# The Aesthetics of Indirection: Intermittent Adjacencies and Subaltern Presences at the Borders of Europe

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*Abstract*

Luca Guadagnino's *A Bigger Splash* (2015), I argue, produces a sensorial registration of the presence of scattered subalterns. More importantly, an 'aesthetics of indirection' (con)figures the disturbing island-space between Italy and North Africa, where the intermittent appearance of subaltern subjects disturbs normative understandings of place and produces counter-intuitive understandings of relationality. The filmic construction of 'intermittent adjacencies' between subaltern presences and narrative protagonists produces figurations of disturbing relationalities between privilege and destitution, pleasure and pain, life and death. The logic of intermittent adjacencies left conspicuously un-integrated by the plot provide a sensorial and political provocation for thinking through the geopolitics of globalization in the context of the displacement of people.

The location of the subaltern subject is intrinsic to its political importance. One influential theorization of subaltern subjectivity placed it within the ambit of incipient nationalism in decolonizing space.[1] Whether resistant or unreadable, erased or subjected, the subaltern subject's relation to globality was both national and colonial. Gayatri Spivak's later intervention in the work of the Subaltern Studies group's further complicated this spatial matrix by noting the disruptive place of the female subaltern subject.[2] Recently, she marked a transition in her work on the figure of the subaltern from a figure 'removed from all lines of social mobility'[3] to the new subaltern, 'a global subaltern', which functions as a 'source of intellectual property without the benefit of benefit-sharing'.[4]

[1] Ranajit Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. by Guha and Gayatri Ch. Spivak (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 45–87.
[2] Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 262–80.
[3] Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular', *Postcolonial Studies*, 18.4 (2005), 475–86 (p. 475).
[4] Ivi, p. 483.

Subaltern space shifts from nation-space exclusion to physical immobilization combined with global value extraction. Hence, she argues that an understanding of the subaltern is 'reserved for the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space'.[5]

'Scattered subalternities' signals the shifting spatial coordinates of the subaltern subject under contemporary globalization. This form of subalternity focuses on contemporary forms of forced physical displacement of the subaltern subject beyond nation-space. Secondly, this understanding of scattering does not assume the subaltern subject's forced withdrawal from institutional protection (e.g., citizenship rights). The scattered subaltern embodied in stateless refugees is *not* an example of 'bare life' or 'mere givenness'.[6] This understanding of the scattered subaltern is crucial since it centralizes the relational and rights-bearing subaltern body's movement beyond nation-space.[7] The scattered subaltern's displacement from nation-space under globalization requires comprehension, and a sense of how its shifting spatial reconstitution is intrinsically related to the spaces, peoples and territories it moves through. That is, it is crucial to understand the scattered subaltern not in isolation, but as a form of embodied subjectivity that is continually adjacent to, imbricated with and relationally implicated with others, such as 'legal' subjects enjoying the rights of citizens, as well as geographical spaces and shifting borders such as islands in the Mediterranean or land borders between countries. Luca Guadagnino's *A Bigger Splash* (2015) provides a disturbing cinematic experience of precisely this *relational* understanding of the scattered subaltern with other, more privileged bodies and subjectivities. By continually interrupting a narratologically-enabled, cognitive experience of cinematic meaning-production with sensory apprehension, through sound and image of the scattered subaltern's disturbing presence, the film provokes the viewer to confront the cruel reality of a world of extremes.

Lastly, understanding scattered subalternities throws up intellectual and political challenges, not least since the complex dynamics of globalization are continually reduced to familiar formulas such as the 'clash of civilizations', the 'end of history', or 'The West and the Rest'.[8] The refugee as one embodiment of scattered subalternity is neatly conceived by scattering its meanings within

[5] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 310.

[6] See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), p. 297. For a convincing critique of this argument, see Jacques Rancière, 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?', in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. by Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), pp. 62–75.

[7] The right to family reunification for minors, for example, established in the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951, applies to refugee children. The systematic denial of this right in many camps illustrates both the rights refugees possess to be unified with family, and their denial. Arguments based on 'bare life' are haphazardly complicit with this denial, however powerful the pathos generated by such discourses of abjection.

[8] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

multiple frameworks, including the threatening cultural other, the welfare scrounger, the potential terrorist or the Absolute Other. Spivak provocatively states that 'Globalization takes place only in capital and data. Everything else is damage control'.[9] When figured as any or all of the above, the threatening figure of the scattered subaltern is also controlled but paradoxically, this 'damage control' is effected precisely through converting the refugee into statistical data (refugee numbers) and a source of information (potential terrorist). That is why Judith Butler is right when arguing that 'the point is not simply to scatter geographically, but to derive a set of principles from scattered existence that can serve a new conception of political justice'.[10] Rather than the insertion of displacement within capitalist globalization as data generated for damage control, the politics of scattering thus resides in its provocations for re-conceptualizing the meaning of justice.

Counter-figurations of scattered subalternity imply a crucial aesthetic dimension. The importance of an aesthetic consideration of cinematic experience resides precisely in understanding how the drive for meaning-making (comprehension) and sensory registration are configured. Both intellectual comprehension and sensory apprehension are needed when making sense of a world whose coordinates are being displaced by contemporary forms of subaltern scatterings. Counter-figurations of scattered subalternities and the politics of globalization are inextricably linked. From a partly Kantian-inspired critique of postcolonial reason, Spivak, for example, argues that the comprehension of globalization must entangle itself with the sensory dimensions of aesthetics through Schiller's notion of *Spieltrieb*, i.e. the play-drive.[11] Jacques Rancière, too, argues that the aesthetic dimensions of political experience are less connected to artistic questions: 'it is not a matter of art and taste; it is, first of all, a matter of time and space.'[12] That is, aesthetic experience derives from deranging the normative alignments of certain bodies with certain spaces. Aesthetics has less to do with taste than with how bodies and spaces can be sensorially figured to break with the norms that govern social orders, such as the alignment of a citizen within a nation, and an outsider beyond the nation-space. Spivak and Rancière's linking of aesthetic experience and politics to questions of globalization and spatiality can be extended and deflected in an analysis of *A Bigger Splash*.

From early cinema's roving gaze on exotic locales and peoples to the mosaic film and other forms of cinematic cartographies of the world, and to the migrant-as-protagonist films of recent years, the relation between cinema and

[9] *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 1.
[10] Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 117–18. Butler's focus here is on the political deployment of diasporic displacement in relation to the Zionist discourse of the state of Israel. Yet, the relevance of her argument can be extended to understand how displacement and political justice continually rework the latter.
[11] *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, pp. 14–29, esp. p. 27.
[12] Rancière, 'From Politics to Aesthetics?', *Paragraph*, 28.1 (March 2005), 13–25 (p. 13).

globalization (including dimensions of migrant experience) are well-known.[13] However, *A Bigger Splash* constructs a specific form of relationality between the figure of the migrant and the privileged subject in the West. The film provides one configuration of scattered subalternity through an aesthetics of indirection, which produces intermittent adjacencies between the figure of the migrant and the film's well-heeled protagonists. Intermittency is one mode of disturbing narrative integration, since the brief appearances and disappearances of the unnamed migrants on the island of Pantelleria prevent the viewer from any sustained understanding of their function within the plot. The term 'adjacencies' implies a side-by-side rather than implicated and integral relation between subaltern presences and narrative protagonists. The film plays out between the desire to understand and the disturbing, often soundless presence of the migrant. This form of aesthetic play between unelaborated presences and overly narrativized protagonists provokes a reconsideration of the cinematic establishment of relationality between the migrant and the vacationing legal resident.

## *Cinema, Displacement and the Poetics of Relation*

*A Bigger Splash* reproduces exactly the title of a documentary on the swimming pool paintings completed in Los Angeles by British artist David Hockney, when he migrated to the United States from his native Yorkshire (via London).[14] Guadagnino's film, however, is advertised as an adaptation of *La Piscine* (Jacques Deray, 1969). Indirection and displacement begin even in the framing of *A Bigger Splash*, where Deray's swimming pool drama is explicitly cited but then displaced to another watery source, whose painterly character in Hockey's work Guadagnino describes as 'this beautiful lightness [which] carried so much depth'.[15] The viewer is seduced into expecting an adaptation of Deray's *La Piscine* in a film which draws its inspiration from another work, the Hockney documentary and painting (of the same title), where lightness bears the burden of much depth. The waters and the depths that the film constructs are depicted by displacing and then relating multiple storylines. Moreover, these storylines are more opaque than enlightening: the lightness and clarity of water are cinematically rendered by obfuscating clear relationships.

[13] See *Exotic Europe: Reisen ins frühe Kino: Journeys into Early Cinema: reizen in de vroege film*, ed. by Connie Betz and others (Berlin: Fochhochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft, 2000), Patricia Pisters, 'The Mosaic Film: Nomadic Style and Politics in Transnational Media', in *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict Resistance and Agency*, ed. by Mieke Bal and Miguel Hernãndez-Navarro (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 175–90, Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
[14] *A Bigger Splash* (Jack Hazan, 1973).
[15] Gaby Wood, 'Tilda and Ralph in Heat: The Making of *A Bigger Splash*', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 February 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/a-bigger-splash/interview-luca-guadagnino-tilda-swinton-ralph-fiennes/> [accessed 26 August 2016].

Water and disturbing relationality have a long history, of course. Édouard Glissant's term, 'the poetics of relation', was constructed to confront specifically the complex histories of displacement (slavery in the Antilles) without giving up on thinking relationality and totality[16] in the context of 'errantry' (a particular form of scattering of peoples borne by boats across waters).[17] The complexity of this form of scattering, for Glissant, resides in the multiple and shifting relations between different abysses in the depths of water. *A Bigger Splash*'s own displacements into the depths of waters across films and artworks are constructed through a specific poetics of relation which I call 'an aesthetics of indirection'. Just as Glissant insists on opacity as integral to comprehending a poetics of relation in the context of displacement, the film produces a sensory experience of opaque relationality through the intermittent adjacencies of those it brings together. This indirection implies an absence of *deixis*, of pointing clearly and directing which path the viewer must follow to set up a relation between the migrant presences and film's protagonists. The preservation of opacity had a crucial political goal for Glissant of preventing the complex subjectivities of those scattered by slavery from being reduced to crude stereotypes. Likewise, the film provokes the viewer to confront the brute realities of wealth and desperation, the luxury of Mediterranean vacationing and the reality of offshore drowning, while preserving the opacity of the migrant presences without explaining what they mean. The opacity of their presences is political precisely because their aesthetic apprehension forces a relation with the protagonists without explaining this relation.

Guadagnino transposes the film from *La Piscine*'s Côte d'Azur to the island of Pantelleria, the closest spot in Italy to the Libyan coast. The island and the villa with swimming pool form the setting for a psychological drama between four protagonists: Marianne Lane (Tilda Swinton), a rock singer recuperating after losing her voice, her lover Paul (Matthias Schoenaerts), a cameraman to whom she was introduced by a former lover, Harry (Ralph Fiennes), who joins them uninvited along with his daughter Penelope (Dakota Johnson). The erotic tension between the former lovers is matched by a growing attraction between Paul and Penelope. This intense foursome takes on sinister overtones through elliptical dialogues while the editing and camera glides over and away from them rather than cutting and suturing sound with image. This aesthetic strategy invites involvement, speculation and suspense. The sensorial experience of this erotic quadrilateral is linked to cognitive speculation to know who is related to whom, how and where this will all lead. The suspense-filled narrative momentum will lead to a death, when Paul forcibly drowns Harry after a fight in the swimming pool. The title of the film, however, suggest another splash.

What bigger splash does it refer to? Evidently nothing in the narrative itself suggests the homoerotic paintings in Hockney's *A Bigger Splash*. Here, the depths below the lightness of water take on a relevance when conjoined with

[16] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).
[17] Ivi, p. 11. See also pp. 11–22.

the displacement of the locale to Pantelleria. For Glissant, the specific opacity of the poetics of relation is partly related to the three abysses of displacement, the abyss of the ocean floor on which the corpses of dead slaves lie, the abyss of the ships where they died on the middle passage, and the abyss of an indefinite future confronting slaves as they approached the shores of the Caribbean islands. Guadagnino's questions 'What is behind — what is beyond, what is before — the crashing of the surface?' prompted by viewing Hockney's painting frame the crashing about of Paul and Harry in the swimming pool in Pantelleria, and point elsewhere, precisely because of the 'bigger' splash the film promises but does not explicitly elucidate.[18]

Pantelleria's waters produce a different set of abysses, rendered to construct a form of opacity that is only approachable through an aesthetics of indirection. It is precisely here that intermittent adjacencies can help understand how the politics of location (Pantelleria) and the aesthetics of indirection figure one form of scattered subalternity. The first visually explicit encounter between the protagonists and migrant presences takes place roughly halfway through the film, when Paul agrees to show Penelope a deserted lake across a mountain on the island. As they climb up the mountain, they encounter a small group of men. The frontal shot-counter shot sequence lasting less than a minute has no dialogue. When they meet, they all halt, and Penelope covers her almost bare torso with her hands. The sequence ends when the men whisper to each other in Arabic, with no subtitling, and disappear. Within a minute or two, the extended sequence ends with Penelope naked on a rock by the lake, gesturing to Paul to come near, and the camera follows him. It is the first explicit rendition of her desire for him in the film.

The silent, frontal visual construction of the confrontation between the two white bodies on the one hand, and the group of unkept unknown men suddenly appearing on the mountain, provokes a tension in the viewer. The difference in number, the markers of skin colour, and the implicit threat of (sexual) violence deliberately invite apprehension and fear. But, just as the barely audible 'jalla jalla' (Come come) uttered by one of the men to the rest to usher them away, the film provokes and then ushers the viewer away almost immediately into another encounter, an explicitly sexual one between Paul and Penelope. The cinematic experience promises and then deflects attention from one scenario to another. The establishment of a relation between the protagonists and the migrant presences is a provocation fraught with tension, which is deflected quickly into another, unrelated one. The intermittency of this sudden appearance functions as a plot excess: that which being repressed in a story of erotic luxuriating on Pantelleria, which appears only through opaque figures that are deprived of audible meaning. Jacqueline Rose suggests 'something arises in excess when there is something else you cannot bear to think about.'[19] The excess cannot be thought *within*

[18] Wood, online.
[19] Jacqueline Rose, *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 55.

the plot because these presences are not narratively integrated. Rather, they are simply sensed through image and sound (or lack thereof). The sensory works as a counterfoil to the cognitive, the thinking of scattered subalternity is blocked and transferred to the sensory register.

This cinematic poetics of relation indirectly constructs an opacity with its own specific abysses: the abyss of the Mediterranean, from which corpses arise and are deposited on the beaches of Pantelleria; the abyss of the boats from which they drown; and the abyss of the uncertain futures of those who survive and get presenced cinematically on the island and in the film, though not in the narrative. These abysses are constructed through an indirect, lateral movement of sound and image across time and space. The film plays on the tension between the time of the narrative and the space of the island, both fleetingly populated by presences who appear but do not speak. The aesthetics of indirection between sound/image and time/space, constructed in the above example, also takes other forms in the film, when the narrative is disrupted by the intermittent appearances of unexplained adjacencies.

The abyss in which Harry is drowned is strikingly rendered in the glittering water of the illuminated pool, by night. A long overhead shot of his crouched body at the bottom is followed by a long tracking shot at eye level. It is uncertain if it represents the point of view of Paul, who wanders in a daze along the beach, and whose presence is blocked by the striking upturned hulls of wrecked boats lined up on its edge. The absence of any establishing shots can be read as a visual accompaniment of the psychic state of Paul, who is in disarray after the unplanned murder of Harry. But that fatal splashing about in the swimming pool is laterally linked through the temporality of the sequence to a space where the wrecked boats signify another kind of drowning: an absent presence. The vessels are abysses, whose broken bottoms plunge migrants to the bottom of the sea, only to be washed up later on the island's shores. Scattered subalterns are figured through the multiple abysses they traverse. What 'comes after the crashing of the surface' of the swimming pool are the physical remnants of the lives that splashed into the 'bigger pool' of the Mediterranean.

When Penelope, Marianne and Paul are summoned to the local police station for further questioning following Harry's death, the cinematic presentation of this indirect relation between presences and protagonists is given to the viewer through a strikingly disjunctive sound-image composition. The three present their passports while in the background a group of people in a caged enclosures are seen playing basketball. The three passports are shot in extreme close-up, appearing in great detail on the screen as they are photocopied. A dialogue between two nearby but unseen policemen is layered over this visualization. A voice from an unseen body is heard saying, 'We put them all in an enclosure here, but it's inhumane. It's shameful'. 'School isn't in session. Can't we put them there?', another voice adds. 'They're human beings, at least theoretically', a third voice adds. The inspector argues on the phone to arrange refrigeration of Harry's corpse, and Penelope angrily interrupts him, speaking Italian for the first time in

the film, and asking him to show some respect for her father. Later we learn that the corpses of seven migrants have washed up on the beach. The deliberately disjunctive conjunction of sound and image in the passport sequence violently juxtaposes protagonist and absent presences. The disjunction of voice and image is confusing and jarring in its obvious breaking of the rules of cinematic sound-image coordination. The meaning of the words 'They're human beings' could apply to either the protagonists or the migrants, or to both, producing confusion. This aesthetic experience of indirection is political precisely because it disrupts the normative understanding of humanity through the production of a disjunctive sensorial experience. The 'aesthetic experience' produced here through cinematic spectatorship 'suspends the commandment of form over matter' by deforming the sound-image conjunction: 'it is a revocation of the type of "humanity" […] implied by the distinction between the men of coarse senses and those of refined senses.'[20]

That the category of the human does not apply equally is rendered brutally in Marianne's suggestive 'help' that she offers to the inspector, once he mentions the dead bodies found on the beach. Marianne responds by saying that there is a path from the beach to the pool through which 'anybody could have come up'. This is the one and only moment in the narrative when the intensely psychological, erotic hot-house drama of the four protagonists is linked to the presence of the refugees. The inspector sardonically replies that he will interrogate them, since 'they cannot be offended more than they already are'. His cutting dismissal of her attempt to incriminate the refugees severs any narrative link between the splash in the pool and the bigger splashes ending in the abyss of the Mediterranean.

This severing of the narrative link, accompanied by the implied connection in the word 'Bigger' in the title is a specific form of *adjacent* relationality. The adjacent relation without a plot connection exemplifies Adorno's famous rejoinder — Andre Gide's statement 'les extrèmes me touchent' — to Benjamin's essay on cinema.[21] The extreme differences between wealthy vacationers and scattered subalterns are brought together adjacently on the same (film) surface, and they touch the spectator. This provocation, unmitigated by causal didactic arguments, forces us to acknowledge the relationality mentioned earlier, since both groups are equally entitled to the rights which have been withdrawn for subalterns, in their scattering. The latter are not abject creatures, men with 'coarse senses' or exemplars of 'bare life'.[22] They are bearers of rights too, including police protection, decent burials and humane relocation, rather than pitiful creatures worthy of our benevolence.

[20] Rancière, *Dissensus*, p. 176.
[21] Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 130.
[22] See footnote 7.

## *An Other Ending in Medias Res*

'Globalization', Spivak argues, 'can never happen to the sensory equipment of the experiencing being except insofar as it always was implicit in its vanishing outlines.'[23] The scattered subaltern is both the cause and effect of heterogeneous global space and its outmoded cartography. Specifically, 'an aesthetic education […] can prepare us for […] thinking an uneven and only apparently accessible contemporaneity that can no longer be interpreted by such nice polarities as modernity/tradition, colonial/postcolonial.'[24] An aesthetics of indirection diverts thinking from the temptations of precisely these polarities. It constructs disturbing adjacencies whose intermittent presences block both the aesthetic contemplation of distant suffering and the engaged, almost pornographic involvement in the detailing of the other's plight.[25] Both strategies reinforce dichotomies based on distance and proximity, safe viewing and violent representation.

How we know is partly a question of how 'we' are located in a world that is itself a sensory construction. This is as much about cinematic 'experience' at the level of the senses as it is the exercise of understanding through the construction of neatly concluded arguments.[26] The film constructs a relation between the human and the non-human by exploiting cinematic 'conditions of representability', deploying aesthetic experimentation toward political epistemology and social critique.[27] For example, Guadagnino deliberately avoids what he calls the 'pre-ordained moulding' of the three-act arc structure, ending the film *in medias res*, somewhat like the bodies whose journey are interrupted by the 'bigger splash' in the Mediterranean.[28]

This aesthetics mimes rather than represents the scattered subaltern's tracing of heterogeneous global space.[29] The film's deliberately elliptical style deploys an

[23] *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 2.
[24] Ibidem.
[25] Butler, 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25 (2005), 951–66 (p. 965). Discretely approaching objects of suffering, whether drowned subalterns whose scattering is halted, or victims of torture (Butler's example is Abu Ghraib) is a form of aesthetically constructing a relation which avoids a penetrative and voyeuristic involvement by the viewer.
[26] Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), esp. pp. xvii–xviii. Hansen reads all three authors as theorists of cinema's capacity to alter the human sensorium through counter-intuitive and non-narrative formal experimentation. She calls this 'a materialist phenomenology' (p. xviii), hence her focus more on the experiential than the literal and thematic dimensions of cinema. It is precisely this experiential dimension of the cinematic (sound and image) construction of intermittent adjacencies that describes what I call an aesthetics of indirection.
[27] 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', p. 953.
[28] Wood, online.
[29] Gertrud Koch, 'Mimesis and *Bildverbot*', *Screen*, 34.3 (August 1993), 211–22. Using Adorno, Koch convincingly reformulates mimesis as the sensory relationality between film and spectator rather than meaning-production through thematic engagement. See pp. 219–20 in particular. An aesthetics of indirection describes exactly this mimetic understanding of cinematic experience. See also footnote 26.

aesthetics of indirection, where scattered subalterns intermittently appear through specific forms of sound/image and time/space relations. Their appearances are adjacent to, and accompany, the cinematic experience of the film, yet they are deliberately kept out of narrative integration. They are symptoms of an excess in contemporary globalization. The human cost of the repression of this excess is contained through neat polarities. However, an aesthetics of indirection through cinematic experience has the potential to configure their adjacent presences in contemporary globalization.