of these requirements apply to these fictions. With the erosion of the logic of action, the focus then once again shifts to what Aristotle wanted to diverge from: to the performance of bodies. But these bodies don't serve so much as supports for mimetic enactment as they do for the invention of spaces of reverie, capable of seeping out ripples in the fabric of repetitive time, ripples that don't have a finality beyond themselves, beyond their own vitality that keeps on extending outward. Contrary to what might be deduced from today's inclinations to evacuate images from human presence and seek refuge in the non-individual in fear of identification and stereotypy, cinematic bodies have not lost their capacity for resistance or "defamiliarization". It's just that their disruptive force, capable of sending ripples through the order of the real and breaking with identitary assignments, has now increasingly found a place in fictions that seek out the singularity of experiences lived in the solitude of fleeting moments — that which connects it, precisely, to the common experience of everyone. Undoubtedly these fictions of fleetingness and fragility are to be considered as trivial in light of the necessity of real action, particularly that of political action aimed at transformation. There is no shortage of calls for the emergence of a global biopolitical movement that could battle the all-devouring monster of the dominant order with its own liquid forces, or arguments pleading for the need for a radical turn in view of the increasing exhaustion and ruination of our world. But perhaps the inability of these explanations of our present to account for the

determination that sets bodies in motion and makes them occupy public parks and squares in today's scenes of dissent might make us wonder what it means to act together, when the established conditions for collective action and the certainty of finality have fallen away. And if this is so, couldn't the resonances between these movements and some of the "trivial" fictions that constitute today's cinema at least help us to rethink what it is that we really want from "our time"?

Lots to talk about, I believe.  
Let's meet again soon!

Looking forward,

Stoffel





## Afterthoughts



Brussels, May 2016

Dear Barry,

I hope this writing finds you well.

Last time we spoke the air was heavy with the dread and tremor spawned by the events of March 22, which prevented you from joining us in Ghent. I wish you could have been there. During those initial days after the bombings, one could sense a profound need to share something other than the sentiments of despair and powerlessness that we felt flooding into all areas of life. All of a sudden, the full weight of the Deleuzian catchphrase “the exhausted can no longer possibilite”<sup>1</sup> seemed to impose itself with breathtaking force. Confronted with the immediacy of the situation, I admit that we hesitated for a long time over whether to go ahead with the planned screenings and conversations or not. In light of the reality of terror and violence, of fear and trembling, what could the appearances of cinema possibly have to offer? What can one have to say about them at a time when expressions of anguish and rage tend to drown out all others?

We decided to continue anyway, although I don't think we ever got rid of a galling impression of doubt, maybe even of guilt. Perhaps the critics had been right all along: why show or watch, let alone try to expand on superfluous appearances in the seclusion of film and art spaces, when there are such urgent matters to attend to in the real world? Even the *In Between Times* program that was meant to draw out some echoes between the legacy of Thatcherism and today's landscape of neoliberal and securitarian policy felt strangely out of place. For a moment it didn't seem to make much sense to look back at the work of filmmakers and collectives who sought to capture the pulse of an era of transition whose challenges and transformations might still be with us today.<sup>2</sup> It was as if, in light of the unthinkable, all attempts to try to examine “our times” in terms of causes and consequences were doomed to fall short. As if only the irrationality of raw factuality or primordial animosity could be thought of as cause of anything. Should we have taken to heart the loud arguments stating that only silence can offer an adequate response to the unfathomable? Overcome with doubt, we decided to cancel the conversation with Avi Mograbi, as we didn't manage to figure out how to even begin discussing the work he has been doing with African asylum-seekers who are held in Israeli detention centers. Today, in the comfort of hindsight, I can't help thinking it might have been a bit foolish of us to give in to resignation.

Perhaps we complied all too easily with the misgivings towards cinematic appearances, denouncing them for being either too real or not real enough, either insufficient or overabundant in the face of reality. Perhaps the reasonings that pit the immediacy of action against the inaction of contemplation, and those that advance the presence of silence in response to the crisis of representation, fail to take into account that the division between appearance and reality, action and inaction, possibility and impossibility is always the object of a certain framework of common sense, a framing of “our times” that needs to be constantly questioned and interspersed from the inside. These critical reasonings might neglect to consider that the art of cinematic appearances itself has to offer a multiplicity of possible exercises that have both as a frame and as matter the order of relations between concrete presence and intangible appearance, between images dancing on distant surfaces and the instant meanings and values attributed to them.

Sometimes, just sometimes, it happens that cinematic exercises are capable of unsettling the framework of common sense. They don't necessarily have to be provocative propositions that aim to relentlessly mobilize the whole of our senses. In the course of those strange days we could witness, for instance, how even a modest, quiet chronicle of everyday life such as Michel Khleifi's *Fertile Memory* (1980) could bring in a world of difference. Khleifi's loving portrait of two Palestinian women struggling to manifest their existence in a society that denies it to them—under restraint of both patriarchal order and colonial rule—may not offer any clear orientation towards a better future, and it may not elicit a purification of terror and fear from an unfolding of dramatic action. But the film does manage to break away from the images of inconsolable suffering and irreconcilable violence that have for long been dominating the vision of a Middle East in ruins. It does so without taking a universal vantage point, but by giving the utmost attention to the quotidian gestures and words of these two individuals, Farah Hatoum and Sahar Khalifeh, and by extracting their force of resistance directly from their own environment and history. The outcome of this attention is not simply a reproduction of life as it is, but an aesthetic fiction that reframes the relation between these figures, the world that they inhabit and the way in which they are able to disarrange its mapping of coordinates and positions. It is by way of this “fictionalization” that the film endows individuals who are all too often submitted to a classificatory logic dividing between victims and perpetrators, between the weak and the mighty, with a force that breaks with the allocation of identities. What is proposed is not a grand act of subversion that aims to unambiguously denounce a certain situation of injustice, but rather a poetics of

small ruptures that brings about the capacity of those who are living through that situation, a capacity that is put to work in the wandering of bodies and gazes, the resonance of speech and rhythm, the glimmering of light and color. As I tried to say to you in my previous letter, cinema is not only an art of mechanical reproduction that registers a trace of the real, it is also an art of light and shadow whose forms are always shifting, trembling, hesitating. I believe it's this double identity that gives the art of moving images its tremendous potential to create transmutations that can make the real somehow foreign to itself.

Still, in times when urgency is called for, the refusal to propose strategies of radical subversion or didactic demonstration might appear as hopelessly starry-eyed. Serge Daney suggested as much when he wrote about the first films of Michel Khleifi: amongst the Arab filmmakers who attempt to reconcile art and commitment, he wrote, Khleifi stands out “as the last romantic, even utopist, who thinks one has to film.”<sup>3</sup> But what does it mean to film? Isn't the act of recording and organizing images (not to forget sounds) first and foremost an exercise of the gaze, the work of a spectator who restages and reframes into new figures the experiences of those living their lives and straddling between different words, in view of sharing these figures with others? Isn't making films a way of sharing a condensed view of a world in which filmmakers are spectators themselves, a view which already includes a place for other spectators? After all, aren't we all observers who look at appearances and try to make sense of them? The difficulty that comes with “making sense” might not so much have to do with a supposed naivety of the gaze in the face of the real, but rather with the frames of representation and interpretation that always already accompany appearances, delineating what can be considered as pertaining to the “real” or the “naïve”—and thus the possible and impossible—and what cannot. No need to call these frames ideological: it may well be that we are not so much subjected to appearances as we are in the midst of them. We all connect or disconnect what we see with what we have or haven't seen before, with the imaginaries and memories that we live with and the words and signs that we use to give them sense. The challenge taken up by many artists and filmmakers is for them to find singular dispositions that could rattle the dominant framework which regulates the relations between what is given to see, the form that suits it and the meaning that it comes to have. This involves a search for arrangements of figuration and defiguration that could interfere with the normative lines of reasoning that define the appropriate correspondences between form and subject, including those that condemn the downtrodden to a grim and grimy treatment while disallowing all modes of “aestheticization.” In the

case of *Fertile Memory*, we can already see a refutation of this injunction in its very first image, showing a static scene of a bowl of fruits and vegetables that brings to mind the still lifes of Cézanne or Gauguin. In fact, the whole film is interlaced with moments that don't seem to have any narrative interest or representative significance, showing either the kind of domestic interiors that were savored by the impressionist painters or idyllic rural landscapes that appear to come straight out of an Alexander Dovzhenko film. In bearing the "meaningless" truth of life, these vignettes appear to bring about a poetry of the banal as it was once lauded by the Romantic thinkers for severing the threads of representation and taking on an autonomy in appearance. These pictorial compositions are not exactly the kind of images that one would expect to see in a film about the everyday Palestinian struggle. But if Khleifi's film succeeds in upsetting our outlook, it might be because he has refused to impose the form of representation that is deemed appropriate for the represented subjects. Instead of offering "poor" images to underscore the suffering of poverty and deprivation or "active" images to indicate the urgency of action, he has given us a beautifully crafted and slow-paced film that blurs the boundaries between the observational and the fictional, the significant and the insignificant. Instead of offering a reflection on a world out of joint, he has caringly constructed a world that joins and disjoins in unexpected ways what we see and hear and the meanings and possibilities assigned to it, giving characters who are usually assigned to narratives of violence and despair back their dignity by making them circulate, and circulating with them.

The rupturing of the strategic and codified schemas of representation does, however, imply that the filmmaker has to walk the tightrope between compassionate identification and abstracted indifferentism without a safety net, in an uncertain search for a balance between the documentation of structural injustice and the evocation of intimate suffering, without letting the magnitude of the first be drowned out by the contiguity of the latter, or the other way around. You can see very well in *Fertile Memory* how Khleifi has searched for a framework that is at the same time fitting and unfitting, adjusted and maladjusted to its subjects, by constantly playing with the tensions between proximity and distance within and between the scenes. At the same time, this resistance to anticipation and the renegotiation of the gaps between sense and presence entails an inability of predicting the effects of the work. In sharing one's own frame of perception and interpretation with others, the filmmaker is bound to let go of any presupposition of "usefulness" based on a correspondence between intention, form and reception. No wonder Khleifi himself has called his film "naïve" in its proposition of a

carefully constructed aesthetic world that could defy the reduction to stereotypical representations, without taking recourse to a systematic calculation of effect or efficiency.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, I think that *Fertile Memory* has something fundamental in common with the film I wrote to you about last time, not coincidentally another idiosyncratic feature debut that was made without substantial commercial pressure or targeted audience expectation: Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* (1977). For me their commonality is not so much defined by the filmmakers' stubborn insouciance towards industrial norms and representational reiteration as by their willful exposure to the uncertainty of both the manifestation and the effects of their singular adventure of looking, framing and crafting. There is a certain generosity to abandoning the product of a singular cinematic adventure to the gazes of others—which has nothing to do with the ideology of “proximity” that can be discerned in contemporary art and politics. I believe it is precisely the risk of uncertainty that comes with the sharing of aesthetic worlds, at the same time recognizable and foreign, that opens up possible paths towards other adventures. These fragile sensible worlds that, each in their own way, give a singular existence of capacity to everyday lives shared in proximity and distance, don't they in their turn call upon the capacity of anyone to invent one's own renditions and permutations?

Imagine my surprise when I was recently asked to clarify whether I position myself as a “spectator” or a “producer”—“in Benjaminian terms,” the interlocutor added. I admit the question took me aback: perhaps I had taken it for granted that I am, first and foremost, looking, speaking and working as a spectator amongst others. In other words: as someone who, in looking at appearances, is summoned to translate and reinvent them towards his own sphere of experience. In a sense, this idea of appropriation was actually put forward by Walter Benjamin in his reflections on the arts of mechanical reproduction. Denouncing the traditional art forms for their coercion of the spectator into the position of passive beholder who is merely asked to consume the vision of genius, he championed the arts of photography and cinematography for their break with the aura of uniqueness and authoritativeness. While many discussions have been focusing on the notion of “reproduction,” it is often overlooked that Benjamin saw in the decline of the cult of auratic arts the way to new appropriations. Not only did he call attention to the abandonment of grand pictorial compositions in favor of an appropriation of the image of the anonymous and the commonplace—a democratization which had in fact already ensued earlier in other art forms. He also pointed out that, in freeing “the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction, tasks that now devolved solely upon the eye looking into a lens,”<sup>5</sup> the new arts resolutely shifted the



focus from the skill set of the expert artist to the possibilities opened up by the act of looking, which is available to anyone. By identifying this turn from the specialized art of the hand to the egalitarian art of the gaze, spectators could be thought of as potential creators. For Benjamin, however, the possibility of emancipation primarily depended on art's function of instruction: for him the mechanical arts offered a means towards a new sensible education by providing instruments that could teach viewers how to become experts in reading the signs of their own historical situatedness and seizing the techniques and products of technology for themselves. "The function of film," he wrote, "is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily."<sup>6</sup> This "apparatus," according to Benjamin, was no less than an illusionary phantasmagoria that is taken as natural, transforming living beings into subjects. The mission assigned to the new arts was to break its spell, annulling auratic contemplation in favor of fragmentation and distraction as to create an enhanced awareness of the lived world and a collective participation in the new productive forces set free by technology. This mission of transforming spectators into collaborators by offering an improved *dispositif* of perception and instruction, and erasing the dichotomy between form and content was something that Benjamin particularly discerned in Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, which he hailed for its ability "to expose what is present."<sup>7</sup> But he also saw it in August Sander's physiognomic studies collected in the book *Face of our Time* which he considered as a "training manual" that could serve to identify the friends and foes of the class struggle; or Eugène Atget's pictures of depopulated city streets which he likened to crime scenes, photographed for the purposes of "establishing evidence" in the trial of History.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, he considered films as forms of "tests" which, by urging spectators to take the position of the camera, were able to break the spell of empathy and stimulate critical examinations of what is given to see. In short, the arts of mechanical reproduction were embraced in their potential to engender a new political sensibility and social consciousness, in their propensity to give access to hidden meanings that could be deciphered as symptoms of the state of the world, signposts that would necessarily need to be given direction by way of captions and legends.

Benjamin developed his definition of "producer" along the same vein: the elementary task of the producer, he argued, is to turn consumers into fellow producers. In order to do that, it was not deemed enough to tendentiously communicate a position, however critical, *towards* social reality: it was necessary to actively take position *within*. The work of a producer is not to offer reports or reflections, but to actively intervene in the relations of production and at the same

time demystify this activity. It does not consist in reproducing existing means and conditions, but to uncover the conditions and modify the means as to actively create new relationships. Rather than a supplier, the producer is an engineer who sets out to bring about transformation by thwarting the techniques of perception and constructing new *dispositifs* by which contemporaries could learn how to decipher the lived world and orient themselves in it. The ultimate goal is to compel spectators to become collaborators by appropriating the presented modes of critical analysis and production for themselves. We know that this change of focus from art *about* politics to art *as* politics and the suppression of the privileged figure of the artist in the interest of the operations of art and the emancipation of the spectator would be furthered three decades later, notably by Roland Barthes in his declaration of “the death of the author,” which was supposed to lead to the “birth of the reader.”<sup>9</sup> It was around the same time that the proposals of Benjamin and Barthes were taken up by various filmmakers, critics and collectives who broke with the tradition of the *politique des auteurs* and declared that cinema’s task did not consist in showing a reflection of reality, but the reality of reflection. Instead of simply producing “political films,” it was deemed necessary to “make films politically.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, it was not enough for cinema to simply reproduce the existing relations of production: it had to strive to expose and transform the reality of what is represented as well as the conditions and means of production on which representation is founded. Cinema was to become an instrument in the service of struggle, training spectators to acquire an “informed gaze” and urging them to take a stand. The separation between specialists and laymen was to be broken by propelling those participating in the struggle to seize the means and products of film technology. The cinema space was to be turned from a refuge for “culinary” audience pleasure to both an assembly and a school where spectators would become conscious of their situation and discuss their own interests. It wasn’t for long, however, before these paradigms would enter into a state of crisis, when the concrete presence of the struggles and the theoretical framework that accorded their efficiency started to crumble. With the rupture of the straight line between the knowledge of the causes of domination and the promise of liberation, the critical models that were based on this logic of efficiency also started floundering. During the festival, for instance, we could see in the *In Between Times* program how, at a time when various forms of political consensualism started to establish themselves and the history of emancipatory movements was gradually criminalized, cinematic approaches shifted away from the surmise of raising consciousness and enabling action. On one hand, the critical *dispositif*

of demystification began to criticize itself, unmasking the strategy of exposing and mobilizing as just another illusion among a hall of mirrors, negotiating its own indetermination without really knowing what goal it should serve. On the other hand, affirmation of possibility was either sought in voyages through time, in search for soundings of the rumble of struggle wrested free from the grasp of historical necessity, or in the manifestation of the capacity of the “wretched of the earth” to measure up to the injustices endured and occupy a sensible world that is refused to them. One way or another, cinema’s promise as productive apparatus of new rational and perceptual capacities seems to have parted from any kind of emancipatory efficiency.

Nevertheless, today we are once again inclined to take up Benjamin’s questioning of the “autonomy of the poet, of the freedom to write whatever he pleases.”<sup>11</sup> We feel once more compelled to evaluate the notion of “production” as a transformative practice that could turn consumers into producers. In that regard, some have placed their trust in the revolution of information and reproductive technologies that has supposedly shattered the cult of authorship by blurring the boundaries between expert and non-expert and participating in the grand fusion of material and immaterial production, art and knowledge in one and the same process of enactment of collective creativity and intelligence. Others have countered the idea of the autonomy of the artwork and its author by advocating the construction of collective situations and communal enclaves, exempt from both edification and commodification, where new relations of co-production and collaboration are stimulated. Either way, there seems to be a tendency to directly identify the operations of art with a new kind of collective agency, which includes a revaluation of the figure of the producer as a cultural worker and engineer participating in the construction of a new lifeworld. In light of this tendency, I’m afraid my own propositions may seem rather tentative. I have not set out to produce playgrounds or battlefields, models of activation or participation that could convert spectators into experts, actors or artists. I did not particularly care to add to the growing supply of outreach programs and educational forums that aim to illuminate the appropriate manner of looking at images. Neither were my propositions consciously aimed at a radical transformation of social relations within institutional contexts or the establishment of autonomous zones or counter-publics. And they definitely did not aspire to create new modes of perception or instruction in view of learning how to critically read the “face” of the present moment. Quite the contrary, I’ve tried to acknowledge cinema as an art that is not simply a vehicle of signs that are in need of decoding, consisting of a series of

“tests” that are completely removed from the realm of the “beautiful semblance.” On the other hand, neither do I see cinema as a universe of raw presences and pure intensities that does not allow for any mode of elucidation. Sure enough there has never stopped being an oscillation between arguments that beat the drum for a new media literacy in view of teaching how to read images like the alphabet, and those that state that we better ought to learn how to see anew and save the untranslatable, sensuous immediacy of images from the domination of language. For my part, I have sought to verify whether there are ways to take into account the two sides of the coin, to neither take recourse to deciphering signs nor dissipate into silence, but to engage with cinema’s double power of showing and signifying. How to live and work with an art that is at the same time composed of signs that can be recognized and interpreted and apparitions that suspend recognition and interpretation? How to deal with this entwining of figures that constitute a presence by themselves and figures that stand in for something else, this constant movement of differentiation and recomposition which excludes any uniform transmission between the filmmaker’s intention and the spectator’s interpretation?

Could it be that this tension between presence and representation is too easily put aside by those advocating the construction of new social relations as opposed to the contemplation of appearances, or those aiming to demystify the figure of the artist by directly identifying the operations of art to the operations of politics in the name of effectivity? If the work of Jacques Rancière shines through in this question, and in so many of my ventures of the past years, it’s because he continues to direct our attention to the importance of interruptions, derivations and reconfigurations that continue to alter the circulation of aesthetic experiences, occurring anywhere and at any time without final destination or appointed order. As I mentioned in my last letter, what remains lingering with me from Rancière’s reading of Hegel’s writings is his suggestion that art is alive as long as it is outside itself, as long as it keeps circulating through different arenas of exchange, which are always spaces of reinvention. True enough, nowadays Hegel’s thesis about “the end of art” is commonly used to refer to “postmodern” art that can look like anything at all and is even no longer meant to be looked at, but merely stared at; or else art’s ruination is attributed to its devourment by the regime of interpretations, which has brought about a hegemony of content over form. But perhaps, if we want to hold on to art’s aliveness rather than wallow in its unfortunate demise, we need to maintain and measure its difference from itself, affirm that a work contains many different works, just as its audience holds many different spectators. That’s why I think the widespread stance “against interpretation” tends to overlook

the potential of words to reinvent what has been seen—whether seen well, seen badly, or even not seen at all. Cinema, I wrote to you, is an art of recollection, of evocation: it only exists through the circulation of words that keep on reworking and restating what is given to see on its surface. I have always found that nowadays there are not too many words, but far too little: too little that are able to give a profound expression to the experience of watching singular compositions of images and sounds hovering between recognition and estrangement, too little that give form to singular resonance chambers that can put this experience into play. How we tend to forget that forms cannot live without words that instill them with meaning and install them in a frame of visibility. Remember that cinema has only been granted an existence as art as soon as it was written and spoken about by those who were passionate about its manifestations without really understanding why. Their words were not so much meant to explain how films should or shouldn't look like or to judge what the filmmaker should or shouldn't do, but to reformulate the relation between what can be seen and what can be said and thought about it. Even the commentators who pitted the immediacy of presence against the signification of representation, as was the case within the phenomenological tradition of cinephilia, still relied on the mediation of words to give this presence a place and a value within a configuration of meanings and experiences. Every time new arrangements of figuration and defiguration offer themselves up to gazes, the challenge is to give them an existence by way of words and actions, which always constitutes a way of framing and translating. Isn't the world of cinema only a world of imagination in as much as spectators contribute to its existence?

Looking back at the propositions I have advanced over the past years, I consider them as part of a minor and unfinished attempt to create a small-scale interface allowing for visibilities to be translated into words and words to be translated into a new visibility, comprised of a long-term series of resonance spaces where the intervals between identification and dis-identification, between intention and interpretation could be put to work. As you know, on most occasions the set-up so far has been quite simply to publically screen a selection or constellation of film works and try to make sense of them in the company of their makers. These encounters were not at all meant to legitimate the “genius” of film directors or audiovisual artists, who are strangely enough often treated as today's exemplary embodiments of the idea of the auratic artist as the master of the medium to give form to matter. Instead, what I wanted to bring into play was neither the specific skill set of the author, nor a demystification of the myth of the artist, but the singular sensitivity that a filmmaker is able to bring to what

is happening in the landscape of the perceptible: as someone who, like any other spectator, observes, selects, compares, and interprets what is seen, heard and felt. In that sense it was simply an exchange of “views” that I was interested in, an interchange of a multiplicity of perspectives between those who translate their views into cinematic condensations and those who translate these forms towards their own experiential world and construct their own mode of efficiency from it, no matter how much time that winds up taking. The point was then not at all to further the common oppositions between the culture of intellect and the culture of the gaze, discourse and affect, or aestheticism and philistinism, but to redeploy a space of the possible by creating some kind of *espace flou* where all these antinomies could be put into question, a space of indetermination in which the only commonality between those present is that everyone is a spectator.

For me, being a spectator means being in between, not at the beginning nor at the end, not in a position from where one can point out what to look for or how it should have looked like, but amidst a chain of movements and exchanges where the challenge consists in finding out what can be said and thought about what is experienced, what is seen taking shape and how to develop it further. Being in between doesn't mean being too early or too late, lamenting what might have been possible but isn't anymore, or postponing the possible until the day come, but being in a moment when possibilities are defined in the present, by taking up the wager of prolonging the moment of experience with others. The role of the spectator is not that of an engineer of human souls, a manager of consciousness or an explicator who sets out to teach others how to read the signs of history and enlighten those who don't know what they know. He is not situated above or beyond but in front and in the midst of appearances, whose meaning is owned by anyone. The spectator is someone who cares about specific forms of appearance to the extent that he doesn't fully understand them, which is why he needs to search for ways of appropriating and translating the cinematic emotions that are resonating from the screen, and in doing so might affirm a common capacity that perhaps has no other place than in this continuous circulation of renewed actualizations. He might even care so much about them that he decides to share them with others, in a desire to widen the sphere of emotion, so that he could perhaps better understand what caring means, so that he could figure out how care is also a matter of engaging with what resists, with what defies the familiar and the calculated. So that he might eventually find out that the passion for appearances is nothing without a passion for the world.

In defiance of the voices of realism that continue to preach futility and resignation, and equally removed from the ambition of producing forums for

collective enlightenment in anticipation of new forms of life, this spectator has merely chosen to put some confidence into the life of forms. Never forgetting that it's first and foremost up to those in front of these fleeting forms to assess and extend their resistances and promises, and to recognize that nothing has ended; the work is always still ongoing.

I hope to see you soon.  
Take care, my friend.

Stoffel

## Notes

### Evan Calder Williams

1. The program *Karl Marx, le retour?* was initiated by Arenberg Cinémas Nomades and took place at the Université Populaire de Bruxelles in January-May 2014.
2. In an account given by Anatoli Lunacharsky (head of the Soviet People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) of a conversation with Vladimir Illich Lenin in February 1922, Lenin reportedly proclaimed that "for us, the most important of all arts is the cinema." See Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939* (London: Routledge, 1988), 154.
3. The term "dialogism" was proposed by the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin to refer to the process by which meaning is evolved out of interactions and tensions between different people and traditions. Otherness introduces "estrangement" (or "ostranenie") in the form of disagreements, different evaluations and accounts, which can lead to the distribution of incompatible elements within different perspectives of equal value. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929), ed. and trans. Carol Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) and Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981).
4. See for instance Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).
5. Jacques Rancière, "The Misadventures of Critical Thought," in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), 25-50.
6. "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment." It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom — Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (1848), in *Marx/Engels Selected Works, Vol. One*, trans. Samuel Moore (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 98-137.
7. Serge Daney, *L'exercice a été profitable, Monsieur* (Paris: P.O.L., 1993), 210.
8. Serge Daney, *L'exercice a été profitable, Monsieur*, 345.
9. The question whether to endorse "two merge into one" (pushing for "peaceful coexistence") or "one divides into two" (upholding the "class struggle") was the object of intense debate in the 1960s, particularly in the context of Maoism and Marxism-Leninism.
10. For Daney's take on the "visual," see Serge Daney, "Montage Obligé. La guerre, le Golfe et le petit écran," *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à main: cinéma, télévision, information* (Paris: Aléas, 1991), 159-66.
11. *Ici et Ailleurs* is discussed in the letter to Mohamad Yaqubi. See page 73.
12. Jacques Rancière, "The Cultural Historic Compromise," in *The Intellectual and His People: Staging the People Volume 2*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2011), 41-73. Originally published as "Le compromis culturel historique," *Les révoltes logiques, special issue: Les Lauriers de Mai ou Les chemins du pouvoir (1968-1978)* (1978): 106-26.
13. Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana, "L'Image Fraternelle. Entretien avec Jacques Rancière," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 268-269 (1976): 19.
14. Serge Daney, *L'exercice a été profitable, Monsieur*, 210.
15. Jacques Aumont, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni and Sylvie Pierre, "Le temps déborde. Entretien avec Jacques Rivette," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 204 (1968): 20.
16. Jacques Rancière, "Problems and Transformations of Critical Art," in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 45-60.
17. In the 1970s French theoreticians like Jean-Louis Baudry and Jean-Louis Comolli focused on the cinematic *dispositif* to point out how the very technique and mechanism of cinematic reproduction and its illusion of continuity by and large produces an "impression of reality" which tends to reproduce prevailing ideologies in an unquestioning manner, smoothing over the contradictoriness of the social. See Jean-Louis Baudry, "Cinema: effects idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base," *Cinéthique* 7-8 (1970): 1-8. Jean-Louis Comolli, "Technique et idéologie," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 229 (1971): 4-21, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 230 (1971): 51-57, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 231 (1971): 42-49, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 233 (1971): 39-45, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 234-235 (1971): 94-100, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 241 (1972): 20-24.
18. Symptomatology, as a practice of deciphering cinematic "texts" in search for symptoms which lays bare an unconscious, can still be found in the work of critics such as Fredric Jameson, who studies narrative cinema as the representation, at least symptomatically, of the political unconscious of a historic moment. See, for instance, Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009).
19. Jacques Rancière, "A Child Kills Himself," in *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*, trans. James B. Swenson (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 105-41. In a later article on *Europa 51*, Rancière reworked the centrality of the notion of grace in opposition to law by emphasizing the artistic operations that stage this "grace," thereby questioning the conventional opposition between the cinema of montage and manipulation on one hand and the "modern" cinema of presence and duration on the other. See Jacques Rancière, "Falling Bodies: Rossellini's Physics," in *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 125-42. *Europa 51* is also discussed in the letter to Ricardo Matos Cabo. See page 121.
20. Michel Foucault, "A Question of Method: an interview with Michel Foucault," *Ideology and Consciousness* 8 (1981): 4-14.
21. Gilles Deleuze, "Letter to Serge Daney: Optimism, Pessimism, and Travel," in *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University, 1995), 76.



22. André Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality" (1948), in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (California: University of California Press, 2005), 20.
23. Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963). Originally published as *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1961). "Only violence helps when violence reigns" is taken from Bertolt Brecht, *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* (1929-1932).
24. Jacques Rancière, "Il est arrivé quelque chose au reel," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 545 (2000): 62-4. The "depression" of fiction is further discussed in the letter to Ricardo Matos Cabo. See page 121.
25. "The simple 'reproduction of reality' says less than ever about that reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions." Bertolt Brecht, "The Threepenny Material (1930-1932)," in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, ed. and trans. Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000), 164-65.
26. "Il ne s'agit pas de comprendre, il s'agit de sentir. Ce n'est pas la même chose." Robert Bresson, Cannes Film Festival, 1983.
27. "A saturation of magnificent signs bathing in the light of the absence of explanation." This sentence, borrowed from Manoel de Oliveira, is quoted by Jean-Luc Godard in film works such as *For Ever Mozart* (1996) and *Histoires du Cinéma* (1989-1998).
28. *Ubu Roi* is a play by Alfred Jarry. It was first performed in Paris at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre, causing a riotous response in the audience as it opened and closed on December 10, 1896.
29. See for example Steven Shaviro, "Every time I try to Fly: Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*," lecture held on November 22, 2013 at the Post-Cinematic Perspectives Conference, accessed 29 April, 2016, <http://bernardgm.com/podcast/steven-shaviro-spring-breakers-harmony-korine-episode-11#sthash.WCf9Gz6y.dpuf>.
30. Fredric Jameson, "Utopia as Replication," in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 410-34.
31. Franz Kafka, "Abraham," in *Parables and Paradoxes*, ed. Nahum Glatzer, trans. Clement Greenberg (New York: Schocken, 1961), 121.
32. "We must fight to come to exist, to remain in existence, to be the future that happens" is borrowed from Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 197.
33. Jacques Aumont, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni and Sylvie Pierre, "Le temps déborde. Entretien avec Jacques Rivette," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 204 (1968): 20.
34. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 11.
35. Glauber Rocha, "Beginning at Zero: Notes on Cinema and Society," trans. Joanne Pottlitzer, *The Drama Review* 14 (1970): 144.
36. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 215.
37. In the framework of *Figures of Dissent*, conversations with Pedro Costa were held on February 2, 2013 and April 3, 2015 (with Thom Andersen).
38. "Losing, too, is still ours" is taken from Rainer Maria Rilke, "For Hans Carossa" (1924), *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 165.
39. Michel Foucault, "Dream, imagination, and existence," introduction to *Dream and Existence*, by Ludwig Binswanger, ed. Keith Hoeller, trans. Forest Williams (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), 29-78.
40. Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana, "Entretien avec Robert Bresson," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 348-349 (1983): 13-15.
41. Franz Kafka, "Letter to Oskar Pollak" (January 27, 1904), *Letters to friends, family, and editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 16.

## Barry Esson

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 178.
2. "The world as symptom, and the artist as symptomatologist," Deleuze said about the work of Samuel Beckett. Gilles Deleuze, "Mystique et masochisme" (interview with Madeleine Chapsal), *La Quinzaine littéraire* 25 (1967): 12-13.
3. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
4. Marguerite Duras, *Ah, Ernesto!* (Paris: Ruy-Vidal-Quist, 1971). See also the film adaptation by Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, *En râchachant* (1982).
5. Fred Moten has borrowed the notion of "duty beyond duty" from Jacques Derrida. See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 35.
6. Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoires du Cinéma* (1988-1998).
7. "Can this sharing of a life in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused and consent, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which to know, a place out of which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question?" Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112.4 (2013): 756.
8. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*, 140.
9. Bill Douglas, *My Childhood* (1972), *My Ain Folk* (1973), *My Way Home* (1978).
10. Serge Daney, "Le travelling de Kapo," *Trafic* 4 (1992): 7.
11. The British Documentary Movement is the name given to a group of British filmmakers, which included John Grierson, Basil Wright, Humphrey Jennings, Paul Rotha and Alberto Cavalcanti, whose documentary work of the 1930s and 1940s sought to strike a balance between the informational and educational on one hand and the poetic and aesthetic on the other. Denouncing the imperatives of Hollywood, they found inspiration in the Russian cinema of the 1920s, the early films of Robert Flaherty as well as the aesthetic theories of Kant and Hegel. See Ian Aitken, ed., *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).
12. Catherine Arnaud and Yann Lardau, "An Artisan of Daily Life: Charles Burnett" (1981), in *Charles Burnett: Interviews*, ed. Robert E. Kapsis (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 6.
13. Charles Burnett, "Warming by the Devil's Fire: Director Interview" (2003), in *Charles Burnett: Interviews*, 132.

14. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 5. The work of James Agee is further discussed in the letter to Ricardo Matos Cabo. See page 121.
15. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 206.
16. James Agee, "Open City by Roberto Rossellini," *The Nation*, April 13, 1946. Reprinted in James Agee, *Film Writing and Selected Journalism* (New York: Library of America, 2005), 225–29.
17. Amiri Baraka, liner notes to Archie Shepp, *Four For Trane* (Impulse Records, 1964).
18. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957); *La chambre claire, note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).
19. See, for example, Todd Cronan, "Art and Political Consequence: Brecht and the Problem of Affect," Special issue on Bertolt Brecht, *nonsite.org* 10 (2013), accessed April 29, 2016, <http://nonsite.org/article/art-and-political-consequence-brecht-and-the-problem-of-affect>. The work of Bertolt Brecht is further discussed in the letter to Ricardo Matos Cabo. See page 121.
20. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art* (1833), trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
21. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), trans. J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914), 182.
22. See Jacques Rancière, "La politique des auteurs, ce qu'il en reste," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 559 (2001): 36–38.
23. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 172.
24. Tom Naegels, "Het einde van de kunstenaar," *De Standaard*, November 15, 2014.
25. Hal Foster, "What's the problem with critical art?," *London Review of Books* 35:19 (2013): 14–15.
26. Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1794), trans. Reginald Snell (New York: F. Ungar, 1965).
27. See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden: Polity Press, 2004); *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004); "Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art," *Art & Research* 2 (2008): 1–10.
28. "If there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet... *the people are missing*," Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 216.
29. Theodor W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society" (1957), in *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 39.
30. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 220. L.A. Rebellion is first of all a handy and appealing designation for something that might actually be both too momentous and too heterogeneous to contain in a name. Nevertheless, one is faced with some bare facts: at a particular time and place in American cinema history, a critical mass of filmmakers of African origin or descent together produced a rich and venturesome body of work, independent of any entertainment industry influence. At this time, in this place, buzzing with the spirit of the civil rights movement and memories of past and future uprisings, these filmmakers—most of whom studied at UCLA in Los Angeles in the late 1960s to the late 1980s—committed themselves to depicting the lives of black communities in the US and worldwide. This group included Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, Billy Woodberry, Julie Dash, Barbara McCullough, Haile Gerima, and other. In the framework of *Figures of Dissent*, a program with a selection of these film works was organized in the context of the Courtisane Festival 2015 (1–5 April), in collaboration with Tate Modern & UCLA Film & Television Archive.
31. Jacques Rancière "Is There a Deleuzian Aesthetics?," trans. Radmila Djordjevic, *Qui Parle* 14:2 (2004): 1–14.
32. Jacques Rancière, "Deleuze, Bartleby, and the Literary Formula," in *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 159.
33. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 52.
34. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 9.
35. Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, "Art of the possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Artforum* 45 (2007): 264.
36. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Sylvan Tompkins," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1995): 513.
37. *Movie Mutations* was instigated and edited by Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin. Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin, eds., *Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia* (London: BFI, 2003).
- 38) Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Volume I*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: New Press, 1997), 321–28.

## Mohanad Yaqubi

1. Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il vuoto del potere in Italia," *Corriere della sera*, February 1, 1975.
2. Christophe Derouet and Vincent Vatrican, "Entretien avec Serge Daney: l'apprenti sorcier," *24 images* 61 (1992): 62.
3. Serge Daney, "Du défilement au défile," *La Recherche cinématographique* 7 (1984): 49.
4. *The Gulag Archipelago* is a book by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn about the Soviet forced labor camp system. It was written between 1958 and 1968, but only published in the West in 1973. *The Chairman's New Clothes* is a critical account of the Chinese Cultural Revolution at its midpoint—at a moment when many other sinologists were still praising Mao Zedong. Written between 1967 and 1969 by Pierre Ryckmans, under the pen name Simon Leys, it was published first in 1971. *Cambodia: Year Zero* is the first detailed account of the beginning of the Khmer Rouge regime. Its author, François Ponchaud, was a missionary in Cambodia from 1965 until he was forced to flee Phnom Penh in 1975. He first wrote about his experiences in a series of articles for *Le Monde* in 1976, which culminated in the publication of the book in 1977.
5. Jean-François Lyotard, "Defining The Postmodern," in *Postmodernism*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi, trans. Geoff Bennington (London: ICA Documents, London, 1986), 6.
6. André Glucksmann, *Les Maîtres-Penseurs* (Paris: Grasset, 1977). Bernard-Henri Lévy, *La Barbarie à visage humain* (Paris: Grasset, 1977). Jean-François Lyotard, *Instructions païennes* (Paris: Gallilée, 1977). Jean Baudrillard, *Oublier Foucault* (Paris: Gallilée, 1977). Marguerite Duras, *Le Camion* (1977). Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Penguin, 1977). Sex Pistols, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* (1977). Throbbing Gristle, *The Second Annual Report* (1977). Simon Nora and Alain Minc, *Rapport sur l'information de la société* (1977).

7. Christian Braad Thomsen, "Five Interviews with Fassbinder," in *Fassbinder*, ed. Tony Rayns (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 100.
8. Wolfram Schütte, "Interview mit Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Nur so entstehen Filme: indem man sie ohne Rücksicht auf Verluste macht," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, February 20, 1979. Fassbinder's *Die Dritte Generation* was released in May 1979.
9. Elias Sanbar and Stéphane Hessel, *Le Rescapé et l'Exilé* (Paris: Don Quichotte editions, 2012).
10. Godard's concern for "Third Worldism" is illustrated, for example, in his conversation with Fernando Solanas that was recorded by the Third World Cinema Group in 1969 and which includes the following quote: "During the screening of an imperialist film, the screen sells the voice of the boss to the viewer; the voice flatters, represses or bludgeons. During the screening of a revisionist film, the screen is only the loudspeaker of a voice delegated by the people but which is no longer the voice of the people, for the people watch their own disfigured face in silence. During the screening of an activist film, the screen is just a blackboard or the wall of a school providing a concrete analysis of a concrete situation." Jean Luc Godard and Fernando E. Solanas, "Godard by Solanas! Solanas by Godard!," Third World Cinema Group (1969), accessed April 29, 2016, <https://cinefiles.bampfa.berkeley.edu/cinefiles/DocDetail?docId=11299>. In *Vent d'Est*, a 1970 film by the Dziga Vertov Group, Godard also staged a scene in which Glauber Rocha stands at a dusty crossroads, with arms outstretched. A young woman with a movie camera goes up to him and says, "Excuse me for interrupting your class struggle, but could you please show me the way towards political cinema?" Rocha points in front of him, then behind and to his left and says, "That way is the cinema of aesthetic adventure and philosophical inquiry, while this way is Third World cinema—a dangerous cinema, divine and marvelous, where the questions are practical ones..." See Glauber Rocha, "Godard's Latest Scandal" (1970), in *The Fire Next Time* catalogue, trans. Stoffel Debuysere (Ghent: KASK/School of Arts, 2014).
11. Elias Sanbar, "Vingt et un ans après," *Trafic* 1 (1991): 116.
12. The conflict between the PLO and the Jordanian Armed Forces led to an enlarged PLO presence in Lebanon, which helped precipitate the Lebanon Civil War. The September events also set alight the smouldering conflict between Hafez al-Assad and Salah Jadid in Syria, culminated in Assad's Corrective Movement of November 1970.
13. Johan Van Der Keuken, "Leesteksten dagboek," in *Bewogen Beelden: Films, foto's, teksten* (De Geus: Breda, 2001), 34.
14. Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 203-38.
15. Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Unpopular Cinema" (1970), in *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. and trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 268. According to Pasolini, through their boundless provocation and transgression of cinematic codes, the "unpopular" films of Godard, Glauber Rocha, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet at the same time made them into *agent provocateurs*, martyrs and victims: the search for freedom from repression had led to a suicidal intoxication and didactic self-exclusion, veering violently towards the negation of cinema. For Pasolini, who was a great admirer of Christian Metz' semiology of cinema, there was no doubt that an infraction of the codes is a necessary condition for invention—the first step towards liberation is to let go of certainties and open up to the unknown. But it also implies a refraction of self-preservation, one that opens the way to self-destruction. When the codes are too violently violated, when the front lines of transgression and invention are crossed too far behind the firing line, there comes a point when the codes can be recuperated for endless possibilities of modification and expansion, and any notion of struggle ends up being neutralized. This is when the struggle is no longer fought on the barricades, but on the other side, behind vacated enemy lines, at which point the enemy has disappeared, because he is fighting elsewhere. "What is important," wrote Pasolini, "is not the moment of the realization of invention, but the moment of invention. Permanent invention, continual struggle."
16. "It seems to me that we have to rediscover everything about everything. We must move into modern life with a virgin eye." Jean-Luc Godard, "One or two things: Jean-Luc Godard," *Sight and Sound* 36 (1966): 4.
17. "Retro-cinema" was the name given to the tendency in cinema to present the militant past as comforting and consensual fictions of origin that annulate all heterogeneity and subjectivity, something which the *Cahiers du Cinéma* detected in films such as *Lacombe Lucien* (Louis Malle, 1973) and *The Night Porter* (Liliana Cavani, 1974). This "retro mode" was notably discussed in an interview with Michel Foucault (in conversation with Pascal Bonitzer and Serge Toubiana, "Anti-rétro," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 251-252 (1974): 5-15) and later in an interview with Jacques Rancière (in conversation with Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana, "L'Image Fraternelle," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 268-269 (1976): 7-19).
18. Bernard-Henri Lévy, *La Barbarie à visage humain* (Paris: Grasset, 1977).
19. Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie libidinale* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974).
20. Irmgard Emmelhainz was one of the guests at *The Fire Next Time. Afterlives of the militant image* (3-4 April 2014), where she gave a lecture entitled "Militant Cinema: from Third Worldism to Neoliberal Sensible Politics."
21. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1950).
22. Theodor Adorno, "Commitment" (1962), in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 1977), 180.
23. In an interview with Gilbert Laroche, Jean-François Lyotard said: "Without knowing it at the time, I was repeating a process that Adorno had gone through while writing his *Aesthetic Theory*. I was plunged like him into the anguish caused by the disappearance of the revolutionary alternative, by the loss of the notion of good and evil. That's when I tried to lay out a kind of representation of what might be valuable in general, which I called 'intensity.'" Jean-François Lyotard and Gilbert Laroche, "That Which Resists, After All," *Philosophy Today* 36:4 (1992): 404. In a 1973 essay titled "Adorno as the Devil," Lyotard paid homage to Adorno's "diabolical" critique of identity thinking, but at the same contended his notion of negative dialectics. According to Lyotard, art practices that give form to contradiction are doomed to be neutralized by the force of capitalism. In response Lyotard asked, "What can an affirmative politics be, which does not look for support in a representative (a party) of the negative?" Jean-François Lyotard, "Adorno as the Devil," *Telos* 19 (1974): 28-137.
24. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 9. See also Lyotard's article on the "Acinema" which is according to him aimed at destroying "the illusion of unity and coherence." "All so-called good form," he charged, "implies the return of sameness, the folding back of diversity upon an identical unity." Jean-François Lyotard, "Acinema," *Revue d'Esthétique* 26:2-4 (1973): 357-69.
25. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 357.

26. "The overcoming of the conflictual doesn't occur through suspension, abstention, abolition of the paradigm, but through invention of a third term: complex term and not zero, neutral term." Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press: 2005), 55.
27. Jean-Luc Godard, *Introduction to a True History of Cinema and Television* (1980), trans. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: caboose, 2012), 398, 404.
28. Pierre Reverdy, "L'Image," *Nord-sud* 13 (1918).
29. Franco Fortini, *The Dogs of the Sinai* (1967), trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Seagull Books, 2013), 19.
30. Jean-Luc Godard, "Lettre à Elie Sanbar" (19 July 1977), *Cahiers du Cinéma* 300 (1979): 16-19.
31. Jean-Luc Godard, in conversation with Jean Daive, *France Culture*, May 20, 1995.
32. Jean-Luc Godard, in conversation with Stéphane Zagdanski, *Paroles des Jours*, November 4, 2004.
33. In *Passés cités par JLG*, Georges Didi-Huberman points out that there might be an image lacking in *Ici et Ailleurs*: the one of the conversation that Godard had with Yasser Arafat, in preparation of *Jusqu'à la Victoire*, during which he inquired about the latter's view on the relationship between the systematic dispossession of the Palestinians and the systematic extermination of the Jews. To Godard's revelation about Jewish prisoners being called Musulman, Arafat responded "So what?". Georges Didi-Huberman, *Passés cités par JLG. L'œil de l'histoire*, 5 (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2015), 114.
34. Franco Fortini, "A Note for Jean-Marie Straub" (1978), in *The Dogs of the Sinai*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Seagull Books, 2013), 76.
35. Serge Daney, "Le paradoxe de Godard," *La Revue belge du cinéma* 16 (1986): 24-36.
36. See, for instance, Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London: Verso, 2000). Finkelstein recalls that after WW II the denunciation of the Nazi genocide was first of all a matter of establishing the facts, while also reinforcing the determination of Western states to struggle against totalitarianism. It was only in the 1970s that the exceptional particularity of the process of systematic extermination was emphasized. The crimes were then not only considered as the monstrous outcome of totalitarian regimes that have to be battled, but as the manifestation of an infinite, unthinkable and irreparable evil, exceeding all legal and political measures. This ethical framework to think about the Holocaust can also be found in the thought paradigms related to cinema, for example in the work of Serge Daney, who started foregrounding the question of morality in the mid-1975s. This included the reference to a short article by Jacques Rivette on Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapò* (1959), whose story takes place in a concentration camp. Rivette's text did not draw too much attention when it was published in 1961; it was only fifteen years later that it would begin to function as one of the prime axioms for Daney's thinking. See Serge Daney and Bill Krohn, "Les Cahiers du Cinéma 1968-1977," *The Thousand Eyes* 2 (1977), accessed April 29, 2016, [http://home.earthlink.net/~steevee/Daney\\_1977.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~steevee/Daney_1977.html).
37. Jean-Luc Godard, "La légende du siècle," *Les Inrockuptibles* 170 (1998): 20-28.
38. Claude Lanzmann, "Le lieu et la parole," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 374 (1985): 374.
39. "The Holocaust is unique because it created a circle of flame around itself, a boundary not to be crossed, since horror in the absolute degree cannot be communicated. To pretend that one has done so is to commit the gravest of transgressions. One must speak out and yet keep silent at the same time, knowing that in this case silence is the most authentic form of speech – maintaining as in the eye of the hurricane, a protected, safe zone that is not to be entered. Here, to transgress or to trivialize are alike. The Hollywood serial transgresses because it trivializes, destroying the unique nature of the Holocaust, the thing that removes it from any comparison, that makes it the worst of all crimes to have been or ever to be committed." Claude Lanzmann, "From the Holocaust to the Holocaust," *Telos* 42 (1979): 137-43. Lanzmann would later take a similar stance towards Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1994).
40. *Route 181 – Fragments of a Journey to Palestine and Israel* (2003) documents a voyage that Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan made along the demarcation line of the Partition Plan for Palestine, drawn up and voted by the UN in 1947. The film was notably attacked by Alain Finkielkraut who argued that the film rested on a false analogy between Israel's 1948 war of independence and the Nazi Holocaust and that the film was a "call to murder." Jean-Luc Godard and others defended the film, but to no avail: the screenings that were scheduled in France were cancelled. In the framework of *Figures of Dissent*, conversations with Eyal Sivan were held on December 12 and 13, 2012; and with Michel Khleifi on December 9, 2015 and March 24, 2016. For an account of the debate, see *Cabinet* 26 (2007), accessed April 29, 2016, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/26/sivanintro.php>. A connected polemic developed over the exhibition *Memoires des camps* (2001), of which a critical account can be found in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
41. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 17. The ethics of silence putting a ban on images has notably been problematized by Jacques Rancière. See Jacques Rancière, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," in *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), 123-30. Jacques Rancière, "The Intolerable Image," in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2010), 83-106.
42. Jean-Luc Godard, *Introduction to a True History of Cinema and Television*, 338.
43. Jacques Rancière, "The Saint and the Heiress: A Propos of Godard's *Histoire(s) Du Cinéma*," trans. T. S. Murphy, *Discourse* 24.1 (2002): 113-19.
44. Herman Asselberghs, Els Opsomer and Pieter Van Bogaert, *Time Suspended* (Brussels: Square vzw, 2004). I saw the exhibition at Witte de With, Rotterdam (November 7, 2004-January 8, 2005).
45. Elias Sanbar, *The Palestinians: Photographs of a Land and its People from 1839 to the Present Day* (Paris: Editions Hazan, 2015).
46. Michel Khleifi, "From Reality to Fiction – From Poverty to Expression," trans. Omar al-Qattan, in *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, ed. Hamid Dabashi (London, Verso: 2006), 45-57. In the framework of *Figures of Dissent*, conversations with Michel Khleifi were held on December 9, 2015 and March 24, 2016.
47. Serge Daney, "Before and After the Image" (1991), trans. Melissa McMahon, *Discourse* 21.1 (1999): 181-90.
48. Harun Farocki, *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges (Images of the World and the Inscription of War)* (1989).
49. Serge Daney, "Les Journées de Damas," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 290-291 (1978): 73-77.
50. Jean Baudrillard, *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (Paris: Galilée, 1991).

51. For an account about the "veiling" of *Guernica*, see Fraser MacDonald, Rachel Hughes and Klaus Dodds, eds., introduction to *Observant States: Observant States* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 6. The covering up of a copy of Picasso's painting reminds me of another instance of censorship. In 1983 Jean Mohr was commissioned by the UN, on Edward Said's recommendation, to take photos of Palestinians living their lives. The images of Jean Mohr were exhibited in the hall of the UN offices at the Palais des Nations, but no writing was allowed to be displayed with them. No legends, no explanations. In response Said and Mohr decided to work together on an "interplay," as Said put it, of Said's personal account of Palestinian suffering and exile and Mohr's photographs—"an unconventional, hybrid, and fragmentary (form) of expression." Edward W. Said and Jean Mohr, *After the Last Sky* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).
52. Richard Grusin, *Premeditation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11* (New York: Palgrave, 2010).
53. For more on the ethical turn, see Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001) and Jacques Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," *Critical Horizons* 7 (2006): 1-20.
54. Gilles Deleuze, "À propos des nouveaux philosophes et d'un problème plus general," *Supplément de Minuit* 24 (1977). For an account of the establishment of ethical ideology and the shift from Third Worldism to a humanitarian sensibility, see Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (New York: Verso, 2011). In the framework of *Figures of Dissent*, a conversation with Eyal Weizman was held on December 8, 2014.
55. Andrew Klavan, "What Bush and Batman Have in Common," *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2008, accessed April 29, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121694247343482821>
56. Donald Rumsfeld, speech at the Pentagon, April 11, 2003.
57. Benjamin Netanyahu, interview with NRG news website, March 16, 2015.
58. Benjamin Netanyahu, speech at the 37<sup>th</sup> Zionist Congress, October 20, 2015.
59. Jean-Luc Godard, "What is to be done?," *Afterimage* 1 (1970). "What does it mean to ask the question: 'Where are we now?'" is from The Dziga Vertov Group, *Le Vent d'est* (1970).
60. Susan Sontag, "Photography unlimited," *The New York Review of Books*, June 23, 1977, 26-31. Republished as "The Image-World" in *On Photography* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 153-80.
61. Susan Sontag and Guy Scarpetta, "La dissidence vue des USA," *Quel Tel* 77 (1978): 71-77.
62. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 84.
63. Jean-Luc Godard, *Le Grand Escroc* (1963).

## Ricardo Matos Cabo

1. Elio Vittorini, *Le donne di Messina* (1949) (Milano: Bompiani, 1964).
2. "The only thing that can defeat ideology is reality, the facts." Herman van Rompuy, VTM news, June 27, 2015.
3. "We can only arrive at a resolution if there is a dialogue, and for the moment we are short of the dialogue, so the key emergency in my view is to restore the dialogue with adults in the room." Christine Lagarde, press conference following the Eurogroup meeting, June 18, 2015.
4. The Treaty of Paris (formally the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community) was signed on April 18, 1951.
5. Bart de Wever, speech at Ugent, September 22, 2015.
6. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody. Semio-capitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (London: Autonomedia, 2009), 86.
7. The term "semio-capital" has been proposed by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi to designate "the sphere of the increasing replacement of production by a financial — and financial means de-territorialised — and fractal-recombinant form of production." Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, "Semio-Capital and the Problem of Solidarity," *Shift Magazine* 14 (2012): 10.
8. In the framework of *Figures of Dissent*, a conversation with Pedro Costa and Thom Anderson was held on April 3, 2015, in Sphinx Cinema Ghent.
9. In 1930 Eisenstein screened *Old and New* at Vidor's home. See Raymond Durnat, *King Vidor, American* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
10. Joseph Losey quoted in Michel Ciment, *Conversations with Losey* (London: Methuen, 1985), 70.
11. Edmund Wilson, *The Boys in the Back Room* (San Francisco: The Colt Press, 1941), 61. Edmund Wilson did however dismiss *The Grapes of Wrath* as "a propaganda novel, full of preachments and sociological interludes" and pointed out Steinbeck's tendency to "animalize" humanity.
12. Bill Levy, *John Ford: A Bio-bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 27.
13. In the novel the Joad daughter, Rosasharn, after the loss of her stillborn baby, offers her maternal breast to be suckled by a starving man in a railroad car.
14. "All that lives is holy" is borrowed from William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," which was composed in the period immediately after the French Revolution (1790-1793). "All souls are just a small portion of a larger soul" is a variation on ideas stated in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Over-Soul" (1841). In his essay Emerson describes the "Unity... within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart. Though we live in succession, in division, in parts and particles, it remains true that within man is the soul of the whole... to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE."
15. Peter Delpout and Mart Dominicus, "Het fordiaanse moment," *Versus* 4 (1983): 73-87.
16. Louis Skorecki, "John Ford, Vers sa destinée," *Libération*, 6 January, 1998. Reprinted in Louis Skorecki, *Les violons ont toujours raison* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), 41-42.
17. Edwin Locke regretted that Gregg Toland's photography was at times "too beautiful" and Pare Lorentz wrote that "It may be that (Toland and Ford) were frightened of their subject and felt they must make it artistic, instead of realizing that more than any Western horse opera they ever made, here indeed was a simple story of simple people. But for all the beauty of his night effects and the difficult trick shots he made, Toland did not get the size of the Southwest, nor the feeling of the sky and land in his

- camera." Pare Lorentz, "The Grapes of Wrath," in *Lorentz on Film: Movies 1927 to 1941* (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1975), 183-86. Edwin Locke, "John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*," *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from The Birth of a Nation to Judgment at Nuremberg*, ed. David Platt (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 316-23.
18. It is true that the director of the government-run camp, the one beacon of hope in the Joads' journey, bears striking resemblances to Franklin Roosevelt.
  19. See Jacques Rancière, "Les pieds du héros," *Trafic* 56 (2005): 26-33.
  20. According to Eisenstein, *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) has a "quality, a wonderful quality, a quality that every work of art must have—an astonishing harmony of all its commonest parts, a really amazing harmony as a whole." The filmmaker had seen the film on the eve of World War II and was "immediately enthralled" by the "perfection of its harmony and the rare skill with which it employed all the expressive means at its disposal." Sergei Eisenstein, "Mr. Lincoln by Mr. Ford," in *Eisenstein's Film Essays and a Lecture*, ed. Jay Leyda (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 139. The text was written in 1945 and originally published in *Iskusstvo Kino* in 1960.
  21. Pare Lorentz, who had a working friendship with John Steinbeck made well-received films such as *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936), *The River* (1938) and *The Fight for Life* (1940, with narrative portions written by Steinbeck). Edwin Locke was assistant chief of the Historical Section of FSA and editor at *US Camera* magazine. Locke and Lorentz had both been working on *The Power of the Land* (1940), directed by Joris Ivens. Edwin Locke wrote that "*The Grapes of Wrath* has set a precedent for contemporary and historical honesty in movie-making"; but that "it is a pity that Ford's sense of environment has not come through as well as his sense of people... Where are the vast stretches of the dust bowl and the tiny houses as lonely as ships at sea? Where is the dust?" And Lorenz Pare lauded the film's "fidelity" to the "original spirit of the book" and the "newsreel quality" of the latter part of the film, but regretted that some scenes "did not give you a feeling of the land" and that others were too "self-conscious, prosy, and maudlin." Pare Lorentz, "The Grapes of Wrath," in *Lorentz on Film: Movies 1927 to 1941* (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1975), 183-86. Edwin Locke, "John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*," *Celluloid Power: Social Film Criticism from The Birth of a Nation to Judgment at Nuremberg*, ed. David Platt (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 316-23.
  22. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 7.
  23. Michael A. Lofaro and Hugh Davis, eds., *James Agee Rediscovered: The Journals of 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Men' and Other New Manuscripts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 141.
  24. James Agee, "Farrebique, ou Les Quatre Saisons," *The Nation*, March 13, 1948.
  25. James Agee, "Farrebique, ou Les Quatre Saisons."
  26. James Agee, introduction to *A Way of Seeing* (1966), by Helen Levitt (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989).
  27. James Agee, "Rome Open City," *The Nation*, March 23, 1946.
  28. For an account on the relation between Agee and Chaplin, see John Wranovics's *Chaplin and Agee: The Untold Story of the Tramp, the Writer, and the Lost Screenplay* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). This book also contains the screenplay Agee wrote for Chaplin, entitled *The Tramp's New World*.
  29. André Bazin, "Farrebique, ou le paradoxe du réalisme," *L'Esprit* 15 (1947). The article was partly written in response to "anti-Farrebiquians" like Henri Jeanson, who described the film as "demagogy and cow dung—critics decree that that is pure cinema: the crap of *Farrebique*."
  30. André Bazin, "Les Raisins de la Colère," *L'Esprit* 143 (1948).
  31. André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Western" (1955), in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (California: University of California Press, 2005), 174.
  32. André Bazin, "In Defense of Rossellini" (1955), in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (California: University of California Press, 2005), 100.
  33. Gigi Cane, "Europa '51 o la tragedia del conformismo," *Rassegna del Film*, February, 1952, 16.
  34. Eric Rohmer (signed Maurice Schérer), "Génie du Christianism," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 25 (1953): 45.
  35. André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (California: University of California Press, 2005), 27.
  36. André Bazin et al., *Cinéma 53 à travers le monde* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1954). The critical pieces that Bazin responded to are Guido Aristarco, "Europa '51," *Cinema nuovo* 1 (1952), and Marcel Oms, "Du fascisme à la démocratie chrétienne," *Positif* 28 (1958).
  37. Jacques Rivette, "Nous ne sommes plus innocents," *Bulletin du cine-club du Quartier Latin*, January, 1950.
  38. Eric Rohmer, "De Trois Films et d'une certaine école," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 26 (1953): 18.
  39. André Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What Is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray (California: University of California Press, 2005), 21.
  40. Dwight Macdonald, "The Soviet Cinema, 1930-1938 (Part I)," *Partisan Review* 5:2 (1938): 37-50. Dwight Macdonald, "The Soviet Cinema, 1930-1938 (Part II)," *Partisan Review* 5:3 (1938): 35-62. Dwight Macdonald, "Soviet Society and Its Cinema," *Partisan Review* 6:2 (1939): 80-95.
  41. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6:5 (1939): 35.
  42. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1991), 151.
  43. Dwight Macdonald, *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain*, ed. John Summers (New York: New York Review Books, 2011).
  44. Quoted in Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 177.
  45. Ayn Rand, *Screen Guide for Americans* (Beverly Hills, CA: Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, 1947), accessed April 29, 2016, <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/AmRad/screenguideamericans.pdf>.
  46. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was originally created in 1938.
  47. For an account of the influence of Greenberg's work on the American "avant-garde" cinema, see James Peterson, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order. Understanding the American Avant-Garde* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1994).
  48. In *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Clement Greenberg argued that the "avant-garde" artist sought to avoid "content" and call attention to art itself, rather than using art to conceal art. "In turning his attention away from subject matter of common experience," he wrote, "the poet or artist turns it in upon the medium of his own craft." The notion of the "avant-garde" would be redefined thirty

- five years later, in the wake of the supposed failure of the movements of May 1968, in Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), which still serves as one of the central reference points in current debates on "modernism" and the "avant-garde." Bürger defines "modernism" as an aesthetic revolution, with its roots in the nineteenth-century move away from the social, when "means become available as the category 'content' withers." The "avant-garde" then stands for the counter-movement that attempted to break with the intensified autonomy and aestheticism of the bourgeois "institution" of art. This attempt to sublimate art into life is said to have failed precisely because the culture industry was able to incorporate and neutralize even its most radical gestures. In Bürger's account, the failure of the avant-garde (the years of dadaism and surrealism and the Soviet and Weimar practices), which lasted barely more than a decade, prefigured the failure of the May '68 movement. Looking back, the end of political illusions retroactively shed light on the end of aesthetic illusions. Champions of postmodernism have then sought to connect Bürger's avant-garde with the postmodern revolt against modernism, once again seeking to integrate art into social praxis. This view has been contested by, amongst others, Gabriel Rockhill, who has taken issue with the model of art history as a singular process of development, and Jacques Rancière, who has attempted to show that the tendency to connect art and life runs through the art practices of the nineteenth century—including the work that Bürger considers as the summit of bourgeois art for art's sake. For Rancière, that what is called "art for art's sake" has always been a search for a certain type of inclusion of new forms of life within the forms of art. See Gabriel Rockhill, *Radical History and the Politics of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), and Jacques Rancière, *Aesthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013).
49. Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, ed. John Willett, trans. Hugh Rorrison (New York: Routledge, 1993). Journal Entry of January 22, 1941.
  50. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1968), 89.
  51. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 151.
  52. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 56.
  53. Bertolt Brecht, "Popularity and Realism" (1938), *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 1977), 81.
  54. The question of "realism" and "modernism" has been the object of debate between, amongst others, Brecht and György Lukács in the 1930s. While the latter defended the bourgeois tradition of "critical realism" of, for example, Honoré de Balzac, Leo Tolstoy, and Thomas Mann in the face of rising movements such as expressionism, which for Lukács included the work of James Joyce, Franz Kafka, and Virginia Woolf, the former attempted to find a way to define precisely the break with the progressive bourgeois model as "realism." Essentially, what was at stake in this European debate was ultimately the question whether the socialist revolution should be presented as a prolongation of a narrative model that could reflect and refract history in its totality, or rather by way of rupture and fragmentation. Echoes of this debate can still be found in, for example, Fredric Jameson's theory of the postmodern, which points out a return to intrigue in the form of pastiche as, in its turn, an estrangement of modernism and its reified *Verfremdung* techniques. Jameson has also, to a certain extent, taken up Lukács' interest in art as reflection of a historical period, the focus on characterization and narration as sites for political interpretation and the way in which artistic works are affected by the social. Documents of the debate are collected in Ronald Taylor, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 1977). See also Fredric Jameson, "Antinomies of the Realism-Modernism Debate," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3 (2012): 475-85.
  55. Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre?" (1931), *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 150.
  56. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 249.
  57. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), 259.
  58. Sergei Eisenstein, "Organic Unity and Pathos in the Composition of Potemkin," in *Notes of A Film Director*, ed. R.Yurenev, trans. X.Danko (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 53-56.
  59. Bertolt Brecht, epilogue to *Arturo Ui* (1941).
  60. Bertolt Brecht in conversation with Friedrich Wolf (25 January 1949), in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1968), 267.
  61. Roland Barthes, "Mother Courage Blind" (1955), in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 34.
  62. Roland Barthes, "The Poor and the Proletariat," in *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 35-37.
  63. Roland Barthes, "A Sympathetic Worker," in *Mythologies* (1957), trans. Annette Lavers and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 70-72.
  64. Roland Barthes, "The Poor and the Proletariat," 36.
  65. Louis Althusser, "The Piccolo Teatro: Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a Materialist Theatre" (1962), *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 145-46.
  66. Louis Althusser, "The Piccolo Teatro: Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a Materialist Theatre" (1962), 146.
  67. Louis Althusser, "From Capital to Marx's Philosophy," *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970), 15.
  68. Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema—Directors and Directions: 1929-1968* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 45.
  69. Pauline Kael, "The Grapes of Wrath," in *I Lost It at the Movies* (New York: Bantam, 1966), 260.
  70. Pauline Kael, "Bonnie and Clyde," *New Yorker Magazine*, October 2, 1967.
  71. The film Bonnie and Clyde get to see is Mervyn LeRoy's *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933). Patricia and Michel see Budd Boetticher's *Westbound* (1959).
  72. Fritz Lang and Bertolt Brecht would also collaborate on *Hangmen Also Die* (1941), which was however an unhappy experience for Brecht, who reportedly refused to have his name credited, allowing only "from an idea by Brecht" to be written.
  73. Jacques Rancière, "The missing shot: the poetics of Nicholas Ray," in *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 95-106.

74. Theodor W. Adorno, "Transparencies on Film" (1966), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981): 199-205.
75. Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Godard: Cities and Car wrecks," *Film Society Review* 4:2 (1968).
76. See Jean-Louis Baudry, "Cinema: effects idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base," *Cinéthique* 7-8 (1970): 1-8. Jean-Louis Comolli, "Technique et idéologie," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 229 (1971): 4-21, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 230 (1971): 51-57, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 231 (1971): 42-49, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 233 (1971): 39-45, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 234-235 (1971): 94-100, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 241 (1972): 20-24.
77. Editors of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, "Young Mr. Lincoln, texte collectif," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 223 (1970), English translation published in *Screen* 13:3 (1972). Ford's film, the critics argued, is so eager to bolster capitalist ideology and cover over political antagonism with morality, that it cannot help crumbling under the weight of its own contradictions. The character of Lincoln is shown to be contradictory, split between powerlessness and dreaded violence.
78. In Marxist-Leninist thought the Maoist credo "all things invariably divide into two" was considered as the basic law of materialist dialectics, in contrast to "fusing two into one"—the reconciliation of contradictions—which was considered as reactionary theory.
79. Godard's *Tout va bien* is explicitly indebted to Brecht's "Notes to the opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*" (1930).
80. "The masses don't need the intellectual to gain knowledge," thus wrote Michel Foucault in the aftermath of the events that erupted on the world scene at the end of the 1960s, "they know perfectly well, without illusion; they know far better than he and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves." Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, "Intellectuals and Power" (1972), in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1994), 75. May 1968 led to an explosion of the Althusserian project, whose theories underwrote the denunciation of the uprisings as a petit-bourgeois movement, one whose actors were in fact the victims of the bourgeois ideology they unconsciously assimilated. This explosion led to a devaluation of the figure of the theoretician and a revaluation of the figure of worker, whose values, customs and knowledge, which had been criticized by Marxist science as "illusionist," were now held in a positive light.
81. Karl Marx, letter to Arnold Ruge (September, 1843), accessed April 29, 2016, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43\\_09.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm).
82. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014).
83. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 312.
84. Serge Daney, "L'ethnographie militante de Thomas Harlan," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 301 (1979): 43.
85. Serge Daney, "La Rampe (bis)," in *La Rampe: cahier critique 1970-82* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma/Gallimard, 1983), 171.
86. Gilles Deleuze, "Letter to Serge Daney: Optimism, Pessimism, and Travel," preface to Serge Daney, *Ciné journal 1981-1986* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1986).
87. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1985), 2.
88. Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 13.
89. Being reminded of today's continuing laments of a cinema that has supposedly lost its innocence, I wonder... The lost innocence of "before," this Garden of Eden so eagerly longed for, isn't it continuously being thought up by those who come "after"? Lindsay Anderson, another Ford-aficionado, has spoken about his experience of re-watching *The Grapes of Wrath* as "looking into the Garden of Eden, looking at our own lost innocence." At the same time, he couldn't help expressing a bitterness towards the nostalgic tendency of being "unhealthily in love with one's youth." Making a film such as *The Grapes of Wrath* might have taken an act of courage, he said, but now it's up to us to make our own acts of courage. See Scott Eyman, *Print the Legend: The Life and Times of John Ford* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 207. Jacques Rancière has reminded us that this nostalgia for the time of innocence has, since about two centuries, become the law of art, as expressed in the Schillerian opposition between the "naïve" art that presents itself as the natural expression of a mode of collective life, and "sentimental" art that views itself as separated from the prosaic and is obliged to establish its value in opposition to that world. The sentimental considers itself as an art that has lost its naïve unity, art that knows it is art. "It's always in the past that art has been rooted in life, witness in the present of a world. It's always the poetry that comes after (since two centuries it is called "criticism") that invents this poetry of before in which the child is united with the old man, and the savvy and is united with the man of the people." Jacques Rancière, "La politique des auteurs, ce qu'il en reste," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 559 (2001): 36-38.
90. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), 49.
91. See Robin Wood, "Two Films by Michael Cimino," in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 270-317.
92. Jacques Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics," *Critical Horizons* 7:1 (2006): 1-20.
93. Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano, "Filming the Crisis: A Survey," *Film Quarterly* 65:1 (2011): 39-51. A conversation with Alberto Toscano was held on February 18, 2014.
94. Jacques Rancière, "Il est arrivé quelque chose au reel," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 545 (2000): 52-54.
95. Luc Dardenne, *Au dos de nos images* (Paris: Edition Seuil, 2005), 25.
96. Jacques Rancière, "L'utilisation du temps—les moments cinématographiques," lecture at MaMa, Zagreb, October 5, 2015.
97. See Jacques Rancière, "Éclats de lumière," *Trafic* 86 (2013): 70-73. In the framework of *Figures of Dissent*, a conversation with Sylvain George was held on March 8, 2016.
98. See Jacques Rancière, "La Lettre de Ventura," *Trafic* 61 (2007): 5-9 and Jacques Rancière "L'étrange tribunal," *Le Monde diplomatique* 589 (2003): 28.
99. This argument was brought forward by Jacques Rancière in his talk "L'utilisation du temps—les moments cinématographiques." Parallels between *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Colossal Youth* have also been pointed out by Andy Rector on <http://kinoslang.blogspot.com>.
100. Louis Althusser, "The Piccolo Teatro: Bertolazzi and Brecht. Notes on a Materialist Theatre" (1962), *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 137-38.



## Sarah Vanhee

1. John Akomfrah, "Black Independent Filmmaking: A Statement by the Black Audio Film Collective," *Artrage: Inter-Cultural Arts Magazine* 3/4 (1983): 29-30.
2. Bertolt Brecht, "Extraits du Journal de travail" (Journal Entry of March 27, 1942), *Cahiers du Cinéma* 254-5 (1974): 84.
3. Robert Smithson, "A Cinematic Atopia," *Artforum* 10:1 (1971): 53. In the essay, Smithson described how he would like to "build a cinema in a cave or an abandoned mine, and film the process of its construction. That film would be the only film shown in the cave." Smithson also devised a sketch for this project, which played on the term "underground cinema" and the resonances with Plato's allegory of the cave, with the inscription, "Towards the Development of a Cinema Cavern, or the Moviegoer as Spelunker."
4. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Cinéma: effets idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base," *Cinéthique* 7-8 (1970): 1-8. Jean-Louis Comolli, "Technique et idéologie," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 229 (1971): 4-21, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 230 (1971): 51-57, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 231 (1971): 42-49, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 233 (1971): 39-45, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 234-235 (1971): 94-100, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 241 (1972): 20-24. What Baudry, Comolli and others targeted was the cinematographic *dispositif* or apparatus, which was suspected of being shot through with ideology, by producing a "reality effect" of "subject effect," an "impression of reality" which spectators mistake for reality itself. The apparatus not only makes spectators identify uncritically with the ideological underpinnings of what is seen, but it also, by presenting an imaginary coherence, confirms the self as omniscient, all-knowing center of the world. In short, the function of the cinematic apparatus is to reproduce an idealist ideology, an illusory sensation that what we see is indeed "objective reality," all the more so because we believe we call it into being.
5. Robert Smithson, "A Cinematic Atopia," 53.
6. An example can be found in this fragment from a manifesto written by Valie Export and Peter Weibel (who were part of the Viennese *Film-Coop* in the late 1960s and early 1970s), published on the occasion of a public event in Munich in 1969: "Our event declares that the time of visual communications as profane religious image adoration, of the theatre as secular temples, of the cinema as secularized churches to be terminated. It declares all these institutions as instruments of domination, which bind the individuals to the values, goals, norms of the state (...) all that mystic, magic and religion of the image-thinking as archaic technologies of ecstasy, the symbolizations as technologies of repressive socialization (...) It thus declares an end to this era of homology, identification, of the relations of representation of that epistemological system, which from the eighth to the twentieth century has managed to dominate and repress the consciousness of the people, to be terminated." Peter Weibel, *Kritik der Kunst – Kunst der Kritik* (Jugend & Volk: Vienna, 1973), 62.
7. Chris Marker, voice-over in *Groupe Medvedkine, Die Kamera in der Fabrik* (1970), an edit of *A bientôt j'espère* (1968) and *Classe de Lutte* (1969), produced for German television. The *Groupe Medvedkine* was named after the Soviet director Alexander Medvedkin, who in 1932 had traveled around the Soviet Union in a specially equipped "ciné-train."
8. The Dziga Vertov Group, *Pravda* (1970).
9. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema" (1969), in *Movies and Methods Volume I*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 51.
10. The book version of *La Société du Spectacle* dates back to 1967. The images of Custer are taken from Raoul Walsh, *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941).
11. Guy Debord, "In and Against Cinema," trans. Reuben Keehan, *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (1958), accessed April 29, 2016, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/cinema.html>.
12. Guy Debord, "Lettre à Mezioud Ouldamer" (November 22, 1985), trans. NOT BORED!, accessed April 29, 2016, <http://www.notbored.org/debord-22November1985.html>.
13. Stéphane Zagdanski, *La mort dans l'oeil: critique du cinéma comme vision, domination, falsification, éradication, fascination, manipulation, dévastation, usurpation* (Paris: édition Maren Sell, 2004).
14. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014). Original citation is "Dans un monde réellement inversé, le vrai est un moment du faux". Guy Debord, *Société du Spectacle* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1967), 9.
15. Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theater" (1975), in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 346.
16. In his 1926 essay "Cult of Distraction," Siegfried Kracauer insisted on the importance of a cinema of distraction that could "expose disintegration instead of masking it" and save spectators from "sink(ing) into the abyss" of the film. Arguing against the contemplative concentration that he saw as characteristic of the bourgeois mode of stable sensory experience, Kracauer located the emancipatory potential of distraction in its capacity to retool perception in light of the new sensorial economy of modernity. A decade later, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin defined "reception in distraction" as "a symptom of profound changes in apperception," which "finds in film its true training ground." According to Benjamin, cinema's effect of distraction—or shock—"seeks to induce heightened attention." By eradicating the auratic distance between spectator and aesthetic representation, cinema was thought to be able to break down the auratic distance between producer and recipient—in other words, to empower spectators to become actors. However, just as Kracauer maligned the films that force back distraction, as a reflection on the disorder of the world, into a unity that no longer exists, Benjamin maligned the dominant system of film production and distribution under capitalism for "trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion promoting spectacles and dubious speculations," forcing the masses back into the passive role of spectators. For another reading of the notion of "distraction" see for example Martin Heidegger's critique of mass culture and communication technologies, which, rather than engendering "concern"—perception guided by circumspection and contemplation—contribute to a state of "distraction," characterized by a "never dwelling anywhere" and an "absorption" in the shallowness of ever-changing perceptions. See Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction" (1926), *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 323-28; Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936), in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19-55; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), trans. Joan Stambaugh, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010). For an account on the history of the relation between attention and distraction, see Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

17. Chrissie Iles, "Between the Still and Moving Image," in *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001), 4.
18. Dominique Païni, "Le Retour du flâneur/The Return of the Flâneur," *Art Press* 255 (2000): 33-40.
19. Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action (June 1957)," trans. Ken Knabb, accessed April 29, 2016, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html>.
20. Erika Balsom, "Screening Rooms: The Movie Theatre in/and the Gallery," *Public: Art/Culture/Ideas* 40 (2010): 24-39. Erika Balsom writes about Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *The Paradise Institute* (2001) that "the work mobilizes the cinema situation to stage a relationality normally missing from the spaces of art." About Rirkrit Tiravanija and Douglas Gordon's *Cinema Liberté Bar Lounge* (1996), she writes that it "calls upon cinema as a way of reviving a 'lost horizon' of public experience wherein temporary and provisional collectivities might be formed through the face-to-face encounter." According to her, these works take up the task of forging a "politics of relationality (Zusammenhang)." What is shown on the screens that are part of these installations is not expanded upon.
21. Serge Daney, "Du défilement au défilé," *La Recherche photographique* 7 (1989): 49-51.
22. Raymond Bellour, "The Pensive Spectator," *Wide Angle* 9:1 (1984): 6-10.
23. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).
24. Elie Faure, "A silver-screen symphony" (1937), *UNESCO Courier* 48:7/8 (1995): 41. Around the same time, Walter Benjamin wrote about the "simultaneous collective reception" which characterizes the viewing of a film, and Louis Delluc wrote that "cinema is the only spectacle where all crowds meet and unite (...). It draws not the people but the crowd." Daniel Banda and José Moure, eds., *Le Cinéma: naissance d'un art 1895-1920* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), 507.
25. Antonin Artaud, "Witchcraft and the Cinema," in *Collected Works, vol. 3*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder and Boyars, 1972), 66.
26. "This is not just a film showing, nor is it a show; rather, it is, above all A MEETING—an act of anti-imperialist unity; this is a place only for those who feel identified with this struggle, because here there is no room for spectators or for accomplices of the enemy; here there is room only for the authors and protagonists of the process which the film attempts to bear witness to and to deepen. The film is the pretext for dialogue, for the seeking and finding of wills. It is a report that we place before you for your consideration, to be debated after the showing." Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, *La hora de los hornos* (1968)
27. "Notre but est de diviser les gens et non de les réunir, à l'encontre de la télévision." Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, "Pourquoi tout va bien?," interview by Marlène Belilos, Michel Boujut, Jean-Claude Deschamps and Pierre-Henri Zoller, *Politique Hebdo* 26, April 27, 1972. In an interview featured on the Criterion edition of *Tout va Bien* (1972), the last film that Godard and Gorin made as the Dziga Vertov Group, Gorin says that "a political film was essentially an operation in which you went to church and you saw on the screen something you profoundly agreed with. So there was no surprise; you came and you prayed at that church, and you were persuaded that what was on the screen was going to explain or illustrate either the evils that you were yourself fighting against, or the glorious fights against that evil that you were yourself sustaining. We made films that bypassed that system and wanted to divide the audience, creating the possibility of discussion had no pretence at all, contrary to what people thought about being politically correct in any way shape or form. We were as incorrect as it was possible to be."
28. Margaret Thatcher, interview in *Woman's Own*, September 23, 1987.
29. Margaret Thatcher, speech to Conservative Central Council, March 27, 1982.
30. "I prefer to believe that certain lessons have been learned from experience, that we are coming, slowly, painfully, to an autumn of understanding. And I hope that it will be followed by a winter of common sense. If it is not, we shall not be—diverted from our course." Margaret Thatcher, speech to the Conservative Party Conference, October 10, 1980.
31. Margaret Thatcher, interview in *Daily Telegraph*, May 22, 1980.
32. Walter Benjamin, "Linke Melancholie: Zu Erich Kästners neuem Gedichtbuch," *Die Gesellschaft* 8:1 (1931): 181-84. See also Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2* 26:3 (1999): 19-27.
33. In a book that since then has tangibly, if not undisputedly, marked the theoretico-political landscape, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe identified the new social struggles as an "extension of the democratic revolution to a whole new series of social relations." Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 67.
34. Margaret Thatcher, TV interview for *Granada World in Action*, January 27, 1978, accessed 29 April 2016, <http://www.margarethatcher.org/document/103485>.
35. Sir Ronald Bell, interview on the BBC's documentary series *Panorama*. Quoted in Black Audio Film Collective, *Expeditions One: Signs of Empire* (1983).
36. In the framework of *Figures of Dissent*, conversations with John Akomfrah were held on November 20 and 21, 2013.
37. Jacques Rancière, "Marker and the Fiction of Memory," in *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2006), 157-70.
38. James Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 55.
39. Oliver Letwin, then adviser to Margaret Thatcher—and currently David Cameron's chief policy adviser—warded off cabinet pleas for assistance for black unemployed youth following the 1985 riots with the argument that any help would only end up in the "disco and drug trade." "Riots, criminality and social disintegration," he wrote, "are caused solely by individual characters and attitudes. So long as bad moral attitudes remain, all efforts to improve the inner cities will founder." "Letwin apologises over 1985 Broadwater Farm riot memo," BBC News site, 30 December, 2015, accessed 29 April 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-35192265>.
40. Salman Rushdie, "Songs doesn't know the score," *The Guardian*, January 12, 1987.
41. Stuart Hall, "Representation and the Media," a Media Education Foundation video lecture (1997), accessed April 29, 2016, [http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/409/transcript\\_409.pdf](http://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/409/transcript_409.pdf).
42. See, for example, Horace Ové's *Pressure* (1975), Menelik Shabazz, *Burning an Illusion* (1981), or Franco Rosso, *Babylon* (1980).
43. Orlando Patterson, *An Absence of Ruins* (London: Hutchinson, 1967).
44. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 233.
45. John Akomfrah, "Introduction to the morning sessions," *Framework, Third Scenario: Theory and the Politics of Location* 36 (1989), 5.

46. Cyrille Offermans, *Sporen van Montaigne* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1994), 23.
47. The Ethnic Minorities Committee was created in 1981 as a response to riots and increasing racial tension, subsequently followed by a new subsidiary called The Black Arts Division. At the same time Britain's film production union, the Association of Cinematograph Television & Allied Technicians, instituted the Grant-Aided Workshop Production Declaration in 1981. Through these two institutions and the help of Britain's Channel 4, the BAFC were able to become a franchised workshop in 1986.
48. Heike Ander and Nadja Rottner, eds., *Documenta 11\_ Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue* (Hatje Cantz Verlag: Ostfildern—Germany, 2002).
49. The screening took place in Khiasma ([www.khiasma.net](http://www.khiasma.net)) on 11 May 2012, in the context of "Occupation. Festival of Living Literatures and Words." I would like to thank Olivier Marboeuf for the kind invitation.

## Herman Asselberghs & Pieter Van Bogaert

1. Quote taken from Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera* (1928).
2. Jessica Pressler, "The Big Short Will Make You Furious All Over Again About 2008," *Vulture*, 30 November 2015.
3. See Thom Andersen and Noël Burch, *Red Hollywood* (1996) and Thom Andersen, "Red Hollywood," in *"Un-American" Hollywood: politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, eds. Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, Peter Stanfield (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 238–241. Thom Andersen and Noël Burch were both guests in the frame of the *Figures of Dissent* series.
4. Walter Benjamin about his friend's *Threepenny Novel* (1934), which he placed in the tradition of the detective fiction as a form of social criticism: "Brecht is concerned with politics: he makes visible the element of crime hidden in every business enterprise." Walter Benjamin, "Brecht's Threepenny Novel," *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1998), 75–84.
5. See Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivity. The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
6. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13:2 (1993), 151.
7. David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 151.
8. David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Knopf, 2010).
9. Jacques Rancière with Stoffel Debuysere (Minard, Ghent, 30 March 2017).
10. Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 168.
11. Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth," 168.
12. Hito Steyerl, "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post- Democracy", *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 99.
13. Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" *e-flux Journal* #49, November 2013.
14. Clint Burnham, *Fredric Jameson and The Wolf of Wall Street* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).
15. Deleuze borrowed the term "experimental night" from Jean-Louis Schefer. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 169.
16. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 60.
17. See Jacques Rancière "Is There a Deleuzian Aesthetics?," trans. Radmila Djordjevic, *Qui Parle* 14:2 (2004): 1–14.
18. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 176–77.
19. Herman Asselberghs in Dieter Roelstraete, ed., *Auguste Orts: Correspondence* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 37.
20. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 32.
21. "Cinema isn't theater, rather, it makes bodies out of grains." Gilles Deleuze, "The Brain Is the Screen," trans. Melissa McMuhan, *Discourse* Vol. 20, No. 3 (1998), 47–55. Originally published in *Cahiers du cinéma* 380 (1986).
22. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Mimique" (1886), in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 310.
23. Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondances," *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857).
24. Herman Asselberghs and Dieter Lesage, *After Empire* (Ghent: MER. Paper Kunsthalle, 2013).
25. Ricciota Canudo, *La naissance du sixième art* (1911).
26. Hito Steyerl and Marvin Jordan, "Politics of Post-Representation," *DIS Magazine*, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://dismagazine.com/disillusioned-2/62143/hito-steyerl-politics-of-post-representation/>
27. Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?," *e-flux Journal* #49 (2013).
28. Hito Steyerl, "The Language of Things," [eipcp.net](http://eipcp.net) (2006), accessed May 30, 2017, <http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/0606/steyerl/en>.
29. Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 172.
30. Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?," *e-flux Journal* #49 (2013).
31. Hito Steyerl, "The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 172.
32. Julio García Espinosa, "For an imperfect cinema" (1969), trans. Julianne Burton, *Jump Cut*, no. 20 (1979) 24–26. accessed May 30, 2017, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinesays/JC20folder/ImperfectCinema.html>.
33. Jodi Dean, "Images without Viewers," [fotomuseum.ch](http://fotomuseum.ch) (2016), accessed May 30, 2017, [https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/26418\\_images\\_without\\_viewers](https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/26418_images_without_viewers)
34. For an extensive analysis, see Jacques Rancière, "Seeing Things Through Things (Moscow, 1926)," *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Verso, 2013), 225–243.
35. Viktor Shklovsky saw Chaplin as an exemplar of his concept of "ostranienie," the operation of art that allowed for the transformation of something familiar into an experience of perceiving it for first time. Viktor Shklovsky, *Literature and Cinematography* (1922), trans. Irina Masinovsky (Champaign, IL: The Dalkey Archive Press, 2008).

36. For an extensive analysis, see Jacques Rancière, "The Machine and Its Shadow (Hollywood, 1916)," *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Verso, 2013), 191-206.
37. Slavoj Žižek on the website of Criterion, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.openculture.com/2015/01/slavoj-zizek-names-his-favorite-films-from-the-criterion-collection.html>
38. Aaron Schuster, "Comedy in Times of Austerity," in Ivana Novak, Jela Krečič, Mladen Dolar, eds., *Lubitsch can't wait* (Ljubljana: Kinoteka, Slovenian Cinematheque, 2014), 29.
39. Aaron Schuster, "Comedy in Times of Austerity," 32.
40. Jacques Rancière, "La porte du paradis," *Cahiers du cinéma*, n° 554 (2001).
41. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review*, Fall (1964), 515-530.
42. This observation can also be found in François Truffaut, "Lubitsch Was A Prince" (1968), *The Films in My Life*, trans. Leonard Mayhew (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 162-172.
43. Slavoj Žižek, "Lubitsch, the Poet of Cynical Wisdom?," Ivana Novak, Jela Krečič, Mladen Dolar, eds., *Lubitsch can't wait* (Ljubljana: Kinoteka, Slovenian Cinematheque, 2014), 181-205.
44. Theodor Adorno, "Commitment" (1962), in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor, trans. Francis McDonagh (London: Verso, 1977), 184.
45. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, eds., trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 165.
46. Theodor Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture" (1942), trans. Nicholas Walker, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essayson Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 55.
47. Hito Steyerl, "Art as Occupation: Claims for an Autonomy of Life," *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 172.
48. "Real life is indistinguishable from the movies", Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer asserted in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). An echo can be heard in this quote from Hito Steyerl: "We used to believe that fiction is the reflection of something that happened in reality, which was then exaggerated and embellished. But now we see everywhere fictions becoming real. Fictions are like architectural blueprints to create reality because people try to imitate fiction and they try to repeat it, live up to it or embody it, and then they get it wrong and then a new story starts." Hito Steyerl and Andrey Shental, "In the Junkyard of Wrecked Fictions," *Mute* (2013), accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/junkyard-wrecked-fictions>.
49. The term "panic-images" was proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman in his account of László Nemes' *Son of Saul* (2015). Georges Didi-Huberman, *Sortir du Noir* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 2015).
50. Kelly Reichardt and Xan Brooks.; "My films are just glimpses of people passing through," *The Guardian*, 21 August 2014, accessed May 30, 2017, [https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/21-sp-kelly-reichardt-my-films-are-just-glimpses-of-people-passing-through](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/21/sp-kelly-reichardt-my-films-are-just-glimpses-of-people-passing-through)
51. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1985)

## Afterthoughts

1. Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted," trans. Anthony Uhlmann, *SubStance* 24: 3-28 (1995): 3.
2. The program *In Between Times* (part of the Courtisane Festival 2016, March 23-27) included film works by Berwick Street Film Collective, Marc Karlin, Jon Sanders, James Scott, Humphrey Trevelyan, Marc Karlin, Cinema Action, Poster-Film Collective, and Black Audio Film Collective. In the context of this program, conversations were held with Ann Guedes and Steve Sprung.
3. Serge Daney, untitled, *Libération*, May 16, 1987, reprinted in *La Maison cinéma et le monde. Part 3-Les années "Libé" (1986-1991)* (Paris: P.O.L, 2012), 443.
4. In the framework of *Figures of Dissent*, conversations with Michel Khleifi were held on December 9, 2015 and March 24, 2016.
5. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936), in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 20.
6. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936), 26.
7. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" (1936), in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 91.
8. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936) and "Little History of Photography" (1931), in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
9. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" (1936), 79-95. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music – Text* (1967), ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-148.
10. Jean-Luc Godard, "What is to be done?," *Afterimage* 1 (1970).
11. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" (1936), 79.

A selection of these letters has previously been published by AraMer (ISBN 978 94 9232 124 4).



# Conversations



## On the borders of Fiction

### Conversation with Jacques Rancière

30 March 2017, Minard Ghent, on the occasion of the Courtisane Festival 2017.

How can cinema challenge us to imagine something other? This question has been stirring Jacques Rancière ever since he was taken in by the wave of cinephilia that churned through Paris in the 1960s. From his first interview in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1976, via his own series of writings for the same magazine between 1998 and 2001, to the publication of *La Fable cinématographique* (2001) and *Les écarts du cinéma* (2011), cinema has remained an important strain throughout his work, linking his longtime research into the scenes of social emancipation with his dwellings on the shores of politics and his ventures into the realms of aesthetics.

What all these areas of research have in common is an attention to what he has called “le partage du sensible” or “the distribution of the sensible:” the ways in which forms of practice and knowledge draw out a certain cartography of the common world, which we use to make sense of our world and how we take part in it. This cartography, according to Jacques Rancière, is articulated and established by way of fictions, meaning ways of framing and narrating the time we live in, with all its inherent possibilities and impossibilities, and how we are in tune or out of tune with that time.

During this conversation a selection of recent film works were chosen as a starting point for an exploration of the relations between cinema and fiction, and the workings of fiction in the art of cinema.

**Today we seem to be confronted with a certain scepticism in regards to the notion of “fiction”. There is of course the idea of “post-truth” which has become a commonplace in recent months, but also within the arts there is a growing fascination with the so-called “factual turn” or “documentary turn”. This seems to resonate with David Shields’ often quoted idea of a so-called “reality hunger” that has supposedly effected contemporary literature, favouring the testimonial and confessional and an openness to contingency and serendipity in opposition to contrived plots, characters and dialogue. The appeal to the authority of “real” experiences is thus set against the artificiality of imagined plots and scenarios. Counter to these tendencies, you have in recent years chosen to continue to explore ever deeper the spaces of modern fiction. What was for you the impetus to analyze the logics of avowed forms of**



**fiction? How do you situate your research in relation to the so-called “reality hunger”?**

I think “reality hunger” for me is a dubious notion. Because it tends to equate the taste for documentary with this reality hunger, the desire for the flesh, for the “reality“ of reality shows. For me fiction doesn’t mean the invention of imaginary beings but the creation of a certain structure of rationality, a structure for presenting facts, characters and situations, for connecting events. There is fiction everywhere, even in the news that we hear every day. So fiction in general is what creates a sense of reality. For me the idea that people don’t want fiction because they want reality has something strange about it. In the book of David Shields (*Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, 2010) there are basically two arguments, which are not really consistently related to one another. The first argument is about artifice, saying that since people now live in a universe of techniques and screens, they want reality as a compensation. That’s a rather weak argument. The second argument is quite different. It deals with the distinction between invention and imagination. The idea that documentary is on the side of imagination and fiction is on the side of invention – meaning that one has to invent characters, situations and so on. That is indeed not what documentary does, but what is important in documentary is that it is a kind of fiction in which you don’t have to make as if it were real. This shift is important: the point is not to create credible characters, situations and connections between events, because in a way they are real, so you don’t have to prove that they are possible. Which means that in the “documentary turn” there is no obsession with the flesh, or with the real. The question is not “Is it real?” but “What kind of reality is at play here?” Not “Is it real?”, but “How is it real? What does this kind of reality mean?” If you think of some authors who work between literature and cinema, like W.G. Sebald or Alexander Kluge, you could say they are part of some kind of documentary turn, but dealing with this question: “How is it real?” If you think of those photographs in Sebald’s book, they are supposed to document what is said but at the same time they have no real relation, no authentic relation, so the question is precisely “What is the kind of affect produced by a photograph?” And it is something that is more complex, more subtle, than the “flesh of reality”, or “reality hunger”.

I think documentary is not about confession, but about what it means to confess or to testify. My own position is to overturn the question, saying that it is not true that people want the real, that they don’t want fiction. Fiction is everywhere. The point is: where do we situate the starting point of fiction? What kind of arrangement makes something happen? In a way, we can say there is fiction

when there is some kind of development of narration, telling or showing us that something happens. This is why in my recent work I was most interested in the edge of fiction, the edge between nothing happens and something happens. I think it is time to dismiss all these suppositions that people are stupid, that they don't want fiction anymore because they want flesh. They don't want flesh, they want emotions. The question is what kind of emotion is produced by what kind of fiction. This is what I'm really working on. I just finished writing a book that is called *The Edges of Fiction*, which deals precisely with this really tiny distinction or invisible border between nothing happens and something happens.

**in *Délit de fiction* (2011), writer Luc Lang explains the inflation of fiction and the tendency to insist on the factual as a symptom of a wider cultural phenomenon, in reaction to the proliferation of “histoires vraies,” first-person journals and faits divers that saturate everyday life. In his account, the “literary democracy” of modern fiction has become the brouhaha of intimate stories which comes down to a recitative polyphony of one and the same discourse which is well-suited to the dominant ideology. This argumentation echoes with other recent tropes of criticism, like Adam Curtis’ denunciation of individual self-expression which supposedly feeds the conformity of our time. Is your investigation into the forces of fiction also a way to displace and question this atmosphere of disenchantment and scepticism?**

Basically, If you are a Jacotist, if you follow the ideas of Jacotot on intellectual emancipation, the question is about the starting point. Either you start from inequality or you start from equality. On the first side there is the argument saying that people are stupid, that they want flesh but they are offered “real” stories, which are entirely stereotyped, following the dominant ideology of individuality and individualism. Democracy is supposed to mean that everyone wants his or her own story. Everyone wants to express her- or himself, but they only reproduce dominant ideology. There is this kind of disdainful analysis which is very influential in the so-called intellectual world. I decided to start from the opposite side: saying first there is fiction everywhere and in fiction precisely there is an effort of making something of his or her own life. What interests me more specifically in fiction – perhaps we'll see some examples later – is this link between the fiction of the author and this capacity of fictioning that belongs to everybody. In my book I did a lot of research on Brazilian novelist João Guimarães Rosa, who wrote very short stories about this edge of something and nothing. Precisely with this idea of restaging the capacity of all the people, in this case peasants in Brazil, to

invent their own stories, their own fictions. We have also a striking example in the films of Abbas Kiarostami. In most of his films there is precisely a kind a tension — sometimes it's tension, sometimes it's collaboration — between the design of the filmmaker and this capacity of anyone to build a fiction. There is this famous example of the film *Close-Up* (1990), which is about this guy who passes himself off as Mohsen Makmalbaf, wanting to be recognized as a filmmaker. But even if you think of the films about the young boys and what happens in the villages after the earthquake, you have always this tension between the work of the filmmaker and this capacity of all the boys and girls of these faraway villages who want to have their characters, their own way of being in front of the camera that follows their own stories.<sup>1</sup> The question is whether you think fiction from the presupposition of inequality or the presupposition of equality.

**Why is it that artifice, or at least certain kinds of artifice, seem to have become so hard to bear? At the end of the 1990s – beginning of the 2000s, you have written a series of articles in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in which you've analysed how certain fictional forms of cinema — entanglements of the ordinary and extraordinary, of proximity and distance — have lost their bearings and their credibility. “Something has happened to the real,” you wrote, which has called into question “the real of fiction”. What was, in your observations then, this “something” that has upset the relation between the real and the fictional?**

This article was about a kind of political film, *Nadia et les hippopotames* (Dominique Cabrera, 1999), which is typical of a certain kind of film with strong political commitment, but at the same time following the idea that you must not be too political. So politics but not too much politics, or politics mixed with some kind of story, politics happening to people who are not politically committed. The film was about a single mother who happens to be near a train station in Paris during a big strike. There is an encounter between this single mother with her child and the strikers and unionists, with the effect that this woman who was there ad random becomes politically conscious while on the other hand the unionists who were politically rigid now become more human. What is really at issue here is not the artifice but a certain kind of artifice which I call “the real of fiction”. So there is this kind of real that tries to create this coincidence between political belief

---

1. Jacques Rancière is probably referring to Abbas Kiarostami's so-called “Koker Trilogy”, consisting of *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987) *Life and Nothing More* (1992) and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994).

and fictional credibility, a balance of making a film political but not too political, using fictional plots to create a distance from politics with the idea that you must erase the rigidity of political ideals or strategies to have people seduced by the emotional aspect of the story. I said we don't stand it anymore. Not because we can't stand artifice in general anymore. What has happened to the real is not the vanishing of the real, but that the real has become a matter of inquiry. No longer something to testify to, but something that you are in front of, asking what sense of the real is exactly constructed here.

We can no longer stand this kind of "political" fiction, because it happens that some filmmakers have started doing political films with the opposite idea, meaning by way of direct contact of political words and statements, ideas and ideals with real bodies, without mediation of a story, of feelings and so on. Think of the way in which Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet put the words of Vittorini or Pavese in bodies of people who are at the same time doing ordinary jobs in a little village in Tuscany and are at the same time actors in local theatres. They used this capacity of anybody to be an actor to create a direct relation between political statements and bodies. You can also think of what Jean-Luc Godard does in *Eloge de L'Amour* (2001) with the traces of history, in front of the building that was previously the Renault factory. We can think of a multiplicity of films of that kind. Think of the work of Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas or Kamal Aljafari, who are dealing with disappearance, inquiring how politics is inscribed in the landscape, in the presence or absence of traces.<sup>2</sup> In this particular article I dealt with Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), which takes the words of some witnesses and tries to stage the power of those words in the present, within certain landscapes. I think what happened to the real doesn't deal with the loss of the artifice, the privilege of the visual and so on: it deals with the fact that we have been accustomed to seeing those films that try to deal directly with politics, in our bodies, in our faces, in our voices.

**You have written and spoken on many occasions about the work of Pedro Costa, in particular about the series of films he has made with the inhabitants of Fontainhas. His latest, *Horse Money* (*Cavalo Dinheiro*, 2014), is certainly the most abstract of his films. Spaces and times are distorted beyond recognition and the tales and memories of its protagonists take on the form of**

---

2. See for instance Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil's *A Perfect Day* (2005) or *Je Veux Voir* (2008) and Kamal Aljafari's *Recollection* (2015). Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige were also among the guests of the DISSENT! series.

fabulations or hallucinations. His work seems to gradually remove itself from the chronicle form, as if the ascendancy of the fantastic cinema of Jacques Tourneur is increasingly creeping in. The world of Fontainhas is transformed into a shadowy world of night creatures brought about by way of an expressive use of lightning and as well as a kind of feverish rhythm of moving and gesturing. What is the importance for you of this growing “fantastical” or “mythological” dimension?

It is true that there has been a certain shift from the beginning of this cycle, which now consists of four films. The very first film, *Ossos* (1997), was still a kind of conventional fiction, while the second one, *In Vanda's Room* (2000), looked like a chronicle, following the character in her room, her drug addiction, her conversations with other drug addicts. Then in the following film, *Colossal Youth* (2006), it appeared more and more clearly that what looks like a chronicle of the life of some migrant workers was entirely a fiction, meaning it was made of some kind of theatrical performances, some little scenes which have some kind of Brechtianism about them but not in the same way as in Straub. Scenes in which they play or replay moments or episodes of their own life or the life of their colleagues, all the persons who came from Cape Verde to work in Portugal. More and more this theatrical performance becomes epic — something that looks like a travel into the Inferno, which stems from ancient epics, notably of Vergil, but also the Odyssey. This is what Pedro Costa wants to show — that these people are in our world, living amongst us but at the same time they don't really live amongst us, they are a kind of living dead. There is a moment at the end of *Colossal Youth* when they appear to be ghosts and this ghostly presence becomes a way of illustrating their situation.

In a way the hospital in *Horse Money* is something like the unconscious of our world, of neoliberalism, but for Costa it is also the unconscious of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal. In this series there is always this obsession with migrant workers because when young boys like him in 1974 were happy with the revolution the migrant workers were hiding because they were afraid of the revolutionary militias. You have here a kind of remembrance of this moment. The last film is of an extreme abstraction. From the very beginning it is clear that the hospital where it all happens is a double place: it is a normal hospital where people like Ventura and his friends who worked a lot and took a lot of drugs find themselves now, but it is also a two storey building — though we never see the exact division — where the underground becomes a place of the dead. As a matter of fact, in the scene you see the truck driving into a place which is in fact a mortuary in

Lisbon. So what is interesting in this film is that the quasi-chronicle aspect almost entirely disappeared. People make some kind of fables about their own life, but with characteristics pushed to the extreme. It is impossible to tell where it is reality, hallucination or memory, present or past. These people are supposed to be in a hospital in the 2010s but at the same time they remember scenes from the 1970s, the moment when they were young men competing for the same woman, I suppose. You don't exactly know what happens, if it is just a scuffle between two young workers who play ladykillers or if it is an aggression by the soldiers. So there is an indiscernability, an indistinction of what happens in this place.

What I think is interesting is that the fantastic is not made by any recourse to ghosts but by the bodies of those people which are the bodies of the workers who have been working, drinking, sniffing for forty years and now bear the stigmas on their body, but on the body they also wear the clothes of young men. You see the red shirt of Tito and in the sequence just before you see the extraordinary embroiled shirt of the young Ventura but now worn by the old Ventura. There is a relation between real stigmas of a life on one hand and a disguise on the other. They are both people wearing history on their body and people playing history as actors. I think this is something really strong. This is something Pedro Costa wants to show: what is the real condition of the life of these people. So in a way fiction — a rather sophisticated fiction — is needed to account for the reality of their lives.

**In *Colossal Youth*, Ventura was still able to traverse different spaces which also evoked different sensible worlds. *Horse Money* mostly takes place in a hospital or an asylum, a space of confinement and hauntings. Does that indicate for you a difficulty of creating possibilities for transgression between worlds?**

The fact is that Pedro Costa has been working with the same actors, the same characters like Ventura and some of his colleagues for many years. What happens is the exhaustion of those people. Pedro Costa, when I saw him, said that it was more and more difficult to work with Ventura. It is a problem. You cannot imagine Pedro Costa hiring an actor to play the role of Ventura. As long as it is possible those people have to play their own life. One of those people you saw on the screen died last year in Germany. We must think it is a kind of end to the story for those people. I don't know if it was the intention from the very beginning of Pedro Costa to make a film in this space of confinement. But with those workers, with Ventura, it was a kind of space where it was possible to move on, to follow the fiction. It seems to be a fiction of the end, but with the idea that it is possible to overturn things. Ventura and his colleagues are increasingly weak, and unable to stand up, but in the same

way Costa is more allowed to leave the chronicle and play with this trembling of the hand, which is I suppose a trembling of the hand of Ventura now. But we have it in this shot which is supposed to show something happening forty years before. There is a kind of abstraction in this relation between present and past, the so-called real to the imaginary. A kind of radicalization. I think that Costa thinks that he is now allowed to stress this kind of mythological aspect to put stronger stress on this situation of these people who are invisible, who have lived for forty years in our world, dying in an invisible way. Being this kind of hidden secret of our world. This is why at the end I would say there is kind of settling of scores with the Carnation revolution and with leftists enthusiasm. The almost last scene of the film takes place in an elevator with Ventura in the hospital pyjama with a former soldier of the Portuguese revolution, covered with gold, like a statue. It is a dialogue that is a non-dialogue between an exhausted worker and a soldier that has become a bronze statue of the revolution.

**At the same time, Costa never stops mentioning the influence of photographers such as Jacob Riis and Walker Evans, as well as filmmakers such as Charles Chaplin or Jean Renoir — a certain realist tradition of photographic and cinematic representation of “the common man” or “the other half”. Costa finds in their work a degree of concentration and condensation which brings out a sharing in a common humanity. Would you yourself situate Costa in this lineage, and what do you think is so specific — in aesthetics terms — in the works of this realist tradition?**

It's really difficult, because yes, there is this homage given to Jacob Riis in the first shots. Riis was a photographer who at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century made a series of photographs which were compiled in a book *How the Other Half lives*, showing poor people living in poor tenements in NY. In the middle of the film you also have some shots that seem to be modern replicas, showing the hidden side of the world in the suburbs of Lisbon. So you have the political reference to people dealing with “the other half”, but I am also struck by the selection of the images that Costa made. They are not so much about misery as about people not exactly fitting in their space, for example this big black man who seems to be too wide for the screen, or these close-ups of Ventura in the hospital from a high angle. Or on the contrary, people who do not seem to be occupying the space. So I think there is some kind of formal framing that he takes from Jacob Riis rather than a political stress on misery. There is also some kind of joke, I think, because there is also this photography of Riis in the beginning where you see two people in a boat under a

bridge, it doesn't connote or denote misery but it has a similar framing than the scene at the end of *Colossal Youth* with Ventura and Lento going under a bridge in a boat. At this moment the boat is not a signifier of misery or poverty but of the river of death.

**Earlier you spoke of emotion. What kind of emotion does this kind of framing, this kind of relation between figure and frame bring out for you?**

For me, the emotion is of being in front of these people who at the same time share and not share the same world. They set to work the same capacity and at the same time are not seen setting to work that capacity. People who fit and don't fit the spaces. They occupy the space but, specifically in *Horse Money*, they are on the edge of leaving, meaning at the edge of dying. I think there is something of the last performance, something that might remind us of Chaplin's *Limelight* (1952) — the last performance<sup>3</sup>.

**How to think about cinematic approaches towards limit situations of injustice and desperation in terms of aesthetics? I'm also thinking of the documentary work of Wang Bing — in particular 'Til Madness Do Us Part (Feng Ai, 2013), another film that, like *Horse Money*, deals with imprisonment in a hospital. Bing's camera drifts from one subject to the other, capturing their movements and expressions in long takes which constantly negotiate a distance that balances on a thin line between respectfulness and intrusion. In that regard, his work has often been evaluated in moral terms and criticized as "voyeuristic" in the face of a misery which is too vast to fit into an image. Is there a way of taking the measure of a film's experience of distance and proximity in aesthetical rather than moral terms?**

There are two positions. There is the position: this is aesthetic and not moral. For filmmakers like Wang Bing or Pedro Costa, in a way aesthetics and morals are quite the same thing. The point is to know how you deal with the characters in front of you, how you deal with their bodies. Where you put your camera, but also how much time you spend with them. And there is some kind of madness in Wang Bing's film about the asylum. It might seem quite unbearable to stay in front of those people for four hours. But what is important is the time taken by Wang Bing.

---

3. Although it was not quite his last film, *Limelight's* story of an old comedian doing one last performance is generally considered as Charlie Chaplin's farewell.



The point is to turn what seem like symptoms of delirium or madness into some form of action. In a way it's also about the capacity of the bodies, of the persons themselves. In the beginning there is a scene with just a form under a sheet. It seems there is a kind of discussion between those persons whether they just go to bed or they do something. And it seems like Wang Bing's decision coincides with a decision of these people to do something rather than simply staying in bed. What Wang Bing does is spending time to transform what can be a manic ritual into some form of action and to transform their discourse into a history that is told.

There is this episode with this young man running around the floor. He's there as if doing some kind of morning jogging. And this guy we see standing at his bed rubbing his face, we don't know exactly what he is doing and afterwards we see him writing things on his legs. What I think is important is that Bing takes enough time to transform this unintelligible manic ritual in some kind of performance. Which doesn't mean he transforms them into actors, like Pedro Costa does, but there is this aspect of taking enough time. Which means that the question is not of voyeurism but what kind of look is given. A clinical picture is turned into some kind of performance. And I'm also struck by the way in which the camera walks with the characters, sometimes runs with them, as if to open the space. What is very fascinating in the film is the way the camera all the time seems to open the spaces, which are very confined, so precisely. To transform the closed space into an open space of some kind of action. The most desperate part of the film is a scene about a man who can go back home for ten or fifteen days and it is the worst moment because he is at home and he doesn't know what to do and his wife and the people around him doesn't know what to do with them.

**As you mention, one major difference between Costa and Bing's work is that in the first the characters are restaging and in doing so in a way also transform their own life. In the case of Bing this element of performance is absent, so the task of aesthetic invention and transformation is much more the filmmaker's. Doesn't that also make the exchange more fragile or unequal? How to attend to that inequality so that the characters get a force of their own?**

If we think of this short excerpt I'm struck by this respect of the camera. In this instant I think the camera has to be close to show what he's doing — writing on his own body. Of course it is not the kind of performance you can ask of someone. Pedro Costa asks his characters to repeat words, to play scenes, to add gestures. That's not the case here. There is a given. Nobody knows exactly why this boy is

doing what he's doing but for him there is something important in doing this. Also when he's writing "virtuous thought" there are two possible attitudes: either one says it's nothing, it's only voyeurism to look at it. But you can take another position and say: it is something important for this person. Bing selects the points where the gestures, the behaviour of the mad or the criminal — because there are all sorts of people in this institution — can be connected, can be similar to the gestures of normal men. Again, not making it a kind of repetitive ritual, but making it something that happens as if at this very moment they were doing a specific action. Of course, he cannot ask them to do this or that gesture. It is their invention, but precisely he turns it into an invention and not simply a clinical symptom.

***Horse Money* is perhaps also Costa's most melancholic and mournful film, as it evokes an anguish that is felt by those who are trying to come to terms with the prolonged fallout of imperialism and the collapse of revolutionary struggles. On the surface, its form — "A Baudelarian night", as Costa has called it — might seem inappropriate to accompany the urgency of our times or the forms of resistance that we see rising today. And yet, you see in Costa's cinema an actualisation of the stance taken by Straub and Huillet: that of non-reconciliation. Where does its force of non-reconciliation and affirmation situate itself for you?**

Non-reconciliation means several things. Non-reconciliation, for me, means no explanation. You cannot say we all know there is capitalism, relations of production and migrant workers coming into Europe under bad conditions etc. No, in a way what Costa does is dismissing this attitude. We are not allowed to feel comfortable because we know the causes of what we see. Also, there is this visual aspect of non-reconciliation: people who are visibly in our world and at the same time are not. A kind of contradiction which is at the very surface of the image. Especially when the necessity to show the unseen in fact tips over into the fantastic.

**The intertwining of different temporalities which is central to Costa's latest films is also at the heart of what might be one of the most remarkable debut films in recent years: Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* (*Lu Bian Ye Can*, 2015). A film that was made for a small budget with mostly non-actors and a first-time cinematographer, but which manifests an admirable imaginative boldness. The fantastic and the real, past, present and future are interwoven with one other. Do you see this "drifting" form, interlacing several times and spaces — which finds a synthesis in the extraordinary, epic 40-minute single**

**one-take shot which travels through space, time, memory — as a cinematic prolongation of the inventions of modern fiction in literature?**

Yes and no — of course. It is true that this kind of drifting form — I'm not only thinking of the long take and its technical performance, but rather of the kind of narration — has some features which really belong to the tradition of modern fiction: dealing with so-called details, with spaces, gestures, objects, emotions on a face rather than big plots. Secondly, there is a sort of continuum, not unlike in Pedro Costa's work, where present and past and here also the future are mixed up, as well as so-called reality, imagination, memory, hallucination. All is taken in the same continuum. The difficulty is that in the novel it's relatively easy to deal with this kind of difference of time and temporalities and levels of reality. The writer can shift his or her position and sometimes get into the mind of a character and see things through a character. Which means that the synthesis of past and present, perception and memory can be made in one mode of enunciation. This was performed for the first time by Flaubert and his "free indirect style," which was a model of modern narration. The problem is that in spite what Passolini and Deleuze have written about cinema and "free indirect style," it doesn't work in cinema. It is not possible for the camera to play the same game of proximity and distance between the narrator and the character. Which means that the synthesis of times and levels of reality cannot be done by some form of subjectivity. You know that the attempts with subjective camera — when the camera plays a character — were rather failures in general.

So what is important is that in films like this the synthesis must be done from the outside and notably by the role played by the words. It is more evident with all the poems in this film. It's quite interesting that the words in the film are in the space: you don't really see them in the mouth of a character. There is a very striking sequence when the character Chen, who is now a doctor but who has been in prison in ten years for being involved in a crime, on a certain moment has to go to a village where he is supposed to meet the former lover of the old doctor and bring him a shirt and a tape. At this moment he also meets the person who was an accomplice in the crime. They are in the car and he is telling his story but we don't see his face or the face of his companion. What we see are the curves of the road. The words that tell the story are in the space. That is one of the procedures from which the synthesis can be made from the outside. There is also the role of objects, which are sometimes part of the decor, sometimes memories of the past like the shirt and the tape, and sometimes take part in a form of exchange because at the end he wears the shirt himself and he gives the tape to someone he meets in the village.

The second point is that the space itself must have several uses and be the place for what happens now, what happened in the past and what will happen in the future. In this long shot there are a lot of metamorphoses. In the village we see Chen telling his story from afar, in the mirror, but during the same process he becomes either the young man that he was in the past and the young man who is now the nephew that he is looking for. There is this confusion: we don't know exactly if he is performing his role in the present, remembering his past or anticipating the future of the young boy. What is interesting is that in a way it is normal that a shot, an image, a sentence never tells by itself whether it is actual, remembrance or hallucination, past or present. In classical fiction there are marks of distance, of shifts. In Hollywood films for example the image starts trembling to announce a remembrance of the past. Here there is a mingling of times with no signs of distinction. So it is "fantastic" but with quite simple means. There are no ghosts, no "Uncle Boonmee"...

**Still, *Kaili Blues* has often been compared to the work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Like Costa's, and on the surface perhaps also like Apichatpong's films, the world constructed is an enigmatic world of ghosts and phantoms, haunting memories and historic traumas, where the dead and the living share a certain commonality. It is as if the enigmatic has come to save fiction from the exhausted narrative laws of necessity and catharsis, of social codification and legibility, to account for the reality of our time. As if it's the only mode left where different worlds can encounter one another. Does this particular sensibility towards the enigmatic say something about our actual sensible landscape?**

We must remember that it takes place in China. On one hand there is a reference to a specific form of Chinese poetry — he says that the film has been made like poetry from the Song Dynasty. There is also a reference to Buddhism and the idea that there is no distinction between past, present and future in thought. There are those references to Chinese culture and it is clear that those references are increasingly coming to the fore in the period after the Cultural Revolution. Also for me it's clear that the enigma is not so much a taste for the enigmatic in itself but an interrogation of a young man — he is 28 — about the world in which he lives. Most of the shots in the first part are visual interrogations on the world in which he lives, after which comes the interrogation about the past. The enigma is also: "from what kind of history do we inherit?" There is always this relation between the personal story of the characters and the Cultural Revolution. There

is a moment in the village when we see a young man with a bin on his head left in the middle of the road by thugs. It is clear that it is a reference to the Cultural Revolution and to the kind of punishments that were inflicted on the “counter-revolutionaries.”

So I think that the enigmatic aspect of the film is linked to the enigma of the communist or post-communist world and history. There are some filmmakers who put the stress on the continuity of situations of destitution and injustice like Wang Bing, or of continuations of situations of violence like Jia Zhangke. What Bi Gan does is focusing on time itself. How to tell a story? When I was looking at this film, I was remembering a film of the 1960s that I really hated which is Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961). There is the idea that Resnais' distorted temporality is appropriate because it is a story of well-off and idle people gathered in a palace. But this kind of “appropriation” between the complications of temporality and complicated “elite” characters does not work at all. On the contrary the confusion of times perfectly works with the ordinary people of Bi Gan because they inherit of a twisted history with which they don't know how to cope.

**Fiction bordering on non-fiction: this can also be said of the work of Kelly Reichardt. In her latest film, *Certain Women* (2016), she chronicles a few days in the lives of four women who are struggling to stay afloat and to connect in the small towns and ranches of the rural Midwest of the US. Her characters — like those in Maile Meloy's short stories on which the three episodes are based — are animated by a kind of quiet desperation as they go about their daily routines and wander about the vast landscapes. Reichardt herself says that her films are “just glimpses of people passing through.” What is it for you in these “glimpses” which makes these drifting bodies “stand out” of the landscapes which always threaten to swallow them? What is it in their performance and in their *mise-en-scène* that establishes their singularity?**

What is interesting is that three of the four women in the film don't really stand out, there are mainly there to ask the question: “Is this a real world?” Only one of those women is a married woman and she is deceived by her husband and despised by her daughter. So it's not about the domestic oppression of women. Women are rather here at the edge of several worlds. One of them is a lawyer with only uninteresting cases and more specifically that of a worker who had an accident and wants to sue the company which is not possible because of an earlier settlement. So the case is entirely desperate and at a certain moment he will take

her hostage. The second story is about a woman who has a dream of living on the countryside and having a natural life, of having a house made of sandstone, etc. She seems to be entirely alone with her dream. The third story is that of a lawyer played by Kirstin Stewart who in the same way is seen as going to a non-place just for money to give a class to teachers. But there is a fourth woman, the Indian rancher who on some day, she doesn't know why, goes into that classroom. In a way I would say she is really the character who stands out because she is not simply a sociological character. Nor is she here to show solitude or desperation. She is a character who is perfectly adapted to her routine but at a certain moment deviates from her normal life. You see her doing her job, doing it well, and in the classroom she sees this elegant lady from the big town. She's fascinated and this last story is about this fascination, which at the end is deceived. There is a kind of imbalance in the role played by all these women: three of them are testifying to a certain state of social reality in a certain geographical zone. But this other character is a real cinematographic character who is for me in the line of some other characters in the history of cinema. I'm thinking of *The Postmaster* (1961) by Satyajit Ray, which has a young girl who is a servant for the postman who sets out to teach her to write, but at the end he leaves. It is the same kind of one-way love story because the other one who is the learned person is absolutely unable to see what is at play in their relation. In both cases it is the illiterate person who is able to feel something different, to get out of her line. In most cases this kind of characters faithful to a deviation are women, like Ginnie in Vincente Minelli's *Some came running* (1958) or girls like Estike in Bela Tarr's *Satantango* (1994).

**The characters in *Certain Women* are constantly craving for connection — even on the radio we hear voices of people calling in to connect over the airwaves — but are somehow confirmed in their solitude. It's something that strikes me quite often in contemporary cinema: a sensibility of rootlessness, solitude and desolation, a difficulty to — visually and fictionally — become associated with collective life. What do you think about this relation between isolation and community in contemporary cinema, in relation to, for example, the “realist” cinema of the 1930s, of Jean Renoir and co:**

There are different kinds of contemporary cinema. You can certainly find certain kinds of cinema where there is a commonality or where there is an attempt to revive a kind of social cinema of the old times. It's certainly not a general case, but it is true that many films which try to deal with a certain question, with the sense of what is our world today, are not simply dealing with solitude but with

the idea that collective life is not given, that it has to be won. What is striking in this film is the way how these little towns in Montana are shown. If you type “Belgrade, Montana” on Google, you see that there is a big stadium, so it’s more than a hamlet with a few houses and a snack bar.<sup>4</sup> But in the film it is shown as a kind of non-place. So you have characters who are engaged in relations which are not real relationships. What is interesting is this idea that there must be some kind of miracle to have real encounters.

I think there is a relation between contemporary cinematographic fictions — or at least their most acute forms — and the problems of contemporary politics. We are in a time when big collectives no more exist. Political relations have to be constructed by encounters. This is something that has been very important in the Occupy movements or the movements on the squares in recent years. There is the idea that the community between those who are in the street is no more given by a certain state of social relationships, it has to be built, and this can be done only through singular encounters.

*An edited version of this interview was published on [www.sabzian.be](http://www.sabzian.be).*

*A video registration of the talk can be found on [www.diagonalthoughts.com](http://www.diagonalthoughts.com).*

*Thank you to Jacques Rancière for the corrections.*

---

4. Jacques Rancière here seems to make the same mistake that the character of Kristin Stewart makes in the film: she mistakes Belfry, where her classes are actually taking place, for Belgrade.







## **Between the Fire and the Voice**

### **Conversation with John Akomfrah**

20 November 2013, Cinematek Brussels.

*Handsworth Songs* was the first film John Akomfrah made as a member of the Black Audio Film Collective, a group of artists, critics and filmmakers who set out to intervene in the cultural debates around black identity and representation that were raging all over Britain in the 1980s. The film, in many ways the key work of the collective, was made in response to the riots that broke out in September 1985, when roughly three hundred residents of Birmingham's multi-ethnic suburb of Handsworth came into violent contact with the local police force. The violence was presented by the government as a solely criminal event with racial overtones, as yet another manifestation of the disintegration of norms regarding "law and order". Confronted with the rhetorics surrounding these events, the challenge for Akomfrah and the collective was then to find a form that could address and problematize the dominant representation of the riots in particular and the figuration of race and ethnicity in general. The events in Handsworth resonated with other uprisings that had swept through England's inner cities throughout the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. From the Notting Hill Carnival in 1976 and the "riots" which ignited nationwide in 1981, to the uprisings sparked in response to the shooting of Cherry Groce in Brixton and the death of Cynthia Jarrett in Tottenham in 1985: these were the events that painfully exposed the gap between the dominant discourses on 'Britishness' and what was intimately experienced by the "children of the Windrush generation", those whose parents formed the first mass wave of migration from the Caribbean, the Indian Sub Continent and Africa during the 1950s, those 'bastard children of 1968' who came of age in a Britain that still carried with it so many unresolved ghosts from its colonial past. These were the events that crystallised what was felt by many: a sense of discrimination, marginalisation and downpression, cultivated by a state power deciding who belongs and who does not, who is the same and who is other, who has the right to speak and to be heard, and who merely emits senseless noise. At the heart of liberal realism, supposedly freed of archaic impulses and immature passions, a consensual order in which the rationalization of social roles went hand in hand with a propagation of a certain multiculturalism, a new racism roared its ugly head: one propelled and maintained by the state itself. Who could not forget the words of the infamous speech given by Thatcher in the run-up to the

1979 election, stating that the once so proud empire “might be rather swamped by people of a different culture”, upsetting the hearts and minds of its hardworking people? Who could forget the sight of Sir Ronald Bell on the set of BBC’s Panorama studio, disdainfully gesturing at the screen behind him showing footage of the ‘civil disorders’ of 1981, and saying: “If you look at their faces... I think they don’t know who they are or what they are. And really, what you’re asking me is how the hell one gives them the kind of sense of belonging young Englishmen have?”

These are the words that marked a whole generation, a generation who felt trapped in history, and was anxious to reclaim an affective counter-memory that could intervene in the official versions of historical continuity and national identity. For many of those who were coming of age in the England of the 1980s, who were painfully confronted with the complacency of a dominant order that contended to have ‘history on its side’ and the contempt of an imagined community in which they did not seem to have any part, the forage into counter-memory was not only a way of undoing the complicity of past, present and future, but moreover of the distribution of allocated places and roles that defined Thatcher’s “Englishness”. The organisation of representations and reasoning that shaped this reality had to be challenged and displaced by way of forms and narratives that could somehow express the uncertainties and anxieties that affectively contradicted and disrupted the state of consensus; forms and narratives that could establish new relations with the past: a past that had produced oppression, inequality, exploitation and discrimination, but had also grown inward, a haunting, unbinding past that had inflicted agonizing wounds and bruises to the sense of identity and collectivity.

John Akomfrah: “There’s a moment of apocrypha that for me underwrites personally the coming of *Handsworth Songs*. It was in 1981. Now, you’ve got to remember that the 1981 disturbances in the streets of London and across the country were being re-enacted by people of my age and that’s not too surprising because we were almost certainly the first post-migrant generation. Think about the demographic shifts that took place in England between 1949 and ’59: about 1.5 million people came across from Africa, the Caribbean, the West Indies, ... It takes about four or five years to find your feet, so if you start to have kids in the beginning of the 1960’s, they turn 18 in 1981, give or take a few years. That demographic block which comes of age between 1976 and ’85, those who are the offspring of the original migrant settlers, are historically unusual because for the first time a culture has to find a way of processing them. But they are also historically unusual because in a very real sense they spell the coming of the ‘hyphen’. In other words these are people who will be uniquely hybrid, but not in

the way that is nowadays fashionably spoken about. They are black British, yes, but their identities will be formed in that space between the two. Because both categories exist prior to them.

This is the first group that was coming into being in that gap between the two, and it was a complicated becoming: part of the complexity had to do with how much of the Faustian bargain pact my generation would make with its history, with its past. The past said: “your parents came here to clean, sweep up the floors, and ‘say yes sir, no sir’”. How much of that will you embrace? If you decide to embrace that, you’re a migrant. But this is an impossible demand to make of that generation because the amnesia that characterized that becoming is not deliberate. Many of these people don’t know an elsewhere. They can’t rely on the resources of an elsewhere to make this bargain, so they necessarily have to be subversive, because subversion just meant “no, I won’t be that”.

Before *Handsworth Songs*, we did a piece called *Signs of Empire*, and one of the speeches we used came from 1981 when a conservative minister said over and over again: “these people don’t know who they are or what they are. And really what you’re asking me” — and I’m quoting verbatim — “is how one gives them a sense of belonging”. Now he was speaking from the right of the political spectrum but I believe that in that particular instance he was voicing a common sentiment, which is: “who the fuck are these young people? We really don’t know who they are”. But crucially they don’t know who they are either. And there’s an element of truth in that. So when *Handsworth* happened, when it became clear that you had both a birth and death agony at the same time, we had to do something about it.

As for my moment of apocrypha: I remember standing in Brixton, London — then an area of large black settlements — during the riots of 1981. I have a camera and while I’m photographing stuff I see a group of policemen — young, in their twenties, very scared — who’ve got these shields and they are banging on them and screaming “kill, kill, kill!”, because they were trying to find some energy and courage. I was surrounded by all these journalists who were doing the exact same thing as I was. Now the next days’ newspapers all had that story of these policemen. But something interesting had happened — there was this “kill, kill, kill!” as the headline but rather than coming from the police these were now the words being uttered by the rioters. And that for me was a major lesson. Because I suddenly realized that there is something called a ‘regime of representation’ in which people play particular roles, narrative roles. In that regime at the time it was impossible to imagine that a group of police officers would be saying those words, ergo it had to be the young black people. So I became aware very early on that there

was something called a 'slippery signifier' and that it was really all about naming. This was about undermining or confirming certain narrative expectations. And we — because many of the people who went on to form the collective were also around at that time — we became aware of this discrepancy between the fact and the naming of the fact. Part of the way in which you came into being as a subject was to choose the ability, to choose the terrain on which you name who you are. You had to involve yourself in that process."

*As part of the act of "naming things anew", the collective had to look for narratives and forms that could undo and rearticulate the trajectories that framed the existing landscape of reality, and redraw the topography of places, roles and competences inscribed in it. A critical response to cultural and socio-political commonplaces could no longer be found in the language of binary oppositions and substitutions, as it was cultivated by Screen theory and its discussions on ideological stereotyping, nor could it be found in the paradigms of 'cultural ethnography', with its vocations to represent the inner workings of a community's experiential reality. The problem did not lie in opposing the rhetorical messages that are disseminated through mass media or in, as Salman Rushdie suggested in his vexing critique on the film, "giving voice to the voiceless" by making heard their authentic colourful tales, but in questioning the way words and forms are interwoven in a common sense.*

John Akomfrah: "There are several interviews we did for the film. The first two guys they tell you why they do this. The Asian people tell you "we knew there was something wrong, the problem was ..." the point is that people might tell you what led to it but that doesn't explain the acts themselves. And that is the problem that most of the discourse runs into. In other words, as long as you keep insisting that the reasons why people make certain social acts are purposive, rational and programmatic, you're gonna miss the point, which is that we're not entirely rational in our actions. Psychoanalysts understand this now and we all understand. There are certain obsessive compulsive acts, there are certain acts of hysteria or anger, ... not everybody who's on the streets is saying to themselves "we're doing this to bring down racism in British society", they're just responding to it. I tried — like everybody else I was looking and asking around — but when we put it together, we realised it just wasn't enough. It didn't seem to explain the cataclysm. So you needed other ways of trying to do that and we did. We were editing this for a year trying to take seriously the folkloric and the ethnographic and it just wasn't there. There was always a gap between the fire and the voice.

When we almost finished the film there was a key British post-structuralist called Colin MacCabe, who was very close to Salman Rushdie. He said, "I love this

film, I'll show it to Salman and he will love it too". Salman did this article in the Guardian and it appeared that he hated the film. The key accusation that he made was that instead of telling stories we had rehashed bits and pieces from archives and this was the worst way of going about things. The argument was that we needed a certain ethnographic veracity and it was difficult then to persuade people that it's the very language of veracity that had to be challenged.

By the time we came to this film, we knew the cinema of Michael Powell, Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, Tarkovsky... We had seen everything because we had been to the same fucking schools as everyone else. But nobody believed that. We went to the arts council to get money to make 'avant-garde' films and they were like: "you can't because black people don't make avant-garde films." This was the environment. This was the primal scene of our becoming. Salman just couldn't believe any more than most people who ran the film funds that you might do this deliberately. The assumption is that if something exists like this it is because you don't know any other way of doing it.

What we wanted to do, and this is going to sound very pompous but I don't mean it that way, is to write a kind of feelroom about the coming of hybrid identities, to suggest that this is a kind of neural pathway. I'm not surprised that the work has some kind of resonance here in Brussels, because the condition of the diaspora is the same everywhere and always. In terms of impact on the community, it's always the same: people love it, some hate it. But it forced us to talk to each other about what the film is trying to say, which is really where are we and what do we want to say to each other about this country. Are we Ghanian, black, black British, how do we want to name ourselves? And I'm glad we made it because it helped that discussion.

We just wanted to say: "look, there are no stories in the riots, they're just ghosts of other stories". These are just infinite rehearsals for this moment, and in order to just understand this moment you need to sift through all of this. You've got to understand that nobody leaves their country saving up money for five years, getting up a boat to travel 10,000 miles to come anywhere to cause trouble. Nobody does this. So if someone with their family made this journey to come here and their kids are on the streets rioting, it means that something has happened in the nature of the pact made between them and you. Something has gone wrong. So in order to understand what has gone wrong you've got to go back, to look at the moments of affirmation and when this affirmation goes wrong. That is the only premise for the film, there is no other reason to make the film, because anybody else had done the other stuff before. You can still watch it every day on television: there will be a socialist MP and a conservative MP and a newscaster in-between — and he will

say, “Mister socialist, why are these young black people doing this?”, and he will answer “Oh well, because there is unemployment and policing, etc.” And then the newscaster will turn to mister conservative who will say “Ah, but these problems you are talking about: white people in poor areas also face the same problem, so that can’t be the reason why they are rioting, the reason why is because they’re black, they don’t belong.” There’s no amount of great storytelling that will get you around this problem. The problem is race. Everybody knows it, but everybody is trying to wish it away. So we had to confront it: yes, it is about race, yes, all the kids on the street rioting are black. But why is it about race? That’s the question.”

*There has always been a certain undecidability at the heart of the image, a tension between the composition of a distinctly visual sensibility, and a sensory fabric of indistinct intensities, circulating independent of any predetermined relationship of address. In other words, there is always a play with the variable significance of images, which are isolated to convey the tonality of the whole entity, or combined into an opaque object or dynamic form. It is this versatility of signs that has been dismissed by structuralist thought, which restored them to their signifying materiality. Within film culture, this tendency ultimately collapsed in endless discussions on ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ images, which more than often filled the pages of magazines such as Screen. The work of the Black Audio Film Collective can be considered as a break with the idea that there was a sort of wholesomeness to the image and that the response to dominant imagery had to be found in its antagonistic double. Their work was an attempt to render sensible the gaps and silences of Britain’s colonial history on the strength of the signs of those who had written it, addressing the uncertainties of the colonial archive and their effects on the diasporic condition by creating a space of poetic reflection in which the irreconcilable gaps and fissures between history and myth, the imagined and the experienced — there where diasporic histories lie in wait — can be excavated.*

John Akomfrah: “We were talking earlier about this distrust of ambivalence and agnosticism in regards to the truth of the image. Yes, all these kids are out on the streets, but the reasons why they’re there is not implicit in the image. This is the standard ethnographic myth: that if you see people breaking stones, somehow it gives you some insight in their being, in their nature. Bullshit, it doesn’t, it’s just them breaking stones. If you see people throwing Molotov cocktails, that’s what they are doing. What it means, that’s a different proposition. It seems to me that when you reach these conceptual ruptures in the tissue of the social, you have to go somewhere else in order to effect a kind of repair. You have to find resources from other spaces, other than what is immediately in front of you, to make sense of that. So the fact that we were sceptical about documentary realism had to do with that. With the fact that

you just had to question the value of the immediate, of what is immediately in front of you. Because sometimes it is telling you as much of the truth as it was lying.

The diasporic relationship to the archive is a very special one. In the case of the African diaspora in Europe in particular — between 1949 and '69 maybe 2 million people passed through — there is no epitaph, no monument anywhere that tells you that these people ever passed through. Most of them are dead now. The only tangible record of them ever having existed is the archive. But the archive is also paradoxical in the sense that these are also official memories of moments written in the language, or allegedly in the language of the official narratives. So from the beginning you have to have an ambivalent relation to the archive: everything that is in there — you see people coming off ships or boats, there is a voice-over saying “here are the immigrants, they’re going to be causing trouble” or “we have to be kind” — it’s the voice of the outsider of the interior of the archive. Most of these people have no idea that they’re already being constructed as a social problem before they’d even landed. So part of the ethical task in using this material is unravelling the polyvalent, to take apart the multiple meanings which are always present at the same time and make a choice about which of the possible meanings you are going to commandeer and use for certain aesthetic, cultural or political ends. And this starts with the realisation that things are always in multiple places at the same time.”

*Handsworth Songs does not assume a posture of urgency and emergency, as is typical of the so-called ‘militant’ films which attempt to take up the torch for those considered as ‘surplus’; it does not aim for the awakening of a political consciousness, as was the case for some films of Horace Ove, Menelik Shabazz, or Franco Rosso, who each in their own way attempted to express the sense of dread and disquiet that gripped 1970’s Britain. It rather proposes a rearrangement of words, images and sounds in another fabric of sensibility, one of intimacy and vulnerability. It takes on the tonality of an allegory, choosing the fragmentary and the incomplete over the symbolic and the whole, choosing doleful monody over dramatic discursiveness, the expression of sorrow over the rhetoric of agon. What persists is a sense of loss, of place and time, a loss that cannot be recovered but that leaves behind its traces, in images of departure and words of reminiscence. But there is also something else that remains vacated, another absence that haunts and taunts the lives of those portrayed: that which Orlando Patterson and Derek Walcott have called ‘the absence of ruins’, the lack of tangible documents or monuments, memorials or libraries, that legitimize the existence of those anonymous lives, of those who perish in the cracks of history, perish by never being allowed to go behind the definitions that others made of them, by not being allowed to spell their proper name or recount their own memories. What is felt, especially through the use of poetic*



*texts, is a melancholic agency who cannot know its history as the past, cannot capture its history through chronology, and does not know who it is except as the persistence of a certain unavailability and unavailability that keeps haunting the present.*

John Akomfrah: “When I first came across the phrase ‘the absence of ruins’ it helped me so much. It is a phrase by the Jamaican sociologist/novelist Orlando Patterson. He was using it to describe the new world, the Caribbean, and how it, as a place of the diasporic subject, is marked by the absence of ruins – ruins that suggest a kind a civilizing trace. There’s no Acropolis, no elegy marble, these are places formed on the basis of an ever present. It struck us that the absence of ruins characterizes all diasporic lives. It’s the sine qua non of the diaspora. It’s marked by an absence of tangible traces to your existence. The available means are partly the archival records and you have to look not only for what the archival trace says but also what it doesn’t say. Because sometimes it’s hidden there. So all the words we used in the project were ones we rewrote because we believed those sentiments, silent though they are, were present as well at the time when those images were shot.”

*He said to her, Remember Bunny Enriquez and Greta Borg and Lady June Barkeri.  
Remember Countess Corblunski with her black velvet top her skirt of figured net  
over satin.*

*Remember the nights of Coruba cocktails and Curuba sour, their secret  
pregnancies, your wet nursing and me nappy washing.*

*It is about time we had our own child.*

*Our own master George Hammond Banner Bart.*

John Akomfrah: “All of those names are from real people, based on research into Caribbean upper class life in the 1940s, so they are the very people many of the people inside the film would have left to get away from, because migration is a profoundly utopian act – you leave because things are gonna be better in the future, somewhere else. But by virtue of it being utopian it’s also a dystopian critique of where you’re leaving. It suggests that they are in flight. A number of the voice-overs were either to suggest what might be the reasons for flight or what might arrive – what you would meet in what Naipaul calls the ‘enigma of arrival’, because in the very real sense you are being made into something new. The journey of migration is the journey of diaspora. By the time you arrive you are something else. And you will never be the same again; you will never be a fola or wolof, you will now be something else and that something else is what that life you’re about to lead is about to discover, the implications of that something are what you about

to discover. These are deeply held sentiments that we felt the writing should aid people to understand. “I walk with my back to the sea, horizon straight ahead.” Well, which horizon? “Night time, I am the sea”. In the evening you might go the Caribbean, in your dreams, but in the daytime you will be here in this cold, in this space, this impossible space that you have chosen. This is the awful thing about migration, no matter how awful things are for you, you made that choice. So you have to deal with it, you have to process this decision that you’ve made. That’s the importance of the writing.”

*In the 1980s, when it became clear that the legacies of the Bandung moment and its varied postures of nonaligned sovereignty had effectively come to an end, the narratives of liberation and overcoming that sustained the force of the politically engaged cinematic practices from the 1960s could no longer hold the critical salience they once had. This was especially felt in regards to the legacy of the so-called ‘Third Cinema’, referring to the often militant cinema forms that were developed in subaltern cultures as an answer to the hegemony of western cinema and an instrument in the process of decolonization. “Inscribed in the militant and nationalist pretensions of the term ‘third cinema,’” wrote Akomfrah in 1988, “is a certainty which simply cannot be spoken anymore. A certainty of place, location and subjectivity. What now characterizes the ‘truths’ of cinema, politics and theory is uncertainty.” In times of uncertainty we can no longer hold on to these stories of salvation and redemption, depending upon a certain utopian horizon or a prospect of homogeneous collectivity toward which the emancipatory history is imagined to be moving. In times of uncertainty, as Cyrille Offermans wrote about Michel de Montaigne’s essays, other fictions tend to be created, reports of wanderings without preconceived maps or destinations, forms of inquiry that are not in search for the one and only Truth, but for a sincerity of small truths. As David Scott has written, there is a need of fictions that embrace the ‘unknowing’ and oppose the view of history as a chain of events on a ‘road to salvation’ with that of a broken series of paradoxes and reversals in which action is ever open to unaccountable contingency, chance and peripeteia.*

John Akomfrah: “The quote is from a journal that I co-edited. It was really about trying to grapple with what we called the ‘politics of location’. Now it seems to me that the politics of location debate is connected to the question you were asking about diaspora and the notion of uncertainty. Just to make it real simple, if I speak to my mum – or rather, when I could speak to her when she was alive – she would say “we Ghanians, we do this”. There was a certainty that underpinned the utterance of identity that I couldn’t use. Because I couldn’t speak with the same assurance, the same certainty about what a Ghanaian was. For the simple reason I didn’t really know – she did. The lack of not knowing has to do with this business

of diaspora, of relocation. Because I am being formed in her home, in the care and love and concern of her home. At the same time as I am being processed by something else: a school, an outside. So I have to work on the assumption that this uncertainty, this doppelgänger in my head saying “everything’s OK, don’t worry, you are really like everybody else” – that doppelgänger has to at one point meet the other phantom on this side of my shoulder saying “if you’re really like everybody else how come you are being treated in different ways?” In other words, you’re split psychically and culturally in ways that you begin to understand are references to how the society in itself is split towards you and people like you. At that moment you choose something. You say “I will be the product of this and that”. And it seems to me that this need to make uncertainty a militant gesture, the need to make the hybrid identity a condition of speech, this is what diasporas do. At some point you say “I will sit here and I will sing about river Jordan”. Because I now know that I’m not wholly of here, and will probably never be of there. So whatever I am going to become, has to be made of my will, effort, gestures which we’ll have to take from both somewhere. Uncertainty becomes the condition of speech.

David’s point, which I think is a really important one, was that there were moments when a certain political narrative could become endear to explain certain actions, certain moments of anti-colonial struggles. But in the absence of those things, do we measure the effectivity of current actions in relation to the so-called *pregivens*, the narratives of a past? In other words, if a bunch of kids is out on the streets, even helping themselves to 10.000 Nikes, if you can’t explain it by the discourse of socialist action, is the problem the theory or them? That’s what David is trying to grapple with: what happens in post-political times when the categories are not adequate to explaining the acts? What is the act now and how do we make sense of it without recourse to pre-existing ones, which by definition will say that these are not good enough? Because the pre-existing ones have models that are obviously always much more dramatic. In Ghana, in 1949, when Nkrumah started the CPP there was a country of 7.5 million people and 2.5 of them joined the party. It’s a mass party, so of course if you have that model in your head about anti-colonial struggle you’re going to run into problems when you hit the inner cities of London where there may be 10.000 people on the street who don’t and don’t want to belong to any party, and the cause they’re making is not for something clear.

After the 2011 riots in London there was this big event at Tate. Hundreds of people turned up to watch the film and to discuss it. Lots of people told us we had to make another film. But no! I believe very much in generations taking responsibility. The people on the streets in London in 2012 are not 45-55, they’re 25 and they have

to find their own way of articulating the reasons why, they have to find a narrative for speaking out. That doesn't mean I wouldn't help if I was asked but I will not initiate a project on another riot. Because the reason why we did it was because we wanted our generation to have it's own stake in the argument. I wouldn't do it for another generation, they have to do it themselves. I would help them but first and foremost they have to make the effort, otherwise it is not worth it.

We were very careful in *Handsworth Songs* to not take on the militant posture which says "these are revolutionary acts to bring down capital". I mean that's not what we were saying there. I'm not saying in *Handsworth Songs* that there were no criminal acts, but here's the thing: there's a tautology at work which you have to unmask. Criminals are subjects, you can't be tried as a mass for a crime. Crimes are committed by criminals. They have to be able to face the law as subjects. So if you have 10.000 people on the streets committing a crime, then something else is going on other than a crime. Since the singularity is missing. This is a mass act. One needs to discuss how a certain form of sociality in a place at a particular time takes that form. Why? It doesn't matter how many times you say, "it's just criminal". It doesn't help you to understand that. I don't believe, as many of my generation said about the event, that these were just kids interpellated by capital, that they just wanted Nike shoes, etc. If you want Nike shoes you can go buy them or steal them on your own. When you do that with 10.000 other people, you're making another sort of statement – as well as the fact that you want Nike shoes. So what is that statement? Why do people choose to bang together to do this in the name of Nike shoes, even if that's all it was?

The fact that there is no grand narrative at the heart of it may well be their modus operandi. If the modus operandi of an event is "we don't have a slogan", that seems to me to be a political gesture, a political statement. Question is: what is it? You need to unpick that. Some lazy cultural theorist who goes "oh, they don't have a political slogan, they went home and they took the fridge and the Nike shoes". Do your job, dude! You are the guy who is paid to think about the impossible, they don't have to. If you read the beginning of 'The Making of the English Working Class' by Edward Thompson, you never find anybody in the opening saying "we are the working class people, our historical mission is to take over capital." People don't speak like that. Nobody ever has. Bolsheviks might, but the people who joined the Kronstadt rebellion didn't say "we are the avant-garde of the working class." Nobody speaks like this. If you want the language, you have to make analysis, calculations, deductions, based on what you're seeing or reading about. To expect the actors to announce in pamphlet form or, even better, in three volumes of *Das Kapital* is an

impossible demand. Nobody has ever done it and no amount of young black kids are going to do it for you. It's that basic. I don't know of any social formation ever that did that. Including the most powerful one, the working class. There is no record. The moment when people become aware that they're a class for themselves comes two centuries later, but not when it's being formed. And that's an important point to remember when we make these accusations about people without a signal or orientation. People never do have those things."

*Handsworth Songs was made in a time when various 'endisms' started to make their way into the political and cultural imagination: the end of all grand narratives, of ideology and utopia, of politics and history, and ultimately the end of any meaningful time whatsoever. What was said to be dead and buried were the optimistic narratives that contained a historical faith in a possible transformation of the dominant world order, and the credibility of the theoretical models that sustained this faith with the promise of providing both the means to entangle the workings of our lived world and the weapons in the struggle for a new one. But this rhetoric also tainted the thinking about cinema: in the aftermath of the golden age of structuralism and semiology, there was talk of the death of the image, of the emergence of a certain post-cinema, a cinema that could no longer keep its promise and renounced its historical and political possibilities. The collective, however, did not concern itself with mourning the 'end of cinema' and lamenting the growing banality of signs and images, but on the contrary, with awakening the potential that is inside of them, a potential that is realized in new topographies of the significant and the insignificant, documents and monuments. The sense of mourning in Akomfrah's film does not seem to be prompted by a loyalty to a world of lost ideals or a helplessness in the face of catastrophe, it rather coincides with a resistance to closure, finality and fixation.*

John Akomfrah: "I started to make Super 8 films when I was very young and then I started up film societies. In fact, I am very proud of the fact that I was once beaten up for showing Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976) in a film club. Cinema was really important to me from the beginning. But the collective did start off working in the gallery and at some point, about a decade ago, everybody denied this was the case. I don't necessarily believe the theoreticians who announce the post-cinema moment, but it's clear that something is happening. It's clear that the disenchantment that we feel vis-à-vis the image is not just paranoia, it's clear that some of the questions that people of my generation and certain generations before felt were the providence of cinema are now being addressed in other spaces, other platforms, other spheres. So I'm trying to respond to all of that.

I don't love all cinema, there was a time when I could put my hand on my heart and say "I love cinema", but not anymore. I love certain kinds, forms, practices,

authors of cinema but I don't love cinema in general anymore. Because so much is consciously not for me. So I'm happy to find spaces in which it's possible to make some of the questions I want to pose. But I also think something happened just after the war. It had a long trajectory but essentially when you watch *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) or Rossellini stuff, you see a certain approach to the real. People say "we will be custodians of what you embody". A number of institutions then came up, television being one of them, who said "we too will join you in this contract with the real". I don't feel that this is the case anymore. I think the real is again a fugitive subject, a pariah subject. Certainly television is like "the real, we don't do that, we do reality TV but we don't do real stuff because it involves open-endedness, fluctuation and ambiguity". Suddenly all sorts of other spaces and platforms are receptive to the messiness of the real and they're willing to take it on. I'm happy to go there because first and foremost that's what took me into cinema. Because it was the custodian of that thing. Which it is not anymore, or at least not exclusively. You look at the opening sequence of *Ladri di biciclette* (1948) or *Roma città aperta* (1945) and you can see all of these things. The dialogue, the discussions, the critique, it is all there. The fact that it is presented doesn't mean that everything is accepted. There's a sort of analytic power at work which is open to the very messy, protean possibilities of the real. Some of my favourite stuff is from television of the 1960s: you watch it and there's just this obsession with the insignificant. Now everything means something. It's so tame, everything is 'meaningful'. It's that disenchantment with the real that I'm talking about, with its subversive, protean possibilities."

*An edited version of this interview was published on [www.sabzian.be](http://www.sabzian.be).*

*A video registration of the talk, as well as a transcript of a second conversation with John Akomfrah can be found on [www.diagonalthoughts.com](http://www.diagonalthoughts.com).*



## A Secret to be Shared

### Conversation with Pedro Costa

2 February 2013, Argos Brussels.

“We make films on high seas,” says Pedro Costa, “and as we do not have a book of laws, we work in a very dark area, which is memory.” Without predetermined structures to draw from, with few certainties to rely upon, Pedro Costa’s work is a continuous labour of arduous experimentation and utmost concentration. Ever since he first made his way into Fontainhas, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Lisbon, he has made it his life’s work to document the lives of its inhabitants, many of whom are immigrants from Cape Verde. But contrary to the rules of the filmmaking playbook, he does not rely on the traditional modes of documentary, aimed at providing testimony of the misery of the world and laying bare the dominant order of exploitation. Instead, his work is the result of a painstaking process of construction, building on shards of imagination emanating from memory of the actors and giving them form through the prism of his own retention of the history of cinema. These memories are the building blocks of a unique cinematic world, which is of profound intimacy and at the same time astonishing beauty, of a meticulous rigor and haunting resonance. Part of the tremendous force of these films is undoubtedly due to the desire, patience and dedication invested in them. It is this work of attention that opens up the poetic possibilities of the spaces that are lived in and the words that are lived out, giving the depicted lives being depicted the splendour and dignity they are usually denied. The epic dimension of venture, tragedy and sacrifice at the heart of exile — from elsewhere or from oneself — is particularly embodied in the figure of Ventura, the majestic wanderer somewhere in between Oedipus and King Lear, Tom Joad and Ethan Edwards, who is the main character in *Colossal Youth* (2006), as well as in Costa’s latest film *Horse Money* (2014). This time, even more than in the past, Ventura’s ruminations of lost struggles and violent experiences give out in zones of the unmoored and the delirious, revealing a restlessness and a disquiet that might open up to our own. Battling the demons of one’s history does not simply amount to a lamentation of brokenness and failure: it can also be a way of reclaiming and rethinking one’s own life, which already acts as a means of transforming it.

This conversation took place at a moment when Pedro Costa was still working on *Horse Money*. The film would only premiere more than a year later, but a first glimpse was already given in the short film *Sweet Exorcist* (*Lamento da Vida Jovem*, 2012). We decided to start off the evening with a screening of a film by



two filmmakers he greatly admires and with whom he made the film *Où git votre sourire enfoui?* (2001): Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. We chose *Umiliati* (2003), one of the films that Straub and Huillet have based on extracts from Elio Vittorini's *Le Donne di Messina* (1949).

The conversation took off with a quote by Jean-Marie Straub:

*“The spoken text, the words are not more important than the different rhythms and tempi of the actors, and their accents are not more important than their particular voices, caught in the instant, struggling with the noise, the air, the space, the sun and the wind; not more important than their unintentional sighs or any other small surprises of life recorded at the same time, like particular sounds which all of the sudden assume meaning; not more important than the effort, the work done by the actors, and the risk they take, like tightrope walkers or sleepwalkers, going through long fragments of a difficult text; not more important than the frame in which the actors are enclosed; or their movements or positions inside the frame or the background in front of which they find themselves; or the changes and the leaps of light and colour; not more important in any case than the cuts, the change of images, the shots.”*<sup>5</sup>

For me, every experience of the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet is the same as now, because this doesn't change. It never changes. It's difficult to talk about, because this very special film you chose is a very sad one. Especially for me, or for people who are experiencing what we are experiencing in the South, now with these austerity things happening — coming from here, from Brussels, actually. It's very simple, and nobody does this kind of work today. So this doesn't change. This kind of work is never done. I discovered that these films existed when I was younger. Now they do not exist anymore, period. And when I saw this for the first time, for me it had this amazing energy and sensuality....

The quote you read seems very concrete to me because I work in this field: I work with cuts, with this kind of rhetoric, so I know the procedure and sometimes I'm afraid. I do not take the risks that he speaks about, but sometimes I'm a little bit afraid. Whenever you do a cut, an infliction or an intonation, whenever you decide something, you have to assume that thing completely. And then I'm afraid. I think

---

5. Jean-Marie Straub, "Othon. Introduction à la présentation télévisée" (1977) as found in Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet, *écrits* (Paris: Independencia éditions, 2012), 73-74. Own translation.

everybody's afraid. More than before, more than yesterday. People do not take that risk anymore. So if we are here to talk about politics and ethics, I think that's the main issue.

It is as if we are in the position of one of the people in this film, Ventura: "What can I say, what can I do?" Either you are charmed or seduced by something, or you quit and you are left alone. That's what I feel, I'm really feeling alone. Not because I'm doing something special. Absolutely not. But I'm feeling alone. There's no more people working in this way. When I was younger this seemed to me a way to make politics... not to make a film, but politics. And it's the most beautiful thing for me. I was not at all seduced by the idea of making films or charmed by the guys with the guns. That's not the charm for me, it never was. The charm was to do something as violent, as gentle as everything that Straub says in this way. Against the language of cinema. Because this is not cinema, or rather, this is not the language of cinema.

I never believed in working inside the system. Because this happens outside the system. I Always believed in the outside. It's a position, and then you have to live with it. But you cannot turn the system around. I don't believe in that. I'm not that kind of person, I'm not that kind of citizen, I'm not that kind of filmmaker. You cannot work inside the language, you have to invent something else. There are some things in this film, and I'm sure you all know more films by Jean-Marie and Danièle — if you don't, I hope this one gives you some appetite — there are some things there that you have never seen before in your life, I'm sure of it. The guy knocking on the table: you have never seen this, never in this way. So it's a way of saying: let's cut the crap, we are trying to invent, we are trying to work, to search, find another way of pulling something from someone who doesn't know yet what he is going to do. You have to pull something out that he doesn't know he is capable of. That is the work, for me, that is the politics. To give appetite to the other one, so that he can go say something to his boss, his friend, his employee, his lover. He can say it in another way, not in the same old language.

They are the guys who have never let me down. I'm a fanatic. They are fanatics. I think it's the only way to talk about this kind of work. There is no other way of working in cinema or art. Did you see these mysterious shots of wood? It happens two or three times in the film. It's very strong. When you do things like that, you're done for the rest of your life. It's over. You cannot work in this town anymore. You have no more job in this town, in cinema. It's going very far. Sometimes if there is no reason to do it, you have to go beyond your fear. I tell you, I cannot do it. It's not a matter of talent. It's just that I don't work that much. It's that simple, there's no secret here. It's not a question of being well practiced in the ways of writing scripts,

it's not the number of films that you have seen... It's life, it's taking a risk that has nothing to do with cinema. Because we're not talking about cinema now.

It's a tension that is very hard to maintain because it's not in the films, it's in life. We all know it's very difficult to be in love all the time. At least, that's how I feel. I knew Danièle and I was very close to her, perhaps more than to Jean-Marie, and I know they were in love all the time. I'm not saying that you need to be in love to make art, or to live, to be alive, but it helps. Again, there are things here that you have never seen in your life. It means that they try to keep this tension at the maximum level. It's very young, very alive, very political, very resilient. All the words you want. But it's in life, not in cinema. Actually this is one of the least visual of their films, I think. Everything is what it is. Like one of them says, "it's here, it's what it is". So it's not film, it's something else. The difficult part is not making the film, it's believing in the film. It's believing that this is material, that this is more than material, that we can represent it in another way. The strength to believe in going from saying something to doing something. It's like Ventura trying to get up. You cannot get up nowadays. He can't get up, because he was seduced, charmed. This is a film that has death in it, that's why it's a sad film. There's something very "there". You die. You die for some things, you die seeing certain films. When you go to films today you don't die. But you have to die a little sometimes. Me, I died a thousand times. And I was not reborn immediately. Today it's only ghosts. I'm tired of them. There's no ghosts here. There's no tricks. It's something Jean-Marie always says, "you should never 'faire le malin' — play the smartass". These films never do this. They don't play the smartass. You choose this or you don't. I'm also very sad because we didn't win this. We lost.

There was a film before this one, called *Workers Peasants (Operai, contadini, 2001)*, which is about what happens before. These people tried to reinvent everything: this village, this life, this commune. In this particular film they quarrel, they discuss, they fight, there are some love stories... This is the sad epilogue. It felt so sad today. But it's so well done. There are no metaphors here. In films, there are usually constantly metaphors for everything, but they are the only artists I know who are beyond metaphor. It's all crystal clear. It is as sad as — when I think about them in a historical context — the last films by Eisenstein or Vertov, they have the same effect. I see them dying, lying down, giving up, taken down by the forces of progress and power. So it's a very sad film, but it's a film that has to be done. It all comes from Italian writers who were very important — Vittorini, Pavese and others. They didn't give up, but they were forced to stop writing. Pavese ended they way he did, Vittorini cried for the rest of his life. And we, we are still crying.

What they are saying is that they are a bit lost and don't know their way. That was in the original text and it's done perfectly: actors, camera, direction, flowers, rivers, things that pass... And ourselves: we are perfect in this film. When I saw *From the Clouds to the Resistance (Della Nuba Alla Resistenzai, 1979)* when I was younger, I fantasized that the movement in a film was not only there on the screen, but up here, in our head. So the work you have to do is not an intellectual work: if you understand, you understand, If you don't, go home, wait, grow older or forget, go somewhere else. It's a balance: you have the movement in your head, as if the camera is your head. For me, the camera was always in our eyes. That's why I say that these films are the fastest for me, because they make me think so much. This never happens to me with other filmmakers. Sometimes even Godard seems very slow. When I was younger I was a lot into music, and this was for me the exact correspondence to the music I was listening to, which was very noisy rock music, very simple, tense, nervous. Even Godard seems a bit more rhetorical, more stuck inside cinema. Even if he appears to be more revolutionary, more of a genius than this couple — which I do not think — sometimes I thought he was slowing down because of the rhetorics of the language. It's like poetry: they are poets. You're stuck if you're into language. Everybody knows that. At the same time you cannot do poetry with poetic words. You cannot write a poem with poetic terms. You have to escape, work, work a lot.

For me, work is, or at least it was the only thing left for me. I came a bit too late, at a very bad moment. The people I liked and the things I wanted to do were very “underground” — but not in the marginal sense, they were not fancy or elegant or making money: they were really despised. They still are, by the way: recently I tried to help produce a film of Straub, but I didn't manage. Anyway, at the same time Godard was in that very political moment, so nobody cared about him. Those were the things that inspired me. I was never into the avant-garde or experimental film, I was never seduced by it, I always thought it was too easy. It's my Capricorn side. When I go to museums and I see those videos, I always say “it's too easy, let's work a little bit more and be a bit more provocative.” To go beyond, you have to respect some things. It's hard to say, to confess, but you have to observe, and not forget things. For me, in experimental cinema, they forgot everything: Chaplin, Griffith, ... not the angles or the shots, but the spirit. I'm talking about politics. Experimental cinema pushed for a kind of politics that was not interesting for me. Guy Debord, for example, I was never into. Far from it.

When I started I was confronted with a big dilemma. I worked as an assistant for about ten years. It was a nightmare. I recently read some biography that said “he worked as an assistant and he gathered a lot of un-useful and traumatic

experiences”. It was exactly like that. I realised I did not want to work in this kind of thing. But it’s not like I’m going to try to change the industry or the rules. No, I just don’t want to work this way. But it took me three films and a lot of years to really get out. For them, it was a bit easier. I shouldn’t be saying this, but in the 1950s and ’60s, it was somewhat different. Me, I had to spend the 1990’s trying to figure out how to get off this train. I had to find the people, the place, the story, the narrative, the politics, everything, to be able to start again. It’s about production, in the Walter Benjamin sense. It’s the nights you spend thinking about production. The mornings you think about the art mean nothing. Or the nights when you think about the shot, or the girl, or the flower. It’s not like that. It’s a little bit abstract sometimes: it’s money, it’s cars, aspirin, social security, going up a stair, making a phone call, those kind of things that have to do with real fear. Should I call, should I explain, expose, should I go — like in the Clash song? That’s the risk. I think today it’s very difficult and I’m not really sure if the best way is not to work inside the system again. Not for me, but for young people. I’m outside, I’m retired.

I work alone too much, that’s my problem. I would like to work a little bit more with the people I usually work with. Not with technicians because that’s not really possible for me anymore. One thing Godard once said is that you have to have people around you who do the same things, someone at the camera or the sound who are really working with you. I could be here telling you that I have some partners, but I just don’t. It’s not that no-one knows what I’m doing, that it’s a secret or a mystery. It’s just because film has become economically very violent. I can’t find anyone to stay with me every day for six months. It’s not possible in my situation. I really want to make films that compete with Tarantino, I’m not kidding. I will always try, just like Jean-Marie, to put my film in the same place as Tarantino’s: in the cinema, in the multiplex. To make the same kind of objects, tell a story, more or less in a kind of rich way. We want to do the same thing, we want to be judged or appreciated in the same marketplace, even Jean-Marie wants that. But I can’t find people from the industry to work with me. Jean-Marie can’t, because he doesn’t have the money or the patience. I have a bit more patience, I think, but I spend more time. I can still have someone for the sound, because sound people are more sensitive, more here on this planet, as sound is more concrete. But a lot of others I can’t have. They want to be somewhere else, make films in Africa or in Brazil, they need the planes, the cars, the girls, the small talk. It’s the mythology of film and it’s very difficult to fight against that.

When I’m saying I don’t work enough, it’s perhaps because I’m working too much “on the other side”. After my years working as an assistant and doing a lot of

terrible things, I thought of only one thing: I have to demonstrate that film can be done in that place – Fontainhas. I have to tell these guys that film was born in this place. And it was so evident, so simple. Just see a film by Chaplin or Griffith: it was born there, in the street corner. So I spent a lot of years trying to explain ”this is a tripod, this is a camera, pointing there. And there’s a guy passing. We can go from here to something else and then there’s the sun and we can invent a scene...” Just telling a lot of people, friends, people that I like, that I wanted to do something with them. But in order to do that I needed them to understand. So I was making a transfer of everything that I knew to that place. We did two or three films that way. But I invested a lot in the production side of things, and perhaps that’s the good side of those films that I made. That they are made there, with those people. Something is felt, something comes from them too.

Everybody has one’s own secret awards, and mine is not the artistic value or compensation. It’s much more the work we did there — a lot of people worked for that. I don’t really like documentaries, I never liked them, but there is a certain documentation in what we did. And now it’s done, and people see it, they think and they reflect. And that has a value. It’s like Jean Rouch’s work: something that has value. It was important. But now it has become something else.

It’s the stupidity of me thinking that film was supposed to record human life. I did that, and now I’m stuck. I’m no place. Because I don’t like documentary — and it’s not that anyway. And I can’t go on recording something that doesn’t exist anymore. Fontainhas doesn’t exist anymore, physically, but most of all the soul is missing: they are broken, as broken as Ventura. So it’s too much for me to pull them back up again. I don’t know how. And now I’m into artistic deliriums, I’m afraid. I talked with Jean-Marie about that: we are doing things to forget, not to remember. First I was doing things to remember, now I ‘m doing things to forget. That’s my feeling. I cannot explain. Every time we get to something like the film you saw recently — *Sweet Exorcist* — I have the feeling we are doing films to forget a lot of things. Forget the life that went before, forget what we did, perhaps forget to start again. We have to start something new, but what? It has to be done, but I don’t see anything new in films.

I do not have the sets, the houses, the skies, the forest, the sea. They — Straub-Huillet — have taken that away from me. I cannot do a shot of the sea. I can’t. Even if the script says: “and then he looks at the sea”, I will never shoot a sea, I promise you. I don’t even have text to work with anymore. Because they, the people I’m working with, are forgetting. They have so many problems. Do you see what I mean? How do we start from here, alone, everybody alone, if there is no possibility of a collective thing. I don’t see it because I don’t talk with anyone. I don’t want to

be in the film-film thing. I can't. I can't do a film like Olivier Assayas. I don't know how. That mythology of film, for me it doesn't exist. It never existed.

In *Umiliati* you saw the soldiers, the guys with the red scarfs. They say they come to charm, to seduce. I'm not seduced by that. I was never seduced by cinema. It's so beautiful I have to tell once again the story of Rossellini. It was Truffaut — he made some nice films but his texts are really wonderful — who was talking about Rossellini, who he knew very well — he was his assistant for a while. He said: “you see, there are people who are not born to make films, Rossellini is one of them. Because he's not stupid, he's not an idiot. He hasn't got the naivety to make a film. Because you have to be a little bit stupid.” When Truffaut says “stupid” I know exactly what he means. Anyone who has tried to be behind the camera knows what it means. Faking, being stupid faking, faking being intelligent, faking a lot of things. Rossellini couldn't do that, he couldn't say “and now you kiss each other and you say I love you”. He just couldn't do that. He did several films like this. And Truffaut said that his work goes from the city of Rome — in *Roma, città aperta* — to a lot a little cities — in *Paisa*, a film shot all over Italy, from Sicily to the North — to an Island — *Stromboli* — and a continent — *Europe 51*, a very beautiful film. And then he wanted even more. Because he was loosing his beliefs, he was loosing it completely. You can see that in *Voyage in Italy*: It's a magnificent film, but he's completely nuts. You see him going away. And then he literally goes away to India — which is an amazing film. And after *India*, he goes to the abstract planet of ideas: Socrates, Jesus... He was out of his head, saying things like “TV is the future of democracy” and so on. What is nice about Truffaut is that he said: he was too stupid to be in this business. He never said he was too intelligent, too kind, too gentle. He never said that, but that's what he meant. This kind of people, like Jean-Marie, are too kind for this world, for this cinema. Too gentle, too intense to make films. So we should say that films should be something else. But what?

I felt it was important for me to look for something new, just for me, privately. Which means a little place on this planet to put my camera, and for that I had to convince the people around me that it was possible. Because they were saying “don't film this, this is ugly, this is poor, there is nothing to see. If you put a pistol, it will look much better”. My work was to try to convince them that we didn't need a pistol, or somebody saying “I love you”. It was very difficult, it still is. It's because of the mythology I was talking about. So when I did this part of the job it was obvious that I had to work with what I had, with what they gave me. One of them told me he wanted to do his text like if he was dying in the hospital. He really wanted to say his text that way. I resisted a bit, already thinking about the email or the fax

stating “dear sir, we are doing a film ... we want to ask your permission... etc.” I was already dying! I’m very lazy for this kind of thing. That’s the kind of work I don’t want to do. Because I think there are great things in not doing this work. If you don’t do it, it’s resistance. Even more so because you have to pay if you want to shoot in a hospital or a museum. For example, I wanted to film a painting in an art museum. They asked for 300 euro, I said “no, I won’t do it”. So I bought a book — from Taschen — and with a friend I cut out the thing and it’s exactly the same. They will see it, of course. I’ll probably put “museum” just to annoy them, but I won’t pay. Because it’s never used for the right purposes, it’s going into somebody’s pocket. To come back to the hospital scene: the guy had this idea to shoot the scene in a certain way — you never get this from professional actors or technicians — putting the bed in a certain position, putting something under the mattress so that he was bending a bit and so on. The shot is there, everything is white and there’s a big window with white violent light. And it’s a hospital. That’s what we’re doing now, trying to do something between extreme laziness and getting the things that are there.

Of course it’s more complicated than this, there is always some kind of fight. Of course they want to go to the real place. It’s part of our job to resist the institutions, in this case a hospital, or the government, the police. But it’s not that, it’s more about making them think about another kind of language. That’s what I want. It’s not a language, it should be something else. The experience should come from this kind of experience. This worked because he wanted to say something to his mother, it’s part of a very long process. This boy was in bad shape, because of drugs and so on. And me, I make films, I make something that people see and believe. So he took me as a postman to post a letter to his mother. “I’m going there to tell something to the mother. You will help me say that, you will put me in the right position. The best way for me to tell my mother some things: she didn’t help me”, “I’m dying. It’s your fault...” Very difficult things. This art direction comes from there, from a much more violent and difficult place. It always comes from a very serious thing. It’s not about faking, imitating or fantasizing. He believes in this, I don’t and when we get together, it works because he believes. That’s why I work with this kind of people behind and in front of the camera, because professionals do not believe. It’s always technological, technical, artistic. It’s never political.

I do not know anyone in this room who has seen more films by Andy Warhol than me, I mean completely. I challenge anyone. I always liked him, I really like the filmmaker, even more than Jean-Marie. He’s my kind of guy, as serious as Rocky, as strong, stubborn, as mellow as Straub. When he makes you cry, he makes you cry. I’ve seen Warhol’s films in film theatres, and I’ve been waiting in cues to buy a



ticket and 10, 20 minutes after the film starts, everybody goes away, just like for a Straub film. And I stay alone with two or three guys, one of them sleeping... In the same way that when you say "Straub", everybody goes away, screaming "marxist, terrorist, boring!" In the case of Warhol they say: "Rock 'n' Roll!". Nobody has the patience to really see. They see a picture, something from a catalogue from a museum. They never see the complete film. Like they have never seen this film and sometimes they have never seen a Charlie Chaplin film. It's that simple.

I made a film called *In Vanda's Room*. I was suffering to make this film, thinking, dying, I really worked a lot on this film, editing for two years. The suffering was very material. Two or three years after the film was made someone asked me, "have you ever seen Warhol's *Beauty 2?*". When I finally saw it, I had the feeling that he did it just like that .. "let's make a film"... he did and it was exactly the same as my film. So it took me two years, it took him in real time about one hour. It's a beautiful film, it has the same thing that I tried to do. I keep seeing the film again and again. It's a dilemma. I killed myself to do this and he doesn't give a shit and he does it. He doesn't give a shit, but he's a great filmmaker. The core of what I and him wanted to do is the same. What he says is on the bed everything is sexy, even peeling a potato. I write 50 pages about my film. That's the difference. Sometimes you have to go to the basic simple thing. There's more examples, but you have to see it, experience it. First you have to see the film. I am convinced there is a cloud of fog and dust surrounding a lot of film art aspects.

I met Antonio Reis when he was a teacher at film school. I went to this school because of him. He made me stay because at that time I was more into music. It was a difficult moment in those years. It was the moment of Straub of Godard and there was nothing more exiting than that. There were a lot of things coming from Europe: this kind of poetic cinema from Budapest or elsewhere, the kind that still exists today: guys with raincoats in places where it rains all the time. And I hate that. But it's also in music: I was into the Sex Pistols and my friends were into Joy Division. You have to choose. And at that moment film was like Joy Division. Very profound and artistic and philosophical. I'm joking of course, but I'm trying to define something that was awful for me. Everything that I didn't want was there in that school, and this guy was the only one that saved me, pulling me through. Because I was only saying this kind of bullshit "I hate this and that." I was just against. And he said "keep saying that, one day you will be tired of it and you will do something." And I had to do something one day.

Antonio Reis was very important, also because he was the only one in my country who gave me hope. More than hope: he showed that it was possible to

make a film in the Portuguese language. For me, films come a little bit from when I hear the words, what people say, the tone, how they pronounce. I hear a lot of things in films. I wouldn't say "class", but money. I hear how much they were paid: I see a film and the girl says "I love you" and I say "oh, 200 euro". I know how much it costs. I'm joking, but there's a segment in the film I made with Jean-Marie and Danièle in which they speak a little bit about this problem. Which is why sometimes when you work with non-professional actors — people who have other jobs in life and come to do this job as an extra thing — you get more, you get an accent. Accent is always a good thing. You get an imperfection, you get something less to get something more. And you fight with your imperfections. It's like the guy in the hospital: "I don't have to be in the hospital to tell you this. So I'm even more intense. See, I'm completely naked". What you get is this naked rawness. It's difficult to have this with an actor. I prefer this kind of surprises or accidents. I'm always challenged, amazed, surprised. It's a life I want, a life of surprise.

I would like my films to be shown as much as possible. Why not in a museum, a gallery, a video on the wall? It's all the same audience for me. When I started to make films as I'm doing them now I really wanted to have an audience. Now the people I work with are the audience. Each time I make a film, if it doesn't come out on DVD, I have to make 5000 copies. This abstract neighbourhood I'm always talking about exists. The houses are not there anymore, but the people exist. Some died, some are no longer there, but they have sons and cousins. Again it's this fascination for film: "I want to see my cousin, my dad's house, ..." So we make a film and we show it among ourselves. Some colleagues... I don't know if they want this kind of thing. They are content doing the film and showing it in Rotterdam or Berlin. At that moment, ten-fifteen years ago, I needed this response. It felt incomplete if I was doing that kind of work to stop there. Now it's even more difficult because there are no more theatres in that place there. No more neighbourhood, no more film theatres. When we showed the films there's was still a theatre. It's been torn down, it's a supermarket now. Like I told you, I lost.

Jean-Marie and perhaps Godard — I don't know him, with Jean-Marie and Danièle there's also the sentimental thing — I think they belong to an age, time, moment when this kind of work was for you and me. It was for a lot of people at the same time. It could be philosophy or poetry for all young boys and girls. Me, I cannot go beyond "the one". I can only attract one sad boy. Yes, There's quite a few of us here, but we're not a lot. If we pick up some sticks and fight, we will loose. Back then filmmaking and film experience still had some fascination, this kind of mystery that it always had: this emotion, this secret emotion just for you, when you see something

and you think “this is made just for me”. People shared the same secret. Everybody thought “this is mine”, but actually it belonged to everybody. Me, I cannot belong to everybody, although I wanted to. Tarantino apparently manages to be shared.

This kind of work — I’m not talking about commercial success, not even critical success — is not there anymore. It’s not the same world. That’s my experience, from my mother and father and grandfather and what they told me and what I saw when I was young. The films I experience now, I feel the difference. Yesterday somebody asked me “how is your workflow?” Workflow today means: the film you’re doing. Just the word makes everything different: “flow”. In my time it didn’t flow, it just stopped. Today the work flows. Workflow today means you shoot something and you go to the end and you show it on DCP. It’s the movement you make from the moment you say “action” to the moment you see it on the screen. No more shooting or editing. Something specific is lost. There’s no more shots, the work or the intensity you have to put in something to be a part of you. It’s no more. It’s something else.

There is a part of work in film that is gone, because of the workflow: the part “flow” is fake, the part “work” is fake. When I go to a lab today it’s completely phony: to change the shot, it takes you ten seconds. It’s not the speed, there’s just no work. The guys working in the labs are not working, but just pushing buttons. Again, they have a language inside them, a digital language in their brains, their hands, their eyes. I’m afraid in their hearts, already, and that blinds them a bit from what I’m trying to tell them. So what I’m trying to say is that there’s not enough work in the films that I see. There are films here and there, the problem is that they’re not seen. Never in the theatre. I’m afraid of things getting exactly the same. If you see a Thai film, all of them are exactly the same, they’re all about ghosts in the jungle. If you see a Portuguese film, they’re all the same. Everything is becoming the same.

This kind of work, the kind that stops: it puts obstacles in front of me every time. But with these obstacles, you jump or you don’t. If you don’t, just go away. There are some films that I admire, but I don’t jump. This kind of work that I like is very useful. Jean-Marie and Daniele never liked it when we talked like this, but I think it’s very useful. Like I think Jean Rouch was very useful. There are no more works like Jean Rouch being made in the world today. No more. Perhaps on TV, but how can you see that when there are 100.000 channels? Somebody has to tell me where. If someone goes somewhere with a camera it’s always for a different purpose. I’ve seen that so many times with young people nowadays, they take their small camera, go to a small island or a desert and they come back with a desert. That’s what I’m pessimistic about. This workflow, this language. The battle that is won is saying that cinema is a language. I fought against that a little bit. Not enough. The

Straubs have fought a lot, Godard fought a lot, Rouch fought a lot. It was supposed to become something else than a language. Breaking the grammar. But again: I don't believe in working inside the language. I don't even know if it's possible anymore not to. I think it was, this film we have seen is the proof. Even today some other filmmakers, very few, prove that it's possible sometimes. But it's not possible to be seen. I don't see how I can make a film and go to a theatre and people will come and pay a ticket to see it. No one will come. I know there's the Internet, streaming, downloading, I get a lot of things from different places, but it's a different kind of work... perhaps it will make me change something again. I don't know.

Actually, this digital revolution saved me a little bit. I did films with 35mm with big crews, producers, the normal things. When I got fed up and didn't know what to do, one of the things that saved me was those small digital cameras. I thought of doing something on 16mm with two or three friends, but even that was very expensive and technically too difficult for the thing we wanted to do. I did *Vanda* in 1998, a long time ago, and I guess I was one of the first to use those cameras. It's a bit pretentious to say that the small camera was just the same as the others, but it was. I thought about it like the others. At first I didn't believe in the digital thing, I thought it was very poor, but then slowly it became part of the day by day work. It dissolved everything that was technical, all the ambitions of having something else dissolved in this routine. What was good about it was that I found a routine that I never had in cinema. Every day, more or less, when I didn't shoot I was doing something else. But it's now been twenty years, and I see digital replacing the oldest ghosts of cinema again. Everything that I thought was over is coming back. Ghosts, projections... You have seen films by Murnau or Lang: it's very different. You cannot fake it. You cannot do it again, you have to do something else, but you have to break a little, be a bit violent, not gentle. You cannot be gentle with Murnau or Lang. The way people are, speak, act: they are from today. This is today. That woman: I know her. And I don't see that in today's cinema. Films by Warhol or Straub: that is the revolution. Proof is: nobody sees them.

*An edited version of this interview, as well as a transcript of a second conversation with Pedro Costa can be found on [www.diagonalthoughts.com](http://www.diagonalthoughts.com).*



## Figures of Dissent events

*Figures of Dissent: Pier Paolo Pasolini* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 8-9 June 2011)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*Figures of Dissent: Masao Adachi* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 23 November 2011)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*Figures of Dissent: Jean Genet* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 24 November 2011)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*Figures of Dissent: Thomas Harlan* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 16 February 2012)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*Reverberances* (Courtisane Festival 2012, Ghent, 21-25 March 2012)  
Screenings + talks. With film works by Robert Gardner, Robert Fenz, Thomas Harlan, José Filipe Costa, Eric Baudelaire, Philippe Grandrieux. Produced by Courtisane.

*Figures of Dissent: Johan Van der Keuken* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 3 May 2012)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*Occupation: Handsworth Songs* (Khasma, Paris (FR), 11 May 2012)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Khasma.

*Figures of Dissent: Glauber Rocha* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 25 October 2012)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*DISSENT ! Olivier Assayas & Eric de Bruyn* (Argos, Brussels, 22 November 2012)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/LUCA/Cinemathek.

*DISSENT ! Eyal Sivan* (Argos, Brussels, 12 December 2012 + KASKcinema, Ghent, 13 December 2012)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/ KASKlezingen.

*DISSENT ! Pedro Costa* (Argos, Brussels, 2 February 2013)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/ERG.

*Figures of Dissent: Robert Kramer* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 21 February 2013)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*DISSENT ! Hartmut Bitomsky* (Cinema Galleries, Brussels, 28 March 2013)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/Galleries/Goethe Institut.

*DISSENT ! Marcel Ophuls & Eyal Sivan* (KASK, Ghent, 18 April 2013)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/KASK.

*Once Was Fire* (Courtisane Festival 2013, Ghent, 17-21 April 2013)  
Screenings. With film works by Antonio Reis & Margarida Cordeiro, Stavros Tornes & Charlotte van Gelder, Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet. Produced by Courtisane/Cinemathek.

*Figures of Dissent: Nagisa Oshima* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 2 May 2013)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*Figures of Dissent: Ritwik Ghatak* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 3 October 2013)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*DISSENT ! Anand Patwardhan* (Flagey, Brussels, 8 November 2013)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Filmer à Tout Prix/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/INSAS/LUCA.

*DISSENT ! Avi Mograbi* (Flagey, Brussels, 13 November 2013)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/Cinemathek/KASKcinéessies.

*DISSENT ! John Akomfrah* (Cinemathek, Brussels, 20 November 2013 + KASKcinema, Ghent, 21 November 2013)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/Cinemathek/KASKlezingen/P'tit ciné/Brussels Art Platform/VUB Doctoral School.

*Possessions: Mother Dao* (Khasma, Paris (FR), 29 November 2013)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Khasma.

*Figures of Dissent: Bill Douglas* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 6 February 2014)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*DISSENT ! Akram Zaatari* (Wiels, Brussels, 16 February 2014)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Wiels/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*DISSENT ! Alberto Toscano* (Argos, Brussels, 18 February 2014)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*The Fire Next Time, Afterlives of the Militant Image* (KASK, Ghent, 3-4 April 2014)  
Screening + Talks. With contributions from Irmgard Emmelhainz, Sabu Kohso & Go Hirasawa, Evan Calder Williams & Victoria Brooks, Angela Melitopoulos & Bettina Knaup, Ayreen Anastas & Rene Gabri, Olivier Hadouchi, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Subversive Film (Mohamad Yaqubi & Reem Shilleh), Raquel Schefer, Ramiro Ledo Cordeiro, Daphné Hérétakis. With Film works by Jean-Luc Godard & Anne-Marie Miéville, Hito Steyerl, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Masao Adachi & Koji Wakamatsu, Sophie Bissonnette, Martin Duckworth, Joyce Rock, Santiago Álvarez, Ugo Ulive, Nicolás Guillén Landrián, Humberto Solás, Palestine Film Unit, Daphné Hérétakis, Ramiro Ledo Cordeiro. Produced in the context of the EU project *The Uses of Art – The Legacy of 1848 and 1989* (confederation L'Internationale), in conjunction with *L'œil se noie*, an exhibition of work by Eric Baudelaire and Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc (KIOSK, 5 April-15 June 2014) and the Courtisane Festival (2-6 April 2014). With the support of the research groups S:PAM & PEPPER (UGent), art centre Vooruit, BAM institute for visual, audiovisual and media art, Eye on Palestine, Embassies of France & Mexico.

*Across the Margins, Beyond the Pale* (Courtisane Festival 2014, Ghent, 2-6 April 2014)  
Screenings. With film works by Djibril Diop Mambéty, Kidlat Tahimik, Arthur Omar, Carlos Mayolo & Luis Ospina, Med Hondo, Glauber Rocha. Produced by Courtisane/Cinematek.

*Karl Marx, le retour: Straub / Huillet* (Université Populaire de Bruxelles, Brussels, 24 April 2014)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Cinéma Nomades.

*Figures of Dissent: Jean Eustache* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 8 May 2014)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*Figures of Dissent: Yoshishige Yoshida* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 9 October 2014)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*DISSENT ! Loredana Bianconi* (Cinematek, Brussels, 16 October 2014)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/Cinematek.

*Figures of Dissent: Željimir Žilnik* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 27 November 2014)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema/KASKlezingen.

*DISSENT ! Eric Baudelaire* (Bozar Cinema, Brussels, 5 December 2014)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Bozar/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*DISSENT ! Eyal Weizman* (Aleppo, Brussels, 8 December 2014)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Aleppo/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/ERG.

*DISSENT ! Ariella Azoulay* (Cinema Galeries, Brussels, 15 & 18 December 2014)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/KULeuven/Galleries.

*DISSENT ! Jean-Pierre Rehm* (Bozar Cinema, Brussels, 5 February 2015)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by ERG/Bozar/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*DISSENT ! Noël Burch* (Bozar Cinema, Brussels, 18 February 2015 + KASKcinema, Ghent, 19 February 2015)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Bozar/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*DISSENT ! Sergej Loznitsa* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 12 March 2015)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by KASKcinéessies/KASKcinema/ Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*DISSENT! Billy Woodberry & Barbara McCullough* (Paddenhoek, Ghent, 2 April 2015)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane

*DISSENT! Pedro Costa & Thom Andersen* (Sphinx Cinema Ghent, 3 April 2015)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by KASKcinéessies/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*L.A. Rebellion* (Courtisane Festival 2015, Ghent, 1-5 April 2015)  
Screenings + talks. With film works by Larry Clark, Charles Burnett, Billy Woodberry, Julie Dash, Barbara McCullough, Haile Gerima.  
Produced by Courtisane/Tate Modern/UCLA Film & Television Archive.

*Figures of Dissent: Jean Rouch* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 21 May 2015)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*DISSENT ! Lav Diaz* (Bozar Cinema, Brussels, 11 November 2015)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Cinematek/Bozar/VDFC/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/University of Antwerp/Cinema Zuid/Jeu de Paume/Le Festival d'Automne/Austrian Film Museum/Cineteca Bologna/Philippine Embassy in Belgium.

*DISSENT ! Michel Khleifi* (STUK / Cinema Zed, Leuven, 9 December 2015)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by STUK/Cinema Zed/KULeuven/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane

*Figures of Dissent: Satyajit Ray* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 4 February 2016)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*DISSENT ! Sylvain George* (STUK / Cinema Zed, Leuven, 9 March 2016)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by STUK/Cinema Zed/KULeuven/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*DISSENT ! Kidlat Tahimik* (Bozar Cinema, Brussels, 20 March 2016)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by STUK/Cinema Zed/KULeuven /Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/Arsenal—Institute for Film and Video Art/Cinematrix/Birkbeck Essay Film Festival.

*In Between Times* (Courtisane festival, Ghent, 23-27 March 2016)  
Screenings + talks. With film works by Berwick Street Film Collective, Marc Karlin, Jon Sanders, James Scott, Humphrey Trevelyan, Marc Karlin, Cinema Action, Poster-Film Collective, Black Audio Film Collective. Produced by Courtisane.

*DISSENT ! Michel Khleifi* (Sphinx Cinema, Ghent, 24 March 2016)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by KASKcinésessies/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*DISSENT ! Ann Guedes & Steve Sprung* (KASKCinema, Ghent, 25 March 2016)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane

*DISSENT ! Charles Burnett* (STUK / Cinema Zed, Leuven, 25 April 2016)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by STUK/Cinema Zed/KULeuven/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane/Playdoc.

*Figures of Dissent: Pere Portabella* (KASKcinema, Ghent, 5 & 12 May 2016)  
Screening. Produced by Courtisane/KASKcinema.

*DISSENT ! Sammy Balaji, Sven Augustijnen & Lotte Arndt* (Cinema Galeries, Brussels, 25 May 2016)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Kunstenfestivaldesarts/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*DISSENT ! Abbas Fahdel* (Bozar Cinema, Brussels, 11 June 2016)  
Screening + Talk. Produced by Bozar/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*DISSENT ! Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige* (Cinematek, Brussels, 9 October 2016). Screening + talk. Produced by Cinematek/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane

*Europe, Past Future* (TABAKALERA International Centre for Contemporary Culture, Donostia / San Sebastián, 11 December 2016).  
Screening + talk. With film works by Marc Karlin and Black Audio Film Collective/ Auguiste Reece.

*DISSENT ! Lizzie Borden* (Cinematek, Brussels, 3 February 2017). Screening + talk. Produced by Cinematek/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane in collaboration with the Embassy of USA, ERG, Macba & Tabakalera.

*DISSENT ! Patrick Keiller* (STUK / Cinema Zed, Leuven, 1 March 2017). Screening + Talk. Produced by STUK/Cinema Zed/KULeuven/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*Of Time and Struggle - Four Films by Ogawa Productions* (Courtisane festival, Ghent, 28 March 2017 – 1 April). Screenings + talks. With film works by Ogawa Productions. Produced by Courtisane. Curated with Ricardo Matos Cabo.

*DISSENT ! Jacques Rancière* (Minard, Ghent, 30 March 2017). Screenings + talk. Produced by Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

*DISSENT ! Haile Gerima* (Cinematek, Brussels, 8 April 2017). Screening + talk. Produced by Cinematek/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane in collaboration with the Embassy of USA, Jeu de Paume & Afrika Film Festival.

*DISSENT ! Susana de Sousa Dias* (STUK / Cinema Zed, Leuven, 19 April 2017). Screening + Talk. Produced by STUK/Cinema Zed/KULeuven/Argos/Auguste Orts/Courtisane.

All info and documentation can be found on [www.diagonalthoughts.com](http://www.diagonalthoughts.com).



