THE FUNAMBULIST PAMPHLETS
VOLUME 11

CINEMA

Edited by Léopold Lambert
February 2015

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INTRO

THE CINEMA PAPERS

Most of the thirty following essays dedicated to cinema are rather short; probably too short to carry a consistent argument throughout this volume. However, the adequate manner in which to read them might be using the films they describe as a referential landscape, and triggering unexpected dialogues and peculiar combinations. Spike Lee, Béla Tarr, Michelangelo Antonioni and the many other filmmakers named in this volume do not seem to have much in common at first sight; nevertheless, considered through the interpretation of a Spinozist materialist philosophy, their films might have something to say to one another. Take the mud of *Red Desert* (Antonioni), the volcanic slopes of *The Bad Sleep Well* (Kurosawa) and the soil of Pina Bausch's *Rite of Spring* magnified in *Pina* (Wenders) for example. What these material manifestations have in common is that they are all in relation with bodies, themselves assemblages of moving matter. Similarly, consider Spike Lee's dolly shot, Orson Welles's labyrinth, Béla Tarr's entropy, and Peter Watkins's democratic improvisations: they all manifest the power of immanence and its inexorability. These films involve no *deus ex machina*; everything in them comes 'from the ground' in a continuous refusal of a celestial or other form of transcendence. Developing this kind of reading of these films allows us to avoid a traditional chronological reading of history of cinema in favor of another, one more dedicated to the philosophical vision of the world that cinema triggers.

01

LA HAINE: BANLIEUES AND POLICE

If, like me, you were a French teenager in the 1990s, you probably have a powerful remembrance of Mathieu Kasovitz's *La Haine* (1995), in particular of the tracking shot that starts from the back of DJ Cut Killer mixing Assassin and NTM's (the historical reference of Parisian hip-hop) "Nique la Police" ("Fuck the Police") and Edith Piaf's "Non, je ne regrette rien" ("No, I do not regret anything"), before slowly flying over the *Cité* des Muguets in the suburbs of Paris. This film remains a narrative reference to the situation of the Parisian *banlieues* [suburbs], where the most precarious populations live, which include an important part of the North and West African first and second generations of immigration from France's former colonies.

The film's plot is set to start on the following day of massive demonstrations following the arrest by the police of a young man of the *cité* — *cités* refer to this particular urban typology of separated groups of buildings that were thought to be used in a quasi-autarkic way — which brutalized him into a comatose state. The first minutes of the film show documentary footage of similar historical protests following Makome M'Bowole's murder by the police after his arrest in 1993, and Malik Oussekine's murder by the riot police during a demonstration in 1986. In *La Haine*, the police are the clear antagonists. This is not always true in the individuality of the police officers themselves: persons deal with the power

they exercise in various ways, from an understanding practice of it to the most violent one. However, the police forces, beyond their various incarnations in individual persons, are to be understood as part of the systematic exclusion to which the *banlieues* are subjected.

La Haine's tracking shot shows us the *cité* in its daily dimension and in its contained atmosphere. The world outside of it does not seem accessible and only little activity seems accessible. Earlier in the film, a team of journalists tried to ask questions of the three main characters without getting out of their car, "like in a zoo," as Hubert (one of the three) says.

Here again lies the strict and systematic separation between the world and the *cité*. The wall around the *banlieue*, dramatized in the more recent and popular film franchise *B13*, is enforced in reality by the void that surrounds the *cité*. This separating void is both spatial and social as can be seen in the rest of the film when the three main characters spend some time in the center of Paris. This void is enforced by the police as an institution that historically shifted the main part of its activity from intervention to anticipation and the biased expectations that such a change of paradigm implies. This has never been truer in the context of *banlieue*s since Nicolas Sarkozy, as secretary of interior affairs, dissolved the "proximity police" in 2003. Sarkozy, who became president of France four years later, is well-known for having systematically antagonized and marginalized the young (often Black or Arab) population that live in the *cités*. Ten years after *La Haine* was released, massive actions occurred in the *banlieue*s against the status quo. The police suppressed these protests and things are supposedly back to 'normal' since then. It is difficult not to conclude the same way *La Haine* does, through this small metaphor:

Heard about the guy who fell off a skyscraper? On his way down, past each floor, he keeps saying to reassure himself: “So far, so good…so far, so good…so far, so good…” But how you fall does not matter: what does is how you land.

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02

PARIS IS BURNING: GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RACE'S PERFORMATIVITY

Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1991) shows an important aspect of African-American and Latino gay and transgender life in New York in the 1980s: drag "balls." Organized in Harlem, these balls consist of competitions where bodies attempt to perform in the "realest" manner, where someone occupies a different position than one they usually occupy in society. For example, a ball jury determines which one of the two dark and gay bodies can perform the best as a rich heterosexual white body. Similarly, transgenders are judged on their ability to perform as "real" — a term used by the jury itself — women.

Fashion is an important component of the balls. Some contestants create their own clothes, others struggle to gather enough money to purchase remarkable clothing relevant to the category in which they compete. In this matter, a brief inventory of these categories is evocative of the variety of the social labels performed: "pretty girl," "high fashion winter sportswear," "luscious body," "schoolboy schoolgirl," "town and country," "businessman of the 80's," "high fashion Parisian," "butch queen," "military," "high fashion eveningwear," etc. The balls also invented a new dance at the crossroad of homage to and parody of fashion magazines like *Vogue*:


THIS IS WHITE AMERICA.

"voguing" thus consists in the fast succession of poses systematically adopted by models when being photographed for fashion magazines.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler describes gender as a performative act, a repeated performance accomplished in the public realm as a recognizable semiotics:

> In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this "action" is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame – an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject. (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* Routledge, 2006, 140.)

The drag balls in Harlem certainly illustrate Butler's thesis. The assemblage behavior+fashion+confidence can construct a gender. Bodies that are recognized as male by society can use such an assemblage as a sort of camouflage. Similarly, the balls tend to show us that race and sexuality are also founded on performativity and here as well, camouflages can be created. Although we can think of this idea of camouflage as a way for dark bodies to appear as white bodies or for male

bodies to appear as female bodies, we should refrain from this idea as it precisely brings us back to the idea that each body belongs to a category by some sort of essence. Rather we should recognize the norm for what it is: a camouflage for all bodies. The norm is performativity since no body fully corresponds to the norm. Of course, some bodies (white, male and heterosexual for example) do not need much effort to perform the norm as several characteristics of their public body are already interpreted as symbolically embodying the norm. Others, presenting characteristics that are recognized by the norm as distant from its composition, require many efforts to get closer to that supposed norm.

What *Paris Is Burning* reveals both through the presentation of the balls and through the interviews with its protagonists, is the deep desire and will of most these bodies to reach what they themselves call "normality." Transgender women explain that they want to be normal housewives and dark bodies explain that they want to live like normal rich white people do. One may think that these desires and volitions do not constitute strong political manifestos, or that the very will for normality prevents by definition the idea of transgression. However, a body that gives itself the means to hack the characteristics of its public appearance to the point of changing one's sex (even as performance), constitutes an extremely high degree of subversion of the norm's mechanisms, and therefore constitutes a serious political act.

The film provides a tragic proof to such a politics, as one of its transgender protagonists, Venus Extravaganza, is said to have been savagely murdered during the making of the documentary. Therein lies the violence that the norm reserves for bodies that subvert its function and unmask its performative technics. The film is made in such a way that the performers' aspirations for normality affirmed in a supposedly trivial man-

ner by its subjects (participation in “balls”) is soon contrasted in the strongest way with this murder that characterizes the risks of trying to be something else than what the norm wants to legislate in other bodies.

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03

CORIOLANUS: STATE OF EXCEPTION

[also in The Funambulist Pamphlets Volume 10: LITERATURE]

More than a historical figure, Caius Marcius Coriolanus is a legendary one. He was a Roman general in the fifth century B.C., and what belongs to history and what belongs to the myth about him remains unclear. This chapter will address his (hi)story without the doubts and precautions that a historian would need to systematically indicate when recounting the same story.

Coriolanus's story is brought to us by the 1608 play written by William Shakespeare. General Caius Marcius earns his name of Coriolanus by his glorious victory against the Volscian city of Corioli. Strengthened by this success, he is encouraged to run for Consul of Rome. Despite apparent support from both the Senate and the Plebe, he has to face riots from the latter. He finally publicly expresses his despise of democratic processes and exiles himself when he is condemned as a traitor. Later, he joins his former Volscian enemies and marches towards Rome. He remains insensitive to every request of his formers friends including his own wife, but finally accepts a peace treatise after being won over by his manipulative mother. Peace is signed between the Romans and the Volscians but Coriolanus is assassinated by the latter for his treason.

In 2011, actor and director Ralph Fiennes turned Shake-


FIDELIS TV
ROMAN FOOD CRISIS
SENATE DECLARES STATE OF EMERGENCY
POLICE
MARTIUS
R.S.F.
VOLSCIAN ADVANCE
CORIOLANUS AND AUFIDIUS BEGIN ASSAULT ON ROME

speare's dialogues into a contemporary version of Coriolanus. The Elizabethan language, as well as the classical Roman names contrasts with the images of our world that recall the war in the Balkans and numerous internal political intrigues and manipulations in Western representative democracies. Both the play and the film — Ralph Fiennes chose himself to play Coriolanus — are sympathetic to the Roman general who remains faithful to his principles and his honor until he cedes to his mother and accepts death for it. The plebe is pictured as a versatile horde that can be easily manipulated by politicians who are after their own ambition. When we look at it closely however, Coriolanus is a perfect embodiment of fascism — of course, it is an anachronism to talk about fascism both for classical Rome and seventeenth century England — where the military realm and the political one fuse into a new form of sovereignty.

Fienne's film opens with news images — he uses the power of the televisual medium in modern democracies in an evocative way — of the state of emergency declared by the Roman Senate when the city is facing riots against the public requisition of grain storage and the scarcity resulting from it. The state of emergency or state of exception is concomitant to the state of war, when military and politics become a single mode of sovereignty. Once the state of exception is triggered, there is a systematic effort from it, to sustain itself in time. This is even more true in our era — that is why Fienne's movie is so timely — as the state of war is not as clearly delimited as it used to be in the past when the belligerents were defined by their belonging to a given nation or city. Nowadays, the so-called "war on terror" has blurred the limits in time of the state of war, and therefore of the state of exception. War can be continuous when it is waged against diffuse international groups of people whose sporadic killings are made for symbolic spectacle — a pleonasm — of entrenched nations and

do not have actual military effectiveness, since these groups grow as the (often hazardous) strikes against them intensify. Meanwhile, the continuous tension that sustains the state of exception is organized through media outlets that propose a unique imaginary built on the fear of loosing the *status quo*.

Coriolanus does not constitute the paradigm of the contemporary sovereign. His personality and his military principles are distant from the ones of our current 'leaders;' this is also true for his refusal to use the spectacular mediums — a scene of the film shows him addressing the people on a television set — to embrace his ambition. However, the problem is not one of the people but rather of the systems in which they operate. Coriolanus may not be a paradigm of the Western democrat politician, but he is a paradigm of the form of sovereignty to which we are subjected: a perpetual state of emergency where military actions — surveillance of populations, NSA — and politics work together to sustain the exception in time.

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04

WORLD WAR Z: THE ZOMBIE IS A HUMAN YOU CAN KILL

Movies that dramatize a pandemic of zombies are well-known for involving a high level of symbolic elements. In them, the fictional figure of the zombie refers to a human body reduced to its animal (cannibalistic) function. It is understood that if we want to see these narratives for the way they influence our imaginary, we have to consider that the figure of the zombie exists only through the subjectivity of a non-zombie human, and that these rampant hordes of zombie bodies (which are something that this non-zombie is not) chasing the non-zombies are the reflection of a strong paranoia towards a specific group of people.

In an article entitled "World Revolution Z" (*Space and Politics,* December 5, 2012), Gastón Gordillo advances the hypothesis that in the case of Marc Forster's film *World War Z* (2013), the zombies represent the insurrectional proletariat engaged in a worldwide revolution. Such an interpretation becomes extremely plausible when we see the strongest image of the film: a mass of bodies climbing on each other to get over a tall concrete wall in Jerusalem. The film crew was careful to explicitly describe that the wall had been built specifically against the zombie attack — in other words, this is not the separation barrier built in the West Bank by the Israeli government — and to include a scene in which Arabs and Jews seem to be collaborators when facing the universal danger

set upon them. In other words, these zombies are not the Palestinians who are trying to liberate themselves from this wall that separate them from their family, their fields, and their roots. I will not mention the sum of details that do bring us back to a Zionist perspective — the very fact that the whole city of Jerusalem is said to be in Israel is the most obvious one — to rather focus on the fact that the symbolic aspect of this image cannot liberate itself from the way we see it, with our experience and cultural references: this wall is the separation barrier and these bodies are the Palestinians fighting against their restriction of movement.

The film 'offers' us a multitude of scenes in which these unarmed bodies, that are said to be zombies — the shots are so quickly strung together that it is impossible to recognize zombies from 'sane' bodies — are being killed in the hundreds by various machine guns, grenades, axes, bombs etc. The end of the film itself describes a war where zombies are not able to perceive the 'sane' bodies; they are thus methodically killed one by one and piled up on gigantic mounds of bodies while the calm voice of the main character explains that "the enemy" has to be exterminated. I would like to insist on the fact that, despite the film's narrative that non-humans are destroying humans, our imaginary necessarily perceives the images we see as humans systematically killing other humans. This remark is essential as no group of people ever commits any form of genocide without a preliminary construction of a sub-human subjectivity that is imposed upon this group of people to be anihilated. In other words, humans can only be systematically killed if they have been previously stripped in some fashion off their human status at a legal and/or imaginary level. The Holocaust itself is the conclusion of several decades of an anti-Semitic narratives that 'legitimized' — or, at the very least, made tolerable — the deportation of millions of Jewish people (along with groups of homosexuals,

handicapped, gypsies and communists) and their industrial extermination.

What then is the status of the zombie? The word itself comes from Haitian creole; it describes the status of a dead slave — before the 1791 independence war against the French — whose soul was prevented from going back to *lan guinée* (i.e. Africa/Heaven). We can therefore interpret the zombie as the figure of the body that remains colonized even after its death. Such status can be shared by the various soldiers of human history that have been deliberately killed in such a way that they are prevented from going to heaven or its equivalent in the precepts of their various religions.

The zombie is also a human that has lost its legal status, including the one guaranteeing the status of the marker 'human' itself. It can therefore be killed without legal repercussions, and the various narratives involving it even promote the systematization of such killing. The status of zombie might be acquired in an objective manner — that is what the pandemic is about — however, their perception by the non-zombie (this idea that they are chasing them) is strictly subjective and constructs a scenario in which the killing is acceptable. In the case of *World War Z*, what would be interesting to see is the same plot from the point of view of a zombie. What we might then see through this other subjectivity is the methodical and horrifying massacre of humans, whose only crime was to have been contaminated, whether this contamination is health-related as in Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* or ideologically as in Gastón Gordillo's hypothesis.

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05

THE ACT OF KILLING: WHAT CONSTITUTES THE ACT OF KILLING

[also in The Funambulist Pamphlets Volume 07: CRUEL DESIGNS]

It took me about a month to digest watching Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012) that constitutes as much a film about Indonesian history as a historical film about Indonesia, as I will try to illustrate in this chapter. It took me that much time to write about it, because this film explores the dark depths of humanity, as well as those of a system that has been rarely examined in such a way.

The film is a two-hours-long edited version of more than a thousand of hours of footage, which were filmed by Op-

penheimer in Indonesia during the nine years preceding the release of the film. What the film shows is the testimony of several Indonesian "gangsters," — that is how they call themselves — dramatically re-enacting the mass killings that they perpetrated in 1965 during the dictatorship-backed purge of several hundreds of thousands of people that were accurately or not suspected to be communists. Throughout the film, the re-enactment goes from a 'simple' reconstitution of the killings on the site where they were committed, to the dramatic reconstitution in various forms of Hollywood and local cinema, orchestrated directly by the perpetrators themselves. Oppenheimer let them choose the form they wanted for such re-enactments. The surreal result of these scenes oscillates between the surrealism of Bunuel, the aesthetics of Thomas De Quincey's *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts* (1827) and the insupportable procedural precision of the Marquis de Sade.

Oppenheimer's method is interesting in that he regularly shows previous footage to the perpetrator whom he is mainly following in this film, Anwar Congo. He then films him while he is watching himself on the screen. To the viewer's disbelief, the large majority of his comments address the way he appears in the film; the way he dressed, for example. Oppenheimer, in many interviews about the film, says how he is convinced that such triviality, displayed when tackling the tragic question of mass killing, constitutes Congo's self-defense, his means not to fathom the reality that seemed to have left some marks in him. These marks springs back more as the film focuses on his friends with whom he committed these mass murders. Similarly, the scenes that this group of friend plays together — the notion of acting explains the double sense of the film's title — seem to be either a sort of surreal reconstitution of the way they imagined themselves while they were committing murder (policemen, soldiers, knights of some kind, etc.), or it might be

a retroactive means to fictionalize their crimes, and therefore to detach them even more from reality.

The way Oppenheimer composes his film is remarkable, as it manages simultaneously to never remove responsibility from the perpetrators and also to make them appear to share in the status of victims of history. This is an extremely sensitive problem. One cannot legitimately claim that all are victims in the same manner. Millions of people have lost members of their family without knowing what happened to them, and without being able to properly mourn them, as the same forces are still in power in Indonesia. The families of those killed — many of them are ethnically Chinese — are still marginalized and bullied within the Indonesian society. One of the perpetrators clearly illustrates that when he explains that he cannot be considered as a criminal: "the law is written by the winners. I am a winner, I can decide what is a crime and what is not." During interviews, Oppenheimer explains that someone like Anwar Congo "has not been tried, but he has been punished," since his past haunts him every day, despite his best effort to minimize it. The director insists that he is still in contact with him despite what the viewer might first think: "I don't like him, but I love him in a certain way." Again, there is no process of deresponsabilization involved here. Simply, the actual killers of history are often what we could call the proletariat of the system that encourages or orders such killings. They are the ones to who "do the dirty work" for a more or less organized system and its hierarchy. They are also the ones that are the most susceptible to become traumatized within this hierarchy.

In this regard, it is not innocent if the only people who were truly angry at the film are the politicians — some of them are shown in the film. They did not kill anyone in the literal sense, but they are part of a political dynasty that organized

the conditions of the political purge in 1965. As Oppenheimer himself says, "if they were not upset, it means that I would have not done my job right." As I observed at the beginning,

there seems to be a 'before' and an 'after.' *The Act of Killing* broke a taboo in the Indonesian population who did not know how to address its past. Similarly to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995), led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the post-Apartheid South Africa, this film acts as a civilizational 'therapy' where no one is delivered from his/her responsibility, yet the collective project for the nation's future is understood as more important than the desire of revenge for the true victims of the past conflict. Of course, in the case of Indonesia, it cannot be accomplished through a legal and institutional process yet. Nevertheless, Oppenheimer's film led the way to trigger the historical conditions of this process.

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06

HUNGER: THE BODY AT WAR

In 1976, the British government withdrew the status of political prisoner to every detainee who had been imprisoned for having taken part in the Northern Irish conflict. On March 5, 1981, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher delivered a speech in Belfast stating the following:

> There is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing and criminal violence. We will not compromise on this. There will be no political status.

The refusal to attribute this status to prisoners forces them to wear a uniform, and to do prison work, and also prevents them from association with other prisoners. More importantly, it denies the very essence of each convict's action that was accomplished within the frame of an ethical collective narrative, and not for some individual opportunist purpose. The point of the following essay is to show how the Republican prisoners' bodies constituted the unique site of both resistance and torture in the actions that were undertake following this governmental decision. In order to do so, I will use screenshots that I made from Steve McQueen's film, *Hunger* (2008), about which film it is not my purpose to launch a critique but rather to use its still-images to illustrate some important political points.

The first form of resistance against the withdrawal of the status of political prisoner consisted for the Republicans in refusing to wear the carceral uniform, and thus remain naked with only a blanket as cloth. Through several articles on The Funambulist, we have seen how wearing a certain cloth could constitute a form of resistance against normative or authoritarian processes (see articles in the "Dressed Bodies" categories on thefunambulist.net). In the case of the Irish Republicans however, the "blanket strike" consisted in the refusal of any clothing that might be provided by the prison administrators, expressed also the high discomfort (cold, dirt, lack of intimacy, etc.) that such a choice involved in the determination to also refuse the new status. There is a high symbolism in the refusal to wear the clothes that are imposed by the carceral authorities: the violence of the prison walls' inescapability is already highly present; the clothing would also carry a violence, even closer to the body itself, and refusing to wear it constitutes an attempt to avoid, and thereby also void the new designation as 'criminal.'

In 1978, another strike was enacted: the "no-wash protest," or "dirty protest," which consisted in the refusal of the Republican prisoners to wash and to use the toilets, access to the bathrooms being granted by the wardens. Both in the Long Kesh men's prison and in the Armagh women's prison, prisoners spread their excrement on their walls — as well as their menstrual blood for women — and urinated under the doors of their cells. The notion of the abject is particularly striking here, whether by the fecal and menstrual matter that constitutes part of the direct environment of the prisoners' bodies, or by these bodies themselves, dirty and smelly as they were. The ability for bodies and matter to reach abjection has consequential political effects: abjection reveals the repugnance we have for other bodies and their material effects, and as "matter out of place" (Mary Douglas, 1966), they disrupt the

order of the system in which they are embedded. One could think that there is a paradox in seeing prison wardens forcefully washing the prisoners' bodies (cutting their hair, plunging them into a bath, etc.), as well as regularly cleaning the cells' walls. There is none however, for the reasons given above. It constitutes an attempt to annihilate abjection, its distressing imaginary, and the disruption it enacts.

Bodies as sites of resistance are total. Even the transmission of messages and other miniaturized objects is made through them. The orifices of the mouth, the anus, and the vagina were used as dissimulated transportation vessels whether to get documents out of the prison — like Bobby Sands's poems for example — or to get them in. Miniaturization as a form of dissimulation operates here at its climax: messages are written as small as possible — in another geographical and historical context, one can think of Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* written on a single roll of paper in prison — and objects need to be reduced to the minimum size to fit the size of their transporting vessel, etc. Since these methods are well-known to and anticipated by the prison wardens, violent bodily searches of orifices are regularly conducted.

The third strike that was enacted by the Republican prisoners was a deadly one: a hunger strike. The first one, accomplished by Bobby Sands — represented by McQueen in *Hunger* — started on March 1, 1981. Margaret Thatcher and the British government systematically refused to grant the political prisoner status to the Republicans, and as a consequence ten men died from this refusal as a result of their determination to pursue their strike until the end. We often associate the difficulty of a hunger strike to hunger itself as the materialization of an intuitive need. However, what McQueen's film shows well is the consequences that the absence of nutrition triggers in the body. After three weeks without eating or drinking,

the muscles and the bones of a body begin to substantially deteriorate. After 66 days of his hunger strike, Bobby Sands's body ceased to perform vital functions.

The few years that followed the 1976 negation of political prisoner status in Northern Ireland was thus exemplary in demonstrating how the carceral violence puts bodies at war and makes them become sites of resistance and of torture. Many Republicans prisoners did not present any defense when being tried and convicted, refusing by doing so to recognize the legitimacy of the British court. Their bodies were forcefully placed into a carceral architecture from which no escape seemed conceivable. However, by using their bodies in their abject nudity, in the matter they secrete, in their ability to transport objects, and in the possibility of becoming the expression of their voluntary and slow deterioration, Republican prisoners used the available means — what is more available than our bodies? — to pulverize the role that was designated for their instrumentalization. By doing so, they also accepted that the violence developed to break their efforts would be directed at the very weapon that they were using — that is, their bodies.

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07

THE DIARY OF AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER & THE FORGOTTEN FACES: TWO FILMS BY PETER WATKINS

The Diary of an Unknown Soldier (1959) and T*he Forgotten Faces* (1961) are Peter Watkins's two first movies. These two short films might appear as less ambitious than *The War Game* (1965), *Punishment Park* (1970) and *La Commune* (1999, see next chapter); however, they already carry the essence of Watkins's cinema both in their form and in their content.

The Diary of an Unknown Soldier is an internal monologue by a First World War British soldier deployed on the front in eastern France. The spectator is a witness of his thoughts and his fears before engaging in combat. Image and sound are not synchronized and the successive and fast series of shots combine to express the anguished wait of the soldier. The way the body is filmed and described in the script is remarkable as it insists on the fact that war for soldiers — in opposition to higher ranking officers — is essentially a matter of bodies: their movement, their collisions with bullet and bomb trajectories and their relationship to the ground — in this case, the mud. The body is what the soldier is asked to supply to his or her army to accomplish the strategies planned 'from above.' In this regard, Watkins has the main soldier thinking the following while filming close-ups of parts of his body along with other soldiers (see the screenshots above):

> That's how I will probably die, left like a poor old rag on the battlefield. When you know this is going to happen to you, your body suddenly becomes something terribly precious to you. This flesh, soft and warm is yours; a personal belonging not to be discarded like an awful piece of meat. You find yourself thinking about this, realizing what a wonderful thing your body is, and what an awful and wrong thing it is to maltreat it.

The Forgotten Faces, on the other hand, reconstitutes the 1956 Hungarian revolution against the Soviets that occurred five years earlier. Groups of young civilians took over the city of Budapest before being mercilessly judged and killed by the suppressive forces sent against them. Watkins insists on the youth and the amateurism of the rebels, thus creating an ambiguity between the story *in* the film and the story *of* the film itself: actors and the film's crew were also amateurs and

the revolutionary actions of their characters propose a similar analogy to the crew's own within the broader context of the cinematographic industry.

These two movies, both filmed as historic reconstitutions, like every other film created by Watkins, help us to question the subjectivity of a work of art, but more broadly, of any form of discursive documentation. Both *The Diary of an Unknown Soldier* and *The Forgotten Faces* are introduced as fictions, yet they tell us more about war and revolution than any documentary with the illusion of objectivity as its primary ambition. Watkins, along with Chris Marker, appears to capture best what Gilles Deleuze calls the "power of false" (see "Vérité et temps: La puissance du faux," his 1983 seminar about cinema at the Vincennes University), in order to help us access a few moments of a graspable reality that history can only allow when it is in progress, or in other words, is incarnated (etymologically, made flesh).

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08

LA COMMUNE (PARIS, 1871): DEMOCRATIC CINEMATOGRAPHIC CONSTRUCTION

La Commune (Paris, 1871) by Peter Watkins was filmed in 1999. It addresses the political question of the Paris Commune through a cinematographic work being itself a democratic construction. This film bases its plot on a historical event through a reconstitution, in order to question the contemporaneity of the class struggle. In order to do so, it limits its setting to a warehouse in the North of Paris, and introduces the action through an anachronistic documentary crew. The long shots show amateur actors expressing them-

selves in a contemporary language while improvising most of the content of their participation. Using this method, the film reaches almost 6 hours in its totality.

Watkins pushed the democratic process of making a film to the point of hiring actors opposed to the idea of the Paris Commune to play the Parisians who fled the capital city or remained hidden during the three months of the Commune's existence. The film does not neglect either the important faults of the Commune: the execution of the clerical hostages, the cowardice of some members of the Central Committee (an elected group of decision-makers in all districts of Paris and from every profession), the strong lack of organizations in front of the Versailles Army, the crowd syndromes, etc. This antagonism of facts reflects the antagonism in the numerous debates showed on the screen with the actors. The latter reach a high level of passion, since they have no problem identifying with their characters with whom they share many characteristics and desires. In this regard, the pseudo-documentary crew goes as far as asking these same actors if they would also risk their lives today if confronted with the same situation while they act out the fight on the barricades.

The film was badly received when it was released on television, even by its own producer, Arte, as Watkins himself explains on his website. The reasons are probably numerous and the first one is of course the institutional form of censorship that never gave to the 1871 Commune the place in history that it deserves. However, another interesting reason for it can be seen in the very means of this film. We could think of an alternate film from a liberal filmmaker who would have the favors of the industry to gather an important budget in order to create a glorious aesthetic film that would narrate an individual (love) story within the history of the Commune. The so-called 'liberal media' would applaud this work and

through it, self-congratulate itself for its open-mindedness.

However, the way Watkins has filmed this movie subverts the order of cinematographic creation (although he was not the first one to involve improvisation to this level) as he voluntarily gave up an important part of his directorial power over the actors and therefore his absolute control upon what becomes impossible to call "his" movie. Giving up on this control constitutes, of course, a danger for the cinematographic industry as it implies that one does not know in advance what a film will show and express at the beginning of its production. In a more general spectrum, an intelligentsia is, by definition, always afraid of a distribution of power, not only in the field it controls, but also at a larger social-cultural scale.

This question is a difficult one for every creator who has a clear idea of what (s)he wants to produce, especially if a clear political manifesto is at stake. Starting the moment where one needs the participation of others, (s)he cannot avoid the question of the hierarchical relationships that will link them together. It is indeed a difficult question as the 'right' answer is probably more complex than the simple absolute horizontality of those relationships. Satisfying all parties involved requires experiments, reflection and redoubled efforts as a result of these reflections. What is true for a film is also true for the construction of a building and, by extension, for the whole organization of society. The film directed by Watkins was one of these experiments, just as the Commune was, and thus both were exceedingly valuable models for questioning history through a creative process.

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09

SLEEP DEALER: SEPARATING THE BODY AND ITS LABOR PRODUCTION

Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008) introduces a near future where a young Mexican farmer faces the militarized privatization of water resources on a daily basis before seeing helplessly the destruction of his house by a drone controlled by the United States government. He then moves to Tijuana where he earns a wage by working in a 'sleep dealer' factory where the minds and energies of Mexican labor workers are being used through body-plug connections linked to various working machines in the United States. The views of the factory are the most striking images of the film as they fully reconstruct the imagery of the assembly line factory as we currently know it, while at the same time the object of production is removed from this same imagery. The workers' bodies still endure the physical labor and its repetition, yet the product of their work is situated on the other side of the border. The connection cables are the only link from the laborers to the product of their labor. The violence with which the cables penetrate the laborer's body expresses the power of his/her exploitation. It is probably not unintended that these cables make the workers appear as puppets in a literal illustration of their bodies' dispossession.

On the other side of the border, the drone pilot is subjected to a similar dispossession. He is also connected to the objects of his labor through cables in his body, yet his energy and mind

are not dedicated to labor, but rather to the military assassination of "water terrorists," — i.e. Mexican proletariats trying to survive by stealing water. The nature of his relationship with them through a digital interface allows him to disconnect what he sees and does from his perception of reality. Of course in this latter case, this is barely science fiction as the United States currently operates targeted assassinations through drones in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and Somalia. For many reasons, the dissociation of the body and its instrument — in the case of the U.S. drone program, a weapon, but in the film's factory the instrument is a working tool — is profitable on a political and economic level for the dominant powers. *Sleep Dealer* only materializes a current situation, the one where labor is only understood as a flow of energy that needs to be extracted from the body, controlled and maximized through a strategized interface. The more this interface is separating the body from its objects of production, the more the exploitation is effective. In this regard, the invention of the assembly line was a key moment of such a separation as each worker became in charge of one piece of an object that (s)he could not comprehend as a whole.

On the other hand, the worker's repossession of his/her body and its reconciliation with the process of production allows a political empowerment and emancipation from the transcendental logic of the capitalist system. In this regard, Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis's documentary *The Take* (2004) shows the physical occupation of a factory in Argentina by its workers and the redistribution of power and wealth to the ensemble of the laborers. The bodies and the factory were so involved together that the former had to physically defend the latter against the police which was trying to take back the factory in favor of its former owner in order for him to be able to sell it.

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10

EVEN THE RAIN: WHAT KIND OF LEFTIST DO WE WANT TO BE?

The film *También la Lluvia* (*Even the Rain*, 2010), by Icíar Bollaín, invites us to question our complaisance in thinking of ourselves as reasonable "leftists." The film's plot introduces Sebastian, a film director visiting a pre-Morales Bolivia (2000), in order to shoot a movie illustrating the horror of the Spanish colonialism after Christopher Columbus arrived in the 'new world' in the late 15th century. The beginning of the film (Bollaín's) shows Sebastian's generosity and passion to (re)write history through a strong anti-colonialist verve. Soon enough however, the Cochachamba water conflict occurs and crowds oppose the governmental privatization of water distribution. For many reasons developed at length in the movie, Sebastian is confronted to a series of choices between his film and his ethics. The latter would suggest that he stop his project and join the protesters in one way or another. Each time, nevertheless, he favors his film more than anything else and without actively helping the violent suppression, he makes compromises betraying the spirit in which he was making his film in the first place.

Sebastian is a film director but the problem is the exact same for an architect. Designing shelters for precarious populations of the world in Western architecture schools is good and certainly stems from honorable feelings, but doesn't it satisfy us too quickly without contributing to a

practical, long-term plan to help the people our efforts are addressed to in the first place? Moreover, before even initiating such projects, don't we have everything to learn from the people our projects claim to be serving? Aren't we patronizing them when we pretend to know the solutions to their problems, without a deeper series of interactions? The very use of pronouns like "we" and "them," as I emply here, is also problematic *vis-à-vis* the essential differences these pronounsseems to be stressing. Architects tend to think of their designs as ends in themselves, often ignoring the means and compromises that these designs necessitate to serve their primary goals. Admittedly, nothing happens without compromises but to whom and to what are these compromises possibly detrimental?

Who are the 'we' in this movie? The stubborn director who values 'history' more than what is happening in front of him in the present? The venal producer who is finally the most eager to dialogue with the local population while remaining slightly paternalist? The actor playing Christopher Columbus to whom the difficulty of this problem appears very clearly, but who prefers to escape from it by drinking rather than acting? The other actors who value their 15th-century ethical characters but act like cowards when the riots begin? Or can we possibly be somebody else?

This question cannot be answered theoretically; it can only be responded to in actions. Many are the occasions to make the choice that is the most conform to our ethics, as difficult it might be. We all occupy a position of power to a certain degree, depending on our citizenship status, if we are white, male, healthy, heterosexual, rich, living in the city, citizen of a former or current colonial empire, etc. Embodying at least one of these characteristics forces us to question our attitude *vis-à-vis* our position in society. On the other hand, the

norm is never fully incarnated by a specific body as we also share a few or many "minor" characteristics inviting us to be part of what Deleuze calls "revolutionary becoming." Which one of these two antagonist characteristics we want to embrace and, therefore, which position towards the relationships of power we want to occupy is up to us and us only.

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Originally published on April 25, 2012

11

DOGTOOTH: EMANCIPATION FROM A SADIAN PATRIARCHAL WORLD

Dogtooth (2009) is a Greek film by Yorgos Lanthimos. It introduces a heteronormative family whose children and mother never leaves the luxurious and remote villa where they live. The parents have fashioned a world limited to the house and the garden, the outside being defined as extremely dangerous, only accessible by car when one loses his/her dogtooth. The children are continuously associated with dogs to the point that the father teaches a class of self-defense that consists in learning how to bark.

The reference to the Marquis de Sade and his *120 Days of Sodom* (1785) and its cinematographic adaptation, *Salo* (1975) by Pier Paolo Pasolini is clearly assumed in the relationship between the father and his children and the territoriality of this Sadian domination. In contrast, the mother seems to be more associated with the contractual masochistic relationship with her husband, since she is aware of the perpetual lie she lives in and to which she also contributes while accepting her prisoner condition.

The movie intervenes in the life of these children (who seem to be between 17 and 20 years old) when one of them, influenced by some rare exterior influences, starts to develop

a curiosity if not an awareness of the outside world that ultimately leads to her final emancipation. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that this emancipation seems to emerge from within the illusional rationale imagined by her parents: before running away from the house, the girl character, who named herself Bruce (when her parents, sister and brother calls her only "the eldest"), breaks her tooth as a sign of her sufficient maturity for the outside world.

This film can therefore be interpreted as a series of political metaphors for the societal emancipation of a class dominated by another class which sustains this condition by the composition of a specific imaginary. However, this emancipation from 'within' prevents the idea of a more thorough revolution that would fully overcome the illusion provided by this imaginary, and instead imagines this new 'emancipated' status as necessarily acquired within the limits offered by one's field of understanding of the world.

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Originally published on February 28, 2011

12

THE EXTERMINATING ANGEL: WE MUST BECOME CLAUSTROPHOBIC ARCHITECTS

[also in The Funambulist Pamphlets Volume 12: WEAPONIZED ARCHITECTURE]

El ángel exterminador (The Exterminating Angel, 1962) is a film by Luis Buñuel in which the main characters are stuck for weeks in a living room after an urbane dinner. Nothing technically prevents them from actually exiting the living room but for a mysterious reason none of them appears to try to actually get out despite the fact that they are close to dying from hunger.

This narrative can be interpreted as a surrealist vision of architecture's fundamental power over bodies. In this case, the

living room does not appear to be a prison, since the large double door at its entrance remains open throughout the film, yet, we can interrogate ourselves *vis-à-vis* this state of affairs the power that allows the architect to draw such paradoxical barriers.

What is a door, after all? Isn't it simply an apparatus that organizes architecture's porosity or, in other words, a device that controls the carceral characteristics of a room? After all, a prison cell also has a door. A locked door is nothing else than a wall against which wall (most of the time) the human body cannot develop a sufficient energy to physically modify or destroy. Each interior space, traced by the architect as a continuous closed line, is a prison *en puissance* ("in power," "potentially").

The claustrophobia that Buñuel succeeds in transmitting in *The Exterminating Angel* is a feeling that we should consider as fundamental in the creation and use of architecture. We have to be claustrophobic architects and users of architecture! By this, I do not mean in any way that we should refrain from designing and using narrow or small spaces (there are other phobia developed in relation to larger open spaces), but rather that we should be somehow 'terrified' by the very act of tracing the lines that shut (*claustrum* in Latin) space onto itself. Again, this does not mean that we should never trace or experience these lines; what it means is that we should be fully aware of the tremendous power contained within them in order to trace/experience them in such a way that we would be in the least possible ways subjected to their violence. This attitude would allow us to practice what Michel Foucault describes in his preface to Deleuze & Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) as a means "to neutralize the effects of power linked to [our] own discourse."

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Originally published on January 30, 2013

13

UN CHIEN ANDALOU: DREAM AS TRUE HORROR

It seems to me that there are two kinds of true horror: there is the absolute relentlessness of the real that is felt through certain built-up realms of rational realism And, there is another type of true horror, the one that escapes from this rationality and belongs to the domain of the dream. No need here to dissociate dreams and nightmares, since this terminology is only understood retrospectively when the dream is over and when rationality is reactivated.

Dreams and their generator, the unconscious, were both the

raw material and the objects of the Surrealists. In 1929 the young Luis Buñuel created a beautiful 15-minute film, *Un Chien Andalou*, with Salvador Dali. The film explores this notion of dream as the sequence of irrational — and therefore terrifying — events created by the unconscious of one person. The fact that it is only one person who dreams is interesting to observe here, since this film has two authors. As Gilles Deleuze points out in his lecture at the Fémis (École Nationale Supérieure des Métiers de l'Image et du Son) in May 1987, "if you fall into the dream of another person, you are screwed-up." Here, Deleuze speaks more about the dream as an enunciated desire (and a realm, further, in hich the dreamer has some agency) than the dream as an experience in which the unconscious exercises full power. However, we can argue that both of these definitions of dreams are in fact creating a unique, more unified definition that celebrates the victory of the unconscious over the real. Deleuze therefore advices against the imposition of the surreal on the real, since the dream needs to use the whole power of the real in order to implement itself within it.

Dreams thus become true horror as they do not incorporate any exit. They are the ultimate labyrinth that I believe is being described in Kafka's work, and as I have argued elsewhere, *The Trial* has not been well reconstituted by Max Brod and is actually a post-mortem dream (see next chapter). In this hypothesis, I argue that death's time is out of the real and therefore is "lived" as an infinite dream in which only the unconscious remains. Dream, in this regard, is a moment of death and *Un Chien Andalou*, a vision of death.

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Originally published on May 8, 2011

14

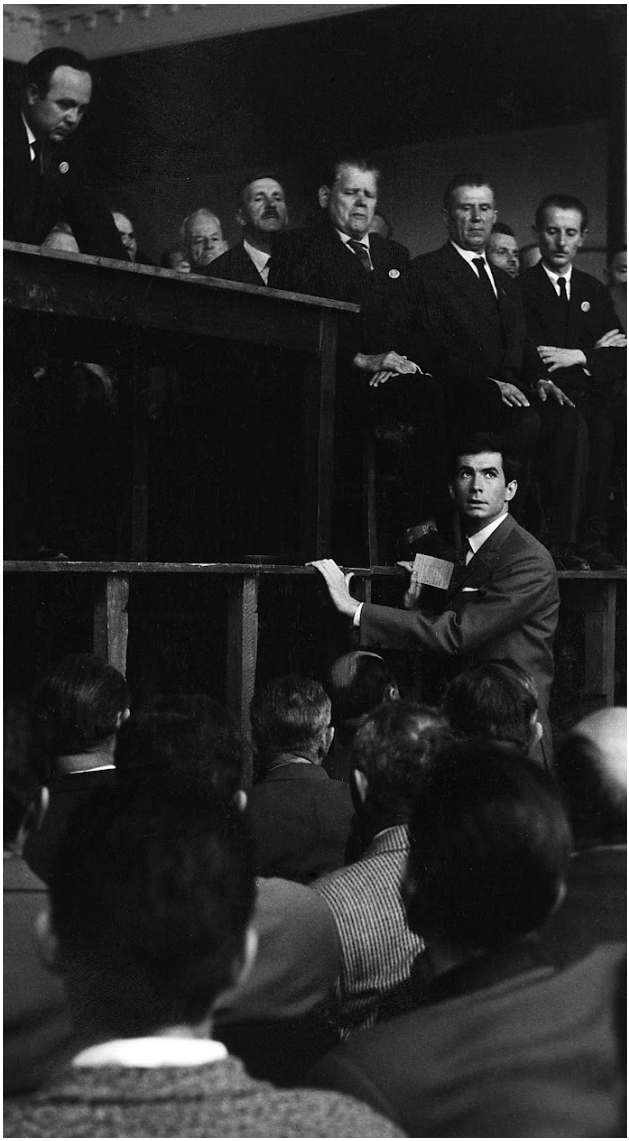
THE TRIAL: THE KAFKAIAN IMMANENT LABYRINTH AS A POSTMORTEM DREAM

[also in The Funambulist Pamphlets Volume 10: LITERATURE]

In this chapter, I would like to discuss my interpretation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* published after his death in 1925 and then adapted in a film by Orson Welles in 1962. *The Trial* has all the characteristics of a dream. The fact that Joseph K. is in bed in the first line of the novel — Welles even shows him sleeping in the film — is a clue that leads us in that direction. Just like a dream, the whole narrative is centered on his person and nothing seems to exist where he is not.

The dream consists of K.'s fantasies and fears that make this dream a nightmare. On the one hand, throughout the plot, K. gives orders and eloquent speeches that express a fantasy for power. In Orson Welles's film, the character played by Anthony Perkins, does not seem to have the skills to exercise this power; his screen presence is not charismatic. This paradox goes further with his surprising success with women who all fall for him so easily that it seems to be only be allowed through K.'s fantasy. We will find this fantasy again in *The Castle* (1926), Kafka's text whose main character shares the same name, K.

The text then becomes paranoid as each man becomes a



threat either to himself and his judicial case or to 'his' women who are all kidnapped by other men. Welles illustrates a "kidnapping" by a scene where a woman who was just seduced by K. is carried away by a magistrate in a very suggestive position that recalls Giovanni Bologna's classic sculpture *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1574).

The paranoia is also enunciated by K. during his audition in the court room, when he denounces a transcendental power persecuting him:

> There is no doubt," he said quietly, "that there is some enormous organization determining what is said by this court. In my case this includes my arrest and the examination taking place here today, an organization that employs policemen who can be bribed, oafish supervisors and judges of whom nothing better can be said than that they are not as arrogant as some others. This organization even maintains a high-level judiciary along with its train of countless servants, scribes, policemen and all the other assistance that it needs, perhaps even executioners and torturers. (Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, Prague: Schocken, 1999.)

This hypothesis of a transcendence 'ruling the machine' is the key question of *The Trial*. The literal theory of conspiracy is definitely the less interesting hypothesis. However, we can wonder if the bureaucratic system acquired its own transcendence that now escapes from any kind of human control, or if only the almost religious perception of this machine carries this transcendence when its functioning is actually operative only by immanence. Considered more closely, the two hypotheses appear to be the same. Such hypotheses bring us

closer to the interpretation of *The Trial* as a dream. It is not important whether the transcendence is real or only perceived as such, since the narrative is nothing else than pure perception without depth.

I have just evoked the notion of control, fundamental in the novel as in the movie. Kafka is the inventor of a new type of labyrinth. This invention stands far from the classical and transcendental paradigm of the labyrinth whose author, who looks at it from above, is amused by the confused bodies mistreated by architecture. On the contrary Kafka's labyrinth celebrates its immanence by including its author, lost, within the labyrinth. Kafka gives us a lot of clues in this direction. First, the name of the character, K., who can be associated with the author. Second, the policemen being punished by the machine they're serving, and third, the obvious absence of control from anybody over this system. However, Welles goes even further by playing the role of the lawyer himself. By doing so, he is able to create an additional event that celebrates the loss of control of the author over his work. In fact, the film incorporates the scene written by Kafka in which K. dismisses the lawyer from his service provoking the latter's fury and the desperation of the woman Leni. Since he plays the role of the lawyer, Welles dramatizes this moment of loss of control by representing the actor dismissing the director without ending the film. Transcendence is therefore dismissed, but K. then has to experience the even more frightening power of immanence.

The space of this labyrinth has therefore a fundamental importance and is expressed in a similar way by Kafka and Welles. Spaces are continuous and seem to be included one in another which accentuates the impossibility of an exit. The heterogeneity of architectural styles in the film (modern, neoclassic, gothic…) would seem to diminish the labyrinthine ef-

fect as they create locality; nevertheless, by being contiguous to each other, they maintain the feeling of a unique endless building with no exteriority. Claustrophobia, in this narrative, is not provoked by the smallness of spaces encountered but, rather, by their greatness, which expresses the weight of transcendence. When the transcendence is dissolved in the film, K. has to run away through a narrow corridor of lines that seems to absorb the character while he is chased by a crowd of frightening children whose laughs and screams accentuate the paranoia.

Kafka's labyrinth is considered one of the hallmark works of Modern Literature for reasons that are partially independent from him. In fact, he never finished *The Trial* and wanted it to be burned after his death. Max Brod, his friend and literary executor, not only decided to save it from fire but had to reassemble the disorganized chapters in an order that was probably not Kafka's choice. The labyrinth quite literally lost its author, replaced by someone else. This may explain why the last chapter seesm so inadequate: that may have been due to Brod, imposing an end while the whole narrative seemed to direct towards its infinity. Only infinity can prolonge the nightmare long enough to be worth of the definition of nightmare.

One could argue that death has to be present in order to tackle the question of freedom. The real freedom, as expressed in *The Trial,* occurs at the same time as the acceptance of the sentence, as we see it in the last chapter of the novel. *The Trial* is a disease that confronts K. to his imminent death and makes him freer than the man — called Block in the novel — whose trial's procedure (here, the disease) did not even start and who allowed himself to be humiliated by the lawyer. As Block points out in the same scene, "it is often better to be in chains than to be free." K. confronted this question after he almost fainted in the Court House and a woman, guiding him

to an exit, asked him: “Why don’t you go out? That’s what you wanted!”

Preparing this essay, I thought about the Kubler-Ross model published in 1969 that establishes the five behavioral steps of disease, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, which seem to match the narrative more or less accurately. However, it appears to me as a mistake to insist on this metaphor of the disease against the one of the dream as such a process implies a strict chronology which contradicts by definition the immanent labyrinth I have been presenting so far.

Death has to be thought in a non-chronological way, and the dream allows us to think about it in that way. In fact, death can be characterized by an absolute suspension of time that leads to a perceived infinity of dreams tending to death without ever reaching it. One could then draw curves of time as it is perceived by those who are subjected to it. When living beings would be characterized by a linear curve, dead beings would be characterized by an asymptotic function starting at the moment of their death.

Of course this hypothesis repudiates the last chapter of *The Trial* as such. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari evoke the hypothesis that this chapter was maybe a dream by K. somewhere in the middle of the narrative. Or, as I suggest, if the whole narrative is a dream, this last chapter might be, on the contrary, the only moment of non-dream. In this case, and following the hypothesis of curves of time that I just evoked, this last chapter would in fact be the first one, the one that allows the infinite dream to begin.

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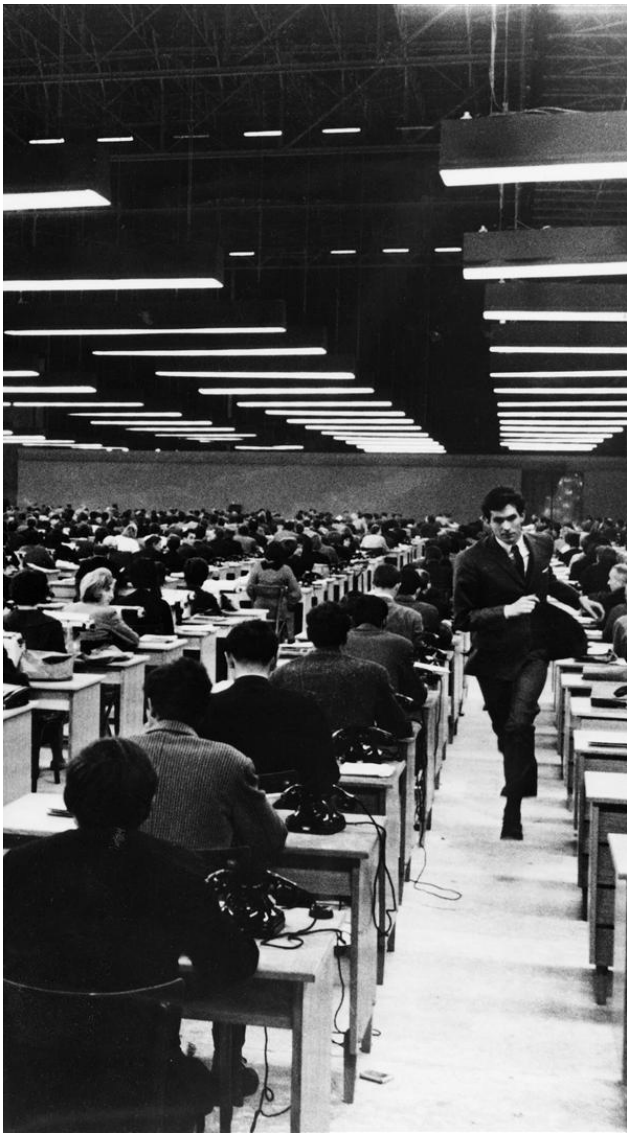

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ENTER THE VOID: POSTMORTEM WANDERING

The subjective point of view of the camera in Gaspard Noé's *Enter the Void* (2010), a continuous single shot throughout the film, forces the viewer to become the main character. However, this unique cinematographic aesthetic should not make us forget the essence of the movie which can be seen as a wandering *vis-à-vis* a certain interpretation of death.

A few minutes before dying, the main character, Oscar, hears indeed from his friend the way Buddhists conceive death as a soul wandering as well as a look at previous lives, preceding reincarnation itself. The film constitutes Oscar's death following such a process without any possibility for the viewer to perceive if this "soul wandering" is real or dreamed by him at the very moment of his death. As Marcel Duchamp once put it, "it is always other people who die." I interpret this mysterious sentence as the idea that time might exponentially decrease its speed when one is dying without ever reaching the limit where life ceases completely. Of course, for external viewers, one actually dies and time continues, but the perception of an infinite time does not necessarily presuppose the cessation of time in another scale of its perception — the one we experience when we are fully alive.

In the previous chapter, I claimed that Kafka/Welles' *Trial* was following the exact same wandering as the one introduced in *Enter the Void*. Franz Kafka's friend Max Brod was the person who reassembled the disseminated and incomplete chapters of *The Trial* before its publication. He assumed that K.'s death was the final episode of the narrative whereas I suggest that it was in fact the first one. In this interpretation, the endless wandering of K. in the administrative labyrinth that we know is actually his infinite dream experienced while dying during the exponential decrease of the speed of his own curving time. This wandering of thoughts leaves us with one question that *Enter the Void* implicitly asks: does death really even 'exist'?

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Originally published on December 27, 2011

16

HOLY MOTORS: PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTROSPECTION

I have an intuition that the key element of modernity in art to the ability it has to be introspective through its own representational means. *Holy Motors* (2012) by Leos Carax provides a narrative that motivates me to further explore this intuition.

In *Holy Motors*, the main character played by Denis Lavant is followed during one (suggestively typical) day of his life in which he goes from "appointment" to "appointment." These appointments consist in roles he incarnates like an actor would in front of cameras. However, there is no other camera here than the one that we find in each film, invisible, and which allows us, the spectator to watch the movie. That is

how Carax progressively blurs the limits between reality (in the film) and fiction (again, in the film), in an obvious embrace of such ambiguity. In doing so, we are not only wandering in the realms of representation but, more importantly, we are being questioned about our very human condition. This is not to say, of course, that we all play a role thus perpetually hiding of our "true self." The very notion of "true self" corresponds to nothing in reality. Rather, Carax's film questions the fact that what we really might be the sum of the point of views that others have on us.

This is obvious in the cinematographic construction, which requires a camera to give existence to what the film frames and sees. However, this film proposes the hypothesis that this situation may be just as true in our lives. As said in the movie, the "beauty of the act" only exists if there is "a beholder," even if the beholder is the actor him/herself. This hypothesis is certainly a phenomenological one. Nevertheless, isn't cinema (along with photography) the art that belongs the most to phenomenology in its very essence, i.e. the capture of light in order to encode a recognizable mode of representation?

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Originally published on January 10, 2013

17

THE TURIN HORSE: ENTROPY OF MIND AND MATTER

The title of Béla Tarr's most recent film (2011), *A torinói ló* (*The Turin Horse*, 2011), refers to the horse that Nietzsche saw being beaten almost to death by its master, and that he consequently hugged before sinking into prostration for a few days. This event is said to have been the trigger to Nietzsche's "madness," from which he would never exit. This film relates the narrative of this horse's life as well as his master and his master's daughter's life before (or after) this event. The setting never changes: a small stone house in the middle of a Beckettian landscape, where the father and the daughter repeat the same routine every day. Tarr shows us this routine

in his beautiful long sequence shots that have defined his style since *Damnation*.

The film starts with the beginning of a storm that will never cease increasing in intensity throughout the narrative. Leaves, trees, clothes, and fabrics are all subjected to this heavy wind. Even the light itself changes drastically from quasi-monochromatic whites to darkness at the end of the movie. Everything seems submitted to a sort of entropy in which all means of subsistence are affected. The horse refuses to move, then to eat and drink, the water of the well disappears, the words of the book the daughter reads resound as pure meaningless sound and, ultimately, the light itself dies. Nietzsche is never explicitly evoked (although the prophet who visits the master and his daughter at some point recalls Zarathustra to some extent), but we might want to see this entropy of matter as a parallel to the entropy of the mind he experiences. I would even be keen to propose the idea that this whole film consists in the vision that Nietzsche had when he saw this horse being beaten to death. Tarr's long sequences would therefore contrast with the sudden and punctual event Nietzsche experienced in a paradoxical parallelism of time scales with which I remain fascinated (see chapters 14 and 15).

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Originally published on February 15, 2012

18

RED DESERT: CORRUPTED MATERIALS

Red Desert (1964) is the first color movie created by Michelangelo Antonioni. This film is an extraordinary pictorial dialogue between bright chemical colors and a variety of industrial greys.

What I am interested to point out here is the "dark materialism" developed by Antonioni throughout the film to provide the perfect environment for the generalized paranoia of the main character played by Monica Vitti. In fact, Antonioni 'fills' his images with a quasi-infinity of micro-particles that have all been influenced by human activity. The built environment is an obvious component of it: factories, antennas, modernist apartment buildings, off-shore rigs, etc. Even what remains of the so-called "nature" — a problematic notion in itself — has been 'corrupted' by human activity, and is now part of a sort of humanly produced mono-matter, which seems to engulf Giulana's body. Even, sounds themselves, generated by the continuous processes of the transformation of this matter, are always there in an oppressive and persistent background.

However, I believe that it would be a mistake to understand the darkness of this materialism as being despised by Antonioni, who would then be merely providing a moralizing vision of the successive industrial revolutions. On the contrary, he develops a creative approach that can be associated to the

one practiced by Bernd & Hilla Becher in their industrial photographic inventories. A few decades later, a photograper h like Edward Burtynsky seems to have been greatly influenced by Antonioni's and the Bechers' approach. This approach is characterized by the expression of an ambiguity between disgust and fascination for these landscapes.

This ambiguity here is expressed in a much more powerful way than in the Bechers and Burtynsky's work, since Antonioni, in his skilled dramatization of women bodies — Monica Vitti in particular — manages to contrast this environment with Giuliana's elegantly dressed body. The confrontation between the backdrop and clothing is violent and helps fuelling her continuous panic.

In Spinozist terms, the relations developed between the environment's body and Monica Vitti's body can be said to be "sad" as they seem to never be able to harmonize. Her body seems to be the last one uncorrupted in this landscape and it has to wage a dreadful fight in order to remain as such. Only the power of her imagination seems to create an escape world where the environment is composed of untouched beaches in a bright blue sea. Paradoxically, in reality, the boats that could be considered as the means of a potential escape for her seem to constitute the ultimate barriers of this environment won over by corrupt, industrial matter. When the first one is under quarantine, the second one is inaccessible by the border of language. No material exit is therefore allowed, and the fight of and within the matter continues.

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Originally published on September 5, 2011

19

GRAVITY: AN ODE TO WEIGHT

I have been fascinated for several years by material encounters in films and photographs that reveal the true weight of things, and thus the weight of the material assemblages that bodies (living and non-living) constitute. I often make this reading through Spinoza's philosophy, which insists on the relation that these encounters compose.

This reading is possible when the weight of things constitutes their relationship to gravity. It is therefore legitimate to expect another approach when it comes to these encounters considered in outer space, where the gravitational force is still strong enough to carry each body in its own orbit but weak enough such that these bodies are not drawn back to the center of the

earth. As we will see later, the very title of Alfonso Cuarón's film, *Gravity* (2013), constitutes a true dedication to the expression of these encounters in space. The 'Hollywood' storyline can be seen as a strategy of capitulation to big budget productions, but let us not be mistaken; this film is truly about the collision of matter in the vacuum of space. What triggers the plot itself is the encounter of the protagonists with a pack of debris created by the explosion of a satellite whose high speed does not suffer from any friction. Throughout the film, we are reminded of this fact: vectors of movement are absolute in space. In other words, a body in space barely pushed in one direction will be moved according to this vector without encountering any friction. Henri Bergson's "sliding point" is captured in an infinite inertia. Thus, throughout the film, we are observing the body of the main character subjected to the violence of each change of vector it manages to adopt thanks to exterior elements. *Gravity*'s silent explosions — there can't be sound in the void of space, for example, illustrate magisterially the multi-vectorial directions that the debris adopt — it makes us wish that we could see the last scene of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* in 3D.

This does not tell us why the film is called *Gravity* and not *gravityless* or *anti-gravity*. Of course, a work of art is 'strong' enough not to depend wholly on its author's intentions; however, I would like to insist on the fact that Cuarón evidently knows exactly what he is doing. It could not be less innocent that, when the main character 'lands' on earth, she is immediately confronted with another milieu in which gravity is reduced: water. The scene insists that she does not seem uncomfortable in this milieu: she puts off her space suit that was filled with water and easily reaches the surface of the lake she is in. These conditions are sufficiently similar enough to space for her not to be disturbed by them. Indeed, when she reaches the shore, she cannot manage to stand up as she

is experiencing gravity 'for the first time.' Cuarón insists on this image of this body that has faced the worst difficulties, but cannot compose one of the simplest relations to gravity that a toddler has learned to have. Similarly, it is not innocent that there is no 'Hollywood' ending here, no swarm of Apache helicopters coming to the rescue. The main character is alone in a 'natural' environment and, it is alone that she eventually manages to stand up and compose the parts of her body in relation to gravity. The name of the film is thus retroactively expressing the fact that the entire movie was dedicated to its very last scene, the simplest one. We can even associate this final scene with the teleological manifestation of the tool become weapon, and thus the ape become human in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. She is the first human on earth, the first one to experience gravity. For the second time in the history of cinema, we paradoxically need a futurist 'spacecraft movie' to make us think about the birth of the human.

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PINA: THE WEIGHT OF THE BODY DANCING

[also in The Funambulist Pamphlets Volume 1: SPINOZA]

It has been said many times that the most beautiful ballets are the ones that makes us forget the weight of the dancers' bodies. With Pina Bausch, on the contrary, dance becomes a vehicle of celebration of this weight in its interaction with itself, the others, and the environment. The film *Pina* (2011) by Wim Wenders is remarkable in this regard. It offers to the spectator another point of view on four of the German choreographer's main pieces (*The Rite of Spring*, *Café Muller*, *Kontakthoh* and *Vollmond*) as well as introducing her dancers in various open landscapes thus perpetuating the emphasis on the relationship dance creates with a terrain.

This new point of view is highly interesting as it focuses on details that are almost imperceptible from the audience's traditional situation. However, all those details are what composes the atmosphere of Bausch's ballet, and they are beautifully emphasized by Wenders. The sound of the bodies, in particular, is fascinating, whether they inhale, breathe, run, fall on the floor or hit it. Bodies are celebrated both in their power and in their fragility. There is a violence in Bauch's work that is fascinating and frightening in its crudeness. The film recounts well this dimension of dance, whether it is by those two female bodies which repeatedly encounter the

power of a wall in *Café Muller*, or the group of women ritually hitting their bodies in *Le Sacre du Printemps*, or else the rope that prevents a young girl from escaping of the room, or again, the couple, in *Café Muller*, who can't stop repeating the same action over and over between embrace and fall. Each time, the sound produced by those bodies reminds us of their weight, i.e. their factor of attraction for gravity, and shocks us by its coldness.

Depending of the matter of which it is composed, the environment reacts more or less visually to those encounters. Earth, sand and water are found regularly in the movie as examples of such visible interactions. Indeed, these materials embody expressively the effect that the environment has on the body and vice versa.

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WINGS OF DESIRE: DER ERZÄHLER (THE STORYTELLER)

Wim Wenders's magnificent movie *Der Himmel Uber Berlin* (strangely translated as *Wings of Desire,* 1987) is an ode to our humanity. It performs such through the testimony of the weight of our bodies — the circus is particularly useful for this matter — but also the weight of life and history (in the individual and collective sense), which facilitates the enclosing of the self and its defiance towards Otherness, easily manifested in Cold-War Berlin. A taxi driver thinks in the film:

> Are there still borders? More than ever! Every street has its borderline. Between each plot, there's a strip of no-man's-land disguised as a

> hedge or a ditch. Whoever dares, will fall into booby traps or be hit by laser rays. The trout are really torpedoes. Every home owner, or even every tenant nails his name plate on the door, like a coat of arms and studies the morning paper as if he were a world leader. Germany has crumbled into as many small states as there are individuals. And these small states are mobile. Everyone carries his own state with him, and demands a toll when another wants to enter. A fly caught in amber, or a leather bottle. So much for the border. But one can only enter each state with a password. The German soul of today can only be conquered and governed by one who arrives at each small state with the password. Fortunately, no one is currently in a position to do this. So… everyone migrates, and waves his one-man-state flag in all earthly directions. Their children already shake their rattles and drag their filth around them in circles.

Many characters are introduced in this movie, but one strikes us as being able to embody the role of the film's director himself and, by extension, any poet, writer or other storyteller: *der Erzähler* (the storyteller). In *Wings of Desire* this character is old and weak, as he is the witness to the origins of the Berlin situation at the end of the 1980s: war and the partition. Wenders introduces Berliners and the urban space as entities that cannot manage to forget the world wars and their horrible damage. It is through the *Erzahler* that he attributes this misery to the flags, i.e. the increasing success of nationalist ideology in Europe, and more specifically of Nazism in Germany. We see him in the library, struggling his way up the stairs as his body does not seem to be able to carry him anymore:

> Tell me, muse, of the storyteller who has been thrust to the edge of the world, both an infant and an ancient, and through him reveal every man. With time, those who listened to me became my readers. They no longer sit in a circle, bur rather sit apart. And one doesn't know anything about the other. I'm an old man with a broken voice, but the tale still rises from the depths, and the mouth, slightly opened, repeats it as clearly, as powerfully. A liturgy for which no one needs to be initiated to the meaning of words and sentences.

Then later, he wanders along the wall, looking for the Potzdamer Platz that used to be a prosperous part of Berlin and which disappeared at the end of the war and also during the partition. Through this physical wandering, he also goes from thought to thought wondering what his role is in society:

> Must I give up now? If I do give up, then mankind will lose its storyteller. And if mankind once loses its storyteller, then it will lose its childhood.

As it is immediately understood in this film, childhood is indeed the state of humanity that embodies the most a Rousseauvian interpretation of life, and its playfulness is celebrated by Wenders through his recurrent psalmody, "Als das Kind Kind war …" ("When the child was child ..."). However, through this movie, Wenders also questions his role as a storyteller and reaches the conclusion than this role is fundamental for society, as the old *Erzähler* finishes the film with this sentence:

> Tell me of the men, women, and children who will look for me – me, their storyteller, their bard,

their choirmaster – because they need me more than anything in the world. *Nous sommes embarqués*

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AKIRA KUROSAWA: APPLIED SPINOZISM

[also in The Funambulist Pamphlets Volume 01: SPINOZA]

The possibility of reading the bodies depicted in the cinema of Akira Kurosawa through the philosophy of Spinoza is not necessarily obvious (he is usually associated with authors like Dostoevsky or Shakespeare) and my interpretation of it might be somehow shallow and incomplete. I suppose, however, that good ideas are based on intuitions and, for this reason, the latter should be explored!

Having watched of Kurosawa films these last four years, I noticed that we often see in them one or two characters who are struggling to climb up an earth slope. That is the case in *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *Rashomon* (1950), *High and Low* (1963) and probably in more that I forgot or did not watch. The almost obsessive care that Kurosawa takes to film those scenes of various length leads us to think that there might be something important to be observed in them. These scenes do not bring anything to the plot in terms of additional information, and an inattentive reading of them could let us think that a flat land would pretty much depict the same action; but, again, the slope seems to be a crucial element in Kurosawa's cinematographic (and therefore conceptual) toolbox.

It is important to stress the fact that those slopes are not symbolic. In the four films I indicated above, the reasons that force the characters to climb up them are all different. In *The Bad Sleep Well*, the character climbs up a volcano to kill himself while in *The Hidden Fortress*, the two buffoons/protagonists experience the difficulty of the slope during their trip. In *Rashomon*, the two main characters are climbing up the terrain of the forest so that one can rob the other, while in *High and Low*, the slope is used in the context of a police investigation. Kurosawa's choice to insist on this type of scene is thus strictly "material" in the sense that there is no meaning that would be expressed in indirect ways through these scenes. The difficulty of the bodies climbing up the terrain seems to be a perfect illustration of the necessary struggle a body has to face to adjust the material assemblage (s)he is to the material assemblage that surrounds her (him), as we said in the preceding chapter. The stones that occasionally tumble down along the slopes as the body attempts to climb them could even be seen as a "wink" from Kurosawa to Spinoza's repeated example of the stone (see chapter 2), but again, that might be strictly coincidental.

Such a struggle towards the harmony of the body and the surrounding matter can be seen in various other moments in the cinema of Kurosawa. The most expressive example of it is probably the ultimate moment of the battle in the village of *Seven Samurai* (1954) as the rain, the earth and the blood are mixed into an ubiquitous mud with which the bodies have no choice but to compose. Again, such conditions were not necessary for the film's plot; quite the contrary, the fights acquire a slowness that is at the antipodes of what spectacular cinema requires. Kurosawa's cinema, however, is different. He does not want to liberate the bodies from the weight of things including their own. The beauty comes precisely from the way the bodies engage with the matter: some of them

are cruelly left in the first mode of perception where the surrounding matter remains a site of violent encounter that the body has to experience. His heroes, however, are bodies which embrace matter and thus achieve the second mode of perception. Sometimes they even approach the third one, usually in fights, when they seem to read almost perfectly the surrounding movement of speed and slowness of the matter which, of course, includes their opponent.

I would like to conclude this article with a last example of Kurosawa's Spinozism by invoking a film I already wrote about, *Throne of Blood* (1957), a cinematographic adaptation of Macbeth. (just as in Shakespeare's text, here the final battle involves an army camouflaged by a multitude of trees that they cut and transport with them. The graphic effect, and therefore the camouflage's goal, appears as a moving offensive forest that comes to claim its rights against Washizu/Macbeth's castle. Leaving the symbolic and animist aspects of this story aside, let's focus on the strict physical characteristics of this fantastic scene: the hybridization of human bodies with others, the trees, in a sort of literal interpretation of becoming-nature as Deleuze could have theorized it (he more often evokes becoming-animal). Despite the fact that trees are usually the paradigmatic fetish of a Cartesian nature, as opposed to the world of artifacts, we have to understand the notion of nature in a Spinozist way. Nature is the material world, it is the substance, it is God and nothing can exist outside of it. A concept of becoming nature is therefore an acknowledgement of the existence of bodies within this nature and the possibility for them to construct harmonious, if not entirely hybrid, relations at the material level of their own composition. Such a philosophy requires an imaginary that the Deleuzian metaphors and the films of Kurosawa contribute to construct.

Following illustrations are extracted from *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *Seven Samurai* (1954) & *Throne of Blood* (1957) by Akira Kurosawa

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SPIKE LEE: THE DOLLY SHOT AS INEXORABILITY OF IMMANENCE

[also in The Funambulist Pamphlet Volume 01: SPINOZA]

It is interesting to envision Art History in terms of inventions. Of course, one could argue that a work of art is not simply about inventing new techniques but also being able to use the techniques in the content of this work. However, we could approach the problem in a Spinozist way that does not distinguish between the soul and the body, and therefore between the means and the essence. Studying Art History by focusing on inventions is interesting to the extent that it allows to communicate new emotions.

I am interested in observing more specifically what Spike Lee invented for Cinema. The principle is pretty simple: filming an actor standing on the dolly on which the camera is set, in a back traveling shot that makes the actor immobile but the setting around him or her moves. The main effect produced is the feeling that the actor is floating and moved by an external force.

With this process, Spike Lee manages to communicate different emotions that take over the character whose body has no choice but to obey to an irresistible force that pushes him (her) forward.

In *Malcolm X*, the character of Denzel Washington is pushed by the fatal history when he goes to give the speech during which he will be assassinated. In *Clockers*, a young drug dealer is moved by its loss of control of a situation that drives the kid that helps him to shoot a man in front of him. In the *25th Hour*, both Anna Paquin and Philip Seymour Hoffman's characters are subjected to a state of drunkenness that brings her to seduce him and him to kiss her despite the fact that she is his 17 years old student. Eventually, in *Inside Man*, Denzel Washington, as a hostage negotiator, calm for the whole first part of the movie, is moved by a virulent anger when one of the hostages for whom he is responsible been shot by bank robbers.

There are more Spike Lee's movies using this process (*Mo' Better Blues, School Daze* and *Crooklyn*) but I would like to focus on the four films I evoked. The speed is interesting, as it differentiates between the fast intensity of a profound emotion such as Denzel Washington's anger in *Inside Man* and the slow and inexorable fate that brings Malcolm X to his death. The notion of fate is important here, and I believe that it should not be considered in the usual terms. Fate, here, is not to be understood as a trick used by Spike Lee to introduce a *deus ex machina* in his films that would allow him to trigger an event in an absolute transcendental way. No, in my understanding, the Dolly Shot occurs because the whole narrative before it constructed the circumstances that make this scene inexorable. In other words, the force that I was evoking earlier is not a divine force that would influence the plot, but rather the implacable logical conclusion of the sum of events that built up the story so far.

Spike Lee's Dolly Shots are therefore a good illustration of Paul Klee's famous phrase: "Art does not represent the visible; rather, it makes things visible." (1920). In fact, those

shots are not reproducing any real situation, but rather envision the inexorability of our behaviors based on the sum of circumstances that bring them in situation.

Following illustrations are respectively extracted from Malcolm X (1992), 25th Hour (x2) (2002), Clockers (1995) & The Inside Man (2006) by Spike Lee.

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ABOUT

THE FUNAMBULIST: a blog written and edited by Léopold Lambert. It finds its name in the consideration for architecture's representative medium, the line, and its philosophical and political power when it materializes and subjectivizes bodies. If the white page represents a given milieu — a desert, for example — and one (an architect, for example) comes to trace a line on it, (s)he will virtually split this same milieu into two distinct impermeable parts through its embodiment, the wall. The Funambulist, also known as a tightrope walker, is the character who, somehow, subverts this power by walking on the line.

CENTER FOR TRANSFORMATIVE MEDIA, Parsons The New School for Design: a transdisciplinary media research initiative bridging design and the social sciences, and dedicated to the exploration of the transformative potential of emerging technologies upon the foundational practices of everyday life across a range of settings.

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