Political Cinema: The Historicity of an Encounter

by

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The Program in Literature
Duke University

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Kenneth Surin

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Program in Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

2010
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The basic question “Political Cinema: The Historicity of an Encounter” asks whether it is possible to think a concept of political cinema while simultaneously asserting the autonomous capacities of both cinema, understood as an art, and politics, understood as the thought of collective self-determination. Is it, in other words, possible to elaborate a relationship between cinema and politics that would at the same time establish a separation between the two and thus refuse to reduce one to the other? This dissertation argues that such a “relation of separation” does indeed exist and proposes that it be conceived of as an encounter. Cinema encounters politics insofar as politics affects it and insofar as cinema can produce certain political effects; but also only insofar as cinema is immanently capable of configuring its relationship to politics. Following this simple affirmation, the dissertation considers political cinema at a distance from questions of genre (where political cinema would be merely one among other cinematic genres) and distinguishes it from the theme of political instrumentalization (where political cinema would appear under the rubric of propaganda). “Political cinema” refers to real cinematic inventions that occur in relation to processes of human emancipation.

Following the Introduction (Ch 1), which sets up the theoretical stakes of the project, “Political Cinema” unfolds through four case studies. The studies are intensive in approach, but refer to a set of longer historical sequences that open up broad theoretical questions. Part I analyzes the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s appropriation of several elements of laughter – comedy, militant humor, carnival, and caricature – as specifically cinematic means Eisenstein used to bring his films as closely as possible to the revolutionary break of the October Revolution. Central to the argument is the concept of “world-historical laughter,” which serves as the entry point
for a discussion of the relationship between the structure of the comic and the means of historical representation at our disposal when imagining radical change and collective transformation (Ch 2). Part II of the dissertation starts from Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* and discusses the figure of the worker as a forceful cinematic symbolization of the existence of modern proletarian masses during the interwar period (Ch 3). Through a juxtaposition of the figure of the worker in cinema with the appearance of the worker in other regimes of representation (Taylorism and Fordism, Post-Fordism, Stalinism/State Socialism), the analysis offers not only an understanding of *Modern Times*, but also proposes a conceptual framework that helps us make sense of the recent reemergence of the figure of the worker in world cinema (Ch 4). Part III consists of an analysis of the films of the Palestinian director Michel Khleifi. It shows how the filmmaker’s strategy of blurring the boundary between documentary and fiction operates as an artistic procedure, rendering visible the complexity of Palestinian historical experience. The discussion centers on Khleifi’s paradoxical idea of a fertile memory and tests out the extent to which various figures of memory – trauma, mourning, and melancholy – can function as substitutes for historical thought (Ch 5). And finally, the Conclusion to the dissertation (Ch 6) presents an analysis of recent Romanian cinema. Recapitulating questions that were raised in previous chapters – laughter and the event, figuration and the proletariat, fiction and memory – the conclusion addresses them in relation to a situation of profound political disorientation brought on by the collapse of the socialist State and imposition of neoliberal reform. The concluding chapter traces how in the post-socialist New Romanian Cinema films themselves register an impasse with respect to what André Bazin once called “cinema’s aesthetic participation in history”. The goal here is, however, not to draw the dissertation to a pessimistic end, but rather to find in the very element of crisis resources for a renewal of political filmmaking.
For my parents
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1. Introduction: The Configuration of Political Cinema

The goal of the analyses that compose the dissertation in front of you is to discuss the twentieth-century idea of political cinema. Rather than present this idea in the form of an overarching historical and theoretical narrative, the more modest attempt has been made to catch the idea at work in a few of its concrete moments: the laughter and comedy in the cinema of Sergei Eisenstein; the figure of the worker in Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times and a few other films; the operations of memory in a film by the Palestinian director Michel Khleifi (Fertile Memory); and the confrontation with the post-historical situation in new Romanian cinema. In this introduction I want to offer a few general remarks on the concept of political cinema in order to explain the motives and the convictions behind the project.

The discussion of political cinema in what follows rests on two implicit assumptions. On the one hand, there is the assumption that with an idea of political cinema one posits a relationship between cinema and politics. There is political cinema insofar as politics has effects on cinema and, perhaps more importantly, insofar as cinema itself can be said to produce political effects. On the other hand, the discussion of political cinema has to establish the separation between the two, constituting both cinema and politics as two distinct and autonomous modes of thought – in turn complicating what we might understand as their relation and how we conceive of the political effects (the politicity) of cinema. Without the relation, one could say, there would be no need to speak of political cinema; and without the separation, the term “political cinema” would become unnecessarily redundant. Political cinema can be made intelligible only as a relation of separation between cinema and politics.

I propose to call this relation of separation an encounter. An encounter is an occurrence in which two things meet and are affected by their meeting, which, however,
produces in each of them a shocking revelation of their singularity. Encounters can have short or long-term consequences. Their consequences can become immediately apparent or can keep hidden underground, burrowing with the prophetic blindness of a mole, in order to suddenly appear and transform the situation long after the encounter has taken place or even after the encountered things themselves have disappeared from the world. Whatever their form and duration, however, the consequences of an encounter always have to be an invention, since what an encounter points to is the incompleteness in the set of conditions out of which the consequences arise. What comes out of an encounter – in order to preserve the encounter as an encounter – has to create its own conditions out of the material of their absence. To think of the relation between cinema and politics as an encounter means to think an unstable relation manifested in a precarious set of inventive consequences that constitute the configuration of political cinema.

There are two important corollaries to this approach. The first, concerning the autonomy of political cinema; the second, the question of political cinema’s politicity:

1. The Autonomy of Political Cinema. Rather than a genre of filmmaking, governed by a set of conventions, political cinema becomes understandable as a series of rare occurrences in which films, touched by the processes of collective self-determination and emancipation, make something previously unseen emerge. At the same time, it becomes possible to explore not only how cinema’s construction is modified in relation to politics, but also how this modification is a sign of cinema’s immanent capacity rather than its submission to the dictates of political propaganda or Message. In this dissertation, political cinema is approached as autonomous from both a representational system of genres, on the one hand, and direct political instrumentalization of the cinematic medium, on the other.
The idea of the autonomy of cinematic art (or any other art) should, however, not be taken in the sense of *l'art pour l'art*, an artistic absolute which the bourgeois understanding always sought to separate from other spheres of human existence in the name of a carefully guarded purity. The autonomy of art does not stem from a lack of art’s encounter with something outside itself. On the contrary, it can be shown that an idea of art free from all interest, whose aim, ultimately, is to maintain the existing calculus of interests within the society, effectively abolishes any possible project of autonomy. Autonomy that can and must be defended in the name of art is different from the bourgeois model of art that exists solely for itself.

Autonomy can only be maintained when it becomes clear that it is art’s impurity, its encounter with politics and the socio-historical conditions, and not its *a priori* distance from the latter that makes an effective autonomy of art possible in the first place. The art of cinema encounters politics, it sees itself participating in the process of emancipation – it wants to be an art for everyone, a communist art – and it is this desire (which should not be confused with individual desires and views of particular filmmaker-artists) that forces it to transform immanently, to pose to itself the question of the possibility and impossibility of cinematic art as such, to revolutionize its capacities and subvert its boundaries – all of which already describes a process of art through which cinema has made itself irreducible to the thought of politics and to the determination of its socio-historical conditions.

2. The Politicity of Political Cinema. The second corollary concerns the meaning of “politics” in political cinema. Understanding political cinema as a product of an encounter namely forces us to ask ourselves what of politics does cinema actually encounter, and further, to relate cinema to a concrete *historical mode of politics* (a term I borrow from Sylvain Lazarus). One of the problems in today’s discussions of political
cinema in the field of film studies is precisely the lack of clarity regarding the notion of politics involved. When the analyses of cinema’s politicity speak of this politicity, the term can signify: (a) an idea of mass experience read against the horizon of modernity or cultural identity; (b) the reality of an ultimately liberal (synaesthetist or cognitivist) individual spectator as the subject of a (con-fused or discerning) judgment; or (c) a reference to the more general question of forms of life (effectively, a turn from politics to ethics). I would argue that in none of these cases “politics” signifies what cinema actually encounters of politics in the world. Certainly not what cinema encountered of politics during the twentieth century! The reason lies, quite simply, in the fact that the sheer “massness” or collectiveness of experience, the individual subversions of the hierarchy of the senses or the scientistic “materialist” subversions of psychological interiority, just as the blurring of the line separating form and life, do not yet constitute political subjectivation.¹ They might in some way or another enter into its process, but political subjectivation has to be grasped primarily in terms of what it itself is capable of thinking.

It is here that Sylvain Lazarus’ concept of “historical modes of politics” becomes useful for us. For Lazarus, the concept means primarily that politics takes place in the shape of singular sequences, which have to be grasped in their interiority, insofar as this is the only way to think each political sequence’s relationship to the real. A relationship of politics to the real (politics in its interiority) is something other than a relationship of politics to an object or to the domain of the objective as such (politics in its exteriority). When one understands politics as having an object, or when one sees political subjectivation unfolding in a dialectical relationship with the domain of the objective,

¹ Actually, these different approaches seek to identify political effects of cinema, but they do so by completely de-specifying the question of politicity as such.
one is saying that politics is intelligible through what determines it heteronomously. For instance, one says that the antagonism between social classes is the proper object of politics and that subjectively politics is the expression of objective social contradictions. But when one speaks of politics as having a relationship to the real, it is on the contrary the autonomy of politics from any domain of objectivity that is at stake. In constructing a relationship to the real, political subjectivation demonstrates an intellectuality which is an expression of nothing but its own immanent capacity. Lazarus puts this simple affirmation in the following way: “People think.”

The question to the existing discourses on cinema and politics in the field of film studies could therefore be formulated in the following way: How do concepts such as the concepts of cinema’s new vernacular-modernist sensorium, or the idea of cinema as an expression of (inter-)cultural identity, how do the notions of a synaesthetist or a cognitivist spectatorship, or the alignment of cinema with the purposes of ethical deliberation and action, how do these approaches stand with respect to the simple affirmation which concerns politics insofar as the latter constitutes a relationship to the real? What would it mean to explicitly rearticulate these approaches, which obviously all in one way or another touch on the question of thought (the relation between thought and sensible experience, thought and poetics of cinematic form, thought and action, etc.), in relation to the affirmation – “People think” - which asserts the generic capacity of thought for anyone?

I take it that the historical mode of politics, the singular sequence of emancipatory thought’s relationship to the real, which cinema encountered in the twentieth century was that of modern revolutionary politics. The term signifies the unfolding of a sequence of emancipatory thought which “secured” its place in the world

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through a deployment of (at least) three crucial categories: the category of a great revolutionary Event; the category of the proletariat as the generic name of a collective humanity; and the category of the existence of a country as the territorial form assumed by the process of political subjectivation. Political subjectivation in the historical mode of revolutionary politics can therefore be seen as a composition of (at least) three dimensions. First, political subjectivation depends on a radical break; it inaugurates a new beginning (the dimension of the Event). Second, it depends on the transformation of an inexistent (a term used recently by Alain Badiou) into something that exists absolutely, turning the point which has lost all of its positive substantial determinations into the sole possible support for the thought of collective self-determination. This is the dimension in which a new subject can proclaim: “We have been naught, we shall be all!” (the dimension of the proletariat). And third, political subjectivation depends on the establishment of a territory, whose name, however, will not simply identify the finite limits within which the process of subjectivation is confined, but will also announce the infinite problematization of all limits. One could call this third dimension of revolutionary politics at work in every process of political subjectivation the dialectic of the national and the international, or of the local and the planetary. This is the dimension of the existence of a country. In modern revolutionary politics a country’s existence means both that there is a determinate territory within the borders of which a struggle for this very territory is taking place and that this struggle at the same time puts border as such into question, i.e. the struggle is seen as universal (a good example of this dialectic would, for example, be the existence of Spain during the Spanish Civil War).

Revolution, proletariat, existence of a country. These are the categories of modern revolutionary politics cinema encountered in its becoming-political. My hope is

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that presenting them in this way can be a useful first step in giving some concreteness to the meaning of politics in the idea of political cinema. I use the term “categories” rather loosely here, and the relationship between cinema and the categories of modern revolutionary politics should certainly not be interpreted according to the logic of Kantian understanding, following which the categories would come to organize the sensible material of cinema’s images and sounds through the operation of a transcendental schematism. The notion of an encounter, which I suggested above is the best way to understand the status of political cinema, should make it impossible to maintain an idea of some schematism organizing the relationship between cinema and politics – especially when the existence of a schema typically implies that one of the two terms is able to subordinate and incorporate the other.

It is precisely the absence of any schematism capable of coupling cinema and politics without a remainder or a contradiction that Jacques Rancière has in mind when he claims: “the politicity of art is tied to its very autonomy.” The statement echoes very clearly the dialectical paradox mentioned above in our discussion of artistic autonomy: art can only be autonomous when it participates in the process of human emancipation. But I quote the short sentence from Rancière here in order to point out that, because of a missing schematism, not only does the concept of autonomy have to be internally split and impurified, as we saw above, but there is also a doubling of politicity that

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5 Another way of distinguishing between the bourgeois l’art pour l’art type of autonomy of art and a communist egalitarian conception of the autonomy of art would be to say that the former denies the possibility of precisely such an immanent splitting of artistic autonomy, while the latter makes it into a condition of possibility. The difference is, then, between two basic orientations: “Two merge into One,” i.e. the autonomy of art, by separating art from the world, is interpreted as art’s capacity to erase the traces of any separation, to heal the world’s antagonism; and “One divides into Two,” i.e. the autonomy of art is only worth something if it is capable of incorporating the separation into itself, when art is not afraid to posit its own autonomy as essentially the autonomy of struggle.
necessarily takes place. The politicity of politics and the politicity of political cinema, clearly related to each other, are yet irreducible to one another.

All the chapters in this dissertation attempt to follow the logic of the encounter that I have tried to briefly describe above, and which consists in refusing to give up the idea of cinema’s artistic autonomy in the interest of affirming its political effects, or vice versa, to put aside the politicity of cinema in the name of the purity of its artistic inventions. Let me, then, quickly present the chapters that test this double imperative.

In the first chapter following this introduction I analyze Sergei Eisenstein’s appropriation of several elements of laughter – comedy, militant humor, carnival, etc. – as specifically cinematic means Eisenstein uses to bring his films as closely as possible to the revolutionary process and the break the latter introduced into the history of humanity. As numerous disagreements and tensions between Eisenstein and the official Soviet cultural directives attest, the world-historical laughter of Eisenstein’s cinema does not consist in the submission of cinematic art to the decrees of the revolutionary State and its cultural policy. Rather, it consists in Eisenstein’s ability to reinvent the means of cinema out of a desire to make it participate in a revolutionary break of planetary proportions (Chapter 2).

In the second part of the dissertation (Chapters 3 and 4), I discuss (primarily on the example of Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times, but expanding the argument also to a few more recent examples) the figure of the worker as a way for cinema to forcefully symbolize the existence of the modern proletarian masses without, however, having to give up the effective autonomy of cinematic expression. The fact that political cinema does not simply reflect the political and social reality of the modern proletariat – which for the major part of the twentieth century was caught between its Taylorist assignment,
its Stalinist “heroization,” and the Fascist mobilization of its resentment – forces us to add to these socio-political modes of workers’ existence a peculiar mode whose reality only cinema appears to be aware of: Chaplinism.

Finally, in an analysis of the work of the Palestinian director Michel Khleifi, I try to show how the filmmaker’s strategy of blurring the boundary between documentary and fiction is an artistic procedure (a cinema of “documentary fiction”) that makes visible the complexity of Palestinian historical experience and memory, but does so at a distance from any direct political discourse on the question of Palestine (Chapter 5). The autonomy of political cinema with respect to the causality of a specifically political determination is confirmed in the concluding chapter of the dissertation, in which an analysis of the recent Romanian film renders visible striking new ideas of political cinema that are produced in the absence of anything more than mere traces of what deserves to be called politics (Chapter 6).

As a way of concluding these introductory remarks, one final note should be added. If understanding political cinema as an encounter, a relation of separation between cinema and politics, means that there can be no schematism governing this relation, then history, too, cannot perform the role of such a schematism. History cannot occupy the place of the “transcendental signified” (Derrida) guaranteeing that the meeting between the “signifiers” of cinema and politics takes place. “Historicity of an encounter” which serves as the subtitle of this dissertation attempts to convey precisely a sense of historical consequences that grow out of the lack of any transcendental guarantee of history. In this sense, historicity names the point at which history is unable to account for what happens by referring to itself as merely a set of (historical) conditions. Historicity refers to a dimension which within history appears as a montage
of history and something more than history. It is a doubling of history, a fortuitous use of it, in which people have often recognized the traces of something eternal.

While the problem of historicity is itself not explicitly elaborated and developed in the following chapters, I have attempted to make it serve as a guide and as a kind of methodological imperative in my analyses. The content of this imperative can be put quite simply: what needs to be avoided is the restrictive historicizing approach, which seeks, first, to situate the cinematic work of art in the historical context of its time in order to, in a second step, recognize in the work what of this time would exist even if cinema did not exist. In opposition to such an approach, which represents a specifically historicist form of bad faith, the following needs to be said: to speak of the historicity of (political) cinema does not mean to simply dissolve the works of cinema in their context, in the set of the works’ socio-historical or political conditions. On the contrary, it means to think what of these works, by being part of their historical context, nevertheless resists and will always resist the latter.

We might find support for such a concept of historicity – historicity inseparable from resistance to history – in Marx’s discussion of our relationship to the Greeks and their art in the Introduction to the Grundrisse. Marx discusses the Greek work of art as being possible solely within the determinate set of conditions of the Greek slave-owning society (“Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer’s bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish?”). To have the same relationship to art as the Greeks is for us strictly an impossibility. There is no going back and there is no way of simply reviving the beauty of Greek art in capitalist modernity. As Marx says, “Greek art presupposes Greek mythology,” while our age demands that artistic imagination be independent from mythological imagination. But – and here comes the crucial part – it is precisely by recognizing it as an impossibility for
us, by naming it as the impossibility of a return – with which the question of what it would mean to repeat Greek art can turn into a truly abyssal and exhilarating one – that Greek art has already become something that exceeds the strict perimeters of its socio-historical conditions and comes to galvanize our present. As Marx points out, it is this dimension of historicity, one that puts a wager on the fundamentally non-contemporaneous status of works of art and not merely on the work of art’s contextual existence in time, that is the difficult problem demanding from us that we confront it.⁶

In this dissertation I am interested in political cinema as an impossibility of precisely this sort. “Political Cinema: The Historicity of an Encounter” does not so much propose a new model of political filmmaking as it is interested in identifying a few elements of the “unattainable model” represented by the encounter between cinema and twentieth-century revolutionary politics.⁷ This dissertation could therefore open itself to an accusation of wanting nothing other but to nostalgically dwell on our recent history, indulging in the satisfaction of driving even deeper the wedge of discontinuity between the grandeur of the nearby past, which it presents as inaccessible, and the present, which

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⁶ “[T]he difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.” All quotes are from: Karl Marx, Grundrisse, available at: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm (Accessed: Aug 15, 2010), my emphasis.

⁷ On the idea of the modern political and artistic revolutionary sequence as our own antiquity and thus possibly our own galvanizing “Impossibility,” which I find myself following, see TJ Clark, Farewell to an Idea (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), or, Alexander Kluge’s recent film News From Ideological Antiquity, Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital (2008). On Kluge’s film see also Fredric Jameson’s essay “Marx and Montage” in New Left Review 58 (July-August, 2009), which concludes with the following statement: “For the concept of antiquity may have the function of placing us in some new relationship with the Marxian tradition and with Marx himself—as well as Eisenstein. Marx is neither actual nor outmoded: he is classical, and the whole Marxist and Communist tradition, more or less equal in duration to Athens’s golden age, is precisely that golden age of the European left, to be returned to again and again with the most bewildering and fanatical, productive and contradictory results. And if it is objected that it would be an abomination to glamorize an era that included Stalinist executions and the starvation of millions of peasants, a reminder of the bloodiness of Greek history might also be in order—the eternal shame of Megara, let alone the no less abominable miseries of slave society as such. Greece was Sparta as much as Athens, Sicily as much as Marathon; and the Soviet Union was also the deathknell of Nazism and the first sputnik, the People’s Republic of China the awakening of countless millions of new historical subjects. The category of classical antiquity may not be the least productive framework in which a global left reinvents an energizing past for itself.” 116-7.
it can only see as misery. But that would be far from the truth. For, one drives a wedge and gives body to discontinuity only to find a new way to continue. And giving shape to the impossibility of an “unattainable model” is the necessary first step in transforming the limits of the possible.
Part I: Cinema and the Revolutionary Event
2. Laughter and Destruction: Militant Humor in the Cinema of Sergei Eisenstein

“I ask myself the question: do we laugh? Our laughter will come, but what sort of laughter will it be? How will our laughter turn out? ...

Perhaps I was not destined to make a Soviet comedy. But one thing remains clear: I belong to the tradition of black humor. The laughter of destruction.”

-- Sergei Eisenstein, Bolsheviks Do Laugh (Thoughts on Soviet Comedy), 1935

There is no better starting point for thought than laughter; speaking more precisely, spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances for thought than spasms of the soul.

-- Walter Benjamin, Author as Producer, 1934

The image of Sergei Eisenstein generally deployed today is a textbook figure. On the one hand, no introductory presentation of film theory and history can afford to exclude Eisenstein: he was the pioneer of montage, a formal innovator, the first important theorist of the production of cinematic meaning through a conflictual juxtaposition of images. On the other hand, however, precisely because this picture often reduces him to a discoverer of a set of formalistic procedures, “Eisensteinian montage” has by now something almost commonsensical about it. Eisenstein is accorded his prominent place in the historical development of “cinematic language,” but his inventions are most often reduced to simple formulas, ready-made categories, and an easily recognizable trajectory in the history of cinema. To put it bluntly, the opinion on Eisenstein says something like this: “We want to keep Eisenstein’s concept of montage, it is after all a useful tool for explaining to those who enter our seminars and read our books how sense is made in cinema, but we want the concept without the political and aesthetic project within which Eisenstein formulated it.” This task, to arrive at a concept
of montage that would be free of its historical and ideological “baggage,” effectively amounts to the abolishment of the concept itself.

Any reevaluation of Eisenstein has to be proposed against such an attempt to parse out what is living and what is dead in Eisenstein and must not so much aim to reconcile him to our present, as it has to attempt to fully elaborate what in Eisenstein’s work resists the latter. Taking his work as a whole, a reevaluation of Eisenstein has to start from an assumption that there is something irreducibly strange in his films, something irreconcilable to our time. The aim has to be to describe Eisenstein positively as an anachronism, avoiding both the facile attitude of appreciation as well as any straightforward belief in the possibility of a renewal of Eisensteinian filmmaking or the latter’s direct usefulness for our contemporary situation. Despite its apparent self-evidence, nothing should seem more outlandish to us than the concept and the implications of Eisensteinian montage.¹

The hypothesis this chapter seeks to explore is that the anachronism of Eisenstein resides in an uproarious laughter of world-historical proportions, which characterizes his cinema. In spite of its cruelty and violence, the brutality depicted in his films and the cruelty and violence his scissors inflict on the material of cinema, Eisenstein’s cinema is not a cinema of terror. The difficulty for us, for whom laughter seems to inevitably mean something obscurely private and particularistic, is to understand how it was once able to figure at the level of the world-historical, the level that in our own time is occupied by the images of Apocalypse. Great emancipatory moments in human history have often been compared to great outbursts of laughter, and it is, of course, not particularly

¹ Despite appearances to the contrary, Eisenstein’s montage has, for example, very little to do with the fast-cutting style of contemporary action movies. See below for a discussion of the limits of the more recent attempts to resuscitate the famous Eisensteinian notion of “cine-attractions” (Tom Gunning) as an analytical tool for grasping the autonomous status of purely spectacular cinematic elements in the avant-garde tradition of film-making as well as in recent mainstream production.
surprising to make a claim that a cinema, which took one of the great historical events (the October Revolution of 1917) as its primary subject, is saturated with a kind of political laughter.

From the very beginning of his career, Eisenstein’s theoretical analysis and practical realization of montage, which as a principle permeates all aspects of his filmmaking, took root in the discussions of laughter and multiple forms of comedy. What is surprising, however, is that in its afterlives and subsequent interpretations the concept of Eisensteinian montage remained so impervious to the influence of precisely this aspect of laughter that so fundamentally informed Eisenstein’s filmmaking. The absence of laughter and comedy from discussions of Eisenstein appears even more remarkable when one realizes the evidence of this influence lies scattered in plain sight throughout Eisenstein’s work. A reevaluation of Eisenstein’s work through the element of laughter is, therefore, not meant simply as a provocation against the above-described “textbook Eisenstein,” or even against the well-established appreciation of Eisenstein as a “serious” genius or a calculating engineer of a great and sober revolutionary energy.² It is also not simply a matter of foregrounding laughter and comedy in order to point out a marginal and previously unrecognized region of his work. The point of gathering the fragmentary evidence is rather to show how this marginal and ignored aspect says

² One of the reasons for this common assessment of Eisenstein as a fundamentally serious filmmaker lies undoubtedly in the fact that Eisenstein, strictly speaking, never made a comedy. He came closest to it in 1933, after his return to Moscow from Mexico, when he planned to shoot a film called MMM. Judging from the few existing descriptions of the project, MMM was not going to lack the excesses of Eisensteinian wit. At some point in the film’s scenario the action became so knotted and complicated that Eisenstein could only imagine disentangling it with the help of a trick: a sudden pull-back of the camera was to reveal the entire scene (along with its tiled floor) as one enormous chessboard. Actors, who were supposed to suddenly appear as chess figures on this gigantic board, were then to stand still and observe how the film’s director and screenwriter, who now also became part of this impressive long shot, discussed the solution of the film’s hopelessly disoriented plot. In her exhaustive study of Eisenstein’s work during the 1930s and 1940s, Anna Bohn describes MMM as “an eccentric and anti-bureaucratic comedy”. See: Anna Bohn, Film und Macht: zur Kunsttheorie Sergej M. Eisensteins (Munich: diskurs film Verlag, 2003), 31. Needless to say, MMM was far from the official taste of that time. Censored by the head of Soviet film industry, Boris Shumyatsky, it never moved beyond the screenplay stage.
something essential about Eisenstein’s work as a whole; how, by following this seemingly minor dimension in the reception of Eisenstein, Eisenstein’s practice of montage, his ideas about form and composition, can become intelligible in a new way.

My approach, which here attempts this question in a preliminary way, proceeds in two steps. First, if we are to see Eisenstein as an anachronism, we must discuss Eisenstein’s anachronistic status with respect to his own time and context. What was Eisenstein’s relation to Soviet cinema, and specifically, to the discussions of comedy and laughter in Soviet cinema of the first half of the 20th century? Second, we must attempt to describe what we mean when we posit an intimate relationship between Eisensteinian montage, the central idea of his work, and laughter. What is in the structure of Eisensteinian montage that allows us to relate it to the structure of a specific theory of laughter?

2.1 Eisenstein In/Against the Context of Soviet Laughter

It is impossible to separate the shifts of Soviet comedy and laughter in the 1920s, 30s and 40s from the transformations undergone by the entire Soviet film industry during that same time.3 If the famous statement supposedly uttered by Lenin – “Of all the arts, for us cinema is the most important!” – set up the development of Soviet cinema, then the different stages which Soviet cinema passed through can perhaps be understood as each presenting a different interpretation of this inaugurating declaration.

2.1.1 “Leninist” Interpretation

The first period of Soviet cinema (approximately between 1919-1928) can be periodized as roughly corresponding to the period of the New Economic Policy. It was characterized by the struggle for nationalization and centralization of film production

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and by a concern for the right proportion between entertainment (Hollywood or domestic) and agitational (documentary and didactic) film. This period pragmatically submitted cinema to political command, whose task was to secure cinema’s efficiency for the State’s propagandistic needs, but which also, because of the miserable economic situation of the post-Civil War Soviet Russia, left the film industry relatively free so that the latter could economically provide for itself. Entertainment films from the West (comedies of Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle, films with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks) were separated from the directly agitational films and at the same time regarded as allies, insofar as the proceeds from their distribution provided the means for a more properly Bolshevik production. “Lenin is reported to have said: “if you have a good newsreel, serious and educational pictures, then it doesn’t matter if, to attract the public, you have some kind of useless picture of the more usual type.””

Hollywood slapstick comedy, one of the most popular genres in the post-revolutionary Soviet Union, was therefore simultaneously devalued from the ideological point of view and approached in a practical-utilitarian fashion. There were, however, some who developed a different understanding of comedy (Lev Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin). Their appropriation of slapstick was internal to what I am here calling the “Leninist” orientation, but it also diverged from its main pragmatic line. They refused the “division of labor” between a cinema of entertainment and an agitational, ideologically purposeful cinema. Attempting to bridge the gap between the two and to turn cinema into a new mass and Communist art, they invented a wholly original way of appropriating the resources of foreign cinema, especially of the American slapstick comedy. Not only was Charlie Chaplin foundational for some of the

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Futurists and for the members of FEKS (Factory of the Eccentric Actor, headed by Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg) working in film, it is also hard to imagine Lev Kuleshov’s first feature length experiments with montage in The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of Bolsheviks (1924) without taking into account the blasphemously comic “Americanitis” that characterized so much of the Russian avant-garde.5

American slapstick represented for Russian filmmakers the genre of liberated movement. They were won over to it because of its ability to show the dynamic logic of objective situations, which overcame the bourgeois focus on psychology, dramatic unities, and narrative constraints. Slapstick and burlesque comedy was for these early experimenters in cinematic form the only authentic cinematic genre that could be confidently opposed to films derived from literature and theatre. What attracted them to comedy was not merely an interest in copying its methods and operations, but rather the possibility of merging this narrow space of liberated modernity with the social and ideological significance of the Soviet experience. In the 1927 selection of Formalist writings on film, The Poetics of Cinema, Adrian Piotrovsky summed up this view of comedy:

The curious development of the “comedy” genre may, it seems, occur in Soviet cinema. The path to it lies in the attraction of a social class sign into the eccentric play of objects and the establishment of consistent social comic masks. In this way we might construct a brilliant genre of political eccentro-comedy, firmly based on the technical achievements of American comedy.6

Eisenstein’s own career follows this early Eccentric affirmation of comedy to a certain point. Already in 1922, when he was still working in the Proletkult theatre and

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5 Of other examples of Soviet comedy of the 1920s, let us list here only a few: Aelita (1924, Yakov Protazanov), Chess Fever (1925, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Nikolai Shpikovsky), The Overcoat (1926, Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg), Bed and Sofa (1927, Abram Room), Girl with the Hatbox (1927, Boris Barnet), Fragment of Empire (1929, Fredrikh Ermler).

before the beginning of his film career, Eisenstein used the weapon of slapstick comedy to attack the “illusionist” and “naturalist” drama:

Lastly, the third and the most powerful trend in cinema, which originates in America and offers new opportunities of genuine Eccentrism: the detective adventure comedy film has produced a whole series of wonderful actors … Mary Pickford, the ideal Anglo-Saxon woman, the heroine of improbable adventure films, Douglas the sportsman and optimist, … Fatty Arbuckle … and above all, of course, the incomparable Charlie Chaplin!7

The appropriation of American comedy becomes central for Eisenstein’s formulation of his first great theoretical discovery: montage of attractions. The comic liberation of movement from a theatrical or narrative assignment enables association and juxtaposition of images outside of either plot or psychological-dramatic justification. “[T]he American comedy film (the method in its pure form) provide[s] inexhaustible material for the study of [the methods of constructing attractional schemas].”8 This is the period of Eisenstein’s first film, The Strike (1925), which, in spite of its grave and commemorative conclusion, is a kind of comical and unstable unity of heterogeneous genres and approaches: the cubist mise-en-scène of the factory, the office grand-guignol, and the circus acrobatics of the actions sequences, coexist with the pieta with a dead worker, the bestiary of spies and strike breakers, the savage caricature portrayals of the capitalists and the police, the abstract and playfully violent patterns of the water hosing sequence, and the metaphoric montage of the massacre of the proletarian masses intercut with the images of the slaughtering of a bull. A comic, slapstick, bounciness governs the first moment of Eisenstein’s cinematic experimentation where the

8 Sergei Eisenstein, “Montage of Film Attractions” (1924), SW1, 44.
inquisitive approach, the multiplicity of elements that barely hang together, predominates over the demands of unity and consistency.\(^9\)

Eisenstein’s second film, *Battleship Potemkin*, is, however, already a very different film and reminds us that Eisenstein’s notion of “montage of attractions” is not exactly identical to the one practiced and celebrated by the Eccentrics in FEKS. Although, at a superficial level, Eisenstein’s concept resembles the Eccentric notion, the most recent recovery of which has been attempted by Tom Gunning with his concept of “cinema of attractions,”\(^10\) there is a fundamental difference between the two: while the Eccentric concept of “cinema of attractions” stresses the element of a self-referential spectacle, an open “showmanship” and a playful and popular destruction of classical conventions of a certain type of cinema, it does not correspond to Eisenstein’s notion of attraction at its crucial level. While it is true that attractions are a qualitatively new reality, they are also, and most importantly, a unit of construction, a unit of a reinvented mode of association and composition through which a work is produced – not simply a “cinema of attractions” but rather a “cinema of montage of attractions”. This is the reason why Eisenstein in a very non-Eccentric manner differentiates attractions from stunts.\(^11\)

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\(^9\) Pointing out the force of multiplicity and dispersal in *Strike* does not necessarily mean that one could not discover in the fiction of the film a more coherent structure, an ordering of the elements that would at the same time support and to some extent restrict the pure heterogenesis of the film. For example, in his 1971 article “Systeme de la grève” Pascal Bonitzer argues that while Eisenstein in *Strike* de-centers the film along the narrative axis, he also re-centers it in relation to a three-leveled mythical structure. The three levels, which reformulate the socio-economic antagonism along the mythico-fictional lines, are that of the “super-human” heights (the owners, capitalists), the “human” surface of the earth (the workers), and the “sub-human” underground (the lumpenproletariat). This is indeed a very effective analysis that introduces some interpretative order into the multiplicity of the film. Among the possible objections to it the strongest would consist in pointing out that especially in the first half of the film (the secret mobilization and the organization of the strike) Eisenstein sketches out a far more complicated and dynamic “territory” (in the air, under water…) of the workers’ existence. See, Pascal Bonitzer, “Systeme de la grève,” *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 226-227 (January-February, 1971), 43-44.


\(^11\) “The attraction has nothing to do with the stunt. The stunt or, more accurately, the trick … is a finished achievement of a particular kind of mastery … and it is only one kind of attraction that is suitable for presentation… In so far as the trick is absolute and complete *within itself*, it means the direct opposite of the
Contrary to the stunts, which are self-standing and elicit fascination and enjoyment even when taken completely out of context, attractions are something essentially incomplete in themselves and need to be articulated, i.e. montaged, into an effective whole.

Eisenstein’s goal is not an Eccentric spectacle of autonomous acrobatic numbers, not even simply a calculated or machinic linking up of these purely spectacular instances into a new arrangement. He is primarily after a new kind of (non-dramatic, non-narrative) thematic synthesis. As he says in a crucial passage from one of his early essays:

Our present approach radically alters our opportunities in the principles of creating an “effective structure” (the show as a whole) instead of a static “reflection” of a particular event dictated by the theme, and our opportunities for resolving it through an effect that is logically implicit in that event, and this gives rise to a new concept: a free montage with arbitrarily chosen independent (of both the PARTICULAR composition and any thematic connection with the actors) effects (attractions) but with the precise aim of a specific thematic effect – montage of attractions.

Through extraction and thematic assembly of attractions, an effective organic unity, a work of art as a living and effective Idea, is constructed; i.e. a work that will not be only a static reflection of an event but will give us an experience of the event from the inside.

Already in this first instance Eisenstein turns the resources of comedy towards his own theory of montage. If the Eccentrics’ aim was a series of independent anecdotes in which the spectacular element of the stunt and acrobatic movement were brought to the fore, for Eisenstein montage of attractions meant something a bit more precise. He conceived of it as an operation of de-anecdotalization. This awkward term used over and over by Eisenstein to describe the operation of montage refers to the manner in which during the making of a film phenomena are decomposed into fragments with a

attraction, which is based exclusively on something relative, the reactions of the audience.” “Montage of Film Attractions”, SWJ, 34-5.

ibid.
determinate set of values and then re-constructed out of these fragments into a new type of a whole which functions not merely as a translation of these phenomena from the medium of reality into the medium of cinema, but rather accomplishes their transcription into the register of their determinate ideological significance. Through the work of montage, phenomena – the habitual and conventional stories we tell ourselves, our spontaneous quasi-natural perceptions – are suddenly referred to unexpected, unnatural, causes; as if they, actual entities that compose our lives, were suddenly overwhelmed by an evental emergence of some other life they could have lead but were unable to. This is already a dialectical understanding of phenomena: they are to be considered not merely as results (“a static ‘reflection’”), but above all, in the process of their becoming (“through an effect that is logically implicit in that event”). Cinema is to present phenomena not simply as self-standing facts of nature, but rather in a way that includes their temporal coming into existence, i.e. their concept. So, for example, in his first film, Strike, Eisenstein is not only interested in an empirical or anecdotal account of a particular strike, but in presenting a generic strike, the “production methods of a strike,” as he says; achieving a concept of “a strike” with the use of cinematic means.\(^{13}\)

Discovery of this dialectical conception of montage as a form of de-anecdotalization through a comic-attractive “displacement” of phenomena prepares the ground for Eisenstein’s next great invention – his theory of *intellectual montage* –

\(^{13}\) It is interesting to compare Eisenstein’s dialectical approach and his focus on the “production methods of a strike,” with the following passage from Cesare Zavattini, in which a phenomenological, revelatory, and not a dialectical rejection of plot and narration is articulated with the use of a similar example: “Example: Before this [before Italian Neorealism, L.A.], if one was thinking over the idea a film on, say, a strike, one was immediately forced to invent a plot. And the strike itself became only the background to the film. Today, our attitude would be one of ‘revelation’: we would describe the strike itself, try to work out the largest possible number of human, moral, social, economic, poetic values from the bare documentary fact.” Cesare Zavattini, “Some Ideas on the Cinema,” *Sight and Sound* (October, 1953), 64-69.
which he explains in a burst of theoretical creativity in the second half of 1920s. Here, Eisenstein seems less directly concerned with the potentials of comedy as he is with taking on the very serious problem of a direct “materialization of ideas,” i.e. the possibility of turning cinema into a visual language capable not only of affective but also of conceptual thought. The degree to which the possibility of the latter rests on a set of various operations of laughter, especially visual punning and a new kind of cinematic humor, is astonishing. Indeed, it is possible to see Eisenstein’s intellectual montage as a dialectical heightening of the comedic influence at work in the previous period. It is not a coincidence that his most “intellectual” works are also the most openly comical ones: October (1927), Eisenstein’s epic interpretation of the Revolution, is one of the most stunning exercises in the comic use of objects in the history of cinema; and his “comedy” of collectivization, The General Line (1926-9), is perhaps his most playful and funniest as well as his most openly grotesque film.

If one examines the diary notes Eisenstein made for the film that was to be the culmination of intellectual cinema, his filming of Karl Marx’s Capital, one is struck by the centrality of various comic devices that were to lead “to a complete departure from the factual and the anecdotal” and help transform the cinematic image into a demonstration of the method of dialectical thinking. “The elements of the historiette itself are thus chiefly those which, in the form of puns, provide the impulse towards abstraction and generalization (mechanical spring-boards for patterns of dialectical attitudes toward events).” This abstract dialectical attitude of intellectual cinema more often than not manifests itself in strikingly funny images: “God – a graduate of Oxford

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16 Ibid., 16.
University. Playing rugby and ping-pong and accepting the prayers of the faithful. And in the background adding machines click away in ‘divine’ bookkeeping, entering sacrifices and donations.”17 And to continue for a brief moment with humorous depictions of divinity, the famous sequence of gods in October, which Eisenstein later theorized with the concepts of regression and sensuous thought, rests on a similar equation as the one just quoted from his “Notes for a Film of Capital”. In the October sequence the idea of God is articulated along an associative series of images, which depict divinities from different religions. Eisenstein’s stated purpose in this sequence is to express, or rather to demonstrate the concept of God along a succession, an “almost asyntactic series,”18 of the concept’s embodiments (fetishes) in order to produce the blasphemous effect which in his a posteriori notes about the film he renders as “God=a block of wood”.19

Humor, I would argue, is at the problematic center of the question of intellectual cinema, because it allows Eisenstein to think an effective arrangement of the relationship between conceptual (or abstract) thought and the sensuous (or embodied) dimension of the image – the difficult relationship that intellectual cinema, as a new kind of filmmaking and a new kind of art, was meant to produce a solution for. The question Eisenstein faced, and this is particularly clear in some of his most humorous examples, is how to make images serve something more than mere relativization and mockery of concepts and ideas. How to make images truly expressive of ideas, capable of rendering abstractions that govern social and political life? Or, to put it differently, the question Eisenstein tackled in his idea of intellectual cinema was how to make images useful for

17 Ibid., 8.
19 The formulation “God is a Block of wood” has to remind us, of course, of the humorous form of infinite judgment in Hegel’s Phenomenology – “Spirit is a bone.” For Eisenstein’s description of the sequence see: Anna Bohn, Film und Macht, 45.
the production of affect in the domain of concepts and ideas and not merely in the
domain of embodied experience; which is to say, Eisenstein’s problem was not simply
how to use images to mock the abstraction of God, but rather how to use images to
invest the abstract concept of God as an abstraction with the appropriate militant and
partisan affect (in this case, hatred). The use of humor is so crucial, because humor most
clearly demonstrates the precarious difference between the two aspects of
“materialization of ideas” that Eisenstein attempted with his intellectual cinema: on the
one hand, we have the mockery and relativization of abstractions from the point of
embodied experience, i.e. the danger of loss of an idea through its particularization; and
on the other hand, we have the demonstration of the concrete effectiveness of
abstractions in our embodied experience and thus the demonstration of a revolutionary
necessity to invest abstractions themselves with an authentic affective charge.

2.1.2 “Cultural Revolution” and “Proletarian Hegemony”

It is, however, at this time of Eisenstein’s career that the second, transitional,
phase of Soviet cultural life and therefore also a new period for Soviet cinema begins:
the period inaugurated in 1928 with the onset of the first Five-year plan, the tremendous
social upheaval of mass collectivization, and the accompanying “cultural revolution”.

The effects of the latter on Soviet cinema manifested themselves in a double demand: to
make Soviet cinema intelligible to millions and to do so by depicting “real life,” the
“living Soviet men and women,” i.e. without a reliance on either Western genres or on
“bourgeois” methods. Chief among the “bourgeois” methods so heavily combated in
this period was, of course, also the method of montage, whose practitioners, not only

20 Sheila Fitzpatrick, Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931 (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University
Eisenstein but also Dziga Vertov, for instance, were viciously accused of formalist (intellectualist) deviation.

The status of comedy in this period is indicative of the general situation. While mostly a destructive phase, which failed to establish a set of firm prescriptions and thereby prepared the fragmented ground for the unified and stabilizing dogma of socialist realism, the “cultural revolution” as an aide to the mass collectivization of the countryside nevertheless opened a new possibility for film comedy – the brutally direct form of political film satire that served as a weapon in the service of the great social upheaval. The early film career of Alexander Medvedkin is the most concise expression of this new, always double-edged, function of film comedy.\(^\text{22}\)

In 1927/28 Medvedkin moved from theatrical and other forms of cultural agitation to the production of short agitational films, taking these explosive cocktails of humor and humiliation onto his agit-train and through the Russian countryside. Medvedkin’s satire can be considered as the comic genre of this period due to its aggressive and immediate quality (although, to be fair, Medvedkin did not have a large following). His best work, made famous by Chris Marker in his remarkable The Last Bolshevik (1992), and certainly a unique specimen in the history of film, is the 1934 film Happiness. Happiness is a film that in its ambiguity best encapsulates the extreme commotion of the Five-year plan, but it is also a film that in a way came too late, as the period its grotesque and seemingly absurd humor was responding to was practically over. In 1934, in the context of the newly emerging dogma of socialist realism, Medvedkin could not but be considered as too subversive and dangerous. Happiness was

shown briefly, hailed (importantly for us) by Eisenstein as – finally! – a new type of Soviet social comedy,\(^ {23} \) and then removed from circulation by Stalinist censorship.

Eisenstein’s relationship to this period of Soviet history is, however, a bit harder to evaluate. After finishing his own masterpiece about mass collectivization (The General Line), he spent most of the period traveling abroad. Leaving Russia in 1929 on a mission to study production methods of sound cinema in the West, Eisenstein visited Germany, Switzerland, France, England, the US, and most importantly Mexico, where in an encounter with the muralist movement, the popular-national political discourse, and ethnography his conceptual framework underwent a significant shift.\(^ {24} \) He returned to Soviet Union in 1932, recalled by Stalin, who was growing suspicious of Eisenstein’s intentions and allegiances.

While 1929 began the ten-year period of Eisenstein’s failure to complete a film, his confrontation with the new phenomenon of sound film nevertheless prompted several new conceptions of montage in his theoretical writing: the idea of montage as interior monologue, the overtonal montage, and the idea of montage as a type of “primitive,” preverbal, sensuous thought. Let us look only at the case of interior monologue. Eisenstein was familiar with the Formalist and Bakhtinian discussions of inner speech, as well as with the work of Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria, with whom he also collaborated. But the immediate influence for the idea of interior monologue came from Eisenstein’s reading of James Joyce’s Ulysses. And even if the comic elements and the influence of laughter which interests us are perhaps least visible in this period, this presence of Joyce, to whom Eisenstein planned to dedicate his filmed version of


\(^ {24} \) On Eisenstein’s adventure in Mexico and the cultural and historical context of his unfinished Que viva Mexico! see Masha Salazkina, In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein’s Mexico (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
Marx’s *Capital*, nevertheless signals also the continuous presence of humor and laughter among Eisenstein’s interests.

The evolution of the concept of montage in this period can be seen as a further elaboration of Eisenstein’s idea of de-anecdotalization, which as we saw had primarily comic origins. The idea of interior monologue namely rests on the possibility of an estranging jump from the conventional reality towards a dialectical reflection of it in the experience of a consciousness, which the movement of cinematic form now attempts to imitate. The reason we can think of interior monologue as a further form of “de-anecdotalization” lies not – and this is a crucial point – in the fact that the operation of montage-as-interior-monologue suddenly refers all the external anecdotes to their meaning in the interior experience of an individual consciousness imitated by the cinema, but rather in the fact that through the operations of montage-as-interior-monologue phenomena of interior life themselves become presented in a “de-anecdotalized” way – as the always socially mediated experience of interiority. Interior monologue, contrary to what its name might at first suggest, does not mean interiorization of external objects in the movement of an individual consciousness, but rather the breaking apart of the individual consciousness as something that can exist alone, secured within its own confines, i.e. interior monologue helps us see consciousness as a product of externality, making it into a kind of highly complex and constructible object.

In the theory of inner speech developed by Vyogtsky and his associates, with which Eisenstein was familiar, interior monologue can be seen as a kind of comical leap in the social development of a human being in which an external egocentric function of language is transformed (by an act of prohibition) into an internal function of non-verbal speech. The social exteriority “trips up,” so to speak, and produces a semi-intelligible
delirious interior rattle, which is then called the human psyche. The “universal” function of language in social and external life is ecstatically transposed into the “particular” activity of inner speech which resembles certain comical elements, most importantly the loosening of the relationship between the sign and its meaning that causes a sudden expansion and fluidity of sense, which may even begin to jump from one word to another. Not to make too much of it, but interior monologue does strike us as an inherently funny phenomenon: “Watson says that inner speech would be incomprehensible even if fully recorded”. To turn, as Eisenstein attempted for a few years, this strange blabbering intruder into the very principle of cinematic form is a gesture of great humor.

2.1.3 “Stalinist” Interpretation: Socialist Realism

It was around 1934/35 that the notion of “the most important art” began to rigidify into a paranoically elaborated system of restrictions and genres. After the “Leninist” and the “cultural revolutionary,” this is the third interpretation of cinema and, consequently, also of Soviet comedy as the most important of Soviet arts – the “Stalinist” interpretation. As the breaks were pulled on the process of collectivization, the Revolution proclaimed victorious, and a classless society declared into existence, the slogan “Cinema For the Millions,” invented already in 1928 at the Party Conference on Cinema in Moscow, attained new content. No longer an expression of struggle for “proletarian hegemony” within the cultural and political space of the Soviet Union – since the struggle was apparently over and the new Stalinist State was seen as the embodied victory of the proletarian class – the slogan now announced the dogmatic affirmation of that peculiar type of classicism called socialist realism.

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26 Ibid., 247.
stabilization, the increasingly carnivalesque and theatrical violence perpetrated by the Party State, finally pacified comedy and begun to approach it through a classicist question of genres (musical comedy emerges along with historical film, the Civil War adventure film, etc.).

The direct question of political and revolutionary exigency of cinema (comedy included) was replaced by discussions of correct depictions of great historical figures of the Russian past, by the mobilization of new technological achievements for a conventional and declamatory use of speech, song, and music, by the production of likable entertainment films on the model of Hollywood with which the audience was able to identify, and by vigilant prohibitions of anything that smelled of bourgeois-like “formalist” filmmaking. All this signaled the end of experimentation and a final routing out of the inventive spirit of formalization, including the several anarchic forms of comedy and satire, by a re-centered “logic of representation, which enter[ed] into relationship of global analogy with an overall hierarchy of political and social occupations.”

27 Richard Taylor, “A ‘Cinema for the Millions’: Soviet Socialist Realism and the Problem of Film Comedy”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 18. 3 (July, 1983), 439-461. For many film historians, the period of socialist realism began fully with the enormously popular and successful film *Chapaev* (1934). This war film, based on the life of a well-known Red Army commander, was made by Georgi and Sergei Vasilyev. It convincingly won the first prize at the 1935 All-Union Creative Conference of Workers in Soviet Cinema. At the same conference Eisenstein made his famous speeches, but walked home with a humiliating fourth prize, a not so subtle suggestion that his formalist excesses would not be tolerated within the new socialist realist consensus. The success of *Chapaev* was not limited only to Soviet Union: the film won the 1935 U.S. National Board of Review prize for “Best Foreign Film” as well as the Grand-Prix of Paris World Affair in 1937. Given the precarious situation in which Eisenstein found himself during these years, it is no small feat of irony that one of the directors who came to be most closely identified with this period of Soviet comedy started his career as Eisenstein’s assistant in the 1920s. Grigorii Alexandrov, who worked with Eisenstein until the failed attempt to make a film about Mexico (*Que Viva Mexico*), is the author of the exemplary socialist realist musicals: *The Circus* (1936) and *Volga-Volga* (1938).

28 This is Jacques Rancière’s definition of classicism, which fits quite nicely also as a description of the logic of socialist realism. See: *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 22. Eisenstein seemed to recognize the need for a new classicism more clearly than others. When others were speaking of socialist realism, he openly identified it as a new classical period. His subversion of the aesthetico-political idea of socialist realism could therefore be attributed to his precise recognition of what the demand for the latter implied, his full identification with this implicit dimension of the demand, and carrying it through to the point where the legitimate framework of the demand itself was made to collapse. Something to the order of: “You say you want a new realism, but what you really wants is a new classicism.
It is perhaps in this period that Eisenstein’s thinking about comedy and laughter most visibly clashes with the official atmosphere. While the importance of comedy and laughter in his films of this period seems to diminish (both films *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* are of an historical genre), the amount of explicit discussion of laughter in his writings increases. The discovery of a new type of the “socially illogical gag” in Medvedkin’s *Happiness*, the explanation of typage through the comedy of masks in *commedia dell’arte*, the attempts to revive the violent laughter of satire as a weapon in anti-Fascist struggle, and a rather touching return to Charlie Chaplin and the escapism of American comedy through a classification of various types and a general theory of laughter. As it is clear from Eisenstein’s four-year teaching programme at VGIK, laughter and the comic played a significant part in this period of his thought.

Another important shift of this period of Eisenstein’s career occurs in the role of the carnival that constitutes the basic matrix of the content of all of his films. The carnival is inseparably linked with Eisenstein’s desire to make a cinema of the masses, in which the individual characters and their psychology would be replaced by the seemingly anarchic and chaotic movement of collectivity. For the specific instances of the carnivalesque one only has to think of the mockery of the factory foremen in *The Strike*, of the great scenes of solidarization between the ship and Odessans in *Potemkin*, the dismantling of the Winter Palace in *October*, the religious procession, the milk

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Here is how you produce an aesthetic of a new classical period of Soviet cinema…”. See Eisenstein’s speeches at the 1935 Congress: “Speeches to the All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Filmworkers,” SW3, 2-15.

30 “Cinema Against Fascism”, SW3, 183-5.
31 “Charlie the Kid”, SW3, 243-267.
32 “Bolsheviks Do Laugh (Thoughts on Soviet Comedy)”, SW3, 68-72.
separator scene, and the wedding ceremony with the collective farm’s bull and a cow in *The General Line*, the planned but never finished festival of life and death at the end of *Que Viva Mexico!*, as well as the destruction of the church by the young Komsomol activists in *Bezhin Meadow* (1936), which prompted the Stalinist censorship to ban the film and stop it from being completed. In all of these cases carnival is affirmed as a form of revolutionary destruction, a great explosion of liberating violence. Carnivalesque movement is conceived as the form taken by revolutionary violence necessary for collective self-determination.

The carnival, however, undergoes an important shift in Eisenstein’s last two films. In *Alexander Nevsky* (1939) and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1946/58) it stops functioning as a subversive overturning of the social order initiated by the revolutionary masses and becomes thematized as a secret and disavowed form of a punishing violence by which the State, no longer a revolutionary entity, stabilizes and unifies a country, turning the field of social antagonism into an ordered social body. Carnival becomes the form of Terror gone berserk, but also a Terror safely lodged within the order of the State. The chauvinistic public humiliations of the enemy at the end of *Alexander Nevsky* and especially the color sequence of the dance of Oprichniki in Part II of *Ivan the Terrible* are places where the carnivalesque theme stops playing the role of an authentically subversive element and is exposed by Eisenstein, to put it in Slavoj Žižek’s terms, as a function of the obscene underside of the official law of the State. One cannot but help seeing here Eisenstein as a profound diagnostician of the twentieth century, the enormous transformation in the nature of political (state) power that the twentieth century organized.

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At the beginning of the 1930s Eisenstein became interested in projects which he thought of as an inverse of his earlier films. If the first four of Eisenstein’s films represent, as he put it, “a heroless cinema of the masses,” then the three of his never completed films that were conceived during his travels in the US and Mexico (Sutter’s Gold (1930), Black Majesty (1930-31), and Twilight of the Gods (1930-32)) had to do with “the tragedy of a great Personality. The clash of a great Personality with the society.”\(^{35}\)

Especially the idea for Black Majesty, to make a film about the Haitian ruler Henri-Christophe that would based on the book by John Vandercook, which Eisenstein thought of as a “tragedy of a leader’s degeneration into a despot,”\(^{36}\) is pertinent for a discussion of Ivan the Terrible.

With respect to the question of the carnival one more remark can be made. When one compares Eisenstein’s last film with his first (Strike), one sees that in the period that passed between the latter and the former, the relationship between the carnival and Power has been reversed. In Strike it is the leader of the “sub-human” lumpenproletarian gang that poses as a kind of carnival-King, a grotesque mask, when he leads his swarming and disheveled troops from their holes in the ground into battle against the striking workers. In Ivan the situation is a reverse one. It is the King and his closest circle of collaborators that have to, in the crucial moment of the constitution of their power, assume the masks of the carnivalesque “sub-human” carnival. In the case of Strike it is the subhuman that takes on the parodic mask of “The King” in order to perform its lumpenproletarian function within the situation of capitalist exploitation, while in the case of Ivan the King himself has to take on the carnivalesque mask of the “subhuman”

\(^{35}\) Eisenstein quoted in Bohn, Film und Macht, 182.

\(^{36}\) Eisenstein’s description of the project in his notes, quoted by Bohn. Ibid., 183.
in order to carry out the purge and to secure his place as a King in the moment of a crisis of State-power.

The undoubtedly insufficient periodization presented above suggests two insights that will, hopefully, lead us to a more precise discussion of the relationship between laughter and Eisenstein’s conceptions of cinematic form and montage.

(1) Eisenstein engaged with the questions of laughter and comedy throughout his entire creative life. His thinking, however, hardly corresponded to the way these notions were determined in the more general context of Soviet cinema. The relationship of Eisenstein’s thinking on comedy and laughter to the history of comedy and laughter in Soviet cinema as a whole is closest in their formative years, when both the nascent revolutionary art as well as Eisenstein’s experiments found a common ally in the slapstick comedies from the West. Very early on, however, Eisenstein separated himself from the general trend of Soviet laughter. He participated in the debates, strategically took up their terms, but always to his own ends and with a view towards the singularity of his own project.

Some of the most important elements of Eisenstein’s practice further reveal the influence that the comic in its various guises exercised on him. Let me list here, for the purpose of illustration, three such devices, which will occupy us in the next section. (a) In Eisenstein’s theory of “expressive movement” and biomechanics, i.e. in his theory of gesture and acting, which were to a large extent derived from slapstick and burlesque, the actor is essentially a comic actor. Following Vsevolod Meyerhold, his theatrical master, Eisenstein developed a kind of literal acting style, in which expressivity was to be at a maximum distance from psychology. It was to be instead the expressivity of objective situations themselves. Like in any good physical comedy, Eisenstein’s actors
are forcefully traversed by a movement that is much bigger than them, that robs them of their purely individual properties and functions, sweeping them up, without merely overwhelming or abolishing them, in a large impersonal unfolding. (b) One also finds comedy at the heart of Eisenstein’s theory of typage – the production of typical characters, capable of representing not only individual heroes but also the social categories and structural positions of class at play in the process of history and revolutionary struggle. Characters, which Eisenstein conceived in the spirit of commedia dell’arte and the comedy of social mask, are submitted to a logic of selectively applied character traits. They are reduced to social personae and to the external appearance of the symbolic mandates they occupy. With the use of typicality, Eisenstein develops the subversive insight of corrosive satirical art: namely, the set of external characteristics and limited traits that describe our appearance in the social field is far closer to the real core of our “personality” than the infinite interior richness we imagine ourselves possessing. (c) And finally, if one looks at Eisenstein’s largely unpublished drawing opus and his conception of the line, which in the 1930s and 40s was of great importance for his theorization of artistic form as such, one can see that here Eisenstein falls into a long and often subterranean tradition of caricature. As in the case of caricature, the line in Eisenstein’s drawings is always loaded, invested with more meaning and intensity than

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37 Eisenstein took up drawing on his trip to Mexico in the beginning of 1930s and was afterward, according to some accounts, almost never seen without a sketchbook. Only a small segment of his drawing has been made public, while the majority remains and awaits further research in the Eisenstein Museum in Moscow. This research remains one of the most pressing needs in Eisenstein scholarship, not simply because of the incredible amount of drawing produced by Eisenstein in the 1930s and 40s, but above all because the function the line performs in his theoretical and systematizing efforts of the same period is so intimately linked to the problem of his work as a whole. Eisenstein understands the line as a direct embodiment of time and as the sensual form of the ecstatic process, a phenomenon Eisenstein was interested in intensely in the late phase of his life. As such the line becomes for him also the minimal way in which the movement of form can be represented. In the most general sense, the line refers not only to drawing, but also to Eisenstein’s ideas of mise-en-scene, mise-en-cadre, the movement of montage, and to the principles of audio-visual montage. In Eisenstein’s late writings on montage the line functions as the common denominator of movement of all the different registers of cinematic form and articulates them into an internally differentiated synthetic unity.
it can seemingly hold. The line is, so to speak, already a montage, a double thing: in its plasticity it constantly articulates whatever it draws in the double mode of its simple representation and its thematic and affective significance.

(2) The second point concerns more specifically the intimate relationship between Eisenstein’s constantly changing conception of montage and his explorations of comedy and laughter. Not only does montage present a new take on the possible functions of comedy and laughter. What has to be stressed as well is how the latter two represent an essential element of Eisensteinian montage, an element from which – this, at least, is our hypothesis – Eisenstein draws his resources and in which he develops his practice of montage. The question of laughter and montage will be considered in the last section of this chapter.

2.2 Aesthetic Elements of Eisensteinian Laughter

2.2.1 On Eisenstein’s Concepts of Art and Aesthetic Experience in General: Affirmation of Fiction

In his 1923 booklet, Literature and Cinematography, Viktor Shklovsky says the following: in the history of art the legacy passes not from the father to the son, but from the uncle to the nephew. Artistic forms do not develop through a series of dominants, but through a constant detour of incorporation of some marginal, “lower,” popular genres and forms. A new form of art does not demonstrate obedience to the paternal law. It is closer to the behavior of children who learn of their independence by observing the disrespectable actions of family members in relation to which authority is of secondary importance. Think, for example, of Bakhtin’s description of how Rabelais employed the medieval carnival in Gargantua and Pantagruel. In the same way Shklovsky

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speculated about the possible renewal of literature and theatre that could emerge out of their encounter with various 19th and early 20th century forms of the carnival such as vaudeville and circus, the acrobatic fairground arts of stunts and spectacle, and the modern mass society.

For Shklovsky, the status of cinema in this situation was ambiguous. He considered cinema at the level of vaudeville and circus as one of the forms of popular entertainment, but he also thought of cinema as something more, insofar as cinema seemed to offer in its omnipresence a great possibility for the synthesis of unmotivated movement liberated by these popular genres. However, in spite of its potential, Shklovsky thought, cinema should not be counted as art, since rather than reproducing and giving its audiences an intuition of real movement, it offered only an illusion of it. Our conscious experience might be tricked by the false movement of cinema, but our unconscious registering of its fundamentally discontinuous nature simultaneously undermines any artistic effect cinema might have on us as spectators in cinema. An illusion rather than reproduction of movement, discontinuity of static frames rather than real duration, cinema according to Shklovsky’s Bergsonian thesis offered nothing to a true renewal of perception, to a destruction of habitual and naturalized experience of the world. If anything, cinema was the exact opposite of renewal: the very example of a mechanical fragmentation of reality – and even more dangerous at that because it so successfully posed as a veritable reproduction of life. As a consequence, Shklovsky had to deny that cinema, even as the dominant form of popular entertainment, had anything to contribute to literature. Despite the novelty of cinema, it was in fact literature that provided cinema with the device of plot, without which the latter would be hardly more than a parasite, capable of little more than to amuse us with its series of unmotivated stunts.
Like his friend Shklovsky, Eisenstein was well aware that cinema did not offer a reproduction or an intuition of real movement. Any effects cinema was able to produce had to be premised on an essentially false, fictitious movement, on discontinuity which cinema introduced into the continuum of the real. Shklovsky was in this sense right in his estimation of cinema. But from the insight into cinema’s false movement, the young Eisenstein drew a conclusion that was the exact opposite of the one achieved by the young Shklovsky: it is precisely because cinema offers the possibility of construction and composition of a great fiction of movement that it can become an art; it’s ontological lack, if one might call it that, is what actually enables it to assume the capacity of art. The difference between Shklovsky and Eisenstein was therefore not so much in their understanding of the status of movement in cinema (the “ontology of the cinematic image”), as it was a difference in their understanding of the consequences of the latter with respect to their ideas of art and aesthetic experience (the ontological status of a cinematic work of art).

For Shklovsky, the capacity to estrange our everyday comprehension of reality and shock us with an unprecedented perception of the continuous process of life was what makes art art. For Eisenstein, art was not so much a question of a new perception, but rather a question of a presentation of a new idea, i.e. the possibility of configuring the effects of thought in the perceptual material of art (as we saw in the brief discussion of intellectual montage in section 2.1.2 above). If one starts from a vitalist premise like Shklovsky, one might indeed have to disappointedly proclaim the falsity of cinema’s movement, but in his dialectical conception of cinema Eisenstein was able to overcome the opposition between true and false movement, relating the two aspects not to the moment of an intuition of reality, but to the process of becoming of an Idea. The false movement of the cinematic image is doomed when compared to the notion of a purely
continuous movement of the real, but it gains incredible potency when it is taken as expressive of a determinate movement of thought.

Contrary to Shklovsky, then, Eisenstein will maintain that if cinema is capable of integrating inventions of other arts as well as of the lower genres of popular entertainment, it is not under the pretense of extracting from them a pure intuition of movement, but by its capacity to candidly translate every movement into a false one and organize it in such a way that it becomes expressive of thought. If Eisenstein conceives cinema not merely as a powerful form of entertainment, but as a new revolutionary art, it is because in cinema one suddenly finds an artistic form without a paternal ancestry. Cinema, a voracious child, barely learning to walk and always hungry for more renewing laughter, is capable of turning all arts, the unofficial line of the popular forms just as the “paternal” line of the system of higher arts, into a gallery of crazy, prankster uncles.

It is his affirmation of the cinematic image’s capacity to organize false movement extracted from reality into a material configuration of ideas that separates Eisenstein from many of his contemporaries. Eisenstein has to be understood at a distance from the more Bergsonian vitalist theory of art taken up by Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists, who defined artistic operation of form as production of a radically new image which disrupts and reinvigorates our naturalized and habitual perceptions. But his constructivism also has to be distinguished from a vanguardist productivist constructivism, according to which the illusory images of art, the false independence of artistic forms, had to be dissolved in a direct construction of everyday life and in the processes of real social production. Contrary to both, Eisenstein understood the question of artistic form in terms of a relationship that cinematic images as an organized and
conscious fiction have to an Idea. It was the organization of false movement in cinema that was capable of expressing thought and thereby producing effects in the real:

Finally, only an ultimate aspiration can serve to justify diversions that give the audience real satisfaction (both physical and moral) as a result of fictive collaboration with what is being shown (through motor imitation of the action by those perceiving it and through psychological ‘empathy’). If it were not for this phenomenon which, incidentally, alone makes for the magnetism of theatre, circus, and cinema, the thoroughgoing removal of accumulated forces would proceed at a more intense pace and sports clubs would have in their debt significantly larger number of people whose physical nature had caught up with them.39

Eisensteinian laughter is related to these questions not only because Eisenstein infused what he took to be a new type of artistic image with elements taken from various comedic forms of art and entertainment (vaudeville, circus, the liberated movement of the industrial society) previously denied to it, but also because Eisenstein refused both the pious limitation of artistic images to the reproduction of reality and vitalist intuitions as well as the productivist attempt to destroy the outdated fiction of art in the name of a direct construction of life.

While a large part of the Soviet avant-garde movement subscribed in one form or another to the so called productivist ideal – end to the separation of art and life – Eisenstein, who was close both to the Futurists and the Constructivists, very early on realized his specific difference from this productivist tendency. He did this, as it is clear from the quote in the paragraph above, by insisting on the element of art’s effectivity which, proceeding by way of fiction, by way of the mask, produces effects in the real and is as such irreducible to any other social function.

For Futurists and Constructivists, changing the world as opposed to interpreting it (i.e. transforming as opposed to reflecting or representing the world) meant that art

had to be abolished and its creative capacity rendered immediately functional in the reality of a new Soviet society, in the very production of a new reality. On the pages of the most important cultural-artistic journal of the early twenties, *Lef* (“Left Front of the Arts”), Boris Arvatov wrote: “The ‘Leftists’ demand production methods, a production-consciousness, production-attitude and approach to every sphere of art without exception. We must not sanctify industrial, collective life with the ‘beauties’ of easel-art theatre, but totally sub-ordinate the theatre to the constructive methods and problems of collectivized industrial life.”⁴⁰ The tendency of production-in-art proclaimed: “We have dispersed the old literary dust, using only the scrap-iron of antiquity. We do not want to know the difference between poetry, prose, and practical language. We know only a single material of the word, and we throw it into modern treatment.”⁴¹ The general characteristic of this tendency is summed up well in a statement by Osip Brik:

It is true that art work, and factory workshop work, are still separate. The artist is still an alien in the factory. People react suspiciously to him, they do not let him get close. … They cannot understand why he must know the technical processes, why he should have information of a purely industrial nature. His business is to draw, to make drawings – and it is the business of the factory to choose suitable ones from among them and stick them on ready-made manufactures.

The basic idea of production art, that the external appearance of a thing is determined by its economic purpose and not by abstract, aesthetic considerations, is still apprehended by our industrialists, and it seems to them that the artist, in seeking to delve into the ‘economic secret’ of the object, is poking his nose into other people’s business. …

What conclusion can be drawn from this?
Forward! – to the overcoming of this alienation.
Forward! – to the union of artist and factory.⁴²

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⁴¹ Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip Brik, “Our Literary Work”, ibid., p. 273

⁴² Osip Brik, “From Picture to Calico-Print”, ibid. p. 282
This call for a union of art and factory production is especially interesting in the context of Eisenstein’s career, since it was precisely a failed encounter between theatre and the factory that convinced Eisenstein of the necessity to make a move from theater to cinema. In his 1924 attempt to stage *Gas Masks* in the Moscow gasworks Eisenstein himself attempted a productivist merger of artistic and mass industrial production. His experience with it was to be the exact opposite of what any productivist would desire. The effect of the play was completely lost, the staging completely overwhelmed by the intensity of the factory environment, and the play closed after only four repetitions.

At this point Eisenstein drew his crucial disagreement: art (theater, cinema) can be most useful in the construction of a new Soviet society not by abolishing itself and merging its function with the functions of everyday social reproduction but rather by reinventing its own function. Eisenstein posits the question of reinvention of art in terms of ideological struggle in the artistic field. Ideological struggle in art was for Eisenstein, who was just as fervent as the Constructivists in his rejection of idealist notions of aesthetics, irreducible to the immediate sphere of social production. The task of ideological struggle in the artistic field and in the concrete historical conjunctures of the (post)revolutionary Soviet society was, according to Eisenstein, not simply to merge art with the newly won power of social productivity, but to organize the consequences of this victory within the limits of artistic means themselves.\(^\text{43}\) In other words: if the art is to be put under the imperative of the “social command,” it is through a determinate configuration of artistic means themselves and not by an external act of abolition which

\(^{43}\) One can refer here to the brilliant essay by Jacques Ranciere, “Eisenstein’s Madness,” in which this same specific difference of Eisenstein’s is succinctly discussed in the following way: “The point, then, was not to pit, wholesale, the realities of the construction of a new life against the fables and images of yore, as was fashionable at the time, but to wrench the psychic and social powers of mimesis from the grip of the mimetic regime of art. It was to transform the powers of mimesis into a power of thought capable of producing, directly and within a specific mode of sensorialization, the effects that mimetic art had until then entrusted to the episodes of the stories and the audience’s identification with the characters.” Jacques Ranciere, *Film Fables*, Berg Publishers, London, 2006, p. 23-4
would put art directly into the service of social reality that this can be achieved. Not a destruction of artistic autonomy, but rather its unworking from within, an active internal Umfunktionierung, to borrow Brecht’s and Benjamin’s term, towards a new political and ideological function.

The laughter of Eisenstein’s cinema exists in a distance that its artistic images and its fiction maintain with respect to the exigency of life. But to do justice to Eisenstein who, of course, saw his art as also intensely caught up with life – he was, after all, going to entitle his first autobiography My Art in Life as a riposte to Stanislavsky’s My Life in Art – we should immediately add that the existence of laughter testifies to the fact that, for Eisenstein, this distance of art from life was internal to life itself and not, for example, a tragic, unbridgeable, gap between the two. What follows are, in a way, three different ways of formulating this immanent gap in life, a comical gap by which life can become unrecognizable to itself and, for the very same reason, expressive of thought.

2.2.2 A Theory of Expressive Movement

As discussed above (see section 2.1.1), the impact of American comedy on the Soviet filmmakers and film theorists was most visible in the new concept of movement which it allowed them to formulate. Relating the operations of cinema to slapstick acrobatics meant that in cinema movement would take primacy over the assignment of diegetic, narrative, or psychological consistency. It was no longer that a dramatic situation, a story, or the psychological motivation of characters would express itself in movement, rather the primacy and autonomy of movement meant that it was movement itself that had to become expressive. Man, no longer the measure relative to which

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44 The term “social command” was used by Sergei Tretyakov to distinguish the revolutionary imperative of art from a command over art by external political directives and organs of the state. On the notion of “social command” with respect to Eisenstein and Soviet cinema see Francois Albera’s Eisenstein et le constructivisme russe: Stuttgart, dramaturgie de la forme (L’Age d’Homme, Laussanne, 1990) which to my knowledge provides the best discussion of Eisenstein’s work in the context of Russian constructivism.
everything else can be measured, was swept up along with the rest of the world in this new type of movement.

Eisenstein describes the cinematic reversal of the traditional approach to movement in the following way: “[F]irst the movement, and then what moves.” “[M]ovement is registered before the object is recognized.” All the traditional devices that are used to motivate movement lose their priority.

As already noted, plot in the traditional sense of the word can only serve to constrain and regulate this whirlwind of stunts. The concepts of composition employed by the “American comedy” are different, numerous and unique. They are: semantic circles, reverse puns, returning eventually to their standing point, the punch-line of jokes..., a particular gradation of jokes – these are the arsenal of schemae … akin to the compositional schemae of folkloric embellishments and farce.

Eisenstein came to this conception of movement even prior to his encounter with cinema as a student of Vsevolod Meyerhold’s and as an apprentice director at Proletkult in the early 1920s. Meyerhold began to theorize the consequences of the autonomy of movement already in the 1910s in his attempts to distance himself from the naturalist and psychological bourgeois drama. Meyerhold did not understand biomechanics, “the science of the action of forces, internal or external, on the living body,” only as an acting method, but much more as an integral program of actor training, which made all elements of acting equivalent as different types of movement (speech, stage movement, singing, pose and gesture, pantomime, versification) and opened up the acting to various non-theatrical forms of movement (gymnastics, sports, acrobatics, fencing, juggling, dancing) as it sought to modernize theatre by breaking down the traditional

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46 Adrian Piotrovsky, “Towards a Theory of Film Genres”, in Poetics of Cinema

limitations of the stage (see, for example, Meyerhold’s involvement with Red Army military exercises and parades).

It is possible to see Meyerhold’s theatre in the context of progressive industrialization and modernization, the great unleashing of movement beyond the comprehensive capacities of individual human beings. Taylorist analyses of movement in the process of production, William James’ psychology, Vladimir Bekhterev’s reflexology, Pyotr Lesgaft’s program of physical education, which Meyerhold’s theatre sought to absorb, were not characterized simply by the way they depersonalized (either physical or emotional) movement, but most of all by the way they related movement to a whole before making it an expressive quality of a part. For Frederick Winslow Taylor, it was the efficiency of the whole productive arrangement that was at stake, and according to which individuals’ tasks were calculated. For James, the entire complex of the situation was primary and productive of an emotional expression: “I saw a bear, I ran, I became frightened”.

Movement is first of all a movement of the whole; and it is the expression of this movement that mobilizes the individual bodies and not vice versa. This is also why the stage settings of Meyerhold’s productions had to be revolutionized: his collaborations with Lyubov Popova (the staging of The Magnanimous Cuckold in 1922) reinvented the scenery and the organization of the stage “as a machine for actors’ play (‘work’ in Constructivist terms) … By defining and structuring the spatial limits of the performing area, the construction aided the actors in much the same way a properly designed machine enables a worker to produce more efficiently.”

Of the comical resources for this theatre of movement and gesture, where the two are liberated from their conventional constraints, one cannot avoid mentioning

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48 Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*, p. 43
**commedia dell’arte.** While *commedia dell’arte* was not the only resource of Meyerhold’s – he studied Indian, Japanese, and Chinese theatre, traditional puppet theatre, etc. – it was perhaps the most important one. It deeply influenced Eisenstein as well. Apart from the central role it plays in Eisenstein’s theory of typage to which we will turn later, *commedia dell’arte* offered Eisenstein an example of artistic practice, in which expressiveness and meaning belonged first and foremost to external movement and action and were, following a carefully elaborated technique, brought to the surface of bodies and objects. One of the functions of the mask in comedic performances is that it prevents the performer from resorting to the facial expression (the prime locus of emotion and psychological interiority), making instead primary the movement of the body and forcing the performer to create meaning with gesture. “If an actor is hidden by a mask, what he has to do is to operate with movement and gesture. . . . Incidentally, the most active theatre from the viewpoint of gesture was the Masked Comedy. Thanks to the mask, the repertoire of movement and gesture was entirely reconstituted.”

The use of masks not only liberates movement, but also maintains a difference between the individual and his actions. Actions in a comic theatre of masks are never completely aligned with the individuals who carry them out, the characters are always at least minimally depersonalized; their status always somewhat accidental with respect to the movement demanded by events taking place on stage.

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49 “With its emphasis on the actor not the play, acting rather than speaking, and movement instead of intellect, the importance of technique and the example of improvisation which it offered, the *commedia dell’arte* was the inspiration Meyerhold sought. The stock types of the *commedia* were an illuminating contrast to the individual psychological portrayals on the stage of the Moscow Arts Theatre, and the strolling player’s continuous communion with his audience was an answer to the problem of breaking down the division between actors and audience. Finally, after the Revolution, it was the gaiety, humor, topicality, and mass appeal of the comedians which corresponded closest to the spirit of liberation and dynamism which took hold of the theatre.” C. Moody, “Vsevolod Meyerhold and the ‘Commedia dell’arte’”, *The Modern Language Review*, 73.4 (October, 1978), 869.

In the comedy of masks, there exists a definite set of characters, which remains invariable for the countless number of interludes and comedies, which only in their broadest outlines result from the traditional and once-established pattern of the interaction of the invariable functions of once-established characters, appropriately called not characters, but masks. These are not the only possible personalities in the only possible connection of dramaturgical events and situations, like Hamlet and Othello; but rather they are a kaleidoscope of hieroglyphs, complete in themselves, which are combined into any number of patterns of the arbitrary plots of the comedy of masks.\(^{51}\)

Different from the great singular figures of tragic drama, the figures of the comedy of masks are much closer to “Disney’s horses, cows, goats, ostriches and monkeys,” who, as Eisenstein says, “rush along, leaving themselves behind.”\(^{52}\) Decentered organisms, they are simultaneously less characters than they are signs, hieroglyphic inscriptions of alien forces that seem to govern their activity. In both, the commedia dell’arte characters and in Disney’s animals, an “inviolable characteristic prevails, namely: a self-contained independence of the outlined character and an independence of his actions.”\(^{53}\)

Another comic element which was employed already in the laazzi routines of commedia dell’arte as well as Meyerhold’s theatrical performances but that could only be fully brought out in cinema was the relationship of a liberated movement to the strange independent life of the world of objects.\(^{54}\) If abstract movement is primary, a movement of the whole prior to the recognition of its parts, if it is general and separable from its relation to human individuals, i.e. if it makes all types of movement equivalent in relation to itself, there is no reason why a movement of an individual human organism

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\(^{51}\) *The Eisenstein Collection*, p 146-7.

\(^{52}\) *The Eisenstein Collection*, p. 146.

\(^{53}\) *The Eisenstein Collection*, p. 146.

\(^{54}\) “One of the lessons Meyerhold learned from his production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* was that the most biomechanically effective elements of Popova’s construction were those parts such as the revolving door which were dynamic, that is, which gave the actor something to play with. Clearly, the next step was to separate these components from the general construction. In effect, this is what Meyerhold did in *The Death of Tarelkin* (1922), which he staged as a ‘montage of attractions’ featuring special furniture, designed by Varvara Stepanova. Each piece was constructed so that it would jump, collapse, or in some way respond to the actor. In practice, however, the Tarelkin furniture proved so unreliable that it completely lost its effectiveness as an instrument of play.” (Law and Gordon, 47)
would be more important than the movement of, let’s say, the organism of a concert piano. Cinema, with its capacities of close-up and montage, accomplishes a fully-fledged animism of the world of things. In a way, cinema enables the function of the mask to be generalized. All the objects become masked, i.e. lose the “natural” function and their “spontaneous” significance, and become strangely moved and gestural. This aspect of movement was, again, first really explored by American slapstick comedy.

The invention of close-ups was the factor that above all helped to strengthen the eccentric significance of the object in American comedy. The object, deployed not for its straightforward purpose but unexpectedly and out of context – toothbrushes as a tool to open a jam jar… - this entire mad world of incongruities has been opened up by cinema. … It becomes possible to speak of comic “comparisons”, of the paradoxical combinations of objects, of “object-metaphors” and “object-puns”. … In truth, if the invention of cinema had led to this great panopticum of objects and nothing more, it would for that reason alone have been a great art.55

Eisenstein turned these independently animated and comical objects towards a direct production of meaning: the lion statue suddenly raising his head in Potemkin, the ecstatic milk separator in The General Line, the shadowy conspiratorial existence of objects imbued with an unprecedented vibratory power in Ivan the Terrible. The most consistent and diverse comedy of objects might, however, be found in October. In this restaging of the revolutionary year 1917 the movement of the masses is coupled with a great movement of objects: the czar’s statue falling and recomposing itself, the mockery of Kerensky entering the peacock’s ass, Kerensky and Kornilov as two Napoleon statuettes staring at each other, the sequence of religious fetishes as a demonstration of the vacuity of the idea of god, the slogan “Proletariat learn to use your rifle” accompanied by a reverse assembling of a gun from a bullet, Trotsky’s oratory compared to a playing of harps, and Bolshevik speeches compared to the shooting of machine guns. Throughout October the objects that have gained an independence from

human causes and have become their equals both express historical movement and pass judgment on the fate of historical individuals. It is as though the domain of objects were autonomous and with respect to the movement of the masses somewhat ambiguous domain (e.g. the falling and reassembling of the statue of Alexander III). One might explain the ambiguity in the following way: The movement of objects in October does not represent the direct inscription of the movement of the masses in the objective world, but rather a dialectical inscription of the appearance of the revolutionary masses in the logic of the historical situation. Objects in October play out the historical significance of the protagonists. And it is not surprising that at the end of the film the revolutionary masses engage in a destruction of the emperor’s and empresses’ bedrooms and the wine cellar. For if the objects serve as the expression of historical logic of the situation – the historical significance of all mass commotion – they are also the locus of all the historical residue, accumulated meaning, the clutter of the past, which resists the novelty of the masses and has to be swept away by the subjective force of history for a new existence to become possible.56

Unlike Meyerhold, who cared little about creating a fixed method out of his program of biomechanics, Eisenstein sought from the very beginning a precise formalization and systematization of the practice. He produced several texts on biomechanics in the early 1920s (in collaboration with Sergei Tretyakov), intended to write a study of “Biomechanics in the Representational Aspects of Honore Daumier’s Litographs,” lectured on the subject in the 1930s at VGIK and intended to produce a longer text on expressive movement after finishing Ivan the Terrible, the film in which the

56 An alternative reading of October was proposed much later by Viktor Shklovsky who was at first one of the many cultural workers on the left opposed to the film. “Fifty years later Shklovsky would admit that he had only understood the film as an old man, after he had been allowed to travel to the West and experience the consumer age. Eisenstein’s October had been way ahead of them all, since it was a film about the end of things.” Oksana Bulgakowa, Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography (Berlin, San Francisco: Potemkin Press, 2001), 78.
acting is fully biomechanical. Eisenstein’s more consistent systematization of biomechanics and expressive movement results in an important discovery, which can be expressed in the following way: if movement is to be itself expressive, it has to be conceived as double. It is as though prior to the duality of the abstract movement of the whole and the particular movement, which it expresses and by which it is expressed, there were also the duality of the abstract movement itself, the heterogeneous relationship of the movement of the whole to itself. What generates expression, what makes abstract movement expressive, is its splitting into two moments.

Eisenstein presents this duality in different ways: movement and the underscoring of movement, movement and recoil, reflexive and conscious movement versus the point of their undecidability, movement of the centre versus peripheral movement, movement and raccourci (tableaux). In a text Eisenstein co-wrote with Tretyakov, he describes this duality in the following way:

1. Expression is always a motor element and never a static one (it is a process); and 2. In every expression, from the very mechanics of this process, one can single out the moment of “fixation” – the moment when the forces are balanced, after which the expression passes over either into a real act, symbolized by the expression (victory of the reflexive thrust), or into a state of repose (victory of the voluntary stimulus). The teeth bared in fury either will bite, or the lips will close over them...

Before movement becomes an individual action or is stabilized in a state, it produces as though out of itself a pre-individual or a pre-situational point, an instance which can be described as the movement’s own point of inexpression (“the forces are balanced”). It is crucial to see how this point of inexpression is internal to the movement and how, for Eisenstein, the movement has to pass through it. The raccourci, for example, a kind of dynamic tableaux, is not a suspension or an arrest of movement by way of an external

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capture of the movement’s logic. It is movement itself, but at an instance at which it
produces its own immanent figure. One therefore does not alternate between movement
(pure process) and raccourci (signifying tableaux) as two independent terms in a relation
of exteriority with respect to each other – this, in my opinion faulty, interpretation is
suggested by Alma Law and Mel Gordon\(^59\) – the two moments, the process and the
instance, have to be seen as two heterogeneous parts of one and the same movement.

Such an understanding of expressive movement as abstract movement
(movement of the whole) that is itself split into process and “point of fixation” –
movement and, one could say, the singular point at which this movement produces its
own rest – is to be found primarily in the laboratory of comedy. For instance, take a
clichéd comic scene in which a waiter in an up-scale restaurant, carrying a tray of
champagne glasses that are all filled to the top, trips up in front of the polite society of
the restaurant guests. Suddenly, as though out of nowhere, he stumbles. The
choreographic operations of comedy, if the comedy is any good, will at this point
artificially extend the stumbling into an almost self-standing sequence (what Eisenstein
would call attraction). The waiter stumbles for an unnaturally long time, neither
reestablishing his composure, nor falling and breaking the glasses. The waiter’s
movement might have been tripped up by some external intrusion (a mischievous guest
might have stuck out his leg), or, it might have been interrupted by the waiter’s own
clumsiness. Whatever its nature, however, the obstacle that causes the waiter to trip up
enables the waiter’s movement to develop a “point of fixation,” a kind of dynamic
balance, which also appears as a sudden flash of something that exceeds the waiter’s
particularity. Not yet a passage into a “real act”, i.e. falling down (victory of a reflexive
thrust), nor a passage into a “state of repose”, i.e. reestablishment of stability (victory of

\(^59\) Law and Gordon, p. 82-3
voluntary control), the stumbling sequence in itself can be seen as a point of inexpression at which one gets, in the form of an Eisensteinian close-up, to the “waiterness” of the waiter, the very concept of this fragile and noble profession. The “waiterness” is expressed in the strangely inexpressive and unnaturally prolonged stumbling prior to the point of the waiter’s re-individuation (a fallen/a successfully reestablished waiter) and prior to some possible further re-constitution of the situation (firing of the waiter/continuation of waiter’s work as if nothing occurred).

It is as though in the fiction of the expressive movement the abstract movement of the whole has to, before it passes over to the movement of individual parts that it expresses and that express it, pass also through an immanent inexpressive point, a moment of stillness and calm in which something other than mere movement – a brief intrusion of a concept, of an idea – can be perceived.

2.2.3 Eisenstein’s Drawing: the Line, the Monstrous, the Grotesque

There are several ways in which Eisenstein discusses the line as a comical object par excellence. First and most abstractly, the line is for Eisenstein the sensual form of time in its ecstatic fiery dimension of constant becoming. As such, as a direct embodiment of the temporal process, Eisenstein says, the line is comical. “Comicality lies in the fact that the process of ecstasy is represented as an object: literalized, formalized. That is, Disney is an example (within the general formula of the comical) of a case of formal ecstasy!!! (Great!) (Producing an effect the same degree of intensity as ecstasy!)”\(^6\) As the direct embodiment of time and as the sensual form of an ecstatic process, the line is also the minimal way in which the most extreme movement of form can be represented. In the general sense, the line refers not only to drawing, but also to Eisenstein’s ideas of mise-

\(^6\) *The Eisenstein Collection*, p. 126
en-scene, mise-en-cadre, montage, and, as is clear from his analyses of *Alexander Nevsky*, to the principles of audio-visual counterpoint. In Eisenstein’s late writings on montage the line functions as the common denominator of movement of all the different registers of cinematic form and articulates them into an internally differentiated synthetic unity.

Always taken from the perspective of process rather than stasis, the line is analyzed by Eisenstein at the point where a classicist harmony of form and content break up. An unease, which is a mark of time and of historical transformation, enters into the peaceful marriage of content and the form of its representation and wrests them apart. Eisenstein relates this collapse of unity to those historical moments of decay and regeneration in which two or more social formations are struggling in “an unbalanced outstripping of one by the other,” resulting in a transformation of artistic styles. What characterizes this period is that the line gains a certain independence with respect to what it is supposed to represent. The laws of representation and representability that hold content and form in an accord, as well as the figure in which they were seamlessly executed, begin to oscillate.

From the perspective of the line this means that its generalizing aspect separates itself from the figural one: “Thus, it turns out that the contour, the outline of a drawing – its generalizing line, suddenly begins to take on an independent life, independent of the figures themselves, the objects themselves.” The line for itself is animated; Eisenstein speaks of the animism of the line: “Drawing as such – outside an object of representation! – is brought to life.” The line comes to embody the split of the two aspects and has to maintain them without a resolution. Rather than the line being an

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61 *The Eisenstein Collection*, p.147
62 *The Eisenstein Collection*, p. 144
63 *The Eisenstein Collection*, p. 127
outline of an object, it is now, in a reflexive turn, the split between the outline and the object depicted that the line traces. The autonomization of the outline with respect to the figure it represents does not exactly break the link between the two, but it does test it; and the organism whose form and content have suddenly been split up suddenly appears as if traversed by an alien inorganic element, marked by the affective movement of laughter.

The example of such a comical line, says Eisenstein, can be found in a drawing in which a person’s neck is elongated beyond its anatomical sense. “And only after the contour of the neck elongates beyond the possible limits of the neck – does it become a comical embodiment … The comicality here stems from the fact that any representation exists in two ways: as a set of lines, and as the image that arises from them.”64 The comic effect comes from the fact that a neck is extended beyond the limit of the possible while still miraculously remaining a neck and not, for example, becoming simply an abstract pattern of parallel lines. The ecstatic and comic operation consists in liberating the line from its purely depictive function and (at the same time) maintaining the line and what it depicts in a transformed and heightened unity, in a new type of a dynamized image. The line and depiction are, paradoxically, neither harmoniously joined, nor are they separated. Along the line the unity of a figure divides into two but also itself undergoes a metamorphosis – the figure leaps into a new quality. The line moves away from what it depicts toward pure expression, pure sensation (“beyond any image, without an image, beyond tangibility”).65 But the unity between the line and what it depicts, broken by this movement towards pure expression, now reinvents itself as gesture. Line becomes

64 The Eisenstein Collection, p. 142
65 The Eisenstein Collection, p. 130
gestural – an inherently comical element in Eisenstein – a transformed unity of the line’s self-division and elasticity.

Nowhere is this event that happens to the line clearer than in the cases of the monstrous and the grotesque. The latter is described by Eisenstein in the following way:

Upon what is the fascination of the grotesque constructed? It is constructed upon unclosed lines. What is the basic motif of the grotesque? The combination of reality and fantasy, the combination of two opposite levels. ... A non-reduction of levels, an absence of synthesis, are also a mark of the grotesque. The material and non-material levels are present not as a unity, which shows one side and then another, but the opposite: there is a creeping of one level into the other and an emphasized collision of the real and the unreal. ... We know that a unity of the material and non-material is present and exists in nature. That is a non-grotesque unity. But when material and non-material elements are artificially detached from each other, and then deliberately rejoined, run into each other as a collision, then an effect arises which is specific to the grotesque.66

Grotesqueness designates a body that is incomplete, an organism in the process of change and transformation, a denatured organism of real and unreal parts. What Eisenstein shows, however, is that a grotesque organism is not only a “not yet” of an organism, but also an organ of thought and signification, a “no longer” of an organism.67

For somebody like Kant, a grotesque denaturing, a monstrous discomfiture of an organism means the anihilation of its concept, of the possibility of its comprehension, and its loss for cognition. He says, “an object is monstrous if by its magnitude it annihilates the end which its concept constitutes.”68 With respect to the Kantian definition of monstrosity, which is different from the healthy “oscillation of the organs” caused by laughter, Eisenstein’s own definition is ambiguous. For, certainly a monstrous

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66 The Eisenstein Collection, p. 325-6

67 In this Eisenstein’s vision corresponds precisely with Mikhail Bakhtin’s description of the grotesque body: “One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born. ... But at their extreme limit the two bodies unite to form one. The individual is shown at the stage when it is recast into a new mold. No longer is there one body, nor are there as yet two.” Rabelais and His World. Indiana University Press. Bloomington (1984), p. 26

disfigurement of an object affects the finality under which this object is understood, but this negative step is merely half of the monstrous task. The goal of monstrous disfigurement is to expand the concept of the object, to make it, as Eisenstein would put it, signify something ideologically, to turn its end away from its everyday meaning towards a historical and social meaning, which is absent from it in the case of a simple naturalist representation. The monstrous athleticism of organisms extracts them from their “natural” finality, and places them on the terrain of history in order to win them as finite expressions of the idea. It is Eisenstein’s great insight, which posits comical, monstrous, and grotesque disfigurations of organisms not as the opposite of form but rather as a necessary element of the forms intelligibility, that clearly separates his thinking from traditional aesthetic conceptions.

The value a monstrous disfigurement of the outline has for Eisenstein is clearly visible in his analyses of the drawings of the Japanese master Sharaku. In one of the famous texts from the late 1920s, Eisenstein explains the denatured unity presented by a monstrous figure as the form in which a new kind of image emerges – an image that not only represents an object, but rather becomes capable of signifying it, i.e. it now includes the subjective stance, the ideological evaluation, of the object in the image itself.

Just as Sharaku does by stopping time so we too do in time by provoking a monstrous disproportion between the parts of a normally occurring phenomenon, when we suddenly divide it into “close-up of hands clasped”, “medium shots of battle” and “big close-up of staring eyes” and produce a montage division of the phenomenon into the types of shot! … From the juxtaposition of these monstrous incongruities we reassemble the disintegrated phenomena into a single whole but from our own perspective,

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69 “The representation of an object in the actual (absolute) proportions proper to it is, of course, merely a tribute to orthodox formal logic, a subordination to the inviolable order of things. This returns periodically and unfailingly in periods when absolutism is in the ascendancy, replacing the expressiveness of antiquated disproportion with a regular “ranking table” of officially designated harmony. Positivist realism is by no means the correct form of perception. It is simply a function of a particular form of social structure, following on from an autocratic state that has propagated a state uniformity of thought.” (“Beyond the Shot”, SWI, p. 142)

70 See also: Francois Albera, Notes sur l’esthetique d’Eisenstein (Lyon: CIRC-CRT, 1973).
in the light of our own orientation towards the phenomenon. … We can observe the same thing in all Sharaku’s large heads. It is just not possible that the great master was unaware that these proportions were wrong. He quite deliberately repudiated naturalism and, while each detail taken separately is constructed on the principles of concentrated naturalism, their general compositional juxtaposition is subjugated to a purely semantic purpose. He took as a norm for the proportions the quintessence of psychological expressiveness…\textsuperscript{71}

The work of composition that takes apart the naturalist ordering of an organism (a face in this case) and re-assembles it into a new expressive unity performs the same operation of division and elastic re-invention that I described above in relation to Eisenstein’s conception of the line. The organism is not destroyed, it is shaken up, elongated, stretched – disorganized by a shudder that passes through it. This shudder is the mark of the operation of form as the latter necessarily passes through a moment of deformation; it might even be seen as the point of form’s emergence in the place of the deformed. Form emerges as a sudden transformation on the face of an organism, but is itself nothing organic; it is that which leaves an irreducibly strange mark on the organism. It makes the latter appear suddenly as montaged: an organism is now a composite of itself and what it can never admit as the evidence of its own existence. In the organic medium, the inorganic force of thought makes itself felt.

2.2.4 Typage: Caricature and the Comedy of Masks

The grotesque and monstrous character of Eisenstein’s line, his conception of figures transformed as they become embodiments of time and conceptual movement, is only one aspect of Eisenstein’s drawing. The line divides figures and turns them into montaged organisms, hieroglyphic signs of a revolt of time against the stasis of things. But this movement of the line is also inseparable from a severe laconicism. The line organizes the ecstatic leaps by which the body of a figure becomes possessed by a thought, but it speaks in an extremely economized and arid language. The line has to

\textsuperscript{71} SWJ, p. 141-2
organize maximum movement – a dynamic passage into a new quality – with minimal effort. In this aspect Eisenstein’s conception of the line is indebted to the art of caricature. His fondness for Hogarth, Gillray, and especially Daumier is manifested not only in the various uses of caricatural elements in his films – the bestiary of the spies in Strike, the ship officers in Potemkin, Kerensky and the provisional government in October, the kulaks in The General Line, the Teuronic knights in Alexander Nevsky, the figure of Ivan and of the boyars in Ivan the Terrible – but is echoed also on the more general level of the films’ composition and fictional logic.

It is through caricature that Eisenstein conceives of the processes of individuation and characterization in his films. The above described conceptions of movement (“first movement and then what moves”) and time (the gestural character of the line), the primacy of the two over narrative, psychological, or dramatic criteria, present a difficulty for individuation in a film and necessitate a new conception of character, which can no longer be secured through a progressive interaction of individual parts in the direction towards the whole, but through a (self-)division and (self-)differentiation of the whole (movement, time) prior to its parts. This crucial aspect of Eisenstein’s films is named by the concept of typage.

What exactly is meant by typage in Eisenstein? Is it, for example, something similar to the idea of a typical character in Lukacs’ defense of literary realism? The question is difficult to answer, because even as the term “typage” is always present in Eisenstein’s theoretical work, the practice of typage seems to change. In what film does Eisenstein develop typage most fully? Is it in the films in which the main hero are the masses themselves – Strike, Battleship Potemkin, October – where one does not encounter so much an individuation within the masses, but rather an individuation of the masses? In these films the typical individual (Strongin in The Strike and Vakulinchuk in Battleship.
Potemkin) serves only as a kind of “vanishing mediator” in the movement of the masses, which are the true types of these early films. The General Line with the heroine, Marfa Lapkina, would perhaps represent the form of individuation in which a typical individual is individuated within a mass (“Among the millions…. Marfa Lapkina” the intertitles say). Indeed Marfa Lapkina comes closest to the Lukacsian prescriptions about the kind of “typical hero [who] reacts with his entire personality to the life of [her] age …There is present this organic unity of profound individuality and profound typicality.” In the case of Eisenstein’s Marfa, who belongs to the order of the grotesque, the “unity of profound individuality and profound typicality” is quite simply their sameness. They are one and the same thing. Marfa’s “entire personality” could be summed up by a couple of sentences and she is individuated not so much through an internal and reflective appropriation of the social world, as she is through her immediate identification with the external and impersonal actions related to the struggle over the collectivization of the countryside. It is not that Marfa in the space of her personality reacts to the struggle, she is struggle. The typicality of Marfa does not consist in the organic unity of her experience and the world she encounters, since her experience simply is this encounter – there is a beautiful coldness to Marfa, a complete lack of any psychological dimension that would be separable from the antagonistic movement of the struggle to which she commits. “Everything that today’s viewers find unbearable about the film is there in Marfa’s body. … Marfa should do a little more to seduce us than just loosen her headscarf from time to time. She should also convey, however slightly, a human desire, a desire for something other than her cream-separator, her bull, or her tractor. A little weakness in the body, a breach in the law, is necessary to make the

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law lovable. ... A woman without a man, whether husband or lover, with no parents and children, Marfa only desires communism.”

The next step in Eisenstein’s theory and practice of typage would have been his use of interior monologue, inner speech, in the film based on Theodore Dreiser’s American Tragedy, which he was preparing but failed to complete for Paramount Studios during his stay in Hollywood. It becomes clear from Eisenstein’s own descriptions that his interest in this phenomenon is not to be understood as a kind of return to psychologism or empiricism. On the contrary, one has to understand the question of inner speech and interiority in Eisenstein’s wok not as what is pre-social, but what is most fully socially mediated. The inner experience, the ego, the sense of one’s interiority and individuality is the point of the highest dialectical mediation of the dynamic of social life, it is the point of self-reflection of collectivity; and only as such can it be exposed to a typage treatment. For Eisenstein, interior monologue has to itself bear the mark of the play of social forces and it can only be made sense of, i.e. it only works as a significant formal innovation, if it is conceived together with a correct treatment of the social logic of class relations in the film as a whole. This is clear from Eisenstein’s discussion of his plan to use the technique of interior monologue in the filming of American Tragedy. Interior monologue was to be used in a scene of murder in order to demonstrate the hesitation and subjective “innocence” of the murderer (Clyde). The subjective innocence would in turn serve as a counterpoint to the progressive establishment of his objective (social) “guilt” through a treatment in which Clyde’s destiny gradually fades into the background while a dynamic situation of various social

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73 Jacques Rancière, Film Fables, 29-30.
groups (the farmers, the prosecutor, the defense lawyers, the church) using Clyde’s trial as their lever in a competition for power and influence is brought to the fore.  

The last phase with which the conception of typage in Eisenstein has to be confronted is the phase of his last two films. Given that both Alexander Nevsky and Ivan the Terrible belong to the historical genre dealing with exceptional figures, one could suppose that the question of typicality would not significantly structure the two works. Both Alexander and Ivan are the very opposite of typicality; they are singular historical leaders, in relation to which the popular masses are represented as an instrument of military conquest or as an instrument in the struggle for State power. One therefore seems to get a more classical form of individuation: an indistinct collectivity, something that now only exists in itself, is opposed to a great historical individual who fills the symbolic mandate of universality. One gets here the relationship between an exceptional individual and an undifferentiated mass. There are however reasons to doubt such an interpretation of Eisenstein’s later films. Especially in the case of Ivan the strange discomfort, the conspiratorial double existence of characters and objects, the excessiveness of Eisenstein’s mise-en-scene and the significance of trans-individual elements such as music and color all suggest that apart from the historical drama of Ivan’s struggle for power and unification of Russia another kind of drama is taking place. Jacques Aumont has suggested that this other drama can be read as a radically different kind of typage – symbolic typage.

What can be read through the images [in Ivan the Terrible] is neither the social position of the characters, nor a simple moral judgment about them, nor even about their political position – but something much more archetypal, which is superimposed on all of these meanings. ... This “symbolic typage” ... is therefore a double perversion of “true” typing. This is so, first of all because it produces its figures in a trans-historical field which is properly speaking that of the symbol, and, second, because it is precarious. ... Finally, on the

74 “Help Yourself!”, SW1, 219-237.
scale of the film as a whole, it is one of the principal vectors of a process of overdetermination of the manifest scene (that of politics – maneuverings of strategies around power) by the other scene, the one in which the repressed erotic content is at work.\textsuperscript{75}

It is not clear, however, why, in a film that so clearly stages the “other scene” within its images, one would still have to refer these images to the other “other scene”. The psychoanalytic interpretation ignores how the shadowy dimension (Aumont’s “symbolic” dimension) haunts the political level of power because it is the very logic of power, which the film explores, that is split and exists in the impasse of its self-constitution. Perhaps we should understand the double existence of all the elements in \textit{Ivan} (the truly typical and the “symbolic” typical) not as their overdetermination by archetypal and erotic content, but rather as an expression of the antagonism of the manifest content itself; a tension of the content which cannot be maintained in the explicit actions and relations of the characters and has to therefore appear at the level of technique and form. And perhaps in this way we can analyze \textit{Ivan} as a film in which the film’s historical content is traversed by the moment in which the film was made, realizing Eisenstein’s idea of the historical film as contemporary film: “So it must be said that the role of the historical film is vital precisely for making contemporary films and, generalizing the experience of historical films, it should always be borne in mind that this material can be used for making a contemporary film too.”\textsuperscript{76} Rather than claim a trans-historical mode of typage, we can say that in producing a contact between the demands of the present (in which the film was made) with the historical content of the past represented in the film, the situation described by the film’s content (struggle for power) is suddenly wrested from its enclosure in the sequential unfolding of historical time and transformed into, not a trans-historical, but rather a typical situation, a


\textsuperscript{76} “The Problems of the Soviet Historical Film”. \textit{SW3}, p. 129
situation in which the structural deadlocks of the present, beyond the latter’s empirical account, can appear.

But to return to the question of caricature and typage.... There are two important elements of the line in caricature and of Eisenstein’s use of the line, which will bring us to the problem of typage. The first is what we will call the animal element of caricature. The animal element has to do with the incredible capacity of the caricatural drawing to reduce figures to a few basic traits. This is the element of extreme laconism. The effectiveness of this laconic and funny operation consists in a very serious proposition. By reducing a figure to a limited set of animal traits one is not so much comparing a person to the animal characteristics, as one is rather saying that this person, this human individual, essentially is just this limited set of animal traits. Not only, for example, in Grandville’s *Public and Private Lives of Animals* where the French bourgeoisie is savagely mocked, but also in the caricatures of Daumier, where animals are rarely explicitly drawn, but where the caricature is nevertheless inseparable from an animal world. Regardless of whether the animals actually appear in the images or not, they populate caricature. This is so simply because in their everyday behavior, caught in their social activity, pursuing their interests and goals, performing their tasks and jobs, i.e. precisely where people feel most human, they are nothing more than animals. The reason animals populate not only caricature but also other genres of laughter lies in the fact that the distinction between animality and humanity is a fully human one, internal to humanity itself. In laughing at animality humanity tests its own internal instability and groundlessness.77

77 “Henri Bergson is right when he remarks that neither plants nor animals can be ridiculous per se; that is, they do not make us laugh unless we recognize human features in them, as our own deformities.” Agnes Heller, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature, and Life*. Lexington Books. New York (2005), p.28
“Not just animal world, but also the plant world.” The other element is the vegetal element and it corresponds to what Eisenstein calls the protoplasmic character of his line. This is the element that sets the laconic economy of animal traits in motion. The vegetal element is the aspect of plasticity and modulation of figures. The vegetal is, as Eisenstein says, the movement of things before they become things. “A plasmaticness of contour… A deciphering of all these individual traits.” The vegetal, protoplasmic, element is the constant movement of inscription and description of the animal traits, it constantly inflects and rearranges the ciphers of individual’s pre-individual existence.

The animal and the vegetal elements constitute one half of Eisenstein’s idea of society. The animal and vegetal domain of the social is not so much a supra- as it is an infra-individual domain. The social is not a sum of all the individuals, but rather a pre-individual a swarming reality – a constant vegetative modulation and deciphering of various animal traits along the lines which form the condition of individuation. The idea of history which corresponds to this idea of the social is not so much that of history as a temporal arrangement of individuals and their actions as it is of a history as a kind of molecular movement, organizing pre-individual traits in a constant process of becoming and decay. The laconic animal element and the protoplasmic vegetal element of the line (and cinematic construction itself) allow for an infra-individual and temporal physiognomy of the social. As a consequence of this, the process of individuation cannot really be ascribed to the individuals. It always exceeds them and makes individuals from the very beginning exist “outside themselves”. Individuation in this caricatural social world always occurs as individuation of something “beside” the individual. Furthermore, it is only this fact that has the capacity to make an individual into a type. The existence of individual organisms in Eisenstein’s films, be they masses, humans, or

78 Eisenstein Collection, 126.
79 Ibid., 125-160.
objects, cannot be comprehended without referring them to these animal and vegetal elements, i.e. to a naturalist and caricaturist theory of the social.

This, however, is not all. Apart from the naturalist and caricaturist theory of society there is, of course, also a Marxist theory of the social, that is to say of the logic of social classes. The caricatural individuation through the animal and vegetal element opens the possibility and the genesis of a great gallery of social types form the point of view of the infra-individual, but the Marxist imperative demands that one also conceives of individuation along the supra-individual lines of class. It is here that the comedy of masks (*commedia dell’arte*) proves once again significant for Eisenstein. For, if, as we have described above, the mask functions as what forces the actor to become expressive through movement and gesture, de-psychologizing the character and exposing it to the movement of the whole, it is also something that fixes the various (animal) traits and their (vegetal) legibility into identifiable structural positions.

When a traditional mask emerges, the audience knows straight away who it is and what it is. The specific character of the comedy of masks depends not on the revelation of character but on the treatment of it, because a person comes on [stage] with a defined character passport. And *commedia dell’arte* plays on situations between traditional characters. … [P]eople who think that typage is a sign of naturalism are mistaken. … [W]hen you are looking for the most typical representative of a particular milieu from all the available options you make an enormous artistic selection in typage: that is, [you look for] an element of realistic representation.  

The process of individuation is here transposed from an infra- to a supra-individual level, bypassing, or, at least, making secondary the level of the individual. The individual characters are not referred only to the swarm of the infra-individual social life but also to their supra-individual symbolic mandates, to the socio-structural positions they occupy. In the comedy of masks the mask is always a social one; it is not simply a more or less variable accretion of traits, but also a position within relations of

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80 “Theatre and Cinema”, SW3, p. 8-9
power. In commedia dell’arte, for example, one of the main axes of action is that of the master (vecchi) and the servant (zanni). In a social mask, the vegetal movement coagulates and assembles disparate animal traits into an identifiable socio-structural place.

If caricature reduces to a minimum the gap that separates the human from an animal, then the operation of comedy reduces to a minimum the distance between an individual character and his position in the social structure, the place he occupies in the symbolic order. The comedy says: “You are much more your symbolic mandate than the infinitely rich interiority and depth that you experience yourself as!” So, when a comic character experiences an unease, a disjunction within himself, that propels him into a series of comic actions and statements, this must be understood not so much as a result of a disjunction between his personality and the infinitely demanding task of his symbolic place, but rather as the unease of this symbolic place itself, a disjunct internal to the socio-structural mandate that the individual occupies.

In a comedy of masks there is little else than this dimension of socio-structural places. The greatness of comedy consists in recognizing antagonism and dynamism at the level of structural positions rather than turning it into a tragic discord of individual life and structural meaning. “This is the “atomism” of comedy. In this sense it is materialist and structuralist. It agrees with the objective of semblance and of symbolic structure, of the order of places in society as opposed to the imaginary, the self-image of individuals. Tragedy, by contrast, advocates, the thesis of “under-specificity”: in reality you are all more than everyone believes.”81 In comic experience, we are always more typical than we are willing to admit. The reason there is an experience of loss of meaning on the

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part of individual life, that our life never seems to add up to the demands of social
totality, lies in the fact that we are so closely identified with whatever the social mandate
we are occupying that we end up producing our individuality as the very excess of this
mandate itself. The comical path therefore does not consists in a mediation of the
individual and the social, but rather in the conception of an individual as the point at
which the social mandate itself is mediated, and thus as the point at which the
antagonism of the social is most acutely felt. Recognizing the dynamic and impersonal
life of structural places, a consequence of the fact that both the social as a whole and any
social mandate in particular are traversed by conflict and antagonism, allows comedy to
figure much more precisely and decisively the realism of class struggle.

2.3 Montage and Laughter

The idea behind Eisenstein’s conception of montage and cinematic form is the
following: one extracts fragments from reality and then assembles them without trying
to adequate them back to reality, which for Eisenstein was never more than a historically
determined and conventional perception anyway, but to articulate these fragments in
such a way that they become capable of producing a completely new meaning, a
meaning that does not yet exist in reality and thereby intervenes and redefines the very
framework of reality in which it appears. But there is in fact a twofold movement in this
conception of montage: as a new language, montage is always a double thing. It is a
simultaneous work of dis-embodiment and re-embodiment. It is a cool constructivist
production of meaning through a purely differential and calculated juxtaposition of
disembodied images or fragments, but it is, for Eisenstein, also always something like a
creation of a new body out of these images, a new type of a body, which is realized
through a qualitative leap in the image and which materializes an idea in the sensuous
material of cinema. This double aspect of Eisenstein’s conception of montage is analyzed
most precisely by Jacques Rancière in his essay “Eisenstein’s Madness”. In Eisenstein’s conception of montage, Rancière says, “cinema’s direct effects on the brain that is to be stimulated are doubly calculated: as the exact communication of ideas in the language of images, and as the direct modification of a sensory state through the combination of sensory stimuli.”

In Eisenstein’s conception of cinematic form, construction – a calculated, conscious, arrangement of images as heterogeneous disembodied fragments – has to produce not only an abstract representation of an idea but also idea as an actual, living reality, directly embodied, if you want, in the sensuous material of the images that stimulate the brain. An image is not simply a symbol of an idea, a metaphoric presentation of thought, but also its quite literal existence. Without remembering this important point one cannot understand the idea of Kino-Fist or the famous lines, written by young Eisenstein, on cinema as a tool for ploughing the spectator’s psyche. For Eisenstein, one cannot think a construction of an idea through a juxtaposition of images without at the same time thinking a transformed sensuous character of the images themselves. If there is a move towards a more abstract intellectual level, this move for Eisenstein always necessitates a simultaneous leap at the level of the sensible. This is what Jacques Rancière has in mind when in the above-mentioned essay he speaks of “Eisenstein’s madness” and shows us how it is impossible to think Eisenstein’s cinema without thinking the cinematic image as a kind of body possessed by an idea: “it is the power of the idea to become incarnate that cinematographic procedures have to be able to capture if they hope to convert the idea into another body. Montage cannot ensure

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82 Jacques Rancière, Film Fables, 25.
this conversion through a simple calculation of “attractions,” so it must liken itself to this body possessed by an idea in order to bring it about.”

The vertiginous, maddening, link between the two dimensions of the image – the simultaneity of the “upward” movement toward an Idea and the “downward” plunge toward Sensation – this dyadic unity of the image, produced by montage solely through this irreconcilable divergence that lies at its source, delineates the experience of laughter at the heart of Eisenstein’s cinema. The simultaneous leap in two absolutely divergent directions is constitutive of the experience of Shock, a concept that is central to Eisenstein’s understanding of the effectivity of form (see, as already suggested, his early ideas about Kino-Fist, as well as his later writing on ex-stasis and sensuous thought). The interest in laughter in Eisenstein’s work comes from a necessity to grasp the nature of this Shock, which Eisenstein intended his films to produce in the spectator, and therefore to think the unity of a split in the image between a new type of disembodiment – a calculated production of meaning through an organization of heterogeneous fragments – and of a new type of embodiment – a new sensuous intensity of the image – at work in the same concept of montage.

All of this is for now, of course, hardly more than a hypothesis. Why, after all, would all of this describe a particular experience of laughter and not some other type of experience? We can perhaps answer this question if we remember that laughter in its

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83 Ibid., 27.
84 One has to mention in this place Gilles Deleuze’s description of Eisenstein as a filmmaker of the “dialectical sublime” in Cinema 2: time-image. For Deleuze, too, Eisenstein’s cinema has to be understood in terms of a continuous double movement. First, from image to concept. And second, from concept to affect. There are therefore many similarities between our description of Eisensteinian laughter and Deleuze’s description of Eisensteinian “dialectical sublime”. The relationship between the two would demand a separate discussion, which would have to explain not only what the specific meaning of the sublime is for Deleuze (he does not, for example, simply lift it unchanged out of Kant), but perhaps even more importantly, why does Deleuze have to invent a completely new type of the sublime, namely the “dialectical sublime” (next to the Kantian types of mathematical and the dynamic sublime, which he discusses in relation to French and German inter-war cinemas) in order to be able to describe Eisenstein’s work and to
various philosophical determinations appears precisely as a sign of the kind of disjunctive unity that we are here trying to describe in relation to Eisenstein’s practice of montage. Laughter marks a joint of something dis-embodied, mechanical, “constructivist,” and something embodied, living, “organicist”. Most famously, there is the theory proposed by Henri Bergson in his book on laughter. Bergson defined the comic as something “mechanical encrusted upon the living”, or, to put it in the terms we’ve been using so far, as a dis-embodied exigency imposed upon an embodied organism. Laughter, triggered by the appearance of such a comical being, for Bergson functions as a social corrective, which ensures that the mechanical impostor encrusted upon the living being is again subsumed into the organic movement of life whose uninterrupted flow is thus restored. In Bergson, the comic means that a stubborn thought has imposed itself and now terrorizes life, and laughter, although importantly analyzed by Bergson as a social institution, is in essence a defensive reaction, a return of life to itself.

Contrary to Bergson, with Eisenstein we seem to laugh in response to a discovery of a living organism that has suddenly acquired an inorganic – montaged – quality and thus become a bearer of a sense alien to its “natural” constitution without this laughter in anyway returning us, or reconstituting for us, a natural flow of life. In Eisenstein, laughter consists not so much, as it does in Bergson, in a rectification of our initial perception of a comical, montaged, organism, but rather in a shock that such an organism in spite, or rather because, of its obviously montaged character is capable of giving life to an idea and to function as a kind of organism of thought. With Eisenstein

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make Eisenstein a representative example of pre-war cinema. “Dialectical sublime” is a truly curious term! It might even strike us as an oxymoron, a paradox of sorts, a genuinely humorous formulation.

too, like in Bergson, the comic means that an alien thought has emerged in the midst of life. But laughter, which signifies this event, does not at all function reactively, as a corrective that returns life to itself. In Eisenstein’s work laughter signals that the thought, which has suddenly appeared in life, is capable of producing life-like effects of its own and that the problem is not how to return to life but rather how to maintain this thought in its precarious existence.\footnote{In his attempt at a late theoretical synthesis of his thought, \textit{Method}, Eisenstein discusses Bergson in the following way: “Bergson’s main formula holds, “the mechanization of life is the authentic cause of laughter.”... In the mean time, the first example one comes across turns this definition on its head.... [L]et’s recall the animated films with Mickey Mouse and we will see a completely opposite picture. A pair of child’s pants drops down onto a sausage, cutting it in half. A locomotive is given coal on a tray, and it chews it with its pilot like a cow. A cunning grand piano tries to catch a daydreaming pianist in keys which have turned into teeth... One could announce the ‘pygmalionization’ of the machine with the same certainty, with which Bergson establishes the initial ‘mechanization of the living.’” (Quoted from a manuscript edited by Masha Salazkina and John MacKay, translated by Mihaela Mihailova, and presented at the “Permanent Seminar on History of Film Theories” conference in Udine, Italy, March 23-26, 2009)}

It remains to be shown what advances this hypothesis about the existence of Eisenstein’s laughter, of montage as laughter, enables. If it is true that laughter functions as an affective mark (Shock) produced by a sudden link between an Idea and Sensation, between thought and life, does this allow us to identify a specific region of form that would be properly described by this laughter? What are, for instance, the modernist and avant-garde artworks that bear the mark of this type of laughter – a specific subset of Shock aesthetics – and what is the relationship between the latter and the experience of the sublime – also a type of Shock – which is so often evoked in discussing modern art?

But perhaps it is better to posit the question at the level of history and ask: Can the disjunctive unity between thought and life, or as I put it above, between a disembodied exigency and an embodied and transformed organism at work in Eisenstein’s laughter, be presented as an analogon to the disjunctive dialectic of the Revolution itself? If the laughter of Eisenstein’s cinema is intimately linked to the violence and shock of a new thought that suddenly takes hold of a body and to the problem of form as that which
supports the existence upon which this new thought makes its claims, then another question can be suggested: What, for Eisenstein, is the place of laughter between history and event, between time as succession and time as an organization of a break?

### 2.4 Laughter in History: Eisenstein with Baudelaire and Marx

Here, a comparison with Bergson can no longer satisfy us. Instead, it is perhaps more useful to compare Eisenstein to Charles Baudelaire, who, at least on the question of comedy and laughter seems to be much closer to him. Baudelaire already identified the question of laughter (the essence of laughter) very closely with the question of humanity’s historical existence (or, as he puts in the Christian rhetoric of his essay, resuscitating the terms of the old medieval agelasts: laughter has to do with a “fallen humanity,” there is something diabolic about it, laughter is on intimate terms with suffering).  

Laughter is for Baudelaire a specific characteristic of beings thrown into historical time, who, on the one hand, possess knowledge and feel themselves superior to other (human) animals, while, on the other hand, always feel themselves inferior to the Absolute, from which they are excluded by the sheer fact of their temporal existence. Laughter is, therefore, for Baudelaire a sign of the always split being of humanity, of humanity’s irreducibly double nature, which we could say is always that of being simultaneously relatively superior and absolutely inferior, relatively powerful and absolutely weak (this, for example, distinguishes laughter from joy, which is for

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87 Charles Baudelaire, “On the Essence of Laughter”, *The Mirror of Art*. Doubleday Anchor Books, Garden City, New York (1956). Compared to Mikhail Bakhtin’s great work on Rabelais and the culture of laughter, the choice of Baudelaire as a point of comparison with Eisenstein appears as perhaps the less obvious one. Above, I have identified the carnival as the main theme of Eisenstein’s films, but it is now time to qualify this statement. The relationship of carnival – which relies on a cyclical conception of time and on a certain notion of an “immortal collective popular body” – to historical time is a question that requires a separate discussion. My argument, however, would be that in order to have any explanatory power with respect to Eisenstein’s cinema, the logic of Bakhtinian carnival and laughter would have to be placed in the context of historical time and related to the notion of an historical event (not only a cyclical recurrence, but primarily a break), both of which I discuss here by turning to Baudelaire.
Baudelaire not a double but rather a unitary experience proper to either the figure of the innocent or to the Absolute in its pure state).

As a consequence of this double nature of human existence, which is so closely related to laughter, there exist also two different types of the comic. Baudelaire names them “the significative comic” – significative comic has to do with knowledge, feeling of superiority over other people, and is, so to speak, a wretched comic of violence towards “particular” others – and “the absolute comic” – which Baudelaire relates to intuition, to the feeling of superiority over nature, and could be identified as the comic of a “universal” violence, a violence which concerns humanity as a whole (and not, as is the case with “the significative comic,” only one part of humanity against another).

Man’s historical existence, then, is for Baudelaire composed not of one but rather of two types of comedy. The “significative comic,” as already the name suggests, has to do with the establishment of (moral) meaning and is achieved through a comparison with other humans, in relation to whom the laughing human being feels superior. As such, i.e based on comparison, “the significative comic” is also the relative mode of the comic. The object of the “absolute comic,” however, is not superiority over another human being, but rather, as noted above, over nature insofar as nature stands in opposition to humanity as a whole. So, while in “the significative comic” man compares himself to other beings within history (other men), in the case of the “absolute comic” he compares himself with something that strictly speaking is not in history, namely nature. Another way of putting this last point would be to say that in the case of the “absolute comic” we are dealing not with a comparison internal to history, but rather with a comparison of history itself (humanity as historical being) to a non-historical outside. Now – and this is absolutely important! – it is not the case that, for Baudelaire, “the significative comic” is an historical type, while the “absolute comic” stands somehow
outside of history. Baudelaire is very clear that the “absolute comic” is not at all to be understood as having something to do with a direct knowledge of the Absolute, but rather as a specific relation of the comic – the comic in its universal dimension – to our existence in history. Baudelaire says: “The comic can only be absolute in relation to fallen humanity, and it is in this way that I am understanding it.”

To be very precise, the experience of the “absolute comic” is an experience of a historical being who, from within history, compares himself, feels himself superior to nature and thereby intuits (for he does not know it, he cannot establish the meaning of it), something that is not of this history. For Baudelaire this dimension of the “absolute comic” appears not in the form of a temporal succession but rather in the form of an event, i.e. not in the form of historical continuity, but rather in the form of a break that ruptures this continuity’s interiority.

This is how Baudelaire describes a case of “the absolute comic”. “It seemed to me that the distinctive mark of this type of the comic was violence.” It is important, however, that the violence he is describing here has less to do with the violence of and between the characters and their individual actions, as it has to do with a sudden transformation of their situation as a whole (i.e. violence of an event). At the beginning of the performance, he says, “They are all but rational beings and do not differ much from the fine fellows in the audience.” But suddenly,

a dizzy intoxication is abroad; intoxication swims in the air; we breathe intoxication; it is intoxication that fills the lungs and renews the blood in the arteries. What is this intoxication? It is the absolute comic, and it has taken charge of each of them. The extraordinary gestures executed by Leandre, Pierrot and Cassandre make it quite clear that they feel themselves forcibly projected into a new existence. They do not seem at all put out. They set about preparing for the great disasters and the tumultuous destiny which awaits

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88 Ibid., 144.
89 He is describing a performance of an English pantomime troupe that he saw in Paris sometime in the early 1840s.
them, like a man who spits on his hands and rubs them together before doing some heroic deed. They flourish their arms, like windmills lashed by the tempest. It must be to loosen their joints – and they will certainly need it. All this is carried out to great gusts of laughter, full of huge contentment.\textsuperscript{90}

It is rather striking to compare Baudelaire’s essay on laughter with a text that appeared twelve years earlier, but in which one can find very concisely identified Baudelaire’s two types of the comic. The text I have in mind is Karl Marx’s “Introduction” to his Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (1843), where in one of the particularly striking passages the Young Marx says the following:

[T]he present German regime, an anachronism, a flagrant contradiction of generally recognized axioms, the nothingness of the ancien régime exhibited to the world, only imagines that it believes in itself and demands that the world should imagine the same thing. If it believed in its own essence, would it try to hide that essence under the semblance of an alien essence and seek refuge in hypocrisy and sophism? The modern ancien régime is rather only the comedian of a world order whose true heroes are dead. History is thorough and goes through many phases when carrying an old form to the grave. The last phases of a world-historical form is its comedy. The gods of Greece, already tragically wounded to death in Aeschylus’s tragedy Prometheus Bound, had to re-die a comic death in Lucian’s Dialogues. Why this course of history? So that humanity should part with its past cheerfully. This cheerful historical destiny is what we vindicate for the political authorities of Germany.\textsuperscript{91}

Here, too, just as in Baudelaire, laughter connects two different modalities of the comic. On the one hand, there is “the significative comic,” which is in Marx’s text played by the German aristocracy, who still parades around believing in its own historical importance, but whom historical development – the succession of historical epochs, which allows for relativization and comparison, and therefore for the emergence of significance – has turned into an inferior and outdated residue. On the other hand, however, we have the figure of the laughing humanity. It is crucial, it seems to me, that Marx does not say simply “the laughing bourgeoisie,” or “the laughing working class,” for the figure of a

\textsuperscript{90} Ibib.

laughing humanity is a figure of universality and of an event (the laughing humanity “parts with its past”). Its laughter does not correspond to “the significative comic,” but rather to the comic in its absolute dimension.

I would like to suggest that one can place Eisensteinian comedy and laughter in line with Baudelaire’s and Marx’s theories of the two phenomena, and that Eisenstein’s work can perhaps be seen as a realization, or perhaps better, a reinvention in cinema of the idea of laughter and comedy proposed by Baudelaire and Marx in the enthusiasm and tumult of the mid-nineteenth century.

One can certainly recognize in Eisenstein both dimensions of the comic identified by Baudelaire and Marx. When in his plea for a new type of militant humor – “Laughter is merely a new kind of weapon. Laughter is simply a light weapon whose strike is just as deadly and which can be deployed where there is no sense in bringing in the all-crushing tanks of social wrath.”92 – he specifies this humor as aimed at the historically incongruent existence of capitalists and kulaks, it is clearly a case of “the significative comic” he is proposing. The proletariat laughs from the position of historical superiority (maturity) at the inferiority (infantility) of its class enemies: “That very feature will be the object of our laughter: social infantility, caught up in an age of social adulthood, socialist adulthood.”93 But it is also very clear that this “significative” aspect of Eisenstein’s militant humor means nothing without its absolute dimension, i.e. if it does not serve an event, a universal break with the old order and the establishment of a new society. The very central role played by carnival in Eisenstein’s films, the way he makes the masses, a generic image of humanity if there ever was one, into the main subject of his films, and, as I have tried to show above, the way the aesthetic elements of his

92 “Bolsheviks Do Laugh”, SW3, 72.
93 Ibid., 70.
cinema and his montage itself attempt to produce in us the shock of laughter – all of this points to the dimension of the “absolute comic” in Eisenstein’s work. The two types of the comic are inseparably tied in the militant humor and comedy of Eisenstein’s cinema. There is the social (“significative”) criticism of a knowing Bolshevik, but there is also laughter in relation to the sudden rupture that takes charge of a new artistic form in which the young art of cinema – which Eisenstein tied so closely to the fate of the Revolution – feels itself (to quote again from Baudelaire) “forcibly projected into a new existence”. There is both a retroactive historical apprehension of proletarian superiority as well as the absolutely comic (and laborious) task of “preparing,” to the amusement of all, the consequences of a great event.
Part II: Cinema and the Proletariat
3. The Figure of the Worker in Chaplin’s *Modern Times*

3.1 Prologue: Cinema’s Inexistent Encounter with the Masses – Two Dialectical Formulas and a Couple of Introductory Remarks

The history of cinema’s encounter with the popular masses – through which, as Walter Benjamin once hoped, the proletariat could become the “matrix from which all customary behavior towards works of art”¹ would suddenly emerge newborn – now appears shrouded by a twisted and perverse set of reversals.

The period between the first cinematographic exhibitions before the turn of the twentieth century and the subsequent integration of film industry around the time of World War I is often nostalgically described as the golden age of cinema’s relatively unproblematic situatedness in the world of the urban proletariat. Vaudeville, travelling shows, and nickelodeons, the eccentric and centrifugal representational strategies, the disperse organization of production and distribution, as well as the existence of a whole genre of “labor and capital” films – all describe a form of entertainment made for and consumed by the popular masses. Not that this popular amusement somehow provided a correct or even politically conscious correlate to the proletarian existence of its audience, but it was – in the very unstable multiplicity of its procedures, the voracious and indiscriminate search for new material in all phenomena of big city life, in its “polymorphousness,” and irreverent depictions of social inequalities – undoubtedly close to this audience’s demands and its social reality.² However, this was not yet cinema, if by the latter we understand a mode of filmmaking governed by the classical-realist codes and a relatively fixed set of procedures for diegetic and narrative

construction that emerged around 1915. The period that has since the 1970s become probably the most explored and researched period of cinema’s entire history, is instead better understood as cinema before cinema, pre-cinema, rather than “early cinema”.

Cinema became itself only through a slow shedding of this pre-cinematic skin, a removal of the proletarian mass element and a process of gradual *embourgeoisement*, which was composed of several simultaneous developments: the economization of representational codes; the sanitization of narrative techniques, subjects, and exhibition spaces; the building of movie palaces, which slowly replaced the lowly nickelodeons and begun to dictate new conditions of film distribution and viewership; and the formation of a respectable film criticism, a kind of moral guardianship for film industry and its audience that replaced the proletarian populism with a more respectful petty bourgeois one.

Importantly for us, several authors have noted how at the very moment of the crisis of nineteenth century realism when the figurative possibilities of other arts seemed exhausted, cinema came to liberate painting and sculpture from the imperative of realist representation (this was, of course, one of Bazin’s claims as well). Cinema helped to liberate literature from classical narrative, ... disburden music of any programme, that is to say from storytelling. Put differently, it all seems as if cinema took over the figurative aspect of art, thereby actively contributing to the emergence of the modern crisis of art. It is remarkable that non-figurative painting, the modern novel, the atonal music appear around 1910, as exactly contemporary with the first attempts at cinematographic formalization conducted by Griffith.\(^3\)

The *embourgeoisement* of cinema, then, primarily signifies a transfer of traditional methods of figuration that had exhausted themselves in other arts onto the new technological apparatus of cinema and the latter’s ensuing transformation from mere

popular entertainment into a respectable art form. This does not, of course, mean the
figurative aspect was imported into cinema in a straightforward way. On the contrary,
in order to insert itself into the long tradition of classical humanist representation,
cinema had to reinvent the latter in its own terms, through what was in fact an unstable
and contingent process.\footnote{On the invention, or rather the re-invention, of the human figure in cinema see: Jacques Aumont ed., \textit{L'invention de la figure humaine: le cinéma, l'humain et l'inhumain} (Paris: Conférences du Collège d'histoire de l'art cinématographique, 1994-1995).}
The view of cinema as a domain of reinvestment in classical humanist representation will, however, be helpful for us, insofar as the present chapter and the one that follows it are both concerned precisely with the question of figuration, albeit of a different kind, one that does not constitute a part of cinema’s reinvention of the classical humanist mission of art, but rather a deviation from the latter.\footnote{According to Denis Levy this reinvestment of figuration places cinema (classical, realist Hollywood cinema) into the lineage of art that stretches back to the Christian humanism of the Renaissance. This implies a specific definition of realism, characterized by the invention of a central, virtually infinite, perspective that organizes the representational space and appears in cinema in the form of a transparent and continuous diegesis: “on peut dire que le cinéma vient parachever cinq siècles de réalisme. Mais si le réalisme est l’art de l’humanisme chrétien, on pourrait penser que le cinéma arrive tardivement, à une époque où le christianisme se défait, où l’humanisme est remis en question, et où les autres arts secouent le jou du réalisme. Ce serait sans compter avec l’apport américain au cinéma: Il est significatif que l’art cinématographique réaliste ait trouvé son terrain d’élection dans un pays qui s’est constamment posé en champion ultime des valeurs chrétiennes humanistes, que, corollairement, l’art américain par excellence ait été le cinéma. Ainsi, le cinéma (et en particulier le cinéma hollywoodien) ouvre à l’art chrétien la possibilité d’une nouvelle, prodigieuse et peut-être ultime flambee de réalisme.” \textit{Situation esthetique du cinema}, 44-5.}

It was only with the appearance of new forms of mass culture and consumption (from television to video) and the so-called “crisis of political modernism”\footnote{The term is David Rodowick’s. David Rodowick, \textit{The Crisis of Political Modernism} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).} in the late 1970s that a need arose to discover some previously unexplored territory, from which the strength of cinema’s classical figurative role could be exposed as historically contingent and overturned. With the exhaustion of the modernist aesthetico-political idea that sought to topple cinema’s humanist illusions by way of an immanent, artistic, traversal – either in the form of a more implicit \textit{politique des auteurs}, or more explicitly
with a project of a critical avant-garde – a historiographic return to pre-cinema offered itself as the most enticing new path of subversion. This time the subversion was to come from without (or rather from the archive), infused with a heavy dosage of historicist skepsis towards grand trans-historical schemas, and mobilizing the repressed and long forgotten proletarian beginnings of cinema (the film studies version of a “history from below”) for the purpose of formulating a new type of counter-hegemonic cultural practice and a new non-hierarchical language of images.

The most inspiring research in this direction probably remains that of Noel Burch, whose pioneering discussion of the “primitive mode of representation,” a kind of paradise of unbridled heterogeneity, and of the process by which this primitive mode was eventually “civilized” and managed into the narrative linearity of classical Hollywood (what Burch called the “institutional mode of representation”), had the explicit political aim of bringing back to our attention cinema’s relationship to the popular masses of the modern industrial society. As Thomas Elsaesser summarized Burch’s project:

For Burch, the motive force of change was cinema’s rapid appropriation by the ideological interests of the bourgeoisie: their conception of the individual, their need to ‘center’ the spectator (rather than let him scan the image), to suppress the apparatus for illusionist purposes (rather than display the devices of illusionism) and to engage the viewer in the voyeuristic relation with the representation (rather than letting the spectator judge a ‘presentation’).

Burch and several others sought to expose this “motive force of change” as a contingent event and to mine it for the virtual possibilities that its occurrence prevented cinema from realizing. It is in this sense that we can apply the first dialectical formula to the

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7 Some of the elements Burch lists as characteristic of the primitive mode of representation are: topological complexity of flat, tableau compositions, single-shot scenes, frontal staging, lack of scene dissection, ‘insert’ close-ups, action overlap motivated by the autonomy of the event, camera movement provoked externally by the need for reframing and centering, performer’s eye-contact with the spectator, reliance on spectatorial fore-knowledge, etc. See: Noel Burch, Life to Those Shadows (London: BFI Publishing, 1990).

phenomenon of early cinema: the beginning is always a negation of what comes after it. In cinema’s historical development, the beginning (the multiple, unregulated, heterogeneous reality of cinema’s pre-history as a form of proletarian entertainment) is the negation of what actually began with it (the hegemonic articulation of cinema as art).

If, however, the various histories of what we above simply called pre-cinema seem nevertheless inherently inadequate for the accomplishment of their declared critical task, it is because they usually fail to take into account that cinema in its development observed yet another dialectical formula – this time not a Schellingian formula of beginning as negation, but rather a Hegelian one: namely, that history repeats, or rather, that for a thing to become a historical actuality, it has to happen twice. Not only is every beginning necessarily a negation of the subsequent development (a formula exploited by the archaeologists and historiographers of pre-cinema), but this initial negation has to itself be repeated in order for a development to become established as a historical reality. “By repetition that which at first appeared merely a matter of chance and contingency becomes a real and ratified existence.”

We, therefore, have to find out how the repression of a spontaneous, proletarian, reality of pre-cinema was crucially repeated at some later point in cinema’s history, and furthermore, how it is only this repetition that fully accomplished the irreversibility of cinema’s development, sealing it off from the subjectivity of the proletarian masses.

Hence the idea that the cinema, as art of the masses, could be the supreme revolutionary or democratic art, which makes the masses a true subject. But a great many factors were to compromise this belief: the rise of Hitler, which gave cinema as its object not the masses become subject but the masses subjected; Stalinism, which replaced the unanimism of peoples with the tyrannical unity of a party; the break-up of the American people, who could no longer believe themselves to be either the melting-pot of peoples past or the seed of a people to

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come. … In short, if there were a modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet … the people are missing.¹⁰

We have to describe a movement of double negation. Cinema had to first negate its immediate, pre-reflexive, link to the modern proletarian masses (the moment of pre-cinema) in order to become an art. It was only this initial negation that in turn opened up the possibility of cinema as a veritable mass art, the subsequent betrayal of which – the moment of the second negation – is described in the above quote passage form Gilles Deleuze’s Cinema 1. In other words, the possibility of cinema as a veritable mass art was not there at the beginning. Mass art only became possible when the pre-cinematic beginning was negated and a qualitatively different space, representing a chance for a radically transformed relationship between the cinema and the masses, appeared in its wake. Eisenstein was possible only after Griffith.

What was then devastatingly crushed in the 1930s, with history happening for the second time, was this very potential, the radical possibility of cinema as mass art that was indissociably bound up with the artistic status of cinema opened up by the first negation. It becomes clear why this second failure (the failure of the possibility of cinema as an authentic mass art) appears as a much larger and more difficult event with further reaching and far more demoralizing consequences. For, what the second betrayal negates are the redemptive possibilities opened up by the first betrayal. Any return to pre-cinema that sets itself the goal of interrogating the heterogeneous elements in cinema’s genealogy and reviving its mass character, such as for example Tom Gunning’s “cinema of attractions,” would thus have to resist the empiricist temptation (the direct temptation of the archive) and proceed not in one but in two steps, turning and investigating simultaneously in two directions, or even on two qualitatively different

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¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1: movement-image (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 216.
planes. It would somehow have to program the second betrayal back into the first, if indeed the pre-cinematic, pre-Hollywood, proletarian potential of cinema is still there to be recovered and mobilized in the purpose of a new popular orientation.

What is here summed up in two dialectical formulas suggests that a discussion of the figure of the worker in cinema has to deal with a fundamental tension. From the very beginning, even from before it really began, cinema appeared destined for an encounter with the popular masses. And yet, it was the betrayal of this destination that was constitutive of cinema’s progressive institutionalization and historical development. The rare occurrences of a veritable figure of the worker, in which cinema manages to symbolize the existence of the proletariat, thus present us with paradoxical points of torsion in which the truth of cinema’s betrayed proletarian destiny resurfaces, flashes for a brief obstinate moment, at the expense of cinema’s historical confidence whose assurance rests on the organization of this betrayal. The figure of the worker, when it appears, points neither to what exists in cinema, nor does it refer to something non-existent, it is inexistent. And to expand this claim a bit further, it is the inexistence of a truly popular cinema that is at stake when we are discussing the figure of the worker.

This chapter and the next one propose to discuss the figure of the worker through a study of a single example: Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. I will proceed as though one can posit *Modern Times* as a foundational text, which can supply us with a basic degree of the figure’s cinematic intelligibility. The approach will, hopefully, allow us (1) to describe and define what exactly might be meant by the figure of the worker and (2) briefly suggest, at the end this second part of the present dissertation, how this definition could be reactualized with respect to a few other, contemporary examples of the cinematic figure of the worker.
Two short notes before we turn to *Modern Times*. Although what is at stake in the figure of the worker is the encounter between cinema and the popular masses, it is nevertheless necessary to distinguish a *cinematic* figure of the worker from a *political* one. The latter is not the subject of this chapter and it would be wrong to suppose that what will be said of the cinematic figure of the worker in the following pages could simply be translated into political terms.\(^\text{11}\) In Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, for example, one gets a veritable figure of the worker, but it is impossible to deduce from it anything prescriptive in terms of the workers’ political orientation. At the same time, the goal is also not to see how cinema translates an already existing *political* figure into images, since the point is rather to see how cinema invents its *own* figure of the worker. It is important to understand the difference between a cinematic and a political figure of the worker – especially today, when, on the one hand, the cinematic figure of the worker is alive and well,\(^\text{12}\) while, on the other hand, the political figure of the worker finds itself under the sign of crisis, disappearance, or even death. And for this reason our choice of Chaplin is not purely coincidental. *Modern Times* is a good place to start because it is impossible not to consider Chaplin in proximity to the effective idea of worker-power, which certainly existed in the mid-1930s when the film was made. But it is precisely this proximity between a cinematic and a political figure of the worker in Chaplin that allows us to measure what is probably more important for us to understand today: the difference between the two.

The second point concerns the term “figure” itself. “Figure” interests us insofar as it designates a specific operation of form in the process of a militant discourse. A

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\(^{12}\) See especially the issue of *L’art du cinema*, dedicated to the figure of the worker: *L’art du cinema* 32/33/34 (January, 2001).
figure is a weapon with which a subjective force, combining a “practical politics with creative poetic faith,” as Erich Auerbach found them in St. Paul, transforms elements of law and historical fact that exist confined to their particular situation into an announcement of a new and universal possibility of collective existence. Figure, at a distance from allegory and metaphor, is what precariously connects history and a new collective truth – it is historical fact from the perspective of an event of truth, “a middle term between littera-historia and veritas.” In a similar way that “the figural interpretation changed the Old Testament from a book of laws and a history of the people of Israel into a series of figures of Christ and Redemption,” so cinema has the capacity to transform the world into a series of figures of a new collective humanity:

Cinema is an art of figures. Not only figures of visible space and active places. It is foremost an art of the great figures of active humanity. It proposes a kind of universal stage of action and its confrontation with common values. ... Because cinema and its derivatives, including television, represent on a human scale, after Tragedy and Religion, the third historical attempt at the spiritual subjugation of the visible, available to all, without exception or measure.

It is with this brief mention of cinema’s “spiritualization” of the visible world, of cinema’s peculiar figural intellectuality, that we turn to the figure of the worker in Chaplin’s Modern Times.

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14 Ibid., 47
15 Ibid., 51.
3.2 Chaplin’s Worker Between Political and Artistic Crises

Ne vous y trompez pas. Charlot est un conceptualiste.

-- Élie Faure, “Charlot”, 1922

1936, the year in which Chaplin released Modern Times, seems in retrospect to have concentrated within itself an entire century. Chaplin was not unaffected by the surrounding social and political upheavals of his time, which we can simply mark, on the one hand, with the Great Depression, the crisis of capitalism and the New Deal, and on the other, with the Popular Front, the final, desperate stage of the prolonged Civil War, set off by October 1917, between the proletarian revolution and workers’ movements on one side and the forces of reaction on the other. Before starting work on Modern Times, Chaplin went on a world tour in order to promote his 1931 film City Lights. During the tour he met with Winston Churchill, talked economics with John Maynard Keynes, discussed the use of industrial machinery with Mahatma Gandhi, and debated “philosophy of socialism” with H.G. Wells. Chaplin involved himself extensively, albeit in a non-committal way, in conversations about politics and economics; and an anecdote has it that for a brief moment of creative doubt he even considered becoming a politician. The intensification of Chaplin’s interest in political and social questions, which to a great extent provided the stuff of Modern Times, needs to, however, be understood against the background not of a political, but rather of Chaplin’s artistic crisis. It happened, namely, at the exact same time as the terrain of silent cinema and slapstick comedy – on which Chaplin established his international fame that enabled him to meet people like Gandhi and Keynes in the first place –was
quickly disappearing, faced as it was with that grotesque and unstoppable monster of sound cinema.

The otherwise prolific Chaplin made only three films between 1930 and 1940 (City Lights, Modern Times, and in 1940, The Great Dictator) and his difficult and problematic transition to sound, which, it could be argued, was never really completed, is well-known. It is expressive of a wider crisis the transformation of film industry meant for the entire genre of slapstick comedy. In Chaplin’s work, talking cinema meant the impossibility of continuing with the figure of the Tramp whose international recognizability depended on the silent expressivity of pantomime. As Chaplin himself said, the Tramp was “as mute as the rags he wore,”¹⁷ and there was no way Chaplin could have given him a voice without at the same time destroying him. What is thus crucial for our understanding of Modern Times is not simply Chaplin’s reception of political and social questions, but rather the way these questions were mediated by an artistic crisis and, furthermore, the way they were construed in an attempt to get out of the specific difficulty Chaplin found himself confronting in relation to sound cinema.

The figure of the worker in Modern Times appeared in the context of a crucial transitional point not only of Chaplin’s career but of cinema itself, which the quote from Deleuze earlier helped us identify with the moment of a betrayal of the promise of cinema as mass art. The appearance of the figure of the worker in Modern Times can be understood as the only possible way for Chaplin to have continued with the essentially silent slapstick figure of the Tramp when the world that made the Tramp possible was already gone. The first possible definition of the figure of the worker in Chaplin could, therefore, be stated as follows: the figure of the worker is a figure belonging to the genre

of slapstick comedy, but which is forced to appear in a world where this type of comedy no longer has any reason to exist. The figure of the worker is a way to make the silence of the Tramp survive, while letting go of it as a fully consistent figure.

Figure 1: The Tramp’s Rags

For, when the Tramp reappears in *Modern Times* (twenty minutes into the film, as he is released from the mental asylum), Chaplin submits him to a new type of violence. Over the image of his shaky descent down the asylum steps he superimposes images of a pneumatic pick driving nervously into a wall of coal, of cars turning rapidly on a dangerous curve, and of anonymous urban crowds rushing in waves from one corner of the screen to the other – images of violence and enervation that suggests a large, systemic, and essentially uncontrollable framework, exceeding in its force any situation the Tramp found himself in in Chaplin’s previous films.
Figure 2: The Pneumatic Pick and the Tramp

It is indicative that the images are superimposed, i.e. that they do not present violence as something that could be taken up in a slapstick movement and treated with a comic realism, but rather function as a kind of literal symbol, a sudden revelation of an abstract movement of a Whole, into which the Tramp can no longer insert himself (similar to the way the violent massacre at the end of Eisenstein’s *Strike* can only be “shown” by a “symbolic” leap to the images of a slaughter house). Immediately following this brief sequence, to my knowledge an exception in Chaplin’s work, we see the Tramp walking down the street, passing a door, on which a large “CLOSED” sign is nailed, and next to which another sign says “PRIVATE, KEEP OUT!” suggesting the closure of the commons, of at least a minimal degree of non-colonized space that the figure of the Tramp always requires, and from which in all of other Chaplin’s silent films he enters into various situations. As if all of this were not enough, as soon as Charlie turns the corner, he finds himself, unwillingly, at the head of a large proletarian street demonstration, is arrested for leading the proletarian revolt, and ends up in jail, which
in turn he assumes as the only place of tranquility and normalcy. This all leads us to suggest that, even when we are seeing the Tramp reappear in *Modern Times*, we are in fact observing a set of the Tramp’s indices (his hat, his cane, his shoes, his walk), which have, however, been recomposed into a new figure, more properly called the figure of the Unemployed, a shadowy double that constantly haunts the figure of the worker in cinema and strikes us as sufficiently different from the Tramp to warrant a distinction.

### 3.3 The Figure of the Worker and Slapstick Comedy

Having located the appearance of Chaplin’s figure of the worker as closely related to the fate of his slapstick type, it becomes necessary to say a bit more about slapstick comedy itself. Of all the main silent film genres such as melodrama, war film, and western, for instance, slapstick comedy was the one hit hardest by the introduction of talking cinema. Not only because of the impossibility of reconciling its pantomime-based action with the alien element of the voice, but also because the introduction of actors’ speech necessitated a much bigger, heavier, and less mobile apparatus of production, which restricted the lightness needed for improvisation and manipulation of space upon which slapstick depended. Elements of slapstick translated partly into the genre of musical comedy, but really did not return in full force until the films of Jerry Lewis, where they drew on the resources of animation, the most immediate heir of slapstick in the sound era.

The transformation of the film industry was, however, itself part of a larger transformation of industrial society as a whole and it is safe to say that slapstick encountered its limit not only in the emergence of voice and speech, not only in the new type of film production, but also in the metamorphosis of the entire socio-industrial arrangement surrounding it: the processes of automation, the proliferation of disciplinary space, and the expansion of the vast oppressive object-world, what Sartre
called the “exigency of the practico-inert.” Consequently, *Modern Times*, which with the figure of the worker it invents traverses precisely this territory of a new Fordist society, can be seen as a slapstick comedy about the limits of slapstick – its greatness lying in the fact that it confronts the historical impossibility, the impasse of an entire genre, from within the genre itself.18

But what is the status of slapstick comedy as a genre, as the key genre, of silent cinema? If we start from an assumption that a cinematic genre can be described by a specific set of semantic and syntactic elements, the combination of which forms what can be called a basic “situation” of any particular genre, then we can observe that, within the genre system, slapstick comedy occupies a rather peculiar place.19 On the one hand, slapstick comedy is extremely poor in semantic elements that would be properly its own, as for example the Wild West, cowboys, and guns are proper to the genre of the western. Slapstick, however, compensates for this poverty of its proper semantic elements by becoming capable of borrowing and submitting to slapstick treatment elements belonging to other genres. On the other hand, the specific syntactic inventions of slapstick comedy consist not so much in the way various elements are made to relate to each other in a more or less orderly manner, but rather in a movement whose main purpose lies in a disordering of elements and their relations. That is why there is perhaps something constitutively at odds in the genre of slapstick with the narrative function of genre and why the genre-effect of slapstick comedy is constituted somewhat differently than the genre-effect of other genres. Thus, as Denis Levy has suggested in his *Situation éshtétique du cinéma*, slapstick comedy, unlike other genres, cannot really be

said to possess a situation that is properly its own, or at least, it does not possess a situation in the same way other genres are defined by their basic situation. The status of slapstick comedy is paradoxical: slapstick can seize on any situation since its subjective force consists in an unexpected disorientation of other (generic) situations.20

The consequence is that in a taxonomy of genres, such as, for instance, the following one proposed by Denis Levy, in which different genres are distributed according to the axes of situation and tonality (their basic affective register or atmosphere), slapstick comedy does not have a place of its own:

**Table 1: System of Silent Cinema Genres According to Denis Levy**21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Conquest</th>
<th>Sentimental peripety</th>
<th>Collective/Social Violence</th>
<th>Contradiction: Natural-Supernatural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tonality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exalting</td>
<td>of world</td>
<td></td>
<td>war film</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathetic</td>
<td>adventure film</td>
<td>melodrama</td>
<td>war film</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>western</td>
<td></td>
<td>thriller (Film Noir)</td>
<td>the fantastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comic</td>
<td></td>
<td>sophisticated comedy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyrical</td>
<td></td>
<td>musical comedy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didactic</td>
<td>documentary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such a table should, of course, in no way be considered as an axiomatic or even an exhaustive and systematic taxonomy of genres. Because of genre’s fundamental instability, a principled system of genres might indeed be impossible – in spite of the fact that it is perhaps impossible to think of genres unsystematically.22 Levy himself suggests that genre is not so much a delimitation as an orientation, and if one, for example,

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20 *Situation esthétique du cinéma*, 293-317.
21 Ibid., 303.
started to elaborate on hybrid genres, the table above would immediately prove to be completely insufficient. I reproduce it here simply as an empirical constatation, which nevertheless allows us to underscore the somewhat exceptional status of slapstick, burlesque, or physical comedy within cinema’s system of genres.

When one looks at *Modern Times* as a slapstick film, it becomes clear that the film traverses all of the situations listed in Levy’s table.

(1) One certainly finds in it a situation of conquest, insofar as in its movement *Modern Times* exhausts the entire space of the modern city: the factory, the asylum and the prison, the suburban home, the street as a place for political manifestation, the department store, the slum-like periphery, and that modern institution *par excellence*: the restaurant. With respect to the adventurous movement of conquest, we are tempted to suggest that slapstick comedy conquers a world that at first is not there, or that it re-conquers a conquered world in an original way, as it has never been conquered before. It accomplishes its conquest through what could be called a parataxis of sites, in which contingency often plays the role of the sole and fragile link, so that the world is achieved and at the same time taken apart, allowing us to find in slapstick an adventurous exaltation, a veritable heroism of destruction.

(2) *Modern Times* traverses a situation of sentimental peripety, not only because the role of the Gamine, the feminine counterpart to Chaplin’s Factory Worker (played by Paulette Godard), is almost as important as the role played by Chaplin himself, but also because there exists in *Modern Times* a specific comic treatment of romantic and sentimental situations, producing a new idea of love and of an amorous couple, which I am tempted to qualify as proletarian, and which in place of a longer discussion can be simply said to consist of making the
sentimental situation appear explicitly as peripeteia (as an effect contrary to the one intended). That is to say the film makes love appear as something that depends on an event, whose consequences have to be verified in, rather than at a distance from, the situation itself (the world of work, of struggle for survival, of escape...), and whose path does not follow any predictable or traditional plot structure or identification. *Modern Times* produces a new idea of sentimentality and romance, by linking the latter’s emergence to a contentless encounter that, once it has occurred, can not only not be avoided, but must also be related to the very conquering movement of the heroic parataxis of the world.

(3) One finds in *Modern Times* a striking situation of collective and social violence (i.e. the situation of gangster films and thrillers): the factory itself is such a place, perhaps even more than the other disciplinary spaces (the prison or the mental asylum). Here, let us observe only two operations slapstick comedy sets up in relation to the violent situation. First, slapstick treats the question of social and collective violence by making use of stunning and unexpected reversals. For Chaplin, work=prison, but prison=home, and home=fantasy, while fantasy, as we will suggest shortly, brings us back to the situation of work. Slapstick thus treats the situations of social and collective violence as non-identical with themselves, so that we can pose, as our second observation, that one of the main operations of slapstick in relation to violent situations consists in finding in them the point of their immanent and radical peace, the possibility of a “complete loss of fear.” This particular point will become clearer later, as we analyze the

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23 “What this self-consciousness beholds is that whatever assumes the form of essentiality over against it, is instead dissolved in it – in its thinking, its existence, and its action – and is at its mercy. It is the return of everything universal into the certainty of itself which, in consequence, is this complete loss of fear and of essential being on the part of all that is alien. This self-certainty is a state of spiritual well-being and of
famous factory dance sequence, in which Charlie is swallowed by a machine and undergoes a psychotic break.

(4) Finally, it is not hard to recognize in the contradiction, or the tension, between humans and machines, between the activity of human bodies and the incredible weight of the man-made and yet somehow inhuman, “supernatural,” world which threatens to engulf them (the feeding machine!), the contradiction inherent to the genre of the fantastic. In the situation of the industrial fantastic, slapstick fights for the claim of realism (in one way or another it is always a war against the clouds of superstition), without at the same time reducing the constitutive tension of this situation to a commonsensical reconciliation (one only has to think of the “spontaneous” comedy of objects and machines). Not phased by the claims of the supernatural, slapstick allows for a non-paranoid treatment of the pseudo-autonomous life of the practico-inert.

We can further clarify the paradoxical status of slapstick comedy by looking at the status of slapstick laughter in relation to the element of tonality, of an affective atmosphere, according to which different genres can also be distinguished. Above, we have already identified in Modern Times the element of a heroic tonality, which is typically associated with the movement of conquest in the genre of adventure film, but which for Chaplin accompanies an exhaustive and paratactic traversal of urban space. We can also find in Modern Times a melodramatic pathos, as well as the more typically romantic lyrical elements, associated by Chaplin with the dramatic role of music, but also, as we tried to suggest, given a specific comic treatment. Modern Times is repose therein, such as is not to be found anywhere outside of this Comedy.” G.W.F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 452-3.
simultaneously shot through with a profound affect of anxiety, which refers us both to the question of collective and social violence we otherwise associate with thrillers and film noir, where industrial society appears as a site of a brutal struggle for survival, but which can also point us in the direction of the genre of the fantastic, if we understand that the anxiety associated with the fantastic stems from a contradiction between the natural and the supernatural, which Chaplin in Modern Times transposes onto the tension between the human and the machine.

Along with a traversal of several situations, we thus also find in Modern Times a traversal of several affective registers – the heroic, the pathetic and the lyrical, the anxious – which points to the possibility of identifying a specific role that belongs to the laughter of slapstick comedy, or at least to the laughter of Chaplin’s comedy. It allows us, namely, to suggest that laughter should not be considered so much an affect, or a tonality, in its own right, since what it marks is a certain indifference, a distance from affect and feeling, which at the same time allows for an immanent treatment of several affective registers within the film’s singular movement. It is as though slapstick laughter were a kind of internal indifference, an immanent, transitive coldness of tonality and affect.24

24 “Here I would point out, as a symptom equally worthy of notice, the absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity. In a society composed of pure intelligences there would probably be no more tears, though perhaps there would still be laughter; whereas highly emotional souls, in tune and unison with life, in whom every event would be sentimentally prolonged and re-echoed, would neither know nor understand laughter.” Henri Bergson, “Laughter,” in: Wylie Sypher, ed., Comedy (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 63.
3.4 The Dance Sequence in Modern Times

With the description above we wanted to establish the paradoxical status of slapstick comedy in the system of genres. It is clear that this description holds more firmly for silent cinema and that it would need adjustment if we were to consider the fate of slapstick in the context of sound film, where its status might still be considered paradoxical, but is nevertheless completely offset for two main reasons: first, in the sound era slapstick becomes marginal and can no longer be thought of as one of the main film genres and, second, after the second World War, the genre system of sound cinema as a whole enters into a period of slow decline, of self-reflexivity and pastiche, making it more difficult to locate the question of generic exceptionality and of paradox. As we suggested above, following the analysis of Denis Levy, the paradoxical status of slapstick stems from a missing situation that would belong to slapstick as properly its own. As a consequence, the subject of slapstick comedy, with respect to which the appearance of the figure of the worker in Modern Times can be defined, consists in a disordering or in a disorientation of situations belonging to other genres.

In order to probe the slapstick capacity of disorientation a little further, let us turn what is perhaps the most famous scene in the entire Modern Times, the factory scene (occurring about fifteen minutes into the film and lasting less than five minutes), in which Charlie is swallowed by the machine, rolls in and out of its clock-like mechanism, and enters into a dance traversing the entire space of the factory, after which he is apprehended and taken to a mental asylum.
It has to be noted first that the slapstick disorientation of the sequence occurs in a situation of Taylorist, Fordist factory, which is here both carefully reproduced and caricatured by Chaplin. We are dealing with a situation that is truly marginal in the history of Hollywood cinema and can best be indentified – to continue our discussion of the system of genres for a brief moment – as belonging to the relatively insignificant species of industry films, which would belong to the documentary genre of “didactic conquest” (according to Levy’s table).

In the sequence a certain force is introduced that splits open the logic of representation which otherwise governs the factory’s Taylorist situation and assures the clear distribution of places and tasks within it. The slapstick force proceeds by disordering the univocal logic of place and time to the point where the entire space-time of the factory becomes non-identical to itself. This operation, which manifests a certain subjective comic capacity, can in fact be described quite precisely. First, it should be noted that, within the narrative fiction of the film, disorientation is identified on both ends as a case of madness. At the beginning of the sequence a fellow-worker proclaims Charlie as crazy and at the end Charlie is committed to an asylum. The theme of
madness here provides the means of maintaining a narrative coherence in the face a radical comic disorientation presented by the episode. But if we take this comic disorientation, the real subjective force of the scene, as something that exists for itself, then we can say that it consists:

- First, of a separation of the tool from the place of its application in the production process and its consequent reapplication in a new metonymic chain. Charlie’s wrenches are separated from the metonymy of the conveyor belt and enter into a series that now includes not only the bolts on the conveyor belt (their proper place of application), but also the interior mechanism of the machine, the co-workers’ and foreman’s nipples and noses, the buttons on the back of the secretary’s skirt, the water hydrant, and the exceptionally big buttons on the front of the old lady’s dress. One can speak here of the “potentiality of tools” to suddenly convert one situation into another, which Gilles Deleuze defined as one of the key characteristics of Chaplin’s comedy; 25

- Second, comic disorientation submits the operation of the machinery, both of the conveyor belt as well as the mechanism controlling the entire production process, to an irregular rhythm which no longer obeys the functional organization’s imperative of productivity, but rather develops in relation to the logic of a chase;

- The third element is the movement of the chase itself. It involves the worker leaving his place and his task, crossing several boundaries that the Taylorist-Fordist organization holds as sacred:

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25 “The important element, the burlesque process itself, consists in this: the action is filmed from the angle of the smallest difference form another action (firing a gun – playing a shot), but in this way it discloses enormity of the distance between two situations (game of billiards – war). … This is what we find in most diversions of everyday objects: a very slight difference introduced into the object will induce opposable functions of opposed situations. This is the potentiality of tools: and even when Charlie comes face to face with machines, he clings to the idea of a huge tool which is automatically converted into the opposing situation.” Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 1: movement-image, 169.
the boundary between the interiority and the exteriority of the machine
the boundary between the inside and the outside of the factory
and the boundary between the bottom and the upper level of the factory
floor, i.e. the boundary between execution of work and managerial
supervision of work;

- Lastly, there is Chaplin’s enigmatic use of the oil can (first a large one and later a
smaller, pocket-sized, one), which he uses to spray oil into his co-worker’s and
managers’ eyes, defacing them and blotting out their vision. As though Chaplin’s
worker attempted to make himself invisible by blinding everyone around him.
An attempt, perhaps, to withdraw from the regime of visibility that governs the
space-time of the factory, so that the entire scene could be understood as a
magnificent comic spectacle at the center of which lies a desire for its exact
opposite – a negation of spectacle.

As mentioned, the narrative rationality of the sequence is guaranteed by an
introduction of the theme of madness, a psychotic break suffered by the worker, which
in the plot of the film localizes the force of comic disorientation as an appearance of
irrationality. It is, however, possible, at a distance from narrative justification, as though
we were moving from within the disorienting slapstick force itself, to discern another
rationality at work in the scene. This other rationality can perhaps be best approached
through the question of dance, since it is to a large extent a dancing movement that
constitutes the discontinuous continuity of this particular slapstick sequence.

A reference to dance, to a particular idea of dance, allows us to better grasp the
effect and the consistency created by the scene in question. Here is how Alain Badiou,
summarizing Nietzsche’s conception of dance in his essay “Dance as a Metaphor for
Thought,” describes the paradoxical relationship of a dancing figure to its body:
Dance visibly transmits the Idea of an immanent intensification. … In fact the metaphor works only if we put aside every representation of dance that depicts it as an external constraint imposed upon a supple body or as the gymnastics of a dancing body controlled from the outside. … After all, one could imagine that dance exposes an obedient and muscled body to our gaze, a body simultaneously capable and submitted. In other words, a regime of the body in which the body is exerted for the sake of its subjection to choreography. But for Nietzsche such a body is the opposite of the dancing body, of the body that internally exchanges the earth with the air. What in Nietzsche’s eyes is the opposite of dance? It is the German, the bad German, whom he defines as follows: “Obedience and long legs.” The essence of this bad Germany is the military parade, the aligned and hammering body, the servile and sonorous body. … The body of beaten cadence. Dance instead is the aerial and broken body. Not at all the hammering body, but the body “on points,” the body that pricks the floor just as one would puncture a cloud. … [W]hat Nietzsche sees in dance—both as an image of thought and as the Real of the body—is the theme of a mobility that is firmly fastened to itself, a mobility that is not inscribed within an external determination, but instead moves without detaching itself from its own center.26

We could add to the dictates of choreography and to the image of a military march as the antipode to dance also the image of factory work, especially industrial work in a Taylorist factory, a supreme example of a choreographed movement externally imposed on the body. We can thus suggest that the passage from work to dance in Chaplin resembles a passage from an externally determined choreographed movement to an immanently determined (a self-determined) one, a movement, that “visibly transmits the Idea of thought as an immanent intensification,” as Badiou says.27

But this Nietzschean understanding of dance has another side to it. This turn from an external determination of the body’s movement towards an immanent determination is not to be understood as a turn from discipline to some spontaneous self-expression of the body.

Dance is in no way the liberated bodily impulse, the wild energy of the body. On the contrary, it is the bodily manifestation of the disobedience to an impulse.

27 Ibid.
Dance shows how the impulse can be rendered ineffective within movement in such a way that it would be a question of restraint, rather than obedience. With a figure of a dancing body we have to be able to think not only a body unconstrained externally by the gravity of a choreographing (or for that matter a Taylorist managerial) consciousness, but also a body at a distance from itself. A dancing body, in its own immanent discipline, is a body of a double disobedience, so that the “idea of immanent intensification” transmitted by dance organizes two passages: one, from a body determined externally by a choreographed rhythm to a “body on points,” and a second from an energetic body to a body whose own impulses have been neutralized.

Now, there is something in Chaplin’s dance that resists such modernist purity. Can we simply identify Chaplin’s dance with the abstract becoming of the body-thought of modern dance described by Badiou? Is Charlie not still a bit too vulgar, his body overly energetic, to be such a Badiouian-Nietzschean dancer? Is not his movement still too caught in the movement of the factory machinery, too choreographed, to really convince us as a figure of immanent intensification? Perhaps, but this would simply confirm that dance is not impervious to the effect of cinematic impurification, which inflects all arts as they come into contact with cinema. In the sequence from *Modern Times* the figure of the worker exists as cinema’s impurification of the figure of a modern dancer. The scene simultaneously distills the situation of the factory in the direction of dance, while it at the same time impurifies the idea of dance by making it exist in a set of cinematic operations that present us a situation of the factory. Chaplin both playfully disengages from the constraint of machinery, from the repetitive and segmented labor in Taylorist choreography, and, from within the movement of his dance, stays close to the

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28 Ibid., 61.
29 On cinema and artistic impurity see this dissertation’s “Introduction”.

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latter. Compared to his work as a Taylorist “detail worker,” the new metonymic chains he enters into are hardly any less machinic than the ones he has just freed himself from, which in turn prevents us from reading the scene as an affirmation of the right of his body against the machines. The least we can say is that even if we cannot directly confirm that Chaplin’s movement takes place according to the “vector of immanent intensification,” i.e. that his dance is still too impure, and even if his dance leaves the question of movement undecidable (choreography vs. “body on points,” impulse vs. neutralization), it nevertheless makes it exist as a question and thus visible for us.

The visibility of the question of movement’s determination allows us to connect the sequence in question to the idea of the “lightness” of dance, the beautiful image of an immanent reversal of the terrestrial and the aerial, which Nietzsche opposed to the grave histrionics of theatrical art and which Chaplin opposes to the grave histrionics of a Taylorist factory. Badiou interprets this “lightness” in his own terms as a problem of movement’s principled restraint:

The essence of lightness lies in its capacity to manifest the secret slowness of the fast. … The movement of dance can certainly manifest an extreme quickness, but only to the extent that it is inhabited by its latent slowness, by the affirmative power of restraint. … It obviously follows from this observation that the essence of dance is virtual, rather than actual movement: Virtual movement as the secret slowness of actual movement. Or, more precisely: Dance, in its most extreme and virtuosic quickness, exhibits this hidden slowness that makes it so that what takes place is indiscernible from its own restraint. In Chaplin’s slapstick disordering of the factory situation one truly does get such an idea of dance as a latent, or virtual, slowness – a slowness and deceleration that opens up at the very heart, or even as a direct consequence, of acceleration. Remember that Chaplin’s dance (as well as his supposed madness) result from the brutal and unbearable

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acceleration of the conveyor belt and that dance ensues not at a distance from this acceleration, but rather from becoming part of it and going to its limit. It is as though the time of production were sped up to the point where a break occurs and what one gets is no longer time, but rather a suspension of it, as though a sudden spatialization of time has taken place.

The figure of the worker in Chaplin would thus have to do with this very point, at which the disorienting, dancing movement suspends the accelerated time of production, suspends it even without necessarily stopping it, producing in it an interior fold and an effect of space in which the movement of acceleration becomes legible in the form of its own virtual slowness and restraint.

3.5 Chaplin as an Anti-Humanist

Let us for now posit the above as a hypothesis, a proposal for a possible reading of the figure of the worker’s disorienting slapstick force in Modern Times. One of the advantages of such a reading is that it allows us to perceive the figure of the worker in Modern Times as it is tied to the point of the situation’s internal tension, to an antagonism that is immanent to the space-time of the factory. The figure of the worker is what appears when the factory becomes non-identical to itself. Which means that the figure of the worker in Chaplin can be conceived as a figure of combat and not as a figure of mediation or sacrifice, and furthermore, that the point of its comic force lies not in a reconciliation or a humanization of the inhuman space-time of the factory, but rather in setting up in the midst of its inhumanity a movement that does not belong to the latter.

We can now connect to this reading of Chaplin’s dance the film’s key idea, which concerns the very status of time and modernity. We can approach it by introducing a certain ambiguity into the film’s title. Modern Times can suggest two rather distinct
questions. First, it implies a film about the time, the period of modernity, offering us a stunning panorama of the historical epoch of capitalism and of its phenomena – above, in our discussion of slapstick’s relationship to the system of genres, we identified this phenomenology with the theme of an adventurous conquest. We can remember here that as, Barthelemy Amengual has said, Modern Times was actually the first of Chaplin’s films in which Chaplin fully disclosed the historical situation of the film’s action: “la grande fable de Charlot – depuis ses débuts jusqu’aux Lumières de la ville – se développe dans une société sans Histoire (...) tandis qu’avec Les temps modernes, la vision de la société américaine devient vision d’une société réelle, moderne, précisément, prise dans l’Histoire, et dont l’économie et la lutte des classes sont le moteur historique-effectif.”32

But there is a second, and for us more important, sense that can be given to the title of the film. Modern Times refers not only to the question “What is the time of modernity like, what are its phenomena, its representative spaces and institutions, etc.?.” but rather, and in a traversal of the first question, “What is the modernity of time? What is time itself when it becomes modern?” So that Modern Times, certainly a kind of phenomenology of capitalist modernity, is above all a film about time’s own historicity. The question it announces in its opening image, an emblematic representation of a clock, is: What happens to time when it falls out of joint and becomes modern time?

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It is with respect to this question that the originality of *Modern Times* has to be measured. For Chaplin’s great contemporaries becoming capable of handling what they took to be constitutive of time’s modernity – the shock presented by a completely new historical experience that wrested time out of its religious coordinates and made it indifferent to communal cycles – required positing the existence of at least two different temporal registers in their films: most often, the modern and the premodern (where it is of little importance that the latter is always a retrospective projection from the point of view of the first). In the case of the Soviets, for instance, the problem is almost always that of a leap from one time to another, the staging of a revolutionary break in the stuporous condition of pre-revolutionary time (*The Old and the New*). The Soviets wager on absolute modernity of time, but the latter exists predominantly in the guise of a utopian goal and not as their point of departure.
A different strategy can be found in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, another great film about the contradictions of the modern experience of temporality, where the problem that structures all other tensions and binary oppositions of the film is precisely that of a reconciliation of the antagonism inherent to capitalist time through a reference to another temporal register whose character is far more obscure – call it natural, human, or even messianic time. The emblematic image of time offered at the very beginning of *Metropolis* (an image that later reappears at a crucial narrative turn of the film), occupying a similar structural position as Chaplin’s opening image of the clock, points to a significant difference between Lang and Chaplin.

![Figure 5: The Clock (Metropolis)](image)

In Lang we get the co-presence of two distinct temporal matrices. The ten-hour clock is clearly the hour of capitalist time, of the working day, whose occupation of a disproportionately large part of the image suggests that the ten-hours have usurped the
temporal equilibrium, which is thus offered to us as a virtual possibility by the image. The smaller clock in the upper section of the image, however, is more enigmatic. It is a clock with a twenty-four hour dial. But it is precisely this vagueness that actually secures its ideological efficiency, since it is capable of rendering, with the exhaustiveness of its dial, a sense of wholeness, completeness, of a full circle – the opposite of the ten-hour anomaly – without at the same time explicitly telling us what this circle contains, without making this completeness of time belong to any determined register of the film.

Yet, it is not only the twenty-four-hour clock that is vague, the entire state of disequilibrium symbolized by the image can be read in two ways as well. The disproportionately large ten-hour clock, which stands for the violence of capitalist time, determined as it is in relation to the smaller clock does not allow any distinction between the violence of capital, the dominating instrumental rationality, and that of the working masses, which are presented by the film as the creaturely substance of this unnatural ten-hour day, mute victims indiscernible from what victimizes them. So that the disequilibrium can function within the symbolic space of the film as both an image of the unbridled capitalist rationality and as an image of the threat presented by the dehumanized proletarian mob. The antagonism which would be, so to speak, internal to the ten-hour clock, is blurred and Metropolis constantly moves away from the possibility of staging the conflict between the two faces of inhumanity, the capitalist and the workers, the two possible significances of the ten-hour clock, by relating the confrontation to a wholly different and essentially hazy temporal register. This displacement allows the film to invent an exemplary, Christ-like, figure of sacrifice that comes and mediates the antagonism (“Father—! Father—! Will ten hours never end!”).

The film’s ideological gesture consists in giving support to the conservative and sentimental desire for a humanization of time, the strict equivalent of the compromise
between capital and labor, which is proposed to us as a narrative resolution at the end of the film, and repeatedly expressed throughout the film’s motto: “Between the brain that plans and the hands that build, there must be a mediator. ... It is the heart that must bring the understanding between them.”

This option of humanization, or rather of a re-humanization, of modern, capitalist time is absent from *Modern Times*. For the Chaplin of *Modern Times* there is only one time, the inhuman time of capitalist modernity, and any possibility of mediating its antagonism, either by reference to some external and separate temporal system (of nature, of religion, of community...) or to the possibility of a messianic arrival, cannot appear. As suggested in our discussion of dance as acceleration’s *immanent* restraint, its *internal* slowness, rather than its external interruption or its other, the antagonism in *Modern Times* is not mediated but rather presented, exhibited as inhering in the only time that exists. The modernity of time does not mean that time is somehow straightened out or that it does not contain divergences, that somehow it is untroubled by violently antagonistic processes. Quite the contrary, the idea of time in *Modern Times* is that of time as antagonism and combat, of a confrontation within the violence of capitalist time.

The temporality that goes against the inhuman temporality of the modern world is not external to the latter, but rather constitutes its internal limit. It is as though we were watching one temporal dimension articulated along a continuous Moebius strip, where what was at first a completely regularized and calculated temporality of capitalist effectivity becomes a maddening time of an anarchic dance, and what seemed to be the uprooted movement of an escape, suddenly returns to punch the clock. It is in this sense that we have to understand the slowness implicated in the idea of dance, which we discussed above. The fact that dance emerges as such a strong element of *Modern Times*
is a consequence of a desire to treat simultaneously time and this time’s inherent antagonism. This would, finally, be Chaplin’s idea of time in Modern Times: the historicity of modern time can only be grasped if we perceive the antagonism as time’s internal rather than external fold. The slowness, the suspension of time, the quasi-spatialization of time – all, crucially, not forms of time’s stoppage – are part of the following idea of time: modern time is singular and stripped of any external reference. In fact, we could say, since it is ultimately the abstract time of capitalist reality, it can be infinitely varied only by a reference to itself – and yet it is not univocal, not at all without an internal antagonism and the most radical immanent anomalies.

Inhuman time’s immanent anomalies – the insight seems important, especially in light of many interpretations of Chaplin, particularly of Modern Times and the factory sequence, which has often been discussed as an expression of Chaplin’s humanism. According to this interpretation, which repeats the structure of Bergsonian theory of laughter, the laughter Chaplin creates in Modern Times performs a restorative, essentially corrective function: against the domination of the Taylorist-Fordist factory, Chaplin reminds us of the human life the latter enslaves. Against the inhumanity of the machines, which rob the workers of their gestures and movements, Chaplin wins them again as gestures and movements of a human body. But if we interpret the sequence in question as presenting us not with a humanization of movement, but rather with a movement of comic disorientation that exposes this inhuman time’s internal antagonism, making visible its latent slowness, there is perhaps no need to think Chaplin’s dance implies some ultimately anthropomorphic reference. The following statement by Andre Bazin can be read as confirming the point:

Whatever the facts, one can clearly see that the gag referred to above opens up under the initial comic shock a spiritual abyss which induces in the spectator, without giving him a chance to analyze it, that delicious vertigo that quickly
modifies the tone of the laughter it provokes. The reason is that Charlie carries to absurd lengths his basic principle of never going beyond the actual moment. In what Bazin names as Chaplin’s refusal to reach beyond the limits of the actual in his comic solutions, we recognize the “principle” of immanent restraint, of an inherent fold in the speed of Chaplin’s movement, a suspension of the inhuman time without stepping outside of it. But what is truly staggering in Bazin’s statement is that he connects this discovery of Chaplin’s immanent fold to an experience of a spiritual abyss: there is no image of a Human behind the disordered, antagonistic actuality created by Chaplin’s slapstick.

No need, thus, to turn the figure of the worker, the spiritual abyss that opens in the actuality of the factory, into a humanist one. We have to, on the contrary, be able to recognize it in a body that is indiscernible from its mechanical and machinic displacements, a body that is composed of nothing more than a set of liberated artificial and mechanical gestures. A body that, pulled as it is into the abyss, cannot hope to simply return to itself.

### 3.6 Proletarian Hunger

In the short entry on Modern Times in his Mythologies, Roland Barthes writes how for Chaplin the figure of “the proletarian” is contained and absorbed by the figure of “the poor,” a more general category of human existence that designates less a political than a laboring animal, less a consciousness than a body caught in the immediacy of its

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34 “If laughter is a reaction that takes certain circuits, it can be said that Charlie Chaplin, as the film’s sequences unfold, progressively displaces the reactions, causes them to recede, level by level, until the moment when the spectator is no longer master of his own circuits, and tends to spontaneously take either a shorter path, which is not passable, which is barred, or else a path that is very explicitly posted as leading nowhere. After having suppressed the spectator as such, Chaplin perverts the laughter, which comes to be like so many short-circuits of a disconnected piece of machinery.” Michel Cournot, quoted in: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1992), 317.
needs. According to Barthes, the crucial theme illustrating this essentially corporeal and
generically human existence is that of hunger, a constant in all of Chaplin’s films, which
in *Modern Times* gets an almost systematic treatment.

For Chaplin, the proletarian is still the man who is hungry; the representations of
hunger are always epic with him: excessive size of the sandwiches, rivers of milk,
fruit which one tosses aside hardly touched. Ironically, the food dispensing
machine (which is part of the employers’ world) delivers only fragmented and
obviously flavorless nutriment. Ensnared in his starvation, Chaplin-Man is
always just below political awareness. A strike is a catastrophe for him because it
threatens a man truly blinded by his hunger.35

Chaplin’s poor proletarian, is “defined,” Barthes says, “by the immediate character of
his needs,”36 which would appear to throw an obstacle on the path of our anti-humanist
interpretation: there might indeed be machinic displacements which transform Chaplin
into something other than a human figure, but with the theme of hunger, which truly is
Chaplin’s constant theme, the rights of the human body, and with them a kind of
corporeal, a more modest type of humanism might nevertheless return in full force.

It thus becomes important to note, as Barthes’ text itself shows, that Charlie’s
relationship with food never works out and that there is always something terribly off in
that relationship. There are, of course, the famous scenes from his other films: Chaplin
eating a shoe, or sticking forks into a couple of bread buns, making them dance on top of
the table (both in *Gold Rush*). In *Modern Times*, Chaplin’s “encyclopedic treatise” on food
and hunger comprises several scenes. First, there is the famous industrial feeding
machine (mentioned by Barthes in the passage quoted above), in what is surely one of
the most disturbingly violent scenes in the entire history of cinema. Chaplin had the idea
for the feeding machine already in 1916, at the very beginning of his film career, which
points to the fact that for him food and feeding were from early on disconnected from

36 Ibid.
their organic function – right from the start Chaplin has a passion for mechanical treatment of hunger. There is always struggle for food in Chaplin. In *Modern Times*, for example, he fights a fellow prisoner over a piece of bread. It seems food is in one way or another caught in misrecognition: the mistaken identification of cocaine as salt, which turns Charlie into a kind of dysfunctional self-feeding machine, a replica of the one, in which he was entrapped and suffered earlier in the film. When there occurs a successful encounter with food in Chaplin’s films, it belongs to states that are “essentially by-products” (to borrow a term from John Elster): when he finishes off an exorbitant amount of food, the only scene in *Modern Times* where food presents no difficulty for him, it is only because satisfying hunger is not his main goal. He eats, so he can refuse to pay and thus be apprehended by the police – he wants to go back to jail, the only place of happiness for Chaplin’s proletarian. The scenes of Chaplin’s and Paulette Goddard’s imagined domestic bliss are a parody of suburban comfort and plenty, contrasted sharply with their actual domestic life: a sandwich is cut too thick to fit into Chaplin’s mouth; he does not have time to eat it, so that running to work, he stuffs it down his pants. Finally, we cannot forget the famous scene of Chaplin during lunch break feeding a coworker caught in a machine (the ingenious use of a whole chicken as a funnel to pour coffee into the coworker’s mouth). There is always something amiss whenever Charlie comes into contact with food, which is why Barthes can say that Chaplin remains “ensnared in his starvation.”

Now, if hunger and Chaplin’s relationship to food are representative of a more general sense in which, according to Barthes, Chaplin’s proletarian is “defined by the immediate character of his needs,” suggesting Chaplin’s generic and compassionate humanist vision of man caught up in essential necessities of the latter’s existence, then we have to add that this immediate character of need in Chaplin immediately splits into
two. There is the dimension of need proper, the visible feeling of hunger and the constant effort to find what might satisfy it and the way it might be satisfied, but there is also the moment in which this movement itself assumes the place of a quasi-independent dimension, as though need suddenly, by its own fiat, acquired a degree of freedom irreducible to the relationship between a body and an object the function of need is meant to connect. This is a striking image, since Chaplin manages to create a sense of a self-positing freedom emerging in the milieu of pure necessity, at a distance certainly from any idea of human freedom: it is need that is liberated from its functional framework not the human being that is liberated from need.

The fact that there is constantly something amiss in the movement from Charlie’s need to its satisfaction in objects manages to isolate and autononimize this movement itself, turning it into a type of pseudo-object with a reality of its own. We move from a satisfaction with objects, to satisfaction itself as an object. Psychoanalysts would say this distinction is one between desire and drive, between, on the one hand, a metonymic movement constantly in search of new objects, seeking to exhaust the world in the pursuit of satisfaction and, on the other, the circular, repetitive movement whose object is this search itself. This pulsive dimension that from within corrodes the “immediate character of [the poor proletarian’s] needs,” allows us to supplement what we above identified as machinic displacements of Chaplin’s body (displacements caused by Chaplin’s encounter with the machine) with another, more intimate, type of machinic displacement: an inorganic exigency of a liberated and self-positing need that affects the organic function of satisfaction and “proletarianizes” want beyond the right given it by its humanist interpretation.
4. Taylorism, Stalinism,… Chaplinism!

From our reading of Chaplin in the previous chapter come two main insights. First, that the figure of the worker in Modern Times appears in the gap that opens and is maintained between a slapstick subjective force and a particular situation into which the force intervenes. We focused on the situation of a Taylorist-Fordist factory, in the space-time of which Chaplin’s slapstick dance created an internal fold, exhibiting the figure of the worker as an immanent restraint of the accelerated industrial production. The second insight consists in comprehending how this “situational” non-identity extends to a non-identity of the character’s body, which in turn allowed us to propose a non-humanist interpretation of Chaplin’s worker. So that a figure in fact describes, or holds together, two different registers of non-identity, that of an antagonism (and of a refusal of mediation) in a situation and of a body that does not return to itself.

Now we will make a somewhat abrupt step back in order to show how this discussion of Modern Times might be made useful in a broader historical perspective, but also how a historical comparison might strengthen or help us further develop the meaning of the figure of the worker. The question might be put in the following way: How does the figure of the worker in Modern Times open up a new perspective on the question of the visibility or invisibility of workers and work as such? We will compare the figure of the worker in Chaplin to the representation of workers and work first in the discourse of Taylorism and second in the discourse of Stalinism, or rather its aeshtetico-political doctrine of socialist realism. Both phenomena, Taylorist scientific management and Stalinist heroization of labor, were more or less contemporary with Modern Times. As it will hopefully be clear throughout the discussion, it is Chaplin’s film that opens up the space of this comparison. So that in what follows Chaplin’s worker is not read against the background of Taylorist and Stalinist discourses, but rather the other way
around: Taylorism and Stalinism emerge in a new light against the background of what could be called Chaplinism. In order to immediately make good on this intention, we will take as a starting point of our comparison the comic opposition opened up by our discussion of Modern Times: the opposition between a disordered, and yet consistent subjective force, and a representational logic that governs the situation that this force comes to disorder.

4.1 Taylorism and Scientific Management

One of the most striking aspects of Taylorism, formulated with shocking honesty in Frederick Winslow Taylor’s main book Principles of Scientific Management (1911), is undoubtedly the extent to which Taylorist organization of labor depends on separating workers from their collective control over cooperative relations and their knowledge of the production process, i.e. from the workers’ own subjective capacity. The idea of scientific management proposed by Taylor was aimed directly at the suppression of workers’ subjectivity, by which I mean the workers’ collective capacity, and the expropriation of the content of the latter. Taylor first admits that a workers’ subjective capacity exists. He calls it “traditional knowledge,” by which he means the workers’ own, combined, and inter-generationally transmitted experience that in its

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comprehension of the production process exceeds any other point from which this process could be grasped.

The ingenuity and experience of each generation — of each decade, even, have without doubt handed over better methods to the next. This mass of rule-of-thumb or traditional knowledge may be said to be the principal asset or possession of every tradesman. Now, in the best of the ordinary types of management, the managers recognize frankly the fact that the 500 or 1000 workmen, included in the twenty to thirty trades, who are under them, possess this mass of traditional knowledge, a large part of which is not in the possession of the management. ... [T]hese foremen and superintendents know, better than any one else, that their own knowledge and personal skill falls far short of the combined knowledge and dexterity of all the workmen under them.

Against this subjective force, the capacity of workers’ “traditional knowledge,” Taylor’s method of scientific management introduces its specific form of violence:

The development of a science ... involves the establishment of many rules, laws, and formulae which replace the judgment of the individual workman and which can be effectively used only after having been systematically recorded, indexed, etc. The practical use of scientific data also calls for a room in which to keep the books, records, etc., and a desk for the planner to work at. Thus all of the planning which under the old system was done by the workman, as a result of his personal experience, must of necessity under the new system be done by the management in accordance with the laws of the science; because even if the workman was well suited to the development and use of scientific data, it would be physically impossible for him to work at his machine and at a desk at the same time. It is also clear that in most cases one type of man is needed to plan ahead and an entirely different type to execute the work.

With the intervention of a new “science,” the know-how of workers is formalized and codified, which is to say: it is represented. The thought and knowledge of the production process, which Taylor suggests should be carefully recorded and stored in a special room, are separated from the physical execution of work. Taylor’s invention effects a kind of de-subjectivization of workers in the production process – he will, for

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2 On the status of scientific management as a science, or rather, on Taylor’s pretension to produce a new science of management, Harry Braverman has the following to say: “Scientific management, so-called, is an attempt to apply the methods of science to the increasingly complex problems of the control of labor in rapidly growing capitalist enterprises. It lacks the characteristics of a true science because its assumptions reflect nothing more than the outlook of the capitalist with regard to the conditions of production. ... It does not attempt to discover and confront the cause of this condition, but accepts it as an inexorable given, a “natural” condition. It investigates not labor in general, but the adaptation of labor to the needs of capital. It enters the workplace not as the representative of science, but as the representative of management masquerading in the trappings of science.” Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, 59.
example, constantly compare them to animals (to monkeys and oxen) and will say “the stupider the worker the better he is for the job.” The process of production from now on requires two types of men, those who think and plan and those who execute.

Next to the worker that has been desubjectivized, a new figure emerges in Taylorist discourse, namely, the figure of the manager, who now is the heroic embodiment of novelty and sacrifice, of everything that is truly new and dynamic in the entire process:

[T]he managers assume new burdens, new duties, and responsibilities never dreamed of in the past. The managers assume, for instance, the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae which are immensely helpful to the workmen in doing their daily work. In addition to developing a science in this way, the management take on … other types of duties which involve new and heavy burdens for themselves.

If Taylor says that from now on “every single act of every workman can be reduced to a science,” it has to immediately be added that this is a science the worker has no access to, it happens behind his back, or, rather, above his head. The basic goal of Taylorism is to make the workers’ movements and gestures incomprehensible and alien to workers themselves.

Cinema, or more precisely, the use of cinematographic technology is intimately tied to the history of Taylorism, since it can function as perhaps the most effective tool for stealing people’s gestures and training them how to acquire and assume new types of movements. It is crucial to reference in this respect the “motion studies” of Frank Gilbreth, a follower and rival of Taylor’s as well as a source for some of Taylor’s own

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3 On cinema and gesture see, for example, Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in: Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 49-59, where, however, people’s “loss of gesture” at the turn of the twentieth century and the recovery of gesturality in cinema – the reason why, for Agamben, cinema belongs “essentially to the realm of ethics and politics (and not simply that of aesthetics)” – are at no point related to the question of organization of labor.
arguments. Gilbreth’s “motion studies” consisted of filming, analyzing, correcting, and projecting the movement of work. He first recorded several workers doing their work; segmented and took apart their performances; and then, measured and selected the optimal movements, after which the best, the most efficient movements taken from different performances and purified of all waste and excess were spliced together in a kind of managerial montage of the new synthetic movement. This new, synthetic and artificial, movement was called “a task,” described by Taylor as the single most important invention of his work. Workers were then inserted into their proper tasks. Below is a photographic example of a worker’s movement before and after the elimination of “waste” through training.

Figure 6: Taylorist Elimination of Waste. Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, untitled cyclograph, 1913.

Workers would watch Gilbreth’s films as part of their training, first, to learn about their mistakes and to learn how to improve their movements, and, second, to compare their improved movements with the initial model that could thus be perfected.
The photographs produced during Gilbreth’s experiments show how this operation that separated the workers from their movements and gestures, from the knowledge of the production process, and sought to transform also their affects and individual attitudes, was able to thrive on the new technological possibilities of representing workers and work. To be precise, it would be incorrect to say that in Taylor’s system one gets simply a representation of work without workers’ subjectivity, since the subjective capacity of workers remains necessary throughout the labor process as the source of surplus value and can thus not be simply eliminated. The case is rather that the representational regime of scientific management treats the workers’ subjectivity as if it were a non-subjectivity, which, starting from our initial slapstick opposition, can be diagramed in the following way:

![Diagram of Taylorism](image)

**Figure 7: Diagram of Taylorism**

While suppression means that subjectivity of work is treated as if it were a non-subjectivity, it is nevertheless treated – one cannot simply have one without the other – and the effects of this treatment have to be visible somewhere. They can, for example, be observed in the form of empty backgrounds, against which the intangible patterns and lines, hovering mysteriously in mid-air, appear in the Taylorist photographic archive; or
in the form of blurs into which workers seem to vanish. It is as if in Gilbreth’s images, along with the banished workers’ subjectivity, the very image of workers were dragged into the vortex of disappearance as well.

![Figure 8: The Disappearing Worker. Frank and Lillian Gibreth, untitled cyclograph.](image)

The following image sums up the entire Taylorist situation: in it the stop-motion photography progressively blurs the worker on the left of the image, while the supervising manager is left in the static coherence of a person overlooking the process. The observing managerial body never moves, which is to say, the consistency of representation is guaranteed, while the working hands frantically labor themselves out of the picture.
The relationship between cinema and the whole Taylorist or Fordist regime of production has often been discussed. Most interesting are the studies that investigate the extent to which the establishment of film industry and of a seamlessly continuous narrative and dramatic economy of classical Hollywood cinema, what we described at the beginning of the previous chapter (see section 3.1) as cinema’s gradual embourgeoisement, was itself predicated on the existence of a broader regime of Fordist production that militantly fought the existence of waste and inefficiency. At the same

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4 The source for all the images of Gilbreth’s “motion studies” I use in this chapter is Sharon Corwin’s illuminating article on the relationship between scientific management and the American school of painting called Precisionism. See: Sharon Corwin, “Picturing Efficiency: Precisionism, Scientific Management, and the Effacement of Labor,” Representations 84 (Autumn, 2003), 139-165.
time, the suppression of subjectivity in the sphere of production was co-extensive with the appearance of a pseudo-subjectivity in the sphere of consumption. So the role cinema plays in the context of industrial capitalist society can be evaluated with respect to the extent it essentially assents to (or refuses) this basic distinction between production and consumption, work and spectacle, between labor time and leisure time. The ideological operations of cinema can consequently be identified with cinema’s attempts to address this consumptive pseudo-subjectivity and to offer the possibility of a temporary escape from the subjective reality of work in capitalist society.

Such, for example, is one of the conclusions in Harun Farocki’s 1995 film *Workers Leaving the Factory*, where Farocki analyzes a scene from Fritz Lang’s *Clash by Night*, in which Marilyn Monroe is leaving the fish cannery where she works and meets up with a young man (played by Joe Doyle) who is waiting for her outside. As the camera tracks the walking couple, the factory disappearing behind them, Farocki’s voice-over commentary states: “The lives of the solitary individuals can begin. ... The two solitary individuals move away from the factory and the camera is only too happy to follow them. ... The camera follows them as they move further and further away from the factory and detach themselves increasingly from this background.” Among other things in this remarkable film essay, Farocki suggests that leisure, spectacle, the whole apparatus of identification, the star system itself (personified in Marilyn Monroe), all depend on an escape from the space of work. The drama of what Farocki calls “solitary individuals,” around which cinema has built its powerful mythology, begins from a simple initial gesture which separates work from the question of subjectivity confining the latter into the sphere of consumption.

By first showing us the scene as we find it in Lang’s film and then repeating it with an intervening voice-over commentary, Farocki inscribes himself into the long
tradition of critical analyses of Hollywood cinema’s ideological operation. His operation of reading demands that the fetishism of the film’s seamless continuity and the film’s realist illusion be interrupted, slowed down, repeated, until the setting, the actions, and the statements, which the film offers as though they were something natural, can be examined for all the strange sense they conceal, and which can become visible only upon a second, third, or fourth viewing. Such critical reading takes on the laborious task of analysis in order to recast the film itself as a product of work, an outcome of (often unconscious) choices and decisions and of a necessarily unstable confrontation between the task of splicing images and sounds, a labor intensive matter in its own right, and the limits imposed on this task by the industrial and ideological situation of the film’s production.

It has to be kept in mind to what extent this critical theoretical approach that most consistently followed through on making visible the absence of work in cinema, the way the enjoyment of cinema was itself predicated on the suppression of the act of production – that of Althusserian and Lacanian critics around *Cahiers du Cinema* and later *Screen* – was engaged in a profound battle against the very basic condition of Taylorism. What I have in mind is, for example, the notion of production as the “other scene,” the idea of work as the unconscious of cinema, which was central in the formalization of the concept of off-screen space. In Pascal Bonitzer’s pioneering critique, off-screen space is theorized as fundamentally discontinuous in relation to the surface of spectacle and irreducible to it. Bonitzer writes: “But something (‘some of’ space) has remained radically off stage. The suture [i.e. placing in a sequential order an image and then this image’s presumed off-screen space] is foreclosure.”

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identifies this operation of foreclosure with a space of production: “And what is foreclosed in this way by the apparatus of the scene – the duplication of the field from one shot to the next, the strange process which confirms a space in the juxtaposition of its fragments – is another scene: that of the film’s production.” The spatial and temporal continuity and the consistency of diegesis are produced only at the price of the productive act’s disappearance from the image, resulting in the illusion of the cinematic image as a kind of self-propelling spectacle. The meaning of “production” is, however, broad and operates a constant and conscious slippage between, on the one hand, production understood in terms of a more abstract, impersonal and unconscious subjectivity that has to be presupposed if the work (usually by avoiding precisely this subjectivity) is to hold together. This is production understood in a narrow sense: the process of making the film, whose own heterogeneity is purged from the film as soon as the latter is established as the process’ final result. On the other hand, production is understood in the wider socio-economic sense of the word – the dimension of class struggle obfuscated from view by the reifying and fetishizing representational order of capitalist spectacle. The two meanings constantly interfere with each other: “[T]his ‘other scene’ is no part of the real – it is in play. And it is in play at the moment in close proximity with another divided scene, that of history, politics, the class struggle, from which no faction of the intellectual, avant-garde petite bourgeoisie can any longer claim, without being regressive, to be finding cover in its work.” Based on the recognition of a constant interference between the “other scene” in cinema and the status of class struggle in history, Bonitzer articulates the task of a materialist cinema (in opposition to the realist, illusionist, classical, and ideologically complicit cinema of representation). He

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 300.
proposes a materialist cinema that, without collapsing the heterogeneity of the two divided scenes (the scene of cinematic representation and the scene of history) has to make the latter “work on” the former, always indirectly, reconstituting the former in its “plurality”:

The classical scene is divided, and assumed to be complete in each of its fragments. The ‘materialist’ scene is divided, and is constructed-destroyed in the articulation and dialectical interaction of its fragments. The ‘materialist’ scene is worked out within an irreducible heterogeneity, where the homogenous classical scene represents by abstracting a general volume of contradictions, for which it thus becomes a dead location. … Such a questioning is only possible on condition that there is a continual displacement of the ‘literal’ scene (or, if you prefer, the aesthetic scene) under pressure form the principal historical contradiction, ‘the other scene’ of the class struggle.\(^8\)

The radical impossibility of representing the divided scene of history or of rendering the subjectivity of production directly in representation – Bonitzer justifiably makes fun of attempts to make production visible by including within the image the camera and other instruments of film production, an attempt that cannot but end up in a fetishization of production itself – turns into a program for a materialist cinema whose gesture consists of a negative, critical operation of undoing the illusory unity and seamlessness of all cinematic representation.

**4.2 The Worker-hero in Stalinism, Socialist Realism, and the Stakhanovite Movement**

The second discourse, which has to be distinguished from Taylorism, insofar as it is part of an actual attempt at an alternative path of modernization, is that of Stalinism and of the Soviets. If in Taylorism, which had a complicated Soviet history of its own,\(^9\) and capitalism more generally there is an affirmation of a managerial representation of work, which comes in the form of a complex negation of the workers’ own subjective

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\(^8\) Ibid., 302-3.

force, then in the case of Stalinism and its aesthetic of Socialist Realism we instead find
an effort at a reconciliation, a utopian attempt of unification and consolidation of the
two dimensions inside the image of the worker. Here is how Stalinism can be added to
our diagram:

![Diagram of Stalinism](image)

**Figure 10: Diagram of Stalinism**

In the broadest possible terms, socialist realism can be seen as an attempt to
overcome the rift between the subjective and the representational. At the most general
programmatic level it was to be the opposite of both the one-sidedness of subjectivism
(or, bourgeois formalism), as well as the one-sidedness of representationalism (or,
bourgeois naturalism), offering a *sui generis* mediation of the two excesses. As the
famous slogan went, Socialist Realism was to be realist in form and socialist in content,
i.e. it was to realize a recognizable representation of the world, but such that it
simultaneously offered the correct subjective, ideological, and educational interpretation
of it.

If one looks at images of workers in Stalinist art, one can observe there an
attempt at squaring the gap between the worker as an autonomous subjective capacity
and the worker as part of a bigger representational regime. This has everything to do
with Stalin’s and the Communist Party’s attempt in the 1930s to prevent the development of an autonomous and powerful class of managerial cadres in the Soviet Union – something that inevitably happens during the process of capitalist modernization. The heroization of labor in Soviet Union, which reached its height with the Stakhanovite movement in 1936, and whose result was, in fact, a new hierarchy within the working class itself, was part of a specifically Stalinist attempt to modernize and raise productivity while keeping in check the middle class managerial intelligentsia, securing thereby the State’s central command in the sphere of economy. Unlike Taylorism where, as we saw above, the manager “dwarfed” the worker, in the case of Stakhanovism, it is the worker that dwarfs the manager, who was often attacked as an obstacle to efficiency and high productivity rather than, as in Taylorism, the very condition of it.

Figure 11: Stakhanov Dwarfing the Bureaucrat


In this caricature from 1936, Alexei Stakhanov, who in the August of 1935 broke all records and in a single shift dug out 102 tons of coal, is portrayed as the “New Gulliver,” holding in the palm of his hand the Lilliputian manager, who in his myopic ignorance set the productivity norm at a ridiculously low level of 7 tons. The message is clear. The managerial representation of work (the 7 ton norm) looks ridiculous next to the representation of work the worker himself is capable of providing (102 tons). The heroic image of a Stakhanovite worker is thus an image that holds together both what is representative and representational (the norm) as well as what is subjectively exceptional in the Soviet Union as a workers’ State – a contradiction nicely summed up by the fact that a Stakhanovite was a being of a self-positing and constantly breaking norm, and thus of an impossible norm whose primary purpose was to serve its own overcoming. As a miracle in a State-planned economy, the Stakhanovite worker was the vertigo of the normative (of representation) as such. In other words, the Stalinist utopian attempt to reconcile the contradiction between workers’ subjectivity and representation took place solely within the domain of representation.

The reconciliation of the contradiction happened at the expense of Soviet reality, which became victim and plaything of a representational abyss and was pushed into a profound state of confusion. The crucial device in the process was ultimately not the figure of the worker, but rather a reference to an abstract ideal of a new Soviet Man, which extended further to the stature of Stalin as the Leader and the Father of the people, and finally, to the image of the State itself. The worker, in the name of whom everything was done, was in fact only part of a larger spectacle, which can perhaps go a long way in explaining why Socialist Realist portrayals of workers were almost always organized in such a way that they included not only those who performed heroic feats of
work, but also those who admired them, i.e. that they staged the worker as first of all a
vision, an apparition.

In Leonid Kotliarov’s 1938 painting of Stakhanov, for example, it is crucial that
Stakhanov is being observed (and lit) from the background, as though he were unaware
of it, by another, possibly younger, worker. Socialist Realist portrayals of work were not
simply about work and productivity, they were about how to see work and productivity,
i.e. how to represent acceleration and leaps in productivity and labor, while at the same
time monumentalize labor as the subjective reality of the Soviet State as a whole; which
is why work was essentially reduced to the level of a human pose. While in the Taylorist
photographs the worker always tends to disappear in order to leave behind the
calculable and manipulable traces of expended labor, in Socialist Realism we on the
contrary find a full-fledged spectacularization of the worker. Unlike in the case of Dziga
Vertov, for example, who treated seeing as an activity in itself and for whom seeing was
already a form of production and organization of reality, Socialist Realist cinema and art
were a pedagogy of contemplation, of passive participation in what Guy Debord called
the bureaucratic or “the concentrated form of spectacle” (and which Debord opposed to
the “diffuse spectacle” of a capitalist society of commodity abundance).\textsuperscript{11} Socialist
Realism always supplemented one level of representation with a second one, the
purpose of which was to fix the meaning of the first and teach the spectator how to see
it. The psychotic beauty of Stalinist art was a result of the fact that in it a rigid doctrine of
representation paraded as the subjective reality of work, when in fact the subjectivity of
work disappeared between two levels of representation that were made to immediately
fold one into another.

\textbf{4.2.1 Socialist Realism and East European Cinema (Andrzej Wajda’s
\textit{Man of Marble})

A utopian belief in reality as it already existed, a conviction that the Soviet reality
and the Soviet spectacle could be or even already were one and the same thing, was
what characterized the specific representational closure introduced by the aesthetico-
political project of Socialist Realism. Without understanding this closure it is impossible
to understand the post-Stalinist developments in East European art and culture – for
example the various New Waves of East European cinema which are often quite
incomprehensible if not read against the background of Socialist Realism to which they
were reacting. Various East European movements that tried to liberate themselves from
Stalinist dogma are usually understood as attempts at creating a subjectivist, ethical
cinema, based on a split between the public (colonized completely by the socialist state)
and the private, but “tilted toward the individual, where most identity issues and

discussion of Taylorism, Stalinism, and Chaplinism here is indebted to Debord’s \textit{Society of the Spectacle}. The
central chapter of the latter is called “The Proletariat as Subject and Representation,” which could be
mapped on to our slapstick distinction between a subjective force and a representational logic of a situation.
existential insecurities are played out.” It is, however, much more productive to say that East European New Waves worked primarily at the level not of subjectivity but of representation, attempting to displace the specific alignment of the two levels of representation that Socialist Realism folded into each other and open the question of a new public (and not simply private) existence. The task of subversive East European cinema was not simply to pit subjectivity (the private) against the official representation of the state of affairs (the public), an image, for instance, of a subjective interpretation of proletarian existence against the statist representation of workers, since in Socialist Realism the official representation already included subjective interpretation as its internal moment. The question was much more how to undo the very logic of this Socialist Realist representational doubling.

A case in point is Andrzej Wajda’s *Man of Marble* (1977), a systematic deconstruction of the Socialist Realist mythology around the image of the worker. The film follows a *Citizen Kane*-like narrative structure: what we learn about its main character, the Stakhanovite worker Mateusz Birkut (Jerzy Radziwilowicz), comes either through the accounts of other people or archival “documentary” footage. The subjectivation of Birkut is achieved only through a multiplication of representations which, belonging to different genres (all produced by Wajda himself: personal memories of Birkut’s friends and family, official documentary film of shock-work heroics, banned archival footage, etc.), are layered one on top of the other as a result of an investigation carried out by the other principal character of the film, the awkwardly ambitious young filmmaker Agnieszka (Kristina Janda). The film makes the figure of the worker emerge not as a cause, but as an effect of investigation. A fragment of subjective force appears

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12 Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 44.
only through a constant displacement and postponement. That is to say, it is only by
gathering and sifting through the fragmented evidence that the workers’ subjectivity has
left on the surface of other people’s statements, in the memories and recordings of
others, that the actual content of the film is constituted. And furthermore, the
fragmentary subjective force of the figure of the worker, which emerges only as an effect
through a specific investigative configuration of representations, proves to be unstable
and transitive. When, after a series of flashbacks, Birkut does emerge, he does so in an
unexpected place – that of his own son (also played by Jerzy Radziwilowicz), a young
proletarian descending the steps of the Gdansk ship-yard. Which is to say that the re-
subjectivation of Birkut’s monumental Stakhanovite image, the possibility of which for
Wajda clearly bears some fundamental relationship to the question of youth, results in
an enigmatic invocation of a new type of worker-figure, belonging to the world of
Workers’ Defense Committee and Solidarity, a figure that is then traced out less

4.2.2 Modalities of the Worker in Soviet Cinema of the 1920s and early 1930s

In order to conclude this section on Stalinism, it is still necessary to separate the
Socialist Realist heroization of the worker from three other modes in which workers,
labor, and production appear in Soviet cinema of the 1920s and 30s.

1. First, we need to separate the Stalinist worker hero from the portrayal of the
revolutionary masses, the becoming of a large proletarian collectivity, which was the
principal hero of the Soviet cinema of the 1920s. The function of an insurrectional mass,
which is the central figure of several early Soviet films, was to demonstrate the
revolutionary suspension of the existing social relations and the coming to
consciousness of the enormous proletarian population. Referring specifically to the films
of Sergei Eisenstein, whose *Strike*, *Battleship Potemkin*, and *October* are the emblematic examples of this cinema, Gilles Deleuze has written of the figure of an *individuated mass* for which he invented the concept of the Dividual.\(^\text{13}\) That is to say, the central figure and the principal hero of the early Soviet cinema is not simply the mass caught in its spontaneous disperse reality, but rather the *consciousness* of the mass, the intellectuality of the mass revolutionary movement, behind which the films will usually make us recognize the Leninist figure of the Party as what operates the mutual division of the individual and the collective.

As an illustration, one can take a look at the following list of goals put down by Lev Kuleshov, describing the principles of the work of his group during the filming of *The Death Ray* (1925):

1. To show that, technically, we could make a film no worse then the best American or European work (film technique was in the most deplorable state at that time).
2. To demonstrate *each* member of the collective, to display them as in a catalogue
3. To try the “tricks” that the pre-revolutionary and early Soviet cinema could not achieve
4. To prove that crowd-scenes could and should be filmed in an organized rather than in a hit-or-miss fashion
5. To obtain the active participation of the working masses in revolutionary scenes (such scenes of workers were then very rare).\(^\text{14}\)

For Kuleshov and his group, the originality of cinema did not consist in the camera work’s ability to more or less spontaneously capture the masses (in a “hit-or-miss fashion”). What was at stake, according to statements 4 and 5 (statements that concern the filming of working masses), is rather the organization of something like a mobile mass tableau (“working masses in revolutionary scenes”). The quest for new images of the working masses reflects a desire for a new type of filmmaking group as well. The

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\(^{13}\) Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: time-image*, 162.

search is for a cinema that would in its very operations and methods of work resemble the new consciousness and the new revolutionary actuality of the proletariat caught up in a revolutionary becoming. Film work itself had to become the hero of cinema. As Kuleshov’s list suggests, what joins filmmaking and the revolutionary movement of the popular masses is the thrill of collectivity that furthermore, as the second statement on the list shows, must not be understood in opposition to individuality, but rather in terms of a fusional coordination of individuals (to use Sartre’s famous concept), which allows for rather than blocks a heightened performance of individuality, establishing collectivity as a radically new form of individual experience (each individual of the ensemble, Kuleshov suggests, will be able to demonstrate her/his skill).

In the Soviet cinema of the 1920s, a cinema preoccupied with staging the large popular masses, the figure of the worker, if one can speak of a figure of the worker in this case, appears as a vanishing mediator, a figure of a great revolutionary sacrifice, whose sudden emergence against the background of a pre-revolutionary oppressive reality, testifies to the momentous and violent shock of a new consciousness, which, however, must then be occupied by the dual (or the Dividual, in Deleuze’s fortuitous term) figure of the mass movement and the Party.

2. The Socialist Realist heroization of labor should also be distinguished from the so-called Productivist tendency in Soviet art and culture of the 1920s: the constructivist fascination with large-scale technological complexes and coordination of artistic activity within the all-encompassing organization of industrial production – a type of Taylorist grandeur and enthusiasm, infused with an aesthetic will, and expanded onto the entire sphere of social activity. One has to think of Alexei Gastev, the key figure of Soviet Taylorism, who started as a poet only to end up as a director of Moscow’s Central Institute of Labor, and whose version of scientific management was representative of the
more pragmatic side of this productivist strain. One can also think of the productivist movement’s most brilliant theorist, Boris Arvatov, whose ideas sought to merge artistic capacity with the production of everyday life and to infuse social reproduction with aesthetic creativity, turning the social into a sphere of perpetual collective innovation. The main figure in Productivism is not so much the worker, as the couple of the artist-engineer and the machine (*Man With the Movie Camera*).

The productivist approach to large-scale machinery was characterized by a profound ambiguity. On the one hand, it is clear that Productivism wanted to artistically and aesthetically will into existence a level of development that simply did not yet exist in Soviet Union in 1920s. Productivism likened industrial production to artistic production and took on the task of dynamizing the former’s lagging reality, with the hope of rousing industry out of its slumber and liberating its potentials. In short, productivist aesthetic attempted to compensate for the shortcomings of reality, but it was also this latter that often seemed to make productivist project rely (in spite of the modernizing language) on the old figures of the artist as a craftsman and of the collectivity of artistic labor as an essentially communal phenomenon.

On the other hand, however, it is perhaps for the same reason, i.e. precisely because of an artistic will that seeks to impose itself on a lagging reality, that productivism also managed to evoke a radically new type of agency, a new type of collective humanity, which was not yet in place but had to be created for this new world of industrial production. The man with the movie camera, after all, does not pre-exist the apparatus of the camera and does not refer to some past form of human existence. It is, on the contrary, a new type of a (collective) human being, a figure, called forth by the new technical and functional exigency and must therefore be understood as something
that Vertov’s film for the first time brings into existence. Susan Buck-Morss remarkably discusses this double edge of Soviet Productivism:

The enthusiasm for the machine culture in the early Soviet Union has been noted frequently and described at length. But a crucial point often overlooked in these accounts is the degree to which the cult of the machine preceded the machines themselves. … Under the pretechnological conditions that existed in the early Soviet Union … the cult of the human-as-machine sustained a utopian meaning. Its ecstatic intensity in the 1920s, at a time when the factory workforce had disintegrated and the country was struggling simply to restore the pre-World War I industrial capacity, anticipated mechanized processes rather than being a defensive response to them. … Machine culture, Soviet style, had its origins as the expression of a lack…. Only in this dreamlike context could poetry and production techniques converge so irresistibly, attracting dramatists, cinematographers, and choreographers as artists of the human body. Industrial labor became the model of bodily discipline for producing the new man as a creative instrument, fusing work and dance.15

We, therefore, need to make a strict distinction between Productivism and the kind of aestheticization of politics that Benjamin famously identified with Fascism. To put it in terms proposed by Boris Arvatov (whose theory predated Benjamin by several years), we have to draw a difference between the “socialization of aesthetics,” which is what Productivists attempted (closer to Benjamin’s politicization of aesthetics), on the one hand, and an “aestheticization of the social milieu,” on the other. An “aestheticization of the social milieu” (closer to the Fascist aestheticization of politics in Benjamin’s formulation) inscribes an aesthetic and productive capacity into traditionally delimited parameters of communal life, into social relations as they already exist. The latter become the central object of aesthetic investment. “Socialization of aesthetics” as conceived by Arvatov, proceeds on the contrary from a new political and aesthetic will that emerges as a consequence of a break with the social milieu and the traditional forms of social relation and seeks to produce a new type of productive force that would become adequate to this newly acquired collective capacity. “Socialization of aesthetics”

starts form a new political space (from Revolution itself) in search of not only modernized forces of production, but also of new sensible forms of collective existence that would be adequate to the egalitarian gesture of a revolutionary break: relations between people, between objects, as well as between people and objects.¹⁶

3. The third mode in which the themes of productivity, labor, and workers appear in Soviet cinema in a manner significantly distinct from a Socialist Realist treatment can be observed in a set of stunningly beautiful films produced during the period of the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932): The General Line (Eisenstein), Salt For Svannetia (Mikhail Kalatozov), Turksib (Viktor Turin), Enthusiasm (Dziga Vertov). These films, all celebrations of the momentous upheaval of collectivization and industrialization, combine and reinvent in their own way the figures and themes of the two modes described above. On the one hand, they are films of ideological struggle and of becoming-conscious of large proletarian masses, except that here the ideological struggle is waged in the rural countryside and the masses are composed of the newly emerging rural proletariat which is to be liberated from its entrapment in religious and folk superstitions (including, of course, the superstition of vodka). On the other hand, these films deal with modernization and progress, the war-like setting up of industrial infrastructure, and the reeducation of a whole class of “pretechnological” laborers into a modern labor force. The principal subject of these films, however, is not simply progress (the figure of the machine, the figure of the artist-engineer, and the imperative constant movement and reinvention of social life through the production of a new consciousness), but rather the very event of progress, the first-time appearance of history in the Russian steppes, and the incorporation of a large, previously excluded, rural

population into the historical process. Such shock is, for example, the subject of the rapid montage sequence in Kalatozov’s *Salt For Svanetia*.

![Figure 13: Still from Mikhail Kalatozov's *Salt for Svanetia* (1931)](image)

Structurally, the evental appearance of modernization occupies the place of a pre-signifying scream, that which is not yet meaning, but from which all new meaning emerges – as it is beautifully captured by the Sternberg brother’s poster for Viktor Turin’s *Turksib*, where it would never be enough to imagine even the loudest of locomotive sirens to render visible both the violence and the enthusiasm of the event that the locomotive symbolizes.
To a certain extent the three modes, which we have now distinguished from Socialist Realist heroization of labor, depoeticized labor and poeticized instead the revolutionary becoming of the masses, the creative capacity of a mutual becoming between humanity and machines, and the shock of modernization. The three modes were also dominated by different figures: the dividual figure of the masses and the Party, the couple-figure of the machine and of the artist-engineer, and the figure of an evental emergence of history. Perhaps it would not be wrong to identifying in this most intense cinema of revolutionary enthusiasm a rather cautious reservation about the existence of figure of the worker by and for itself.

4.3 Chaplinism, The Figure of the Worker

The figure of the worker, with which we can now return to Chaplin, is a third possibility, a possibility of a relationship between worker as a subjective force and as
representation where this relation is both non-reconciliatory and subjectively determined.

Figure 15: Diagram of the Figure of the Worker

In the case of Chaplinism one can speak of a deployment of fiction or figuration that manifests a new type of relationship between subjectivity and representation of the worker. In this relationship representation is not exactly abolished, but is rather treated from the point of subjectivity itself. That is, in Chaplin the representational situation of the factory is treated as the place for a subjectivation of a non-representational force. Just as on the side of Taylorism we have a treatment of the worker’s subjectivity as if it were a non-subjectivity, so in the case of the figure of the worker, the representational situation is treated as if it were a situation of non-representation. But it is nevertheless

17 “Factory as a place of the worker,” “factory as a place of the State,” and “factory as a place of time” are distinctions used by Sylvain Lazarus in his remarkable book *L’anthropologie du nom*, which I briefly discuss in the “Introduction” to this dissertation.
treated, and it is only through the effects of this treatment – the comic disorientation of representation, the dance in Chaplin’s case – that the figure of the worker appears. 18

The figure of the worker is, therefore, not simply a matter of representation. The question is not how can the workers be represented, how can we let the workers represent themselves, or are the workers representing themselves adequately. The question of the figure can also not be put in terms of an imperative: they must be represented. 19 The figure of the worker in cinema has to be seen first and foremost as a problem of subjectivity. Or, to be more precise: the figure appears at the precise point in

18 The fourth (neutral) term in our semiotic square would, of course, be fascism. Insofar as the fundamental antagonism of capitalist modernity is the contradiction between the proletariat as a new type of collective subjective capacity and proletariat as a representation (as a localized social and economic being), fascism clearly constitutes an attempt to avoid this antagonism completely. Fascism was not a path towards an alternative modernization (like Stalinism), but an attempt at an alternative to modernization. In fascism, workers are treated neither as a subjective force, since any force must be subordinate to the sole legitimate force, which is the intrinsic force of a national community; nor are they represented, since the image of a warrior-like community does not impose relations of representation as much those of command and direct mobilization. In our own terms we could say that the crime of fascism consists in its attempt to completely avoid the contradiction which leads to the slapstick seizure of the situation of capitalist modernity. Fascism tried to elude the tension between a disorienting force and a representational logic and to escape the constitutive antagonism by way of its own constitution of a somber and serious race, rather than to take on the more difficult assumption of a cheerful historical destiny. It is not a coincidence that Chaplin’s comedy came to haunt fascism so devastatingly in The Great Dictator.

19 On the question of representation of workers and work in the contemporary situation of globalization (but without any attention paid to the split between subjectivity and representation), see: Michael Denning, “Representing Global Labor,” Social Text 92 25.3 (Fall, 2007), 125-145.
which the split between the worker as a subjective force, on the one hand, and the historical and social representation of the worker’s being, on the other, emerges and is handled as a question for the subjective force itself.

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To this conclusion, let me add a few brief notes on the perspective the discussion above might open up for our present. Insofar as Modern Times allows us to identify the question that constitutes the figure of the worker as a problem for us, it can, I think, be considered as a sort of foundational text, providing the necessary degree of intelligibility even for our contemporary discussions. On the basis of it one can propose an investigation of all the different ways cinema has presented the gap between workers’ subjectivity and the representation of their socio-economic being as a question that exists for workers themselves. This would obviously have to be an international history, not a history of national representations of workers, which is how the question has so far been mostly discussed. Such history would at the same time have to produce its own singular periodization, for the question in relation to the figure of the worker is really much more what repeats than what changes.

We could start with Jean-Luc Godard’s Tout va bien, where a representation of the conditions of work in a meat processing plant, into which the principal characters of the film (the French filmmaker and the American journalist played by Yves Montand and Jane Fonda) make their “inquest,” suddenly splits into a dissensual situation as it exists for the workers themselves. “Picture yourself in our place. It is truly disgusting to work in such conditions.” – “That is not right!” – “What is wrong with the statement?” – “Nothing, it is just not right. Because this is precisely how the foreman would describe the situation as well. He, too, would say it is disgusting, in fact, he would be the first one
to say it and he would never let you forget it!” – “So, what then is the working situation for us workers?”

Special attention would have to be paid to documentary cinema, because documentary, freed from the worry of having to establish verisimilitude of its representations, seems often much better in the investigation of various subjective forces at work in particular situations: let us simply mention films like Robert Kramer’s *Class Struggles in Portugal*, Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County, USA*, and the more recent incredible film *West of the Tracks* by the Chinese director Wang Bing to name only three.

The figure of the worker is becoming one of the more interesting questions in contemporary cinema. In the situation of an absence of a veritable political figure of the worker, the problems of the relationship between work and unemployment and of the separation between control and execution of work, which Chaplin presented in an exemplary Fordist situation, are now being reinvented as aesthetic problems for cinema in a post-Fordist world. In the case of Chinese cinema, for example, the figure of the worker is found in relation to a massive uprooting and migration (*The World*) that accompany the process of industrialization and modernization, as well as in relation to the simultaneous process of deindustrialization and man made ecological catastrophe (*Still Life*, both films are by Jia Jang-ke).

On the question of the figure of the worker and unemployment, we can look at the Dardenne brothers’ *Rosetta*, where, in order to follow a 17-year-old girl’s quest for work, the filmmakers invent something like a non-psychological subjective camera style: “Je veux un vrai travail!” As Elisabeth Boyer has observed, the camera that follows Rosetta closely, nevertheless leaves her to herself. The consequence of this is, however,

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20 Although it is also true that precisely for the same reasons the threat of a return of a didactic and paternalist form of representation is much stronger in documentary cinema.
that Rosetta becomes her own other – She says: “Tu t’appelles Rosetta, je m’appelle Rosetta” – avoiding the naturalist suturing of the gap between representation and subjectivity, or in Boyer’s terms between a desolate state of affairs and an exemplary will, making the very misalignment between the two into the principle interest of the film:

La caméra subjective – excédant le seul effet technique de virtuosité – est la forme cinématographique capable de rendre cette tension entre un état du monde désolant, très dur pour les pauvres, et la volonté d’une jeune fille exemplaire, mais ordinaire en apparence, d’affronter cet impossible. Aussi le film ne sombre-t-il pas dans un naturalisme dont cependant le spectre rôde dans certaines scènes. Le rythme extraordinaire du film, arraché au genre policier, la subjectivité de Rosetta toute entière tournée vers le travail, justement, condamne le naturalisme. L’espace de duplicité restreint, instauré par la caméra subjective entièrement centrée sur un personnage, est réel : il rend compte d’un combat quotidien que beaucoup de gens doivent mener – et l’on pense ici particulièrement aux jeunes gens, amenés, malgré leur courage et leurs capacités, à n’obtenir que rarement un “vrai travail”.  

It is also only from within the problematic of the figure of the worker that we can really approach the difficult ideological questions of the death of workers as a class or of the supposed disappearance of the worker as a type from our present world. The question here is not whether or not the proletariat is dead, but rather what has been and what is the meaning of death when it exists in relation to the figure of the worker. The figure of the worker has always featured at least the possibility of a vertical fall into death – the theme is inseparable from the difficult question of workers’ heroism – but only in order to ask the two following questions: What kind of death was it that the worker suffered? And what comes to occupies its place? In Eisenstein, as already mentioned, death is essentially sacrificial (Strongin in Strike, Vakulinchuk in Battleship Potemkin) and what arrives in its place is the newly constituted collectivity of memory or of the revolutionary masses (the workers in Strike, the sailors and the citizens in Battleship Potemkin). In Bertolt Brecht and Slatan Dudow’s Kuhle Wampe, worker’s death

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occurs in the form of a suicide caused by the unbearable situation of unemployment and domestic brutality, shown through a minimal use of impersonal details drawn from the reservoir of Neue Sachlichkeit. What arrives in the place of the worker who plunged into death, is a cool almost sociological investigation of different reactions to the tragic event – an estranged social totality suddenly transformed into a stage of contesting stances toward the worker’s death, suggesting by way of a montage of social facts that an event like that is ever simply a social fact but also, and primarily, a partisan affair. To choose a rather different and much later example – Paul Schrader’s Blue Collar – we can see that a worker’s death can occur as a consequence of a conspiracy, organized by the worker’s union in complicity with the management of the factory. The case of a worker dying in a universe that has become completely cynical. The consequence of death is a return to racism, to a vicious particularism rampant at the factory. In all of these cases the vertical case of death is followed not by a reestablishment of a new verticality (or transcendence), but rather of a new horizontality: the masses in Eisenstein, a didactic investigation in Brecht, conspiratorially organized brutality of labor in Schrader.

Finally, we can mention Michael Glawogger’s documentary film Workingman’s Death (2005), in which the explicit theme is a slow disappearance of hard physical labor from our post-industrial world. Ideas of workers’ death and disappearance exist in Glawogger’s film as rather complex terms. They certainly refer to the vanishing of the figure of the worker from our post-industrial present, a historical disappearance of the working class form our consciousness, if not from our reality. But the phrase “workingman’s death” has also at least two other meanings. The first meaning, which becomes clear as we watch the tortuous execution of manual tasks, is quite simply that death is always part of work. In the words of the Pakistani workers featured in the film, work itself is a form of dying, because it includes the danger of a sudden accident, but
also because every act of work, every gesture already constitutes an act of expenditure that brings workers closer to their death. No matter what the worker works on, he is always preparing his death.

We could also say that in the existence of a worker, life and death are so indiscernible that they become reversible and that a worker is not only a life engaged in the preparation of its death, an always already “dying life,” but also a kind of “living dead,” a zombie-like creature, whose very vitality is fully permeated by and inseparable from death. This is the third meaning of death in Workingman’s Death where death paradoxically signifies not only itself, but also its opposite: a life that goes on after death or even in spite of death.

Glawogger’s film is, in fact, wholly ambiguous in its depiction of the workers’ existence. The evocation of their death has the effect of turning this past, to which the being of workers is now assigned, into a proposition of the workers’ present, placing workers simultaneously under the signs of disappearance and persistence, exhaustion and survival, finality and continuation, death and life. In other words, it presents us with an existence of workers that is temporally disjunctive, characterized by an internal temporal or historical non-identity.

But just as we have a difficult time fixing the temporal or historical identity of these workers, we also have a difficult time fixing their identity with respect to the place they occupy. A second non-identity is therefore introduced, which we can describe as a spatial or even a topological one. The workers in Glawogger’s film occupy both the place of their work as well as the place of non-work. The ship-breakers Glawogger films in Pakistan break ships, but they also do other things. For instance, they also discuss their work as workers. They share a cup of tea, sing, pray, and even engage in staging themselves as Muslim “warriors,” posing with a red, plastic Kalashnikov machine gun,
for photos they either intend to send home or keep as a souvenir. Glawogger’s images show an attempt on the part of the ship-breakers to produce at the site of work a kind of minimal fictionalization of themselves, a minimal aestheticization of their existence away from the drudgery of their work.

Workers as the referent of Workingman’s Death are thus characterized by a double non-identity, both temporal and topological, both historical and social (with respect to the space of social occupations and tasks). They are beings of past and present, and belong to work as well as to an attempt to disengage from it (even by way of a fictional distance from it). This double non-identity describes the subjective real of the workers’ existence as Glawogger presents it to us. And we could further say that this aspect of the workers’ existence in Workingman’s Death manages to escape any straightforward representation that would reduce the being of workers to either a univocal historical or a univocal social identity. If one can speak of a figure of the worker in Workingman’s Death, relating Glawogger’s film back to our discussion of Chaplin, it is to the extent that the film manages to show us something of the workers’ existence, of the subjectivity of workers, that can neither be reduced to their representation as beings of an unambiguous historical sense, nor to their representation as unequivocal occupants of their proper place in the social distribution of occupations and tasks. Even in death, the figure of the worker keeps the contradiction alive.
Part III: Cinema and the Existence of a Country
5. Documentary Fiction and the Idea of Memory: Michel Khleifi’s Fertile Memory

Memory doesn’t remember but receives the history raining down on it.

-- Mahmoud Darwish, Memory for Forgetfulness, 1982

5.1 Political Cinema’s Double Affirmation

The conception of political cinema during the twentieth century carried two affirmations. According to the first, which can be described as an anti-historicist affirmation, the idea of cinema always takes primacy over the context of its conditions. The existence of cinema is above all the existence of cinema’s thought, of a set of artistic operations that manifest a determined intellectual orientation, which is irreducible to the set of complex material, technological, economic, and institutional conditions we usually associate with the term “cinema”. Throughout the history of political filmmaking – whether it be the Soviets, Italian Neo-realist, documentarians of cinema verité, or the Third Cinema filmmakers of national liberation – one finds the same intuition: the appropriation of the technical and material conditions of film production is worthless if it does not manage to materialize in its process a new idea of filmmaking. Cinema is not done simply with a camera in your hand, the Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha will say in the 1960s, but also “with an idea in your head.”¹ What decides are not the objective conditions, but rather the intellectual orientation of cinema, supported by the subjective attitude of the filmmaker’s militancy.

The second affirmation, which is just as important as the first one, can be called popular. It consists in the establishment of a relationship between a filmmaker’s new

artistic orientation and a particular country’s processes of universal political innovation. Between a new idea of cinema and an appearance of the people – if we accept “people” as “the name of a political subject, … a supplement in relation to all logics of counting the population, its parts and its whole”. That is, if “people” is the name for political subjectivation, which makes a country exist politically. With an appearance of the people a country is suddenly split apart by an irreducible Two (the One of the country + the supplemental artifice of the people), so that its very status, the distribution and ordering of the common it embodies and guarantees, become contested and disputed. The makers of political films always act as though the idea of their art could not exist without having its fate tied to an appearance of the people and the universal fate of a particular country’s political existence. It is not at all important here that the filmmaker and the idea be native to the country to whose political existence she or he dedicates the film. And the question is not exactly that of national cinema, unless we are willing to agree, for instance, that Eisenstein, the name not only of a famous Soviet director but also of a singular idea of cinema, made, or rather could have made, the inaugurating film of Mexican national cinema (Que Viva Mexico!), that Joris Ivens, a Belgian, made a film of the Soviet Union (Song of Heroes), Spain (The Spanish Earth), and the United States


3 Jacques Rancière, whom I quote here, is only one of the philosophers who have recently attempted a new articulation of the insurrectionary concept of “the people,” which could be traced back at least to Rousseau’s concept of the “general will”. The reason I quote Rancière here has less to do with his specific contribution to the concept of “the people” (as the generic name of political subjectivation), than with the fact that the supplemental logic of “the people” described by Rancière – the people is not the sovereign name that unites all of the parts into a whole (into a body politic), instead the people names an artifice of political subjectivation that gets added to the whole and, as something that is in excess to the whole, dismantles the whole – resembles closely the logic we will a bit later find at work in Rancière’s concept of “documentary fiction.” Both, the appearance of “a people” and the operations of “documentary fiction” consist in a supplementary addition (as opposed, for example, to an integrating addition) of an artificial “part that has no part” to the existing distribution of all of the parts and thus in disputing the existing “distribution of the sensible,” of “the forms of visibility of the common and the identities, forms of belonging, partitions, etc., defined by these forms.” (Ibid.) In both cases, that of an appearance of the people and that of documentary fiction, a fictional reconfiguration of the forms of the common is superimposed over the existing ordering of the common, turning the latter into a “dissensual” entity.
(Power and the Land), that Robert Kramer, an American, produced a beautiful film of the 1970s Portuguese Revolution (Scenes From the Class Struggle in Portugal), and Harun Farocki, a German filmmaker, assembled the decisive film on the fall of state socialism in Romania (Videograms of a Revolution). The conception of political cinema cannot be said to bear in any immediate or inherent way a mark of national belonging, even if the political existence of a country, to which a new idea of cinema relates, is posed in directly national terms.

The configuration of these two affirmations, the anti-historicist and the popular one, makes up the twentieth century conception of political cinema. In this conception a new idea of cinema, asserted for itself, finds a link to the certainty of its popular mission by responding to a country’s political existence. The nature of this response is always complex and does not result in some spectacular identity between cinema’s new orientation and the question of a country. It would be false to think of the relationship between the two in terms of representation. The idea of cinema cannot be said to represent the people or the political existence of a country, for in that case it would no longer be an idea but a mere representation. The conception of political cinema must, rather, be conceived as an internally split composite incapable of producing a reconciliation. The two affirmations do not add up, there is always a dialectical tension – constitutive, unresolved, and sometimes with tragic consequences for the filmmakers – between the two questions: “What is a new idea of cinema?” and “What is a popular cinema for this country?”

It is important to note the way this dialectical tension affects the specific question of political documentary, especially since the rhetoric of the latter is often used as a mechanism of reconciliation, promising to realign the two heterogeneous affirmations of political cinema. Does not the idea of documentary cinema promise a degree of
transparency, of cinema’s basic, even ontological, fidelity to reality, which somehow allows us direct access to the question of a country as real? It is precisely this temptation that has to be resisted if a consistent conception of political cinema is to be maintained. For, by accepting documentary transparency as a fact, one immediately loses the anti-historicist essence of the idea of cinema, the set of operations that any new idea of cinema, fictional or documentary, lays across the texture of history. The concept of political documentary, which played and continues to play a significant role in the configuration of political filmmaking, has to be extracted from the problematic of representation (mimesis, reflection) and documentary capacities of cinema have to be evaluated in relation to a different set of criteria.

5.2 An Introduction to Michel Khleifi

The purpose of this rapidly drawn introduction is to enable us a quick approach to the work of the Palestinian filmmaker Michel Khleifi. The conception of political cinema described above will serve as a framework for a discussion of Khleifi’s first film, the documentary Fertile Memory (1980), and the problem of memory with which this film presents us. Fertile Memory, I will try to show, introduces memory as something related both to Khleifi’s idea of cinema – the operations of cinema coming to resemble the operations of memory – as well as to this cinema’s relationship to the question of Palestine – memory as something that concerns not only the capacities of cinema but also the appearance of the people of Palestine. Memory, then, as something that refers to Khleifi’s anti-historicist affirmation just as it does to the affirmation of the popular fate of his cinema. What kind of memory is Khleifi showing us, if, as a filmmaker, he belongs to the conception of political cinema that refuses to reconcile the two affirmations and simply view them as one? And what consequences does Khleifi’s idea of memory have for our understanding of documentary cinema?
First, a few general remarks on Khleifi’s work are in order. Ever since he began working as a film director in the beginning of 1980s, Khleifi has proceeded by way of a twofold movement, in which we will recognize the two basic affirmations of political cinema described in the preceding section. The twofold configuration of Khleifi’s political cinema is suggested by the title of his best-known programmatic essay, “From Reality to Fiction – From Poverty to Expression” (1997). At the center of Khleifi’s artistic orientation, derived from a complex and novel appropriation of several cinematic traditions, lies a gesture of blurring the line between documentary and fiction, whose consequences can be observed in Khleifi’s fictional as well documentary cinema. On the subject of Khleifi’s first fiction film, *Wedding in Galilee* (1987), one finds in his essay the following statement:

In this film [*Wedding in Galilee*], for which I also wrote a script, I wanted to erase the boundaries between fiction and reality. The characters came from my imagination but they were played by non-professionals who had been chosen for their fictive resemblance to the scenario’s characters…. I tried to multiply the points of view from realism to formalism, theatrical documentary, etc. [my emphasis] I had to concentrate on the visible elements of confrontation (Israeli/Palestinian, soldier/civilian, power/emotion, etc.) and other invisible elements (old/young, men/women, sexuality/tradition, symbols/needs). Khleifi makes here a very interesting suggestion (see my emphasis): one erases the boundaries between fiction and reality not by a direct introduction of reality into the fiction of the film (let’s say by the intrusion of some obviously documentary footage rupturing the film’s diegetic texture, or by an appearance of a didactic acousmatic voice,

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6 “From Reality to Fiction – From Poverty to Expression,” 52.
or by an actress’ sudden turn to the camera in a “direct” address to the audience), but rather by way of multiplying different fictional dispositifs (realism, formalism, theatrical documentary…) within the space of a single film. The hypothesis, which is not the subject of this present chapter and will not be pursued further here, is that documentary (reality) can be thought of as an effect of intra-fictional differences and gaps which it would be wrong to see in opposition to the work of fiction as, let’s say, a suspension of the latter by something external to it.

In the case of his documentary films, which do constitute the focus of this present chapter, the consequences of Khelifi’s principal gesture manifest themselves differently. The purpose of the analysis of Fertile Memory, which will follow here shortly, is to see precisely how. Suffice it for now to stress again that his idea of cinema, which pushes what is perhaps the most ingrained distinction in our understanding of cinema to the edge of undecidability, is effective in both strains of Khleifi’s cinematic work (“From Reality to Fiction”).

The undoing of the distinction between the two main types of cinema, i.e., his idea of cinema, is for Khleifi necessarily related to the question of the Palestinian people and of Palestine as a country. “How can we create a culture that could retain within itself its own originality and specificity, while still being universal? How can we create a cinema, which could carry the Palestinian human experience, vertically (historically) and horizontally (on the basis of people’s daily reality)?” Khleifi does not pose this question in nationalist terms. He deals with the question of Palestine and of the Palestinian people in rather precise terms, introducing the necessity to relate the national

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7 Of course, Khleifi is not the only filmmaker who seeks (or has sought) the suppression of documentary/fiction distinction. The observation here is only a starting point and the facets that make up the singularity of Khleifi’s work will, hopefully, become clearer as we proceed.

8 Ibid., 48.
situation to its outside as well as back onto itself – i.e., by carefully discriminating within the complex pattern of the national situation’s several differentiated levels. He says, for instance:

I thought that if I wanted to make a film about my society, I had to raise uncompromising questions: If Palestinians are the victims of the Israelis, then who are the Israelis? The victims of inhuman repression who then became the tormentors of the Palestinian people? But the Palestinians – are they only victims or are they also both victims and tormentors? They are tormentors, but towards women and children... Everything should be taken at its own level, and only to ascertain the damage done will not show who is the victim or the tormentor. We can only reach the truth by denouncing the logic of the systems that transform us into potential tormentors and victims.⁹

On the one hand, we can note that Khleifi poses the problem of the relationship between his cinema as a form of intellectual expression and the political existence of the people in terms that stretch back at least to the middle of the nineteenth century and to Marx’s ideas about the relationship between philosophy and the proletariat. The possibility of human emancipation is identified with the possibility of a new relationship between a reinvented intellectual activity and the political subjectivation of the proletariat as the point at which all positive substantial determinations become negated and one encounters the purely generic and transformative capacity of collective humanity. Khleifi identifies the process of emancipation with the possibility of creating a circuit between a new cultural movement, of which he sees his films being a part, and the proletarian points of Palestinian existence – especially Palestinian women and children. On the other hand, the need to denounce “the logic of the systems that transform us into potential tormentors and victims” suggests an approach in which the establishment of a circuit between expression and poverty has to be supplemented with a more systematic and abstract investigation into the very conditions of establishing such circuits, the instruments and apparatuses of representation and visibility, the

⁹ Ibid., 51
mechanisms of oppression whose terms must not so much be reversed as they have to be dissolved along with the logic that sustains them (“From Poverty to Expression”).

The double movement of Khleifi’s conception of political cinema allows us to situate him in a longer sequence of political filmmaking, dating back to the Soviets of the 1920s. This, however, is only the first step. For, such a straightforward contextualization runs up against a limit, which in Khleifi’s case I am tempted to associate with the experience of exile, an experience constitutive for his films. Rather than naming a biographical fact, exile has to be thought at the level of Khleifi’s conception of cinema. Perhaps it can best be approached as a sense of inquietude introduced into the double affirmation of political cinema. The experience of exile is a specific form (or even a tone) assumed by the double affirmation, which, however, also means that no matter how much it stretches the limits of this double configuration of political cinema, it becomes intelligible only when perceived as a new dynamic within the latter rather than standing outside of it.

On this particular point, our approach can be distinguished from the interpretations of Khleifi’s work that seek to separate the experience of exile from the constitutive dialectic of political cinema and to present exilic cinema as a sort of relativization of political cinema’s momentous conception. In his book, *Accented Cinema*, Hamid Naficy analyzes a broad selection of postcolonial filmmaking under the new stylistic category of “accented cinema,” which he then further divides into three sub-categories (“exilic,” “diasporic,” and “ethnic cinema”). Within this taxonomy, Naficy describes Khleifi’s work as that of a filmmaker of exile. The assertion of an exilic style

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10 The fact that ever since the 1970s Khleifi has lived outside of Palestine, mostly in Belgium, where he also got his education as a film director and where he now continues to teach.

of filmmaking, however, is given only a biographic and sociological justification while the specific definition of “exilic cinema” Naficy proposes ends up splitting political cinema’s double movement into a static opposition. Naficy’s notion of “exilic cinema” severs the link between the idea of cinema and the question of a country. For an exiled filmmaker, according to Naficy, the country becomes something “there and then,” biographically, geographically, and historically distant, less like a question that provokes constant discrimination and engagement and more like a fetish of a place or an ossified object for a hardened nostalgic gaze. Memory would, thus, play a central role in Naficy’s cinema of exile, but it is memory as nostalgia, which, to bring for a brief moment this general discussion back to the main subject of the present chapter, is not at all the idea of memory one finds in Fertile Memory.

“Exilic cinema,” says Naficy, relates to the question of a country through “binarism and subtraction,” thereby stopping, or cooling down, the irreducible tension of political cinema, which, to stay alive, has to move continuously between a new intellectual orientation and the testing of this orientation’s relationship to the question of a country’s political existence. This cooling down is, by itself, not necessarily a problem. There are, after all, other kinds of filmmaking and not all have to revolve around political cinema’s constitutive problematic. However, by dismantling the non-reconciliatory link between the idea of cinema and the question of a country into a matter of binary opposition, in Naficy’s “exilic cinema” the idea of cinema itself becomes something rigid. It is described, first, as “a style” (borrowing David Bordwell’s definition of cinematic style as a “patterned and significant use of technique”) and,

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12 Ibid., 15
13 Ibid., 14
14 Ibid., 20
second, as “a structure of feeling,” something indeterminate enough and sufficiently vague to be separated from any concrete problem of thought. Both terms (style, structure of feeling) as understood by Naficy are utterly foreign to Michel Khleifi’s films as well as to his declared and explicitly formulated statements about his work.

5.3 Political Cinema and the Question of Exile

If the experience of exile can help us discover new circuits at work in Khleifi’s cinema, it does so only when understood as an internal transformation, an immanent modification, in the movement of political cinema’s double affirmation, i.e., if it is seen as Khleifi’s attempt to reinvent the possibility of political cinema in a situation and in terms foreign to the latter’s traditional instantiations. What are some of these new terms in relation to which we can speak of an exilic experience in political filmmaking?

(1) There is, first of all, something specific in the question of Palestine – a country one cannot find on a map and yet whose existence it is a crime to deny. “Is not Palestine the essence of a mythical country, in spite of its reality?” The paradoxical status of Palestine – Mahmoud Darwish expressed it in the form of an angry question: “Why should Palestine be incompatible with itself?” – is inseparable both from the reality of the Palestinian people’s scattered existence, its relation to the rest of the Arab world, as well as from the effects of the Zionist discourse, which is tied to the specificity of the state of Israel’s historical development. What Edward Said in his The Question of

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16 “From Reality to Fiction – From Poverty to Expression,” 51.
18 On the question of visibility of Palestinians as a people see, for instance, the following statement by Edward Said: “[T]he relationship of Palestinians to the visible and the visual was deeply problematic. In fact, the whole history of the Palestinian struggle has to do with the desire to be visible. Remember the early mobilizing phrase of Zionism: “We are a people without land going to a land without a people?” It
Palestine (1979) identified as “the cubistic form of Palestinian existence”\(^9\) refers to a murmur of an irreducible plurality that Palestine names: “[N]o people – for bad or for good – is so freighted with multiple, and yet unreachable or indigestible, significance as the Palestinians.”\(^20\) This is not a place to discuss the history and the specificity of the political and social aspects of the conflict between Palestine and Israel. To suggest the difficulty this specificity presents for political filmmaking, let me at this point simply quote from a round-table with “Groupe Cinéma Vincennes” (Ali Akika, Guy Chapouillé, Danielle Dubroux, Jean Narboni, Dominique Villain, Serge Le Péron) who in 1975 collectively produced a film on the question of Palestine (L’olivier). It is Serge Le Péron who is speaking here, identifying the specificity of the question of Palestine and the consequences it bears for films about it:

pronounced the emptiness of the land and the non-existence of a people.” But not only invisibility, also a certain type of visibility is a problem: “[O]n the one hand, Palestinians stand against invisibility, which is the fate they have resisted since the beginning; and on the other, they stand against the stereotype in the media: the masked Arab, the kuffiya, the stone-throwing Palestinian – a visual identity associated with terrorism and violence.” Edward Said, “Preface” in: Hamid Dabashi, ed., Dreams of a Nation (London: Verso Press, 2006), 1-5.


\(^20\) Said’s statement, worth quoting at length in spite of some of its dated references, continues: “Their relationship to Zionism, and ultimately with political and even spiritual Judaism, gives them a formidable burden as interlocutors of the Jews. Then their relationships to Islam, to Arab nationalism, to Third World anticolonialist and anti-imperialist struggle, to the Christian world (with its unique historical and cultural attachment to Palestine), to Marxists, to the socialist world – all these put upon the Palestine a burden of interpretation and a multiplication of selves that are virtually unparalleled in modern political or cultural history – a fact made more impressively onerous in that it is all filtered through negation and qualifications. We Palestinians are clearly struggling for our self-determination but for the fact that we have no place, no agreed-upon and available physical terrain on which to conduct our struggle. We are clearly anticolonialist and antiracist in our struggle but for the fact that our opponents are the greatest victims of racism in history, and perhaps our struggle is waged at an awkward, postcolonial period in the modern world’s history. …We are Arab, and yet not simply Arab. We are exiles, and yet tolerated guests in some countries of our exile. We can speak at the United Nations of our own problems, yet only as observers. Of no unambiguously deprived people could a U.S. president say cautiously … that we should participate in determining our future (the clumsy ballet steps around the phrase self-determination are grotesque) at the same time he has almost certainly never met and spoken with a real live Palestinian, or that his government has pursued policies that entail precluding Palestinian voices from being heard directly on the question of Palestinian self-determination. … For the Palestinian, the categories of “too much,” “not at all,” and “almost but for” fade imperceptibly into one another, at his expense.” Ibid., 122-3
Et les films occidentaux pro-palestiniens parlaient de la Palestine comme ils auraient parlé du Vietnam, du Chili ou de la Guinée-Bissau : leurs acteurs nous paraissaient feindre de ne pas s’apercevoir que leur démarche ne fonctionne pas. En effet, si le sionisme a été un phénomène colonialiste, il est incontestable qu’il n’a pas revêtu exactement les mêmes formes que les autres exemples historiques d’implantation coloniale dans le tiers monde. En outre, ces films occultaient le fait que « la cause Juifs » suscitait un retentissement émotif au sein de l’opinion publique européenne, pour des raisons historiques qu’on l’on connaît. Il fallait absolument prendre en compte dans un film le spécificité du problème.21

The question of Palestine can only be posed as though constitutively displaced with respect to the parameters that typically make a question of a particular country intelligible to us. As though the question were itself exiled from within. Khleifi’s work insists on rather than works at dissolving this difficulty, which in turn makes it difficult for us to directly compare his work to the work of other great political filmmakers – for example, to the Soviet filmmakers and their relation to the political existence of Soviet Union, or, let’s say, to the Italian Neo-Realist’s relationship to post-war Italy, or even to the Third World political filmmakers with whom, at least intuitively, Khleifi would seem most closely related.

(2) Secondly, a point we already touched on above: there is something new for the sequence of political cinema in Khleifi’s focus on women and children who in his films replace the more traditional, usually male, figures of proletarian existence and political militancy. Women and children become figures that safeguard Khleifi’s cinema’s access to his country’s political becoming. The importance of women in his films involves a shift from the maternal figure, which is (coupled with the figure of a martyr-son) typically the dominant feminine type in national discourses and discourses of national liberation, towards different figures of feminine existence. Khleifi willfully displaces political emphasis in the world of his films. As we will see, the transformation of feminine figures away from the pull exerted by the maternal Thing is crucial for any

understanding of Fertile Memory. Khleifi also distances himself from privileging two other crucial figures of Palestinian national discourse: the peasant (fallah) and the militant fighter (fedayeen). Put somewhat schematically, if the former represents an element of persistence, “a form of digging in, a response to the deracinating thrust of the Zionist movement,” the latter stands for the dynamic force of political articulation in the present, so that one way of understanding their relationship would be the following:

The peasantry-people produced by nationalist discourse is an immovable mass, an ineradicable presence on the land, the upholder of a culture whose place is natural. The real movers of history and the true heirs of the 1936-39 insurgency [during which Palestinian peasantry emerged as historical agents] are the guerillas or fedayeen who conduct armed struggle (the culturally valorized form of resistance), chiefly from outside historic Palestine, and the PLO leadership which coordinates guerilla actions and international diplomacy. The chief duty of the Palestinian people “inside,” imagined as peasants, is to continue steadfast (samid) on the land and to follow the directives of the leaders – not to undertake their own initiatives.

The first thing to notice is, of course, the dated character of the quoted statement, which describes well the context in which Khleifi shot his first films, but not the present situation. The event of the Intifada, the horizontal and decentered rebellion of the Palestinian masses in which a large role was played by women and children, as well as PLO’s loss of its role as the exclusive representative of the Palestinian people (a role shared today with Hamas), have, accompanied by a series of mostly failed international agreements and compromises, introduced a new reality. But it is not impossible that this new reality reproduces some of the logic that sustained the ideological field during the preceding stage. At the same time, the quoted analysis taken on its own should not necessarily be read as an indictment, but rather a description of a specific form of

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23 Ibid., 27
political organization and articulation, capable of demonstrating – in its time, but perhaps no longer – a large degree of political effectivity.24

The articulation of a relationship between militant agency and peasant persistence, where the latter’s mute (trans-historical) presence can be read as a form of (historical) passivity, can be mapped directly onto the divisions created within the national discourse along gender lines: the passive suffering of mothers, the active fight sustained by their male heirs. And finally, it is interesting to observe that when Michel Khleifi sets and shoots one half of Fertile Memory in the West Bank – Fertile Memory is, in fact, the first full-length film ever shot there25 – the simplicity of these distinctions quickly dissolves. The “exilic” dissolution of binary oppositions that support the national imaginary is closely related to Khleifi’s ability to introduce and show in his films figures of proletarian existence (women and children).

(3) The choice of children and women as new proletarian figures is related to another crucial point: Khleifi’s cinema comes after the period of great political sequences of the twentieth century and is as such an explicit response and a conscious reaction to the decline of the political vigor of PLO and especially of the vanguardist form of PLO’s own film and cultural production. The militant cinema of PLO organizations that

24 Swedenburg, for instance, says the following: “Let me stress, however, that such rural representations fulfill crucial mobilizing and unifying functions in the struggle against the occupation. Of particular note is the Palestinian national movement’s considerable success in surmounting regional, kinship, and sectarian divisions. On the basis of my own experience, moreover, it is clear that unity is something widely desired, since antagonisms within the PLO are regarded as having contributed to the failures of the past.” Ibid., 25. We can always observe a gap between the sociological content of a particular figure and its political effectivity. It is this gap that is constitutive of a political figure’s mobilizing force. The sociological or economic fact, according to which the figure of the peasant should no longer be able to symbolize the collective reality of the Palestinians in the West Bank, is of a different order than the question of the figure’s political (or aesthetic) effect. The two levels are not un-related, but it is important, especially when evaluating a rejection of a particular figure’s privilege (such as Khleifi’s interest in a whole set of figures other than the peasant and the fedayeen), to consider the exhaustion of a figure also and, perhaps, primarily in terms of its political (or aesthetic) capacity and not simply against its socio-economic context.

25 Among Khleifi’s “firsts” one can also include the first feature film directed by a Palestinian director (Wedding in Galilee), and the first feature film shot in Gaza (Tale of Three Jewels).
emerged in 1967 and was most prolific during the 1970s identified its main enemy in the conventional cinema of spectacle, Western as well as Arab, which, on the one hand, obscured the Palestinian consciousness, turning it away from the actual questions of Palestinian national existence, and, on the other, reproduced the “orientalist” manner of treating Palestinian existence as something exotic, from an external point of view rather than from within and as part of the Palestinian struggle for autonomy.  

Documentary cinema played a central role in the transformation of both the conditions as well as the aesthetico-political principles of filmmaking introduced by PLO film organizations. As the almost exclusive genre of PLO filmmaking, documentary was primarily of the didactic type, its main function consisting in an instrumental transmission of explanatory information and revolutionary agitation. The titles of some of these militant documentaries – *Say No to the Defeatist Solution* (Mustapha Abu Ali and Hany Jawhariyya, 1969), *With Blood and Spirit* (Mustapha Abu Ali, 1971), *On the Path Palestinian Revolution* (Fouad Zantout, 1971), *Zionist Aggression* (Samir Nimr, 1973), *Scenes of the Occupation of Gaza* (Mustapha Abu Ali, 1973), *War in Lebanon* (Samir Nimr, 1977), *Barbed-Wire Homeland* (Kaise a-Zubeidi, 1982) – suggest that, above all, the documentary function of these films followed the logic of putting cinematic “objectivity” to use in the subjective unfolding of a political rather than artistic process.

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26 See, for instance, the statements by Mustapha Abu Ali, a founding member of the Palestinian Film Group (PFG), and the founding manifesto (1973) of the PFG, which can be found in the extremely useful collection of texts, interviews, and information on both Palestinian cinema as well as cinema about Palestine, compiled in 1976 by Guy Hennebelle and Khemais Khayati. Guy Hennebelle and Khemais Khayati (ed.), *La Palestine et le cinema* (Paris: E. 100, 1976).

27 The sole fictional film produced by the PLO film organizations between the late 1960s and early 80s was the 1982 feature *The Return to Haifa*, directed by Hawal Kassem. There existed, however, a few films about Palestinian struggle, that were made by non-Palestinian filmmakers (and outside of Palestine). The most important among those is *The Dupes* (Al Makhdu’un, 1972). Made in Syria by the Egyptian director Tewfik Saleh, the film was based on the 1962 novella “Men in the Sun” by Ghassan Kanafani.
As described by Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi (Michel Khleifi’s brother) in their book on Palestinian cinema, the main purpose of these films, conceived by organizations such as Fatah’s Department of Photography (established in Jordan in 1967, it produced its first film in 1968), Cinema Unity (1970) or the Palestinian Film Group (1973), consisted in “constructing the Palestinian national narrative as part of an international revolutionary struggle.” Cinema was submitted to immediate political demands, as the following statement by the Palestinian delegation at the Film Conference of the 1973 Tashkent Film Festival also manages to illustrate:

The people’s war is what granted the revolutionary Palestinian cinema its characteristics and its mode of operation… A film’s success is measured by the same criteria used to measure the success of a military operation. The film and the military operation both aspire to realize a political cause … the revolutionary film is dedicated to tactical objectives of the revolution and to its strategic objectives as well. A militant film, therefore, must become an essential commodity for the masses, just like a loaf of bread. This background – the central importance of documentary cinema for PLO film production, the submission of films’ aesthetic dimension to the exigency of the political aims of national liberation and independence – helps us grasp why Khleifi’s separation from the PLO type of film production had to take place in the domain of documentary cinema and appeared in the form of a desire to produce a new idea of documentary fiction, distinct from the newsreel documentary “objectivity” of PLO films.

Khleifi describes the style direct of PLO documentary cinema as something that very quickly got captured by another, far more dominant type of “objectivity” – that of television:

28 Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi (ed.), Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma, and Memory (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 59

29 Quoted in Palestinian Cinema, 23. To my knowledge Gertz and George Khleifi provide the best, albeit brief, English language account of the history of Palestinian cinema from the 1930s to the present. See especially the Introduction and the first two chapters in Palestinian Cinema.
During the 1970s, Palestinian cinema was the political expression of the PLO. These films directly focused on the events experienced by the Palestinian populations in Jordan until 1970 and in Lebanon thereafter. Towards the end of the Civil War in Lebanon, this cinema slowly died away without having ever shined, because its role was taken over by television cameras, which rushed out to film the Middle East. As far as I was concerned, the Palestinian cause was a just one, but the way it was being fought was wrong. We had to provide the world with another way of talking about us.\(^{30}\)

The statement suggests, however, that Khleifi’s disagreement with PLO documentary movement did not have to do with his belief in the latter’s inherent falsity (after all, Khleifi himself identifies his beginnings as rooted in the experience of direct cinema), but rather with a moment of a particular cinematic movement’s historical exhaustion, and the intervention of new socio-economic and technological forces that made it impossible to hold on to the same mode of documentary filmmaking. It appears that the experience with television was crucial: “After the first [TV] documentary, I had the feeling that the logic of television was limited to the event and was unable to get deeper into the subject to see and to hear the hidden reasons behind these events. The subject was always being ‘covered’ instead of being revealed to show the roots of events. This was (and is) the huge contradiction of TV films.”\(^{31}\) Khleifi describes his own wager as something conceived to turn the logic of television and “the PLO’s militant cinema upside down,” to demonstrate “that it is important to show the thinking that leads to the political slogan rather than the expression of this slogan that is political discourse.”\(^{32}\) Put simply, Khleifi’s difference lies in the affirmation of cinema’s autonomy with respect to both television reportage as well as the discourse of politics.

The questions to which we now turn, namely the question of documentary fiction and *Fertile Memory*, the film with which Khleifi accomplished his break, have to

\(^{30}\) “From Reality to Fiction – From Poverty to Expression,” 48
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 50-1
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 51
be understood as inseparably linked to Khleifi’s distanitation from PLO-type of political filmmaking. However, it has to also be kept in mind to what extent his work cannot simply be seen in pure opposition to the militant submission of cinema’s aesthetic means to political ends. Perhaps it is more interesting to think how militant documentary’s negation of the cinema of spectacle provides the condition on which the aesthetic autonomy of something like Khleifi’s documentary fiction becomes realizable. Khleifi’s cinema would in this sense not simply abolish militant documentary; it would rather make militant documentary into one of its own moments.

5.4 Documentary Fiction

In Khleifi’s “From Reality to Fiction – From Poverty to Expression,” not even a page apart from each other, one finds two seemingly contradictory statements. In the first statement, already referred to above, Khleifi declares his fidelity to the documentary tradition: “My cinematographic roots stem from the history of direct cinema, which anchored itself in people’s reality,”33 while in the second he opposes to the first what seems an irreconcilably different assertion: “[C]inematic expression bears in itself a logic of narration. It must narrate a story, and every story is the result of a subjective discourse, which comes from (an) individual(s).”34 People’s reality versus narration as a subjective discourse (a discourse of a subject, it is worth noting, that is here not identified as a collective political subjectivity of the people). There exists an entire history of cinema which can be seen as nothing other than a long night of boxing matches, all going the whole twelve rounds, in which representatives of these two positions battle it out between each other (Lumièrè versus Méliès, Vertov versus Eisenstein,…), the first group claiming for cinema the destiny of an impersonal

33 Ibid., 49
34 Ibid., 50
recording apparatus that, unrestricted by the subjective limitations of human perception, can get us closer to the mysteries of human and worldly reality, while the second group proclaims for cinema the demiurgic fate of a machine for producing spectacular fictions that, unhindered by the objective limitations of space and time, can force reality in the direction of a truly unprecedented subjective flight.

In this very division Khleifi sees an obstacle that a new orientation of filmmaking has to overcome: “A century after cinema was invented, we must go beyond differences, trends, and schools of filmmaking. We cannot separate the documentary from the fictional film. The question I ask myself is: How can I manage, with sound and picture, to make a film that will integrate drama, theatre, action, and reportage all into one work?” The refusal to separate documentary and fiction does not mean the difference that separates documentary (the side of reality and objectivity) and fiction (the side of myth/narrative and subjectivity) becomes simply abolished. The result of the refusal is not that we cannot or that we should not continue to make distinctions between films that we call “fictional” and films typically referred to as “documentary”. By refusing to separate them, we do not for that matter make them the same. Rather, the point is that the difference between the two terms is reconceived and becomes something internal to the terms themselves. Most importantly, since throughout the history of cinema fiction is clearly the dominant of the two terms, we have to be able to see how as a consequence of Khleifi’s affirmation the difference between fiction film and documentary film becomes instead a difference between two types of fiction: “fictional” fiction, if one can be allowed such a clumsy formulation, and “documentary” fiction.

\[35\] Ibid., 49
This shift changes the very meaning of “fiction”. The latter can no longer be evaluated in terms of the relationship an assemblage of images and sounds bears to reality – where fiction would simply mean a false substitute for this reality, i.e. a lie – but rather has to be evaluated in terms of the immanent capacities of the very work of assembling different types of images and sounds. Consequently, in the distinction between “documentary” fiction and “fictional” fiction, it is neither the cinematic image’s privileged relationship to objective reality, nor, conversely, its privileged relationship to the subjective capacity for producing narratives as plausible substitutes for this reality that is decisive. The difference lies instead in the nature of fiction itself, in the kind of work fiction manages to accomplish.

Here, Khleifi’s statements, belonging as they do less to the genre of theoretical discussion and more to the genre of artistic credo, can be further elaborated with the help of some of the recent writing by Jacques Rancière, who has significantly intervened in our understanding of the meaning of “documentary”:

[I]n general, ‘fiction’ is not a pretty story or evil lie, the flipside of reality that people try to pass off for it. Originally, fingere doesn’t mean ‘to feign’ but ‘to forge’. Fiction means using the means of art to construct a ‘system’ of represented actions, assembled forms, and internally coherent signs. We cannot think of ‘documentary’ film as the polar opposite of ‘fiction’ film simply because the former works with images from real daily life and archive documents about events that obviously happened, and the latter with actors who act out an invented story. The real difference between them isn’t that the documentary sides with the real against the inventions of fiction, it’s just that the documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood. Documentary film can isolate the artistic work of fiction simply by dissociating that work from its most common use: the imaginary production of verisimilitude, of effects of the real.36

Documentary is, thus, a work of fiction just as much as its hegemonic sibling is one (although, again, this should not lead us to think that they are simply the same). It can be understood as a mode of fiction in which the work of producing an assemblage of

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signs becomes freed from the necessity of fulfilling its classical representational assignment (production of the reality-effect, of plausibility and verisimilitude of actions, and events, unity and continuity of narrative time and space)\textsuperscript{37} and creates for itself a different aesthetic condition. “The privilege of the so-called documentary film is that it is not obliged to create the feeling of the real, and this allows it to treat the real as a problem and to experiment more freely with the variable games of action and life, significance and insignificance.”\textsuperscript{38} A vision of documentary cinema that stakes its effectiveness on some notion of documentary’s privileged access to the real, its mimetic relationship to the world it depicts, or its capacity to serve as an indexical representation of reality, necessarily loses all of its privileges.

What guarantees documentary’s effectiveness is not its “epistemological” function (producing adequate representations of objects in reality) but rather its “aesthetic” condition, something we have to be able to hear also in the Kantian sense of free play. We can interpret Jacques Rancière’s statement (“documentary film can... treat the real as a problem”) as saying that, contrary to the commonsensical beliefs about documentary cinema, documentary possesses a great scope of possibilities in relation to reality, and that this is the case not because its fiction can produce a world that looks almost completely unlike our own, but rather because it can make our own world look almost completely unlike itself. Since in the case of documentary cinema reality is at first assumed as a fact, as something one has a “feeling of” from the outset, documentary fiction can operate a suspension (or a neutralization) of our need for this reality so that

\textsuperscript{37} I use “classical” here as it is used in the standard work of film studies by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

\textsuperscript{38} Film Fables, 17-8
the latter, assumed at first as a simple intuition of a fact, can “return” to us as a problem, a question, or even a matter of contestation.

Another way to understand this would be to relate the work of documentary fiction and the gap it introduces into reality (reality as fact turning into reality as a problem) to the effects of what in another place Rancière calls the “fictional ontology” of an aesthetic work. In the case of an aesthetic work of art “[t]he set of relations that constitutes the work operates as if it had a different ontological texture from the sensations that make up everyday experience. But there is neither a sensory difference nor an ontological difference.” Which, if we transpose this definition onto the case of documentary, would give us a notion of documentary as a work of fiction which takes the images and sounds of our reality and organizes them in such a way that they, although never ceasing to be images and sounds of our reality, appear as if they belonged to a consistency of a different order. The work of documentary fiction enabled by its aesthetic condition consists of taking images and sounds of reality and superimposing them over our experience of reality (itself a regime of images and sounds) in such a way that to our senses a necessarily double, non-univocal (Rancière himself would say, “dissensual”) reality appears, a reality become distant from and alien to itself (again, reality as though it simultaneously belonged to two distinct ontological registers superimposed one over the other). The crucial dimension of documentary fiction is thus the operation of superimposition of an as if over an as it is, accompanied by a counterintuitive belief that things arranged in the order of an as if share an effectiveness

that, unpredictable as it might be, is in no way ontologically subordinate to the reality as it is.\footnote{For an excellent discussion of Jacques Rancière’s contribution to the theory and politics of documentary cinema, as well as how Rancière’s writings on documentary film can be understood in the context of his work more broadly, see: Nico Baumbach, “Jacques Rancière and the Fiction Capacity of Documentary,” \textit{New Review of Film and Television Studies} 8.1 (March 2010), 57-72.}

\textbf{5.5 Superimpositions}

It is by claiming it as an exemplary work of “documentary fiction” that I would now like to begin the discussion of \textit{Fertile Memory}. The film creates between the fragments of reality that compose it – images and sounds, actions, gestures, and statements – new and unexpected relations, which cause this reality to fold against itself in a problematic mode of contestation.

The title of the film itself already alerts us to the centrality of superimposition as a key operation of the film as a whole, for in it two and not simply one type of memory are announced. A fiction of a new type of memory (a \textit{fertile} memory) is superimposed over the more conventional notion of memory whose meaning can be defined by recollection, preservation, and continuation of the past in the present. In order to understand the conventional notion of memory from a critical perspective, let us say with Nietzsche’s brutality, that according to the conventional notion memory is what “maintains the habits of old interpretations, i.e., of erroneous causality – so that the “inner experience” has to contain within it the consequences of all previous false causal fictions”.\footnote{Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{Will to Power}, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1968), 266.}

This vision of memory, in which effects are held hostage by false causes, is clearly the counter-image of any notion of “fertility” or novelty, which always has to do with effects that exceed and are in their being irreducible to the territory prescribed by
their causes. An idea of a *fertile* memory has to therefore strike us at first as a rather paradoxical superimposition of a strange new element over our conventional prison-image of memory: the fiction of the title operates as though “old habits of interpretation” can be abandoned, as though the maintenance of relations of “erroneous causality” can suddenly cease, letting us leave the curse of the recollective chamber, which always moves by way of a mutual interiorization and containment of the subject of memory, on one hand, and the constellation of things remembered, on the other. As though memory could place effects in front of causes and learn how to combine them into entities of a new and surprising kind, arranged without re-membering, maintained not in an interiority, but rather in the mode of externality of relations – uncontained.

This new species of memory, no doubt an evolutionary anomaly of sorts, is clearly a fiction, but Khleifi places it over the more conventional prison of memory in such a way that it cannot but turn memory as such into a question for us. It remains then to be added that *Fertile Memory* is not simply a film *about* these two types of memory that are involved in the superimposition. The film is this very superimposition. In other words, the title, with its split referent, points not only to the content of the film, but much more to the very operations in which the form and the content become indiscernible, and with which the film attempts to liken itself to the paradoxical fiction of a *fertile* memory – *as if* a film could be (rather than merely illustrate) a new type of memory.

I will return later and in a more exhaustive way to the question of memory as it concerns the *Fertile Memory* as a whole. What follows first, in the next three sub-sections, are descriptions of the operation of superimposition of a more local kind. They are meant to give us a taste of what documentary fiction is doing in *Fertile Memory*. A kind of *abc of Fertile Memory* as a film of documentary fiction:
5.5.1 Superimposition 1: Solitude-Multiplicity over Individuality-Collectivity

*Fertile Memory* was shot between April and May of 1980. The events, the episodes, and the stories of the film revolve around the lives of the film’s two main protagonists: Romia Farah Hatoum, Khleifi’s aunt, a factory worker from Jaffa of Nazareth in Galilee, and Sahar Khalifeh, a writer, intellectual, and professor at Bir Zeit University, who at the time of filming lived in the city of Ramallah in the West Bank. The two women share a set of differences: those of age and geographical location (Romia lives within the borders of the State of Israel and Sahar in the Occupied Territory of the West Bank), of social class, and educational status. The film stresses these differences by never showing us the two women together, nor suggesting that they might be aware of each other. Communication across what separates the two women is not part of this film. Next to the differences, however, the two women also share a few similarities. The most important one is undoubtedly the fact that neither of them is married. Romia’s husband died shortly after the 1948 War, when she was only twenty-four years old, and after his death Romia refused to re-marry, spending all of her adult life, supporting her family alone, as a widow. Sahar, who also married young, at the age of eighteen, is not a widow, but a divorcee. Having left her husband after thirteen years of a stultifying arranged marriage, she lives alone with her daughter.

In relation to the theme of absent husbands we can quickly notice the centrality of women in the film, which manifests itself not merely in the film’s focus on Romia and Sahar, but also in the numerous images of groups and groupuscules of Palestinian women that continuously appear throughout it. Men enter the film from a marginal position: by way of their absence (the case of the two husbands) or quite literally from the margin of the image itself (e.g. Khleifi’s own presence at several points in the film as
an interrogating off screen voice). Apart from the male members of the Bir Zeit singing group with whom Sahar works, the only important male character in the film is Romia’s son Messaud, whose role, however, is thoroughly determined by his relationship to Romia. The significance of Messaud’s character comes almost exclusively from his status as his mother’s adversary over the question of the plot of land their family lost in 1948. Messaud, not at all a typical martyr-son, argues for a pragmatic compromise and an act of exchange with the Israeli authority: the family should accept a replacement for the plot that has been taken away so that it could again work the land and sustain itself independently. Romia in stubborn opposition to her son rejects any such compromise.

This brings us to another feature shared by Romia and Sahar: a strong agonistic, combative will. The subjective determination of the old, widowed Romia consists of a will not to give up on her right to the plot of land that was expropriated from her family by the State of Israel during the 1948 War and is now being cultivated by an Israeli kibbutz. Against the pleas of her son, Romia refuses to accept a settlement that would provide her not only with substitute land, but also, as her son tries to convince her, a minimal degree of economic security. In defense of her right against the historical fact accompli, a defense that seems at the same time stripped of any naïve illusions, her will takes the form of a principle which could be formulated in the following way: One does not make deals with the expropriated, i.e. “absentee,” land, since the land one gets in exchange might be the land of another expropriated and expelled Palestinian.42 What is at stake for Romia is not only her individual property right, but a collective right of an expropriated people. The striking result of this principled defiance and her consistent

42 Here is the relevant piece of dialogue from the film:
Messaud: “Who will restore your rights to you?”
Romia: “God!”
Messaud: “You prefer this impasse?”
Romia: “Which land would you get in exchange, that doesn’t belong to another? And if the ‘absentees’ came back? Where would you go then?”
refusal is Romia’s proletarization. Forced off and prevented from cultivating her land, while at the same time refusing to accept another plot in exchange – an impasse which she maintains for over 30 years – Romia has to find work first as a servant at a local monastery and later as a worker in a textile factory.

If we return here briefly to our discussion of idealization of the peasant and of the maternal figure in the discourse of Palestinian nationalism, we can see how the status of these figures becomes something rather complex in Khleifi’s film. Romia’s refusal could be interpreted as a form of peasant stubbornness if the film did not at the same time shows how this stubbornness is intimately tied to her becoming a proletarian. Her peasant stubbornness prevents her from living as a peasant. In fact, it is her existence as a proletarian (and not as a peasant), which is the condition of Romia’s ability to obstinately reject any form of compromise. It is impossible to find in *Fertile Memory* a kind of romanticized, idealized vision of peasantry – there are images of people working the land, but there are also images of the industrial agriculture of an Israeli kibbutz – since what the film presents as the key question related to one of its two main protagonists is rather the question of the relationship between the question of land and the process of proletarization. This aspect becomes significant if we keep in mind that in Palestine, and certainly at the time *Fertile Memory* was made, the figure of the proletarian did not play an important role in the national discourse and culture.43

Sahar’s combative will has to do with her existence both as a divorced woman and as an intellectual – in a double conflict with the patriarchal order of the Palestinian

43 “Proletarianization has not given rise to a distinct working-class culture that is displacing that of the peasant village, and not just because workers still resort to agriculture in order to subsist. In part, this is because until the mid-seventies PLO organizations considered West-Bankers working for wages in Israel as traitors and made no attempt to organize them as workers. Left-wing Palestinian groups only started to organize unions in this sector of the working class in the late 1970s. ‘National’ issues, however, take precedence over ‘class’ issues for the rural-based unions. Moreover, unions tend to be organized in village communities rather than at the point of production, and their activities tend to be based in the villages as well.” Swedenburg, “The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier,” 23.
The precise question of Sahar’s will is posed as an insistence on the two questions, that of divorce and of women’s relationships with men, on one side, and that of women’s intellectual existence, on the other, as though they were a single question. She describes her marriage as an experience of “intellectual calcification,” while her difficult divorce is simultaneously necessitated by and what first enables her desire for intellectual work and writing. One can, perhaps, read in this immediate link between a woman’s break from an unhappy marriage and her intellectual existence the expanded etymological resonances of the word “divorce”: at stake is not only separation (from the husband), but also an act of “turning aside,” turning “out of the way” or even in “different directions,” the ability “to divert,” which in Sahar’s case means the ability to produce diversion in the form of literary fiction.

The film presents the combative will of each of the two women as a knot connecting an element of the individual (a decision, a principled insistence, etc.) with elements of the collective (in the case of Romia: the collective right of a people driven off their land; in the case of Sahar: the diversion of literary fiction concerned with Palestinian historical experience), but it does this in an unexpected way that now leads us back to the question of documentary-fictional superimposition.

_Fertile Memory_ is full of various women’s groups and groupuscules (women of different generations, sitting on steps, leaning over balconies, gathered around a table preparing food, collectively mourning at the cemetery, driving in cars and buses, crowding at markets and ceremonies, women in groups of one), but what is striking about the film is not simply the intense focus on multiple and complex sociality of

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41 Sahar at one point in the film says: “The champions of religion prevent us from thinking and discussing. This will eventually damage the country. Women, who constitute half of our society, are clad from top to toe. How can they possibly struggle and take part in social life? The gap’s widening between them and men. Such clothing is a confession that they are a “private, sacred object”. And anything sacred is doomed to be encroached on against its will. _I believe a human being is willpower_. [my emphasis] If a woman considers herself only in relation to her external demeanor what will she draw on for her interior life?”
Palestinian women’s life. The striking thing is not simply that there exists this sociality of Palestinian women and that the film, furthermore, makes clear that it is closely connected not only to the processes of social reproduction, but also to acts of political subjectivation and artistic creation. What is perhaps even more important is the change that affects the very status of sociality when seen through the perspective of Khleifi’s documentary fiction.

The two main protagonists enter and leave various groups, but they are also throughout the course of the film maintained as figures of solitude: Romia climbing the evacuated street in the old city, both of them sitting alone in their homes, Sahar smoking, staring pensively through the window of her apartment, or, in the rather comical case of Romia’s name continuously mispronounced during prayer. Khleifi insists on the irreducible solitude of the two women. Even when they find themselves among others, the close-up of an intense, pensive face isolates them, allowing us to perhaps identify in this a certain degree of sadness and melancholy. Whatever the affective register of this solitude might be, however, we cannot identify the latter as the opposite of sociality. Images of solitude might, in other words, affect us with sadness and melancholy, but they do not imply in some simplistic way or another a sense of alienation, since it is Khelifi’s constant effort to link these images to sets of most diverse and multiple elements.

In the scene in which Romia’s solitude reaches its most intense pitch, a severe image of abandonment, she moves through her living room, pointing out photographs of her siblings and other relatives on the wall, explaining their stories – invariably stories of exile. After she is done with her account, Khleifi shows her sitting alone on a red couch in the same room, contemplating a portrait that stands on the mantelpiece. It is a youthful image of her with her long-deceased husband. Suddenly, sounds and voices of
what seems to be a crowd of playing or rioting children intervene into this 
contemplative sadness, a dynamic element that clearly does not belong to the static 
image of Romia and, thus, stirs the latter. A multiplicity begins to murmur next to 
Romia’s suspenseful sadness. As it turns out, the sounds belong to a wedding ceremony, 
which now appears in a series of loosely linked fragments: a movement of the hand held 
camera over a chaotic gathering of women, a close-up of a bride, the shot of a groom 
approaching through the crowd guarded by what must be his future wife’s brothers, 
there is singing, chanting and clapping, close-ups of hands and faces, a queer and 
awkward element of the wedding ritual (the perfuming of the bride and groom), the 
distribution of food among the guests, newlyweds exchanging rings and bracelets, 
which then rhyme with golden jewelry on an older woman in the crowd, congratulating 
handshakes, the face of a crying child. After all this commotion, Khleifi cuts back to the 
living room where Romia was sitting just a few moments before. The room, however, is 
now empty. No one is sitting on the red couch; as though Romia has somehow 
transmuted, she herself become the manifold elements of the wedding festival, whose 
sounds now fade out in the silent presence of the furniture.

Figure 16: Romia’s Solitude
Throughout the film Khleifi links the women’s solitude to multiplicities in ways that elude any straightforward narrative or diegetic justification. Theirs is a solitude populated by large, unfinished, assemblages of actions and gestures, reading or singing voices, scattered and crowded groups of people, fragments of cities and of land. One is tempted to relate all these occurrences, in which a direct link is forged between a vision of extreme solitude and the unexpected multiplicities that rise up next to it, to an idea of autonomy.

The women’s wills, which move them through struggle and conflict, push Romia and Sahar into their exceptional solitudes, but only for the film to discover in this voluntary solitude an array of involuntarily triggered, unprecedented forms of collective life, which it would, strictly speaking, be wrong to call collective, since as soon as images are collected, the collector disappears, and thus nothing gets collected. Autonomy, the possibility of the shortest link between solitude and multiplicity, like a sudden leap between the infinitesimal and the infinite, escapes the conventional divisions of sociality that move between the individual, the group, and larger collectives, one level framing or representing the other. But what is crucial for our discussion is that such an idea of autonomy is an effect of the work of documentary fiction, a product of taking images and sounds of individual and collective existence and divorcing them from their “habitual interpretations,” from the “false causes” that typically order them and, combining them into a fiction of a new relationship between signs of solitude and forms of multiplicity. This fiction of new “games of action and life,” as Rancière might put it, is

Similarly, to the images of Sahar sitting alone and smoking pensively in her living room Khleifi introduces the incongruous sounds and voices of the Bir Zeit singing group as they invent/rehearse the melody for one of Sahar’s songs. In another scene the expansion of solitude is explicitly discussed by Sahar: “My struggles make sense. At first, they were limited, individualistic. Now, they are broader. I feel I belong. After isolation, my life now has a meaning. But there is always a price to pay. In Arab society, when a woman is over 30 and wants to make a fresh start, all she can do is reorganize her ideas, her choices, develop her principles, but she can’t go back in time. The time that is lost counts a lot.” And when Khelfi asks her if isolation is a sacrifice, she responds “No, a necessity. It’s reality that imposes it. I have to make a choice.”
superimposed by Khleifi over the more conventional forms of sociality with which we go about, as on a pair of crutches, in our everyday life. It is a fiction of an autonomy, which it would be completely false to understand as an affirmation of the individual dimension against the collective one, since it, on the contrary, turns the very status and reality of the texture of sociality sustained by notions of individuality and collectivity into a question.

5.5.2 Superimposition 2: Two Images of Work

Images of work are perhaps the most common images in Fertile Memory. One can divide them into several categories: images of domestic work (such as cooking and baking, crushing grain, washing, doing laundry, cleaning, knitting), factory work (Romia at the swimsuit factory), agricultural work (working in the field, feeding animals), childcare, intellectual or cultural work, and limit or marginal cases of work, whose relation to the question of work seems nevertheless extremely important: the examples of play and the work of mourning.46

We are faced with the question of how these different types of work are represented in the film? One question could we can ask ourselves is, for instance, how does Khleifi show Sahar’s work as an intellectual? To this question at least two answers can be given. First, we could note that Khleifi intervenes directly in the scenes with Sahar, asking her questions about work and her relationship to it, which allows him to make her work into an explicit topic of her statements. Secondly, Khleifi shows Sahar reading from her work, i.e., he presents her presenting the product of her work. Or, if we

46 Mourning and play are opposed both to the productivity of work as well as to the idea of work as maintenance of things in a state of functionality. Mourning and play revolve around loss and expenditure rather than processes of accumulation. The latter has to, in fact, always fight against the existence of mourning and play that appear from the point of view of capitalization and efficiency as nothing but waste. On the political implications of the visibility of mourning and the existence of public mourning see Judith Butler, Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable? (Verso: London, 2009).
are to consider reading as itself part of a writer’s work, Khleifi shows the difficulty of separating Sahar’s work from the product of this work. This second answer, however, immediately separates Sahar from Romia. The latter clearly does not possess the products of her own work (factory labor involved in serial production of swimsuits). Therefore, a question of a different kind can emerge: Why is it that some people’s work can be recognized simply by a reference to the product of this work, while the work of others is disassociated from what it produces? This question itself can point us to two different possibilities. For some people the question of their work is inherently related to their existential determination, while in the case of others the two levels seem to exist as external to each other. Presenting different types of work solicits a need to compare them and provokes questions about the exact content of their differences.

Another direction our questioning could take develop would possibly involve the fact that the film shows the two women perform not one but several types of work: Romia is not only a factory worker, she is also a former servant at a monastery and a domestic worker (feeding the chicken, cooking, taking care of her grandchild etc.), while Sahar not only writes and reads, but also does domestic chores (like mopping the floor) and teaches. The question can therefore appear that, on the one hand, interrogates a single human being as a site where several types of work are combined and performed, and, on the other hand, inquires about the different meanings of the same type of work when performed by different people (what does it mean when Romia performs domestic work, and what does it mean when it is Sahar who does it?)

Finally, there is also a third possibility in which to take our investigation. It is clear that Khleifi is interested in the two women’s own relationship to different types of work they perform. It becomes apparent from their statements and reactions, for example, that Romia’s factory work exhausts her and prevents her from being able to
help with domestic tasks such as preparing dinner and that, for instance, she would prefer her former work as a servant at the monastery to doing work at the factory, if the latter did not come with a higher pay than the former. We learn that Sahar finds domestic work (which we see her perform quite a bit in the film) stultifying and associates it with her marriage, while at the same time being opposed the idea of hiring a maid: for, according to what principle should she make someone else do the work she detests doing herself? Sahar also juxtaposes the difficulty of domestic work with a very different difficulty – that of intellectual work. Etc., etc. A complex picture of work and of attitudes that work produces in the two women emerges. It could even be extended further if we, for example, began to relate images of work to the image of what, at least habitually, we count as non-work (smoking a solitary cigarette, riding a bus or a car to work, watching television with the family…). Not only questions about different types of work, the different status of tasks when performed by different people, or the two women’s attitudes to work, the question could also be: What counts as work, anyway? What can justifiably be called work and what not? And why is it so that there is work, and non-work?

All of these questions, we might say, interrogate the positions of the two women in the social space as the latter is constituted through work and its division. The investigation, along with the comparisons it enables and questions it provokes, loosens the strictly maintained hierarchical and patriarchal boundaries between the different types of tasks and those who perform them. This in itself is not insignificant, since it has the effect of making visible forms of work usually performed by women and hidden from view. But there is perhaps another level at which Khleifi’s film treats the images of work, which is connected to this interrogative treatment, might even be the latter’s condition, but is not exactly of the same sort.
The interrogative comparison of different types of work is on one of its sides still too closely tied to the very hierarchical space of social distribution of tasks that it proposes to investigate. That is, on one side the comparative questioning still sustains the hierarchic distribution between intellectual and manual work, the patriarchal schism between the invisible domestic work and the visible and socially recognizable forms of labor. In order to be able to gain momentum, then, the interrogative comparison cannot start from its hierarchical side, but rather has to find a spark somewhere else. We have to be able to observe in *Fertile Memory* an operation that does not simply compare and describe, questioning one type of work in relation to another, but rather the fictional operation on which the possibility of such questioning rests, and which I propose to identify as the operation of a decomposition of work into smaller gestures, of making work crumble into a series of details – such as, for example, the extreme close-ups of hands, or shots of Sahar through door frames, which obscure the totality of her movement – details that undo both the unity and the univocity of individual tasks, sometimes repeating the broken off details for themselves and at others combining them into unexpected associative chains with other fragments and gestures.

![Figure 17: Fragments of Work](image)

A decomposition and recomposition of minimal gestures, a movement across the surface of various types of work, connecting their forms and actions with each other: an introduction of a fiction of work, according to which it is the intensity of sameness rather
than the extensiveness of an hierarchical ordering that articulates all work across the social reality this film treats.

Figure 18: Fragments of Hands Working, Playing, Praying

This, of course, does not mean that the very important distinctions between different types of work are ignored by Khleifi. Rather it means that Khleifi’s fiction superimposes over one vision of work – according to which work must be organized into a clear distribution of tasks, each task occupying a proper place and corresponding to a specific (specialized) type of a person performing it – a different vision of work – a vision, according to which images of individual types of work can fall apart into
fragments and be inserted into improper series (including elements of both work and non-work). It is between these two visions of work, taking its spark from the latter and enveloping the former in its scope, that *Fertile Memory* can accomplish the comparative investigation and questioning of (women’s) work.

Over our conventional image of work, according to which work must be distributed in a secure and fixed logic of places, Khleifi superimposes a fictional image of work as though work were a swarm of minute gestures separable from the tasks they compose and the places to which they are assigned. It is a fiction of work as something essentially placeless. Perhaps this is the reason Khleifi at the beginning of the film focuses so extensively on scenes of Romia and Sahar leaving home to go to work. Work always involves the ambulant proletarian element of leaving one’s place, although the meaning of placelessness is different in Romia’s and Sahar’s respective cases. As though Khleifi wanted to extend the lesson of placelessness to all work in the film. In the movement of comparison Khleifi develops, one image of work does not “place” the other, but rather helps keep it placeless association, as for example, in one of the earlier scenes in the film, where images of factory work open up like a displaced parenthetical onto a story about Romia’s work for a Christian monastery.

### 5.5.3 Superimposition 3: The Undecidables

In the final scenes of *Fertile Memory* there is an image of Sahar sitting against the background of a blank wall, reading from what presumably is one of her own fictions. Even before this image, which is the final image of Sahar, we hear her voice reading as we see her, camera fixed in the space between two door frames, passing from one room to another, entering the split frame of the shot only to leave it immediately. This oscillation between her presence and absence in the image closely refers to the text she is
reading, which is a very interesting one, a sort of philosophical-ethical fiction about a woman split in a moment of decision.

“I want, I desire, I hope, I long for, I plead for. Life is a miracle of impotence. Nothing new, nothing really finished. No unified body. I feel old, exhausted prematurely before my thirtieth birthday. Soon my lot will be white hair, wrinkles and weakened arms and legs, the skin under my chin all hanging and huge lumps of fat. When I put lipstick on, it will be smudged around the edges of my lips. Oh damn!"

Women must rebel in a radical way. But how?

What can one see in a steam bath, where you breathe deeply but are not relieved. The feelings of the Middle East are like a bath that is boiling, but does not cleanse, nor make one feel good.

“Mother!” – “I’ve told you a thousand times!”

And the finger was raised in warning, creating barriers between herself and love and other people. The past is no longer a hiding place. Escape, defeat, regression… Where is the Revolution? What use are clichés that she keeps churning around? Parrots who have lost their identity between the Middle East and the fog of the West. Reason and sentiment: each wanders in different directions. The devil take all of that! We have lost our simplicity. Even jealousy becomes and object of calculation.

“I should have remained like the others: no dreams, no culture, no Revolution, a simple female who marries a man who earns that much, then becomes pregnant, who would cook, showing what she is capable of in the face of marital and maternal responsibilities.”

She calls out for help: “Mother!” – “I’ve warned you a thousand times!”

And the finger was raised to the edge of despair. The past is no longer a hiding place. Nor is the present. There is escape and there is the struggle. She is stuck between the two.

For the woman in Sahar’s fiction the simplicity of life (marriage, work, but also the simplicity of a “we”) has disappeared, while at the same time no new direction in which to orient her rebellion appears (“Where is the Revolution?” with the suggestion that the question has itself become a cliché). There is a strong sense of impotence, presented in figures of aging and decay, which extend over the opening of the text. There seems to be no potency left in what was once potent. The past, no longer a hiding place, is identified with a sort of superegoic maternal Schadenfreude directed at the child who dared to venture out on her own (“I warned you…”). At the same time, the future remains
obscure. The woman in the fiction thus becomes a figure of an extreme concentration in the present, which, however, at the same time appears as radically split (“No unified body!” Reason and Sentiment each wandering separately) and muddled (the striking image of the Middle East as an intense steam bath whose extreme heat, however, bears no purging qualities).

The crucial move of Sahar’s fiction is to insist in this situation on the importance of rebellion, even in the absence of knowledge of what its determinate character would look like (although, we know that it will be a rebellion connected to a female figure: “Women must rebel in a radical way.”), and to suggest at the point of the impasse of the present something that is not exactly a new positive decision, but rather the impasse itself as the possibility of a new subjective passage, the undecidability of the present as the condition of any new decision. Against the irretrievable background and looking into an obscure future a minimal clarity of choice emerges (escape versus struggle).

While we are listening to Sahar read, however, the image changes. No longer do we see images of Sahar in her apartment, which have at first made us think, of course, that the fiction she is reading is about her. Instead, Khleifi now shows an image of Romia, the old aunt in front of her house, beating with a simple wooden stick a pile of raw wool that sits on a stone table in front of her. Sahar’s fiction is thus forced to find a relationship with this simple action performed by Romia (in itself one of the least complicated tasks one could possibly imagine). But combined with the narration of Sahar’s voice, Romia’s beating of wool condenses into a complicated gesture. Linked to a story of a choice between escape and struggle, the beating of wool, without ceasing to function as an image of a simple task, becomes an image of a very different, violent and insistent, repetition. As though we could read in Romia’s labor of making the stubborn
material more pliable the presence of a gesture of a violent attack. The final image of
Fertile Memory is an image of a woman thrashing (rather than, let’s say, weaving) wool.

It remains undecideble – and thus also contestable – whether we should see the stick in Romia’s hand as a tool or as a weapon. And it is thus also unclear how to read the relation between Sahar’s fiction and the image of Romia’s work unequivocally. Is Khleifi suggesting that the content of Sahar’s ethical fiction is somehow deciphered by Romia’s simple gesture? Is Romia herself the one who is stuck between escape and struggle? Perhaps, but is not Romia also a figure of a choice already made? Certainly, but in that case, how exactly does the opposition between escape and struggle refer to Romia’s choice and the consequences produced by it?

As though linking the two undecidables were not enough, Khleifi introduces one last element into this last sequence of Fertile Memory. On the screen, over the stilled image of Romia’s beating of the wool, written in white letters, appear the following verses from a poem by Mahmoud Darwish:

I congratulate the torturer who has vanquished the blind.
Bravo to the conqueror of a tiny village.
Bravo to the butcher of childhood.

To the fiction of an undecidable choice between escape and struggle and to the image of an ambivalent stick beating the wool (tool/weapon, work/battle), to these two undecidables, the poem adds yet another opposition. At the most direct level, Darwish’s verses distinguish between two types of entities: the torturer, the conqueror, and the butcher are congratulated for vanquishing, conquering, and butchering the blind, the tiny village, and childhood. A series of violent strength is related to a series of weakness – the blind are weak because they cannot see, a tiny village is weak because it is not large, and childhood names the state pregnant with possibility, but also a possibility not yet realized in an actual possession of strength.
At the literal level of the poem’s content, one finds a simple distinction, expressed in the form of a binary opposition between the strong and the weak, and a relation in which the former violently dominate (or even annihilate) the latter. It is, however, immediately clear that the congratulatory and salutary tone that relates the two series is profoundly sarcastic. Congratulating the torturers for vanquishing those that can hardly offer any resistance amounts to saying not only that the torturers have not in fact displayed any real strength, but that the act of torturing is nothing more than a senseless act of brutality, in which we cannot but recognize a sign of weakness. Similarly, conquerors of a tiny village hardly deserve to be called conquerors, since the strength of a conqueror depends on the size of that which he conquers and the sweep with which he makes a large territory submit to his will. The tininess of the village is an objection without appeal to the existence of the conqueror’s strength.

The sarcasm of the poem, set up as it is against the poem’s images of brutal and senseless violence, complicates the simple relation of superiority and reverses it: the poem mocks the false strength of the conquerors, which in turn is only possible if the poem ascribes to its own gnashing of the teeth a patience and a strength superior to that possessed by the torturer, the conqueror, and the butcher. But what kind of strength is this poetic sarcasm, the mocking laughter that says to the conquerors: You have exercised your strength, you have indeed vanquished something, but since this something was the very opposite of strength, you have displayed only a lack of strength, thus exhibiting the truth of your violence as mere brutality? The strength of the poem’s sarcasm lies in this identification of a conquering strength with lack, in reversing the perception of strength, and, finally, in opening up, without presenting it as a positive image, the possibility that what we perceive as strength might not be strength at all, while weakness might be the very form in which a new kind of strength is hiding (for,
the blind might be given time to see; a tiny village can invent an unexpected grandeur; and childhood is the very figure of that which cannot stay as minor as it is and cannot avoid developing strength). And so the lines from Darwish’s poem add another undecidable to the final sequence of Khleifi’s film. To the undecidability of escape/struggle, work/battle, Khleifi adds the Darwishian undecidable of strength/weakness.

How are we to understand this series of undecidables with which the film concludes? It is, I think, best to understand it as another instance of superimposition which, since it exists against the background of aesthetic and not epistemological conditions, has the capacity to treat oppositions in a way that multiplies the lines of conventional distinction between them. The sequence can perhaps be schematized in the following way:

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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>escape / struggle</td>
<td>work / battle</td>
<td>strength / weakness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recognition of necessity / absence of rebellion</td>
<td>tool / weapon</td>
<td>conquest / being conquered</td>
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We find ourselves in front of a multiplicity of elements that are maintained without a sense of totality. The relations between the fiction of a woman’s ethico-political decision, the gesture of wool beating, and the sarcastic reversals of the poem, can be read, following the table above, both horizontally as well as diagonally. But in both cases it is difficult to read the relationships as those of identification and interiority. The option of escape/struggle, which is a result of Sahar’s fiction, prompts the
ambiguity of Romia’s gesture. Consequently, the stick in Romia’s hand can no longer be perceived simply as an instrument of work, but also as though it were suddenly turned into a weapon. The oscillation of the stick between the tool and the weapon is irreducible and itself has retroactive effects that are not simply those of providing a solution to the ambivalence of Sahar’s literary fragment. Furthermore, it is clear that the choice between escape and struggle is linked to the event of conquest/being conquered, but the possibility of a decision that Sahar’s fiction presents us with is not wholly contained or explained by such an event – escape/struggle does not simply identify a response to the state of conquest/being conquered (The diagonal relations). And, is escape a sign of weakness and struggle a sign of strength, is work simply a sign of submission and battle an expression of strength, or is it possible to read the relations between these terms differently? (The horizontal links)

The conjunction of these elements leaves them in a relation of exteriority with respect to one another. It is impossible to identify among the elements a positive term that would turn their multiplicity into a totality. This, however, does not mean that the sequence is simply open or that it bears less coherence than a sequence in which such a final and finalizing term did exist. It is simply the case that coherence here is of a different kind, an aesthetic coherence, which disengages any strict alignment between the sensible and the intelligible elements of the sequence. It rests on the externality not only of horizontal and diagonal relations, but also on the externality of intervals that connect each term to itself. (The vertical line). From the *anagnorisis* of the necessity of struggle (“Women must...”) and the simultaneous admittance of absence of struggle (“Where is the Revolution?”) there is no direct line leading to the dramatic choice between escape and struggle (since it is precisely the orientation that is missing). Darwish’s poem makes it clear that there is no way to ascribe a clear sense of superiority
to the action of conquest and of inferiority to that of being conquered, for the very sarcasm of the poem has the power to reverse the identities exhibited by a simple opposition. Ultimately, the consistency of this multiplicity is the consistency of a question rather than a consistency of an answer, a problematic consistency of a combinatorial arrangement capable of holding together, by way of an investigative probing, several possible effects of sense without positing a single one of them as primary.

5.6 Recollection and the Revelations of Involuntary Memory

An immediate link between the two women’s voluntary solitude and the involuntary emergence of unprecedented multiplicities that suddenly overwhelms it; the crumbling of tasks and gestures into fragments forming new improper associative chains – the fiction of a new image of work; elements of intelligibility and sense organized by the consistency of a question rather than coherence of an answer, a fiction of a poetic enigma. All of these cases of documentary-fictional superimposition relate to the question of memory that concerns Fertile Memory in its entirety. If they can be understood as local examples of the idea of memory, how can we comprehend the question of memory as it relates to the film as a whole? What is the relationship between the work of documentary fiction and the idea of a fertile memory in Khleifi’s film?

Perhaps it is best to begin by establishing what this relation is not. “Many third world films invoke memory, implicitly or even in their title, Perrault’s Pour la suite du monde, Chahine’s Memory, Khleifi’s Fertile Memory. This is not a psychological memory as faculty for summoning recollections, or even a collective memory as that of an existing people.”47 Following this quote from Gilles Deleuze, we can set out by

47 Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2: Time-Image (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 221.
distinguishing the fiction of memory in *Fertile Memory* from the notion of memory as individual recollection. Memory as recollection (Deleuze uses the term “recollection images”\(^48\)) is in cinema typically accompanied by a series of conventions and introduced with the help of a set of codified operations, which help us recognize the image on the screen as belonging to a psychological reality of an individual’s memory. The strongest conventional technique of introducing recollection images in a film is the flashback.

We know very well that the flashback is a conventional, extrinsic device: it is generally indicated by a dissolve-link, and the images that it introduces are often superimposed or meshed. It is like a sign with the words: ‘Watch out! Recollection!’ It can, therefore, indicate, by convention, a causality which is psychological, but still analogous to a sensory-motor determinism, and, despite its circuits, only confirms the progression of a linear narration.\(^49\)

The purpose of the flashback as a convention is to suspend the present moment’s relation to the future and introduce in its place a series of past moments, represented as a psychological reality, experienced and narrated by the individual protagonist (thus, the importance of a voice-over in flashbacks), but following the very same logic that governs the reality of the present (Deleuze says, “analogous to a sensory-motor determinism”). The fictional use of a flashback replaces the dramatic questions “What should I do? What must happen?” with a retrospective series organized around a rather different problem: “How did I get here?” Action, which connects the present to a future that is yet to occur, is suspended. This is why flashbacks often happen when character have been stopped in their movement, physically incapacitated, made inoperative in one way or another. This lack in their present capability is compensated by a gain of a past as a psychological region of experience, to which the individual character’s present can meaningfully relate.

\(^48\) Ibid., 44-67
\(^49\) Ibid., 48
Collective memory cannot be said to differ in kind from this type of individual recollection. It simply multiplies individual memories, while keeping the basic mechanism of recollection in place. One could say that collective memory expands the scope of recollection by adding up individual memories along the synchronic axis, or by replacing individual memories with symbolic or mythic images of memory, while leaving the very logic of the diachronic axis intact. Both kinds of memory, individual recollection as well as the trans-individual recall of collective memory, do not help us approach the question of memory in Khelifi’s film. In support of this claim, we can simply note the absence of flashbacks in the fiction of Fertile Memory and, even more importantly, the fact that the narrow time frame within which the film was shot is announced at the beginning of the film (April-May 1980), which means that we are prevented from simply suspending the awareness of the present by way of treating the images as representations of a recollected past.

There are no recollection images in Fertile Memory. If the film is oriented toward the past, we have to speak of a past of a different kind, a past that does not have the status of a recollection. The absence of recollection images nevertheless proves useful, for it allows us to address a more fundamental question of memory and time. It points, namely, in the direction of a crucial distinction between memory as something willed – both individual as well as collective recollection belong to the type of voluntary memory – and the theme of memory as something involuntary. The idea of involuntary memory, of a memory that is not recalled, introduces a new possibility of memory and a new relationship between the present and the past that the work of fiction can produce. What is the difference between voluntary and involuntary memory? Voluntary recollection, be it individual or collective, treats past as composed of several presents. When the willed operations of recall relate the present moment to a moment in the past, the latter simply
exists as just another (past) present. In voluntary memory, the past exists as re-presented. Voluntary memory makes the past “doubly relative: relative to the present that it has been, but also to the present with regard to which it is now past.”\textsuperscript{50} What thus escapes recollection is the experience of past in its non-relative sense, past as something absolute, past as such, in itself, or to put it yet another way: not the experience of past as a past present, but of past as coextensive with the present, as the present’s great rival. The idea of involuntary memory refers to the possibility of this more fundamental experience of time, which eludes recollection and representation.

The contiguity of present and past moments in involuntary memory differs crucially from the way the two moments relate to each other in voluntary memory. While in the case of voluntary recollection the present and the past exist in a relation of representation, involuntary memory involves a discovery of a more fundamental unity between the present and the past moment: the profound affinity between the sensation in the present and the image of the past the present gives rise to. This unity, however, serves as the condition for an even more radical difference with which the past suddenly appears as coexistent with the present, not at all re-presented, but rather challenging the present.\textsuperscript{51} The difference between the present and the past is in this case no longer something accidental, it rather becomes an essential difference, a point of differentiation in essence itself, which means that the status of the past can no longer be that of a previous present – i.e., of a moment that was once experienced and can now be recalled as something that in essence is no way differs from the present moment – but rather that now past emerges alongside the present moment as something essentially different from the latter, as something completely unprecedented. As Deleuze says in his discussion of

\textsuperscript{50} Gilles Deleuze, \textit{Proust and Signs} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 60.
Proustian memory triggered by the sensation of the madelaine, “Combray rises up in a form that is absolutely new. Combray does not rise up as it was once present; Combray rises up as past, but this past is no longer relative to the present that it has been, it is no longer relative to the present in relation to which it is now past. … Combray appears as it could not be experienced: not in reality, but in its truth”.

I would like to suggest that it is this type of memory, involuntary memory, that is at stake in the scene described above, in which images of Romia contemplating the photograph of her and her husband in the silence of her living room give rise to a chaotic multiplicity of a wedding. The voluntary solitude in which she performs her recollection (recounting the stories of her relatives) gives way to unwilled images of life as she has never lived it (and which, strictly speaking, could never be voluntarily recollected by her). We are clearly not seeing images of her wedding. These are not images of Romia’s psychological reality. The subjective status of this wedding matters little to us (if you recall, Romia disappears from the couch), just as we cannot really be concerned with the objective referent of the presented multiplicity of the ritual (we find out nothing about the factual status of the wedding). What is at stake is a wedding as such, an experience of a wedding as it could never be had psychologically or objectively, to which the great Proustian phrase applies: the wedding in Fertile Memory is “real without being present, ideal without being abstract.”

52 Ibid., 60-1.

53 The wedding is an important motif in Khleifi’s films. Not only in Wedding in Galilee, but also in Route 181, for instance, where Khleifi and Eyal Sivan document a wedding resembling the one in Wedding in Galilee. Another of Khleifi’s film’s that deals with weddings and marriage is Mixed Marriages in the Holy Land. If the first two of the mentioned films show the wedding as a crucial ritual of Palestinian communal life, ensuring both the continuity of life in a situation of limited movement and occupation as well as the continuity of individual and familial existence with the existence of larger groups and communities within the Palestinian society, then Mixed Marriages… tackles the question of the rare (because prohibited) marriages between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. On the importance of weddings in Palestinian cinema see: Nadia Yaqub, “The Palestinian Cinematic Wedding” Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies, 3.2 (Spring, 2007), 56-85
In another scene, only briefly mentioned above, images of a monastery (a place where Romia used to work) suddenly appear in the midst of images of factory work (where Romia works presently). Here too, the monastery is not simply a matter of a flashback and recollection. The parenthesis that opens up in the images of factory work is an involuntary one. The striking composition of the paradoxical images of the past – shot, as we know, at the same time as images of “the present” – reveals them as more than mere recollections. They are compositions of a past in its irreducible aspect.

This involuntary rising up of the images of the monastery might further explain what I above referred to as the refusal of images of work “to place” other images of
work. There is the dimension of comparison between the situation in the factory and the situation of the monastery, a comparison that proceeds by way of a “recollective” juxtaposition of the factory and the monastery as two presents. (We can ask whether comparison of this sort always relies on a notion of memory as recollective rather than involuntary.) But there is also a more fundamental non-comparative, placeless dimension, a fiction of work which extends beyond comparative operations, making the identity between the factory and the monastery something more profound, while at the same time causing the images of the monastery to stand by themselves, as fragments of an absolute past, infinitely different from the present moment of the factory.

The relationship of involuntary memory and the work of documentary fiction in *Fertile Memory* seems indisputable. Whole sequences of images in the film rise up without justification, as though in absence of a will, triggered by a discovery of some unexpected and profound identity, and suggesting by way of a disconnected series of occurrences the rising up of Palestine itself as absolute difference – a new, more necessary version of Proust’s Combray. Here, we can relate the theme of involuntary memory back into our previous discussion of Khleifi’s rejection of documentary cinema as direct cinema. For Khleifi, the idea of documentary filmmaking, which staked its effect on the ability of cinema to faithfully represent reality was not fundamentally at odds with the logic of televisual objectivity and instant representation and thus became easily integrated into the latter’s much larger circuit. The difference between the fiction of an involuntary memory, which is above all a fiction of memory as something non-representational, and the fiction of memory as willed recollection, can be understood in terms of Khleifi’s own distinction between a capacity to “reveal” reality as opposed to the pitiful ability to “cover” it. When the operations of documentary fiction liken themselves to the operation of involuntary memory, it is in order to construct a fiction of
a memory capable of stretching beyond the duly recorded, recollected, and represented facts of the past. The capacity of documentary is to give us not facts but revelations of the past that are as strong if not stronger than our experience of the present.

5.7 Fertile Memory as a Fiction of Memory

The relationship of the work of fiction to an idea of involuntary memory in *Fertile Memory* allows Khleifi to affirm the fiction of memory as a capacity, a strength, that gives us the past as it exists outside recollection and representation. But there is another question – not so much a question of strength as of restraint – with which this fiction of memory has to reckon. The great visions of involuntary memory, as much as they offer resistance, also present a kind of danger. The strength with which the past they carry comes to rival the logic of the present has the capacity of itself turning into a trap. The past of an involuntary revelation can become entombed in a monumental moment, overwhelm the present, and make us miss the relationship the latter bears to the future. As Khleifi himself points out, both relationships, to the past as well as the future, are important: "*Fertile Memory* was for me the vision of the present towards the past for a better future." The fiction of memory can therefore not be satisfied with unprecedented visions of the past, it has to work on what is perhaps an even more difficult task. It has to undo the architectonic of memory itself in order to liberate in this undoing the moments of an unprecedented future. It is with respect to this question that I find it useful to compare Khleifi’s fiction of (a fertile) memory with the old, medieval practice of invention of memory.

54 Ibid., 51
We should first note that the medieval (as well as classical) *ars memoria* was constituted by a reference to “the mnemonic of places and images (loci and imagines).”\(^5\) The practice of the art of memory relied on two sets of principles. The first set concerned the formation of *loci* or places. The invention of an artificial memory proceeded by imprinting upon the subject’s brain an architectonic space within which an astonishing number of places could then be arranged. The places themselves were carefully spaced, chosen at distinct positions, which allowed the subject moving through the mental architecture to move back and forth between them without confusing their sequence, i.e., without losing the sense of orientation in her recollection. The formation of *loci* required further that they be imagined neither as too big, nor as too small. Neither too obscure or dark, nor too brightly lit, since the light might have blinded the subject and pushed him off the train of reminiscence. The principle of the formation of places in the art of memory was therefore that of careful spacing and ordering, distinction and clarity, moderation in size and lighting of places.

The second set of principles of *ars memoria* related not to the formation of places, but to the formation of images that were set upon the places and functioned as mnemonic causes for the subject. The most important principle consisted in the necessity to create images that were striking, capable of affecting the subject and forcefully awaking the subject’s memory. This is the principle of *imagines agentes*, active images, which should not be opposed so much to images of inactivity and passivity, but rather to vague images, images that are commonplace, and therefore incapable of shaking our thought into movement. This second principle thus refers to the effort of “helping memory by arousing emotional affects through these striking and unusual images,

beautiful and hideous, comic or obscene.” In her famous study, Frances Yates described the idea of artificial memory as that of a “a weirdly populated memory,” in which images “appear to be completely amoral, their function being solely to give an emotional impetus to memory by their personal idiosyncrasy or their strangeness.” What mattered was the potency and the effectivity of the images rather than their content, since the relation of the image’s content to the content of the memory it was supposed to arouse was rather indirect and refracted. When the middle ages turned the classical rhetorical artifices of memory into great memories of Heaven and Hell, which were meant to terrify and instruct, when they imbued images of artificial memory with strong moral intentions – i.e. when ars memoria stopped functioning as a technique used by a limited and privileged group of rhetoricians amongst themselves and became part of a moral-theological pedagogy addressed at the masses – this shift, too, relied on the logic of imagines agentes and the effect that these either sublimely beautiful or violently grotesque visions were expected to have on people’s capacity to remember their way.

The two sets of principles of ars memoria support each other and secure the movement of the subject through the architectonic of memory: the well-organized ordering of places ensures that images the mind uses to remember will not get confused and give rise to weird and improper recollections; the vividness of the images, carefully

56 Ibid., 10
57 Ibid., 16
58 Discussing Thomas Aquinas’ use of artificial memory, Yates writes: “The imagines agentes would have been moralized into beautiful or hideous human figures as ‘corporeal similitudes’ of spiritual intentions of gaining Heaven or avoiding Hell, and memorized as arranged in order in some ‘solemn’ building.” Ibid., 77. See also Yates’ speculation at the end of her discussion of the medieval uses of ars memoria: “My theme has been the art of memory in relation to the formation of imagery. This inner art which encouraged the use of the imagination as a duty must surely have been a major factor in the evocation of images. Can memory be one possible explanation of the medieval love of the grotesque, the idiosyncratic? Are the strange figures to be seen on the pages of manuscripts and in all forms of medieval art not so much the revelation of a tortured psychology as evidence that the Middle Ages, when men had to remember, followed classical rules for making memorable images?” Ibid., 104.
placed, ensures that each *locus* will be effective and that the movement encompassing all the *loci* is justified. This spatial order of places and of the images that occupy them produces a well-organized movement of recollection (sequential, reversible, regularly punctuated, with a beginning and an end…), and thus the time of memory itself as something orderly, a well-ordered fiction of a past.

If *Fertile Memory* can referred to this type of artificial memory, it is solely by pointing out how it diverges from its model. Khleifi’s film, to put it as directly as possible, subverts the two sets of principles of *ars memoria*, it overturns both the order of *loci* and the logic of *imaginæ agentes*.

There is a remarkable scene in *Fertile Memory* in which Romia visits for the first time the plot of land, which her family has lost in 1948, and which is the *locus* of her stubborn insistence. The sequence begins with a long panoramic pan of the land in Galilee with cultivated fields in the foreground and hills in the background mist. A singing female voice comes in: “And you say they hit me/ /And that enemies trampled on my body/ /Even if they cut me up/ /I would still be faithful to you/ /Oh light of my eyes…,” referring to the land, or rather as though the land itself were singing, as the image cuts to Romia and her son Messaud surveying the plot. There are a couple of images of Romia, sitting with a sad expression in the tall grass which covers the land, intercut, first, with an image of an Israeli settlement on a nearby hill and, second, with an image of some farming equipment belonging to the kibbutz that is now in possession of the land.

Here is how Edward Said has described the scene:

There is a scene in which this woman – elderly, large, not well-educated, who works as a seamstress in an Israeli swimsuit factory – visits her land for the first time. She is radiant as she stands there and for the first time feels the ground beneath her. This point of contact between her and the land from which she’s
been alienated – and which she no longer owns, and which the present inhabitants want to buy from her – illuminates the screen like an epiphany.\textsuperscript{59} Said’s is a marvelous description, the only problem is that it almost embarrassingly misses the scene it describes. There is, in fact, no radiance on Romia’s face, we expect in vain signs of a magical contact between the old woman and the land, and it is an incredible stretch of imagination, or perhaps hope, on Said’s part to speak of an epiphanic illumination that, as he says, suddenly fills the screen.

No such thing occurs, because something else is happening in the scene. There is first the surprising realization that this is the very first time after several decades that Romia has seen the plot of land from which she has been alienated in her youth. She comes into contact with the piece of land, which has affected her existence in its totality, but which is simultaneously a piece of land of which she cannot produce a recall. And so there cannot but exist a sharp disjunction between the plot of land where she now stands and the plot of land as it has determined her entire adult life. One a reality that she can now examine, walk its parameters and measure its limits, where she can sit and pick

flowers. The other is a plot abstract in its character, a matter of an existential orientation and sacrifice that finds no support in her recollections. Rather than a contact between Romia and the plot of land, there is a gap between the two plots as they exist for her.

Secondly, these images prepare a confrontation between Romia and Messaud. Messaud is the one who features more strongly in the scene and is given time to develop his “argument,” which is essentially the complaint and a plea of a son stifled by his mother’s stubbornness. It is true, Messaud says, they have deprived us of our right to this land, the land I know very well, but which you are seeing as though for the very first time. But it is senseless for us, for me, to insist on this right. The only language the enemy knows is the one in which right equals might, and since our might is inferior, it is useless for us to expect to have our rights recognized. The time of restoration of right will come, but until then we have to live somehow, I have to be able to plant and grow corn, olive trees, and almond trees like everyone else. And in order to do that we have to exchange this plot, get something in return.

![Figure 21: Messaud and Romiah's Tragic Confrontation](Image)

To this plea on the son’s part, a plea for his right to live and go on with life, Romia, who might, as Said says, be uneducated but is certainly not unintelligent, once again asserts the opposite right, the right not to give up on the plot of land, the right not to move on without the plot of land. In this shot-reverse shot between Messaud and Romia we get a sense of what Khleifi means when he states as the specific problem of his
filmmaking the following questions: “How can I manage, with sound and picture, to make a film that will integrate drama, theater, action, and reportage all into one work?” The reportage scenes of Romia and her son’s excursion to the plot of land and its surrounding environment, suddenly give way to a great dramatic confrontation of tragic proportions, a clash of two irreconcilable but equally justifiable ethical positions. And just as suddenly as this tragic scene appears, it also resolves back into a few reportage-like shots of the surroundings that follow the tragic scene.

What should interest us here is that this dramatic confrontation, in which the status of the plot of land is at stake, turns the locus itself into something contested. It is as though the two images of Messaud and Romia transform the place into something in which conflict inheres, rather than simply being played out upon it. We are clearly dealing with a place that is, in a certain sense, apart from the order of other places in the film. It is privileged to the extent that it is a place of disorder, around which the entire story of Romia’s proletarization and her family’s predicament revolves. On the other hand, however, this place is not a place of sacred detachment. It is itself split; it exists in the form of an irreducible gap (between Romia’s reality and abstract conviction) and in the form of conflict and contestation (between the mother and the son), which are both related to and made possible by the violent reality of a historical breach (the displacement of the Palestinians and the taking over of land by the state of Israel). And so we might say that Khelifi subverts the principle of the formation of places on which the art of memory rests by introducing a new type of place, a place that is neither carefully spaced and ordered along with other loci, since what determines it is its exceptionality and the conflict (or, possibly, the many conflicts) that inheres in it. The

60 “From Reality to Fiction – From Poverty to Expression,” 49.
introduction of an inherently contested place is an introduction of a question about the status of place as such, and it cannot but affect all the places ordered through the operation of the film’s fiction.

As to Khleifi’s subversion of the principle of *imaginæ agentes*, of active and vivid images, the latter does not happen because Khleifi would introduce images that are vague, impotent, or imbued with a weak intentionalilty. The subversion does not consist in making the images less active. On the contrary, Khleifi’s images, every single one of them, displays a great capacity to affect. The subversion of the mnemonic principle of active images lies instead in Khleifi’s ability to find active images where we would typically perceive only the workings of habit, to discover significance of gesture and expressiveness of statement in the insignificance of the everyday, to set up as vivid what conventionally exists as vague. We have seen this with the example of Romia’s stick, where a simple and everyday task was suddenly transformed into a great poetic sign. And even in the scene just described above, in which the confrontation between the mother and the son, which is surely something everyday for them (it happens twice even in the film), is turned into a scene of tragic proportions. We could add to this the opening juxtaposition in which a simple act of taking a few vegetables from a bowl is made equal to the titles describing the history of an entire people; or the scene in which the question of militancy Khleifi addresses at Sahar is posed at the breakfast table, reducing to nothing the spatial distance between ordinary life and the significance of political decisions.

Numerous unimportant movements and events (a lot of them images of work) become the very stuff of the film’s *imaginæ agentes*. We can conclude from this that Khleifi’s subversion of the logic of vivid images consists not in denying the agency of images, but rather in the short-circuiting of the distribution of in/significance which
always governs the sense of agency, in scrambling the distribution of the value of presence/absence that is typically given to certain expressions, objects, and gestures and withdrawn from others. In other words, Khleifi reveals agency in images that no practitioner of *ars memoria* would ever consider placing within the architectonic fiction of his memory.

### 5.8 Conflicted loci, Commonplace imagines agentes

The fiction of memory in *Fertile Memory* introduces two important differences with respect to the principles of mnemonic art. On the one hand, it introduces places that are themselves conflicted, inherently contested, rather than simply serving as so many stages for various dramatic scenes of conflict and contestation. When drama takes place in Khleifi’s film, it is as though the drama were of *loci* in themselves. On the other hand, Khleifi introduces *imagines agentes* that have no legitimate place in the architectonic of the art of memory, since what they reveal is the agency of the insignificant and the affect of the inconsequential. Rather than active images, carefully placed and ordered, Khleifi creates an agency of images that belong to the commonplace, to any place whatsoever and, thus, to no place in particular. Places in conflict with themselves and the commonplace *imagines agentes*.

One way of grasping this would be to say that what we constantly see in *Fertile Memory* is either a “surplus” of places over the logic of images or a “surplus” of images over the ordering of places, a “surplus” of places continuously giving way to a “surplus” of images and vice versa. This is how we can understand Khleifi’s pronounced use of framing, which consists either of static shots (unusual for documentary filmmakers of direct cinema lineage), or of the use of frames within frames (windows and doors). His use of framing, on the one hand, allows Khleifi to isolate a place and thus make it independent from the images that populate it: in this consists, for
instance, the importance of all the shots of land taken through car windows. On the other hand, the pronounced use of frames enables Khleifi to isolate images and thus separate them from places where these images would otherwise be fixed. Here, examples are numerous: the involuntary memories of the wedding and the monastery, the television images watched by Romia’s family as well as by Sahar and her daughter, the progressive close-up during Romia’s lullaby for her grandchild, the great poetic sequence in the middle of the film that includes the completely unexplained image of a beautiful singing woman painting her nails. In all these cases the framing works as though it has to guard the image from being fixed to any particular place. Finally, there is the possibility of the frame simultaneously doing both, such as for example in the use of door frames in Sahar’s apartment, which make us oscillate between the perception of an isolated place and the perception of an isolated image within a single scene. Khleifi’s framing ensures the freedom of places with respect to images, and the freedom of images with respect to places.

The conflicted loci and the commonplace imagines agentes do not so much fit one another as they continuously chase one another through the disordered ordering of the film’s fragments. The movement of the chase goes something like this. First, we see an image of a place. This place might be depopulated or evacuated, but it would be wrong to understand it as empty; it is, strictly speaking, isolated and standing apart from the images that might otherwise come to fill it, as though it were “populated” solely by its own internal conflict. Then, a melody, a voice, a conversation, a chant, or a song will begin, an intrusion of sound whose function is double. Elements of sound will, on the one hand, exhibit and give expression to the internal conflict of the place. Sound must be used, since the conflict inheres in each place prior to the images that come to fill it. Towards the end of the film, for instance, four isolated shots of land are accompanied by
a burst of a chanting crowd: “Even our children who are still breast-feeding will not submit! We shall not give in to force! Neither to the phantom jets!”

But a chant, a melody, a song, and a voice thus emerging from a place will, on the other hand, not simply return to the place. Elements of sound will begin to evoke images and serve as the support of their disassociation from the order of places. Take, for instance, the scene in the middle of the film where a vision of a depopulated old town is first joined by a young woman’s voice singing about her lover, which in its turn evokes, as though the film was dreaming with open eyes, images of groupuscules of women, followed by the two young women beautifying themselves in the interior of their apartments, and finally a group of old women at the cemetery. Or, as another example, take the images of the evacuated classrooms of Bir Zeit University, to which Khleifi adds Sahar’s voice reciting a reworked version of a popular folk fable, which then “causes” multiple images of students sitting and relaxing in the shade of a courtyard to appear on the screen. The fable of a conflict between a hen and a cock, a fable written in the form of the hen’s complaint against the violent injustice that befell her and the arrogant ignorance with which the cock has watched it all happen, severs these images of students, which seem to be strictly divided into groups of girls and groups of boys, from the mere reportage-like factual account of a university on strike, as though they were suddenly turned into images of the eternal conflict between the two sexes.

5.9 A Pedagogy of Memory?: A Return to the Double Affirmation of Political Cinema

Both aspects of memory I tried to describe in the sections above (5.6-5.8), the “revelations” of involuntary memory and the subversion of the architectonic of memory, introduce a dimension of the infinite in the finite construction of memory. Involuntary
memory stretches beyond the finite limits of individual and collective experience and introduces the past as an unprecedented novelty, while the subversion of the architectonic of memory undoes the carefully organized space within which the finite temporal exercise of memory is supposed to take place to introduce into it the infinite disordering elements of conflict and commonplaceness.

It is clear that neither involuntary memory nor the subversion of mnemonic architectonic can be thought of as an aid to memory. On the one hand, involuntary revelations are by definition something beyond individual recollector’s control and mastery. They rise up as unexpected consequences of a contingent encounter with some or other element in the sensible world. They are the very opposite of a mnemotechnic exercise that always depends on a willed (even voluntaristic) organization of sensible elements in space and time. On the other hand, the subversion of an architectonic of memory introduces a fiction of a “will” that is inseparable from the existence of conflicted places and the agency of commonplace images. As though a will whose force sustains the construction of memory could actively desire a disordering of the mnemonic architecture and renounce the privileged agency of sublime images, turning the very status of subjectivity that exists as a correlate of will and belongs to the specific fiction of memory into something problematic, non-transparent, and behaving in an unpredictable manner.

Revelation and subversion, the two aspects of the infinite in the finite construction of memory, are inexhaustible. In conclusion, I would simply like to draw out a couple of consequences that follow from this. These final points, hopefully, return us to the problems outlined at the very beginning of this chapter, related as they are to the two affirmations in the configuration of political cinema: the idea of cinema and the
relationship of this idea to the political existence of a country and appearance of the people.

1. *Fertile Memory’s* refusal to use the artifice of memory along the model of an edifying and instructive device guiding the subject in recollection also means the refusal of the idea of memory as something instrumentalizable, as essentially a technology. It is hard to see, for example, to what extent memory could, for Khleifi, ever perform a didactic function. The idea of a *fertile* memory seems inherently anti-didactic, in so far as this memory does not offer any secure and univocal path along which the meaning of expressions, gestures, and stories of the past can be meaningfully recovered in the present. Relations between these various elements are underdetermined, an aspect that can be related to Khleifi’s affirmation of cinema as a kind of writing “Literature can combine all these notions. In a novel, a documentary description can follow a fictional scene and then a poetic evocation of one detail: light, color, movement, without creating a problem for the reader. I think that in our case, the only way to confront the power of commercial cinema is to use a camera as you would use a pen.” There is thus an attempt, which refers back to Alexandre Astruc’s well-known notion of the *camera stylo*, to bring cinema closer to literature, or even to a form of the essay, to approximate with cinema the capacity of literature as a kind of disordered order in which the question of the agency of different forms of expression can be kept at a distance from the problem of their hierarchical distribution. With the emancipation of images’ agency from the question of their hierarchic ordering (the commonplace) and with the multiplication of the paths that the fiction of memory allows for (conflicted places), any idea of didacticism that might be implied by the invention of memory withers.

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61 “From Reality to Fiction – From Poverty to Expression,” 49.
Jacques Rancière has observed in relation to the concept of documentary fiction that, while the latter continuously works at undoing the conventional didacticism of classical fiction film (the implicit didacticism of the reality effect), it itself often falls into the temptation of introducing its own operations as a new form of didacticism and mastery. Rancière’s example is the use of a voice-over commentary, which comes to accompany the documentary fiction’s disordered order. Speaking of Chris Marker, whose films represent for him a superb example of what documentary fiction can do, Rancière says:

And yet he [Marker] falls prey, like Godard but even more so, to an obvious paradox: he feels compelled to punctuate all these ‘images that speak for themselves,’ as well as the interlacing of series of images that make cinema into a meta-language and into a ‘poem of the poem,’ ‘with an imperious voice-over commentary’ [my emphasis] that tells us what it is that they ‘say’…. ‘Documentary’ cinema in particular has always been caught between the ambiguities of cinéma-vérité, the dialectical turns of montage, and the imperialism of the voice of the master [my emphasis], usually off, that either lines the unfolding of heterogeneous images with its melodic continuity, or gives a step by step explanation of the meaning of the images’ silent presence or elegant arabesques.\(^{62}\)

In relation to this statement by Rancière and to strengthen our case for Khleifi’s anti-didactic idea of cinema, we can state that one of the most important gestures Khleifi makes in his documentary filmmaking is undoubtedly to do away with the use of this kind of “imperious voice-over”. The disordered order of Fertile Memory is not accompanied by a masterful off-screen commentary that could come in and tell us what this constant movement of heterogeneous material means.\(^{63}\) The fiction of memory does not seek to restore memory to meaning. But then the difficulty becomes that of thinking a political filmmaker’s idea of cinema at a distance from the notion of political documentary as essentially a form of didacticism. How is it possible not to give up on the relationship between images and signs of political cinema, on one hand, and an idea

\(^{62}\) Film Fables, 168

\(^{63}\) “From my first TV film, I had the voice-over reduced.” Ibid., 50
of emancipation, on the other, while at the same time letting go of didacticism as the privileged figure of this relation?

2. If the first “consequence” related to Khleifi’s idea of cinema, the second leads us to the question of the relationship between Khleifi’s cinema and the question of a country/appearance of the people. How does the disordered order, the infinite within the finite of fertile memory, relate to the existence of the Palestinian people? Perhaps the way to approach this question would be to examine the relationship of Khleifi’s fiction of memory to that other idea of memory which is also a configuration of something finite and something infinite. Traumatic memory, too, presents us with a phenomenon whose emergence as something restricted refers to what extends beyond it as its unsymbolizable (infinite) limit. The comparison between Khleifi’s fiction of a fertile memory and traumatic memory is useful since trauma plays such an important role in our contemporary situation as the dominant matrix for linking the notion of the people to the question of historical experience. To put it as simply as possible, the people’s historical existence as a forceful and rebellious subjectivation has in our contemporary situation been almost completely replaced by a notion of the people whose relation to history is primarily that of trauma.

Peter Osborne has recently suggested that in our contemporary “culture of memory” the idea of memory dominates over any thinking about history. Osborne claims that the contemporary model of cultural memory relies on a metaphorically expanded notion of memory (i.e., memory as something that can account for experience beyond the level of the individual), which is based on psychoanalytic notions of
mourning, melancholy and trauma. For him, the problem lies in this substitution of memory for history as the very horizon of collective experience in time. The idea of history becomes possible only through a sharp differentiation from (or even a negation of) memory and, thus, the reappearance of memory as the model for historical representation necessarily limits our understanding of history and our agency as subjects of history. But there is another question that can be posed in relation to all of this, a question that Osborne in his astute analysis does not address. The question is, namely, what idea of memory serves as a model for historical representation? For instance, is the idea of memory essentially that of traumatic memory or can there be another idea of memory, an idea of memory capable of reinvigorating historical representation?

In *Palestinian Cinema*, their very resourceful book, Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi describe PLO documentary cinema, which they call Socialist Realist, as revolving around the same narrative of trauma and restoration, functioning as a fixed pattern that reappears in various films and is repeated many times over in each one. This pattern leads from images of tranquility (orchards, trees, vegetation – even if only within the refugee camp itself) to a sudden, totally unexpected bombardment. Scenes of destruction and death follow the bombardment, eventually to be replaced by shots of Palestinian fighters training, battles, or symbolic depictions of rifles, hand-grenades and shot-guns. Ostensibly, this structure describes individual accidents, but since the same footage so persistently duplicates itself, using similar shots of bombardments, ruins, and the dead, that impression becomes abstract.

While *Fertile Memory* does not evade the question of the traumatic event (*Nakba*, during which Romia’s family loses the plot of land, is a crucial event for the film), Khleifi’s fiction of memory can nevertheless be opposed to the schema of an obsessive narrative

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64 See Peter Osborne’s lecture “The Truth Will Be Known When the Last Witness is Dead,” available on-line at: http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2010/05/peter-osborne-the-truth-will-be-known-when-the-last-witness-is-dead-history-not-memory/ (Accessed on June 18, 2010).

65 *Palestinian Cinema*, 60.
of a country and a people constructed around a vanishing traumatic center. An 
opposition that is all the more impressive if we remember how closely the invention of 
memory, the emergence of memory as artifice, is associated to the happening of a 
catastrophic, traumatic event. But what exactly constitutes Khleifi’s difference from a 
traumatic model? I would say that it does not consist in some facile denial of the 
importance of trauma for memory, but rather in the modification of the relationship 
between the memory and trauma. As a final disastrous event, a calamitous end to a state of 
well-being, catastrophe produces in the eyes of an obsessive “reading” the need to 
restore, to return things and places to themselves, to bring the people and the country 
back to their lost identities. But there is a possibility of what, in opposition to the 
obcessive reading, I would like to call an atomistic “reading.” Such a “reading,” not 
having and not looking for a place, exists in the register of memory only as a fiction. Its 
effect is to produce in us a need to read catastrophe not as an end, but as “the first 
stromphe of a poem of love” (Jean-Luc Godard). Memory as a friend of the fall, which 
disperses all the elements of history. Not to recollect the falling atoms of history. Not to 
secure us against the anxiety of the void through which this multiplicity falls, but rather 
to help us see the “non-assignable or non-localizable” moments of declination through

66 The story of the invention of *ars memoria*, told by Cicero in *De Oratore*, relates how a roof of a banquet hall 
collapsed on the guests gathered for a symposium at the house of a Thessalian nobleman named Scopas. The 
collapsed roof crushed Scopas and all of his guests beyond recognition. Present at the banquet, there to 
entertain the guest, is the poet Simonides, who manages to escape the disaster. And it is the poet Simonides 
who, unable to recognize guests directly by looking at their mutilated bodies and faces, restores them to 
their proper places by remembering the places they occupied during the banquet. The art of memory, the 
principles of *loci* and *imagines*, is invented as a means of restoring identity to what has been made 
unrecognizable by a traumatic event.

67 “[T]he *clínamen* is by no means a change of direction in the movement of an atom, much less an 
indetermination testifying to the existence of a physical freedom. It is the original determination of the 
direction of movement, the synthesis of movement and its direction which relates one atom to another. 
*Incerto tempore* does not mean undetermined but non-assignable or non-localisable. ... There is a 
deciliation here which also forms the language of thought; there is something here in thought which 
testifies to a limit of thought, but on the basis of which it thinks: faster than thought, ‘in a time smaller...’.” 
Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 184.
which the atoms of history are affected and mutually determined. “Memory doesn’t remember but receives the history raining down on it.”
Conclusion: Political Cinema and Post-Historicity
6. The Meaning of “Post-1989”: The Case of New Romanian Cinema

The central focus of this dissertation has been the encounter between cinema and modern revolutionary politics. The attempt has been to describe three different examples of the way cinema configured its relationship to the sequence of political innovation in the twentieth century. That every historical mode of politics is sequential means, first, that it occurs as a break. Second, that it unfolds through a set of categories that express the immanent capacity of collective thought, which for us were three: the revolutionary event, the proletariat, and the question of a country. And third, it means that a mode of politics can also become exhausted and come to an end. In the present chapter, which takes up the case of the new Romanian cinema, and which will serve as a conclusion to the dissertation, I hope not so much to summarize the work done so far as to offer for it a kind of negative proof in reverse.

The “proof” will be a negative one, insofar as the new Romanian cinema can be considered a distinctly post-1989 phenomenon,1 where 1989 does not mark simply the fall of a set of East European socialist states, but is also understood as the last gasp in the historical mode of revolutionary politics. “Post-1989” in this sense suggests two different meanings. On the one hand, “Post-1989” signifies the exhaustion of an entire historical mode of human emancipation, the coming to end of a sequence whose great events included the French and Haitian Revolutions, the Paris Commune, October Revolution, and May 1968. On the other hand, “Post-1989” names the situation in which no categories of some new historical mode of politics are as yet visible. “Post-1989” has to

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1 I take new Romanian cinema to be the name not so much of a veritable new national cinematic movement as simply the work of a generation of young Romanian filmmakers (born between the late 1960s and the end of 1970s), whose first features began to appear immediately after the year 2000 and whose international recognition has to do with their success on the international festival circuit. To these directors (Cristi Puiu, Corneliu Porumboiu, Cristian Nemescu, Radu Muntean, Cristian Mungiu, etc.), I would add the influence and the work of a few older directors, among whom Lucian Pintilie is arguably the most important one.
do with the sense of finding ourselves lodged between two historical sequences – one seemingly over, the other seemingly not yet begun – and thus faced with a depressing sense of not having a historicity of our own. In such a dispersive situation cinema’s encounter with the categories of revolutionary politics will, of course, be very different from the more affirmative sense we have explored so far. Rather than the appearance of the question of a country in the form of an unprecedented memory (Khleifi), we will find here that the space and time of the question have narrowed and that what ensues is a sense of uncertainty. In place of the figure of the worker, with which cinema was able to symbolize the existence of the proletarian masses (Chaplin), we will instead find the faltering of the very operation of figuration. And rather than likening cinema to the logic of a great revolutionary event (Eisenstein), we will find here the appearance of great historical turmoil in the form of a Non-event.

The approach proposed here is admittedly a one-sided one: to read what is there in this exciting new cinema purely as a sign of a very determinate absence. It means to look in the images of new Romanian cinema for an encounter with revolutionary politics that one knows is missing, to gather up the traces of a sense of historicity that one is sure has already waned.

6.1 A Reading Different From Our Own: Nostalgia and Naturalism

In a reading different from the one I am trying to perform here, were one to describe the post-1989 manifestations of new Romanian cinema in positive rather than determinately negative terms, one could point to it as a kind of dialectical unity of nostalgia and naturalism. The post-1989 lack of historicity is manifested in the nostalgic view taken by the new Romanian films that deal with the so-called “Golden Age” of Causescu’s Romania. Films such as How I Spent the End of the World (Catalin Mitulescu,
2006), 4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days (Cristian Mungiu, 2007), and especially Mungiu’s 2009 Tales of the Golden Age belong to the specific genre of East European nostalgia film, which has so far been analyzed most exhaustively in relation to the German Ostalgie, but is certainly part of a larger phenomenon of Eastern European cultural longing for the communist past, whose emergence can loosely be dated in the end of the 1990s. The emergence of nostalgia in Romanian cinema and the relationship to the past nostalgia signals become clearly visible when one compares these films with the confrontational juxtaposition and, above all, the savage analysis of a hard to grasp continuity between the pre- and the post-1989 Romania in the two remarkable films Lucian Pintilie made after the fall of the socialist regime (The Oak, 1992; Too Late, 1996). Different in spirit from Pinitilie’s films, the appearance of nostalgia around year 2000 testifies to a large shift in collective mood, a qualitative transformation of the distance that separates the present and the state socialist past. Nostalgia is primarily as a sign that the past has loosened its bite, that it is no longer understood to be exerting any direct pull on the


3 Constantin Parvelescu, who makes an argument for the “critical nostalgia” of some of the new Romanian productions, usefully summarizes this shift towards a more “moderate” and nostalgic relationship to the past: “After an initial concern with strong contrasts, tough and allegedly uncompromising moral scrutiny, post-1989 Eastern European cinema toned down its rhetoric. This phenomenon was especially manifest in Romanian productions [...]. Whereas the Romanian cinema of the 1990s was a cinema of tragic satires, intense verbal and visual violence, and political allegories, the hiatus of the year 2000, the “anno zero” of Romanian film (in which no film was produced), brought into theaters features about everyday life. These films deftly balanced suffering and nostalgia, squalor and dignity […]. Films like 4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days (Cristian Mungiu, 2007) or The Way I Spent the End of The World (Catalin Mitulescu, 2006) aimed at a material recuperation of temps perdu, a rebutted world, ethically, politically and intellectually assigned to the trashcan of history…. Compared to Romanian productions of the 1990s, the new films narrated in a less demonstrative way, employing a wider spectrum of grays (or color) in their moral judgment of the past. The films of the 1990s—The Oak (Lucian Pintilie, 1992), Luxury Hotel (Dan Pita, 1992), The Earth’s Most Beloved Son (Serban Marinescu, 1993), and The Conjugal Bed (Mircea Daneliuc, 1993)—offered angry denunciations, concerned with the perversion of basic human values. […]While in the 1990s films, almost every memory of the communist world seems grotesquely perverted and becomes an object of ridicule, 4 Months... starts by depicting a corner of this world as an oasis of human dignity.” Constantin Parvelescu, “The Cold World Behind the Window: 4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days and Romanian cinema’s Return to Real-Existing Communism, http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/4months/index.html (Accessed 7/25/2010).
present situation, and can thus be turned into a compensatory object of aesthetic contemplation.⁴

A phenomenological description of the East European nostalgia film would have to include a reference to its own kind of “glossiness” and displacement of history by style,⁵ visible in the attempts to recreate the socialist object world – the whole set of communist produced commodities and brand names, which evoke the period “fashions” and conjure up the distinctly socialist attempt at leisure and consumer culture. There would, of course, have to be an account of the socialist car – Dacias in the case of Romania – and of Stalinist architecture, as well as of the rare arrival of things from the capitalist West, like the miracle of a pair of jeans, or a VCR that is immediately turned into a new communal experience. The focus in these films is almost exclusively on the everyday. They offer a kind of false ethnography of a life-world at a distance from the State, in which matters of History are most often reflected in the mirror of the humorous and the absurd. The somber spectacle of Politics, typically appearing in the form of a television image, passes through the carnival of everyday life but affects it really only tangentially. The everyday is cyclical and fatalist, presented as a domain of play and subversion, of petty deviancy, budding sexual desires, small betrayals and denunciations that typically serve the interest of moral ambiguity, which is then set up against the monolithic and Manichean paranoia of the bureaucratic Institution. In such a world the West can still function as an authentic fantasy of Freedom, which can be achieved through acts of courage and transgression (like crossing the heavily patrolled

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⁴ “Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia’s power…. This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire.” Linda Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” quoted in: Enns, “The Politics of Ostalgie,” 476.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 20.
Danube in the middle of the night), and is as a category fundamentally different from the reality of the post-socialist freedom, which is essentially that of the commodity.  

Finally, it strikes me that, perhaps unlike in Hollywood nostalgia films, in the case of new Romanian cinema nostalgia is primarily a nostalgia for scarcity, a phenomenon that some would think is a terrible and even unavoidable outcome of any planned economy, but which in the case of East European nostalgia film connotes something more positive, similar to security and comfort. For, the theme of scarcity has the ability to organize desires by simplifying them to their most essential. It triggers in us the “remembrance” of a world in which a wish is as indistinguishable from need as satisfaction is from necessity, making, as a result of this reduction, even the most insignificant acts and objects figure as meaningful parts of the social economy. Most importantly, the situation of scarcity serves as a dramatic condition for representing the ingenuity of human survival, making visible an informal world of barter and exchange, which in its own turn often functions as an ersatz image of communal solidarity and of collectivity as such.

It is not difficult to see how all of this performs what Fredric Jameson has described as one of the central functions of nostalgia film. Nostalgia films “restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate the missing past is now refracted through the iron law

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6 The films’ nostalgia for a certain idea of “the West,” should, however, not be confused with another way in which “the West” is present in these films. One could, namely, argue that the formal aspects of nostalgia (the pastiche, glossiness,...) are themselves coded as coming from the West. Following Svetlana Boym’s analysis, it is possible to speak of a phenomenon of “glocal nostalgia,” a hybrid form of nostalgia, which “incorporates global culture into the local context”. “Glocal nostalgia” describes well the effectiveness of a film such as Tales from the Golden Age (2009). The latter, namely, draws as much of its appeal from the slickness and timeliness of the (global) language of advertising, as it does from the minute, seemingly unimportant (local) stories that are introduced and framed by it (see especially the use of the opening credit sequence and the title sequences that introduce each of the episodes). The film expects one to get at least as much pleasure from imagining the mind that has so successfully managed to package “the concept” as a whole as one does from the idiosyncrasies of the film’s characters and their actions. See, Boym, “Nostalgia and Post-Communist Memory,” 67.
of fashion change and the emergent ideology of generation." Yet what is perhaps even more interesting for us in Jameson’s analyses of nostalgia film, is his claim about the necessity of the latter’s “dialectical relationship […] with an opposing and contrasted aesthetic.” It seems as though the waning of historicity nostalgia films respond to has to trigger the production of yet another type of image, which is constituted by a set of features markedly distinct from those exhibited by nostalgia film. In our case, this contrasting aesthetic is not supplied by some other contemporaneous current of filmmaking, but by new Romanian cinema itself. The latter could, in fact, be grasped as a dialectical unity of nostalgic images of the past, on the one hand, and, on the other, the contrasting gritty naturalism of films that deal with the present: Stuff and Dough (Cristi Puiu, 2001), Fury (Radu Muntean, 2002), Death of Mr. Lazarescu (Cristi Puiu, 2005), 12:08 East of Bucharest (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006), and Police, Adjective (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2009).

The naturalist treatment of reality could be our example of how in the aesthetic opposite to nostalgia film “the form is called to convey specific stances toward the content and as it were to connote its essential features.” The naturalist images of the new Romanian cinema would then, in opposition to the idealized images of the past, proclaim a basic commitment to making visible the rather unspectacular present reality.

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7 Ibid., 19.
9 The short films – C Block Story (2004) and Marilena From P7 (2006) – and the single feature film – California Dreamin’ (2007) – by the late Cristian Nemescu would perhaps form a subgenre within this contrasting aesthetic, insofar as they combine the latter’s naturalism with a set of operations that belong more to the music video and manifest themselves not only in the technically sophisticated style of cutting but also in the relative autonomy and expressive privileging of sound over image.
10 Ibid., 219. In the case of nostalgia film, the relationship between the form and the content of the image functions in the opposite manner. The style of nostalgia connotes a detachment between the appearance of the image and the reality that it represents. It is across this distance, which constitutes the specific superficiality of the nostalgic image, an attitude that invests only in the outermost membrane of what is presented to it, that the vague emotional and sentimental investment characteristic of nostalgia can then develop.
of Romania: the post-socialist transition into capitalism as a kind of return to nature after an unsuccessful social experiment; the rapid pace of privatization with its attendant phenomena of growing social inequality, endemic corruption, and new forms of "economic" violence and exposure; emergence of new particularist hatreds but also of new consumerist boredom; production of various new grotesque types of the market individual; and the disassembling and destitution of public spaces, services, and institutions. The point being, however, that both the nostalgic as well as the naturalist gaze grow from the same non-historical ground: one clinging to the pure images of the past (history without a present) and the other to images of pure, inexplicable, and brutal positivity of life (a present without history) – two different yet dialectically reconcilable figures of post-historicity, which I have tried to described with the use of “post-1989”.

As indicated above, however, what interests me in new Romanian cinema is neither its presentless pastiche of the past, nor its factography of the present without the past. It is, I believe, necessary to see if more can be found in new Romanian cinema than images of nostalgia and naturalism. What should interest us is how to address the absent sense of historicity, which nostalgia and naturalism seek to compensate us for, more directly; to see if new Romanian cinema allows us to think on its own terms the gap between our history and our present. An old Stalinist housing complex, when slightly retouched, will appeal to our sense of nostalgia; and when captured by a shaky hand-held camera, it might satisfy our naturalist needs. But apart from these to modes, it also has a third possible mode of existence in the image: as a kind of ghostly, negative apparition of the past within the present. In the same way, there is perhaps a third way to read the new Romanian cinema. Following this third path means to look for specific, determinate absences. For us, the absences will be those of a country, of the proletariat,
and of the event. They lead us back to – or better, they do not let us leave – the problematic of political cinema.

6.2 The Uncertainty of a Country

Let us start by considering the two strange road movies by Cristi Puiu, *Stuff and Dough* (2001) and *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005), two crucial films of new Romanian cinema. It is not a coincidence that both of these films are road films. The action of *Stuff and Dough* takes place mostly on a highway trip from Constanta to Bucharest and back, undertaken by a group of three youths (two male and one female) trying to fulfill an order from a local criminal. *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* unfolds in the streets of the Romanian capital, where, on what seems a particularly ominous night, the dying Lazarescu is driven from one overflowing hospital to another in an emergency van. Whatever the various dialectical oppositions that structure the genre of the road film – the dialectic of a global movement and local points of rest, of desire and law, etc. – these oppositions can also allow for the articulation of the question of a country whose territory is being traversed in the film. The question of a country can emerge at the intersection of the kinetic element of the film and the geography of the place which the film lets us see and hear. The vehicle (a car or a motorbike), the privileged object at the center of this intersection, turns not only “into a human or spiritual reality,”11 but more precisely can become the moving and movable point of thought signaling an encounter between the artistic concerns of cinema and the political existence of a country.

It is thus necessary to assume that a car (or some other vehicle) will have a metaphysical and a political significance, and that the way a film will show us the reality of a car’s movement can tell us something about the certainties and uncertainties of the

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particular geography through which this car moves. In fact, we can begin by isolating
two distinct ways cinema makes the car into a vehicle for the unfolding of thought. On
the one hand, the car introduces thought by functioning as the operator of deceleration.
By transforming the exposure of being-in-transport into an interiority, the car turns the
mute movement of circulation of bodies into a situation of dialectical speech. This is the
(Platonic) option outlined by Alain Badiou in the following passage:

The usage of car sequences in Kiarostami or even Oliveira’s films works on an
overwhelming stereotype of contemporary imagery, thanks to which the opening
scene of two films out of every three is a car sequence. The operation consists of
making an action scene into the place of speech, of changing what is a sign of
speed into a sign of slowness, of constraining what is an exteriority of movement
to become a form of reflexive or dialogic interiority.\textsuperscript{12}

Here, the car serves the interiority of thought. It is the tool of dialectical restraint which
cuts out a territory for the happening of an idea amidst the swarming chaos of human
communication.

On the other hand, however, the car can become a vehicle of thought in a way
almost exactly opposite to the one suggested by Badiou. In Jean-Luc Nancy’s description
of the same director that serves as the example for Badiou (Abbas Kiarostami), the car is
not understood as an interiority, but rather stands for the voiding of interiority. The car
“a locus without a real inside,”\textsuperscript{13} says Nancy, because what it sets up is not at all the
operation of reflexivity and Platonic dialogue, but rather that of an ecstatic opening of a
look. Shots from the car set up the initial gap, like the rising of an eyelid, with which a
look opens onto the world. The car is not the medium of speech as in Badiou, but the
medium of sight.\textsuperscript{14} It functions as “the frame of the image,” the window that enables our

\textsuperscript{12} Alain Badiou, \textit{Infinite Thought}, 85.
\textsuperscript{13} Jean-Luc Nancy, \textit{The Evidence of Cinema}, 64
\textsuperscript{14} “Kiarostami often lays down the screen, and the film with it of course, right away as an opening onto a
space or a world: so, for instance, ... the car windows in \textit{Life and Nothing More} and \textit{A Taste of Cherry}, which
open the film (and lead it) and then, almost without stopping, go on giving and measuring its opening (its
look).” Ibid., 14.
access to the image and yet at the same time distances us from it, so that in our approach to the image we are always at a distance from ourselves.\textsuperscript{15} This means that the truth of the car’s movement will not be found in slowness and deceleration. On the contrary, the movement’s truth will have to be correlative to the idea of the look as something ecstatic, and will thus only be found in the element of movement that is both immanent to movement and in excess of it, toppling movement into always more movement (something Nancy renders with the help of Deleuze’s concept of the Open from \textit{Cinema 1}).

The car that rides (rolls) through the films as well as through the olive trees is also a kinematic truth in two ways: first, as a box that looks; second, as incessant motion. But what is the motion that, in this way, is cinema (and neither its object nor what it represents or restores, as goes the belief of those who see cinema wholly as an “animated feature”)? Motion is that which “only occurs if the whole is neither given nor giveable.” [Deleuze] Motion is not a displacing or a transferring, which may occur between given places in a totality that is itself given. On the contrary, it is what takes place when a body is in a situation and a state that compel it to find its place, a place it consequently has not had or no longer has. I move (in matter or mind) when I am not-ontologically—where I am—locally. Motion carries me elsewhere but the “elsewhere” is not given beforehand: my coming will make of it the “there” where I will have come from “here”.\textsuperscript{16}

The car in cinema can therefore be involved in two very different operations. On the one hand, there is the slowing down of motion, evacuation of movement in order to construct a space of interiority which turns the car into a place of dialectical exchange (Badiou). On the other hand, the use of a car hollows out the space of interiority in order to arrive at pure kinematism, the aspect of movement which is real, insofar as it is in excess over any order of places and testifies to the ecstatic truth of our existence (Nancy). Deceleration-interiority-speech; kinematism-window-look. These are the two ways cinema can turn the car into a vehicle of thought. What they share is that with them

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 70.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 26-8.
cinema extracts the space-time and the movement of a means of transportation from its functional and technological installment in communication and circulation and turns it into a means of expression. Cinema turns the car into something that has the capacity to transport us into the heart of a question.

With this brief discussion we now have the necessary coordinates with which to evaluate the use of the car in Puiu’s films. We have to observe that it works neither as the kinematic window of Nancy’s nor does it function as the Badiouian “dialogic interiority”. First, while Nancy’s car is essentially a window, Puiu’s cars are like windowless monads. They have nothing to do with any kind of opening onto the world. The youths’ look outside into the Romanian countryside in Stuff and Dough offers only a brief respite in action which concentrates everything inside the car, while the emergency vehicle of Mr. Lazarescu meanders through the streets of Bucharest at night, giving us only an indistinct image of a barely visible world, which seems not to exist for the characters traveling inside it. The kinematic element of an absent totality that, according to Nancy, liberates movement from its assignment to the order of places, is missing as well. The movement in both films is well-determined in advance. It is a movement very explicitly dominated by places. In Stuff and Dough the order makes clear where the goods have to be delivered and where the youths have to return. And if there is swerving from the itinerary laid out by the local Mafioso, it is only to fulfill another order, which is that of the parents who want the youths to purchase some goods that can be sold at their little grocery store. It all unfolds as though the young protagonists have no impulse to a movement of their own. The movement between the different hospitals in Mr. Lazarescu is even more restricted (there are only so many hospitals in Bucharest who can receive the dying old man), creating a sense of a closed, inescapable circuit whose coordinates could be drawn with a single simplistic gesture. Much more than the
movement of a question these two films outline a movement that resembles a pre-given
answer.

Second, this extremely restricted sense of totality that constrains movement,
coupled with the focus on the inside of the car, makes for a sense of intense pressure
(intensified by the constant and threatening intrusions of the radio and especially the
cell-phone). The situations demand speed – to deliver the goods in Stuff and Dough, to
save the old man’s life in Mr. Lazarescu – so that the interiority of the car, on which the
films focus, has very little to do with the slowness required by Badiou. If there is any
slowness, it should be understood as the failure to go fast enough, caused by the
technological and infrastructural backwardness that serves as the condition of
movement. In other words, the car might be a windowless monad, an irreducible
interiority, but it does not for that reason manage to reflect the universe within its walls.
As a consequence of the pressure of speed and the ensuing absence of time, the dialogic
element of speech devolves and collapses. The youths’ pointless conversations in the
earlier film turn eventually into a more open conflict that results in the breaking down of
their friendship. And the disintegration of their friendship in turn exposes them even
more brutally to the commands of the local criminal and the disorientation of their
existence. In Mr. Lazarescu the conversations move between the clichéd, the
repetitiveness of complaint and faulty self-diagnosis, and the fragmented, inconsistent
reminiscences of the old man. Rather than a sign of reflexivity, it is speech, the dialogue,
itsel that maintains the characters in a relation of dehumanized and instrumentalized
“exteriority”. And if it is true, as many have noted, that new Romanian cinema has
managed to put carefully constructed dialogue into the center of its achievement, then it
also has to be added that it does so in order to show the dislodging of speech and
dialogue from its proximity to the dialectical capacity of thought.
All of which suggests an extreme narrowing down of the possibility of thought and a profound sense of uncertainty, which, I would argue, has to be seen as collective and pertaining to the question of Romania’s political existence. A more extensive analysis of the absence of both the dialogic and the kinematic element in the movement of Puiu’s films would have to relate these very limited and local symptoms of uncertainty to at least two kinds of tension by which this uncertainty seems to be fed and which many of the new Romanian films explicitly thematize. On the one side, there is the tension between the provinces and Bucharest as the privileged center and the capital of the country (Stuff and Dough; How I Spent the End of the World; 12:08 East of Bucharest; Boogie; Police, adjective). On the other, however, this first tension is subsumed by a larger one in which Romania itself becomes the province and the West comes to figure as the absent, but for that reason all the more powerful, center towards which everything has to more or less willingly turn (Niki and Flo; Occident; Liviu’s Dream; Ryna).

Cristian Nemescu’s unfinished California Dreamin’ (2007) – in which a rogue railway station chief in a small middle-of-nowhere Romanian town, in open disregard for the official Bucharest policy, stops a train of American NATO soldiers and military equipment on its way to the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia – manages to combine these two levels most successfully. The film makes clear that the transfer of the center of gravity from the Romanian State, which now appears totally in shambles, inefficient, and as distant as the State of Japan, towards the Western countries and their supranational alliances, means also a profound reconfiguration of the local on at least three different levels: (a) it means a radical transformation of desires, both intimate and collective, which Nemescu stages primarily with the help of his female characters and their encounters with the American soldiers. The magic realist motif of electrical short-circuiting, which sparks out of the sexual contact between the main female protagonist
of the film (the teenage daughter of the railway station chief) and her foreign lover (the young American soldier) and causes a complete black out of the town, could certainly be read as an expression of some unreconstructed ideology of sensuality and passion, but then this itself would have to understood as a metaphor for the unmooring of desire from the familiarity of bodies and the communal coordinates which used to contain it, reorganized as this desire is by impulses that come from what is essentially elsewhere. 

(b) The shift means also a radical transformation of relations of power within Romanian society. I should mention here only the most obvious, which is the crisis of the heroic and patriarchal trope of masculinity, from which so many of the male characters of new Romanian cinema seem to suffer. In Nemescu’s film there is a motif, which is reserved precisely for this: the sudden nosebleed that strikes the male protagonist faced with the sight of an inaccessible woman. (c) The transfer of the center of gravity, finally, means a profound and difficult impasse in any process of political subjectivation. It is as though the latter must now pass through something external to the immanent capacity of the people only to hit a wall of impossibility on its return. In California Dreamin’ the whole town is dynamized by the arrival of the NATO train. The presence of the Westerners gives the town (personified in the comic figure of its mayor) courage to stand up to the railway station chief, also somewhat of a local Don, who is holding the entire town’s business and politics in his grip. There is a sudden burst of collective life, which climaxes in the festival organized for the foreign troops (the date of the town’s anniversary is pragmatically moved for this purpose) and the town-hall meeting at which resistance to the corrupt chief and his posse is for the first time publicly declared. The NATO train, however, moves on just as the confrontation is about to occur, the Western soldiers forgetting their support of the town’s population, and what results are
the shocking images of brutal fraternal violence that suddenly engulfs the inhabitants of the town.

6.3 The Faltering of a Figure

In the part of this dissertation, in which we discussed the figure of the worker (Chapters 3 and 4), we said that the figure of the worker, with which cinema symbolizes the existence of proletarian masses, appears at the precise point in which the split between the worker as a subjective force, on the one hand, and the historical and social representation of the worker’s being, on the other, emerges as though it were a question for the subjective force itself. The gap between the workers’ subjectivity and the workers’ being, which starts to exist subjectively – a gap that is itself subjectivized – is the condition of figuration. The faltering of figuration can therefore take not only one but two different forms. The first one consists in the abolishment of the gap between subjectivity and being. The gap, as we saw, has several different modalities. In Chapter 4, Taylorism, Stalinism, and Fascism were all ways to make the constitutive split of any successful figuration disappear, while Chaplinism, on the contrary, presented for us a way to think not only the appearance but also the subjectivation of the split.

Figuration can, however, falter in another way. Not by making the gap between subjectivity and representation disappear, but rather by failing to subjectivize the gap even while making it appear as such, i.e., making the gap between subjectivity and representation cease to exist as a problem for subjectivity. Here, we do not have a forced covering over of a difficult split, but rather a separation of the split from the possibility to consciously configure its effects within a particular situation. The non-subjectivized gap (which, perhaps, must also appear as something non-subjectivizable) does not stop to exert its influence upon our situation. It is simply that this influence becomes inscrutable, as though coming from some free-floating rift “out there,” working on us
from a distance, and like a black hole drawing our situation towards an inexplicable threat.

The film that perhaps most consistently follows this second path of a faltering figuration is Lucian Pintilie’s masterpiece *Too Late* from 1996. The film takes place in Jiu valley, the coal-mining region in the southwest of Romania. It shows in a remarkable way the complex present and the history of the mining industry and the miners’ volatile fate. Rapidly developed and heavily propped up during the socialist industrialization after World War II, the miners of Jiu Valley became notorious during the time immediately following the toppling of the Causescu regime in 1989. Instrumentalized by the “reformed communist” presidency of Ion Iliescu, the miners would strike and descend onto Bucharest, helping the military and the police in violently crushing the anti-government protests that continued well into 1990. During these “mineroids,” as Romanians call them, the miners would enter several buildings of the Bucharest University in order to beat up the students, other workers, and the intellectuals protesting there. The mineroids continued, however, well into the nineties, very soon turning against Iliescu and the subsequent governments which had failed in their promises to the miners, and have in fact started the neoliberal program of “restructuring,” closing several mines, which, of course, resulted in mass unemployment and misery. The figure of the miner in this case is a figure of the workers’ intense submission to, first, the state communist and, later, market capitalist disorientation; and Pintilie presents it as such.

The film takes the form of an investigation of a series of murders that happen in one of the Jiu valley’s mines. The murderer is a miner, who one day walked into the mine, went insane, and never came back. He lives in the dark, killing other miners bestially in order to steal their food, while the owners of the mine (“reformed
communists” and thus also the bosses of the past), who at some fundamental level are responsible for the destruction of the miner’s life, insist on presenting each death as merely an accident. The movement of the film follows a public prosecutor’s quest which, against the management’s insistence, seeks to establish the existence of this completely dehumanized miner as the cause of the deaths and to identify the miner – although this second part of the investigation is not and cannot, as we will see, be completely carried through. But what makes for the tension that sustains and drives the narrative of the film is rather the fact that the miner appears for the large part of the film as an acousmatic voice, wandering in the darkness of the mine shafts, so that the entire unfolding of the film hinges on what Michel Chion called the process of de-acousmatization, i.e., giving the wandering and incorporeal voice an image and a body.17

What I would like to point to in relation to Pintilie’s acousmatic miner is that the presence of the miner as an acousmatic voice, that strange spectral being Chion calls acousmètre, introduces very precisely the split discussed above. The acousmatic voice splits the subjectivity and the representation of the miner. The two aspects occur together but are at the same time made irreducible to each other. As Chion says, acousmètre is not simply outside of the image, not simply a being external to the field of vision. Rather, it is what makes it impossible to clearly distinguish between the inside and the outside of such a field. “It is as if the voice were wandering along the surface, at once inside and outside, seeking a place to settle. … Neither inside nor outside: such is the acousmètre’s fate in cinema.”18 The appearance of the acousmètre splits and haunts

17 “An entire image, an entire story, an entire film can thus hang on the epiphany of the acousmètre. Everything can boil down to a quest to bring the acousmètre into the light. … Embodying the voice is a sort of symbolic act, dooming the acousmètre to the fate of ordinary mortals. De-acousmatization roots the acousmètre to a place and says, “here is your body, you’ll be there and not elsewhere.” Michel Chion, The Voice in Cinema, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 23-8.

18 Ibid., 23.
representation, making it not-all, threatening it with an impossibility to ever fully constitute itself as such. One of the classical measures of cinema to deal with but also to employ and use this destabilizing sonorous appearance is to turn the acousmatic voice into the voice of a Master, to identify in the non-place of the acousmêtre the function of the Master’s (acousmaitre) omnipresence (all-seeing, all-knowing, and omnipotence). In the paranoid fantasy, the Master can still be an evil one, he can be experienced as an almost unbearable threat, but this is itself almost reassuring against the profound anxiety the introduction of an acousmatic voice can cause.

With his acousmatic miner, Pintilie introduces a crucial modification into the figure of the acousmêtre. In Too Late, the miner-acousmêtre might indeed be omnipresent, since he is able to appear anywhere in the mine; he might indeed be all-seeing, since his eyes have adapted to the darkness and can thus see where other miners cannot; he might even be considered omnipotent, since short of closing down the mine the miners appear to have no way of defending themselves from him. But he is not all-knowing. In fact, his acousmatic presence, which is reduced to psychotic laughter, to sobbing and moaning, and to the sound of his footsteps, is indistinguishable from the non-subjective existence of an animal, a completely dehumanized being without speech and thus also, one is led to feel, without any knowledge of himself. The acousmatic voice, unlike in the case of its classical uses, is here completely incapable of reflecting the space-time of the film in a meaningful way. One is tempted to say that in the case of Too Late one is not so much dealing with the acousmêtre as a Master, as rather with a distinct acousmatic species that could be best described with the term acousmonstre – a wild, psychotic type of acousmêtre from below, an omnipresent, all-seeing, and omnipotent being that yet does not know itself (that does not know that he does not know himself). In fact, this interpretation would seem to be confirmed by the film itself, since the latter
does present us with an explicit figure of mastery, of a panoptic and omniscient gaze from above, in the image of a helicopter with which the bosses lift themselves above the mines.

The absolute absence of knowing on the part of the miner-àcoustître, the complete subjective destitution of this creature reduced to an animal state (which, it should be added, is shown by Pintilie as the outcome of a historical process), also means that the fiction of the film cannot make the split between the subjectivity and the representation of the miner, which the acousmatic voice has introduced, exist for the miner subjectively. The split can only exist “objectively,” “out there,” not only for no one in particular, but also without any attachment to some figure of collective transformation (in relation to which, I would argue, the historical meaning of the film’s title is also to be read). So that when the miner’s body appears at the end of the film, covered with hair and coal dust, hardly more than a pile of trembling bones and flesh no figuration can occur. One thinks of the various types of “bare life,” which have come to the interest of recent philosophy, as, for example, in Giorgio Agamben’s *homo sacer*. There is a sudden explosion (not fully explained by the events in the film), in which the miner disappears. And the film ends with another acousmatic dialogue, suggesting that the miner might have escaped and might now be traveling Europe with a pack of dynamite sticks in his bag, having simply changed and enlarged his haunt. Without the subjectivation on the part of the worker of the split between his subjectivity and his representation the worker is condemned to repeat the violence of the split on an ever-increasing scale.

6.4 1989 as Non-Event

Of the films dealing with the Romanian “Revolution” of 1989, *12:08 East of Bucharest* and *The Paper Will be Blue* (Radu Muntean, 2006) are undoubtedly the most
interesting ones. *12:08 East of Bucharest* – whose Romanian title *A fost sau n-a fost?* translates literally as “Was there or wasn’t there” and was shortened by Porumboiu from the initially longer “Was there or wasn’t there a Revolution in our Town” – takes place in the provincial city of Vaslui, where on the occasion of the anniversary of 1989 the local TV organizes a call-in show in which the host, the two guests (a drunken professor and a local Santa-playing pensioner), and the audience at home discuss the question whether or not the Revolution occurred in Vaslui. The comedy of the film stems from the way the protagonists go about this question, i.e., it is the result of the very mode of their questioning. The assumption that implicitly subtends their undertaking, namely, consists of the idea that the question of the Revolution can and needs to be asked purely at the level of empirical facts, which confronted with this task grow more and more banal and petty as the film proceeds. As though the status of the revolution (in this particular town of Vaslui) depended solely on whether or not the professor and a group of his friends have taken to protest before or after the break out of the events in Bucharest. The film constructs its humor from the disjunction between the solemn and ceremonial occasion of the anniversary of an event of national significance, the seriousness with which the questions of courage and historical transformation want to be addressed, on the one hand, and the bickering over empirical minutia, which dissolve the question into a series of confused statements and expressions of private resentment, on the other.

*The Paper Will be Blue* follows a more melancholy direction. It is a drama of an army unit as it wanders the streets of Bucharest during the revolt on December 22 and 23, 1989. Without a clear mission, broken off from the chain of command which it is nevertheless trying constantly to reestablish, without contact to other units, and even internally split, the activity of the unit consists solely in the attempt to locate and bring
back into the file one of its soldier members who in an act of disobedience has left to
defend the television station occupied by the people. During the course of the film the
unit becomes detached from the movement that has seized Bucharest, concerned solely
with the fate of one of its members – a detachment intensified by the numerous scenes
shot in the tight and claustrophobically crammed armored vehicle the unit uses to move
around Bucharest. The rebellious soldier, who for a while offers a glimmer of hope for a
heroic identification, actually never makes it to the TV station as he gets stuck defending
a house occupied by a splinter group whose status is rather unclear and whose leader
appears to be a lunatic. His act of insubordination ends as he is let home where he is
then picked up – without any clear disciplinary sanctions – by the army unit from which
he had initially escaped. He rejoins them and they continue to drive around Bucharest
aimlessly, until, in the early morning stuck at a crossroads, two soldiers step out of the
armored vehicle to have a cigarette and are shot by another army unit. The cyclical
movement of the film (the opening sequence is also its last) corresponds to a sense of
aimlessness and meaninglessness, embodied perfectly in the password (“The paper will
be blue”), which, arbitrary as passwords need to be, also fails to work as a password and
gets two of the soldiers killed. Rather than a sense of participating in a historical break –
the film in fact suggests that already for these protagonists the “Revolution” can only
exist as a TV “event” – the film creates a sense of time suspended, an emptiness of time
rather than a feeling of a moment filled with possibility.

What the two films share is that in both of them what one is to understand as a
great historical Event (“1989”) breaks down into a set of empirical fragments whose
reconstitution into some kind of unity seems well beyond anything imaginable and
achievable. The films lead us, in fact, into doubt about whether or not 1989 is to be
understood as an Event in the first place, if by this we mean Event in the strongest
possible sense, something like the appearance of the Idea in history, or the appearance of History itself. For, the minimum that is needed for a veritable historical Event is that it contains a dimension which is irreducible to the multiplicity of the purely experiential (facts, emotions, opinions, etc.), in other words that it contains something of Truth. As Fredric Jameson writes in *Valences of the Dialectic*, identifying both a melancholic (Sartre) and an enthusiastic (Kant) modality of a veritable Event, what characterizes an evental appearance of History is a sudden “charge of affect as such: distinct in that from the heterogeneous catalogue of empirical emotions and feelings, affect can be described as one immense mood swing from high to low, from moments of exaltation to bad trips and comprehensive depressions. …[T]he intensity of affect signals the transformation of empirical experiences into transcendental ones, the looming sense of totalities beyond the immediate particulars.” It would indeed be possible to interpret the two very different moods of *12:08 East of Bucharest* and *The Paper Will be Blue* along the lines of Jameson’s idea that an encounter with History “can be lived in the two distinct valences of horror and of enthusiasm. The approach to History, its ephemeral encounter as an Event, can be shattering or energizing, the experience of defeat or on the contrary the awakening of immense possibilities…” *12:08 East of Bucharest* would in this sense stand on the side of enthusiasm and *The Paper Will be Blue* on the side of horror. Except, one would have to add, that the humor of *12:08 East of Bucharest* and the melancholy of *The Paper Will be Blue*, respectively, operate in their treatment of 1989 a kind of subtraction of the great pathos, of the affects of enthusiasm and horror that are involved in encounters with History. Consequently, History is not felt as though it was approaching, either as great

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20 Ibid., 596.
collective failure or as immeasurable success, but rather as something that has quite simply quietly slipped away and thus appears as not having been there in the first place.

The fragmentation of an Event into empirical minutia is not merely a matter of perspective. It is not the case that what is in these films presented as empirical fragmentation is simply a set of different narratives of a single Event, which from some other point of view might again emerge as a real transformation on the global scale of history. In Immanuel Kant’s discussion of enthusiasm and French Revolution in The Conflict of the Faculties, for example, the point is not simply that what from “the inside” appears as a set of atrocities and miscarriages, might from “the outside,” from a distance of those who are not directly involved, appear as a sign of “a moral predisposition in the human race,” and that thus what matters is what perspective on the Event one is able to assume, what narrative of the Event one is capable of constructing. The point is much more that the Event itself produces the possibility of this difference, it is the Event and not merely the perception of it that generates something in excess of its mere empirical unfolding, something in addition to the historical multiplicity that it is. It is the same set of occurrences that, when we are dealing with a veritable Event, require that they also be seen “from a distance”. In other words, a set of empirical occurrences does not constitute an Event if it is incapable of opening up at a distance from itself what, as we saw, Jameson calls a transcendental perspective, but which could in a different mode of thinking be understood also as the excess of history over history as the transcendental condition of possibility of our experience. It is crucial to understand how the split between the empirical and the transcendental, which one could also talk about as a split between two types of spectacle, is immanent to the Event itself; an Event exists and sustains itself through this very tension. The purely empirical fragmentation of an Event, then, does not so much signal a kind of postmodern splintering of the Event into its
multiple versions, each equal to another, none capable of taking the place of the dominant interpretation, etc. (This is, for instance, the way Constantin Parvelescu interprets the fragmentation of the Revolution of 1989 in 12:08 East of Bucharest.\textsuperscript{21}) Rather, what the empirical fragmentation signals is the absence, the non-happening, of an Event, the withdrawal of the dimension of Truth from the question of history.

In this sense, we are led to conclude that 12:08 East of Bucharest as well as The Paper Will be Blue, insofar as they stage the failure of producing precisely such an immanent distance between the levels of the empirical and what exceeds it, both present “1989” as a Non-event. They both exhibit, albeit in very different tonalities, a profound and crippling hesitation in relation to what in the national (but also transnational) narratives of recent history has been seen as the one defining moment of historical change. They thus seem to confirm, or at least, they could be read alongside Alain Badiou’s provocative thesis about the fall of East European socialism in Of an Obscure Disaster. For Badiou, namely, “1989” also does not constitute an Event. It is only an event, he says, in the opinionated eyes of the Western “capitalo-parliamentarist” regime and can only appear as an event in the narrative that liberal democracy would like to tell of its own global march. Historically, it introduces nothing new. It is rather a moment of death and “No death is an event”; or more precisely, it is a moment at which something that has been dead for a while is recognized as such. This something that has long been

\textsuperscript{21} “Who is telling the story, when, and how are all critical to the reconstruction of “what really happened,”” Constantin Parvelescu, “The Cold World Behind the Window: 4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days and Romanian cinema’s Return to Real-Existing Communism,” http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/4months/index.html (Accessed 7/25/2010). What is striking is how following this path one gets stuck at the very level of the factual one is trying to problematize with the introduction of multiple perspectives. On the one hand, the event is not a fact, since all we can ever have are particular narratives and particular interpretations of an event. On the other hand, this very perspectivalism manages to keep the idea of facticity alive, since what serves as the ultimate horizon for all these particular interpretations is some ultimately successful “reconstruction of ‘what really happened’,” of an event as a Fact. My interpretation, following Jameson (but also someone like Alain Badiou), is rather different. An event is from the very beginning irreducible to the factual. It is from the very beginning a montage of a set of empirical facts and something else, which registers at the level of truth rather and allows us to not get caught in a boring perspectival game.
dead but has only now been put to rest is, for Badiou, the idea that the State can function as the Truth of politics. It is therefore appropriate to end this section with a somewhat longer quote from Badiou’s text:

These years will remain exemplary in the following regard: that an abrupt and complete change in a situation does not at all mean that the grace of an event has happened to it. ... In the serenity of the concept, let us say that everything that changes is not an event, and that surprise, velocity, disorder, may only be simulacra of the event, not its promise of truth. The simulacrum of the „Romanian Revolution,” widely recognized, is a paradigm here. In truth, it is only a matter of the following: that what was subjectively dead must enter into the State of death and finally be recognized there. ... Let us note this: it was not the rebellious and sunlit masses who decided the end of the party-State, the end of the Soviet Empire. The collapse of this pachyderm was accomplished by an interior dismantling, at once concerted and without perspective. The affair remains to this day state-controlled from beginning to end. No political invention – or the invention of politics – has affected its vicissitudes. That thousands of people signaled, here or there, in the streets and in some factories, that they were content with what was happening is the least one can expect! But, alas, we did not notice that they thought and wanted the experience of a novelty without a precedent. And how could it be otherwise, if it is true, as we are everywhere told, that what the people of Russia, Hungary, and Bulgaria think and want is nothing other than what already exists, and has existed for a long time, on our countries, sadly named, who knows why, ‘western’? Such a wish can only strengthen the preeminence of the statist, constitutional vision of the processes. Elections and owners, politicians and racketeers: is this the entire content of their wish? If so, it is quite reasonable to entrust its implementation not to the inventions of thought, but to specialists in the maneuvering of the apparatuses, indeed, the experts of the International Monetary Fund. For a little spiritual salve, the Pope is always at hand. And for a touch of passionate excess, without which the simulacrum of an event remains far too pacified, one can look back to just before the war of 1914 to find the means to cast one bestial nationalism against another.22

6.5 In Conclusion: A Realism of Ghosts

The uncertainty of a country; the faltering of the figure of the worker; great collective turmoil and regime change that only amount to a Non-event. What do all these things signal? Most certainly, they signal a difficulty that prevents us from achieving what André Bazin in one of his essays on Italian Neorealism called “an

22 Alain Badiou, Of an Obscure Disaster, trans. Barbara Fulks, Alberto Toscano, Nina Power, Ozren Pupovac (Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2009), 15-25.
aesthetic participation in history”.23 Perhaps what cinema configures in the new Romanian films discussed above is not cinema’s relation to history, but its encounter of a situation without a sense of historicity of its own. For Bazin, the inventions of Italian Neorealism – the love of reality, substitution of “the shot” with the cinematic “fact,” putting existence before determinate essence and meaning, the ambiguity of the real, the placement of the camera at the level of a human rather than a God-like perspective, the amalgamation of professional and non-professional actors, the assumption of the narrative technique of the American novel – were all part of a realist artifice with which cinema gave itself new access to history, set up resistances to it, and thus configured its own sense of historicity. For, what realism meant in the case of Bazin, was not simply an aesthetic deduced from the essentially photographic nature of the cinematic medium. This latter was only a specific, contingent wager, necessary at a particular point in time, for the cinema of truth (realism understood more broadly) to combat the ever present escapist tendencies of cinema (what Bazin calls “aestheticism”): “Paisa, Scuscia, and Roma Citta Aperta, like Potemkin, mark a new stage in the long-standing opposition between realism and aestheticism on the screen. But history does not repeat itself; we have to get clear the particular form this aesthetic quarrel assumes today, the new solutions to which Italian Neorealism owed its triumph in 1947.”24

Neorealism was a constant reference for all the post-WW2 East European new waves precisely because of this quality of a renewed sense of historicity and not simply because of the specific formal characteristics it privileged. The aestheticism, which the new realism was combating, was, of course, a broad enough category to include also the official aesthetic of socialist realism. It was in opposition against both Hollywood and

24 Ibid., 16.
Mosfilm that their experiments of the various new waves were pitted. To what extent does new Romanian cinema share in this Neorealist tradition? There are certainly some formal resemblances: the refusal of the artifice of Meaning in the name of the artifice of Fact; the confinement of action to a limited time and place; the “lowering” of the camera’s perspective to the level of the “common man”; etc. But there is also a profound difference between the two.

Take for example the question of limiting the action and narration of the film to single, unitary situations. In the case of Italian Neorealism the limitation to the simplest everyday situations was done out of a belief in the revelatory potential of even the minutest thing in the world, out of a confidence, in spite of the disaster out of which this cinema was emerging, in the immanent “luminosity” of reality and the self-sufficiency of what occurs in the world. In a sense, when Cesare Zavattini writes, “when we have thought out a scene, we feel the need to “remain” in it, because the single scene itself can contain so many echoes and reverberations, can even contain all the situations we may need”;25 or when Bazin claims that “Neorealism knows only immanence. It is from appearance only, the simple appearance of beings and of the world, that it knows how to deduce the ideas that it unearths,”26 they can both make such claims because Meaning, which they refuse as the end of a conscious, calculated construction, is in a way already inherently there in reality itself, present as Ambiguity, pre-existing our approach to it.

In the new Romanian cinema, which also confines its narrative and action to the simplest of situations and problems, the outcome the opposite one – the aesthetic tactic of confinement produces more of the very same element, i.e., it literalizes confinement into a sense of being imprisoned in reality rather than of having it revealed. Stories are

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typically and quite rigorously completed, but, as one critic put it, “a lingering, haunting sense of inconclusiveness remains”\(^{27}\). This inconclusiveness does not come to reinvest reality itself as the latter’s own infinity (or, Ambiguity) but rather stays stranded somewhere in Transcendence, inaccessible to the reality that manages little more than to merely suggest it.

Perhaps one could get at the difference between the two very different metaphysics of realism (a realism of immanence versus a realism of transcendence) by addressing them through the questions of vitalism and community. One could simply note that both the vitalistic energy of reality, which cinema was to make speak for itself against the artificially imposed plots and drama, as well as the inherent revolutionary communal (if not exactly communist) humanism of Italian Neorealism, according to which reality is above all the guarantee of a mode of participation of all with everything,\(^{28}\) both of these elements are missing in new Romanian cinema.

In place of a vitalist and energized reality, in which, even the most insignificant objects and details become direct embodiments of Meaning (what Zavattini called “elements of an absolute significance”), and which gives us the idea that absolutely everything could be recounted and shown, the reality of Romanians is exhausted and sapped. The poverty of the people and the material environment are, after all, in the case of Romania a very different matter from the ruins and fragments of post-war Italy. In the case of Italy, it was a new collective idea that was being sought, a new idea of unity, a new idea of a country and of the people, which was subject to rebuilding and


\(^{28}\) A quote from Zavattini illustrates this idea of participation and inter-connectedness: “In life, in reality today, there are no more empty spaces. Between things, facts, people, exists such an interdependence that a blow struck for the cinema in Rome could have repercussions all over the world. If this is true, it must be worthwhile to take any moment of a human life and show how “striking” that moment is: to excavate and identify it, to send its echo vibrating into other parts of the world.” Zavattini, “Some Ideas on the Cinema”
integration. In the case of Romania it is, on the contrary, a collective project of nation-building (the specific form of Romania’s socialist-national folklorism), a constructive mobilization, that has produced these “ruins”. How can then there be a new collective investment in this material world – an investment of the kind that functioned as the precondition for the vitalist hope of Italian Neorealism – when the sorry material world already is a result of a collective investment that was to end all collective investments? How could there be a new humanist creed, when the state of things is a consequence of the violent attempts to produce a New (Romanian) Man?

Perhaps this is the way to explain the impossibility of finding in new Romanian cinema the aspect of participation, which was there the Neorealist humanist focus on “the man in the street” and the cosmic view, according to which the “Anyone” that was being turned into the hero of a new type of revelatory drama, was also just one thing among all others. Mr. Lazarescu, whose own pathetic proper name (Dante Remus) allegorically mocks his status as a commoner, is hardly thing-like in the sense envisioned by Zavattini and Bazin when they claimed that for cinema man should be only one among many things in the universe. What new Romanian cinema traces is not the possibility of a rebirth of community of men and of the communion of man and world out of the ruins of war, but rather the consequences of a specific perversion of community (called the Socialist State) and the absence of any new models of being-together that would be capable of taking its place (apart, of course, from the non-model of the capitalist market).

If for Bazin, realism was a ticket with which cinema passed over to the side of history and in the midst of a desperate situation gave itself a present, then the realism of new Romanian cinema is to be seen as a realism of the historical present’s impossibility. A realism of what is not there, of a blockage that exists between our aesthetic capacity
and the absent historicity of our existence, but by the same token also a realism of what resists being integrated by a swoop of some faulty Aufhebung into a narrative of history’s ending. It is perhaps an announcement of an unrealistic realism that should interest us. A realism of ghosts and negative apparitions which we can create in order to think our present as an impasse of what has already come to pass, and perhaps in this way find a point from which to construct the sense of a new direction.
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Biography

Luka Arsenjuk was born in 1978 in Celje (Slovenia). He received his B.A. degree in Cultural Studies from the University of Ljubljana (2002) and his PhD from the Program in Literature at Duke University (2010). He has published articles on “Cinema as Mass Art,” “The Configuration of Political Cinema,” “Eisenstein’s Idea of Intellectual Montage,” on “How to Film Marx’s Capital,” as well as on how to survive encounters with the “Specters of Cinema”. He also published an “Introduktion till Jacques Rancière,” which is Swedish for “An Introduction to Jacques Rancière,” and edited, in tandem with Michelle Koerner, Polygraph 21: Study, Students, Universities (2009). He has been a lucky recipient of Duke Literature Program’s Fellowship (2004-2009) and Duke Graduate School’s International Research Award (2009-2010). And he spent 2009-2010 as a Junior Fellow at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies in Vienna (Austria). While he basically agrees with Groucho Marx on the issue of club membership, he nevertheless belongs to both the MLA as well as the SCMS. He lives and researches in Durham, North Carolina, where he is happy to share his life with his wife and a few remarkable friends.