

The film-maker's ethic in the face of the inevidence of the times

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1. Year zero

At the end of the first chapter of the imposing audiovisual project undertaken by Jean Luc Godard in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* entitled *Toutes les Histoire(s)*, the film-maker enters into a key moment in the history of 20th century thought when everything is tottering and the cinema shows its ethical commitment. A title tells us: "Let each eye negotiate for itself". A chain of dissolves melt the images of the title into the eyes of Giulietta Massina / Gelsomina in Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954). Gelsomina, the heroine of Fellini's film, becomes a symbol of an eternal innocence that tries to impose its universe of hope on a world ruled by cruelty and barbarity. Gelsomina's eyes blend with the image of that tragic gesture which, in another film, is made by Edmund, a boy of fourteen, who raises his hand to his youthful eyes, covers them and jumps into the void from the top of a ruined skyscraper. The raw image comes from the last scene of Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* (*Germania Anno Zero*, 1947). Unlike Gelsomina, who tries to impose hope on a meaningless world, young Edmund is unable to find an existential way out in a world where the wounds are so deep that there is no longer a glimpse of an escape of any kind. Edmund has to live in Berlin just after the war with his paralytic father, his brother, who is hiding in the family home for fear of reprisals for his Nazi past, and his sister, who is a prostitute. Edmund cannot free himself from his Nazi education and the slogans of his schoolteacher, who reminds him that "the strong must eliminate the weak." At the end of his journey, after having murdered his useless father, all that is left is suicide, because in his eyes there is no future for Berlin, for Germany or for Europe. Rossellini made *Germany Year Zero* in Berlin in 1946, the year zero which marked a new moment in the history of European culture and thought. Godard returns to that gesture to close his own reflection on the relation between cinema and history. What does Edmund's symbolic death represent for 20th century cinema and thought? What does that original gesture usher in?

The philosopher Gilles Deleuze regards that as a key moment in the passage from what he calls 'movement image' to 'time image'. Movement image is the image subject to the idea of action, in which heroes see that something affects them and decide to act,

drawing their strength from the thrust of action. Movement image is the image of the classical cinema, in which conflicts are resolved by the presence of someone who acts and sets out to free the situation of evil. In the case of Edmund in Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* a significant event takes place as the hero sees a reality that affects him—Berlin just after the war— but feels impotent to act, faced with something which is beyond him. For Deleuze this film, along with most key works of Italian neo-Realism, ushers in a seer's cinema where the action of seeing is opposed to the model established by action cinema. “However much the protagonist moves, runs and shouts, the situation in which he finds himself is too much for his motor capacity on all sides, makes him see and hear what does not properly correspond to a response or an action. More than reacting, he registers. More than undertaking an action, he gives himself up to a vision.” (1)

That presence of a new cinema of optical sensations opposed to action and open to the evident relation of strangeness between individuals and things opens the way for an ethical attitude of commitment by the cinema in the face of historical reality and explores an unexpected new ground in the context of the years just after the war, defined by Serge Daney as the landscape of political and aesthetic non-reconciliation (2). If in the field of culture it is impossible, as Adorno says, to write poetry after Auschwitz, nor can the cinema continue to show hope after becoming aware of barbarity.

Just as in thought, in the cinema it is impossible to reconcile the film-makers — children of a time of crisis— and what can be seen. After the Second World War any possible harmony between beings and things, individuals and the world, ceased to exist. From neo-Realism, the film-maker's commitment to non-reconciliation opened the gates of a modern era opposed to classicism. Fabrice Revault Allones believes that after the year zero declared by Rossellini, a fundamental fissure opens in the cinema, since “the links between man and the world are broken, it is no longer possible to find any evidence. It is impossible to capture the world or allow oneself to be captured by it, since it has ceased to communicate, there is no more communication between oneself and others, between oneself and oneself.” (3) The term “inévidence”, used by Roland Barthes, characterises the new landscape that opened up after the war and lasted throughout the twentieth century, when cinema began to speak cautiously of reconciliation, of other forms of harmony and an urgent need to overcome the conflicts inherited from the experience of otherness. What is the ethical attitude adopted by film-makers in the face of the inevidence of the century?

2. What is a film-maker?

To answer all those questions in some comfort, we could demand a certain conceptual rigour of ourselves and begin our journey by defining what we understand by ‘film-maker’. The question is by no means obvious, since under film-maker we cannot only consider people who are professionally engaged in the task of making films. Nowadays the idea of making films, like the idea of professional, conceals a number of contradictions. The first may be terminological by nature and may be conditioned by

the artistic category we wish to grant to the cinema. From a certain Romantic heritage, confirmed in the sixties by the film-makers of the French Nouvelle Vague and their *politique des auteurs*, it is the film-maker as author that dominates the art of cinema and leaves his personal stamp on his products. The figure of the author therefore acquires a certain transcendence as a public figure who can make the great works that are part of the cinema canon.

To establish a practical definition of what we understand by film-maker and to be able to see what his possible ethical stance is, the first step consists of establishing a process of “demystification” of the cinema. The cinema cannot be seen just as an art and we must begin to understand that the “status of art” is not indispensable to give it positive life; quite the reverse. The cinema is above all a medium of expression with images and the film-maker must be regarded as an artisan of that medium. That from time to time the medium can come up with works that may have an aesthetic impact which we might qualify as art need not keep us awake at night. The cinema does not have to take upon itself, as some critics mistakenly believe, the mission of creating the occasional masterpiece; first we need to think about what a masterpiece is and what attributes decide whether a particular work of art can be regarded as such. The cultural yield of the cinema does not necessarily have to come, as some people still believe, from the allocation of a privileged place within the canon of the arts, nor to be determined by its intellectual or academic recognition. Its yield must be determined by the position it can occupy in history and its capacity to become a means of provoking thought.

To reach a better definition of what we might come to understand by film-maker, we could borrow the one set out by Jean Claude Biette in an interesting article on the subject. For the French analyst, a film-maker is “someone who expresses a point of view on the world and the cinema in the act of making his film.” (4) We may find the definition useful since it contains a twofold possibility. On the one hand, the film-maker is the person who sees that we can maintain a particular perception of reality which is totally related to its contemporariness and expresses a clear commitment to the logic of time. That film-maker, however, may not remain a simple objective observer of reality or a simple teller of tales who, through a story or a *mise en scène*, states his personal concerns within the problems of his time. The modern film-maker has to have a high degree of self-awareness of his own world and cannot maintain an innocent attitude towards his own medium of expression. He is obliged to put forward his point of view about the cinematic exercise he is carrying out. That process of self-awareness is only possible through a deep knowledge of the medium, and that knowledge cannot come, as present day schools of cinema believe, through a mastery of technique, but only through a historical awareness of the road the medium has taken. Knowledge of the medium must go hand in hand with a concern that enables the film-maker to understand the theoretical foundation of the culture where his creative act is eventually inscribed. A self-reflexive attitude must be evident in his works, which must not generate an process of illusion, making us believe that the cinema stages the world transparently; it must show reflection as something inherent to the act of filming.

Taking Biette's definition as a basis, we may conclude that the real ethical attitude of

the film-maker can only emerge from two basic premises: involvement with reality and a reflection on the formal limits of the medium itself.

3. Showing horror

In 1944, in the United States, where they were living in exile, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer published a work entitled *Philosophical Fragments*, a work which would lead, three years later, to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a book which did not find a place in philosophical debate until the seventies, when it came to be regarded as a lucid reflection on the excesses of the Enlightenment project and the way in which the idea of modernity, which emerged from the Enlightenment, was plunged into a crisis as soon as it came into contact with the elements of barbarity which had showed the limits of the construction of the concept of progress. In the final part of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in a chapter entitled “Notes and drafts”, we can read some lucid thoughts, written in 1944 before the end of the war, on Nazism and the position of conscience in the face of barbarity: “In Germany, Fascism won the day with a crassly xenophobic, collectivist ideology which was hostile to culture. Now that it is laying waste the whole world, the nations must fight against it; there is no other way out. But when all is over there is nothing to prove that a spirit of freedom will spread across Europe; its nations may become just as xenophobic, pseudocollectivistic, and hostile to culture as Fascism once was when they had to fight against it. The downfall of Fascism will not necessarily lead to a movement of the avalanche.” (5) How could the cinema immediately after the war fight the avalanche of barbarity that had swept across Europe? What weapons did it have to hand?

Roberto Rossellini's *Roma, Città Aperta* was initially given the title *Storie di Ieri* — Stories of Yesterday— and it returned to a series of real events that took place in the years of the occupation. Their function was to become symbols of how far Nazi barbarism could go. However, *Roma, Città Aperta* is a film that went beyond the boundaries that had been marked out in the field of ethics in the cinema. That was because its great challenge consisted of fearlessly wondering how to show horror.

One of the key moments in *Roma, Città Aperta* is a torture scene. A Gestapo officer subjects a member of the Communist resistance to a series of inhuman humiliations and makes a chaplain, who is also a prisoner, listen to his screams. The chaplain becomes a symbol of a certain kind of Christian struggle that helped the cause of the resistance. Rossellini shows the horror full on with the disfigured face of the resistance leader. The film-maker looks at the horror without emphasising its effects, considering it an event which is perfectly located in historical reality. The gesture eventually means the cinema's loss of innocence in the face of the cruelty of the real world. Rossellini cannot hide the truth and has to reveal the horror in order to combat that official history that had devoted itself to concealing reality. To dare to look horror in the face was one of the great moral steps forward of the Italian cinema just after the war and ushered in a new political way of understanding film.

The director Víctor Erice evoked the fundamental importance of that step in a lecture delivered in 1994 at the Centre Cultural de la Merçè in Girona: “The intense emotional complicity which Roberto Rossellini’s film aroused among the dozen privileged spectators (we only have to think about some of the subjects: resistance to Fascism, the commitment between Catholics and Communists, united in a common front) may have prevented us from clearly perceiving what really existed behind some —not all— of his most genuine images: the need to show everything, not to be silent, which seemed to us to be linked to the notion of cruelty in the scene where the Communist Manfredi is tortured by a member of the Gestapo before the eyes of a third person. Just where a classic film-maker would have used an ellipse in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the director of *Roma Città Aperta* did not do so. Rossellini did not hide the act of horror from our gaze, but a few years later it could be said that there, at that very moment of *Roma, Città Aperta*, the modern cinema was born.”

Where did that ethical wish to show horror in the cinema lead? In 1975, after filming the three chapters of his life trilogy, in *Salo or the 120 Days of Sodom* (*Salo o le 120 giornate de Sodoma*, 1975) Pier Paolo Pasolini set out to transfer the universe of the Marquis de Sade to the Republic of Salo. The result was a strange film, which Pasolini, a film-maker who believed that the cinema was no more than the written language of reality, set out to explore the boundaries of what could be seen on screen. The film showed a group of Nazis engaged with exquisite indulgence in watching the process of degradation to which they subjected a group of young people obliged to behave like slaves to arouse their sadomasochistic appetites, aimed particularly at their leaders’ more voyeuristic side. Pasolini did not only show torture head on; he dared to show sexual humiliation accompanied by the process of destruction of some of the fundamental ethical values of the human being. He had led the cinema into a blind alley, since after the experience of *Salo*, no other film-maker would ever go so far again.

A few days after the premiere of *Salo*, Pasolini was interviewed on RAI by the journalist Furio Colombo. The title of the interview suggested by Pasolini himself was premonitory: “We are all in danger.” He recalled how the people who had passed into history were the ones who had learned to say ‘no’. For Pasolini Italy in the seventies, which had revealed the first syndromes of the crisis arising from the excesses of the economic miracle, had entered a deep crisis. He defined the drama of the world in the following terms: “The tragedy is that there are no human beings any longer, only strange machines that crash into one another. And we, the intellectuals, always pick up last year’s railway timetable, or even one from ten years ago, and then we say: how strange, if those trains don’t go through there, how could they have crashed like that?” (6) The interview was Pasolini’s last public act. The following morning, 2 November, his disfigured body was found dead on the beach at Ostia. What symbolic value did Pasolini’s death have? Was his corpse not the corpse of a modernity that people wanted dead and buried?

4. Showing denial

In France Jean Renoir, who during the time of Popular Front had been one of the film-makers most committed to the political situation and who, after the failure of Leon Blum's policies, felt disconcerted and embittered by the fate of so many hopes for social change, decided to make *La Règle du Jeu* (The Rules of the Game, 1939), one of the most incisive explorations of the state of moral disarray in Europe before the war. His aim was to look at the sterile games of a social class doomed to self-destruction.

For Renoir the strategy was not to show the host of dangers threatening society by tackling the social situation at the time head on. He set out to reflect on a Europe about to fall into barbarity by observing a series of characters who amuse themselves by dancing—as if everything was fine—on the edge of a volcano about to erupt. His attitude to historical events did not consist of showing commitment or describing horror and its effects, but of portraying the existence of beings who deny their present and take refuge in empty games. In a study of *La Règle du Jeu*, Francis Vanoye calls that attitude denial: “All the characters are sterile beings with no future, doomed to a tragic situation, but they disguise it by pretending that they are thinking about other things: match-making, automata and love. That is what is called denial and Renoir shows it by means of a constant coexistence in the film between motifs of party, pleasure and death.” (7) Whilst the automata the Marquis de la Chesnaye has collected dance to the rhythm of a great organ, among the guests at the party he has organised on his estate a group of people disguised as skeletons appear and join the dance, among the aristocrats, but it is the dance of death. *La Règle du Jeu* becomes “a reflection on denial as the origin of evil. Renoir describes a society which, with its sterile games, closes its eyes to the dangers of Fascism.” (8)

What was the political situation denied by the aristocrats in *La Règle du Jeu*? Renoir started the film in September 1938. At that moment France and Britain had just signed the Munich agreement with Italy and Germany. The pact enabled Hitler to occupy a number of territories in Czechoslovakia along the frontier with Germany, boosting the Third Reich's expansion policy. When the film was released in September 1939, general mobilisation was declared in France, as the German invasion had already begun. The German government did not take long to occupy France, which led to the signing of the armistice at Vichy regulating a particular political way of collaborating with Fascism. *La Règle du Jeu* was released at the moment when the powder keg of war had just exploded in Europe. The film was a flop, no-one took any notice of its hints and its true importance was not acknowledged until some years after the war. No-one believed the cinematic fiction; no-one believed that that aristocracy doing the dance of death would end up supporting the collaborationist government of Vichy.

5. Showing inevidence

On 18 August 1950, Cesare Pavese wrote in his diary: “The more particular and specific pain is, the more one questions the life instinct and the idea of suicide arises. It seemed easy when thinking about it. But in spite of everything young gentlemen have done it. One needs humility, not pride. All that disgusts me. Enough of words. A

gesture. I shall write no more.” (9) With that text Pavese closed the scattered notes marking an autobiographical journey that began on 6 October 1935 and ended with the discovery of his suicide.

Pavese died in an Italy that had emerged from the darkness and corruption of the years immediately after the war and begun to take the road towards the promise of the welfare society. However, he could not overcome his inner anguish. The promises of economic transformation that were given in the country only heightened the feeling of emptiness and the discovery that the road that had opened up would lead from the physical poverty of the post-war years to moral poverty, alienation. It is curious that suicide was a common subject in Italian literature and cinema in the fifties.

Although Michelangelo Antonioni only directly adapted Pavese's universe in *Le Amiche* (1955), we can detect a certain parallelism with his poetics. Antonioni's cinema starts from the discovery that there has been an irreversible break between people and things which rules out any chance of harmony in the modern world. The film-maker has to show that inevidence, reflecting the journey made by people doomed to wander with no set destination.

Inevidence, as a reflection of the deep moral crisis of Europe in that period, is shown in Antonioni's *Il Grido* (1957), the only film of his that takes place in a clearly proletarian setting. At the beginning of the film a break with his lover forces Aldo, the hero, to embark on a journey which takes him through a number of places on the Po plain. At first glance the iconographic elements that illustrate his wanderings do not seem too far from Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di Biciclette*, 1948). Aldo is a *déclassé* worker who drifts around in search of an ill-defined happiness. Between the sociology of the everyday described by De Sica and Antonioni's film, however, there is an insuperable barrier, since Aldo's crisis is not social —like the worker without a bicycle — but interior; he is a worker who cannot love, who cannot communicate with other people and can find no meaning in the elements that make up his environment. Despite being a worker, Aldo expects no social change of any kind; all that matters are his individual feelings. He has lost his roots because the world has lost its evidence. There is no possible adaptation between what exists, what Aldo is, and what the world seems to want to be. *Il Grido* ends with his suicide and the discovery that in the face of desperation all that remains is the strength of the scream.

Antonioni showed how a sea change was taking place in a Europe which, in the fifties, was still very much under the weight of the main orthodoxies. The change was the way in which the crisis had moved from outside to inside. In 1955 Italo Calvino had described the essential characteristics of that change: “In that new situation representation of the transformations in the outside world was gradually losing interest: it was the interior that dominated the new landscape. The man of the second industrial revolution is heading for the only non-programmed part of the universe: the inner self, the unmediated relation between the whole and the ego.” (10) If horror had gone from outside to inside, the ethical attitude of the film-maker in the fifties consisted of showing the effects of that inner crisis, the way it became visible in the face and

behaviour. It is no accident that the key question posed by Antonioni at that time was: What does it mean to look when the ties that bind us to the world have been broken?

6. The ethics are in the form

In June 1961, in number 20 of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jacques Rivette published, under the significant title “De l’abjection”, a review of Guillo Pontecorvo’s film *Kapo* (1960). The film had been conceived as a progressive work made from clearly left-wing postulates, which dealt with the problem of the concentration camps. Rivette denounced the film in the following words: “Look at *Kapo*, the shot when Emmanuelle Riva commits suicide by throwing herself on the electrified wires: a man who decides at that moment to do a forward tracking shot to reframe the body from beneath, taking care to set the raised hand exactly in a corner of the final frame, deserves nothing more than the deepest contempt... There are things that can only be approached with fear and a sincere shudder; death is undoubtedly one of them. How can anyone not feel like an impostor when filming such a mysterious event? It would be more useful to wonder about that and include in some way that question about the moral position of the director.” (11)

Rivette considered that a simple forward tracking shot done with the aim of heightening the dramatic effect of the act of dying in order to find a particular standardised beauty which can move the audience was no more nor less than an abuse of form, which shed doubt on the morality of the director’s point of view. The abjection was the emphasis, being unable to keep a distance, using the most hackneyed resources to force the audience’s emotional position faced with an expression of barbarity in images. Rivette discovered that in the cinema subjects are born free and what really matters is the tone, the accent the author wishes to use towards the subject he is dealing with. That accent does not only become apparent in the construction of the script, but basically in the process of the *mise en scène*. It is not enough for *Kapo* to be a left-wing film with a message; it must show a just attitude towards the subject.

One year later José Luis Guarner joined in the controversy stirred up in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in an article entitled *Las gafas de Parménides* (Parmenides’ glasses). Guarner joined in the exchange and wrote: “There is nothing easier than unmasking insincere film-makers, who, behind a brilliant appearance of depth, only seek to dazzle or impress the audience with whatever means they have to hand. It is not enough to show a line of naked men queuing up outside a gas chamber to make a valid condemnation of Nazism, as the authors of *Kapo* thought.” (12)

The reflection may surprise us, since a good deal of modern cinema has been structured from an evident determination to look for forms of expression which exalt the famous tracking shot in *Kapo*, without there ever being any debate on the morality of the form of the images. The lines of human beings stripped and waiting to enter the gas chambers became one of the main iconographic reference points of an Oscar winning film such as Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1994). On that occasion the director

decided not to impose any moral limits on himself and reconstructed the final decision, the moment when the victims are gassed and exterminated. He did, however, take care to offer an image of the Holocaust in black and white. But his decision was not conditioned by a simple aesthetic effect, but by a desire to carry out a simulacrum. The Holocaust was reconstructed as a fiction, taking the aesthetics of documentary images as its basis. In this case, as with many postmodern products, the problem was not the rhetoric of the images itself but the way in which the audiovisuals replace and camouflage the world.

After the torture scene in *Roma, Città Aperta*, the awareness that the modern cinema was cruel and that the audience should accept that cruelty, staring horror in the face if necessary, was lost. Postmodern culture has been characterised by excess and the observation of horror has turned blood into grand guignol, human suffering into a simple parody. Nearly fifty years after Rossellini showed the tortures of Nazism, Quentin Tarantino left his job at the video rental store and made his debut as director with the staging of an act of torture. In *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) a gangster tortures a policeman whom he has caught in the course of a robbery. He ties the victim to a chair, beats him, cuts off one of his ears and then pours petrol all over him. Tarantino shows the torture scene, but in this case the effect produced by the showing of the horror is amusement. Cruelty has no limits, the victims' suffering does not count, everything is part of a bright visual idea which aims to revalue the importance of entertainment. Why does showing always lead to excess in postmodern culture? Might it be that after getting used to having dinner every day to the accompaniment of images of horror from a television set we have become insensible to other people's suffering? Perhaps the new ethics of cinema are not showing, but elliding, not making the barbarity explicit.

Serge Daney returned to the controversy over the tracking shot in *Kapo* in the eighties and, like José Luis Guarner, reviewed the function of the critic. After seeing how the audiovisual ground had undergone a mutation that had taken us from the world—the cinema—to society—television—in order to examine its detritus, Daney insisted on the continuing importance for criticism of a firm belief that cinematic morality is always to be found in a good use of form, of the resources of *mise en scène*. He acknowledges that if he has learnt anything in the exercise of his profession it is a belief that “we need to bear in mind that the sphere of what can be seen has ceased to be entirely available, that there are absences and holes, images that we shall never find wanting and gazes that will always be disheartening.” (13) Perhaps the true ethic of the cinema is respect for those areas of what can be seen which are not available, not wanting to see everything and not forcing an image of what does not want—or does not need—to be seen.

Notes:

- (1) Deleuze, Gilles. *L'image-temps. Cinéma 2*. Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1985.
- (2) Daney, Serge. *La Rampe*. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma / Gallimard, 1996. P.79.

- (3) Revault d'Allones, Fabrice. *Pour le cinéma moderne. Du lien de l'Art au Monde. Petit traité à l'usage de ceux qui ont perdu tout repère*. Brussels: Yellow Now, 1994.
- (4) Biette, Jean Claude. "Qu'est-ce qu'un cinéaste?". In: *Traffic*, no.18. spring 1996. p. 8.
- (5) Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. New York: Herder and Herder. P. 221.
- (6) Pasolini, Pier Paolo. "We are all in danger". Text reproduced in the book: Naldini, Nico. *Pasolini, Una vita*. Giulio Einaudi editore s.p.a., 1989.
- (7) Vanoye, Francis. *La Règle du Jeu*. Paris: Nathan, 1989. P. 64-65.
- (8) Quintana, Angel. *Jean Renoir*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1998. P. 177.
- (9) Pavese, Cesare. *Il mestiere de vivere, diario 1935-1950* (This Business of Living).
- (10) Calvino, Italo. "La sfida al laberinto". In: Aristarco, Guido. *Su Antonioni*. Roma: La Zattera di Babele, 1988. P.155.
- (11) Rivette, Jacques. "De l'abjection". *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 126, December 1961, P. 54-55.
- (12) Guarner, José Luís. "Las gafas de Parménides. Algunas reflexiones acerca de la crítica y su ejercicio.". *Film Ideal*, 104, September 1962. The text has been taken from the collection: Guarner, José Luís. *Autoretrato del cronista*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 1994. P. 67.
- (13) Daney, Serge. "Le travelling de Kapo". *Traffic*, 4, autumn 1992. P.11.

