

Non-cinema: the location of politics in film

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Nagib, L. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8808-9748>
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Non-Cinema, or The Location of Politics in Film

Lúcia Nagib, University of Reading

(l.nagib@reading.ac.uk)

Abstract:

Philosophy has repeatedly denied cinema in order to grant it artistic status. Adorno, for example, defined an ‘uncinematic’ element in the negation of movement in modern cinema, ‘which constitutes its artistic character’. Similarly, Lyotard defended an ‘acinema’, which rather than selecting and excluding movements through editing, accepts what is ‘fortuitous, dirty, confused, unclear, poorly framed, overexposed’. In his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou embraces a similar idea, by describing cinema as an ‘impure circulation’ that incorporates the other arts. Resonating with Bazin and his defence of ‘impure cinema’, that is, of cinema’s interbreeding with other arts, Badiou seems to agree with him also in identifying the uncinematic as the location of the Real. This article will investigate the particular impurities of cinema that drive it beyond the specificities of the medium and into the realm of the other arts and the reality of life itself. Privileged examples will be drawn from various moments in film history and geography, starting with the analysis of two films by Jafar Panahi: *This Is Not a Film* (*In film nist*, 2011), whose anti-cinema stance is announced in its own title; and *The Mirror* (*Aineh*, 1997), another relentless exercise in self-negation. It goes on to examine Kenji Mizoguchi’s deconstruction of cinematic acting in his exploration of the *geidomono* genre (films about theatre actors) in *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemums* (*Zangigku monogatari*, 1939), and culminates in the conjuring of the physical experience of death through the systematic demolition of film genres in *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer et al., 2012).

Keywords: Lyotard; Badiou; André Bazin; Jafar Panahi; Kenji Mizoguchi; *The Act of Killing*; non-cinema.

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Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1973)

Theodor Adorno wrote these at once disillusioned and auspicious lines in the mid 1960s, a moment where philosophy seemed at odds with its time after having disastrously failed to prevent two world wars; but it still continued to exist, albeit, in his view, unaware of its own obsolescence. In a similar vein, Alain Badiou has more recently remarked that philosophy is affected by malaise due to what he terms a 'delocalisation': 'it either strives to graft itself onto established activities – art, poetry, science, political action, psychoanalysis and so on – or *merely* passes over its own history, becoming a museum of itself' (2008: 3). In this chapter, I will appropriate Badiou's idea of 'delocalisation' and focus on film, and film philosophy, in order to identify the places where political thought may continue to thrive after historical failures and manmade catastrophes. My purpose will be to capture the moment where films from different corners of the globe suggest ways of transforming thought, and society along with it. My method will consist of an enquiry into whether cinema itself, having been oblivious of its several deaths as it wandered over different technical supports in its centenarian existence, would still be alive and able to contribute to social change. Rather than looking at the effects of these technical supports on the cyclical deaths and revivals of cinema, I propose to think along the lines of 'non-cinema' by looking at instances in which the medium disregards its own limits in order to politically interfere with the other arts and life itself. Because he was the first to intuit what I am calling here 'non-cinema', my approach will inevitably revolve around André Bazin and his philosophical contribution to film studies.

I will start by recalling the title of Bazin's foundational oeuvre, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, or *What is Cinema?*, which continues to resonate in the ears of whoever proposes to study film. The ineffability of cinema, the near impossibility of defining it, was for Bazin constitutional of the medium and, his writings suggest, should be left unresolved, together with any attempts at identifying its specificities. Bazin's most devoted disciple and erudite specialist, Dudley Andrew, however, has recently dared to provide an answer to the question, and indeed an emphatic one, ending with an exclamation mark: *What Cinema Is!* (2010). Andrew's answer attempts, in the first place, to reframe and update the old dispute fuelled by Bazin between a cinema of montage and a realist cinema based on time and space uncut. To that end, he defends a cinema whose aim is 'to discover, to encounter, to confront, and to reveal' (xviii), the birth of which he sets

at the end of the Second World War, when Italian neorealism inaugurated what he, in tune with Bazin, calls 'modern cinema'. Following in the footsteps of his master also in positing modern cinema against what Bazin and many others after him defined as a 'classical' style reliant on montage, Andrew extends the reach of the modern through the world new waves of the 1960s and up to 'their consequences in our day' (xix). Though reluctant to speak of a 'classical' cinema in the digital age, Andrew takes issue with whatever stands for it today, be it a 'cinema of effect' in the words of Sean Cubitt, a cinema of 'lies and acting' as summarised by Lev Manovich, or 'machines of the visible', which according to Jean-Louis Comolli are aimed at engendering calculated viewer responses. Finally, he sums up his idea of what cinema is with a provocative wordplay: 'real cinema has a relation to the real' (xxv). This tardy manifesto for a realist cinema, whose terms might have sounded too vehement even for the realist champion Bazin, evidently derives from a politics, a *parti pris* for 'the films some of us most care about, and consider central to the enterprise of cinema *in toto*', in Andrew's words. What exactly would this politics be?

A mere claim for the 'modern' would be insufficient to explain the possible political causes of a 'real cinema', in particular if modernity is to be located as late as after the Second World War, when we know that, as a historical phenomenon, it started with the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century or even earlier. Bazin's modernity, however, seemed not only to disregard this fact, but also to reject the contribution made by artistic modernism and the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. In fact, Bazin's hailing of the modern, which for him encompassed projects as radically different as *Germany Year Zero* and *Citizen Kane*, might be simply understood as praise of the cinema of his own time. It moreover coheres with his evolutionary idea of the seventh art, according to which technical progress had no other purpose than to bring cinema closer to the real.

This 'real' for Bazin, however, was never a point of arrival, but an interrogation mark. Indeed Bazin's philosophical insights into realism, scattered over his essentially journalistic work, lead us into different, sometimes conflicting directions, among them, phenomenological (or, in Bazin's terms, ontological) realism, narrative realism and the reality of the medium. Having addressed all these categories, Bazin was never really concerned with providing clear distinctions between them, stating instead that 'what I normally call "realism" does not have any absolute and clear meaning but rather designates a movement, a tendency towards a faithful rendering of reality' (1971: 78). More significantly, all these realist modes were part and parcel of a multifaceted world which kept cinema in

permanent communion with what it was not: the other arts and real life. This Bazin called 'impure cinema' whose interrogation might allow us to elucidate his politics of the real beyond the vagaries of modernity. Indeed, the notion of impure cinema posits Bazin as a precursor of thinkers who resorted to negative dialectics as a means to make a case for art cinema, including the inventor of negative dialectics himself, Theodor Adorno, the herald of postmodernism Jean-François Lyotard and the ultra-leftist philosopher Alain Badiou.

In what follows, I will take Andrew's emphatic affirmation of 'real cinema' as an invitation to reinstate the question mark to Bazin's enquiry into what cinema is, by placing his realist and impure cinema insights in dialogue with the dialectical thought of our time, resulting in the idea of non-cinema. I will then apply these concepts to the analysis of some key elements of Jafar Panahi's anti-cinema experiments; Kenji Mizoguchi's *geidomono* (film on theatre) landmark *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* (1939); and Joshua Oppenheimer and co-directors Christine Cynn and anonymous's re-enactment of mass murder in *The Act of Killing* (2012), in order to demonstrate how, at very different points in film history and geography, cinema's dissolution into other art forms and life itself results in transformative politics.

Non-Cinema and the Politics of Realism

It is universally accepted that film, as a recording medium, entertains an unmediated relation to objective reality, as opposed to other mimetic or representational arts. Most definitions of cinema, however, emphasise the ways in which it tears itself apart from reality by means of framing, scale manipulation (resulting in the close-up) and montage, all techniques aimed at eliciting narrative coherence and a mere 'impression' of reality. In the age of mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin tells us, the simulacrum of cinema has no original (1999). Bazin, however, took the opposite route by focusing on ontology, that is, precisely on the link between cinema and the real world, regardless or even because of the threat it posed to medium specificity. From this point of departure he derived a philosophy of cinema which placed him in direct dialogue with the main debates of his time and anticipated much of the progressive thought of today.

Despite having bequeathed to film studies no philosophical compendium, but instead thousands of journalistic writings, Bazin's philosophical aspirations are clear from his foundational essay, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', whose focus on ontology aligns it with the traditional method of philosophical enquiry going back to Plato. More pointedly, in choosing to start from ontology, Bazin was joining the

phenomenological and existential turn of his time, spearheaded respectively by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose works engage with the legacy of Martin Heidegger. Ontology, a major branch of metaphysics focusing on being and existence, is key to phenomenology insofar as it deals with phenomena generated by the encounter between consciousness and the material world. It is also at the core of existentialism, a school which gives primacy to human existence, as famously defined by Sartre:

Atheistic existentialism, which I represent... states that, if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes its essence... a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept of it. That being is man, or, as Heidegger put it, the human reality. (2007: 22)

Bazin transposes this Sartrean idea literally to cinema, stating, in his *Impure Cinema* essay, that 'we must say of the cinema that its existence precedes its essence' (1967c: 71). The reference here is to the public, without which, in Bazin's view, cinema cannot exist, like a house that 'has no meaning except as a habitation' (71). Another way of understanding a cinema that precedes its essence would however be as 'pre-cinema' or a cinema which has not yet broken its umbilical cord with real life, remaining instead in a permanent embryonic state, a small, inner circle within a major outer container, reality, from which it sucks its life. Several of Bazin's statements would corroborate such a reading, not least his understanding of the photographic image as the 'transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction' (1967a:14), a process enabled by the medium's automatism that places it in direct relation with the objective world. In the ontology essay, this property is highlighted in order to differentiate photography and cinema from the other plastic arts, however it equally establishes cinema's indissoluble link with them as well as with a real world which lies beyond its limits. As we know, this early inkling of indexicality, which in semiotic parlance means the material link between sign and referent, was destined to become one of the most central concepts in film studies. But it was also a first intimation of non-cinema, insofar as it identifies cinema with reality only to demonstrate its insufficiency to fully signify it.

In order to understand the reach of this mode of reasoning I would like to refer to Adorno's definition of dialects, in his late work *Negative Dialectics*:

The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what

Hegel's absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived. (1973: 5)

In a similar way, it was on the basis of an excessive quality of the objective world that Bazin erected his pantheon of realist filmmakers. Indeed, realism, for him, seemed to rely on that part of the film in which pro-filmic phenomena surpass human will and control as exacted through the acts of framing, selecting and cutting. Hence his unflinching defence of the long take and the long shot, which, by virtue of being faithful to the spatio-temporal continuity of the pro-filmic event, preserve these uncontrollable traces of the real which appear to have a will of their own. The defence of these devices means that, even though ontology, or the automatic imprint of the real onto the film strip, is part and parcel of cinema's very nature, not all films are realist in Bazin's view. Realist, in the first place, are those filmmakers who demonstrate allegiance to this element of chance by staying away from the manipulative process of montage. Jean Renoir is one of Bazin's favourite examples of realist filmmakers precisely for this reason, and Bazin reports him as stating: 'The more I learn about my trade the more I incline to direction in depth relative to the screen. The better it works, the less I use the kind of set-up that shows two actors facing the camera, like two well-behaved subjects posing for a still portrait' (Bazin 1967b: 34). Thanks to this preference for the long shot, in Renoir's films, according to Bazin, 'there is always a part of chance in the discovery of the scene by the lens' as it conveys, through depth of field, 'the continuity of the gaze through time, its unique vanishing point in space' (1971: 81).

The act of relinquishing cinema's property of fragmenting the action through the cut is addressed by Jean-François Lyotard with the fitting name of 'acinema'. In Lyotard's understanding, cinema is a 'crowd of elements in motion' which are candidates for selection and elimination. If no movements are picked out, he says, 'we will accept what is fortuitous, dirty, confused, unsteady, unclear, poorly framed, overexposed' (1986: 349). He places the intensity of these incongruous elements in opposition to the law of value, which states 'that the *object*, in this case the movement, is valuable only insofar as it is exchangeable for other objects and in terms of equal quantities of a definable unity (for example, quantities of money)' (350). Instead of a law which governs cinema on the basis of a political economy aimed at productivity and consumption, Lyotard proposes acinema, that is, the enjoyment of sterile moments which 'give rise to perversion and not solely to propagation' (351). Citing Adorno, Lyotard goes on to define the 'only truly great art' as

‘pyrotechnics’, which ‘simulate perfectly the sterile consumption of energies in jouissance’ (351).

Bazin’s realist proposal would, at least partially, resonate with this anti-utilitarian stance. For example, the disposable particles of the real brought into the story by the lens’s automatism were not meant, in his view, to corroborate the story, but to call attention to themselves and away from the narrative thread. A 360-degree pan in depth of field, in Renoir’s *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (*Boudu sauvé des eaux*, 1932), for example, rather than carrying the story forward, is aimed at revealing ‘the intrinsic beauty of the banks of the Marne river, whose rich details are never eluded’ (1971: 79). Phenomenological realism as obtained through spatio-temporal continuity seems at times, for Bazin, so opposed to narrative realism, that they risk cancelling each other out. He says: ‘one could easily imagine ... a film by Stroheim composed of a single shot as long-lasting and as close-up as you like’ (1967b: 27), going on to dream with Zavattini of the ultimate realist film, consisting of ninety minutes of the life of a man to whom nothing ever happens’ (37).

As if following Bazin’s lead, many thinkers have defined ‘modern’ or ‘art’ cinema as the one constantly longing for its own dissolution in real time and space. Though unaware of Bazin’s writing, Adorno, for example, takes issue with Sigfried Kracauer who distinguishes cinema from photography on the basis of added movement: the movement of the objects in front of the camera, the camera movement itself and the movement engendered by editing devices (1997: 33ff). Adorno contends that such a theory is ‘both provocatively denied and yet preserved, in negative form, in the static character of films like Antonioni’s *La Notte*:

Whatever ‘uncinematic’ in this film gives it the power to express, as if with hollow eyes, the emptiness of time. Irrespective of the technological origins of the cinema, the aesthetics of film will do better to base itself on a subjective mode of experience which film resembles and which constitutes its artistic character. (1991: 180)

Similarly, uncinematic stasis, as opposed to cinematic movement, is praised by Bazin in terms of ‘life time’, or ‘the simple continuing to be of a person to whom nothing in particular happens’, as he famously described certain scenes of *Umberto D* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952), in which the rendering of a character’s experience of time takes the upper hand over the narrative (2005: 76). However, Adorno’s preoccupation was not at all with the prevalence of the phenomenological over the subjective world, but with the unavoidable ideological residues of the culture industry, as symbolised by the quarrel between technology and artistic technique,

which uncinematic stasis endeavoured to neutralise. As Miriam Hansen reminds us, Adorno attributed to cinema a leading role in modern art, but only insofar as it rebelled against its own status as art through self-awareness of its technological origin (Hansen 2012: 218).

On the other hand, one would err in reading Bazin's foresight of the politico-philosophical virtues of non-cinema as a dismissal of narrative illusionism, or the realism of the fable. As Tiago de Luca rightly points out, the long take would become associated with dedramatising and non-dramatic cinematic schools long past Bazin's, and, for that matter, Adorno's time, as it takes place much more frequently in current world cinema practices (2014: 21). In what may sound like a contradiction, Bazin is in fact wary of films in which narrative is purposely disrupted through the extended use of the long take and the long shot, ontological though they might be. An example is *The Earth Trembles* (*La terra trema*, Luchino Visconti, 1948), which he lauds for its long takes that allow us to see 'the whole operation; it will not be reduced to its dramatic or symbolic meaning, as is usual with montage' (2005: 43). But he goes on to blame Visconti for running counter to 'some filmic principles' and refusing 'to sacrifice anything to drama'. As a result, he says, *The Earth Trembles* 'bores the public' (45).

The 'aesthetic impasse' that Bazin attributes to Visconti is no other than his own, as he treads the thin line between the defence of a phenomenological world that imposes itself over the filmmaker's will and the need for narrative without which there is no cinema – the story being, in his view, a 'filmic principle'. Bazin's attachment to the fable was indeed notorious, not least in his hostility towards the modernist avant-gardes, which he criticised, among other things, for their disregard for narrative that undermined cinema's popular vocation as mass medium. One possible summary of Bazin's realist formula would then be the spatio-temporal continuity as enabled by the long take and the long shot, which tends towards the sterile *jouissance* of non-cinema, that is to say, life, which in turn finds itself constantly and necessarily limited by the eventual victory of the cut – or the commercial economy of the fable.

More generally, Bazin's politics was to do with history, or 'historicity', as stressed by Philip Rosen (2001; 2014), which can be verified, yet again, in the ontology essay, when he compares photography with the process of embalming, stating that in cinema, for the first time, 'the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified' (1967a: 15). In defending a film such as *Umberto D* as 'a truly realist cinema of time', 'a cinema of "duration"', Bazin was in effect seeking sanctuary in Henri Bergson and his notion of *durée* through which his application of the mummy complex to cinema could be philosophically justified. As Deleuze

explains, for Bergson ‘past and present must be thought as two extreme degrees which coexist within duration, the former of which is defined for its state of distension and the latter, by its state of contraction’. As a result, ‘the present is only the more contracted degree of the past’ (Deleuze 2002: 39–40). By defining realism as a fable infused with, and diffused by, chance encounters with incongruous elements of time and space, Bazin was highlighting those moments where story becomes history. This is precisely what his philosophical successor and Bergson follower Gilles Deleuze was aiming to achieve by splitting cinema into movement-image and time-image, across the axis of the overwhelming historical event of the Second World War.

Non-Cinema and the Politics of Intermediality

Non-cinema is even more openly suggested by Bazin through his praise of cinema’s mixture with other arts conveyed in the notion of ‘impure cinema’, a precursor of today’s trendy term of intermediality. This is one of Bazin’s most complex and fascinating insights, which places him alongside the most politicised thinkers of modernity, including, once again, Adorno, who predicted that ‘film’s most promising potential lies in its interaction with other media, themselves merging into film’ (1991: 183). The exclusive novelty of Bazin’s approach is however his equating to realism those films which make apparent and rely upon cinema’s mingling with other arts and media. Thus he defines as ‘realist’ films which are not at all subservient to the phenomenological real, but instead faithful to their theatrical or literary origins. For example, he applauds Robert Bresson’s decision to film *Diary of a Country Priest* (*Le Journal d’un curé de campagne*, 1950) by following the Bernanos novel page by page, as this demonstrates his fidelity to the reality of the original literary style on which the specificities of the fable rely (1967c: 54).

Along the same lines, Bazin’s adherence to Sartre’s existentialism, leading to his metaphorical statement that ‘cinema precedes its essence’, should be understood as cinema being more than what its specific dynamic properties would allow it to be. This placed him on a collision course with essentialist ideas of film as a self-sufficient medium, as formulated by theorists such as Rudolf Arnheim, Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein, and cherished by the modernist avant-gardes of the 1920s. Bazin’s very use of the term ‘cinéma impur’ was a direct response to the ‘cinéma pur’ project, first launched by Henri Chomette and very much in vogue during the 1920s and 30s among avant-garde and Dada artists and filmmakers, such as René Clair, Man Ray and Fernand Léger. The adepts of ‘cinéma pur’ proposed to draw exclusively on the techniques

inherent in the film medium, such as movement, lighting, contrast, rhythm and – most in conflict with Bazinian thought – montage. Such a fascination with cinema's technological artifice, tending towards complete abstraction from figurative mimesis and narrative representation (Chomette 1993: 372), could not be further removed from Bazin's idea of cinema as a 'window on the world', a realist vocation to which he subordinated all technological progress.

Bazin's anti-avant-garde convictions take him to the extreme of making blatant errors of judgment, such as stating that '*The Andalusian Dog* [*Un chien andalou*, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1929], despite involving multiple artists of incontestable talent, has aged much more than Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* [1919]' (1983: 225). However, the reverberation of his revolutionary and farsighted understanding of cinema's impure nature and mission continues to be felt today, not least in philosophy. Unequivocally drawing on Bazin, without ever quoting him, Alain Badiou, in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (2005), for example, finds in the concept of 'impure cinema' an alternative for reconnecting philosophy with the arts. In a chapter entitled 'The False Movement of Cinema', a propos of Wim Wenders's film *False Movement* (*Falsche Bewegung*, 1975), he questions cinema's specific property of movement in the following terms:

Movement is the impure circulation that evolves within the totality that comprises the other artistic practices. Movement installs the idea within a contrasting allusion (which is itself subtractive) to arts that are wrested from their proper destination. (2005: 79)

Badiou chimes with Bazin not only in establishing cinema's indissoluble link with the other arts, but also in making the very concept of cinema insufficient to carve out a space in the art world for a self-sufficient existence:

It is effectively impossible to think cinema outside of something like a general space in which we could grasp its connection to the other arts. Cinema is the seventh art in a very particular sense. It does not add itself to the other six while remaining on the same level as them. Rather, it implies them – cinema is the 'plus-one' of the arts. It operates on the other arts, using them as its starting point, in a movement that subtracts them from themselves. (79)

In statements such as this, Badiou is replaying the dialectical mode of reasoning I have described above a propos of Adorno and Bazin, which places the concept (that is, cinema) in a subordinate relation to the thing (that is, the other arts) in such a way that impure cinema becomes part of

a wider totality that denies it a totalising status. At the heart of Badiou's theory of inaesthetics, including his view of cinema as 'impure movement', is the proposal of an alternative to what he defines as the three main schools of thought of the twentieth century: Marxism, Heideggerian hermeneutics and psychoanalysis, all of which he deems saturated. His proposal is that art is a truth procedure *sui generis*, both immanent and singular (2005:10), which unveils itself through 'variations' or 'passages'. In the case of cinema, and as exemplified by Wenders's *False Movement*, based on Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, this truth procedure is verified in the passage from one medium to another: movement subtracting itself from film and turning into the novel which subtracts itself from language, and so forth. Once again resonating with Bazin and his defence of realism, Badiou identifies in the transferences and dissolutions between media 'the very thing that will have ultimately constituted the Real of the idea's passage' (2005: 80).

But how does impure cinema, which becomes real insofar as it moves away from itself, become political? In order to provide an answer to this question, I propose to analyse three examples which cross the frontiers of life and the other arts.

Between Real Life and the Other Arts

My first case study refers to a filmmaker who systematically refuses to abide by the rules of cinema in the name of a politics of the real: Jafar Panahi. Any of Panahi's films could illustrate this hypothesis, but I will start with *This Is Not a Film (In film nist)*, shot in 2011, which embraces the non-cinema dialectics in its own title. Confrontational and self-reflexive to the core, the film was made in defiance of the Iranian authorities, who had prohibited the director from making films and placed him under house arrest. With the complicity of assistant Mojtaba Mirtahmasb behind the camera, Panahi undertakes to secretly stage, inside his house, the difficulties of his current situation. But he dislikes the result and at a certain point decides to 'remove his cast'. The reference is to the character of one of his early films, *The Mirror (Ayneh, 1997)*, in which the nine-year-old star, Mina, suddenly decides to abandon the shoot. She throws away the cast from around her arm, which was part of her character, changes into her normal clothes and sets out to find her way back home by herself on foot. The film then cuts to the extract of *The Mirror* where this happens, which is shown on Panahi's TV set, after which the director confesses to his feeling that he had been pretending and lying in his own staging in his home. Addressing Mirtahmasb behind the camera, he wonders whether this is a problem faced by all filmmakers, prompting Mirtahmasb to confirm that he is currently involved in a film

entitled *Behind the Scenes of Iranian Filmmakers Not Making Films* and turning the self-denying effect of *The Mirror* into a specular mise-en-abyme.

The film *The Mirror* itself, made when Panahi was still relatively free as a filmmaker, demonstrates how his method had always been solidly anchored on a real that clashes against and ruins the possibility of a conventional film. For him, losing an actor does not mean losing a character, and accordingly he orders the crew to continue to shoot, profiting from the fact that Mina still has a functioning mic attached to her. With the bus in which the team had been shooting they follow her as she braves Tehran's chaotic traffic in a similar way her character would probably have done in the fictional story. She bumps into an old actress who was part of the cast with her, in *The Mirror*, who reveals to Mina she is as poor and lonely as the character she had been playing and spares no criticism of the crew for the pittance she received for her job, casting doubt on the director's own good intentions. Mina goes on to hop into a cab with other passengers, unwittingly recording the tirades of a male-chauvinist driver against a feminist female passenger. She talks to shop keepers, passers-by and policemen who have no will or means to help a lost child, rendering a spontaneous and revelatory portrait of a country and its society, whilst casting a critical eye over the very act of filmmaking. In pursuit of the girl on their bus, the crew often lose sight of her and, at times, also the signal of her mic. As a result, the film is a collection of 'what is fortuitous, dirty, confused, unsteady, unclear, poorly framed, overexposed', a perfect Lyotardian non-film, but endowed with the evidential quality and political power of the unembellished real. The lack of a process of 'selection and elimination' defined by Lyotard as inherent in the nature of cinema is evident here, leading to the loss in commercial value highlighted in Lyotard's formula. Indeed, despite winning the Golden Leopard at Locarno in 1997, *The Mirror* never found commercial distributors in Europe, having only recently become available on DVD.

As for *This Is Not a Film*, now part of a trilogy including *Closed Curtain* (Pardé, 2013) and the Berlin Golden-Baer-winner *Taxi* (2015), all made in contravention of the filming ban imposed on Panahi, it ends literally with the 'pyrotechnics' Adorno and Lyotard describe as the 'only truly great art', as the director observes the fireworks celebrating the New Year from behind the gate of his building that he and his film cannot trespass. A self-consuming film is thus brought to light whose burning energy momentarily prevails over an oppressive regime.

My second case study is the film *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* (*Zangiku Monogatari*), directed by Kenji Mizoguchi in 1939, where realism

and politics interweave in a completely different kind of non-cinematic experiment. In the 1950s and 60s, Mizoguchi was lauded in the pages of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* by Bazin's disciples, including Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette and Eric Rohmer, for what they understood to be his 'realism', given his lavish use of long takes, long shots and tracking shots, which, though mostly obtained within the four walls of a studio, were deemed realist insofar as they preserved the spatio-temporal continuity of the pro-filmic event. Deleuze has beautifully described the sociological import of the phenomenological space in Kenji Mizoguchi created by the combination of these three devices, through which the oppressed woman, placed in the background, draws the man on to a 'line of the universe' (2005: 199). Curiously, however, Mizoguchi's oeuvre is classified by Deleuze under the category of 'movement-image', hence alongside the classical cinema of montage rather than modern realism, demonstrating the limits of the diachronic division that denies access to modernity to the most innovative procedures originating outside the history and geography of Europe.

The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum in fact could not be more 'modern' in the way it testifies to non-cinema of the highest degree, thanks to a self-reflexive structure which questions styles of performance for film, for theatre and for both combined. The film is the adaptation of the novel of the same name, a fictionalised biopic of Onoe Kikunosuke II, the actor and stepson of one of kabuki's most famous actors in his time, Onoe Kikugoro V, situating the film within the *geidomono* genre. *Geidomono* are films where the protagonist, male or female, is a practitioner of one of the traditional Japanese arts such as *kabuki*, puppet theatre (*bunraku*) or traditional dance (Sato 2008: 77). The genre was particularly resorted to in the late 1930s as an alternative to governmental demands for propaganda films, as the war efforts in Japan escalated. Mizoguchi's incursion into *geidomono* at that point was also a means of eschewing governmental pressures, but it was no less an opportunity for him to exercise his in-depth knowledge of Japanese traditional arts. He even contemplated the possibility of casting the legendary actor Kikugoro VI, the legitimate son of Kikugoro V, to play the role of his father in the film. In an interview, Mizoguchi relates an interesting story about a meeting with Kikugoro VI:

I went to the kabuki... and I met him [Kikugoro] in the backstage. 'Today I will perform in a cinematic way, pay close attention', he told me. Seen from the audience, his performance appeared indeed different from usual, it was, so to say, more realistic, with very natural and essential movements. (apud Aprà, Magrelli & Pistagnesi 1980: 143)

Mizoguchi goes on to say that he was not entirely convinced by the actor's delivery on that day due to the contrast it produced with the rest of the cast, who continued to act in the traditional way. This episode is certainly the inspiration for the astonishing opening of *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum*, showing precisely a moment of 'bad acting' by the young Kikunosuke and performed by the famous *shinpa* (new theatre) and film actor Hanayagi Shotaro. Sato reminds us that when Mizoguchi started in the silent film era, using *shinpa* actors in the Nikkatsu Mukojima Film Studio, they were still casting *onnagata*, or female impersonators, however no close-up shots could be taken because, for example, their Adam's apple would show up (2008: 21). Now, Hanayagi does deserve a medium close up at the beginning of *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum*, as if Mizoguchi wanted to make two statements: 1) this is cinema; 2) this is good film acting, but bad acting for traditional kabuki. As a result, we, spectators, feel that the actor's acting is excellent and are puzzled to see it repeatedly condemned in the film story as inadequate.

We then see Kikunosuke being expelled from his step father's house, due to his romance with his baby brother's wet-nurse, Otoku. He leaves for Osaka and leads a life of utter poverty as a lowly actor, alongside a consumptive Otoku. Towards the end of the film, however, Kikunosuke makes a triumphal return to the kabuki house in Tokyo, having become an accomplished actor at the expenses of his lover's sacrifice. The film then gives us a long kabuki scene, showing him in the famous female role of Sumizome through a series of long shots and middle-range, often semi-veiled, shots allowing the viewer scant access to the actor's facial features and actual performance. However, the sense of a real kabuki theatre is conveyed in quasi-documentary long shots of the packed auditorium. Once justified, kabuki's artificial acting becomes cinema, but only by also becoming uncinematic. At the same time, cinema's ability to produce scale reversal and the close-up, the main pillar of the star system, is rejected, denying the actor the privilege of individual fame, whilst placing theatre within its social context, that is, its audience, without which it cannot exist. In becoming theatre, that is non-cinema, film becomes political and exuberantly alive, amidst a cheering audience within which the actor submerges, echoing that public Bazin so cherished and found inseparable from any understanding of the film medium.

My last example fast-forwards film history to 2012 and one of the most astonishing and disturbing films ever, *The Act of Killing*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn and another collaborator who had to remain anonymous for safety reasons, as is the case for a great part of the crew. The focus is the torture and murder of more than a million alleged Communists, ethnic Chinese and intellectuals in Indonesia in the

mid 1960s, on General Suharto's order. The film undertakes the re-enactment of these atrocities, utilising to that end not those on the side of the victims, but unrepentant perpetrators, including gangsters and members of Indonesia's pro-regime paramilitary Pancasila Youth. These former perpetrators, in particular Anwar Congo and Herman Koto, fashion themselves after the image of their favourite Hollywood heroes and genres in order to represent their crimes. This extraordinary choice is explained by the fact that in the 1960s they were in the film distribution business which was badly affected during the left-leaning Sukarno regime they opposed. But because they are no professional actors and are entirely foreign to movie making, their 'films' within the main film make them appear as grotesque and involuntary parodies of themselves and their acts. Thanks to this and to a constant Brechtian focus on the reality of the medium, including the characters being dressed and made up in front of the camera, the audible shooting instructions and the interviewer's voice, distanciation is elicited and spectatorial empathy prevented and replaced by revulsion. However – and this is one of the several revolutions accomplished by the film – the characters themselves seem increasingly immersed in their roles to the point of identifying, in the classical voyeuristic way, not only with themselves but with their victims as they perform them and then watch the resulting rushes. The impression of reality, as enabled by narrative illusionism, is here turned onto its head, becoming the reality of life, or non-cinema. In a particularly bizarre scene, both Anwar and Adi, his fellow executioner in 1965, play the role of interrogators but with their faces made up in lacerated flesh, as if they themselves had been tortured by the very interrogators they impersonate. It is as if the death mask described by Bazin as comparable to cinema's ontological link to the material world had become alive and were being applied to the faces of those pretending to be the killers, making the past re-emerge in the present in its *durée*.

The extraordinary procedure Oppenheimer devised in order to achieve this effect was to resort to one of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), from which Anwar is clearly suffering, which is presentification. Sufferers from this disease are haunted by the feeling that the traumatic event continues to happen in the present. This is obviously the case of Anwar, who reiterates, in the film, that he continues to be assailed by recurrent nightmares of the crimes he committed more than 50 years ago. Alongside the reliving of the traumatic events, other defining symptoms of PTSD are vivid flashbacks, intrusive memories and images, and physical sensations such as nausea, which is at the core of a key scene I will examine below. As Homa King reminds us a propos of *The Act of Killing* (2013: 31), Sigmund Freud was the first to identify the

symptoms of PTSD, which he described as ‘repetition compulsion’ in patients suffering from traumatic neuroses, many of whom were war veterans. Moved by the aim of unveiling a horrific past, *The Act of Killing* attempts to bring back the dead from their graves and have them play a role in the present through the very trauma their death has caused. Anwar is nothing but an instrument to that end. In the process of presentification and documentation of traumatic symptoms lies the extreme originality of the re-enactment procedure utilised in this film, which rather than resorting to archive photos or footage, conflates the past with the present through the repetition of the act whose freshness and material reality is preserved in the traumatic symptoms and abject bodies of their perpetrators. Oppenheimer’s role as an infiltrator and treacherous ally of the criminals is that of removing the mask of his subjects as well as his own, in front and behind the camera, so as to attach the seal of material truth to the irreparable act of killing whilst dragging the film away from the realm of representation and into the present tense.

Vivian Sobchack (2004: 59) called ‘interobjectivity’ the process of ‘subjective realisation of our own *objectivity*, in the passion of our *own material*’, and the film is undoubtedly pushing its subjects to experience themselves as objects. Viveiros de Castro, along similar lines, resorted to the concept of ‘perspectivism’ to address an ethos among the anthropophagic Tupi-Guarani, who incorporated both the strength and the suffering of the warriors they devoured. Viveiros de Castro defined this as ‘the ability to look at oneself as the Other – a point of view from which one arguably obtains the ideal view of oneself’ (2005: 5). It is not a coincidence that cannibalism is part of the horrors staged in *The Act of Killing*, in a carnivalesque sequence which includes Herman in drag forcing a severed penis and a slice of liver into the mouth of the severed head of a victim, the latter being no other than Anwar himself. In *The Look of Silence* (2014), a kind of sequel to *The Act of Killing* made by Oppenheimer in order to provide the point of view of the victims, perpetrators openly acknowledge the recourse to cannibalism – in their case, to drinking the blood of their prey – as an antidote to the haunting memory of their murderous acts. But *The Act of Killing* had already provided a living testament to that process by adopting a psychoanalytic procedure that turns cathartic identification into the reality of acting, thus rendering palpable the agony of the victims as experienced by those who were, at once, agents and privileged spectators of their killing.

Two scenes placed at the beginning and the end of the film attest to its political aim of forcing the perpetrators into the skin of their victims so as to give them a physical sense of the plights they had caused. In the first

one, Anwar, in a cheerful mood, visits a rooftop terrace which had been the site of many of his thousand murders, in order to demonstrate how he used a wire to strangle his victims with a minimum spilling of blood. In the second scene, Anwar revisits the same spot, but now, as the film leads us to believe, after having gone through various re-enactments of his crimes. As he attempts to convey the same description of the garrotte, Anwar retches uncontrollably, as if he himself were being strangled and, at the same time, regurgitating, though alas only symbolically, the bodies of his victims. As the film has been entirely edited under the filmmaker's authorial authority – the evidence being the 'director's cut' version of the film, on which this analysis was based – it is impossible to state with precision the chronology of the events. Adding a decisive difference to the second sequence from the first is, however, the use of a single long take. Manipulative though it is, the film here opts out of a cinema of montage that 'selects and eliminates' movements, in Lyotard's definition. As a result, the retching is not edited out – and Oppenheimer suggests that Anwar continued to perform, despite his sickness, probably in the hope that this would be the case. The decision to preserve the long take in its integrity is hence a political one, negating cinema in order to let reality speak for itself.

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