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WORLD CINEMAS OF RESISTANCE: CINEMATIC WORLDS AS DECOLONIAL PRACTICES

EDITED BY DANIELE RUGO AND MARCO BENOÎT CARBONE

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Keywords
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The articles that animate this special issue aim to map and investigate decolonial practices in cinematic worlds from the Global South. Whilst the scope is for obvious reasons limited to only few practices and context, this approach emphasises the potential of these cinemas to resist hegemonic filmic (and more generally cultural) forms and to move beyond thematic concerns, formal strategies and industrial frameworks generated and sanctioned in the Global North.

The Global South is understood here as a broad category that denotes contexts and sites that have been historically subjected to financial, political, and cultural othering and dominance, including therefore diasporic and indigenous cinemas practiced in the Global North. As a critique of ideologies, institutions, and power, the contributions in this issue draw on the paradigms of decolonisation and should therefore also be read as attempts to strengthen and expand the use of these paradigms in relation to film scholarship, an area where their use is to this day marginal. As a political category aligning with that of a "cinema of the margins", a south-driven approach challenges the othering of a "world cinema" label. In Traverso and William's definition (2017), a "south-to-south" approach entails hearing voices and seeing through the eyes of majority world nations to decentre the positionality of the subject, offering new perspectives, whether contextually or comparatively. This idea of a Global South cannot thus refrain from intersecting with the critical paradigms of Black cinema, indigenous cinemas, queer and feminist cinema, third cinema, imperfect cinema, poor cinema, migrant, diasporic, and accented cinema.

Inevitably, world cinemas produced away from the canons and infrastructures of Hollywood and/or Europe are also potential sites of resistance. Instances of world cinemas of this kind have the potential to decenter Western gazes and enact practices of decoloniality that are both mindful of and surpass the decolonial third cinemas of the 1960s and 1970s (which this issue touches upon).

The term resistance is employed here both in terms of the themes and issues developed, as well as the formal strategies deployed and the production and

distribution frameworks adopted and/or created. In this sense, the articles of this special issue aim to interrogate resistant world cinemas as they emerge through a range of approaches that may include traditional fiction, political documentary, first-person cinema, as well as avant-garde and collective filmmaking. Resistant world cinemas ideally reconfigure planetary gazes on the present, produce deconstructions of the past, and imagine possible futures. Ultimately, the idea of world cinema as a decolonial practice may offer a chance to rethink formal and aesthetic theorization around cinema's representational forms and objects and their power relations, while challenging the very idea of what cinema is and what discourse presides over definitions, without excluding its relations with cognate media forms.

DECOLONIALITY AND FILM

Decolonial approaches have become extremely popular in the last decades in a variety of academic and non-academic disciplines. The decolonial framework builds on experiences of liberation from colonial rule in the 1960s across Africa, Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean and Latin America and on knowledge developed by authors as different as Frantz Fanon, Anibal Quijano, María Lugones, Mahdi Amel, Sylvia Wynter and Walter Mignolo.

Decolonial theory seeks to expose and dismantle the enduring patterns of power, knowledge, and being that emerged from the colonial project. Whilst rooted in readings and analyses of specific historical experiences, this framework is not simply a historical analysis, but an active practice of thinking that challenges the colonial foundations of the modern world. Its central argument is that colonialism is not merely an event of political conquest and economic extraction, but a profound and ongoing rewiring of material and epistemic realities. It established an enduring global hierarchy of humanity, dividing the world into the modern and traditional, civilized and savage and it embedded this hierarchy into our institutions, our cultural practices, and our sense of self. This hierarchy - which is closely connected to modernity - endures through what Quijano called the 'coloniality of power' (2000: 536). Coloniality is what survives once formal political administrations or military occupation (what we normally call colonialism) ends. As Achille Mbembe underlines the division between two types of humanity (the modern and the savage) is as much a product of modernity as modernity's accomplishments - democracy in the first place. As Mbembe writes: 'The colonial world, as an offspring of democracy, was not the antithesis of the democratic order. It has always been its double or, again, its nocturnal face. No democracy exists without its double, without its colony—little matter the name and the structure. The colony is not external to democracy and is not necessarily located outside its walls. Democracy bears the colony within it, just as colonialism bears democracy, often in the guise of a mask (2019: 26-27). Western modernity—with its promises of progress and its rationality — is built upon and is inextricable from the exploitation and epistemicides

of the colonized world. Modernity's bright side always casts the shadow of coloniality and it is impossible to read one without the other. A foundational act of decolonial thought is therefore 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo 2009). It challenges the universal claims of Western thought, which often presents itself as the sole, objective standard for all human knowledge. Decolonial theorists argue that this "zero-point" perspective—the view from nowhere that claims to be the view from everywhere—is a fiction that masks its own geographical and historical particularity. In response, decoloniality calls for a pluriversality of knowledge (Mignolo 2018). This is not a simple multicultural relativism, but a serious engagement with the vast and suppressed reservoirs of thought, language, and wisdom from colonized peoples—what Mignolo calls the 'colonial difference' (Mignolo 2000). It involves turning to indigenous philosophies and cosmologies, and other subaltern systems of knowing to articulate alternatives to the dominant Western paradigms. Central to this project is the concept of the 'locus of enunciation' (Mignolo 1999) —the acknowledgment that all knowledge is situated, emerging from a specific body in a specific geopolitical and historical context. The decolonial thinker deliberately speaks from the margins, from the "colonial difference," to expose the biases of the supposedly neutral center.

The thematic focus of this special issue is partly motivated by the acknowledgement that much of the potential of decolonial paradigms remains unexpressed in film scholarship. Aside from the work of Robert K. Beshara (an author in this special issue) and in particular his *Transmodern Cinema and Decolonial Film Theory*, there hasn't been a systematic engagement with the tenets of decolonial theory in attempting to reread film language, its production mechanisms and its narrative/thematic choices. However the potential of decolonial theory for cinema seems substantial and moves beyond the earlier responses of Third Cinema and the work of filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène, or Santiago Alvarez, which remain crucial in many respects. The initial decolonial response emerging from Third Cinema movements of the 1960s and 70s in Latin America and Africa, used film as a weapon for anti-colonial resistance, foregrounding revolutionary narratives and giving voice to the oppressed. While vital, this phase often remained within a binary logic of counter-narrative. Other avenues might become available by examining more systematically the core decolonial concepts of pluriversality, embodied knowledge, and coloniality of knowledge and perception. The first step would be a deliberate formal and narrative *delinking* from Western cinematic conventions. Through this delinking scholars can emphasise and amplify cinematic forms rooted in indigenous and Afro-diasporic cosmologies. This can manifest as circular narratives, collective protagonism, or the integration of mythic time into contemporary settings (see on this in particular Apichatpong Weerasethakul's filmography).

Second, decolonial film scholarships should systematically engage in epistemic reconstruction. They can act not just to critically assess works, but to reactivate subjugated knowledges and cinematic experiences. Films become archives of otherwise-erased practices, languages, and ecological relationships. These are not necessarily just decolonial in a thematic sense; they become enactments

of decolonial practices, using filmmaking as a method to diagnose present-day settler colonialism and strengthen intergenerational kinship, immerse the viewer in a specific, non-universal sensorium—the textures, sounds, and oppressive heat of a particular landscape and history—forcing embodied, situated understandings that defy abstraction.

Third, the field should be marked by a critical interrogation of the medium's own materiality and history. This meta-cinematic strand questions the technology of film itself—the camera, the archive, the act of viewing—as a product of colonial modernity. Artists and filmmakers examine ethnographic archives to "rehear" the voices of captured subjects, or use speculative fiction to imagine technological futures divorced from colonial extraction.

The articles in this issue reflect in differing ways on the potential of decolonial theory for film (and more broadly media) scholarship by engaging with these different ways of reading cinematic works. The manifold historical, conceptual, and theoretical contributions are especially valuable for the diversity of their approaches, which nonetheless converge toward shared objectives. Overall, the sheer variety of voices gathered in this collection testifies to the plurality of perspectives animating the special issue. Across the contributions, Authors' approaches and objectives are deeply intertwined with their objects of analysis: whether engaging with the dominant logic of cultural industries, foregrounding voices that challenge it, withdraw from it, or inhabit cracks of resistance, these works proceed from the ground up rather than from an unreflexive alignment with a dominant canon or method. The issue opens with Robert K. Beshara's article *Divine Intervention: A Decolonial Psychoanalytic Reading*. Here Beshara examines Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002) through the lens of decolonial psychoanalysis, offering a critical analysis of the film's engagement with themes of subjectivity, resistance, and the lingering effects of colonialism in contemporary Palestine. I will explore how Suleiman's portrayal of Palestinian life reflects the psychological impacts of colonial subjugation and displacement. The film's surreal and darkly comedic narrative serves as a medium to dissect the internalized colonial trauma and the fractured sense of subjectivity experienced by Palestinians under occupation. The analysis underscores how *Divine Intervention* not only critiques the colonial power dynamics but also addresses the psychological dimensions of liberation within a colonized context. By foregrounding these tensions, Beshara offers tangible examples of how "world cinema" may function as an imposed label in professional and academic practice. Thus, "misgivings about class and positionality" in academic practices are not external to the analysis but become integral to the methodological approach, inseparable from the need to deconstruct entrenched prejudice.

In his *Acousmatic Voices and Visual Glitches: Colonial Hauntings in the Experimental Cinema of Bacigalupo and Orsini*, Edoard Pelligra offers a Derridean reading of how colonialism haunts Italian cinema as an uncanny absence. Focusing on a number of films from 1960s Italian cinema, and specifically juxtaposing Bacigalupo, Orsini and Antonioni, the article examines

the unique modalities through which 1960s Italian filmmakers blended European avant-garde sensibility, Fanon's thinking and the radical aesthetics and politics of Third World Cinema. Working on a similar period, in his *Cinema in Uruguay (1960–1974): Resistance, Guerrilla and Third World*, Alvaro Lema Mosca reviews the ways in which documentary and animated films produced in Uruguay during the 1960s and 1970s engendered powerful critiques of colonialism and established strong links with Third Cinema. Keeping a focus on cinematic resistance, but moving from Latin America to Africa, Alasambom Nyingchuo's *Cinema, Politics and Resistance in Cameroon* charts a history of cinematic production in Cameroon, during and after colonial rule (first by Germany and then France and the UK). Despite a restrictive legal regime during and after the colonial period, cinema in Cameroon has been a site of resistance especially with filmmakers like Jean Marie Teno, Basseck Ba Khobio, Jean Pierre Bekolo and Alphonse Beni; who employ hidden transcripts to lend their voices to an oppressed Cameroonian and African society. The article analyzes how these filmmakers denounce neo-colonialism, dictatorship and cultural alienation on one hand and government's incompetence and insensitivity to the plight of the masses on the other. Nyingchuo employs advocacy to describe how "committed filmmakers denounce neo-colonialism," deconstructing the material and socioeconomic disadvantages faced by peripheral cinemas, as well as the omissions made necessary by restrictions on freedom of speech or limited material affordances.

Nadica Denić's "*Can We Allow Ourselves to Make Films?": Rethinking Production Norms through the Lens of Migration* examines first-person films about migration in Europe with the aim to understand the alternative production practices that they engage in. While first-person films about diverse experiences of migration in Europe have proliferated in recent years, what we know about the positionality of their directors in the European audio-visual sector, and about the films' production process, is however limited. On the basis of a series of interviews with a selection of filmmakers, the article unpacks the challenges migrant filmmakers' encounter during the production process and strategies developed to overcome production barriers and forge alternative practices. Denić thereby extends the polyvocal approach to consider the concrete effects of coloniality and the affordances granted or denied to colonized subjects operating within the colonizer's territory.

In her *Deconstructing Paperlessness: Documentary, Mise-en-scene and Participation in Feminist and Decolonial Film Practices: the Case Study of LALA*, Ludovica Fales reconstructs the making of her own documentary hybrid film "Lala". Starting with an exploration of Boal's theatre of the oppress "Forum" and the construction of Brechtian mechanism of dismantling of the "third wall", this article investigates how the making of LALA played out, what participants retained and whether the film's was able to jostle people's consciousness. Fales's contribution works through "personal storying and cultural critique," placing subjectivity and autoethnography at the core. By employing participatory training workshops, the filmmaker-author, alongside all participants, becomes "not a

passive witness but an active participant in meaning-making." This enables a sustained reflection on the power dynamics embedded in representation itself, enacted through an ongoing struggle toward "inclusive, relational authorship."

The issue is closed by Júlia Vilhena's article *Affective Landscapes of Deterritorialization in Contemporary Cinema*. Here Vilhena delves into the movements of deterritorialization in cinema to understand the affective landscapes that reverberate within the diegetic space of narratives centered on exile, migration, and diaspora. Through an in-depth analysis of films by Cuban filmmakers Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez, and by Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Alice Diop, the article examines the subjective, intimate, historical, and political dimensions arising from the filmmakers' experiences of displacement. In this journey, the article weaves together theoretical articulations around identity and otherness in cinematic practices, in dialogue with diasporic thinkers from Cultural and Postcolonial Studies, and with the aesthetic-political manifestos of Third Cinema movement, which emerged in the 1960s and 70s in Latin America.

The outcomes of this special issue are generative precisely because they exceed any objective or normative conception of research results. Instead, the contributions foreground reflexive questions that are central to both the potential and the problematics of decolonial approaches to cinema. Fales frames filmmaking explicitly as an act of reparation. Beshara's aim is to confront the gatekeeping mechanisms that shape the publication and circulation of scholarship on Palestinian cinema within Eurocentric film studies. Pelligra targets the amnesia surrounding coloniality's impermanent yet diffuse haunting of public discourse. Nyingchuo aims to cultivate a practice of reading between the lines, contextualizing the cinemas of the periphery within interstitial spaces of resistance shaped by pervasive ideologies and their material effects on conditions of production. Likewise, Lema Mosca works to acknowledge the invisibility concealed within these cracks—an invisibility that demands historical and conceptual recognition. Denić broadens this scope by illuminating not only the contextualized workings of film texts, but also the visibility of subjects themselves within these structures.

With keywords such as reparation, gatekeeping, amnesia, and visibility emerging across the issue, the collection offers a series of generative critical prompts through which to engage with, expand, and contest the very concept of the canon.

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Divine Intervention: A Decolonial Psychoanalytic Reading

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This paper offers a decolonial psychoanalytic reading of Elia Suleiman's 2002 film, *Divine Intervention*. It begins by critiquing the Eurocentric gatekeeping within film studies that often marginalizes Palestinian cinema, arguing that publishing on Divine Intervention is a political act against the "prohibition of Palestine" in the *Global North*. Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is extended to propose that the decolonial subject is "doubly divided due to colonial difference," leading to a "double-unconsciousness." The analysis delves into the film's portrayal of jouissance (enjoyment), distinguishing between "mythic jouissance" (colonial oppression) and "divine jouissance" (decolonial liberation). The paper interprets the film's "absurdist" style and the main character's (E.S.) silence as an active, agentic force. Further, the film's political commentary is examined, particularly through the symbolism of a red balloon representing Yasser Arafat's "ego-politics" and vacuous authority. The study also explores the film's unconventional theological undertones, portraying colonialism as the Antichrist and interpreting the Woman character as a fida'iya (one who sacrifices for a cause), embodying a "feminine aesthetic violence" that challenges colonial structures. Ultimately, the paper argues that Suleiman's cinema presents a theory of decolonial power through its representation of decolonial subjectivity.

Keywords
Palestine
Psychoanalysis
Cinema
Decoloniality
Liberation
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INTRODUCTION: GATEKEEPING PALESTINIAN CINEMA

In 2020, I approached a film theorist and the editor of a scholarly book series on cinema with an idea for a book on Elia Suleiman's *Divine Intervention* (2002). I wanted to write about how decolonial subjectivity figures in this Palestinian film. However, the theorist/editor was not keen on my idea, reasoning that the film was not "widely known". I argued that the film is not obscure, given that it won significant film awards (e.g., the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival), has been positively reviewed by prominent film critics (e.g., J. Hoberman and Roger Ebert), and was even streaming on Netflix for a while. Of course, it is also worth mentioning that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences excluded *Divine Intervention* from the Best Foreign Language Film category on the pretext that Palestine is not a formally recognized nation-state according to the United Nations. Nevertheless, Hamid Dabashi argues, "The world of cinema will soon claim Elia Suleiman in the way the republic of letters has claimed Edward Said"

(2006, 156). The parallel between Suleiman and Said is interesting in light of the latter's recognition of the former's cinematic articulation of a national Palestinian narrative "in very subtle and eloquent ways" (as cited in Dabashi 2006, 11).

The theorist/editor then argued that a book on an "obscure" Palestinian film would not sell and would not be taught in film courses. I counter-argued that the film had actually been assigned in film courses at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and Dartmouth College. The theorist/editor was unconvinced by my examples since, for them, these courses are not considered "general film surveys." I wrote back, "This is unfortunately why film studies as a discipline is Eurocentric and excludes many great films from North Africa and West Asia. This is, of course, exemplified in the sub-discipline of 'world cinema' (i.e., the rest of the world)." The theorist/editor encouraged me to choose another 'world' film from Africa or Iran.

I begin with this story of an email exchange about an unrealized book project to showcase the gatekeeping of publishing about Palestinian cinema in North America—a form of censorship in the Eurocentric academic field of 'film studies,' which excludes non-European cinema and places it under the generic heading of 'world cinema.' As such, publishing a peer-reviewed article on *Divine Intervention* for a film and media studies journal is a political act that signifies true freedom of expression since Palestine is a taboo topic in the *Global North*. More than a dozen scholars in the US, for example, have lost their jobs because they are openly pro-Palestine (Lennard 2024).

The prohibition of Palestine—and any signifier of 'Palestinianness'—is a function of a collective symptom vis-à-vis Palestine-as-taboo. Palestine must be negated because acknowledging the historical and ongoing displacement of Palestinians would manifest as collective guilt and anxiety (Freud, 2004). Therefore, the negation of Palestine is a structural component of the Euro-American political unconscious, alongside other structural negations: colonialism, imperialism, genocide, slavery, racism, etc. These structural negations result from a collective emotional ambivalence, which then manifests consciously in a variety of ways, particularly as indifference or hostility; hence, the ungrievability of Palestinian lives in the Euro-American imagination, for instance (Butler 2004).

THE QUESTION OF DECOLONIAL SUBJECTIVITY

Divine Intervention is the second part of a film trilogy of self-portraits that begins with *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) and ends with *The Time That Remains* (2009). The trilogy is a cinematic meditation on the decolonial subjectivity of Palestinians, a resilient subjectivity doubly divided by Israeli settler colonialism (Rodinson 1973). According to psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Lacan 2006), the subject is divided between ego and unconscious. However, this 'subject' is not any generic subject; rather, the psychoanalytic subject is the

Euromodern "subject of science" (Lacan 2006, 727). As such, the psychoanalytic subject is *ipso facto* the (post)colonial subject because (post)coloniality is the underside of (post)modernity. Consequently, I stretch psychoanalytic theory from an exterior perspective and argue that *the decolonial subject is doubly divided due to colonial difference*, a dimension undergirding sexual difference. This double division implies a double-unconsciousness [Fig. 1].

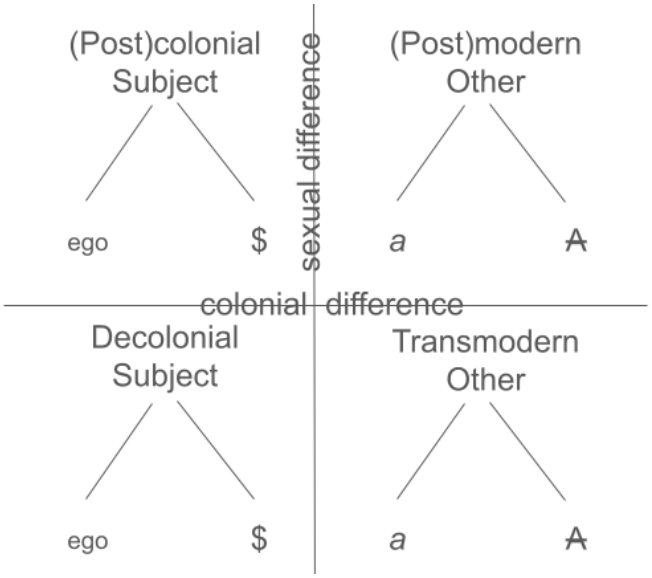

Fig. 1
A theory of double-unconsciousness.

By "(post)colonial subject," I am combining both colonial and postcolonial subjects because I situate postcoloniality as a critique of modernity/coloniality *within* the logic of Totality. As such, I regard the (post)colonial subject as the normative subject of the signifier. Decoloniality, on the other hand, is a critique of Totality from Exteriority. Sexual difference refers to the universal alienation experienced by human subjects during the Oedipal stage of psychosexual development between the ages of three and five, wherein the heterosexual child is sexed through identification with the same-sex parent. So what of colonial difference?

For Lacan (1998), masculinity and femininity are neither biological (male-female) nor cultural (man-woman); sexual difference is a difference in *jouissance* (enjoyment)—the two modes of enjoyment are also framed as *phallic jouissance* and *Other jouissance*. Enjoyment is beyond the pleasure principle, so also includes pain. Whereas phallic jouissance is masturbatory (the enjoyment of the idiot), Other jouissance seems to be more sophisticated since it can entail non-phallic forms of enjoyment like sonic jouissance (the enjoyment of music and sound), optical jouissance (the enjoyment of visual arts), and ecological jouissance (the enjoyment of the environment). In some of my previous work (Beshara, 2019; Beshara, 2021), I also write about the colonial difference between *mythic jouissance* and *divine jouissance*.

While the former is the (post)colonial enjoyment of oppression and violence, which is the modus operandi of Totality (modernity/coloniality), the latter is the decolonial enjoyment of liberation and (non)violence in Exteriority. By "(non) violence," I am indexing the revolutionary traditions of violence and nonviolence,

which always require justification as a means to a liberatory end: historical reason → legitimate power. The reactionary violence of Totality (modernity/coloniality) is an end in itself: instrumental reason → illegitimate power.

Divine Intervention is a film about *jouissance*, and the hint is in the subtitle: *A Chronicle of Love and Pain*. It is a chronicle of love, as opposed to pleasure, because where sex is nowhere to be seen, unspeakable pain is the substance of the film. The silence of pain points to the traumatic Real, hence the necessity for ideological healing through the passion, or discursive-fantasy, of love. A line used several times across different contexts in the film is "I am crazy because I love you." This sentence is never spoken; rather, we see the words a number of times: first as graffiti written on a wall then as a title card—a nod to silent cinema—and finally as a hand-written note. The words arise from Suleiman's need for mobility, renewal, and dislocation as a way to delay death: "Desire and love are decentered in the sense that you never know when and where they will strike, yet you always welcome them" (Suleiman 2000, 101). The silent pain underneath the signifier 'love' epitomizes E.S.'s mute existence, which led Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi to compare him with Naji al-Ali's cartoon character, Handala—another silent, expressionless observer (Gertz and Khleifi 2008, 41). As such, this painful silence is neither passive nor powerless, but active and agentic as I will show later.

AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE FILM

Before I critique the film, I wish to contextualize my first encounter with *Divine Intervention*, an experience that profoundly politicized my psyche. The film was released in 2002 in the context of the Second Intifada and the aftermath of 9/11. I was 18 years old when I saw *Divine Intervention* for the first time with a friend. The screening took place in downtown Cairo inside a makeshift art space owned by the Townhouse Gallery, which used to be an auto repair shop. The film left everyone speechless and gave us something to think about as the war on terror unfolded before our eyes.

Egyptian viewers, who have a deep sense of solidarity with the Palestinian people, were not turned off by the hallucinatory style of the film, which can be described as a cinema of the absurd given its "hybrid aesthetic" that blends "fictionalized memoir, burlesque, formal experimentation, and pungent reflection on Mideast politics" (White and Suleiman 2010, 38). Dabashi characterizes Suleiman's cinema as a willful and violent form of resistance to colonial power by enacting a frivolous aesthetic of emancipation (2006, 174). Dabashi hones in particularly on the decolonial concept of 'frivolity,' which he argues "is the noble version of [colonial] obscenity" (2006, 149). Dabashi writes:

> *What we witness in Elia Suleiman's cinema is the precise critical moment when the depth of tragedy mutates into the height of*

> *comedy, comedy meets absurdity, and then absurdity remembers the dark dread at the heart of its own memory of the terror it must, and cannot but, remember… Elia Suleiman's cinema is the revenge of joyous laughter on obscene mendacity (Dabashi 2006, 148).*

Similarly, Stanley Kaufman characterized Suleiman's cinema as absurdist and compared the filmmaker to Eugène Ionesco (as quoted in Suleiman 2003). However, Suleiman describes his style as "minimalist" and "pure" while "pushing the extremes in two genres–hyperrealism and the absurd" (Suleiman 2000, 101). A scene toward the film's end, wherein three guys are shaking a white car, is a good illustration of this.

The spectator is left wondering why they are shaking the car. They did it to activate the alarm. Is it a meaningless act? It appears so, but on second thought, they sound the alarm to draw attention to their situation under occupation, for it is the occupation itself, which is absurd or obscene to use Dabashi's term. Another absurd scene is of a man waiting at a bus stop. A different man emerges from a building and tells him: "There is no bus". The first man responds, "I know." He then wears his sunglasses—a motif in the film—and feels cool even though he knows he is defeated. The characters seem to be casting shade at the reality of occupation. We conclude that the man is not waiting for a bus, but like Vladimir or Estragon, he is waiting for Godot, that is, for a miracle: the end of the occupation. At some point, we see the following words written on the wall ("I am crazy because I love you") near the bus stop. These words are repeated by E.S. later in the film in a note to Woman near al-Ram checkpoint.

That year, I recorded a song called "Palestine" because I had been thinking about the tragic killing of Muhammad al-Durrah, who was 12 years old, in 2000. Muhammad's father, Jamal al-Durrah, lost his two brothers, sister-in-law, and niece in 2023 during Israel's war on Gaza. I re-recorded my song in 2024 since my words in 2002 continued to apply as if nothing had changed: "Palestine is losing people. Palestine is losing blood. Palestine is strong though powerless. Palestine is the cause for everybody."

THE POLITICAL ARC: FROM INTIFADA TO FRAGMENTED LEADERSHIP

The context of the Second Intifada (2000-2005) is essential for understanding *Divine Intervention* since this uprising signified the failure of the Oslo Accords (1993) that created the Palestinian Authority, which Yasser Arafat then headed. The Oslo Accords were in response to the First Intifada (1987-1993). As such, the Second Intifada, which was in response to Ariel Sharon's visit to al-Aqsa Mosque, indexed the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the end of Arafat's legitimacy as a political leader, particularly after the failure of Camp David (2000). Out of this failure, Likud rose to prominence, and so did Hamas, which took power in Gaza from Fatah in 2007–two years after Israel withdrew its

military. Arafat's political arc is a microcosm of the political failures that have been plaguing the Arab world since 1948, or al-Nakba (the catastrophe), and 1967, or al-Naksa (the setback): first as a tragedy, then as a farce.

Arafat was a revolutionary symbol of Arab socialism; he was one of Fatah's founders who served as Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from 1969 until he died in 2004. The PLO slogan in the 1970s was "Unitary Democratic Non-Sectarian Palestine". What happened to this dream of a secular and democratic binational state? Here is the rub, "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton in 1887).

When Arafat became President of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, his power was legitimized by the Oslo Peace Accord but not by the Palestinian people. This led Said (2001a), who used to be Arafat's comrade for many years before the Oslo peace process, to write that the mandate of "the corrupt Vichy-like Authority of Arafat… has essentially been to police and tax his people on Israel's behalf." To quote Walter Mignolo, Arafat's arc regressed from revolutionary "body-politics" to reactionary "ego-politics" or from an identity based on politics to a politics based on identity (2007, 492). This is the trap of any Imaginary politics, which is always premised on the over-identification with a charismatic leader, who is often reduced to the status of a symbol or an image. The ego-politics of Fatah ended up displacing the cause of Palestinian liberation, which was driving the body-politics of the PLO.

Suleiman represents Arafat's ego-politics in the film through the image of a red balloon with a caricature of Arafat's grinning face, which Gertz and Khleifi read as an ambivalent symbol—or a floating signifier—that "is ridiculed and rejuvenated simultaneously" (2008, 181). I was reminded of the ghost of Hamlet's father. E.S. inflates the balloon at al-Ram checkpoint and releases it through the sunroof. The guards at the checkpoint are alarmed when they see the Arafat balloon flying, but they are unsure what to do, so they contact their superior.

At this point, the balloon is floating gracefully over different parts of Jerusalem, finally making its way to the Dome of the Rock and circling the crescent on top of the Dome. This fantasy sequence is undoubtedly an allusion to the French short film *Le ballon rouge* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956), which has influenced Suleiman's style since it has no dialogue, relying instead on visual storytelling and symbolism. Suleiman has described his cinematic practice as an effort to create "the 'total' image, the image that has no substitution," which, for him, "is the poetic vision" (2000, 98). Stathis Gourgouris qualifies Suleiman's cinema as specifically exemplifying "a poetics of dispossession" (2015, 32).

Poetically, the balloon signifies the vacuousness of Arafat's political authority, an inflated ego: an Imaginary representation without any Real or Symbolic substance–i.e., a perverse subject whose unconscious is disavowed. The Dome of the Rock is one of the holiest sites in Islam, and it marks the site from which Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. In contrast, Arafat's balloon is stuck spiraling around the crescent atop the Dome, which suggests that Arafat is a

false prophet. He is in neither Heaven nor Hell but is stuck in the intermediate state of Barzakh. The balloon, however, distracts the Israeli guards, which allows Woman to successfully pass through the checkpoint.

THEOLOGICAL UNDERTONES: A COLONIAL CHRISTMAS

In my reading, *Divine Intervention* is a Christmas movie but a very unconventional one. What does a colonial Christmas look like in the Holy Land? The film begins with a scene of Santa Claus running for his life in Nazareth while being chased by a band of brothers. Santa throws his gifts at the group in self-defense. As such, the gift economy that anthropologists write about is not operative in this precarious situation. Santa reaches the top of a hill, but in a medium close-up, it is revealed to us that he has been stabbed in the chest. This ominous tragi-comic scene is followed by the title "Nazareth." For Robin Truth Goodman (2024), the dark comedic undertone of Suleiman's cinema is a form of border methodology: "comedy is here a genre of the border in that it connects and overlaps categories of difference while maintaining their differences in dissensus" (2024, 83). In my theorization, the border is the line of colonial difference, which produces double-unconsciousness.

Santa Claus is also known as Father Christmas, so we witness not only the killing of the primal father by a band of brothers–like in *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 2004)–but also the death of Christmas in Nazareth, the city where Jesus lived and preached. This opening scene sets a bleak tone for the theological undertones throughout the rest of the film. The opening scene implies that colonialism is the Antichrist. Suleiman is, of course, a Christian of Rūm Greek Orthodox origin.

Other theological references include a random person telling a story to the welder involving the number 6, and he mentions explicitly "666 shekels." This alludes to "the number of the beast," particularly as mentioned in the *Textus Receptus*. The beast is another reference to the Antichrist by way of Nero Caesar, associated with 666. There is a scene involving three men standing in a yard while hitting a mysterious object using wood logs. A group is watching them. Someone says, "Hit the motherfucker." A fourth man shows up with a gun and shoots at the mysterious object, which we then discover is a snake. The serpent, of course, is a Christian symbol for the Devil or Satan. They then burn it.

THE FIDA'IYA AS CHRIST-REDEEMER AND THE DECOLONIAL GAZE

Another key theological motif appears during the film's climactic fantasy sequence, wherein Woman plays a *fida'iya* (someone willing to sacrifice their life for a cause, such as Palestinian liberation). Suleiman implies that Jesus was a

fida'i since he sacrificed his life to save humanity from sin. In a sense, we can also read Antigone as a *fida'iya*, which implies that Palestinian ethics align with the ethics of psychoanalysis since it entails acting on one's unconscious desire. Free Palestine is the *objet a* causing the desire of the *fida'i subject*. As such, Suleiman frames the *fida'iya* as a Christ-redeemer figure hovering above the ground with her body positioned in the shape of a cross and with bullets frozen in mid-air around her head, forming a halo (saintly aura) or a crown of thorns.

E.S. never speaks; he listens like an analyst. His cinema is his voice. He does not even have expressions on his face, which is reminiscent of the Kuleshov effect, a film editing technique developed in Russia in the early 20th century that allows spectators to derive subjective meanings from their interpretation of juxtaposed shots, wherein the subsequent shot informs how we read the previous shot. The Kuleshov effect resonates with Freud's notion of Nachträglichkeit or après-coup, wherein we interpret S1 (master-signifier) based on S2 (knowledge). The Kuleshov effect opens the space of interpretation for us to reflect on our desire as spectators.

The minimal dialogue and the series of vignettes that repeat and vary using meditative and choreographed wide shots led film critics (e.g., Drake Stutesman) to compare Suleiman with Jacques Tati. Also, E.S.'s expressionless face reminded other critics of Buster Keaton's deadpan style. However, Suleiman denies any influence from these two filmmakers while acknowledging his debt to Ozu, Hsiao-hsien Hou, and Tsai Ming-liang (Porton 2003; Suleiman and Stutesman 2004). Why must non-Europeans always be compared to Europeans for us to be legible?

The only scene wherein we see E.S. barely crying or expressing some sort of emotion is when he is in the kitchen cutting an onion, so we are unsure if he is melancholic about the occupation or if it is the onion that causes his tears. Perhaps occupation is an onion: a complex tear-jerker. Extending food metaphors further, Suleiman ends the film after his father's death, wherein we see E.S. sitting on a couch next to his mother; she says, "That's enough. Stop it now." She is referring to the pressure cooker in front of them, which symbolizes the defeated Palestinian or Arab psyche suffering from repetitive colonial pressures; however, Suleiman uses her statement as a cue for him to also end the film.

PALESTINIAN SUBJECTIVITIES UNDER COLONIALISM

Colonized Palestinian subjectivity is alienated in three ways that mark different degrees of oppression and violence within settler colonialism: (1) Palestinian citizens of Israel, (2) Palestinians in the West Bank, and (3) Gazans–not mentioning Palestinians in the diaspora, whom I will bracket for my analysis even though Suleiman is technically a diasporic Palestinian filmmaker. Palestinian citizens of Israel are a minority in Israel, constituting about 20% of the population; as such,

they are persecuted, but they have been protected to some extent by their legal status as Israeli citizens.

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza do not have the legal protections of citizenship since the United Nations does not officially recognize Palestine as a sovereign nation-state but merely as an "observer state." Therefore, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are colonized subjects of Israel (i.e., non-citizens) who are theoretically protected under international law. Still, in practice, the Geneva Conventions are seldom enforced. Whereas Fatah has the semblance of symbolic authority in the West Bank (or the occupied Palestinian territories) in coordination with the Israeli military; Gaza, which has been described as an open-air prison or concentration camp, was governed by Hamas.

I say "was" because governance is impossible in the context of asymmetrical warfare, given Israel's ongoing assault against the civilian population in Gaza. The current death toll in Gaza, as of June 16, 2025, is more than 55,000 reported fatalities, the majority of which are women and children. These distinctions in colonized Palestinian subjectivity are crucial to emphasize since they reflect different politico-economic realities that Palestinians may experience or various degrees of colonial cruelty that range from anti-Arab racism to sadistic extermination.

As such, Gaza is absent in Suleiman's cinema because he writes from his privileged position as a Palestinian citizen of Israel with a social link to the West Bank. Suleiman states, "I am from Nazareth, not the West Bank. Also, I have not lived in just one place. I have traveled and lived in different countries, and *this nomadic experience is a privilege*. My tie to the land is not exclusive" (2000, 96) [emphasis added]. What is important is that Suleiman uses his subjective privilege to produce radical aesthetic objects (films) about Palestine, and that is an ethico-political act in service of historical reason. Liberation praxis entails double critique: (1) critiquing Totality and (2) Exterior self-criticism. This double critique then becomes the foundation for enacting dual power: colonial resistance v. decolonial power. In other words, we must have a theory of decolonial power before we can practice it, and I argue that Suleiman's cinema presents us with a theory of decolonial power through its representation of decolonial subjectivity.

FROM THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SEXUAL RAPPORT TO DECOLONIAL FANTASY

Many scenes occur at al-Ram checkpoint, which sits at the intersection between the West Bank and Jerusalem, wherein E.S. parks his car to meet with his partner, Woman (played by Manal Khader). E.S. and Woman never speak to one another, but they stare at each other and hold hands in a sensuous manner. Their romance exemplifies what Lacan (1998) terms "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel": their sexual relationship is impossible because the Real of colonial difference is a castrating force symbolized by the materiality of the checkpoint, whose sign

functions as the bar responsible for the double division of the colonized subject.

Goodman conceives of this impossible relationship as akin to "fellow moviegoers" as opposed to lovers (2024, 85). For Goodman, this Real impossibility is characterized by "silent spectatorship," which invites us "to intervene in the image as a democratic public against that image's authority" (2004, 86). This "silent politics of the spectator" de-fetishizes the colonial look, which reduces the image of the Palestinian subject to a stereotype; this de-fetishization and democratization of the image occurs through the *sumudic* silence and decolonial Gaze of E.S. and Woman. According to Goodman, this de-fetishizing and democratic praxis of spectatorship in Suleiman's cinema "is the creation of a public" (2004, 88)—a demos with rights. In essence, with agentic or intentional silence, Suleiman aims to represent the unrepresentable (i.e., the Real): the binational state as a dialectical third space of political antagonism beyond the deadlock of binary nationalisms. This third space would be the culmination of decolonial power.

E.S. can cross the checkpoint back and forth without an issue because he has an Israeli passport; however, Palestinians in the West Bank, like Woman, are often humiliated and denied access—nevertheless, E.S. experiences a sense of impotence, which leads him to resort to all sorts of fantasies involving Woman. In contrast to the humiliation experienced by Palestinians from the West Bank, an obnoxious Israeli driver in a sports car blasting Amr Diab's "Wala Ala Baloh" passes the checkpoint quickly without a sweat.

As an Egyptian, I had two reactions to this scene: (1) it is a case of cultural appropriation of Arabic music by an Israeli colonizer, and (2) it is Suleiman's critique of Egypt's normalizing position as a feeble mediator in the so-called 'conflict.' Anna Ball argues that Suleiman reframes the emasculation of male Palestinian subjectivity, particularly within the space of the border-checkpoint, as a form of "emotional and moral strength" or a "manifestation of *sumud*...an altogether more self-aware, enduring and cerebral masculinity" (Ball 2012, 89–90). For Ball, this reframing of impotence as nonviolent resistance, or *sumud*, facilitates a heterogenous "renewal of the structures of both [the Palestinian] nation and [Palestinian] masculine identity" (2012, 86).

In *Seminar XX*, Lacan (1998) infamously proclaimed, "La femme n'existe pas" or "the woman doesn't exist." A surface feminist reading would lead us to believe that Lacan is a misogynist. However, Lacan is critiquing masculine jouissance, so he argues that ~~Woman~~ does not exist except as an object of fantasy in the phallic order. In occupied Palestine, the phallic order is also a colonial order invested in mythic jouissance. This is why E.S. fantasizes about ~~Woman~~ as a sexy bombshell, who can cross al-Ram checkpoint uninterrupted. In the fantasy, the divine violence of her sexual power makes the Israeli watchtower collapse. Suleiman addresses the feminine logic of not-whole (*pas-toute*) informing the radical aesthetics of the film's counter-ideological fantasy sequences:

> *As opposed to masculine aesthetics, masculine violence which is not aesthetic, which can be less fluid and is many times confrontational,*

> *therefore is always violating and violated; always creating a binary opposition. In the film, I play a little on that… between me and her… despite the fact that I'm experiencing a paralysis, or impotence. The imagined other is* this feminine aesthetic violence which manages to win them all *(Suleiman and Stutesman 2004, 87) [emphasis added].*

The bombshell metaphor is apt here, as we will see later, and it is reminiscent of The Woman in the Red Dress from *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999). Woman is wearing a pink dress and sunglasses. She moves like a model on a catwalk, and her choreography is synchronized with the electronic music soundtrack. It is no coincidence that characters in Suleiman's films move like modern dancers:

> *When I'm asked what I would do if it wasn't film,* I think it's choreography. *You can see that in the film. It's really what I indulge. It's the temporality of all the movements in the frame that are carried by the elements /characters (Suleiman and Stutesman 2004, 86) [emphasis added].*

Woman's decolonial Gaze disturbs the Israeli guards, whom she transfixes. This fantasy sequence exemplifies the not-whole (*pas toute*) logic of feminine *jouissance*. Speaking of *The Matrix*, Israeli hasbara (propaganda) is essentially a form of simulacrum, wherein the myth of "the only democracy in the Middle East" is premised on the erasure of Palestinian culture, that is, ethnic cleansing (Pappé 2006). To maintain this simulacrum, the pro-Israel media in Euro-America repeatedly exposes the public to simulations of peace in the form of the so-called "peace process" toward a hypothetical "two-state solution" recommended by the United Nations and human rights organizations. However, the reality is that at least three potential states (Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza) can form the basis for a new federal entity: Palestine. The other simulation is the phrase "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," which implies power symmetry when no such thing exists in reality.

THE WISDOM OF THE DISPOSSESSED: ON SULEIMAN'S CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

A powerful scene in the film shows us a lost European tourist in Jerusalem, who approaches an Israeli policeman to ask for directions to The Church of the Holy Sepulcher. However, the Israeli policeman does not know the way, probably because he is a European immigrant, so he brings out a blindfolded Palestinian man, who was detained in the back of the van. The detained Palestinian man was able to provide multiple directions to the Church while blindfolded. The blindfolded Palestinian made me think of Tiresias, the blind prophet and oracle of Apollo in Thebes from Sophoclean tragedies, which speaks to the wisdom of

Palestinians as the Indigenous people of Palestine.

Like many instances in the film, the scene is repeated with a variation: the detained man escapes. As a filmmaker, Suleiman thinks not only like a poet and a choreographer, but also like a composer, who works with themes and variations: "The musicality of the film's structure is important" (as quoted in Porton 2003). Instead of writing melodic themes, Suleiman creates tableaux organized contrapuntally.

At some point in the film, Woman disappears without explanation. She stops showing up at the checkpoint to meet with E.S. like usual, so the spectator may assume that she has been detained or worse. This leads E.S. toward the climactic fantasy sequence of the film, wherein Woman plays a fida'iya. Again, *The Matrix* is alluded to because she can dodge bullets, levitate, and accomplish all sorts of ninja feats like Neo and Trinity. In *The Matrix*, Neo (the One) represents Moses, for he is meant to liberate chosen people from the matrix and lead them to the promised land of Zion, in the desert of the Real. And here, we must pause to reflect on the film's title.

The transliteration of the original Arabic title is *yad 'ilāhiyya*, which means "divine hand." Divine intervention refers to Biblical miracles like YHVH splitting the Red Sea. The character of E.S., for example, is introduced in the film through a shot of him driving a car while eating an apricot. He then nonchalantly throws the pit through the car window at an Israeli tank on the side of the road, thereby exploding it instantaneously. Divine violence is possible in revolutionary cinema.

However, divine hand accurately describes one of the central motifs in the film: the hands of E.S. and Woman coming together to signify love and the impossibility of the sexual. As such, the divine hand that Suleiman refers to is Woman's hand, the hand of love that makes the pain of colonialism a bit more bearable. Later, this hand of love becomes a revolutionary hand responsible for divine violence–the kind of violence that can destroy colonial law (Benjamin, 1996), which is not only unjust but also untrue.

THE FIDA'I AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF COLONIAL FANTASY

In the climactic fantasy sequence, ~~Woman~~ becomes ~~Palestinian~~, wherein, according to colonial difference, "the Palestinian doesn't exist." The Palestinian subject does not exist except as an object of fantasy in the colonial order (i.e., a terrorist). In Suleiman's words:

> Palestine does not exist*. It has no borders. It has all the chaotic elements that lead you to question space, borders, and crossings, even if none of these elements, in itself, is valid. The Palestinian people is partitioned into various segments, but there is no real border. This chaotic status quo gives you a kind of freedom. It's the best place to reflect on space. (2000, 96) [emphasis added].*

However, a *fida'i* (self-sacrificer) is distinct from an *irhabi* (terrorist) or even a *jihadi* (one who struggles in the path of Allāh). In the film's climactic fantasy sequence, five Israeli agents are seen firing their guns at seven cardboard targets of a *fida'i*. The image of the *fida'i* is sexually ambivalent, for the face is covered with a *keffiyeh*. Only the decolonial Gaze of the *fida'i* remains, which causes great anxiety for the Israeli agents since they are trained to dehumanize this ideological fantasmatic figure. The iconic *fida'iya* indexed by Suleiman is Leila Khaled, a Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine member.

Six target cardboards fall except the central one, behind which a *fida'i* appears and enacts divine violence. At one point, the *fida'i* reveals their face, and we discover it is Woman. She uses her *divine hand* (1) to juggle grenades that explode and then reveal the Palestinian flag; (2) to throw darts at the agents, which carry the Islamic symbols of the crescent and the star; (3) to hold a metal shield shaped like a map of historic Palestine and then uses this shield as a boomerang weapon with which she destroys a helicopter; (4) to throw her keffiyeh like a lasso with which she pulls the enemy's guns; and (5) to throw stones at the enemy using a sling. This guerrilla tactic came to prominence during the First Intifada but is also a reference to a technique used by David to defeat Goliath in the Old Testament, which brings to mind Said's statement about himself being "the last Jewish intellectual…The only true follower of Adorno" (2001b, 52). I read that as a conceptual point about pan-Semitic non-identitarian affiliation. Is Suleiman the last Jewish filmmaker? He thinks so:

> *I don't see anything Jewish about statehood. In the conceptual, spiritual sense of the word. Of a diasporic experience, of always resisting power, authority, and centeredness, of making affiliations with nondominant authorities. The list is endless to what we can say is Jewish. It is my affiliation. It's what I thrive on. Not only in my daily life, but in my films. In the construction of the image. Look at my being in the frame. It's completely marginalized. I am almost a present absentee or an absent presentee. I make sure that I don't have any weight that could attract authority. I try to exist in a form of translucency so that I do not contain the whole frame. When you decenter the frame, it gives a democratic reading… This is very Jewish. I mean conceptually. Not tribally. By refraining from any sort of possession of authority (as quoted in Suleiman and Stutesman 2004, 92).*

Finally, Woman uses her *divine hand* to throw a grenade underneath her to disappear like a *jinn*. By deconstructing sexual and colonial fantasies, Suleiman demonstrates the revolutionary potential of traversing oppressive and violent fantasies. Suleiman explodes the phallic fantasy of masculine jouissance and the colonial fantasy of mythic jouissance by using these fantasies against themselves. This meta-critique becomes more apparent later in the film as a mise-en-abyme strategy when we see E.S. in his apartment rearranging the film's nonlinear plot using sticky notes on two walls to distinguish between what could have been the film and what is the film. The nonlinearity of Suleiman's meta-cinema is a

function of a "decentralization of viewpoint, perception, and narration", which serves as a metaphor: "Palestinians have always been ghettoized in a way, geographically and historically. To translate this metaphor requires a nonlinear cinematographic narrative structure" (Suleiman 2000, 97).

CONCLUSION: LOVE, RESISTANCE, AND THE REALITIES OF CONTEMPORARY PALESTINIAN CINEMA

Love in Palestine is an impossible but necessary discourse undergirded by non-sexual rapport. Fantasies are then superimposed onto this impotence to cover over the Real of colonial difference, which is traumatic. The fantasy is a screen onto which E.S. projects his revolutionary ideals about Woman, whose function is sustaining a counter-ideology of resistance against occupation. As such, the film frames the Palestinian unconscious through decolonial fantasies of liberation.

However, the fantasy-screen also blocks something from the spectator's view, which speaks to the limit of fantasy vis-à-vis desire. The counter-ideology of resistance is still an ideology, a discursive-fantasy, so the material question of liberation praxis remains. It is a question that entails critique and self-criticism, which, for Suleiman, gets translated through a poetics of dark humor as *ridiculing colonial power and ironizing decolonial resistance*. For Suleiman, "being humorous with the Palestinians is an act of love, not an act of cynicism" (as quoted in Khader 2015, 25).

Whereas the Gaza Strip is entirely isolated, Suleiman's hometown of Nazareth is geopolitically proximate to the West Bank. In other words, Suleiman is undoubtedly committed to the collective struggle to decolonize Israel and liberate Palestine (Halper, 2021), which signifies concretely "a binational Israeli-Palestinian state" (Said, 1999). Gertz and Khleifi acknowledge this when they describe the world of Suleiman's cinema as "this third, open, heterogenous space" (2008, 166). However, a Gazan filmmaker would not be able to produce this kind of arthouse cinema, not because they cannot, but because it requires backing from Euro-American film financiers. This led Ball to critique Suleiman's "willful rejection of national fraternity" as retaining "a level of elitist and artistic privilege" (2012, 90).

Furthermore, bourgeois Euro-American film financiers with a liberal sensibility vis-à-vis the Palestinian cause are more sympathetic toward a sophisticated *cinema of fantasy* than the kind of gritty *cinema of the Real* or cinéma vérité that we may get from Gazan documentarians, such as *From Ground Zero* (Masharawi and Nikolov 2024). This is not an argument about which cinema is better, for both types of cinema are equally necessary. However, I am alluding to the question of class struggle within Palestinian cinema, which mirrors the diverse politico-economic realities of Palestinian citizen-subjects in Israel, the

West Bank, Gaza, and beyond.

Let us consider Gazans as the lumpenproletariat of the Palestinian liberation struggle. Palestinian citizens of Israel may seem like the bourgeoisie, even when many of them are part of the working class. The divide-and-conquer colonial tactics used by Israel to alienate Palestinian subjects from one another, of course, come out of the imperial rulebook passed on by the British Empire (e.g., the Sykes-Picot Agreement). Suleiman treats this (post)colonial alienation with a sense of irony in his autobiographical cinematic trilogy, particularly in *Divine Intervention*.

Another way of framing (post)colonial alienation in the context of settler colonialism is through Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of *internalized oppression*, wherein the oppressed internalize the oppression they are subjected to. In the process, they may repeat the oppressors through sub-oppression, which is how the Palestinian Authority, headed by Mahmoud Abbas since 2005, is perceived, for instance.

The Palestinian Authority is sub-oppressive not only because it is an undemocratic and corrupt administration but also because it cooperates with Israel. However, Suleiman does not focus on the sub-oppression of the Palestinian Authority; instead, he is interested in how sub-oppression manifests in Palestinian civil society, a case of widespread horizontal violence among neighbors, which Gertz and Khleifi describe as "a violent system of vicious cycles, Sisyphean acts" (2008, 187). Suleiman portrays Palestinian neighbors hating one another as a way of demonstrating how colonial oppression results in self-hatred, which is then projected as the hatred of the Other.

As Slavoj Žižek (1998) puts it, "the neighbor elicits the hatred that the subject experiences internally, given the superego's tyrannical relation to the ego" (1998, 6). The Biblical commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself", is a superegoic or cultural demand for us to do something artificial regardless of our unconscious desire, which is singular yet has pluriversal reverberations. The colonial situation further complicates this superegoic demand. The Arab psyche, in general, suffers collectively from a sense of defeat or failure vis-à-vis the Israeli settler colonial project. The Arab subject hates being colonized; therefore, they also hate other colonized beings.

Sub-oppression is an obstacle in any liberation struggle and requires self-criticism (Al-Azm 2011). Self-criticism is one of Suleiman's strategies in the film, in addition to critiquing the Zionist ideology; both are accomplished through frivolity, absurdity, irony, or ridicule (Khader 2015). We encounter one of the protagonists early in the film through a wide shot of him as a defeated Palestinian man standing next to his car during the day while smoking and sighing. He throws away the bud of his cigarette, gets into the car, and turns it on.

We later learn that this man is a welder and E.S.'s father. Cut to him driving through a neighborhood; the spectator is inside the car. He waves at his neighbors while cursing at them in Arabic, which signifies the division of subjectivity between a friendly ego and an unfriendly unconscious. The scene is absurdly humorous because the cursing does not stop; it escalates. The English

subtitles do not capture the nuances of Arabic swear words, meaning this film is intended for Arab (or Arabic-speaking) spectators. The insults are all sexual in nature and target family members.

The unfriendly, or unneighborly, unconscious signifies the repression of sexual desire, which manifests as projected aggression. After all, love and hate are two Imaginary passions that help subjects manage the anxiety they may experience from encountering the traumatic Real. Love is a discourse that slides into fantasy, the path E.S. takes. Hate is an impotent reaction to the Real, the father's route, which eventually gives him a heart attack and kills him–not to mention the material effect of the Israeli police confiscating his welding workshop and car.

The film is replete with hateful neighbors: a man who throws his trash in his neighbor's yard, an old man who punctures a young boy's football and destroys a narrow car slope, and our welder who beats the old man for doing these things. Meanwhile, two elderly men–reminiscent of Statler and Waldorf from the Muppet Show–are sitting on top of a roof, observing the neighborhood imploding for their perverse entertainment.

Nevertheless, colonial being does not foreclose the possibility or potential for decolonial thinking. Decolonial thinking is thinking beyond the Israeli colonial ideology, which interpellates Palestinians as colonial subjects. However, Palestinians are *more* than colonial subjects. This "more" or this excess will be referred to below as "the Palestinian character." In a sense, it is aspirational instead of an essentialist identity.

In Suleiman's words, "I want to be fully Palestinian, to reach a total 'Palestinianness.' I am not talking about blood or roots, but a more conceptual notion" (2000, 97). The possibility of decolonial subjectivity then stems from an unconscious form of thinking that arises from the rich discourse of Palestinian culture, which subverts and critiques the Israeli colonial ideology. This cultural discourse is the *Palestinian Other of the Other*, which is negated in Israeli colonial ideology. In the words of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, "the aggression against Palestinian culture is a part of the premeditated and conscious Israeli operation to eradicate *the Palestinian character*" (as quoted in Beshara 2024, 33) [emphasis added]. He adds:

> *Palestinian cultural expression became, for Israelis, an immediate danger, for it firstly negates the allegations about the destruction of land by a culturally productive people and secondly because such cultural expression provides a very dangerous testimony as to the anti-cultural operation on whose essence the Zionist presence was founded. Thus, as Palestinian culture expressed the relation of the Palestinian people with their land and their history, the conflict became about confirming this relation and nourishing it on the Palestinian land and abroad as well as reviving the Palestinian memory, as to its history, to such an extent that it penetrated international cultural consciousness. This made Israel resort to dealing with the developing Palestinian culture as an immediate danger to its philosophy, ideology, claims, and rights. (as quoted in Beshara 2024, 33-34).*

Putting aside my previous misgivings about class and positionality, Suleiman's cinema is as vital as the cinemas coming out of the West Bank and Gaza because *Palestinian cinema is a form of Palestinian cultural expression*, which amounts to cultural resistance (Said 1993) to the imperialism of the Israeli settler colonial project. This cultural resistance is *the negation of the negation*, that is, the negation of the Israeli colonial ideology's negation of Palestinian cultural expression, for *to exist is to resist*. This is the radical philosophy behind Suleiman's revolutionary cinema. To make cinema, as a Palestinian filmmaker, and to exist as a Palestinian character within this cinema is a form of cultural resistance.

The scene epitomizing the Palestinian ethic of existence as resistance is when E.S. is stopped at a traffic light in Israel. He looks to his right to see a billboard advertising a shooting range with the image of a Palestinian wearing a keffiyeh and holding a knife as the target. The ad says, "Come shoot if you're ready." He looks to his left and sees a Zionist who is parading the Israeli flag on his car, so E.S. decides to put on his sunglasses and plays "I Put A Spell On You" by Natacha Atlas as a way of throwing shade at the Zionist driver next to him.

The existence of a Palestinian subject enjoying Arab aesthetics disturbs the Zionist driver and causes him anxiety. This is the effect of cultural resistance, which challenges the ideological framing of the Palestinian or Arab as an object of colonial fantasy. The billboard is the jumping-off point for the film's climactic sequence, which is a traversal of the colonial fantasy. Ben Werdegar writes about the decolonial function of fantasy in the film as "a method of reiterating the desire for a return to a peaceful, unoccupied Palestine" (2020, 61). Traversing colonial fantasies is the path toward decolonial power.

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Acousmatic Voices and Visual Glitches:

Colonial Hauntings in the Experimental Cinema of Bacigalupo and Orsini

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This article examines the spectral afterlives of Italian colonialism and the elusive forms through which they resurface in postwar experimental cinema. Complicating the very concept of the postcolonial, I propose a counter-archive of 1960s Italian films that resist conventional modes of representation. These works—seemingly disconnected from Italian imperial history—challenge the *a priori* signifiers that define postcolonial cinema, particularly its reliance on explicit depictions of colonial temporalities and geographies. From within this counter-archive, I focus on Massimo Bacigalupo's *Quasi una tangente* (1966) and Valentino Orsini's *I dannati della terra* (1969). Both films ambiguously evoke Italy's fascist colonial campaigns, while bearing witness to mechanisms of ambivalence, hesitation, and sanitization—entangled with complex affects such as shame and nostalgia—through which colonial history was remembered and refracted in the specific conjuncture of the 1960s. These works emerge at the intersection of Third Worldism, decolonial thought, and workerism, within a broader historical context shaped by efforts to "defascistize" and rebuild the nation in the aftermath of World War II, the student uprisings culminating in the 1968 protests, the period of economic growth, and the subsequent phase of recession, civil unrest, and political violence that defined the "Years of Lead." Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the diagram and engaging—while also departing from—Jacques Derrida's figuration of the specter, this essay explores how these films operate at the limits of language and signification: in Bacigalupo's work, through the disjunction between sound and image and the use of acousmatic voices; in Orsini's, through the displacement of Italy's colonial memory—an eloquent absence that materializes in what I define as a visual and conceptual glitch. Through its own distinct anti-representational, non-indexical, or spectral mode, each film in this postcolonial counter-archive prompts a rethinking of Italy's overlooked underground cinema of the 1960s and the very terms by which colonialism is signified on screen.

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This article traces a constellation of hauntings that complicates the ways in which Italy's colonial past was remembered and represented during the 1960s. By "haunting", I refer to Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist reworking of the figuration of the specter. Derridean specters foreground a nonlinear temporality, in which the past infiltrates the present, the future is already inscribed within the now, and bleeds into the past (Derrida 1993, 20-22). At the core of this article lies the haunting of Italy's colonial specters as they emerge in underground experimental films from the 1960s—works that, on the surface,

appear to bear little or no connection to Italian imperial history or to colonialism more generally. I focus primarily on Massimo Bacigalupo's *Quasi una tangente* (1966) and Valentino Orsini's *I dannati della terra* (1969). Their experimental deployment of sound and image elusively indexes Italy's fascist colonial campaigns in Africa, while also testifying to the dynamics of displacement, ambivalence, and sanitisation—entangled with complex affects such as shame and nostalgia—through which this colonial history was retrieved in the 1960s.

This article also attends to the haunting of the very notion of the postcolonial. By this I mean to say that postcolonial studies are haunted by a compulsion to identify their objects of inquiry through *a priori* signifiers. In contrast, this article turns to experimental modes in cinema that exceed the contours of such conventional signs of the postcolonial. These gestures operate at the very limits of representation and language—as in the disjunction of sound and image in Bacigalupo's film, or in what I define as a visual and conceptual glitch in Orsini's. In these works, colonial traces register in precarious or ephemeral ways—emerging in the interstice between moving images, in the disembodied presence of Mussolini, or within the non-indexical space of a white screen. These films thus serve as an entry point for mapping a broader counter-archive of postcolonial films, each evoking Italy's colonial history through a distinct aesthetic that is, in turn, non-representational, spectral, or a-signifying.

I conclude my analysis with *I dannati della terra*—a film that, in apparent contradiction to my argument, places the decolonial struggle at its center. The film has received substantial scholarly attention, yet a crucial dimension remains overlooked. While it presents itself as a manifesto of anticolonial violence, *I dannati della terra* is haunted by Italy's colonial project, which Orsini never explicitly acknowledges. This eloquent absence testifies to the hesitation—typical among Third-Worldist and left-wing filmmakers such as Orsini—to confront the nation's own imperial crimes within the specific post–Second World War conjuncture.

DERRIDA'S SPECTRALITY

My approach to the various forms of spectrality explored in this article both resonates with and departs from Derrida's conceptualization of hauntology. Derrida presents the phantom as a non-object, absence, "non-present present", "non-sensuous sensuous" (1993, 5)—something not visible or immediately comprehensible yet undeniably there. Derrida does not advocate a return to superstitious practices; nor does he refer to literal apparitions of ghosts. His specter functions as a "meta-concept" (del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, 14), a theoretical figure that destabilizes Western ontologies and epistemologies—which privilege presence, self-evidence, and propriety while disavowing the non-apparent, the obscure, and non-being. The non-existence of such specters does not signify a literal non-being, but gestures towards the irreducibility of that which resists intelligibility—yet whose effects alter ordinary experience. In

Derrida's terms, "the specter is a paradoxical incorporation [...] some 'thing' that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body" (1993, 5).

The past, though inaccessible to perception, can be framed as a mode of non-being that permeates the present. Derrida's phantoms entail a nuanced articulation of being and time, their trajectories defying simplistic accounts. The future manifests as another irreducible non-being: a form of virtuality that can be actualized or not but remains nonetheless real. As Mark Fisher emphasizes, "the future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that impinges on the present, conditioning expectations" (2012, 16). Far from being a mental figment or an illusory *eidolon* à la Plato, the future contaminates the present in unexpected ways. Derrida anchors the specter's epiphany in a demand for justice—a call to amend the wrongs of the past. *Specters of Marx* opens with Hamlet swearing "against a destiny that leads him to do justice for a fault, a fault of time and of the times, by rectifying an *address*" (1993, 23, emphasis in the original). The ghost of Hamlet's father haunts the living, demanding vengeance and the restoration of justice. This article does not approach colonial specters through the lens of a comparable appeal to justice. Instead, it attends to the ambiguous ways in which colonial memory lingers within postwar consciousness and circulates through media.

To endow the phantom with an ethical mission, as Derrida suggests, risks undermining the impropriety that defines the very notion of spectrality. Imbuing phantasmatic apparitions with a moral purpose implicitly reintroduces a teleological logic, in which reparation must follow the ghost's epiphany. Such ethical regimentation ultimately romanticizes the ghost, fostering forms of nostalgia and messianism in relation to the past—as observed by Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli (2022, 144) and Esther Peeren (2009, 336). Derrida's line of thinking culminates in a "messianism without religion" (1993, 74)—a longing for a secular messiah, capable of liberating the past from its burdens of shame or irresolution. I do not insist here on the messianic imprint of the colonial ghosts that haunt Bacigalupo's or Orsini's films; rather, I underscore their resistance to any teleological configuration, articulated through an experimental orchestration of sound and image.

Within my framework, the ungovernability of these specters stems not only from the "temporal disturbance and disjointing" they introduce (Peeren 2009, 327), but from their resistance to representation—a resistance that unsettles the very terms by which the postcolonial is defined. In contrast to Derrida's call for justice—with its compulsion to locate and ultimately resolve the unfinished business of the past—I aim to resist such closure. Instead, I propose expanding the postcolonial archive to include those neglected texts that—precisely due to their indeterminate ontology vis-à-vis the notion of the postcolonial—can reveal the erratic workings of colonial memory in postwar Italy.

Beyond *Quasi una tangente*, the postcolonial counter-archive I begin to map in this article centers on Italian moving images from the 1960s—a brief yet

generative period of experimental cinema[1]. Many of these filmmakers actively engaged with social movements informed by Italian *operaismo* (workerism), Third-Worldism, decolonial thought, and various modes of critique directed at fascism, authoritarianism, and state violence. They often entered into dialogue with politicized intellectuals and filmmakers within and beyond Italy. Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage were key interlocutors for Bacigalupo, just as Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas were for Orsini. Most of the films in this counter-archive rely heavily on the manipulation of found footage—a formal strategy also adopted by Bacigalupo and Orsini. This approach to archival material is significant: it subverts the logic of fascist propaganda, which had itself mobilized found footage to construct mystified narratives surrounding the colonial enterprises.

Cioni Carpi's *I Will... I Shan't* (1962) and Brebbia's *Anno 2000* (1969), for instance, incorporate found footage depicting fascist-nazi troops and Adolf Hitler alongside unspecified African tribes—as if history were nothing more than a strip of celluloid, a material to be reassembled into new configurations. Similarly, Vittorio and Silvio Loffredo's *Le Court Bouillon* (1964) juxtaposes archival images of Mussolini with footage of Roman archaeological sites, foregrounding the symbolic continuity between fascist rhetoric and ancient imperial Rome. *L'occhio è per così dire l'evoluzione biologica di una lacrima / Autoritratto Auschwitz* (Grifi 1965-1968/2007)—a visual collage that oscillates between diaristic film and historical documentary—it incorporates dramatic accounts of Auschwitz and of the willingness of fascists to facilitate the deportation of Jews outside Italy, alongside more recent found footage of a Palestinian man denouncing the atrocities of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. This interview evokes another form of colonization—one not directly tied to Italian history, yet one that has haunted the Palestinian people for decades.

BACIGALUPO'S *QUASI UNA TANGENTE*

Despite his foundational role in the development of Italian underground cinema in the 1960s, Massimo Bacigalupo has long remained at the margins of both scholarly and curatorial attention, resurfacing only recently through a partial process of rediscovery. This revival began in 2010 with a retrospective at the 28th Torino Film Festival and gained momentum through further initiatives led by Bologna's Home Movies Archive. Most recently, Rai 3 and its streaming platform RaiPlay curated a retrospective on Bacigalupo's work. On a scholarly level, renewed attention to Bacigalupo's filmic oeuvre has only taken shape over the past five years. Key contributions include the work of Donatella Valente (2020; 2021), an edited volume by Anthony Cristiano and Carlo Coen

1 A number of postcolonial scholars working on Italian history and media have challenged the epistemological limitations underpinning the establishment of postcolonial archives. See Beatrice Falcucci, Luca Iannuzzi, Gianmarco Mancosu (2023, 5–15), and Leonardo De Franceschi (2024, 33).

(2020)—which has brought renewed visibility to Bacigalupo as a filmmaker and, more broadly, to Italian independent and experimental cinema—and a doctoral dissertation by Gianluca Pulsoni (2024).

Nevertheless, none of these contributions expands upon questions of decolonization—nor do they engage with the elusive references to Italian colonial history embedded in *Quasi una tangente*. Drawn to politically complex regions such as Palestine, India, and Nepal, Bacigalupo has expressed a firm anti-colonial sensibility (Libero 2001)—even as his films approach themes of colonialism, subjection, and migration through ephemeral and, at times, almost imperceptible details. Bacigalupo was at the center of a vital chapter in Italian experimental cinema and was among the co-founders of the Cooperativa del Cinema Indipendente Italiano (CCII) in 1967. During this period, he cultivated an intellectual dialogue with Brakhage—whose *Metaphors on Vision* (1963) Bacigalupo translated into Italian—and with Gregory Markopoulos, both of whom had a profound influence on *Quasi una tangente*. While the CCII was deliberately inspired by the ethos of New American Cinema, it followed a more fragmented and short-lived path than its American counterpart, reaching its peak between 1967 and 1968.

The CCII brought together a heterogeneous group of figures—including Gianfranco Baruchello, Alfredo Leonardi, Adamo Vergine, Tonino De Bernardi, Guido Lombardi, and Anna Lajolo—without ever producing a formal manifesto. Apart from the influential yet brief experience of Italian Futurist cinema (1916-1919), experimental filmmaking in Italy has historically struggled for recognition, overshadowed by the neorealist tradition and auteur cinema—what Bacigalupo polemically calls "the great Italian cinema" (1974, 10)[2]. With the notable exception of the works of Angela Ricci Lucchi and Yervant Gianikian, little to no critical attention has been devoted to the specific interventions of Italian experimental cinema in addressing colonialism[3]. Compared to most of Bacigalupo's other works—which often forgo narrative, dialogue, and even sound in favor of pure visual experimentation—*Quasi una tangente* incorporates a loose storyline. The film follows the wanderings of Paul, a student on the final day of his life, culminating in a double suicide with his girlfriend Mara.

Erratic and abrupt camera movements express the young man's existential turmoil and his sense of inadequacy in navigating the world of the 1960s. While retaining a semblance of narrative, *Quasi una tangente* fractures into disparate trajectories only vaguely connected to the plot. The film's digressions—or *tangents*, a conceptual motif central to Bacigalupo's thinking at the time (Bursi and Causo 2010, 137)—collapse the boundaries between diaristic film,

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian to English in this article are my own.

3 Among others, Robert Lumley (2011) and Rhiannon Welch (2017) have examined colonial hauntings in the experimental works of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi. Karen Pinkus offers a bold reading of Antonioni's *L'eclisse*—a film seemingly unrelated to colonialism—as "the most eloquent film about Italian decolonization ever made" (2003, 312).

documentary, cultural and political commentary, found footage, and meditation on experimental filmmaking. Veering toward a collage of moving images and sounds, the film assembles heterogeneous materials: popular songs of the time; close-ups of ephemera juxtaposed with scenes capturing the mundane rhythms of urban life.

Within this impressionistic web of aural and visual motifs, I focus on one particular tangent that obliquely evokes Italy's colonial history. This relates to a scene where an off-screen voice delivers an overview of fascist military and colonial campaigns during the Second World War. The speaking subject is disembodied, identified only by his acousmatic voice—whose source, following Chion's definition, is withheld from the spectator (1982, 18). As the voice recites a list of historical events from Mussolini's regime, the camera pans across a classroom of high school students, apparently indifferent to the historical account. Upon closer analysis, the students' composure suggests that the voice is inaudible to them and accessible only to the spectator. Acousmatic elements are common even in mainstream cinema—such as the soundtrack, a narrating voice, or the use of any sonic effect to underscore an action or convey a specific affect.

In these instances, acousmatic sound remains at the service of the image, functioning as a device to intensify the impact of what is shown on screen. In so doing, it ultimately reaffirms the secondary status of sound within cinema, confirming the medium's long-standing privileging of the visual over the aural. In the classroom scene, acousmatic sound operates differently. Rather than accompanying the image, it marks a rupture—a disjunction between the auditory and the visual, with each pursuing its own trajectory and refusing to cohere into a whole. While the visual gestures toward the students' indifference, the aural points elsewhere: toward an acoustic collage of Italy's colonial campaigns. Before delving further into the analysis of this scene, it is worth briefly outlining not only the contours of Italy's colonial history, but also the ways in which, at the time of Bacigalupo's and Orsini's films' release, colonial memory was ambiguously displaced, sanitized, or erased within public discourse and media representation.

THE TROUBLE WITH COLONIAL HISTORY

While acts of aggression against other territories predated Benito Mussolini's rise to power, it was under "the Fascist Twenty Years" (1922–1943) that the Italian colonial empire reached its peak. Overall, over the relatively short span of eighty years, Italy expanded into Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, parts of China and Anatolia, Libya, Albania, and the Greek Dodecanese Islands. Unlike other former colonial powers, Italy did not lose its colonies through violent upheavals. Instead, it relinquished its colonies as a consequence of the defeat of the fascist regime during the Second World War. As a result, this demise has been inscribed in collective memory as a relatively minor and "conflict-free narrative," in Valeria

Deplano's terms (2017, 83). For decades, the diplomatic and military archives documenting the years of fascist colonization remained inaccessible to the public, leaving most Italians unaware of what had truly occurred in the colonies, as underlined by Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (2005, 15). It was only from the late 1960s that historians such as Angelo Del Boca, Giorgio Rochat, and Mario Isnenghi began to challenge the silences and distortions that had long shaped Italian historiography (Del Boca 1992; 2005; 2010).

Moreover—and again in contrast to other European colonial nations—Italy did not experience significant migratory flows from its former colonies after decolonization. This absence may have contributed to the relatively quiet end of Italy's colonial presence in Africa, which slipped from public attention with minimal collective acknowledgment. At the time when *Quasi una tangente* and *I dannati della terra* were released in the 1960s, Italy had been undergoing a two-decade process of "defascistization" following Benito Mussolini's overthrow—a period during which the nation sought to reposition itself as a democratic and trustworthy actor on the international stage. In an effort to negotiate more favorable terms during the postwar settlements, the newly formed Italian government strategically scapegoated fascism as solely responsible for colonial aggression, suggesting that with the fall of fascism, Italy had achieved both political and moral redemption[4]. Within this context, the colonial past became little more than a disembodied voice to which no one paid attention—as shown in *Quasi una tangente*—supplanted by an overwhelming urgency to move toward a more prosperous, anti-fascist future.

On the surface, the classroom sequence appears to be just another ephemeral glimpse of everyday life in postwar Italy, as captured by Bacigalupo's camera. Yet there is something uncanny about it. The image is out of sync with the sound: when the voice demands silence, we are shown students who are already sitting quietly. The most immediate assumption one might make is that the disembodied voice belongs to a history teacher. Yet when the camera pans towards the opposite end of the classroom, no teacher is ever shown—only two students erasing the traces of chalk from an old-style blackboard. If we consider an alternative reading, the disembodied voice might be understood as that of a dead *attendant* to Italy's fascist crimes—or, more abstractly, as the voice of fascist and colonial authority from the past.

In a Derridean sense, however, we might resist the impulse to overanalyse the scene according to the dominant tenets of representation, presence, and legibility—or, as Steven Shaviro defines it, according to an "ontology of absolute presence" (2006). Bacigalupo complicates and destabilizes these categories. *Quasi una tangente* offers no univocal meaning or final interpretation—only a disjunction between image and sound that resists reconstitution into a coherent chain of signifiers and signifieds. Thus, asking who this voice belongs to, or

4 On this aspect, see Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (2015, 369); Gianmarco Mancosu (2021, 396); or Ann Laura Stoler (2011) for a comparative perspective on modes of colonial displacement in France.

what the purpose of this spectral presence might be, are ultimately the wrong questions. As noted earlier, my analysis avoids a teleological interpretation of the scene—one in which the specter of the colonial past insinuates itself into the present with the aim of alerting younger generations to the crimes of fascism. The voice does not deliver a specific message, nor is its ethical function clear. If anything, it is an anonymous voice that merely recites a list of places and events from the colonial era, while the students either cannot hear it or remain indifferent to it.

This indifference may stem from a broader generational disconnection: in the 1960s, youth were increasingly absorbed in other concerns—contesting authority, engaging in political protest, and exploring cultural and sexual liberation. Unlike the students, however, the spectator does hear the voice—yet the purpose for which Bacigalupo intended this device remains unclear. Once again, we find ourselves in a terrain marked by radical open-endedness and opacity. Nevertheless, Bacigalupo's cinema is neither moralizing nor prescriptive—nor is it merely descriptive. His films record flashes of history and fragments of personal memory, without imposing fixed modes of interpretation. Bacigalupo has described this approach as "phenomenological" (1974, 24), an effort to capture the poetry of the real as it unfolds before the camera. He often refers to his films as "paratactic" (ibid.), composed of thematic and formal units whose meanings are never finalized but form shifting configurations of sense or affect.

This mode of filmmaking reveals resonances among heterogeneous *topoi* and explores the interplay between personal, mythical, and historical time—all rendered on screen with minimal authorial intervention. Bacigalupo often eschews conventional montage in favor of capturing what he describes as "a real jumble [...] a tangle of impressions, culture, and emotional transports" (2010, 140). This convergence of private memory and public history becomes particularly evident in the classroom scene, which may allude to Bacigalupo's own final weeks of high school, as he was preparing for his graduation exams when he shot *Quasi una tangente*. It also surfaces in the film's cultural references of his generation: pop songs glimpsed on vinyl records and woven into the soundtrack, from Thelonious Monk to Bob Dylan; the flourishing of mass culture, advertising, and rampant consumerism—as signaled in the footage of a crowded Genoa, where Paul appears adrift; the pervasive influence of American culture; and unsettling newsreels and science-fiction films that register Cold War anxieties, as shown in a later sequence in which, once again, sound and image are unhinged from each other.

Postwar Italy was first marked by a phase of accelerated economic growth—referred to as the *economic miracle*—and later by a period of recession, civil unrest, and street terrorism that would come to define the *anni di piombo* (Years of Lead). Bacigalupo's camera drifts among these motifs without following a linear or predetermined path. Each element functions instead as "a vector that flees toward its own destiny," intersecting the circle at a single point before proceeding on its unforeseeable course (Bursi and Causo 2010, 137). These

suggestions course through *Quasi una tangente* and, in the classroom scene in particular, interweave with the phantasmatic traces of Italy's colonial past. The latter does not occupy a privileged place within Bacigalupo's filmic collage, yet—without imposing fixed correspondences between cinematic signs and meanings—this spectral presence mirrors the hesitations and contradictions through which colonial memory was recollected in postwar Italy.

THE APHASIA OF THE SUBALTERN

Another dimension that warrants attention is the students' aphasia—their inability, or refusal, to speak. Not only do they appear unaffected by, or unable to hear, the disembodied voice, but they themselves are voiceless: even when they open their mouths, their words are not audible. As Bacigalupo offers no guidance for interpreting this scene, we can only venture provisional assumptions about its meaning. The absence of voice carries powerful historical resonances. In Italian colonial cinema, colonized individuals were systematically denied the faculty of speech—long considered a fundamental marker of humanity, closely linked to rationality and contrasted with a condition of bestiality (Greene 2012, 6; Ben-Ghiat 2015, 154–155). This gesture draws on a long-standing anthropocentric and logocentric legacy within Western philosophy, beginning with Aristotle and continuing through the increasingly close association between language and rational thought in the works of Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Ernst Cassirer[5].

In the Italian colonies, subaltern subjects were recorded by the propaganda camera but were rarely given lines of dialogue. In the rare instances when they did speak, their words were incomprehensible—presented as primitive, animalistic utterances—and were almost never subtitled for Italian audiences. As Carlo Ugolotti notes, the aural register of colonial fiction cinema functioned as: "an equally effective tool for stripping the colonized of an identity within an oppositional dialectic that sets them against the white colonizer and relegates them to an Otherness, impossible to comprehend within the framework of civilization and the national community" (2024, 110).

Colonial cinema under Mussolini thus emphasized—at the level of sound as much as of image—the radical alterity of colonized subjects, reinforcing their status as subaltern and less-than-human. This denial of voice not only naturalized the idea that colonized populations were incapable of self-governance, but also helped consolidate a sense of national identity and racial superiority for the Italian settler (Fredianelli 2024, 79–80). As the scene in *Quasi una tangente* shifts from the classroom to a courtyard, the camera lingers on the shadows of the students cast on the ground. Over this image, Mussolini's voice resounds, bombastically announcing Italy's entry into the war in 1940. His infamously

5 To further explore the coupling of the intelligible voice with rationality, see Kaja Silverman's overview (1988).

iconic speech arrives as yet another acousmatic voice—emerging from an unseen radio or television source, once again left off-screen in Bacigalupo's film—and is repeatedly interrupted by the cheers of the crowd gathered to hear the dictator. Mussolini proclaims, in his characteristic triumphalist rhetoric, that "the hour marked by destiny strikes in the sky of our homeland. The hour of irrevocable decisions"[6].

The uncanniness of the classroom scene—where *natural* sounds were displaced by voices bearing no correspondence to the image—returns here through another form of disruption: a temporal interference. Past and present collide, with the former reemerging in Mussolini's phantasmatic voice, while the historical footage of the event remains excluded from the diegetic space, effaced from the cinematic frame. Yet once again, this moment resists straightforward interpretation. It should not be read as a moralizing gesture that admonishes the viewer not to forget fascism, to correct its wrongs, or to educate the next generation. In a Derridean sense—and consistent with Bacigalupo's investment in a cinema that privileges obscurity and open-endedness—this spectral encounter between Italy's fascist and colonial past and the present is complicated by several factors. In the earlier classroom scene, the students were voiceless, yet their faces were visible. In this sequence, not only are their voices absent, but their bodies, too, have disappeared—reduced to a series of shadows on the ground. These ghostly silhouettes may evoke the exultant crowds that gathered in Rome's Piazza Venezia to hear Mussolini. Alternatively, they might conjure the faceless ranks of the Italian army, soon to join the Nazis on the frontlines.

Unlike the monotone voice that lists Italy's colonial campaigns like a telegram in the classroom scene, Mussolini's voice is impassioned and carefully crafted to inflame the masses. His oratory reinforced a sense of national unity and identity at a time when many Italians had begun to imagine themselves as part of the Aryan race. The merging of past and present in this sequence becomes even more unsettling when we recall that the crowd gathered in Rome to hear Mussolini's speech that day reportedly ranged from 400,000 to over 700,000 people. Most of these individuals would have heard Mussolini's voice without seeing him directly, as his visibility from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia was obstructed for much of the square due to its topography. In this sense, Mussolini's voice during the historical event can itself be considered acousmatic. The recorded acousmatic voice we hear in Bacigalupo's film is itself haunted by the original acousmatic voice of the *Duce* as it saturated the square that day. On the acousmatic voice, Chion writes: "But what is there to fear from the acousmêtre? And what are his powers? The powers are four: the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power. In other words: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence" (1999, 24).

6 Mussolini's speech can be heard in its original language on Rai Teche https://www.teche.rai.it/2020/06/10-giugno-1940-litalia-entra-in-guerra/.

Chion attributes an extraordinary force to acousmatic sounds—their capacity to be ubiquitous, panoptic, omniscient, and omnipotent. Following Chion, Mussolini's belligerent aura is not undermined by the absence of his face, mouth, and body, which are never shown on screen—just as they were out of view for the hundreds of thousands gathered in Rome that day. On the contrary, his presence is amplified to the highest degree: his corporeal image is relegated outside the frame, to what Deleuze would describe as an "Elsewhere" or a "disturbing presence" (1983, 21), while his voice saturates the space across different temporalities (the 1940s and the 1960s), geographies (a square in Rome and a classroom in Liguria), and media (Mussolini's live voice as it addressed the crowd; its simultaneous broadcast via radio; and a later radio or television broadcast of the speech, replayed—stripped of its original footage—in Bacigalupo's experimental work). Ugolotti interprets Mussolini's acousmatic voice as: "an authoritarian narrating voice (and therefore a creator of meaning) offscreen, which allows for no contradiction. The Duce's word, through his mottos of marble-like incisiveness, is expressed by an omnipresent voice that structures, generates, and dominates the sonic space in which it operates" (2024, 116).

In a kind of chiasmic reversal, the erasure of the colonized subjects' voices—to which the voiceless students in the classroom and their mute shadows may allude—metaphorically reaffirms their subordination to the fascist colonizer. Conversely, the absence of Mussolini's corporeal presence intensifies his authority and amplifies the affective charge of the message delivered to the crowd. Bacigalupo's orchestration of sound in relation to image offers an initial insight into the elusive modes through which Italy's colonial past haunts the experimental films included in my postcolonial counter-archive.

ORSINI'S *I DANNATI DELLA TERRA*

While the ghostly remnants of Italian colonialism haunt Bacigalupo's film through the disjunction between sound and image and the use of acousmatic voices, they infiltrate *I dannati della terra* through a different experimental gesture. Orsini's film is deeply—at times didactically—embedded within the discourse of colonialism, which, as we have seen, emerges only as a *tangent* amid the ephemeral motifs in Bacigalupo's work. However, the specific case of Italian colonial history is never explicitly addressed by Orsini. Instead, the film gravitates toward a more abstract discourse on the postcolonial or shifts its focus to other regions, such as Vietnam and the Congo. I interpret this displacement of Italy's colonial memory as an eloquent absence—one that ultimately manifests as a suspension of language and the dissolution of the image at the film's conclusion.

In Orsini's feature film, the Italian director Fausto Morelli (played by American actor Frank Wolff) struggles to complete a film on African decolonization—a project he inherited from his late friend Abramo Malonga (Serique N'Daye

Gonzalez), a Congolese intellectual who died of leukemia. Fausto's central challenge—an obsession that ultimately compromises the realisation of the film—is to resist *europeanising* the project, ensuring that Abramo's work is not subsumed into his own perspective as a white European intellectual. By adopting a hybrid and experimental structure, *I dannati della terra* blends fiction and documentary, combining found footage of postcolonial Africa with fictionalized sequences. The main storyline—Fausto's attempt to complete Abramo's film—unfolds through narrative and temporal gaps, ellipses, and flashbacks, often juxtaposed with documentary images. Within this multi-layered stratification, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish past from present, diegetic reality from the footage of the film within the film—the one being shot or edited by Fausto—or from the dreams, memories, or phantasmatic hallucinations of either Fausto or the deceased Abramo. The documentary material includes depictions of decolonization struggles in Africa and Vietnam and their aftermath, with a particular focus on Congo's independence hero, Patrice Lumumba—while Italy's former colonies are never mentioned.

Fausto and his collaborators frequently debate Abramo's project on set, clashing over stylistic, ethical, and political choices. Meanwhile, Abramo reappears through his voice—another instance of an acousmatic voice, this time belonging to an African intellectual from a formerly colonized region—haunting his white counterpart, Fausto. Elsewhere in the film, Abramo returns as an embodied figure, most likely a projection in Fausto's dreams or visions. Through these ghostly epiphanies, Abramo interrogates the direction the project is taking and reaffirms his resistance to a white aesthetic and ideology, his spectral gaze meeting the camera lens on multiple occasions. In doing so, the film problematizes the impasse of the cinematic gaze in its attempt to convey decolonial struggle. Through his alter ego Abramo, Orsini questions the very possibility of adopting a neutral gaze to represent the postcolonial Third World without contaminating the image with modes of seeing and thinking embedded in Western culture.

A VISUAL AND CONCEPTUAL GLITCH

The final thirty minutes of the film are key to understanding how the Italian imperial past haunts Orsini's work through its very absence. This form of haunting reflects a complex mode of reckoning with Italy's fascist colonial history—one that was specific not only to postwar Italy, but also to left-wing filmmakers and intellectuals such as Orsini and Gillo Pontecorvo, who actively aligned themselves with decolonial movements while displacing the legacy of Italian colonialism. Within a labyrinth of white walls, Fausto and his crew interview the actors on questions surrounding colonialism, racial oppression, the inescapability of anti-colonial violence, and capitalist exploitation. Entirely naked, the actors embody various states of vulnerability under more or less explicit forms of colonial domination. Each performs scenes of torture,

imprisonment, or execution, evoking the necropolitical practices inflicted upon subjugated populations. Orsini's camera pans over their exposed flesh—frozen in immobile postures and stripped of all traces of humanity.

Gradually, the film transitions from what can still be considered representational—to some extent—and therefore partially legible imagery to a more decisively abstract visual register. While scholarship often interprets the film's labyrinthine scene as signaling the impossibility of progression or resolution—not only in completing Abramo's film, but more broadly in confronting the unresolved tensions of postcolonial discourse, including questions of representation, positioning, and the legitimacy of violence—I propose a different reading[7]. I interpret this impasse as a visual and conceptual glitch—one that indirectly testifies to the ambivalence of postwar left-wing filmmakers in recalling the nation's colonial past. This mode of haunting aligns with the Derridean approach to colonial specters I employed in my reading of *Quasi una tangente*, particularly in its avoidance of a metaphysics of presence. At the same time, it also resonates on Gilles Deleuze's figuration of the diagram, which helps us understand how Italy's colonial past can resurface without conforming to the legible signifiers of the postcolonial—even in a film as different as Orsini's, which engages much more explicitly with Third-Worldist and decolonial thinking than Bacigalupo's

DELEUZE'S DIAGRAM

By "diagram," Deleuze refers to visual configurations in painting that resist the representational, projecting alternative modes of engagement with the artwork (1981, 80). Representation acquires a specific connotation in Deleuze's thought, designating the realm of the ordinary, the familiar—both in acts of thinking and in aesthetic modes of expression. According to Deleuze, "representational thinking" is a mode of thought in which the subject neither creates new concepts nor escapes predetermined structures, but merely rearticulates and compares existing ones (1968, 132). For Deleuze, modes of expression function as concepts in their own right, since thinking cannot be separated from aesthetic sensibility—each folding into the other (1967; 1968). As "a chaos, a catastrophe, but [...] also a germ of order", the diagram encapsulates a characteristic double movement in Deleuze's thinking: between affirmativity and negativity, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, the disruption of the status quo—in this case, of art's

7 According to Neelam Srivastava, the film's fragmented ending signals a "radical questioning of every assumption" regarding decolonial struggle (2018, 245). Similarly, Shelleen Greene emphasizes how the deadlocks inherent in 1960s decolonial thinking surface through the self-reflexive and experimental elements of Orsini's film (2020, 168). Guido Aristarco (1985, 148) and Federica Colleoni (2015, 338) focus on the film as a critical meditation on the role of Marxist intellectuals and their ambivalent relation to global decolonization. On a different note, Mariano Mestman interprets the film's experimentalism as a "dreamlike or ghostly universe of oppression and torture," foregrounding the abstract universality of violence and repression (2021, 403).

canons—and the creation of new modes of expression and thought (1981, 83).

Diagrams enable one to navigate the canvas freely, unburdened by the imperative to mimetically reproduce *a priori* forms. In Deleuze's terms, "it is as if a Sahara, a zone of the Sahara, were suddenly inserted into the head; [...] it is as if the unit of measure were changed, and micrometric, or even cosmic, units were substituted for the figurative unit" (1981, 82). Returning to Orsini's film, we can interpret what I have termed the visual and conceptual glitch as a Deleuzian diagram—one that alludes to Italian colonial history without adhering to a representational logic. The film's diagram demands a different kind of attentiveness, one that shifts away from the legible signifiers of the postcolonial archive. Specific characters are replaced by abstract human figures, stripped of their history and identity. Rather, the actors are presented as impersonal masks epitomizing suffering under colonialism—an effect heightened by the use of stark light contrasts.

Similarly, the film's earlier narrative thread—though marked by temporal incongruities—unfolded through a partially legible arch. This is now replaced by overexposed images, flickering lights, and blank white screens. Human figures dissolve into the background, while extreme close-ups of their faces appear out of focus. The screen itself becomes engulfed by an overwhelming whiteness, as Fausto's didactic verbal exchanges begin to falter, giving way to silence and to an overall suspension of the film's flow. In the latter part of this long sequence, the white void bleeding across the frame gradually fades into darkness: a full-screen black image separates—and thereby isolates—each frame of the film from the next. Rather than conventionally serving as an imperceptible transition between scenes, the black image asserts itself as a non-naturalistic and disorienting pause. This lingering void—whether of blackness or whiteness—does not index anything. Instead, it haunts the frame as a non-representational, a-signifying image that demands attention in its own right. Orsini's glitch calls for attunement to the non-literal—to that which might otherwise remain unnoticed, such as the ambiguous operations of colonial memory.

The glitch thus obliquely evokes how this fascist past condenses around blind spots, only to reappear in unexpected forms at the margins of representation and discourse—in moving images such as the final sequence of *I dannati della terra*. The film's silence regarding Italy's fascist colonies is particularly striking, given that the country's Trusteeship in Somalia had ended only nine years before the film's release. This silence becomes all the more eloquent when one considers that *I dannati della terra* functions as a kind of Italian Third-Worldist manifesto, directed by a filmmaker such as Orsini, who was committed to a politicized and experimental artistic environment that, tangentially, intersected with that of Bacigalupo.

THIRD-WORLDISM AND POSTCOLONIAL ITALY

Orsini was active in the armed resistance against Nazi-Fascist forces and later joined the Italian Communist Party (PCI). He subsequently aligned himself with Third-Worldist and decolonial movements, establishing an intellectual and political dialogue with central figures of Third Cinema such as Glauber Rocha, Octavio Getino, and Fernando Solanas. Simultaneously, Orsini experimented with "advanced contemporary avant-garde trends that explore mechanisms of 'happenings', participatory art, action and [...] gestural and body expression" (Mestman 2021, 402). These influences are evident in the labyrinthine final sequence of *I dannati della terra*, which again places Orsini's practice in tangential yet telling proximity to Bacigalupo's experimental and politicized milieu. Through its radical finale, Orsini's film gestures toward the contradictions that shaped an entire generation of left-wing filmmakers in 1960s Italy—artists who championed decolonization struggles in the Third World while, at the same time, failing to openly confront Italy's own colonial history[8].

The Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) against French colonial rule influenced Italian leftist intellectuals. Fanon himself was frequently invited to Italy, where his works were translated earlier than other countries (Srivastava 2015, 310). Pontecorvo—a former anti-fascist partisan—produced one of the most iconic portrayals of the Algerian struggle and a landmark of anti-colonial cinema with *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). When pressed by Srivastava in an interview about Italy's own colonial history, Pontecorvo controversially replied: "Italy didn't have this problem" (Srivastava 2005, 115). On the one hand, there was open support for global decolonization movements; on the other, a conflicted attitude toward Italy's own colonial past persisted for decades. This ambivalence often gave rise to political aporias: while the Italian Communist Party provided an operational base in Rome and financial support to the Algerian National Liberation Front (Srivastava 2018, 230–235), it simultaneously advocated for maintaining Somalia under Italian influence through the Trusteeship[9].

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Italian media closely followed decolonial struggles unfolding in various parts of the world, expressing sympathy for movements such as the Indian resistance to British rule. Yet when it came to reckoning with Italy's own colonial past, these same media outlets offered filtered narratives. Rather than acknowledging the failures of Italian imperialism and—most importantly—its record of war crimes, the media portrayed these

8 For further examination of Third-Worldism in Italy, see Mestman (2017), Caminati (2022; 2024), Peretti (2022a; 2022b), and the aforementioned Srivastava (2015; 2018) and Greene (2012; 2020).

9 To read the full document by the Communist Party, see: *Memoriale n. 4*, Partito Comunista Italiano (sezione di Mogadiscio). "Commissione d'inchiesta per l'assegnazione fiduciaria dell'ex colonie fasciste della Somalia", Gramsci Institute, Rome.

histories as examples of a successful and even honorable form of colonialism. This sanitized recollection typically adopted a paternalistic tone, reinforcing the myth that Del Boca identified as *italiani brava gente* (Italians, good people)—benevolent colonizers who brought civilization to the colonies (Doumanis 1998; Del Boca 2005).

The postwar Italian government sought to rehabilitate the nation's image as democratic and reliable by attributing responsibility for colonial crimes solely to Mussolini's regime. As we have seen, this relative silence—or the "conflict-free narrative" through which colonialism faded from collective memory (Deplano 2017, 83)—helped mitigate the perceived gravity of the atrocities committed in the colonies. This historical leniency was further exacerbated by the fact that key fascist military figures responsible for war crimes—such as Rodolfo Graziani and Pietro Badoglio—were never prosecuted by any international court of justice. The enduring narrative that Italians retained both a moral and practical entitlement to their former colonies—and could still serve as exemplary administrators of those regions—reveals a curious convergence of contradictory affects: nostalgia and a sense of failure. The latter was bound to the fact that Italy's colonial ventures ultimately yielded little material benefit, and were often characterized as *colonialismo straccione* (ragged colonialism). As one of the last European powers to enter the colonial scramble, Italy joined the race only after the most resource-rich territories had already been claimed[10].

Rather than directly confronting Italy's colonial past, *I dannati della terra* introduces a representational and theoretical breakdown that forecloses any articulation of this intricate history. However, the representational shortcomings in *I dannati della terra* differ from the violence of representation theorized in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)—a position embodied by Abramo in Orsini's film as an alter ego and phantasmatic double of Fanon himself. Both the fictional Abramo and the historical Fanon die prematurely of leukemia, leaving their projects on colonialism unfinished, creating a short circuit between the film's diegesis and Fanon's real-life story. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that the subaltern is excluded from language and cannot exist as a self-representing subject (1961, 14). The colonizer envisions otherness through a logic of negation: the native is defined in opposition to the settler's value system, existing only as the "non"—the non-white, the non-human, the non-European, the non-civilized (1961, 8). The refusal of representation in Orsini's film also diverges from Giorgio Agamben's theorization of traumatic events, where the magnitude of suffering exceeds the capacities of language and resists articulation even by those who directly experienced it (1999, 144–145). By contrast, the representational impasse in Orsini's film gestures toward a different register: one shaped by forms of amnesia and disavowal surrounding Italy's past.

10 For a detailed discussion of the specificities of the African territories occupied by Italy and their mystified cinematic representation under Fascism, see especially Giuseppe Fidotta (2024, 4).

While scholarship often remains polarized between two seemingly irreconcilable positions—one emphasizing postwar Italian filmmakers' commitment to decolonization, the other underscoring their uncritical engagement with Italian colonialism—this article has proposed an alternative framework[11]. My aim has been to attend to what remains illegible when viewed through the more familiar lens of postcolonial studies. These forms of haunting, I suggest, are inseparable from the specific conditions that shaped Italy's transition to a post-fascist order. While the case studies discussed in this article represent only a starting point, further research could expand this counter-archive of the postcolonial—beginning with experimental works from the 1960s that I have only tangentially addressed above, such as Carpi's *I Will... I Shan't* (1962), the Loffredo brothers' *Le Court Bouillon* (1964), Grifi's *L'occhio è per così dire l'evoluzione biologica di una lacrima* (1965–1967), and Brebbia's *Anno 2000* (1969).

Broadening the postcolonial archive would also offer insights to making sense of the present. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi once wrote: "all of the present is already contained in the archive" (cited in Lissoni and Bertola 2012, 4). New specters thus continue to insinuate themselves into the now: Italy's former colonies in the Balkans and Greece remain scarcely acknowledged in public discourse, and their cinematic representation is extremely limited. This form of colonial erasure carries its own historical specificities that merit closer attention. For the purposes of this article, it is worth noting that these cases involved a form of internal or *continental* colonization—targeting neighboring European territories rather than the orientalized *places in the sun* of the African continent. Even at the institutional level, forms of amnesia or aphasia are perpetuated when it comes to evoking Italy's colonial past. In 2012, a monument was erected in Affile, near Rome, to commemorate Rodolfo Graziani—*the Butcher of Fezzan*—infamous for his brutal repressions in Libya and Ethiopia. In 2019, Manlio Di Stefano, then Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in the Conte government, wrote in a Facebook post: "We don't have any skeletons in the closet. We don't have a colonial tradition behind us. We haven't bombed anyone, nor have we oppressed anyone's economy" (2019). In doing so, he publicly erased nearly eighty years of genocides, concentration camps, and chemical warfare inflicted on defenseless civilians.

11 Among others, Daniela Baratieri challenges the narrative that Italy's colonial history was entirely disavowed after 1945. See her analysis of the alleged erasure of colonialism from Italian cinema in *Memories and Silences Haunted by Fascism* (2010, 73–75).

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Cinema in Uruguay (1960–1974):

Resistance, Guerrilla and Third World

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The article reviews the dialogue between documentary and animated cinema produced in Uruguay during the 1960s and 1970s and different forms of political resistance. The Uruguayan historical-political situation is contextualised and three films are analysed as examples, in order to show the complexities of the moment: *Como el Uruguay no hay*, by Ugo Ulive (1960), *Me gustan los estudiantes*, by Mario Handler (1968) and *En la selva hay mucho trabajo por hacer*, by Walter Tournier (1974). The three short films show a clear accusation of Uruguay's political situation and, additionally, they reveal the complexities within Uruguayan society in moments of democratic debacle. The complicated political scenario of the country during those years led to the coup d'état of 1973 and the consequent exile of Ulive, Handler and Tournier. The three directors followed a combative form of filmmaking from different Latin American nations by discussing the intellectual's role in a colonized space and eventually they became big names of the Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano. They came together at the Cinemateca del Tercer Mundo (C3M), founded in Montevideo in 1969, and set up a relationship with other Latin American filmmakers of the time. They discussed about the political and artistic situation in the continent, by creating networks of exhibition and co-working and by publishing theorical material on all those topics. The C3M thus became a space for debate on key notions such as Third Cinema, Imperfect Cinema or Cinema of Denunciation, promoted from the Global South as a way of confronting European and Hollywood film industries. .

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"Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence", Frantz Fanon wrote in 1961 (1963, 61, my translation). The phrase belongs to his famous book *Les Damnés de la Terre*, published in Spanish in 1963. The essay quickly became a sort of political-aesthetic proclamation for the young Latin Americans of that time. In December 1961, the Uruguayan weekly *Marcha* published a long review of Fanon's main postulates on what was happening in Algeria and, around 1968–69, the same newspaper printed several reports on the political situation in Africa, the problem of "negritude", decolonisation and the Third World, notions closely linked to Fanon's ideas.

The so-called "global 1960s" were a moment of political, social, and intellectual changes characterised by interactions between the centre and the periphery. While the French May, l'*Autunno Caldo* in Italy, and the Prague Spring were unfolding in Europe, in Latin America the New Left was consolidating its gains with the Cuban Revolution, the Liberation Theology, and the students riots all along the continent. During that time, the notion of Colonialism became a problematic issue, especially in left-wing intellectual circles, and soon

influenced the artistic practices of the time. Artists and writers thus became "makers" of social transformation, participating in resistance, street fighting, and political action. Concepts such as the Third World, the Global South and the Underdevelopment created a whole consciousness that quickly spread inside and outside the continent. All this shaped Latin American "solidarity", especially in cinema, by reinforcing artistic migrations to both sides of the Atlantic. The young filmmakers of that time, interested in the coming together of art and politics, were very influenced by the social and political matters of the world. They were concerned about the consequences of Colonialism and also worried about the risks of belonging to a South characterised by oppression, poverty and racism.

This article attempts to approach Uruguay's film production of that period, focusing on short documentaries and animation produced just before the 1973's coup d'état and the beginning of a long and rough dictatorship. Between 1960 and 1974, several short films were released and many international networks were set up. The choice of the three case studies under scrutiny here is not arbitrary. All three are well-known and long-studied short films: *Como el Uruguay no hay, by Ugo Ulive* (1960), *Me gustan los estudiantes*, by Mario Handler (1968) and *En la selva hay mucho trabajo por hacer*, by Walter Tournier (1974). They articulate a clear critique of Uruguay's political situation and additionally reveal the complexities within Uruguayan society in a moment of democratic debacle. These films use different approaches: from an ironic manifesto confronting the bourgeois' hypocrisy to a street protest against the American intervention and an allegorical animation of resistance. Whilst they have been discussed on previous occasions (Burton-Carvajal 1990; Chanan 2014; López 1997; Tadeo Fuica 2017; Lacruz 2020; Dufuur 2018), there has not been an exhaustive analysis of the key concepts of the time and the influence that political thought had on their creators. Their three directors (Ulive, Handler, Tournier) represent the committed intellectual, encouraged by foreign ideas of anti-imperialism, decolonisation and freedom. They were persecuted by the military government and had to go into exile. But unlike other filmmakers, they remained in Latin America and continued their creative fight from the Global South. Eventually, they became established names in the Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano movement. The main goal of this article is to decipher the influences of colonial thought on the artistic and political stance of these filmmakers, using three films as case studies, analysing the period and the forms of resistance and commitment they use.

COLONIALISM: A KEY CONCEPT IN LATIN AMERICA

In 1965, the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama delivered a lecture in Italy on the possible contribution of Latin American literature (so fashionable at the time) to World Literature. In that essay, published some years later, Rama discussed Fanon's concept of Colonialism: "This Martinican lacks American consciousness

and affirms an improbable desertion, because ultimately he has the eventual support of a non-European cultural tradition, which he assumes racially: the black African" (1973, 8, my translation). Rama argued that Fanon's vision was closer to an African perspective, while in Latin America, European culture had been one of the fundamental assets in formative development. However, he did recognise Fanon's participation in a common space of discussion: the Third World. Even when Rama was an important name, his criticism of Fanon's proposal did not prevent the Martinican's postulates from spreading like wildfire throughout Latin America. In fact, in Latin America, colonialism was deeply shaped during the 1960s by a confluence of intellectual, political, and social movements that critiqued the enduring legacies of colonial rule and imperialist domination in the Global South. In addition to Fanon, other thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi and Pablo González Casanova were crucial, each contributing distinct yet overlapping perspectives that helped frame Latin American and global anti-colonial thought.

In Fanon's view, colonialism is a form of systematic and total violence that impacts the psyche of both the colonised and the colonisers, generating a process of alienation and human degradation. The response to this violence is anticolonial violence, necessary for decolonization and the construction of a new society. This is not only political independence, but also a process of cultural, social, and psychological transformation that involves a new construction of identity. In this scenario, the colonised intellectual becomes an agent in the battle for liberation and restitution. In this sense, Ángel Rama's criticism was not so different from other thinkers. Actually, Fanon's perspective was hardly criticized for not being "Latin" enough, even though his positions were adopted by a large part of the Latin American intelligentsia. The truth is that even the notion of "Latin America" is problematic and complex, since it was a European invention to designate a specific part of the planet in the 19th century. Until the early 1930s, this category was not used and the limitations were essentially national. Its appearance is the result of deep diplomatic, institutional and cultural programs (Palomino 2019).

Fanon's perspective was contemporary with other similar theories. Dependency Theory, Liberation Theology and Liberation Sociology made visible the historical situation of exploitation and dependence. Mexican Pablo González Casanova introduced the concept "internal colonialism" (2006), to describe how Latin American indigenous and rural populations were dominated within independent states. He argued that racial and ethnic minorities were systematically excluded from political and economic life, replicating colonial hierarchies.

In the very successful 1971 essay *Open Veins of Latin America*, Eduardo Galeano detailed how Europe and the United States had historically abused the continent, plundering its natural resources and meddling in its state policies:

> *Latin America is the region of open veins. Everything, from the discovery until our times, has always been transmuted into European—or later United States—capital, and as such has accumulated in distant centres of power. [...] the history of Latin America's underdevelopment is, as someone has said, an integral*

part of the history of world capitalism's development (1997, 2).

Galeano was showing historical exploitation and its repercussions both in the economic and cultural order. Decades later, this critique evolved into Decolonial Theory and the persistence of colonial power structures after formal decolonization. The approaches of fundamental authors such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, Catherine Walsh, among others, have explored the continuities of those old types of interventionism.

In the 1960s, the situation of the modern/colonial world-system (Mignolo 2003) began to be strongly debated in Latin America. But with the peculiarity that this discussion jumped from intellectual circles to the artistic realm and involved networking throughout the space. In various meetings during the 1960s, artists and intellectuals assumed political commitment against capitalist imperialism. At the International Cultural Congress of La Havana (Cuba), in 1968, the intellectual was vindicated as *homo politicus* and the union of artistic and political action was proposed: "The cultural fact par excellence for an underdeveloped country is the revolution" (21). One year earlier, the filmmakers had proposed something similar at the Viña del Mar Film Festival.

Uruguay, as a small country amidst large nations, became the stage for all those discussions. The filmmakers of the time (along with writers, painters, actors, etc.) took an active and participatory role in the debate about Latin American identity and they materialised it in their films. In a weak and almost non-existent industry, they found the most affordable ways to make cinema through political documentaries and hand-made animation. Besides, they were artists committed to the winds of change and took an active stance toward what was happening both in their country and on the continent. Through three key words (resistance, guerrilla, third world) we can trace their cinemas and the political and artistic commitment of those turbulent years.

RESISTANCE: *COMO EL URUGUAY NO HAY*

The 1958's edition of the SODRE Documentary Film Festival in Montevideo held the First Latin American Congress of Filmmakers with the special presence of John Grierson. It was a very important event: for the first time, filmmakers from several countries attended the meeting and discussed the role of Latin American cinema. The meeting laid the groundwork for the Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, a movement that would acquire its final form in subsequent meetings. All participants wanted to create a transnational cinema in opposition to the imitative Hollywood models, a new cinema capable of representing, for the first time, the social, historical and cultural reality of Latin America. Documentary, animation and experimental cinema were the favourite methods to achieve this. The young filmmakers had been educated by the historical avant-gardes, Italian Neorealism, Free Cinema, Chaplin's comedies and the surrealism of Luis Buñuel. All those cinemas had a political connotation that reached a new form and colour in Latin America.

In Uruguay, there was a political and cultural crisis: the economic prosperity

of "the Switzerland of the Americas" (as the country was called after World War II) began to decline. This situation appears in *Como el Uruguay no hay* (Ugo Ulive, 1960), a short film that mockingly questioned the country's exceptional situation.[1] Ulive, who was mainly involved in stage productions, had worked on discontent and moral crisis in a previous film, *Un vintén pa'l Judas* (1959), considered the greatest expression of Uruguayan Neorealism (Lema Mosca 2023, 216–21). With powerful animation fragments, the movie takes up the common belief that there is no other country like Uruguay and creates a sharp critique of the situation in the country. So strong was the vision of Uruguay as an "European nation" that asserting the contrary was already violent. The film was rejected in the 1960's SODRE Film Festival edition and caused a huge uproar in the press.[2]

The movie confronts two existing realities of the country: on the one hand, the progressive and developed life of the rich classes, and on the other, the poor and underdeveloped existence of the marginal neighbourhoods. The contrast between those two spheres is reinforced by the choice of format and the materiality of the images: while advanced Uruguay is shown in fragmented photographs, poor Uruguay is filmed *in situ*, giving priority to the realism of the moving image, deepening the gap between one sector and the other. By using all these unusual techniques, the short film confronts the society and shows a critical view of the political system and state institutions through disbelief and sarcasm, a particularly shocking gesture in a strongly institutionalised, liberal and democratic society.

Additionally, the short film called for street mobilization and violent action as a way to combat the government's injustices. "If we want this to change, one day we will have to take to the streets, not just to protest, not just to have fun, but to stop the country from continuing its march towards a brilliant destiny", the voice-over ironically says. For many years documentary in Latin America has served as a vehicle for political activism and social critique, by exposing state violence, imperialism, and social injustice (Chanan 2014, 2017). By using protest as a form of social change, Ulive's short film thus appeared as one of the first political manifestations in Uruguayan cinema. *Como el Uruguay no hay* aroused heated debates in the local press and critics and it was named a "pamphletary" film. It was also a kind of prequel to later political cinema, as we will see below. Ulive became one of the first "intellectual filmmakers", an auteur linked to the social and political problems of the continent, and one of the most important names of the Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano.[3]

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1 Available for viewing on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJY_o1b5i0g&t=16s.

2 Several film critics came out and defended Ulive's work, as well as his right to present a work no matter how critical it was of the government, but nothing made the Board of Directors back down. However, despite not participating in the competition, the film achieved great notoriety and later that year won the award for best national film from the Film Critics Association.

3 Ulive continued making political films while in exile in Venezuela. In 1969, he released *Basta*, a raw experimental short film about the country's violence.

GUERRILLA: *ME GUSTAN LOS ESTUDIANTES*

As Fredric Jameson (1984) pointed out, thinking about the 1960s means reflecting on a time of enormous social and cultural transformations throughout the world. Events that led to significant political and social change in different parts of the planet also triggered the configuration of a new consciousness. Particularly in Latin America, this change coincided with the emergence of the Third World and the questions about some established historical notions. As Jameson writes, "the 60s was, then, the period in which all these 'natives' became human beings" (181). This new political situation, which put human beings at the centre of the cultural debate, had enormous repercussions on Latin American art and especially on cinema.

Furthermore, the 1960s saw the *boom* of Latin American literature, with the editorial exploitation of young writers of enormous talent who shaped a particular "image" of the continent. In Ángel Rama's conference cited at the beginning of this article, the Uruguayan critic discussed the relevance of this new concept. Rama affirms that there are two cultures in it: one cosmopolitan and another one traditional, which have been historically mixing, intersecting and cross-fertilising. The original contribution of Latin America literature is based on how writers, from a firm anti-imperialist conviction, produce high-quality literary works from the Third World, capable of introducing the Latin continent into the contemporary world (Rama 1973). It is important to think how much the configuration of a very precise "Latin American literature" influenced the creation of a "Latin American cinema" that, from the Global South, confronted the hegemonic aesthetics of the First World. This "transculturation" (in Rama's words) through which writers integrate their own cultural elements with narratives inherited from European or Western traditions, also spread to filmmaking. Or even preceded it and was present in filmmakers before writers.

The main historical events of the world also influenced artists. The Cuban Revolution embodied the dreams that another model of society was possible. Student protests in different parts of the world made young people the protagonists of a countercultural movement. The economic and cultural invasion by the United States in the middle of the Cold War was seen as a threat to Latin American societies. Thus, the role of intellectuals and artists began to change and move towards the premise of political commitment, which somehow responded to Sartre's call and the recovery of Gramscian writings. It was not only abandoning the typical mid-century intellectual passivity but embracing social mobilisations and facing the surrounding reality. With a strong emphasis on the human aspects within a transformative socio-political context, documentary film was concerned with recording the events and offering a possible solution. As Julianne Burton-Carvajal has pointed out, it was at the same time an instrument of cultural exploration, epistemological questioning, nationalist definition and political transformation (1990, 6).

The different meetings throughout Latin America and Europe in the 1960s sought to produce and to exhibit more local cinema, crossing national barriers and appealing to continental affiliation. Key notions showed up for expressing

collective concerns: violence, marginality, resistance, poverty, neo-colonialism. By reflecting the political and social situation of the peoples in Latin America, the filmmakers were also shaping a new identity and a new transnational movement. All of them had the same concerns as filmmakers: they considered Hollywood as a dominant form of cultural invasion, they were influenced by Neorealism and Direct Cinema, they were contemporary to the *Nouvelle Vague* and other new cinemas of the world. Their material possibilities however were different from all of those movements. So, their forms of production demanded alternative models: marginal, low-budget, independent films, often in small format, in order to reflect the crudest reality of Latin America by using documentary and cinema verité to express the underdevelopment of the continent. The spectator played a prominent role, as filmmakers resorted to raising the audience's awareness and spur them into action (López 1997; Chanan 2014).

In 1967, during the First Meeting of Latin American Filmmakers in the Viña del Mar Film Festival, a statement was declared: "The authentic New Latin American cinema has only been, is and will be the cinema that contributes to the development and strengthening of our national cultures, as an instrument of resistance and struggle" (my translation) (Acta del Primer Encuentro de Realizadores Latinoamericanos 1988, 545). Several filmmakers were interested in theorising about their own cinema and most of them shaped their theoretical writings around the ideas of Frantz Fanon and other left-wing intellectuals, such as Sartre, Camus and Gramsci.[4] All of them wielded the advantage of cinema as an instrument of liberation and militant action, against the political and cultural neo-colonialism of Latin America, seeking to reflect the reality of the countries from a critical and intellectualised perspective. They sought to turn the production limitations into a tactical method, in order to highlight the political militancy of the films. Simultaneously, they outlined a cultural movement by rejecting the Hollywood movies and European *cinema d'auteur* and redefining cinematic space (a world divided into three types of cinema).

In Uruguay, the political situation had also a big impact on the pledge. The revolutionary Theory of Foco, thought up by Che Guevara and theorised by Regis Debray, encouraged the violent actions of a small group to incite the masses' uprising and the overthrow of the regime (Jameson 1984). In 1963, the National Liberation Movement-Tupamaros (MLN-T) started an active urban warfare and most of its *guerrilleros* grew into iconic members of the political scenario. During the next years, violence and battles between the government and Tupamaros became more and more frequent. At the same time, a transnational network of leftist organizations emerged in the continent. They promoted political violence and transnational strategies as the only paths to achieving social change. Thus, they relied on armed struggle and built innovative repertoires of protest and collective action, such as street riots, urban guerrilla and exile.

4 In 1962, Fernando Birri published *Cine y subdesarrollo*, three years later Glauber Rocha lectured in Italy *La estética del hambre*, in 1969 appeared also *Hacia un tercer cine* by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino and *Por un cine imperfecto* by Julio García Espinosa.

If *Como el Uruguay no hay* represents denunciation and resistance against an oppressive political system, *Me gustan los estudiantes*[5] (Mario Handler, 1968) embodies the violent response to that oppression. The short film shows the meeting of international Presidents in Punta del Este and the protests of young people in the streets of Montevideo.[6] The documentary presents two situations happening at the same time: on the one hand, the visit to Uruguay of US President Lyndon B. Johnson during the Organization of American States Conference (OAS), in Punta del Este, and on the other, the student riots in Montevideo against the presence of the American President. The OAS Conference was held in April 1967, but the political events during next year were heating up the mobilisations on the streets. The assassinations of the first student martyrs in Uruguay, the death of Che Guevara in Bolivia, the increase of the government's repressions, along with the students' protests all around the world, were the breeding ground for street action by the younger people. Violence was as a symptom of generalised discontent and a confrontative and revolutionary way of changing society.

Originally, Handler's film was meant to be a purely informative record but then became something different with the use of sound and montage: while some scenes are set to music, others are completely mute. Thus, when the young people protest in the street and confront the police, the off-screen music underlines the author's predilection for the song's message. On the contrary, when the politicians appear at the OAS summit, only silence is heard. Paradoxically, this aesthetic twist takes away the voice of those who are speaking and gives it to those silenced.[7]The purpose is further reinforced by the choice of the title (previously it was to be called *Violencia en Montevideo*) and the author's participation in the revolt. The film had an organic function according to that political cinema: to incite something in spectators. According to the chronicles of the time, during the premiere in a downtown theatre of Montevideo, the viewers went out into the streets to protest violently (Getino 1969, 77).

In a 1969 interview with Oscar Getino, Handler asked himself: "Should I make a purely demonstrative film or should I make one with a whole creative and transformative intention?" And he answered: "The only important thing from this aesthetic point of view is, for me, to have joined a cinema of aggression, that is, a cinema directly pamphleteering and not demonstrative" (Getino 1969, 73,

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5 Available for viewing on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU--HzxUiYU.

6 Handler had filmed several political short films before, such as *The Burial of University* (*El entierro de la Universidad*, 1965), a performance by members of the University Students Union, *Carlos: Cinema-portrait of a Walker in Montevideo* (1965), about a homeless man of the city, *Elecciones* (with U. Ulive, 1967), about the presidential elections of that year. Later, he filmed *Líber Arce, liberarse* (1969), a short film about the murder of the first student martyr, *Uruguay 1969: el problema de la carne* (1969), about the conflict of meat processing workers and he clandestinely recorded the prison where the MLN-Tupamaros kept their hostages.

7 In the film *C3M. La Cinemateca del Tercer Mundo* (Lucía Jacob, 2011), Handler assures: "I denied the heads of State the joy of those songs, while the students possess that joy within themselves."

my translation). This approach demonstrates continuity with Ulive's political-artistic proposal (whom Handler considered one of his "maestros"), in terms of producing only politicized and committed cinema that challenges society. *Me gustan los estudiantes* erases from the violence and it shows the duality of its forms: young people respond with violence to the violent actions provoked by politicians. Moreover, it displays in a crude and explicit way the radicalisation of students and the transformation of protest methods. Thus, the young's violence is shown as a form of resistance to the violence of the ruling classes, a transversal idea in all radicalised sectors of the left-wing. In the same interview, Handler added:

> *Today, the situation in Uruguay objectively calls for a political struggle. This means that, whether one has an artistic vocation or not, the situation also forces one to act politically. I might not be a good politician or a good guerrilla fighter, but I can put one's vocation or cinematographic or artistic capacity in function of a political activity (Getino 1969, 73, my translation).*

To "act politically" means: social mobilisation, performance art and the materialisation of violence. But it also means taking a political stance against colonialism and the new forms of expropriation in Latin America. Not surprisingly, once exiled in Venezuela, Handler dedicated his subsequent films to this topic, as can be seen in *Dos puertos y un cerro* (1975) and *Tiempo colonial* (1978).

THIRD WORLD: *EN LA SELVA HAY MUCHO TRABAJO POR HACER*

The foundation of the Cinemateca del Tercer Mundo (C3M), in November 1969, brought together filmmakers, producers, distributors and critics, becoming a beacon of reference for political cinema throughout the continent. The C3M was created as a new space of non-commercial cinema, both producing and exhibiting marginal films from Latin America and other parts of the world. Based in Montevideo's downtown, it was a common space for young people from the art scene identified with the radical left, the Guerrilla and street mobilization.[8] The inauguration was attended by prominent filmmakers such as Joris Ivens, Fernando Solanas and Geraldo Sarno, among others, and it had a clear political goal, like other similar institutions all around the world. Actually, the logo represented a filmmaker holding a camera as if it were a weapon, thus reaffirming the intention to produce and exhibit political films (Villaça 2012; Dufuur 2018; Lacruz 2020).

8 The first members were Walter Achugar, Mario Handler, Mario Jacob, Alejandro Legaspi, Marcos Banchero, José Wainer, Eduardo Terra, Walter Tournier, Rosalba Oxandabarat, Dardo Bardier, Líber Bossolasco, Lucía Seade, Alfredo Echániz, Gabriel Peluffo Linari, Carmen Pérez Marexiano, Inés Blixen, Teresa Trujillo, Olga Filliol, Luis Bello, Luis Rocandio, Ricardo Fleiss, Luisa Fleiss and Armando Bresky.

The existence of three geopolitical spaces proposed at the Bandung Conference in 1955, was later transferred to cinema. According to this theory, first outlined by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, First Cinema was identified with the Hollywood industry and its vernacular imitations around the world, an alienating and dehumanizing cinema mediated by neo-colonialism. The Second Cinema was the "auteur cinema" or "cinema-expression", an alienated gesture that, paradoxically, reproduced the myth of developmental cinematic modernity. The Third Cinema appeared then as a decolonizing cinema, as an open play plausible to be completed not by a mere "spectator", but by a subject in action, fully revolutionary. The existence of a new type of cinema was discussed in several meetings[9] and other paradigmatic notions appeared, traveling concepts that served to designate this political form of filmmaking: militant, revolutionary, marginal, critical, lumpen, postcolonial cinema (Chanan 2014; Shohat and Stam 2014).

The Third World (an extension of the French concept *Tiers Monde*) did not refer to a precise geographical space but a virtual territory. The appearance, in the 1980s, of the term "Global South" seemed to fill this lack, by proposing a division between two metaphorically opposite spaces. Global South is understood as "assemblage of deterritorialization and decolonization", a process of creativity, resistance and affect, as it has been defined by Menon and Taha (2024). This is also a problematic category because it does not clearly designate a specific area, but rather a shared and transnational space. The idea has a special significance when considered from the South, and particularly from a region prone to theoretical discussion and questioning of the hegemony of the North. For this reason, Latin America has generated so many reflections about the *Global North* and the relationships between the two spaces (Palomino 2019). However, this approach had existed in Uruguay for a long time. Already in the 1940s, for instance, the painter Joaquín Torres García had proposed the confrontation between the developed North and the undeveloped South and had inverted the map in his famous drawing *América Invertida* (1943), proclaiming that: "our North is actually the South".[10] That was a current idea for Latin filmmakers and artists for whom Torres García had been a lighthouse in the construction of a local artistic identity. In the following years, the South would also become a

9 A first instance was the Congress of Filmmakers held at the SODRE Film Festival in Montevideo, in 1958, followed by the 1965 edition of the Mar del Plata Film Festival, where the Union of Cinematheques of Latin America was created (UCAL). Then, the First American Independent Film Festival in Montevideo (1965), the First Argentine-Brazilian Meeting of Short Film Directors in Buenos Aires (1965), the Film Festival of Marcha (1967), the Viña del Mar Film Festival (1967), the First Exhibition of Latin American Documentary Cinema in Mérida (1968) and the International Meetings for a New Cinema in Montreal (1974).

10 "I have called this La Escuela del Sur because our North is actually the South. There should be no North for us, except in opposition to our South. Therefore, we now turn the map upside down, and then we have a true idea of our position, and not as the rest of the world wishes. The tip of America, from now on, prolonging, insistently points to the South, our North" (Urban Media Archaeology 2011).

space of dreaming and desire for those Latin American artists.[11]

The C3M debated those theoretical topics in its own journal *Cine del Tercer Mundo*, which published two voluminous issues in 1969 and 1970. In a questionnaire to Solanas, the Argentine director assures: "Either the author-director of the Third World faces the challenge that neo-colonialism throws at him, becoming at the same time a producer, distributor and, if necessary, an exhibitor, or he accepts, before begin the battle, his own denial" (my translation) (Cuestionario a Solanas 1969, 34). In a review on *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), by Mario Handler, published in the same volume, the Uruguayan debated the risk of becoming an "author" and ending up being a part of the imperialist cinema, since the codes of language and the very formation of a filmmaker responded to the First and Second cinema's influence. Rephrasing Fanon's famous expression "every spectator is a coward or a traitor", Handler wondered what a filmmaker was in that context. The answer is blunt: "At one extreme, a slave of the system, or a 'voyeur' who enjoys the vision of the reality of exploitation, or a hitman of domination. In the other, almost a revolutionary, almost a politician, almost a discoverer" (Handler 1969, 31, my translation).

The committed filmmaker found himself in this dilemma. From the beginning, C3M wanted to produce poor and imperfect cinema, capable of portraying the reality of Uruguayan society. An "emergency cinema" characterized by the aesthetics of poverty, street recording and artisanal editing, with immediate production and dissemination, almost at the pace of a newsreel. Furthermore, C3M created bridges with other cinemas, by revitalizing the very notion of collective work and its impact on art. Since then, unusual films were shown, exhibitions in alternative spaces (factories, schools, grassroots committees, workshops) were promoted, magazines and pamphlets were published, and several documentaries and animations were produced[12] (Villaça 2012; Dufuur 2018; Lacruz 2020). Plus, the cultural situation in the country helped to develop documentary as opposed to fiction films, which were difficult to produce in an unprepared and deficient industry (Lema Mosca 2023, 250).

In the following years, the political situation worsened. In 1971, President Pacheco Areco entrusted the Army to attack the *guerrilleros*. One year later, an MLN-Tupamaros offensive was harshly twarted by the military and most of the members got arrested and tortured. In 1973, the Army broke into the C3M and took the films and equipment. Some of the founding members were arrested and tortured and others had to escape into exile. The dictatorship would last until 1985.

One of the last movies produced by C3M was *There is a lot of work to do in the*

11 For instance, in 1985 Mario Benedetti published a famous poetry book titled *El sur también existe* and three years later, Fernando Solanas directed the film *Sur* (1988).

12 Along with the C3M, other institutions promoted these alternative ways of consumption. Cinemateca Uruguaya, the cine-clubs and other state agencies such as Cine Arte del SODRE or the Film Institute of the Universidad de la República (ICUR) reinforced their activities through new exhibitions spaces, courses and theoretical material in its publications, encouraging local production and new places for dissemination and discussion.

jungle (*En la selva hay mucho trabajo por hacer*, Walter Tournier, 1974), a short animation about the animals in a jungle and their battle with an evil hunter.[13] Over the years, the film became a metaphorical response to the dictatorship. Produced and recorded clandestinely in C3M, after the premiere Tournier had to exile to Peru, where he produced his following animations.[14]

Based on a short story by the Uruguayan political prisoner Mauricio Gatti, the jungle serves as an allegory of society. The choice of a group of animals is symptomatic, for several reasons. Fanon had already pointed out the "animality" between colonists and colonised relationship: "The colonist, when he wants to describe [the colonized] and he find the right word, constantly refers to the bestiary" (1963, 20, my translation). The jungle becomes a symbolical space and the hunter represents the oppression: both the coloniser of the north and the military officer of the dictatorship. The figure of the hunter appears exploitative and oppressive: he focuses on the lack of freedom of animals, the mistreatment and exploitation of their property. The Colonialism's lexicon has always been both zoological and bestialising, since the dehumanization transforms the dominated into mere beasts. Colonised people were the first to experience the lacerating significance of modern European politics. Colonialism invents an inferior "Other", and in this difference lies the operation of material and symbolic plunder of colonised peoples. They are attempting to annihilate culture and impose a new order and registration of bodies. If colonialism is characterised by the imposing nature and the use of violence against bodies, the symbolic situation of animals is representative of this new modality. South America's dictatorships thus became a new and ruthless form of imposition, an internal colonialism capable of classifying the inhabitants of the same country into several levels.

In *En la selva hay mucho trabajo por hacer* the jungle is a place where everyone participates without hierarchies and absolute freedom. Working is shown as an essential component in life (a key notion in Marxist philosophy) and it is a motive of equality between the members of the animal society. At the end, a young girl rescues the animals and returns them to their natural habitat, creating an identification with the child audience of the film, but also representing the value of good actions. Finally, animals can decide about their own existence by appealing to revolution: with the organised mobilisation, they can return to the jungle, recover what is lost, and prevent other hunters from coming to kill/colonize them. The lesson is powerful: if the society of the South is organised, no one from the North will come to impose their force.

13 Available for viewing on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gi17VXw5Go0&t=4s.

14 *El cóndor y el zorro* (1979), *El clavel desobediente* (1981) y *Nuestro pequeño paraíso* (1983). Since then, has had a successful career in animation, stop-motion and puppets. Some of his most important works are the television shows *Los Tatitos* (1997–2001) and *Los derechos del niño* (2004–07), films *El jefe y el carpintero* (2000), *Caribbean Christmas* (2001) and *Selkirk, el verdadero Robinson Crusoe* (2012).

CONCLUSION

The 1960s were a moment of political tension and intellectual production in Latin America. They were a period of very significant transformation in which late capitalism ended up consuming the vestiges of pre capitalism, as Jameson puts it (1984). The citizens' mobilisations undertaken in the public sphere found their counterpart in the artistic scene, as the mirror of bigger cultural and social concerns. In those turbulent times, dissimilar notions were linked to common worries: colonialism, exploitation, underdevelopment, marginality, dependence or oppression are some of them. Somehow, those forms of silent violence found their opposite side in street protests and guerrilla warfare. Fanon's call to violent action as the only way was thus the sign of expression for students, artists and *guerrilleros*.

Cinema echoed social changes and captured what was happening on screen, becoming a document of undeniable value for rethinking history and the recent past. Whether through the documentary record or through animation, the film production of that time can be seen as a mirror to recover those moments fifty years later. Discussing the situation of Uruguayan society while the imaginaries of prosperity and splendour were falling apart was something crucial. This was also a way to materialize the concerns of those citizens dissatisfied with the political crisis. The directors analysed here belong to that first generation of professional filmmakers who took their first steps in the 1960s and who, towards the end of the decade, were already prominent names on the local scene. They are also good examples of the committed filmmaker, who combined art and social consciousness as a superior ordinance and, for that reason, had to pay for it with harsh consequences, of which the most notable has been exile.

However, the films discussed here are only a small sample of Uruguayan cinema and they are just a node in that broad fabric called the Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano. The transnational relations of that decade should be explored in greater detail in order to draw a more comprehensive picture of Latin America's cinema. The director's exile only strengthened the relationships with other filmmakers in different spaces of enunciation and expanded their international recognition. While the situation was not always easy, especially when the New Latin American Cinema was beginning to dissolve in the 1980s. Anything was possible and anti-capitalist and neo-colonialist fights seemed something of the past. New times were coming and the Latin American cinema would have to adapt, again.

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Cinema, Politics and Resistance in Cameroon

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Both the colonial and post-independence eras in Cameroon have been characterized by repressive public policies regarding freedom of speech and expression, with strict surveillance on cinematographic expression. In 1934, for example, the French government passed the Laval Decree to prevent cinema from spreading "subversive" or anti-colonial messages. The decree also required the French government's permission before shooting or showing films in French colonies. The subsequent neo-colonial state, established in 1960, worked hand in glove with the former colonial masters, and it can be argued that this neo-colonial state has survived to the present day. Within a national context characterized by dictatorship, human rights abuses, cultural belligerence/emasculation, poverty, and above all, press censorship, this paper sets out to demonstrate that filmmakers such as Alphonse Beni, Jean Marie Teno, Jean Pierre Bekolo, and Basseck Ba Khobio successfully employ several forms of militant cinema techniques and aesthetics to lend their voices to an oppressed Cameroonian and African society. While filmic approaches like the anti-documentary (Teno) and the Mevungu (Bekolo) are more overt in their deconstructionist agenda, others like "sly civility" (Beni) and "Subtle Deconstruction" (Ba Kobhio) are more veiled, in the register of what James Scott calls "hidden transcripts". These hidden transcripts here refer to codified stylistic and narrative techniques constructed by oppressed groups as they speak against the injustice of repressive apparatuses or power structures, serving as a means to protest against hegemonic forces while evading their surveillance. From a post-colonial perspective, this paper analyses films from the aforementioned Cameroonian filmmakers, as well as existing literature on Cameroonian cinema. The objective is to shed light on how these committed filmmakers denounce neo-colonialism, dictatorship and cultural alienation on one hand, and the government's incompetence and insensitivity to the plight of the masses on the other.

Keywords
Hidden transcripts
Sly Civility
Neo-colonialism
Politics
Resistance
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INTRODUCTION

In the colonial era, the continent of Africa as a whole was largely represented cinematically by Western filmmakers who made films that depicted black Africans as inferior, submissive workers, savage, or cannibalistic. Examples of this type of filmmaking include *Kings of the Cannibal Islands* (Wallace McCutcheon, 1909), *Congorilla* (Martin and Osa Johnson, 1932). Others portrayed Africa as exotic, without history or culture. Examples include jungle films based on the Tarzan character created by Edgar Rice Burroughs, as well as adventure films

like *The African Queen* (John Huston, 1951), and various adaptations of H. Rider Haggard's novel *King Solomon's Mines* (1885).

In the French colonies, Africans were prohibited by the 1934 Laval Decree from making films of their own. This decree, passed by the French government and written by Pierre Laval, the minister of colonies, aimed to prevent cinema from spreading subversive or anti-colonial messages. The decree stated that any person who desires to make cinematographic images or sound recordings must address a written request to the lieutenant Governor of the colony where the applicant intends to operate. The request was to include all the information about the applicant's professional references, as well as scripts for film or musical accompaniment. This decree thus restricted the work of both African and European filmmakers from 1934 until 1960. This ban stunted the growth of film as a means of political, cultural, and artistic expression for Africans. This excessive policing and control of the various mechanics of self-expression and how Africans were perceived elsewhere aligns with the views of Memmi (2003), who posits that:

> *Just as the bourgeoisie proposes an image of the proletariat, the existence of the colonizer requires that an image of the colonized be suggested. These images become excuses without which the presence and conduct of a colonizer, and that of a bourgeois, would seem shocking. But the favored image becomes a myth precisely because it suits them too well. Let us imagine, for the sake of this portrait and accusation, the often-cited trait of laziness. It seems to receive unanimous approval of colonizers from Liberia to Laos, via the Maghreb. It is easy to see to what extent this description is useful. It occupies an important place in the dialectics exalting the colonizer and humbling the colonized (123).*

From Memmi's perspective, the colonizers found the need to "suggest" an image of the colonized to the rest of the world that suits their intents and purposes, and that could only be done by controlling the different means and technologies of self-expression, such as cinema. In the particular context of Cameroon, the colonialists were in complete control of filmmaking activities and the type of films that were watched in the colony. They favoured films which portrayed blacks as needing to be civilized, emotionally volatile and easily distracted; in an effort to amuse and disarm the colonized (Tcheuyap 2011). It can thus be argued that cinema was not a neutral force in the colonies. A clear example is the Western genre which was very popular during the colonial era. It used point of view conventions to project the white man—the imperialist agents—as superior; thus, building a sense of dependency within the fissured mind of the colonial spectator. This limited the possibility of the colonized identifying with the colonizers, as the viewer systematically developed inferiority complexes.

Having been subjected to films that sought to propagate Western superiority for over half a century, when African filmmakers began to make films after independence, they confronted a double challenge. First, they felt compelled to fight back and improve upon the negative image the colonialists gave of Africa,

by reasserting their African values and identity, badly distorted by Western films. Secondly, they had to deal with the challenges faced by any developing area in competition with well-established countries for a share of the film market (Diawara 1986, 1995). Unfortunately for Cameroon, the departure of the colonial order did not give way to more freedom of cinematic expression for Cameroonian people as a neocolonial order immediately replaced it. The state dominated the cinematographic field from independence in the 1960s onwards, simply replacing colonialist propaganda with repressive state propaganda, without giving room for pluralistic voices in the country. Between 1960 and 1988, for example, the state propaganda machinery of Cameroon produced over 248 documentaries, flooding the country's cinematic landscape with images of government propaganda. In most cases, the image of the "father of the nation," symbol of a strong state and a prosperous nation, is portrayed in documentaries such as *Le temps de L'Unite* (Sab Atem Stephen,1965), *Le Cameroun et les Nations Unies* (Sab Atem Stephen,1965), *Dix ans de liberte et de Paix* (Jean Paul Ngassa, 1970) and *UNC* (Sab Atem Stephen, 1980) (Doho 2005). The struggles of neocolonial regimes in Africa to protect the interests of neocolonial forces over those of their citizens confirms Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion in the preface of Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) when he says:

> *The European elite undertook to manufacture a native elite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them, as with a red-hot iron, with the principles of Western culture; they stuffed their mouths full with high-sounding phrases, grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother country, they were sent home, whitewashed. These walking lies had nothing left to say to their brothers; they only echoed (7).*

Viewed from Sartre's perspective as stated above, it becomes clear that post-independence regimes in Africa were "manufactured" by the former colonial masters and could only "echo" the interests and lies of the neocolonial forces that fabricated them.

The paucity of independent films in Cameroon was further compounded by the lack of equipment, funding and basic infrastructure, a perfect arrangement for the state that had a firm grip on government communication agencies for its propaganda (Ngansop 1987). This harsh film production climate impacted the filmic approaches of early Cameroonian filmmakers in different ways, ranging from more veiled indictments of the West as found in the works of Jean-Pierre Dikonge Pipa, Daniel Kamwa, Dia Moukouri, Alphonse Beni and Arthur Sibita and Basseck Ba Kobhio, to more overt ones like Jean Marie Teno and Jean Pierre Bekolo (Nfaboum 2005). However, what was common with all of them was the use of cinema as a form of resistance. Filmmakers like Alphone Beni and Basseck Ba Kobhio, in particular, adopted an aesthetic that reflected a concept which James Scott calls "hidden transcripts". Scott explains that hidden transcripts are constructed by oppressed groups as they congregate "offstage" to speak and act outside of the elites' surveillance and repressive

apparatuses" (1990, 4). They are thus a way for the subordinate to express their protests while avoiding being a target of punishment. Because the hidden transcripts are by nature secret and conspiratorial, they are not often subject to policing and repression. Hidden transcripts typically manifest in films through stylistic/aesthetic devices like metaphors, allegories, subtexts in dialogue and characterization, and visual symbolism. Some Cameroonian filmmakers thus use these devices to make veiled statements on the sociopolitical ills plaguing Cameroon and Africa, especially those related to bad governance, dictatorship, institutionalized corruption and the enforcement of neocolonial interests over those of the African masses.

Although all the works analysed in this paper fall in the register of militant filmmaking, each of the filmmakers has a unique style that can be considered as an individual approach to filmmaking. Some like Alphonse Beni and Basseck Ba Kobhio are considered to employ the concept of hidden scripts more thoroughly. By analysing these works, the objective of the paper is to demonstrate that filmmakers are some of the most committed, accurate and courageous media personalities in Cameroon history when it comes to speaking for the oppressed masses in Cameroon and Africa in general. The idea is also to highlight Cameroonian filmmakers' indigenous cinematic styles which demonstrate that, besides deconstructing neocolonialism, dictatorship and bad governance, they are also forging an aesthetic, void of the Eurocentric prisms and voyeuristic approaches to filmmaking in and about Africa.

ALPHONSE BENI AND THE CONCEPT OF "SLY CIVILITY"

Beni's films analysed in this article challenge Western hegemony and white supremacy ideals in subtle ways. Within the post-colonial discourse, his approach falls under the register of "sly civility" as introduced by Homi K. Bhabha (1992) as an extension of the concept of "mimicry". As Bhabha explains, sly civility entails:

> *...subtle forms of resistance "through which the native refuses to* satisfy *the demand of the colonizer's narrative. In this vein, sly civility may be regarded as a sophisticated affective response that in its ambivalence—outward compliance and inner resistance—may be far more effective in its evasion than overt resistance because it escapes detection (1992, 13).*

Although several film scholars have placed Beni among the complacent Cameroonian filmmakers who carefully avoid political discuss in their films, resorting to stories about love, sex and culture (Okadike 1994; Nganang 2005; Tcheuyap 2011), the argument in this article is that Beni is just more subtle and anecdotic in his deconstructionist agenda. The idea of outward compliance and

inner resistance, as elaborated by Bhabha above, is what makes the concept of hidden transcripts also relevant in Beni's films. As will be demonstrated, Beni's films are therefore not just mindless copies of Western genres, as he tactfully employs sly civility in films like *Cameroon Connection* (1985), *Terror Force Commando* (1986), and *Black Ninja* (1987) to destroy the myth of white superiority and invincibility vis-à-vis Africans. To put Beni's deconstructionist approach into perspective, it is important to recall Delavignette, a French colonial officer who was the first to codify a film language that ensured that French and European interests were always presented in a positive light, and as morally superior to Africans. In his films, Beni seems to apply a kind of reverse engineering on Delavignette's approach by showing Africans as superior in very subtle ways. By doing so, he was able to take his films beyond the limited sphere of African films into popular exhibition circuits in the west. By beating the vigilance of the French gatekeepers, Beni was able to gather a considerable following in the West and to achieve considerable commercial success.

To better understand how Beni successfully beat the vigilance of the French, it is necessary to analyse how sly civility is applied in his three films under study. The first thing we notice is that Europeans are mostly portrayed as criminals who are defeated by the hero played by Alphonse Beni, an African. In *Cameroon Connection*, for example, the nightclub fight scene in Paris shows Baiko fighting a group of racist thugs, before Bruce who comes to his aid. We see Baiko (Cameroonian) in a dominant position and he beats up the racist thugs (whites), which is a sharp contrast to what Western films preferred to portray at the time. Furthermore, the town of Paris (which represents Europe in general) is not presented as the dream place to be, as was the popular opinion at the time and reflected in Western movies. Rather, it was presented as a place that harbours dangers at every turn and also holds dark secrets such as a haven of prostitution.

In a similar way, Beni also deconstructs white moral superiority in *Terror Force Commando* where Europeans and Europe are represented in unflattering terms. For example, the main antagonist of the film, Zero, and his entire gang are Europeans, and we find a scene at the beginning where Inspector Baiko roughs up one of the apprehended gang members to extract information. When the investigations later take him to Rome, he faces more European criminals there. In *Black Ninja* however, not all white characters are presented negatively, as we see two antagonists in the persons of Rudolph and Mr. Temple, both of European descent. But what is interesting is that black characters are portrayed to work as equals with whites and not as less experienced nor incompetent, thereby destroying the hierarchy envisaged by Delavignette as concerns representations of working relationships between Africans and Europeans in Francophone African cinema.

It can therefore be concluded that in his deconstruction agenda, Beni makes use of sly civility as a form of hidden transcript; in attempts to escape detection from. Typical of James Scot's approach, Beni pretends to embrace the colonizer's ways by adopting hybrid genres like action films, parts of which

are shot in Western nations. This makes him appear like a colonized subject struggling to emulate the colonizer, which spares him from closer scrutiny from Western gatekeepers. At the same time, he uses subtexts anchored on cultural and political allegories that silently challenge established hegemonies of power structures and societal norms such as those imposed by the French in Cameroon.

BASSECK BA KHOBIO AND SUBTLE DECONSTRUCTION

Ba Kobhio generally catalogues life's experiences from the perspective of the ordinary Cameroonian, providing interesting and informative counter-views from the official one. These counter views are propelled by social actors who are not necessarily experiencing the same level of oppression, because they come from a wide range of social groups such as academics, human rights activists, church leaders, independent artists, businessmen, women's groups, and athletes. His deconstruction becomes quite subtle because these counter-views are not always perceived as posing a direct threat to the state, yet in their own subtle ways gradually erode state domination, staging their opinions from the fringes of the state to create their own forms of social power not controlled by the state. This is demonstrated in *Sango Malo* (1991) where he argues for a theory of development that respects the culture and history by adapting scholarship to local realities in Cameroon.

In *Sango Malo*, Ba Kobhio introduces Bernard Malo, a young teacher trained in the tradition of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972, 1995), who believes that education must be based on dialogue rather than a strict curriculum. This concept of dialogue is based on lived experiences, social practices, and building social capital to enhance the community as a whole. From this perspective, Malo vigorously opposes the school principal, a product of colonial education who remains unaware of the resurgence of nationalism and political progressivism in the country. The school principal seems stuck within the rigid and traditional Eurocentric colonial curriculum, designed to produce docile colonial administrators. Malo's ideological fight with the school principal is an analogy of the fight between nationalistic activists in Africa against neo-colonial leaders whose primary interests seem to be to defend the interests of Western hegemonies. This aligns with what Ziauddin Sardar posits in his introduction to the 2008 edition of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) that:

> *The question then becomes: can the non-West develop its own self-definition by using the tools and instruments of Western civilization? In human sciences, Fanon detects a problem: they have their own drama. They have emerged from a particular cultural milieu and reflect the concerns and prejudices of that culture and worldview. If Western civilization and culture are responsible for colonial racism, and Europe itself has a racist structure, then we should not*

> *be too surprised to find this racism reflected in the discourses of knowledge that emanate from this civilization and that they work to ensure that structural dominance is maintained (xv).*

In light of the above, the school principal is a typical product of the colonial educational system, trained specifically to protect colonial interests. Ba Khobio's use of the fight between Sango Malo and his school principal to indict the colonial educational system typifies hidden transcripts categorized by James Scot (1990) as ideological and political allegories, which constitute covert critiques of political systems or subversive messages from marginalized perspectives, often masked as entertainment.

Freire used the term "banking education," (2005, 72) to define this sort of mindless and conformist education. As a strong disciple of Freire, Malo rather advocates for an education that serves the needs and purposes of the community. Like his role model, Freire, Malo believes in the transformative power of education. He therefore focuses on training the students to survive in the world not only through conventional knowledge but also through common sense and physical labour. Malo believes that training in agriculture will reduce the country's dependence on imported food, but it is not on the headmaster's curriculum. His teaching methods in the school gradually raise the consciousness of the rural populace who start questioning the neocolonial economic system based on export products such as coffee, cocoa, banana, cotton, wood, etc. In order to break the economic monopoly in the village, he organizes the farmers into a trade union that markets their products.

Similarly, in *Silence de la Forét* (*Silence of the Forest*, 2003), Ba Kobhio pursues the same trajectory as in *Sango Malo* by pitting Western education and socialization against tribal relationships and loyalty. The main character Gonaba is a well-educated African, who believes that his Western education is enough for him to trigger positive change as he returns home to the Central African Republic. Top on his list is to shake up the stagnation and privileges of the ruling class. Gonaba's vision is based on the presumption that Western education and his experiences are sufficient to help get the Central African Republic out of under-development. To Gonaba's frustration, that vision is not well received back home. He is seen by his compatriots as nothing but a white man and his entire effort is unappreciated. Having failed woefully to achieve his goal, he decides to make himself useful by taking on the plight of the Pygmies who are regarded with racist contempt by both non-Pigmy Central Africans and the whites running multi-national foreign corporations in the country. At that point, the movie turns into an attack against the mistreatment and exploitation of pygmies in Africa and the ecological threat against the continent.

At the end, Gonaba decides to settle in the jungle and embrace the Pygmies' culture, even taking a Pygmy woman as his spouse. His intention is to use his Western education to teach the Pygmies how to read and write in order to put them on track to be equal to the taller men running the country. To his surprise, he finds out that they have no use for him because their age-old culture is

strong and reliable and does not need to be changed by Western ideals. He also finds out that the game-hunting practised by the Pygmies comes packaged with an authentic and honest way of life, which is more important than what he learned in Europe. Gonaba's helplessness and impotence get compounded when he discovers impending development projects being planned by foreign corporations on their land. This development consists of cutting down the forest for foreign exports, thus completely destroying their habitat and there is nothing he can do about it. *The Silence of the Forest*, as indicated by the title of the film, and so cherished by the Pygmies, is about to be shattered forever.

JEAN MARIE TENO AND THE "ANTI-DOCUMENTARY" FILMIC APPROACH

Jean Marie Teno is an African filmmaker who fully understands the role of film in the decolonization process as well as the capacity of cultural action to mediate social change. To this effect, he makes a conscious effort to initiate political discourse in his filmmaking. He thus aligns with the assertions of film scholars like Frank Ukadike (1994), who claim that the colonial project left Africa little choice but to turn to an "activist cinema" in order to undo the damage of colonization, as elucidated in the introduction to this article. As explained by Ki-Zerbo (1996) in an interview, Teno highlights the historical context of African cinema to argue that the emergence of militant cinema in Africa is not by chance, given that the continent has a long history of exploitation and colonial oppression by Western powers. This explains why in their films African filmmakers focus on reinventing an image and culture that was suppressed by the colonizers. Teno's films aptly demonstrate his views, mostly countering Hollywood aesthetic and narrative style in an effort to extend his narrative to fit within African cultural and socio-political realities.

This aesthetic revolt from Teno has been described by Tchouafe (2006) as "reverse anthropology" or "anti-documentary," in the following terms:

> *This particular documentary style aims to rewrite African visual history from a native perspective by turning the tables on colonial anthropology, which now becomes the subject of investigation rather than the one doing the investigation. It is a practice aimed at removing the documentary genre from colonial paternalistic clutches and obliterating their traces by highlighting its own internal inconsistencies and propaganda through the colonial "voice of God" that for so long has tainted Africa with a colonial ideology lacking in compassion for the natives' human rights... Within these processes, Africans also became strangers in their own land, a nation within the colonial empire, because they were forced to look at themselves through colonial eyes...Thus, the anti-documentary is a way for the natives of Africa to come, on their own, out of the colonial archival shadow. It links aesthetic and moral objections to the colonial project and ideology (33).*

Teno's adoption of the anti-documentary approach is thus aimed at reintroducing humanism into filmmaking, by directing the attention of the viewer to the subject matter, rather than distracting him from it with sophisticated cinematic effects. His philosophy of filmmaking is thus anchored on his beliefs in participation, not just ideological observation based on bad faith and prejudices, an approach that turns filmmaking into an activist tool for progress.

It is therefore apt to draw a parallelism between Teno's anti-documentary approach and Italian Neorealism in post-war Italy. This is especially given the latter's limited effects, combining newsreel-type footage to create a documentary feel to the cinema, enhance moral engagement, and dedication to give a voice to the voiceless. However, with the use of irony, paradox and metaphor which he achieves through the juxtaposition of ideas and images, Teno's aesthetic goes a step further by adopting the performative mode of documentary filmmaking in which he uses his own voice-over, giving him a distinct visual identity. Another parallelism between the two filmic approaches is that while Italian Neorealism was a revolt against Fascist Italy during World War II (Bordwell et al. 1985), Teno's anti-documentary approach is heavily influenced by the ongoing struggle of decolonization in the country, such that both cinemas could be described as shaped by circumstance. This is why both cinemas lay emphasis on real life and real-life events, and in both, the action usually takes place on the street. This way, filmmaking becomes an indigenous way of archiving local realities, analysing, deconstructing and anticipating the symptoms of their societies, then prescribing appropriate remedies.

Teno's first feature film, *L'Eau de Misère* (*Bikutsi Water Blues*, 1988), articulates a powerful critique of polluted water supplies in Cameroon. The film shows long queues of desperate Cameroonians looking for potable water from very few taps on the streets, only to get brown water. Teno's next work *Afrique, je te plumerai* (*Africa, I Will Fleece You*, 1992) was even more critical, probing into the continuing legacies of colonial oppression. In this film, Teno explains why the Cameroon school system has totally failed. After a series of sequences that show the streets invaded by enraged masses and a maddened army, and after zooming in on corpses, Teno brings our attention to the pedagogical tools in use in Cameroonian schools. Books are extremely scarce and those that are available are not adapted to the reality of the country. The university library in Yaoundé is empty, and Teno indicts the former colonial masters who continue to monopolize the market for textbooks so as to make sure that no counter-narratives from the people. This is echoed by Ng'g' wa Thiong'o (1981) when he asserts that:

> *Publications were censored directly, through government licensing laws or indirectly through the editorial practices of those running the government and missionary presses. African languages were still meant to carry the message of the bible. Even the animal tales derived from orature, which were published by these presses in booklets, were often so carefully selected as to make them carry the moral message and implications revealing the unerring finger*

> *of a white God in human affairs. Thus, imperialist pretenses to free the African from superstition, ignorance and awe of nature often resulted in deepening his ignorance, increasing his superstitions and multiplying his awe of the new whip and-gun-wielding master (67).*

Teno thus presents the political leaders as mere protectors of French interests. The president's poster used to cover a corpse clearly indicates the physical and the spiritual dungeon into which decades of dictatorship and psychological manipulation have plunged the country.

Similarly, in *Clando* (1996) Teno denounced the blatant violation of human rights. This film uses the perspective of Sobgui, a computer technician, to archive a historical period. During the upheavals that ran from 1990 to 1993, Sobgui helps the students to print their tracts against the regime. Betrayed by his colleague, he is arrested and held in a torture chamber in a Douala police station where he experiences hardship, but he also witnesses a policeman's sexual assault on his wife. Though he is eventually liberated, Sobgui still feels imprisoned by the repressive forces all around him. Sobgui is at the brink of madness by the time he leaves for Germany, but even in Germany he discovers to his dismay that the status quo is not any better. The immigrant in Europe is the unwanted other, forced to live a ghetto/underground life smeared with alcohol and women.

In the same light, Teno's 2004 film, *Le Malentendu Colonial* (*Colonial Misunderstanding*), is a critical indictment of the paradoxical relationship between European Christian missionaries and colonization in Africa, and how their "noble deeds" actually served to further the interests of their own nation states, rather than those of Africa. The film thus unearths colonization strategies like the Rhineland mission, which even predates German colonization, and which seems to remain in operation till date. From Teno's perspective, the colonial misunderstanding stems from the fact that the term "colonization" with all its violence, continues to be used to comment on world news, even though evoking European colonization in Africa remains a taboo subject. This paradox seems to suggest that collective memory should only retain European propaganda which presents colonization as a civilizing mission.

JEAN-PIERRE BEKOLO AND THE CONCEPT OF "MEVUNGU"

Introduced in his 2005 film *Les Saignantes*, Bekolo's concept of "Mevungu" appears to represent a private space for self-expression, out of reach of the dictators' power. It is within this private space that his films ignite conversations on the nature of African traditional religion and power in Cameroon. To Bekolo, the reins of power always seem farfetched and elusive to the ordinary Cameroonian. To have a complete grasp of the Cameroonian political landscape

therefore, one has to make a conscious effort to understand the complexities and sophistications of its politics, which are deployed within multiple activated spheres of power. Within these contexts, political power does not necessarily mean power over the sacred; consequently, the "Mevungu" cannot be controlled, even by dictators, because politics in Cameroon operates in a context that is mediated by multiple factors and social actors who do not necessarily take directions from the state. In the relative safety of the "Mevungu", Bekolo thus tasks himself with breaking the state's monopoly over the country's audiovisual landscape. With this sacred and safe space, cinema becomes a magical tool which facilitates the participation of new social actors who can now form communities and new modes of addresses from the hinges of the state. Consequently, Bekolo's cinema becomes part of the process of finding new possibilities within the formations of other spheres of power outside of the realm of the state.

In *Les Saignantes*, the "Mevungu" concept is in full display as Bekolo demonstrates the contrast between indigenous African secret societies' practices against the problematic use of sex and satanic cults by Cameroonian elites, a remnant of a colonial culture not based on meritocracy but on an economy of desire brought by the predatory violence of colonization, rape and fascism. The film presents these satanic cults as expressing the colonized elites' attempt at internal colonization through an economy of desire based on colonial mimicry and psychological delusions. As Tchouafe (2006) explains:

> *In practice, it means that the Cameroonians' top brass have settled for mimicking the colonizers and are now wearing their uniforms to routinely exploit their fellow compatriots, hopelessly poor and confused, not understanding that these people are broken and need healing. Bekolo, however, claims that by settling for these evil practices, whatever power the elites gain from their satanic cults cannot stand the test of time, because the "Mevungu's" cosmology is timeless and cannot be bound by evil power. The "Mevungu" sets both the oppressed and the oppressors free (59).*

Bekolo's belief therefore is that the government's power is limited. Both his movies, *Quartier Mozart* (1992) and *Les Saignantes*, were entirely shot in Cameroon within two months before he quickly left the country to do postproduction work in France and the United States. The idea was to be quick enough to beat the slow repressive machinery of the country. The "Mevungu" concept thus also leverages on technological evolutions like light digital cameras leading to smaller crews that draw less attention, to succeed. With this approach, Bekolo has succeeded to develop a completely original, provocative, challenging and even daring understanding of filmmaking. In an era plagued by poverty, opportunism, then political and cultural censorship, Bekolo succeeds to bring in a new breath through the power of imagination.

This imagination runs through almost all his films. *Le president* (2013), for example, depicts a president in office for 42 years who takes a sudden road trip

on the eve of an important electoral meeting. His disappearance is watched by the media, political opponents, and even prisoners and causes a war over who will be the successor. While on his journey he sees the disastrous consequences of a prolonged reign over his country. This is clearly anecdotic to what was happening in 2013 in Cameroon, which continues till date; and with the extremely violent nature of the government in place, his courage can only make sense when attributed to "Mevungu". The same traits can be traced back to an earlier film, *Quartier Mozart* in which he presents a grotesque figure, "Chien merchant" (Mad Dog), a police officer and main character of the film. Mad Dog monopolizes the financial, political, religious and mystical powers in his neighbourhood and exhibits an obsession for total control over those around him, an attitude that leaves his family and neighbours ill at ease. This figure clearly represents, in a larger scale, the autocratic nature of public authorities in Cameroon that sometimes threaten to suffocate other actors within the social system. Bekolo's hidden transcripts could thus be classified to be of the anecdotic and symbolic variant, given his flair for using anecdotes to critically indict hegemonic forces at play in/on Cameroon and elsewhere.

Through filmmaking, Bekolo thus succeeds to highlight the differences between hegemonic forms of institutionalized history and individual histories, and the role of art not as an enforcer of official history (ies), but as a tool to tell the truth. His imaginary "Mevungu" sacred and safe space, where ordinary and powerless Cameroonians can safely express their opinions and frustrations, is a typical demonstration of survival strategies that prop up in a totalitarian society where freedom of speech (or freedom after speech) is not guaranteed. This aligns with Lassiter (2000), who posited that African filmmakers also play the role of journalists and activists. By successfully reflecting the daily realities of ordinary Cameroonians, which are in sharp contrast to images relayed by the government propaganda machinery, Bekolo confirms Lassiter's claim, especially by lending his voice to the voiceless Cameroonians and Africans as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The analyses of selected Cameroonian filmmakers and their films developed in this article show how Cameroonian filmmakers have critically examined the past in order to understand the present and predict the future. The films discussed here also critically appraise the state's monopoly over collective history and memory, drawing attention to the fact that history is not only a science of the past but also of the present. From this perspective, it becomes imperative to contribute to a (re)writing of contemporary history, given the consequences that this is likely to have in the future. Cameroonian filmmakers have evidently understood the power of the camera in contributing to the (re) creation of the world, and the (re)writing of a history free of neocolonial agendas. This accounts for the deconstructionist approach of filmmakers analysed in

this paper, a cinema that reflects a generation of postcolonial citizens ready to examine their country's colonial archives, to determine how its legacy informs their government's neo-colonial ideology and practices, and to build new forms of progressive social idealizations.

Cameroonian cinema has also played an important role as a tool for social change. Through the prism of post-colonial discourse, the analysis of selected works by Alphonse Beni, Jean Marie Teno, Jean Pierre Bekolo and Basseck Ba Khobio has demonstrated that these filmmakers successfully employ several forms of militant cinema techniques and aesthetics to lend their voices to an oppressed Cameroonian and African society. While Teno's anti-documentary technique and Bekolo's concept of "Mevungu" are more overt in their deconstructionist agenda, others like Beni's "sly civility" and Ba Kobhio's "Subtle Deconstruction" are more veiled; more in the register of what James Scott calls "hidden transcripts". Hidden transcripts here refer to codified stylistic and narrative techniques constructed by oppressed groups as they speak against the injustice of repressive apparatuses or power structures, a means to protest against hegemonic forces while evading their surveillance. As a substitute for the human eye, the camera reveals the powerful combination of imagination and the kind of magic recognized in the public sphere. And, embodied within the context of the Cameroonian culture, the camera becomes a powerful witness, establishing a visual model for resistance. Cameroonian cinema, as a communicative enclave, has thus effectively rebelled against the brutal state-sanctioned public sphere as well as the guardians of government-approved national history and their lobotomizing propaganda.

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“Can We Allow Ourselves to Make Films?”:

Rethinking Production Norms through the Lens of Migration

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This article examines the challenges filmmakers face when producing first-person films about migration within the European film industry, which includes films in which the director is simultaneously a subject in and of the film. Although such films have proliferated in recent years, little is known about the directors’ positionality or the production processes behind these works. Drawing on interviews with filmmakers who have navigated the European film industry to share personal and often intimate perspectives on post-migration life in Europe, the article examines the key challenges they encounter in the production process and the tactics they turned to in the negotiation of these barriers. What do their lived experiences reveal about the inclusivity and accessibility of the European film industry? Taking the collective dimension of film production, what role can interpersonal relationships play in mitigating these challenges and barriers as they emerge? The article emphasizes the need to recognize the directors’ vulnerable positionality with respect to migration as well as the importance of considering the specificity of the needs that emerge from it in order to be able to establish a thriving collaboration based on trust. It also urges for more institutional responsibility towards the structural improvement of the position of migrant filmmakers in the European film industry, and for a critical reassessment of crediting and copyright norms in the context of first-person filmmaking.

Keywords
Production Ethics
Migration
European Film Industry
First-Person Cinema
Qualitative Interviews
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INTRODUCTION

Focusing on the European film industry, this article examines the challenges and barriers filmmakers face in the process of making first-person films about migration, which entails films in which the director is simultaneously a subject in and of the film.[1] Migration is a key contextual element here, as I am interested in how filmmakers who are novel to the European film industry navigate its standards and norms with the aim to voice their personal, and often intimate, perspectives on life in Europe in the aftermath of migration. Based on interviews with several directors of first-person films, the article examines the key challenges that arise during their production processes and the tactics the directors turn to navigate these obstacles. What kind of insights can their lived experiences reveal about the inclusivity and accessibility of the European film industry? Taking the collective dimension of film production, what role can interpersonal relationships play in mitigating these challenges and barriers as they emerge?

1 I borrow the notion of ‘first-person cinema’ from Alisa Lebow (2012) to describe films that are not merely autobiographical but that explore broader political or social issues from a personal perspective.

To answer these questions, it is necessary to shift attention from film as a cultural product to film as a cultural process and practice, the examination of which can bring insight into filmmakers' lived experiences, the actual conditions of film production, as well as their institutional contexts (Andersson and Sundholm 2019; Hammett-Jamart, Mitric and Redvall 2019; Beeston and Solomon 2023; Almenara-Niebla and Smets 2024). In particular, studying the challenges and barriers in a film's production process, and the filmmakers' negotiation of them, can be an ideal site for examining how collaborations, institutions, and policies shape the filmmaking process. Moreover, focusing on the productions within the European film industry from the perspective of migration has the potential to reveal how "power operates locally through media production to reproduce social hierarchies and inequalities at the level of daily interactions" (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell 2009, 15). Therefore, even the most personal and intimate forms of filmmaking, as indeed first-person films often are, can be conceptualized as *braided*—shaped by collective processes and practices for better or worse (Sanders and Nash 2019).

The research for this article comprises an explorative qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with four directors concerning their lived experiences of producing first-person films about migration in Europe. I interviewed Kivu Ruhorahoza on the production of *Europa, "Based on a True Story"* (2019), Diana El Jeiroudi on the production of *The Republic of Silence* (2021), and Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez Fernández on the production of *In a Whisper* (2019). The countries of origin of the interviewed filmmakers vary—spanning Rwanda, Syria, and Cuba—as do their motivations to migrate, countries of residence, filmmaking experience, and the collaborations they have established in the film industry. Yet what connects these filmmakers is that upon migration to Europe they have all had to navigate the complexity of its film industry in order to produce their films, with the films' production countries including United Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany, France, and Spain. The lead producer of Europa was Antonio Rui Ribeiro (Moon Road Films, UK), with whom Ruhorahoza has a long-standing working relationship as both producer and editor. *Republic of Silence* was produced by Orwa Nyrabia (No Nation Films, Germany), El Jeiroudi's partner with whom she has worked closely on all her films. Unlike *Europa* and *Republic of Silence*, which were developed through long-standing director-producer partnerships, *In a Whisper* was realised by Hassan and Pérez Fernández with a newly formed team led by producer Daniel Froiz (Matriuska Films, Spain) [Table 1].

FILM	DIRECTOR	COUNTRIES OF PRODUCTION	LEAD PRODUCER
***Europa, "Based on a True Story"* (2019)**	**Kivu Ruhorahoza**	**Rwanda, United Kingdom, Switzerland**	**Antonio Rui Ribeiro**
***Republic of Silence* (2021)**	**Diana El Jeiroudi**	**Syria, Germany, France, Italy, Qatar**	**Orwa Nyrabia**
***In a Whisper* (2019)**	**Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez Fernández**	**Cuba, Spain, France, Switzerland**	**Daniel Froiz**

Table 1: Overview of relevant information regarding the (co-)production of selected films.

An important common element in the production of all three films is that they were realised through co-production arrangements and as such involve intercultural collaborations between people and institutions from different European countries and beyond. As Hammett-Jamart, Mitric and Redvall (2019, 6) aptly argue, there are many manners in which co-productions can be initiated and enacted, "from mutual decision-making about all creative aspects of the project to more pragmatic co-financing arrangements". Indeed, understanding the specific manner of *how* (co-)productions are negotiated interpersonally—from navigating its administrative aspects to establishing working collaborations more generally—and what the effects of those decisions are, is a key focal point of this article.

The interviews with the directors on their lived experiences navigating the European film industry to produce first-person films about migration were conducted with the aim to achieve "new insights into otherwise opaque industrial processes" (Banks et al. 2015, xi). My main interest in each of the interviews has been to understand how migration might have affected the films' production process and the collaborations that were essential to it, as well as what the directors' key tactics were in working through the challenges and barriers they encountered. These considerations open to the study of production ethics, which involves an examination of the ethically salient aspects of the labour involved in filmmaking (Aufderheide 2012; Nash 2012; Hjort 2022; Nannicelli 2022). The aims of studying the ethics of film production can be articulated in the following manner:

> *As a field, film production ethics takes seriously the task of identifying, clarifying, and strengthening the force of ethical norms as they relate to film production. What is at stake here is how living beings-women, children, animals, and specific professional groups (actresses, stunt persons)—but also, for example, the natural environment, are treated during the making of motion pictures. (Hjort 2022, 151–152)*

When it comes to the ethics of film production, the themes of *vulnerability* and *trust* emerge across the varied experiences of Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández, each of whom faced distinct challenges and barriers in this regard.

When ethical concerns arise in the production process, the question of *responsibility* follows, and I side with Nannicelli (2022, 182) that "filmmakers have certain moral responsibilities or duties (as well as constraints) that arise from their relationships with other agents". Taking that the production of first-person documentaries concerns director's own lived experiences, who often also features as a protagonist in the film, the relationship between a director and a producer who oversees the administrative, financial, and practical aspects of the production process deserves special attention, even though other relationships between the director and the crew members can also be of relevance. My aim is not to arrive at prescriptive solutions to the identified challenges and barriers

that can be universally applied to other production processes, but to examine them in the context of first-person filmmaking about migration, and, on the basis of the conducted interviews, identify potential 'good how to approach concerns regarding vulnerability and trust in film production. It is important to highlight that this article's research only includes the director's perspective, and not those of the producer or other collaborators, which would be a productive avenue to explore in further research. In addition, while the select interview corpus won't allow me to make any generalisations regarding the position of migrant filmmakers in Europe, their varied positionalities and experiences can help in rethinking production norms through the lens of migration.

The interviews with Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández were conducted between February 2022 and December 2023.[2] The interpretations of transcribed interviews were sent to all of them for feedback and consent. Drawing on the interviews, the first section elaborates on the directors' lived experiences of production-related challenges, and discusses the importance of acknowledging the different forms of migration-related vulnerability and their impact on the production process. Building on this, the second section examines how the directors' migration-related vulnerability shapes their specific needs in establishing trust with collaborators, with a particular focus on the director-producer relationship.The interviews also highlight the need for greater institutional responsibility in improving the structural position of migrant filmmakers within the European film industry, as well as a re-examination of standards and norms regarding credit and copyright in first-person filmmaking more broadly.

While this research contributes to a long tradition of studying migrant, transnational and intercultural film practices (Marks 2000; Naficy 2001; Iordanova, Martin-Jones and Vidal 2010; Ponzanesi and Waller 2012), it can also be considered explorative in the following ways. First, migration and the position of migrant filmmakers in the film industry are understudied topics in production studies, with some notable exceptions (Grassilli 2008; Frimberger and Bishopp 2020; Hughes 2021). Second, key studies in production ethics tend to focus on the director's responsibility towards the film's protagonist (Sanders 2010; Nash 2011; Alamouti 2020; Hjort 2022), but not on the relationship between the director and the producer in the context of first-person filmmaking. This articles responds to the identified research gaps by deepening the understanding of the ethically salient aspects of collaborations on first-person documentary production in Europe to which migration is central.

2 I received an ethics approval to conduct the interviews by the Ethics Committee Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam in June 2021.

MIGRATION AND VULNERABILITY

Understanding the vulnerability of subjects involved in the production process is key to the prevention of harm (Hjort 2022; Nannicelli 2022). In the case of first-person filmmaking, it is the director's own vulnerable positionality that needs to be addressed. In such cases, the elimination of risk and prevention of harm become complex issues, as this section aims to show. Following Judith Butler (2021), I understand vulnerability as a feature of one's relational existence rather than a subjective state, and precarity in terms of the level of support afforded by that relationality. In the context of production ethics, Hjort (2022, 153) has given the examples of "age, lack of experience, gender, and the absence of institutionalised and properly enforced protections" as potential factors for the subjects' vulnerability. Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández reflected on the specific vulnerabilities of their situations at the time of the films' making. Each of the directors identified different factors that made the production process challenging, such as concerns about the inclusivity of funding infrastructures for migrant filmmakers in Europe, the unpredictability of the production process due to migration, and the lack of accessibility of European film industry for those novel to it. This section details the directors' negotiation of these barriers and the co-production arrangements they established, which range from *non-official* to *official* co-productions (Hammett-Jamart 2019, 48–50). The former denotes "a set-up where content producers from two or more countries decide to collaborate, independently of government, each bringing financial and creative resources to the project" and the latter describes a "very specific form of international co-production which occurs under the auspices of a bilateral agreement between governments".

Inclusivity of funding infrastructures

Not being eligible to receive public funding due to his migrant status was a key challenge for Ruhorahoza when trying to find the means to produce *Europa*. The film is a documentary-fiction hybrid in which Ruhorahoza's own experience of exclusion in Britain frames a fictional story of illegalisation and deportation of a Nigerian migrant in London. The project started in 2016 as featuring only the fictional story, its production coinciding with Britain's vote to exit the European Union. This development led Ruhorahoza to expand the frame of the film to the reality he was living in, which involved increasingly more criminalisation and ostracism of migrants in Britain. He describes this period of living and working in Britain as imbued with a "sense of dread", in part because of his own insecure migrant status. At the time, Ruhorahoza was based in London as a freelance filmmaker, and the infrastructures he could rely on were scarce, if not non-existent. This led him to fund the film entirely from personal finances, rather than any filmmaking grants. "I am not eligible for any European funds that are designed, conceived, and intended for European filmmakers. There are

some funds for African filmmakers, but that's another topic. I was not eligible for anything".[3] Rather than leading Ruhorahoza to abandon the project because of the precarity of its production, the experience of being excluded from the funding infrastructures of the European film industry prompted him to find alternative means to realise his vision. Ruhorahoza describes the process of producing Europa as one of "hustling":

> *Negotiating deals, using my previous work to convince collaborators, collaborators convincing other people in their network that this film should get made, renting equipment at severely reduced prices while making sure everybody has insurance, shooting at the time when the industry is a bit dormant, like in winter, when things tend to get much cheaper and technicians are available.*

While Ruhorahoza was not able to rely on the official funding infrastructures in the United Kingdom, where the film's production took place, together with his long-term producer and editor Antonio Ribeiro, who is a Portuguese filmmaker based in England, he managed to find alternative means to realise *Europa*. Rather than receiving any English national funding for the film, *Europa* was largely funded through Ruhorahoza's personal investments and those of his collaborators, making the non-official co-production between Ruhorahoza and his collaborators in England and Switzerland based on the collective belief in the film's creative potential rather than financial benefit.

Unpredictability of migration

The unpredictability of her own situation and that of her protagonists was the main challenge for El Jeiroudi during the twelve-year long production of *Republic of Silence*. The film is a mosaic of different moments in El Jeiroudi's life, but also in the lives of her family and friends, tracing their interdependence in the face of the 2011–2024 conflict in Syria. After the escalation of the Syrian revolution into an armed conflict, El Jeiroudi relocated to Egypt in 2012 together with her long-term partner and producer Orwa Nyrabia, where the two were able to temporarily continue working on *Republic of Silence*, as well as other films they engaged in as producers. "At one point in 2012," El Jeiroudi explains, "we had two offices in Damascus: one hideout office, an underground office where we did a lot of operations, and our usual office, which was a facade, a legal thing. And then we had another office in Egypt." However, after a coup d'état took place in Egypt in 2013, their operations were immediately shut down, their company closed and bank accounts frozen, which led El Jeiroudi and Nyrabia to

3 With funds specifically intended for African filmmakers, Ruhorahoza refers to grants that would require him to produce the film in Africa, while *Europa* was intended to be set in Europe. This is a common requirement of European and American funds aiming to support non-Western filmmakers, to produce the film in one's country of origin.

move to Germany. The project, El Jeiroudi reflects, was very vulnerable to the unpredictability of their situation:

> *I was very frustrated with the film because it was slipping away from my fingers. Nothing was happening as I planned or as I envisioned. I was changing as a filmmaker, and my characters were changing, they were changing places and thoughts. It was intense. We were all the time in the state of moving. We could only create a set-up that is more productive after a year or two of moving to Germany, because we also needed the time to navigate a new system of production and all of its logistics.*

Rather than resist these disruptions, El Jeiroudi embraced them as part of the film's evolving form, thereby adapting the production process to the unpredictability of migration. This openness to change was sustained not only by her creative resilience but also by her partnership with Nyrabia. El Jeiroudi and Nyrabia closely worked together to establish pragmatic financing arrangements that can support the film's creative process, with *Republic of Silence* being realised through German national funding. It was officially co-produced between Germany and France, with additional finances from Italy and Qatar.

Accessibility of film industry

The struggle to gain access to the European film industry was the biggest challenge for Hassan and Pérez Fernández, whose film *In a Whisper* intimately explored their own experience of belonging in Europe through the prism of their friendship. While Hassan and Pérez Fernández had previous filmmaking experience, trying to get their first feature off the ground in the aftermath of migrating from Cuba to Switzerland and Spain respectively was a trying and lengthy operation:

> *It was the first time we were making a film in Europe following the 'official' rules. Everything we did before was more underground. The production of the film was a very long process and most of the time was dedicated to the finding of the funding. We spent four years trying to find ways to develop the film in a way that it could be funded as a European co-production. A lot of producers showed interest, but in the end they would always think that the project was too weak or fragile to invest in it.*

Eventually, Hassan and Pérez Fernández managed to establish a co-production team with Spain as the main producer, and Switzerland, France, and Cuba as co-producers, which allowed the project to get off the ground. While the team "really believed in the project and in the story we wanted to tell," the directors found the newly established relationships challenging to navigate, which led them to reflect on the importance of carefully choosing collaborators:

> *Co-production is something that requires some kind of casting, in which you not only choose the producer based on financial aspects of their involvement, but also on the basis of their personality and the relationship you have established. We started a professional relationship that lasted five years with people that we only met once. For us, these were the first people that got interested in the project, which felt amazing after years of struggling to achieve funding, but the decision to work together is more complex than that.*

Difficulty in gaining access to the European film industry thereby led the directors to establish a co-production team without understanding all of the implications of that decision, which continued being a challenge during the long production process. In contrast to Ruhorahoza and El Jeiroudi, for whom the established co-production arrangements helped overcome the vulnerability of their respective situations, Hassan and Pérez Fernández reflect that despite managing to establish an official co-production team between Spain and France, with additional financial support from Cuba and Switzerland—all of which was financially necessary to realise *In a Whisper*. The relationship, however, lacked a personal and creative dimension comparable to Ruhorahoza's and El Jeiroudi's production teams, which in turn negatively impacted the production process.

Sharing vulnerability

As the interviews revealed, the vulnerabilities that were identified as key for the films' production led to different challenges and barriers in the production process. Some of these vulnerabilities were of institutional nature, such as the concerns regarding the inclusivity of film funding infrastructures in Europe and the accessibility of the European film industry, while others were of more personal nature, such as the unpredictability of life in the aftermath of migration. Despite these differences, what the conversations with Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández suggest is that migration—and the specificities of the directors' migrant status in Europe—can result in administrative, practical, and professional challenges that can significantly shape the production process but also the form of the films.

What proves crucial for understanding the specific form that vulnerability takes and the obstacles it may create in the production process is not whether the co-production was official or unofficial, but the nature of the director-producer relationship and their shared awareness of the nature of that vulnerability. Learning from these stories, such shared understanding and ability to develop a close working relationship based on it, emerges as pivotal for the production process. In the context of migration and first-person filmmaking, which can bring a specific set of administrative, practical, and professional challenges, having an *acknowledgement of vulnerability* as 'good practice' is relevant not only regarding the producer's ability to support the director and create a thriving production process, but also with respect to their own liability for the

project with respect to investors and financiers. The nature of the interpersonal and intercultural director-producer relationships will be further elaborated in the following section.

COLLABORATION AND TRUST

The decision to collaborate is a complex one, with trust being a key dimension of thriving collaborations. "Placing trust", Kate Nash (2010, 28) argues, "involves risk and makes us vulnerable". Such an understanding of trust stresses its inseparability from risk and vulnerability. How is trust between directors and producers established and maintained in the process of working on first-person films to which migration is central? Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez emphasise that navigating the personal and professional dimensions of the director-producer relationship—and collaborations more broadly—is key to a project's success, each of them highlighting different values they find essential to building trust, such as transparency, interdependence, protection, guidance, and fairness.

Transparency

The trust underlying Ruhorahoza's collaborations appears to be based on transparency about each other's positionality and a willingness to collaborate despite the risks that their vulnerable positions carry. Regarding his team of collaborators, Ruhorahoza stresses the importance of working with Antonio Rui Ribeiro (producer; editor) and MaryEllen Higgins (executive producer). Ruhorahoza's relationship with Ribeiro is long-standing, and the two have collaborated on several of Ruhorahoza's previous films. They met in 2010 when Ribeiro joined Ruhorahoza during the editing phase of his first feature film, *Grey Matter*: "Our collaboration on that film as an editor quickly turned into a discussion about many other things—about alliance, friendship, commitment to film, et cetera. From then on, everything major that I worked on or that he worked on became a professional conversation between the two of us." Ruhorahoza elaborates on the mutual trust on which their personal and professional relationship is based:

> *Antonio grew up in Portugal in times of dictatorship, when his mother wanted them to migrate to Britain, which couldn't happen at the time. He moved to England as an adult, founded a theatre, and was working with artists from Palestine, Indonesia, and Zimbabwe, among others. Because of these things he was exposed to, there are things he understood much faster. Despite the constraints and threats that the project faced, it was a risk he was willing to take. He understood that it won't be an easy ride, like it can sometimes be when you're working with a well-funded British director. It's really that kind of complete conversation at all levels with the producer that can make it possible for things to happen.*

A key factor in establishing a long-standing relationship based on trust between Ruhorahoza and Ribeiro was their similar positionality in Britain. This allowed them to be transparent about the possibilities and limitations of their situations, enabling them to navigate the project's financial vulnerabilities together.

Interdependence

While the process of producing *Republic of Silence* involved different vulnerabilities than Europa, the ability to establish trust among diverse collaborators was vital for El Jeiroudi, with interdependence among collaborators being a key value in this regard. Upon moving to Germany, she describes the hardest part of navigating the German film industry as its "compartmentalised culture", a way of working informed by the understanding that things, people, and processes occur independently of each other. In contrast to what she experienced as an excessive emphasis on independence, interdependence informs her practice—a way of working that embraces relationality between things, people, and processes. Interdependence is key for El Jeiroudi both in production and directing: she stresses the numerous relationships that supported the project during the unpredictable years in which it was made, viewing *Republic of Silence* first and foremost as a collaboration between her, Orwa Nyrabia (producer; cinematographer; protagonist), Guevara Namer (cinematographer; protagonist), and Rami Abou Jamra (protagonist):

> *Personal films are very delicate. The fact that I made films before, and that I'm working with other filmmakers as a producer and mentor, helped me to realise that there are certain problems I will face. I knew that this is a personal film, I'm only doing it once, and it's difficult. Not only is it personal film, but I'm filming people who are very close to me and who are also filmmakers. The good thing, in my case, is that those are friends and people I care about, with whom I had worked before. It was a partnership. It was very important to clarify with everyone what their proportion of work will be or how their work will be portrayed vis-à-vis other contributors. It was important that each and everyone's contribution is credited and agreed on.*

In this way, by developing a large team of collaborators with whom trust was mutually assured through a shared sense of interdependence, El Jeiroudi managed to work through the vulnerabilities of the unpredictable production process.

Guidance, protection, and fairness

Taking that *In a Whisper* was their first feature film, as well as that co-production was a novel form of collaboration to the directors, Hassan and Pérez

Fernández identified guidance and protection as values that were necessary to create a thriving collaboration. These were, however, hard to realise in a newly established team:

> *The relationships were a bit blurry and we didn't have the experience to know how to navigate it. These relationships turned out to be a lot more important than what we could understand at the moment of establishing a co-production team. It's important to note that everyone was in different countries and that the communication was online and in English, while not everyone had a very good command of English, which easily led to misunderstanding.*

While the co-production team gave Hassan and Pérez Fernández creative freedom, the two emphasise that they would have approached the process of co-production differently if they had more experience in the European film industry. "It's really important to have a good personal and professional relationship with everyone in your team", they explain, "not only because these processes tend to be very long, but because, in this type of a project, you are also exposing yourself, and you need the producer to also be some kind of protector". Therefore, a collaboration and co-production primarily motivated by a financing arrangement officially led by a producer with the biggest financial contribution, who in this case was Daniel Froiz, did not meet Hassan's and Pérez Fernández's needs.

A major disagreement between Hassan and Pérez Fernández and their co-production team occurred with respect to the fair provision of credit and copyright. When it comes to co-production, an important consideration concerns the negotiation of credit, with the "recognition of one's name in connection with the role being portrayed is universally seen by performers as an essential element in developing and sustaining a professional career" (Sand 2013, 24). Provision of credit can also be of importance when it comes to the question of copyright, which is automatically granted to the director as the creator of the film, but can be transferred from the director to the producer via a license or assignment of rights, the former being a transfer of rights for a limited amount of time, and the latter involving a full transfer of ownership (Moullier 2022). Transfer of copyright involves the transfer of economic rights against a certain remuneration and/or negotiation of a revenue share. Contracts are considered as key to the efficient transfer of rights, and should stipulate which rights are being given away and which are retained (Sand 2013).

For Hassan and Pérez Fernández, who acted as the film's producers over many years before an official co-production team was established, it was a source of disappointment that this work was not reflected in the provision of credit: "In terms of work done, we also acted as producers, but we never defended that work in terms of credits". Not having a producer credit meant that the copyright to the archival footage of their own lives had to be transferred to the producer, with the initial contract about the transfer of rights stipulating the 'non-compete clause' that prevents filmmakers to reuse the footage intended

for the film in case. The two, however, managed to negotiate otherwise, arguing that the standard 'non-compete clause' needs to be rethought with regards to the autobiographical nature of the footage: "Because of the specifics of the project, its first-person form, we were able to negotiate the ability to reuse the material in our future work. It was too absurd not to have access to the archive of your own life." While the two managed to negotiate the copyright license to ensure access to their own personal archives, negotiating economic rights to the film was more difficult:

> *We hold 7.5% each of* In a Whisper *'s revenue, which was in itself hard to achieve. This means that in most case, when the film is awarded with a prize, each of us gets only 7.5% of that award. There are only select festivals that insist for the prize to be shared between the directors and producers. To avoid such situations after* In a Whisper*, we have decided to create our own production company, so that we can be legally recognised for the work we do, protect our own archival material, and impact the production design of the project. Since we created our own production company, we are in a slightly more comfortable situation, because now we negotiate economic rights as part of the production company's profits, which we try to make at least 20%.*

These difficulties, as Hassan and Pérez Fernández explain, led them to change their approach in their subsequent projects by together establishing a production company, so as to ensure a fair credit provision and in turn also more negotiating power regarding the sharing of the revenue.

Aligning values

In previous qualitative research in production ethics focusing on the director-protagonist relationships, "trust has been found to rely on mutual vulnerability in the relationship and a shared sense of the documentary project as a valuable goal" (Nash 2011, 10), which suggests a need for a relational approach to power, rather than its understanding in terms of the director's power over the subject. Based on the cases discussed here, I would argue that a comparable observation holds for the director-producer relationships when it comes to first-person filmmaking, in particular in vulnerable contexts as the ones created by migration. What the conversations with Ruhorahoza, El Jeiroudi, and Hassan and Pérez Fernández reveal is how trust is relationally negotiated between the director and the producer, but also other collaborators. Rather than there being one way to establish trust among the collaborators, all of the directors identified different values that they considered key for building trust, which speaks to the diversity of needs that different vulnerable positions might require. Transparency, interdependence, guidance, protection, and fairness were values that needed to be negotiated within the respective collaborations, with the ability to establish trust having the potential to aid the director in

navigating the vulnerabilities of migration.

One potential factor that speaks to the differences among the identified values could be the extent of both the director's and the producer's filmmaking experience, with the contingency becoming greater with a smaller body of experience. For example, Ruhorahoza and El Jeiroudi, who had considerable experience as filmmakers at the time,[4] consider transparency and interdependence as key, while Hassan and Pérez Fernández, for whom the projects at stake were their first features, consider guidance and protection important. If the collaboration is established without not only an acknowledgement of vulnerability but also a *consideration of needs* that arise from a vulnerable position, the outcome could be not the mitigation but exacerbation of precarity.

Moreover, Hassan's and Pérez Fernández's critique of norms regarding the provision of credit and copyright concerns the implications of the division of labour in first-person filmmaking. As first-person filmmaking concerns the director's own life, some of the typical production tasks, such as the development of the project and managing of day-to-day operations, tend to be performed by the director, sometimes even before the producer joins the project, as is the case with films built on already existing personal archives. Among the first-person films discussed here, it was only El Jeiroudi who shared the producer credit, while Ruhorahoza co-produced his subsequent film *Father's Day* (2022), and Hassan and Pérez Fernández aim to co-produce their films in the future. While directors can negotiate arrangements in which they have a co-producer credit, it is still not a standard practice in first-person filmmaking to do so. One of the reasons for this is that a provision of producer credit has implications for copyright and economic rights, as those are shared among the co-producers. What the filmmakers here question is the normalisation of transferring the copyright to the archive of one's own life, including occasionally the complete transfer of economic rights. Learning from their stories, the negotiation of labour division in first-person filmmaking, and the implications that carry for provision of credit and copyrights, should become a more standardised practice in the production of first-person films.

CONCLUSION

"Can we allow ourselves to make films?", Ruhorahoza rhetorically asked at the end of our conversation. This appears as a key question when it comes to understanding the relationship between migration and the European film industry. How to position oneself in the environment that is not set up with your positionality in mind? To *allow* oneself to do something implies the process of not only negotiating the external challenges one faces in such an

4 While *Republic of Silence* was El Jeiroudi's first feature as a director, she already had ample experience as a producer.

environment but also a state of internal friction, a question of whether one is permitted to make space for one's own story. The process of navigating the European film industry to tell one's story of migration requires an extensive negotiation not only of a flawed filmmaking infrastructure but also of internalised doubts.

On the basis of interviews with Kivu Ruhorahoza (Europa, "*Based on a True Story*", 2019), Diana El Jeiroudi (*Republic of Silence*, 2021), and Heidi Hassan and Patricia Pérez Fernández (*In a Whisper*, 2019), this article examined how vulnerability and trust are relationally negotiated among the collaborations that were vital to the realisation of the films at stake. When it comes to production ethics, the interviews highlight the importance of acknowledging the directors' vulnerable positionality with respect to migration as well as considering the specificity of the needs that emerge from it in order to be able to establish a thriving collaboration based on trust.

Additionally, the particular situations discussed here also challenge institutional culture in terms of "accepted ways of treating persons within a given hierarchical structure" (Hjort 2022, 165) by calling for more institutional responsibility: they ask whether additional forms of institutional support could be made available to guide and protect the directors and producers who find themselves navigating equivalent or similar challenges to the ones identified here. In addition, in the cases that question the inclusivity and accessibility of the European film industry, there is a need to structurally improve the position of migrant filmmakers in this regard. Moreover, as the concerns regarding the provision of credit and copyright point, the blueprints for collaborating on first-person films should be structurally re-examined.

Furthermore, while the interviews reveal the intricacies of the process of expressing first-person voices, it is worth pointing out that most of these voices—all but Ruhorahoza's—constitute the filmmakers' first feature. The question then emerges whether the making of one's second feature would be easier to navigate. In other words, what are the possibilities for continuing one's work as a filmmaker in Europe after a director's first steps into the European film industry? A recent report, which was specifically focused on Arab filmmakers working in and outside of Europe, shows significant challenges for filmmakers wanting to transition from first to second and third feature (DOX BOX 2018). The number of programmes supporting experienced filmmakers in the development and funding process, as argued in the report, is significantly smaller in comparison to the available support for inexperienced filmmakers. This in turn reveals not only the necessity of better support for migrant filmmakers upon their transition to working in the European film industry, but also the need of nurturing their artistic contribution in the long term. A welcome initiative in this direction has been the recently established Displacement Film Fund, which was launched in 2025 with the support of organizations including the UNHCR and the Hubert Bals Fund, with the aim to support both emerging and established filmmakers who are displaced themselves or focus on stories of displacement.

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Deconstructing Paperlessness:

Documentary, Mise-en-scene and Participation in Feminist and Decolonial Film Practices; the Case Study of LALA

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This paper critically examines LALA, a hybrid documentary-fiction film rooted in feminist, decolonial, and participatory filmmaking practices. Using an autoethnographic lens, the project reflects on the ethical and creative challenges of representing "paperlessness" —a condition of legal and symbolic invisibility experienced by second-generation Roma youth in Italy. Drawing on bell hooks' concept of the "politics of location," the work situates personal and collective trauma as sites of cultural critique and transformation. The film's participatory development, including workshops inspired by Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire, and Pina Bausch, fostered co-creation and embodied storytelling with marginalised teenagers. This paper explores how fiction, performance, and lived experience interweave to disrupt dominant narratives and reclaim agency for those rendered invisible by state structures. LALA thus emerges not only as a film but as a political and reparative process—one that reimagines representation through vulnerability, collaboration, and intersectional resistance.

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"As a radical standpoint, perspective, position, 'the politics of location' necessarily calls those of us who would like to participate in the formation of a counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision" writes bell hooks in her famous article "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness" (hooks 2015, 15). bell hooks, an extraordinarily radical thinker, who sadly passed away in her home in Kentucky after a very rich life of uninterrupted critical production, left an unforgettable legacy in the field of feminist, postcolonial critical theory. Her work enacted forms of theory and practice that push against the oppressive boundaries set by race, gender and class domination and shifting realms of power relations. Her work was never impersonal, but was always triggered by very intimate questions, such as "choice" and "location". In so doing, bell hooks reimagined the field of cultural practice as a space for new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts.

Drawing on bell hooks's concept of the "politics of location"—choosing the margin as a space of radical openness—I position myself both as filmmaker and scholar, committed to autoethnographic self-reflection and the co-creation of counter-hegemonic narratives (hooks, 2015). My ten year journey around the film

Lala begins here: confronting "paperlessness" not only as a bureaucratic void, but as a site of trauma, invisibility, and potential transformation. This paper inscribes my filmmaking process in feminist and decolonial film traditions, expanding on autoethnography's dual aim of personal storying and cultural critique (Ellis et al., 2015). By weaving reflexivity into both methodology and practice, I aim to challenge dominant modes of representation and to reclaim critical identity-making from the margins.

In bell hooks' text, the work of reflecting on language as a "place of struggle", as an examination of one's own response to existing cultural practices as well as on one's own creative acts that generate change, requires critical thinkers to face their own pain, to undertake a difficult exploration of "silences", "unaddressed places" connected to "personal emotional upheaval regarding place, identity, desire" (hooks 2015, 18). hooks invites her readers to face their own 'brokenness' without simple reconciliation or facile self-renewals. A simple reconciliation would have been just another way to use the language of the 'oppressor', to surrender the erasure of the conflict. In hooks' opinion, the work of critical theory requires the acceptance and inclusion of multiple voices—our multiple voices, other people's multiple voices. hooks emphasises here this position even more in her critique of mainstream feminist discourses, hlighting the limitations imposed by dominant narratives, particularly those overlooking the complexities of intersectionality. In her work, hooks advocates for a "pedagogy of resistance", seeking to empower marginalized voices and fostering collective action against oppressive systems (D'Antone & Bianchi 2022).

My role in the making of *Lala* merges that of director, co-author, and former co-researcher, embodying a deeply embedded and reflexive approach to storytelling that resonates strongly with hooks' call for engagement with multiple, intersecting voices and the difficult work of reflection. At the heart of the project lies autoethnography—both a methodological and ethical stance that anchors the film in personal and collective histories. This approach requires intimate engagement with my own positionality, memories, and emotions, alongside a critical examination of the broader cultural and social forces shaping these experiences. In *Lala*, this is reflected through my personal reflections on my grandmother's exile, whose legacy of displacement and trauma resonates throughout the film, foregrounding generational trauma and ongoing marginalisation. Despite the profound differences between the character of *Lala* and the person who inspired her, Zaga, this shared trauma becomes central to the meaning of my involvement in the project.

The narrative's complexity is heightened by the real-life disappearance and eventual return of Zaga, a young Roma woman confronted with her own systemic invisibility in society and forced by her life's circumstances to run away from the country that was rejecting her. This fragile reality deepened my ethical responsibility to represent her story with care. In her absence, fictionalisation became not a distancing tool but an ethical narrative strategy—respecting the limits of representation while fostering co-creation and shared authorship with participants. This collaboration ensured the film remained rooted in the lived realities of Roma, migrant, and Italian youth, moving beyond reductive portrayals

to honor the depth of their embodied experiences, and it unexpectedly gave me the space to also explore a personal dimension of this trauma.

This approach closely aligns with bell hooks's concept of the 'politics of location', which calls for critical reflection on where and how we speak—not as detached observers but as situated, embodied subjects (hooks 2015). Taken by surprise by the process itself, I found myself in a position of ongoing reflection and emotional processing. As the filmmaker, I was here not a passive witness but an active participant in meaning-making, embodying hooks's insistence that theory and practice emerge from vulnerability and political accountability, with personal narratives serving as sites of cultural critique and resistance.

The participatory workshops I facilitated as part of the ways to respond to Zaga's absence and open up the process to other young Roma participants, drew inspiration from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 2020), and Pina Bausch's Tanztheater. These methods encouraged participants to somatise and express unspoken anxieties, traumas, and desires through embodied performance. These "shock-wave" moments of collective expression catalysed script development and anchored the film in authentic, lived experience, enabling the visceral communication of complex dynamics of marginalization and invisibility. Drawing on Boal's Forum Theatre (Boal & McBride, 2020), and Brechtian techniques that break the 'fourth wall', the edited film deliberately created moments of narrative and emotional displacement, by drawing from the immediacy and the unexpected experienced during the workshops. This disruption mirrored the disorientation felt by those navigating the bureaucratic labyrinths of citizenship. For the audience, these strategies exposed the mechanisms of the "othering gaze" (Bhabha, 1994), while for participants to the film process, they worked to reclaim a visibility often denied by dominant societal narratives. Central to this process was the use of performance as a method to challenge self-censorship and to foster vulnerable, genuine expression. By inviting the audience into a space of critical engagement, the film challenged passive spectatorship and encouraged reflection on the power dynamics embedded in representation itself. The construction of identity as "psychic, sexual, and social" (de Lauretis, 1987) further underscored the impossibility of assimilation under systemic oppression, instead embracing fragmentation and multiplicity as conditions of subjecthood. This approach aligns with feminist and decolonial filmmaking practices developed since the 1970s, which insist on representation as a political act and call for inclusive, relational authorship. Beyond the performance space, the implications extend to wider cultural and political discourse, calling attention to how marginalized voices can reclaim narrative agency and disrupt dominant paradigms.

In sum, the integration of Boal's, Brecht's, and Bausch's methodologies within this participatory framework allowed for a dismantling of traditional narrative structures. This approaches fostered a filmic and performative space where both participants and audiences could engage more deeply with the complexities of identity, migration, and citizenship—ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and resistant cultural imagination.

As bell hooks emphasizes, theory must arise from personal struggle and remain accountable to collective histories of pain, resilience, and resistance and must remain anchored in corporeality. This ethos deeply informed the autoethnographic approach, which balanced self-reflection with cultural critique, weaving personal stories into multi-voiced narratives that illuminate the intricate social and cultural forces shaping experience (Ellis et al., 2015). Autoethnography as a reflexive practice compelled me to confront my positionality, biases, and power relations inherent in the project, disrupting traditional hierarchies between subject and object, observer and observed—embodying hooks's vision of counter-hegemonic cultural work that values multiplicity, inclusivity, and relationality towards the community I collaborated with. All of this was reflected both in the creation and the delivery of the project, reflecting on the multilayered approach at every step.

In sum, in *Lala* autoethnography functions not merely as a research method, but as a political and aesthetic strategy challenging dominant narratives of invisibility and exclusion. It opened space for marginalized voices to narrate their own experiences on their terms, while inviting both filmmaker and audience to engage critically and compassionately with the complex intersections of identity, trauma, and resistance.

With an awareness of the potential biases inherent in autoethnographic inquiry, I therefore set out to critically examine the decade-long process of making *Lala*—a film born from personal, ethical, and political imperatives. My aim is to explore whether the creative journey behind the film succeeded in confronting "paperlessness" as a condition of invisibility, trauma, and the systemic reproduction of marginality. Central to this process was the idea of filmmaking as an act of reparation—understood not simply as healing, but as an embodied "awareness of a wound" (Attia, 2018). Filming became a way of transforming displacement and erasure into recognition and voice, a commitment that remained at the heart of the project throughout its development.

This article takes *Lala* as its central case study. In the first section, I outline the theoretical trajectories that the film intersects—frameworks that emerged not from a predefined blueprint, but organically through the filmmaking process itself. I then trace the evolution of the project, highlighting the choices, constraints, shortcomings and discoveries that shaped its form. Finally, I offer reflections on the implications of this experience for decolonial and feminist film practice.

Approaching this analysis through a scholarly lens, I explore the conceptual frameworks *Lala* engages with. The film tells the story of a young Roma woman navigating a bureaucratic labyrinth that denies her legal recognition. Combining documentary techniques, archival material, and staged sequences, *Lala* investigates the legal and symbolic voids surrounding Italian citizenship for second-generation Roma youth. The decision to stage a fictional film within the documentary process became a catalyst for collective reflection among the teenage participants—an exploration of paperlessness as both a lived condition and systemic erasure.

How did I come to this film? How did this structure come to life? As the director of *Lala*, I believe it is essential to outline the creative journey and motivations behind the film's evolution. Many of our decisions emerged organically, shaped by

real-life circumstances. *Lala* draws on the lived experiences of second-generation Roma teenagers and young adults who have faced lifelong paperlessness. Although born and raised in Italy, many come from Balkan refugee families whose legal status remained unresolved for years—leaving these children marginalized despite their integration into public schools. At the film's center is *Lala*, a 17-year-old Roma single mother living in a squatted apartment in Tor Bella Monaca, Rome. With no legal documentation, she must secure her papers before her 18th birthday to avoid losing custody of her son, Toto. Set against the grey areas of Italian citizenship law, the story unfolds as *Lala* creates a new identity in a desperate bid to remain in Italy. Her narrative is mirrored by the experiences of Samantha, the non-professional actress portraying her, as well as Zaga, the young woman whose story initially inspired the project. The film is rooted in my own family history of exile and survival, particularly my paternal grandmother, who escaped war-torn Europe during WWII and carried a lifelong sense of paperlessness and invisibility. In 2012, driven by this personal connection, I began exploring the Roma camp where I met 17-year-old Zaga. Together we began filming a documentary recounting her struggle for recognition and rights—born and raised in Rome yet undocumented due to her parents' lack of refugee status from exile in Yugoslavia. Our collaboration was abruptly interrupted when Zaga disappeared just before turning 18, after exhausting every effort to secure her identity papers. Her sudden absence left me searching for months, and her story—the ongoing fight for dignity within a society that often treats Roma as second-class citizens—became the emotional and ethical foundation of *Lala*.

While French cinema offers numerous examples of films that deeply engage with community issues and themes—most notably the remarkable works of Tony Gatlif—Italian cinema has comparatively few films addressing these topics. Only a few films depicted the contemporary situation of young Roma people, caught between the world of their parents, that of their contemporaries and the contradictions of their sometimes quite complex bureaucratic framework. *Io Rom Romantica* (2013) is an intimate documentary by Italian filmmaker and Roma activist Laura Halilovic. It offers a rare, personal glimpse into the daily lives, struggles, and resilience of Roma women, challenging stereotypical portrayals by centering their voices and experiences with sensitivity and respect. The film highlights issues of identity, discrimination, and cultural pride within the Roma community. On the contrary, *A Ciambra* (2017), directed by Italian – American filmmaker Jonas Carpignano, is a gritty, coming-of-age drama set in a Romani community in Calabria, Italy. The film follows the teenage protagonist, Pio Amato, navigating life between his tight-knit community and the wider Italian society. Praised for its authentic casting and raw storytelling, *A Ciambra* explores themes of belonging, marginalization, and the complexities of growing up on the fringes of society.

How to realise this project I had in mind in an ethical way? How to do it in a way that also reflected the incredible lack of representation of the Roma community in Italian cinema, alongside a pressing need for a more universal perspective that addresses issues of citizenship—a struggle that, tragically, affects many migrant communities but manifests with particular severity within the Roma population?

Zaga was no longer available to give her consent or to tell her story in her own words. I chose to explore the story of a girl whose experiences closely mirrored Zaga's, creating a fictional narrative supported by other teenagers with similar backgrounds who could bring authenticity and truth to the project. I transformed what I had learned from Zaga into a film inspired by the stories she shared with me, believing this to be the most powerful way to convey the core truth at the heart of her fight for rights. The script was shaped by the personal experiences of the group, and over time we co-created the film's space, allowing it to evolve organically. Throughout the nine years since I began working with Zaga, I never stopped searching for her. Then, just as suddenly as she had disappeared, she reappeared—and now, by adding her own voice to this singular journey of life and truth-seeking, Zaga actively participates in the film inspired by her story.

Our shared experience evolved into a pursuit of collective truth—one that is at times intimate, at times painful, but always consciously communal and collective. Throughout the making of this film, I realized that this story of initiation against rejection needed to be told collaboratively—between me, Zaga, and everyone involved as protagonists—for it to truly become our shared narrative. We all carried a profound faith in life alongside a hunger felt deeply by those who see themselves as born by chance—the "survivors". The trauma of exile echoes across three generations, a legacy of history's wounds passed down like an unconscious ghost. This trauma, fueled by the unresolved suffering of those who came before us, manifests as a pervasive sense of rejection, even when the original cause remains unremembered.

As part of the development of the film, I organised a series of participatory training workshops with Roma, Italian and migrant teenagers which I mentioned before– all teenagers were invited to work physically and conceptually on the idea of the "unspoken". In that context I experimented with different methods—from the Forum methodology developed in Augusto Boal's (Boal 1995, 201) theatre investigation, to the pedagogy of the oppressed developed by Paulo Freire and the Tanztheater physical techniques developed by Pina Bausch, as previously described. Through these techniques we worked on the creation of a safe environment where people were encouraged to physically inhabit memories, feelings, stories that could be expressed through their body and voice. Within this mechanism, each participant felt inspired to express unspoken feelings, never addressed anxieties, unprocessed desires, which interacted with other participants' emotions. What happened was something like a shock wave, the encounter between particles charged with enormous energy[1], which fueled the imagination of the film and brought to light the real experiences of the participants and became the catalyst of script development. In the perspective of participatory writing the film is based on, this process led participants to make proposals that enriched the initial screenplay, the characters, the atmospheres, the emotional, relational and visual universe the film

1 Lala Project material written by Ludovica Fales, producer David Cej, acting coach Antonio Calone.

took place in, leading to several versions of the screenplay before the final one.

Augusto Boal's Forum Theater generally begins with a short performance, either rehearsed or improvised, which contains demonstrations of social or political problems. Forum Theater, one of the major techniques within Theatre of the Oppressed, allows spectators to collaborate in the experience by becoming "spectactors" (members of the audiences participating in the actual performance). Through a moderator and a group of actively engaged spectators, Forum Theatre embodies dialogues, exchanges, learning, teaching, and pleasure. At the conclusion, the play will begin again with the audience being able to replace or add to the characters on stage to present their interventions; alternate solutions to the problems faced.

During the rehearsals, we used this model for improvisations:

- Exploration of emotional states only with the body and without words (examples: dignity vs humiliation; challenge vs fearlessness; vulnerability vs fear etc...) first alone and then in couples
- Discussion about what other people saw in the improvisation / role exchange
- Writing about memories and present situations one can connect to improvisations / sharing
- Adding words to certain scenes that came out as connecting to people's personal experiences
- Identifying scenes of the film /building up characters
- Testing scenes from the script / rewriting
- Filming the process of bringing the character to life

During and after these rehearsals, participants were asked to document their experience and express their thoughts and feelings. Here there are some of the comments collected just after the end of the workshops: "Preparation exercises made me think a lot of the complexity of each individual" wrote one of the Roma non professional actors involved in the film and Roma activist, Miguel Lebbiati, "each individual is the result of a crossroad of experiences, examples, cultural, social, environmental – and especially perceptual – factors. Sometimes we are not conscious of how interconnected we are, and how each one of us can potentially become a victim or a perpetrator". "This experience" – wrote another participant, Roma blogger and artist Ivana Nikolic – "influenced me in thinking about how I want to persevere in a process of inner and physical peace. It helped me find the courage and strength to face the demons of my past. To be at peace with myself"[2].

The inquiry into performative methods for expressing unarticulated emotions and traumas associated with particular forms of societal marginality, as well as strategies for dismantling self-censorship mechanisms, emerged distinctly throughout this process (Foucault 1975). It made me reflect on the relationship between the *documentary* and the *performative* material we collected both in the

2 Material collected by Ludovica Fales for the exhibition "Bordered Lives", Ludovica Fales, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll and Emma Humphris,VBKOE, September 2021

construction of the filmic process as well as in the filmic stylistic choices. Stella Bruzzi (2006) posits that documentaries are not merely vehicles for conveying factual information; rather, they are performative acts that create truth through the act of filming itself. This perspective challenges traditional notions of documentary as an objective representation of reality and emphasizes the fluid and unstable nature of documentary truth.

These reflections led me to further reflect on the articulation of the layers in the film through the creation of the relationship between a fictional tale—the story of character *Lala*, inspired to a real story—and a documentary layer—the real stories of all non professional actors participating to the project, and that of Zaga. The main goal was to allow an active participation of the audience through the awareness of this articulation. This is to me a form of resistance to the conventional representations of impotence and subalternity—as bell hooks brilliantly expresses —an experience of awareness of the film's construction that allows the audience to reflect on the power dynamics embedded in their/our gaze.

For the first year of improvisation, while we were planning to make solely a fictional film with nonprofessional actors, inspired by the real story of a woman who had disappeared, I was unconsciously hiding behind the script and the improvisation process. The script was there to be challenged, changed, enriched and I unconsciously felt safe as the written world/ the story world was the catalyst of the conflict. All people gathered there to improvise and myself were avoiding the other elephant in the room: the fact I was not Roma and that this position needed to be challenged and articulated.

One day, during one improvisation one of the participants (I will use the pronoun "they" here) re-enacted a very moving episode of their life: when coming back from a journey to Auschwitz, during which their classmates had shown understanding of the historical facts and empathy towards the victims of the camps, some colleagues started making racist comments. The participant exploded and confessed they had hidden her identity for all of those years—their Roma identity—precisely because of their comments. They accused them of hypocrisy and cowardness. I jumped in and told them the story of my grandmother and how the situation had led a woman in the building where my grandmother lived with her mother, to conceal their identity to allow them to gain time to escape deportation.

From that day onwards, the situation shifted. My story also became material for the film and it got discussed in several instances, until one day I asked one participant if they thought it was legitimate to make a film about Roma not being one. They answered it wasn't entirely legitimate, but they also said I actually wasn't making a film about being Roma, but rather on a universal condition of invisibility that was caused by the beaureacratic hurdle caused by lack of papers' recognition. This was something I could totally understand, in their opinion, and I legitimately could talk about.

These two episodes changed my position in the process and I suddenly felt I could understand why we were all there, part of this collective space we had created. The invisibility and rejection brought about by beaureacratic papers' denial was something that marked people even after two generations from the

actual fact. *Lala* was the perfect symbol—born from migrant parents she was the one who should have the possibility to settle. Instead, the lack of papers gets her to question all of her sense of belonging and pushes her to create a new identity to survive. *Lala*'s symbol brought us all together in the creation of this ritual, where each one of us was able to embody several positions in the victim/perpetrator game and really go deep into the scars of this systematic rejection.

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of the effects of trauma from one generation to the next, impacting the psychological and emotional well-being of descendants of trauma survivors. For example, Knight's exploration of Black parental trauma in the context of apartheid illustrates how systemic oppression can perpetuate trauma across generations, influencing identity and interpersonal relationships (Knight, 2019). Similarly, the experiences of Indigenous populations, as discussed by Cowan, reveal how historical traumas, such as those experienced in residential schools, continue to impact parenting styles and family structures, perpetuating cycles of trauma (Braga et al., 2012). Moreover, the resilience of families in the face of intergenerational trauma has been a focal point in recent studies. Braga emphasize that while trauma can be transmitted, patterns of resilience can also emerge, allowing some descendants to navigate their inherited trauma effectively (*Ibidem*). This resilience can be fostered through supportive relationships and community practices that promote healing and understanding (Cromer et al., 2017; Woods et al., 2022). The field of intergenerational trauma is obviously not my field, as it relates to psychology, but it was important to understand the potential of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in this context. Boal's Theater of the Oppressed is rooted in the principles of critical pedagogy, particularly those articulated by Paulo Freire (Freire 1968). It emphasizes participatory engagement and the importance of giving voice to marginalized communities. Platt and Bobele note that the application of Theatre of the Oppressed in community settings has facilitated dialogues around clinical issues, demonstrating its potential as a therapeutic tool in addressing the psychological impacts of intergenerational trauma (Platt & Bobele 2022). This participatory approach allows individuals to re-enact and analyze their lived experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of how trauma is interwoven with social injustices.

The three-layered articulation of the film is therefore the result of this archaeological process of excavation which led each one of us to uncover a hidden part of ourselves. In this process we all found a truth that made us accept the multiplicity of voices and articulation of this defamiliarisarion/familiarisation process which became the main driver of the film development. The three-layered articulation of the film emerges as a product of an archaeological process of excavation, wherein each participant engaged in a profound journey of self-discovery, unearthing aspects of their identities that had previously remained concealed. This excavation is not merely a metaphorical digging; it represents a critical engagement with personal histories, cultural narratives, and collective memories that shape our understanding of self and community. As we delved into these layers, we encountered truths that compelled us to embrace the multiplicity of voices that contribute to our shared experiences. In this process, the act of

defamiliarisation—where familiar concepts and narratives are presented in new and unexpected ways—allowed us to critically reflect on our preconceived notions and biases. This technique, rooted in the theories of Viktor Shklovsky (1917), serves to disrupt the ordinary and provoke a deeper engagement with the material. By presenting our stories through a lens of defamiliarisation, we were able to challenge dominant narratives and highlight the complexities of our lived experiences. This approach not only facilitated a richer understanding of our individual and collective identities but also fostered an environment where diverse perspectives could coexist and be valued. The familiarisation aspect of this process further reinforced our connection to the material. As we unearthed hidden truths, we began to recognize the shared struggles and triumphs that bind us together as a community. This recognition of commonality became a powerful catalyst for collaboration, as we collectively navigated the intricacies of our narratives. The interplay between defamiliarisation and familiarisation thus became the driving force behind the film's development, allowing us to create a work that resonates with authenticity and depth. Moreover, the three-layered articulation of the film can be understood as a reflection of the intersectionality of our identities. As we excavated our personal histories, we encountered the complexities of race, gender, class, and culture that shape our experiences. By acknowledging these layers, we were able to create a film that not only represents individual voices but also highlights the systemic structures that influence our lives. In conclusion, the three-layered articulation of the film is a testament to the transformative power of the excavation process. Through this journey, we unearthed hidden aspects of ourselves, embraced the multiplicity of voices, and engaged in a dynamic process of defamiliarisation and familiariation. This approach not only enriched the film's narrative but also fostered a deeper understanding of the complexities of identity and community, ultimately leading to a work that is both reflective and resonant.

Challenging conventions associated with realism aimed at serving as a means of empowering audiences who are politically conscious and positioned for active participation. In this context, marginalized spectators are viewed as equivalent to resistant spectators (Diawara 1993), as they disrupt the status quo by moving away from the pleasure of identification towards the pleasure of resistance (hooks 1989). Furthermore, concepts such as migration, mobility, and transnationalism are pivotal in rethinking, or more accurately, unthinking rigid notions of nations, identities, and belonging that extend beyond mere representation (Ponzanesi 2011). These concepts also play a crucial role in themselves in interrogating cinematic conventions that perpetuate power dynamics under the guise of a singular representation of space, time, and subjects. Instead, they encourage explorations that honor the specificity and materiality of lived experiences at borders, thereby problematizing rather than reinforcing dominant Western tropes of visibility (Chang and Ling, 2000). Finally, the concept of 'safe space' was proposed as a decolonial design practice encouraging collaboration (Kambunga et al., 2023). This goes beyond community participation in the research stage, extending into collaborative creation.

The use of art and media as tools for social change has been explored by bell

hooks herself (1996) as the role of visual art in shaping cultural narratives and its potential to challenge oppressive systems. She argues that art can serve as a powerful medium for expressing resistance and fostering community solidarity among marginalized groups. On the other hand, in his foundational text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* , Freire emphasizes the importance of dialogue and storytelling in the process of liberation. He argues that education should be a collaborative and participatory process that empowers individuals to critically engage with their realities. Freire's ideas resonate with the notion of using art and media as tools for social change, as they both seek to challenge oppressive narratives and foster empowerment. More recently, Jacques Rancière (2009) challenges traditional notions of spectatorship in art and performance, proposing that spectators can be active participants in the creation of meaning. He argues that art has the potential to disrupt established hierarchies and empower individuals to engage with social issues critically. This work aligns with the idea that storytelling through art can serve as a form of resistance and empowerment. All of these positions highlight how creative practices can serve as forms of resistance, enabling marginalized voices to reclaim their narratives and assert their agency in the face of systemic oppression.

The significance of a safe space, often referred to as a "third space," lies in its capacity to provide marginalized individuals from contested contexts with an opportunity to cultivate a sense of community. The concept of third space, as articulated by theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha (1994) and Edward Soja (1998), represents a transformative environment where individuals can navigate their identities and experiences outside the constraints of dominant cultural narratives. In such spaces, marginalized groups can engage in dialogue, share their stories, and foster solidarity among one another. This communal aspect is crucial, as it allows individuals to connect over shared experiences of oppression and resilience, ultimately contributing to a collective identity that transcends individual struggles. The creation of a safe space facilitates the exploration of cultural expressions and practices that may be overlooked or suppressed in mainstream society, thereby affirming the value of diverse identities and experiences. Moreover, the third space serves as a site of empowerment, where individuals can challenge prevailing power dynamics and assert their agency. By providing a platform for marginalized voices, these spaces encourage critical reflection and dialogue about issues of identity, belonging, and social justice. This aligns with the work of bell hooks (1990), who emphasizes the importance of creating spaces for marginalized voices to be heard and validated, thus fostering a sense of belonging and community. The role of safe spaces extends beyond mere physical locations; they can also manifest in virtual environments, artistic expressions, and community initiatives. By fostering environments that prioritize inclusivity and empowerment, these spaces play a critical role in challenging dominant narratives and promoting social justice.

To make the film's approach truly egalitarian, it would have clearly been necessary to discuss every single detail of the script, direction, and editing together. However, this level of collaboration was not fully achieved during the process, leaving room for more traditional dynamics where certain decisions

remained primarily in the hands of the director or production team. Considering all the difficulties we encountered during the shoot, the choice made in this respect was to retain a certain amount of creative control. This decision, while necessary under the circumstances, inevitably limited the extent to which the process could be fully egalitarian. The pandemic, delayed funding, and various issues that arose during the reshoots all posed significant challenges, had to be translated into the film's language and I chose to keep the responsibility in my hands to ensure some continuity and consistency. It is also true, however, that little by little, the "us versus them" division typical of more traditional films had gradually began to break down. Some of the participants were involved behind the camera during filming and, at times, watched the footage together with us. After I initially transcribed and drafted the script based on the rehearsal recordings, the editing decisions were then made collaboratively to ensure the text matched the natural flow of the spoken language.

I recognize that this collaborative approach, while involving participants in key aspects of the creative process, ultimately left the directorial responsibility firmly in my hands—a dynamic that is inherently problematic. This concentration of decision-making power raises important questions about authorship, control, and the balance between collaboration and authority. However, given the numerous practical challenges we faced—ranging from logistical constraints to unforeseen difficulties during production—I struggled to envision an alternative path that would allow the film to reach completion. In this context, maintaining a degree of directorial control felt like a necessary compromise to ensure the project's coherence and eventual realization, even if it meant accepting tensions between ideal collaboration and pragmatic necessity.

At the same time, I believe that the creation of a "third space" genuinely took place—a space that transcended the inevitable limitations of the creative process itself. The making of the film was not just about producing a work with its unavoidable constraints, but about fostering a site of struggle and dialogue. This was realized through the construction of a multilayered narrative that continuously invited the audience to question and reflect on what they were witnessing. Rather than offering a single, fixed perspective, the film encouraged viewers to engage critically and dynamically, disrupting passive consumption and opening up possibilities for new understandings and solidarities.

Moreover, the way the film was distributed reinforced this dynamic. Screenings were organized from the ground up, often involving the protagonists themselves and prioritizing spaces where discussion and dialogue were fundamental. This grassroots approach to distribution mirrored the collaborative and participatory spirit of the film's creation, turning each screening into a site of engagement and collective reflection. It was not just about showing the film, but about fostering ongoing conversations that extended the film's impact beyond the screen and into lived social realities.

In conclusion, the film *Lala* was my attempt to reflect on language itself as a "place of struggle". It attempted at empowering audiences by challenging conventional realism. It positions spectators as resistant participants, shifting

from mere identification to active questioning, thereby highlighting cinema's potential as a catalyst for social change. Key concepts such as migration, mobility, and transnationalism are essential for rethinking rigid notions of identity and belonging, interrogating cinematic conventions that reinforce the power dynamics established by borders themselves. By focusing on the specificity of lived experiences at borders, *Lala* attempted at critiquing dominant representations and attempting at enriching the narrative and engaging with the complexities of identity in a globalized context. The film also introduces the idea of 'safe space' as a decolonial practice that fosters collaboration and community, including the audience itself in this space. This "third space" allows for the navigation of identities outside dominant narratives, promoting dialogue and solidarity. In establishing this safe space in common with the audience, I tried to encourage the investigation of varied cultural expressions, contesting prevailing narratives and advancing social justice, thereby nurturing a shared identity that goes beyond individual challenges and essentialist identities.

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Affective Landscapes of Deterritorialization in Contemporary Cinema

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This article explores how filmmaker Alice Diop articulates her diasporic condition through the affective landscapes in her films. Our analysis focuses on her short film *Vers la tendresse* (2016), examining the cinematic and narrative strategies she employs to foreground the voices of the Other and construct an aesthetics of intimacy. We propose the concept of *landscape of displacement* to understand how experiences of migration and dislocation are inscribed in the film's visual and affective language. Through voice-over testimonies and a fragmented structure, Diop portrays intimacy and affect among young men from a Parisian banlieue, destabilizing hegemonic representations and asserting alternative modes of visibility. Drawing on Édouard Glissant's poetics of Relation and theoretical contributions from postcolonial and cultural studies, we reflect on how the film negotiates proximity, distance, and opacity in representing diasporic life. Ultimately, the article contributes to broader debates on diasporic cinema by showing how Diop's work amplifies the voices and subjectivities of marginalized bodies and reshapes dominant modes of perception.

Keywords
Diasporic Cinema
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In recent years, many migrant artists and filmmakers, as well as second-generation diasporic voices in Europe, have critically explored issues related to their experiences of displacement and deterritorialization. Contemporary diasporas arise from recent processes of globalization and are characterized by significant social, cultural, political, and historical diversity. Drawing on an analysis of Alice Diop's film *Vers la tendresse* (2016), this essay explores the nuances of a cinematic practice shaped by the perspective of a filmmaker raised within a diasporic family in France. In *Vers la tendresse*, Diop portrays intimacy and affect among young men from a Parisian banlieue, where she herself grew up. In dialogue with this film, we aim to reflect on how the affective, historical, and political dimensions of territorial displacement are inscribed in Diop's filmic landscape. In this sense, we propose the concept of *landscape of displacement* to think through the aesthetic and narrative forms that emerge from displaced subjectivities. We argue that such landscapes reveal an affective territory in which bodies, gestures, and voices of those who live between symbolic, linguistic and social borders are inscribed.

Filmographies of directors with dual ethno-cultural backgrounds, such as

Franco-Senegalese Alice Diop, have played a key role in reshaping the notion of *world cinema* (Bamba 2011). Rather than portraying identity and culture as fixed or stable, their films highlight the fractures, contradictions, and complexities that shape diasporic life in contemporary Europe. In this essay, we approach the term *diasporic cinema* not as a fixed cinematic category, but as an analytical framework through which to explore how diasporic identities, cultures, and territorialities are discursively co-constructed via cinematic practices (De Man 2023). According to Stuart Hall, the decentralized cultural empowerment of the margins is central to the construction of diasporic identity, and cinema plays a crucial role in this process. The British-Jamaican sociologist argues that cultural identity is created in and through representation, and that cinema, as a representational form, has the power to shape us into new kinds of subjects (Hall 2006, 33).

Processes of deterritorialization involve a reconfiguration of ways of seeing and narrating, which materializes in the filmic landscapes and modes of enunciation adopted by migrant and diasporic filmmakers. Within this framework, the notion of deterritorialization, as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), encompasses not only geographical displacement but also a symbolic and aesthetic transformation, that disrupts dominant codes of language, identity, and belonging. Alice Diop's films can be seen as engaging with the strategies of *minor cinema*, as they subvert dominant narrative and aesthetic forms while allowing personal stories to gain political and collective resonance for marginalized communities. By adopting fragmented narratives that blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction, Diop mirrors her own experience of displacement and cultural fragmentation.

Inspired by Deleuze's concept of the affection-image (*image-affection*), we conceive of affective landscapes as expressive forces that emerge on the surface of the filmic frame, revealing intensities and subjective displacements. In cinema, affective space often transcends the importance of its material form, aligning with Henri Lefebvre's notion of representational space—a space that overlays the physical and draws symbolic meaning from its elements (Lefebvre 1991, 39). Alice Diop explores themes of displacement by subverting the traditional power dynamics between central Paris and its peripheral zones, while also challenging the notion of cultural uniformity within the city. Her work reinterprets space and memory through a plural and relational lens, resonating with theories of *creolisation* that emphasize hybridity, entanglement, and the refusal of fixed identities.

Building on this conceptual framework, the next section examines how Diop articulates her diasporic condition through the affective landscapes in her films. By doing so, Diop reshapes modes of perception and amplifies the voices and subjectivities of marginalized bodies. Our analysis will focus on her short film *Vers la tendresse*, exploring the cinematic and narrative strategies she employs to foreground the voices of the Other and construct an aesthetics of intimacy—a gesture suggested by the film's title.

POETICS OF RELATION AND POLITICS OF PLACE: DETERRITORIALIZING SUBJECTIVITIES

Vers la tendresse opens with a black screen displaying the following words: "During a workshop on the theme of love, I met four young men, all from Seine-Saint-Denis. I recorded our conversation. I wanted to make a film from these voices." (my translation).

Thus, from the very beginning, the film's theme and the device used are made explicit. The film arises from audio recordings of conversations between the director and four young men from the Paris suburbs, discussing the theme of love. It takes shape through images and the mise-en-scène of characters representing these voices. Initially, Alice Diop planned to make a fiction film about romantic relationships, but the project shifted direction after a workshop with young men from her neighborhood, whom she encountered on her daily commute. One of the questions she asked was "What does tenderness mean to you?" After two and a half years, Diop decided to make a film using the answers she had collected.

The voice-over throughout the short film is a dialogue between the director and the four young men. We mostly hear their testimonies, but Alice Diop's interjections are not eliminated; on the contrary, her voice remains present. Visually, the mise-en-scène varies from one segment to another, each focused on one of the testimonies. In the first segment, we see a group of young men in long takes set in public spaces, such as a boxing ring, a café, and a street corner in the neighborhood. The sequence of images leads us to believe that the voice we hear belongs to one of those faces (likely the one most prominently framed in the sequence). It could be, but as suggested by the opening title card and according to the director's statement, the faces we see on screen do not correspond to the actual speakers. The characters we see are young people from Seine-Saint-Denis whom Diop invited to embody those voices in the film [Fig.1-4].

The young men's voices we hear sound very close, as if the speakers were right next to our ears. The silent images—except during transitions between testimonies—alternate between close-ups framing the faces and anonymous gazes of the characters, and wider shots showing their bodies in the public spaces of the city. There is little direct interaction between them; sometimes they are fiddling with their phones, sometimes watching the bar's television, or simply waiting, observing their surroundings with numbness and detachment. These shots therefore convey a sense of distance. Although they share the frame with other bodies, the film communicates a feeling of fragmentation and loneliness.

This feeling resonates with the content of the testimonies, which address the characters' experiences with love and the way they perceive and deal with

Figs. 1–4: Frames of *Vers la tendresse* (Alice Diop, 2016).

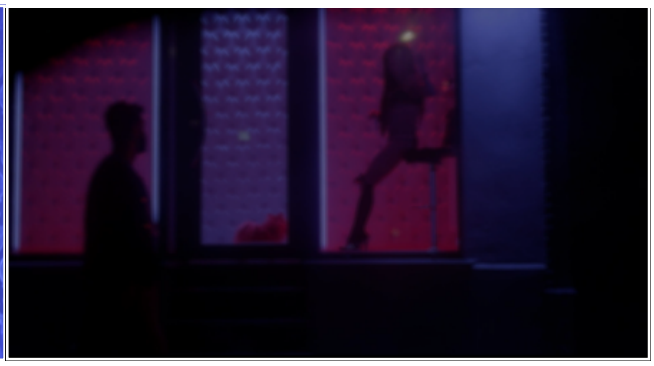
affective relationships. The first testimony comes from a young man who says he feels attracted to prostitutes and "women with problems," knowing that nothing can be built from such relationships. The same voice confesses that they (the young men) are taught from childhood to have relationships based on lies. Among friends, love or feelings are never discussed, and when someone talks about it, they are silenced. After a silence, he says he doesn't know what love is. Maybe white people know love because their parents taught them. "For Arabs and Blacks, it's a taboo" (my translation).

The words themselves are striking, due to the rawness and truthfulness with which they express intimate and rarely discussed subjects—love, tenderness—from a male perspective. This theme gains greater complexity when addressed by young immigrants, or second-generation African immigrants in France, who live in peripheral areas and face racism and exclusion in their daily lives. The weight of these words is amplified by the silences that punctuate them, both from the speakers themselves and from the director, who sometimes seems to hold back her interjections to allow her interlocutor space for reflection. These pauses enable the words to resonate within us, the viewers.

In *Vers la tendresse*, these pauses, which let the words echo, also appear in the transitions between testimonies. During these moments, the shots become more fluid and handheld, filmed from inside a car driving along a road or through city streets. The dim light of the night scenes, combined with a soundtrack of hip hop from the banlieues, brings a pulse and a certain vertigo to the nocturnal drift of the characters' movements.

The second testimony comes from a young man who says he only fell in love during childhood. "That's when you truly live and love." After that, a segregation between boys and girls begins. Talking about girls turns into speaking badly

of them—"easy women", and so on. He compensates for the lack of love or affection with marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco, to the point of forgetting himself. He says he doesn't understand women and is afraid of them. He also mentions that the only tenderness he ever received was from his mother. As we listen to his testimony, we follow the young men inside a car driving through the streets of Paris at night. The camera adopts their perspective, gliding along a street where, across the sidewalk, women appear like living mannequins inside shop windows. Like them, we look straight at these women as the car moves slowly forward. Next, the group gets out of the car, buys drinks at a store, and walks down the street of mannequins [Fig. 6]. One of the young men, whom we follow more closely in this sequence, stops in front of one of these motionless



Figs. 5–6 : Frames of *Vers la tendresse* (Alice Diop, 2016).

women—a Black woman seated on a throne, wearing lingerie and an African necklace [Fig. 5]. She returns his gaze, and the camera frames her more closely, as if it were moving inside the display window.

The third testimony is from a young homosexual man, who Alice Diop says in an interview is represented in the film by a close friend of hers. In this sequence, the young man walks alone through the streets, and the handheld camera follows him closely. The narration begins by recounting a relationship he had with a Muslim Senegalese man, whose behavior was ambiguous. He confessed to being in love but said that family and religion prevented him from engaging in the relationship. The character also describes verbal and physical violence he endured during school for not conforming to socially accepted masculine norms. When Diop asks him about love between two men, he says it's all based on a relationship of sodomy and control. Falling in love is seen as losing control and is considered a "sissy" thing.

The final testimony, which closes the film, runs counter to the others. We follow a young couple arriving together at a hotel, exchanging gestures of affection that reveal the intimacy and sweetness of lovers in love. The testimony is from a young man who says he is not ashamed to be seen by his friends as a lover, someone who enjoys dating and forming bonds. He opposes the stigma of suburban men being seen as macho and violent, but admits that when he was younger, he hid the romantic songs he listened to in order to be seen as a "gangster" as well. The couple's scene is filled with great tenderness [Fig. 7].

There is a naturalness between the two characters, as if their dialogues were not from a predefined script. The voice-over confesses: "shame is stronger than the desire to achieve love, but once love is achieved, it is stronger than shame" (my translation). The next morning, the young woman says goodbye tenderly, and he is left with a melancholic gaze, feeling her absence. The film ends with a romantic French song overlaying a slow pan of Paris at dawn [Fig. 8].

This final testimony contrasts with the previous ones by showing that love and tenderness still endure in contexts marked by trauma and exclusion. Even in the accounts that express disbelief in love, the speakers challenge the toxic masculinity that shapes their behaviors and reveal their vulnerabilities by admitting that they were never taught or had close examples of tenderness that could nurture such a belief.

The final shot of *Vers la tendresse*, depicting the cold and distant city after the couple's farewell in the hotel room, functions as an affective surface of intensities, moving beyond a purely narrative role and approaching what Deleuze describes as the affection-image. In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (2004), Deleuze analyzes the role of the affection-image within movement-image cinema. He first seeks to understand how images can be "facialized"—when objects or places take on the quality or power of a face. An image becomes facialized because it seems to look at us, even if it doesn't literally resemble a face. According to Deleuze, this type of image reaches a new level with the emergence of pure optical and sound situations, especially in Italian neorealism and the French Nouvelle Vague—moments he identifies as turning points in cinema. In these contexts, the affection-image emancipates itself from its former subordinated role to the action-image within the sensory-motor schema. For Deleuze, this image not only gains autonomy but also transcends traditional editing by conveying a multiplicity of impressions independently. It breaks with causal logic and the spatiotemporal continuity of surrounding images, thus acquiring an atemporal character.

It is precisely this opening of the image to a spiritual dimension—the possibility of expressing a truth that exceeds the limits of the frame—that leads Deleuze to situate it within what he calls the *any-space-whatever*. This concept allows us to think of affective landscapes not only as spaces charged with affect but also as expressive, modulatory surfaces that directly address us, even when devoid of human figures. The emergence of the *any-space-whatever* within the affection-

Figs. 7–8: Frames of *Vers la tendresse* (Alice Diop, 2016).

image, as David N. Rodowick (1997) notes, represents one of the "omens of time" still present in the movement-image—a hint of the time-image beginning to emerge. When the affection-image sheds the spatiotemporal coordinates that once anchored it, it becomes autonomous and acquires its own potency. In this process, spaces cease to function merely as settings or narrative locations and instead become any-spaces, possessing the virtual capacity to connect to any other space.

Throughout *Vers la tendresse*, Alice Diop establishes an essential link between subjectivity and urban space. The film's characters appear on screen in transient places—corners, hotels, train cars, stations, metros, bars—spaces that evoke transit and suspension, which we might relate to the notion of *non-places* (Augé 2012), where identity is diluted and relationships are ephemeral. In many of these settings, the characters remain silent, often alone, detached, looking through windows or absorbed in television and cellphone screens. Although close-ups on their faces provoke an effect of subjectivation, there is an absence of individuation: the bodies are close, but their stories remain, to some extent, opaque. This spatial construction reinforces a feeling of loneliness and disintegration, marks of an affectively impoverished masculine youth.

One of the most powerful moments in this regard occurs in the scene where we see, from one character's perspective, women displayed in shop windows. There is a brief hesitation, and the crossing of gazes with one of them introduces a fissure in this affective distance: we then shift to his subjective gaze, observing the woman more closely [Fig. 5]. This gesture of closeness, although momentary, points to a desire for connection—a desire that, however, remains unfulfilled. It is within this tension between proximity and distance that the film inscribes its poetics of intimacy.

The disintegrating and depersonalized urban landscape that frames the narrative contrasts with the confidential, hesitant tone of the intimate accounts shared in the voice-over. These young people who inhabit the metropolitan suburbs are rarely questioned about their feelings. In the sharing of the sensible that guides most of the discourses we are accustomed to seeing and hearing, they represent the working class—subservient, hardened, emotionally flat, and denied the right to show vulnerability. These outskirts of Paris are predominantly inhabited by migrant communities, mostly Maghrebi, as well as young populations descended from diasporic families from other African countries.

Alice Diop states that, in her view, men from the banlieue have no more existence than Arab and African men (Braibant 2016). Diop grew up in the banlieues, which, according to her, are often represented by people who are not from there. So, making cinema was for her a way to produce discourses from within the intimate sphere of the private lives of the people she grew up with. She comments that people from her neighborhood, who experienced both the heart of Paris and the suburbs, in a way, saw what was to come–a society on the brink of fragmentation and fracture:

> *All my films really reside in this guilt that I feel of having, for a time, integrated this French injunction of separating myself from working-class neighborhoods, so-called "popular neighborhoods." And so, in all my films [...] I return to these neighborhoods to make visible the people who I have been conditioned to reject, and that I have been made to believe were not worthy of being represented in film (as quoted in Quinlan 2022).*

The four characters in the film, who provide the testimonies, have Arabic names. Rachid says that in his family, affection was not shown through words or gestures. The only tenderness he claims to have known came from his mother. He also highlights a racial issue that runs through this problem: "White people are the ones who know what love is because their parents showed them. Among Black and Arab people, it's complicated" (my translation).North American intellectual bell hooks (2016) offers a historical perspective on how sexism has appropriated the way Black men exist in life and points to a non-place they occupy within the violent and limited project of phallocentric masculinity. She argues that the colonial and slave-owning system deeply impacted the way Black men love. Within the racist, capitalist, and patriarchal model that emerged in the Western civilizational context, Black men are considered "outlaws," uncivilized—an idea that they often internalize as a way of seeing themselves.

In *Vers la tendresse*, Alice Diop seeks to give voice to those who are unheard, revealing the subjectivity of these bodies. She adopts reflective strategies within the very dialogue she establishes with the characters, thus breaking away from a domesticated dialogism typical of documentaries and embracing an inventive use of offscreen space. It is through the offscreen dialogue that Diop shares the mise-en-scène with the Other being filmed. She *speaks nearby* as proposed by Trinh Minh-ha (Chen 1992), which creates a relationship of closeness and dialogue, opening space for the Other's voice to emerge autonomously. Through a floating listening, without judgment, and through the director's own hesitations and advances in the dialogue, the young men gain humanity.

The dialectic of distance and proximity is present on multiple levels in diasporic cinema. Distance can be physical, temporal, or cultural (including linguistic differences), while proximity can emerge through relationships formed by shared experiences of exile or diaspora and the desire for belonging and connection. Thus, diasporic cinema operates in the interstices, exploring the tension between a here and an *au-delà*, between origin and becoming. Through its process of de-(re)territorialization, it consistently incorporates a fundamental gesture of openness, investing in a reflective dimension that reexamines the ways of seeing and framing the Other. Particularly in films that address the life stories of others, filmmakers are constantly faced with the challenge of finding the right distance—one that allows them to establish a relationship of closeness with their subjects while preserving their fundamental opacity, that is, without attempting to fully unveil or reduce their differences. For anthropologist-filmmaker Marc Piault, there is a "permanent gap," an irreducible distance in the act of understanding and representing the Other—a space of uncertainty and incompleteness:

> *It is not a designation: [...] it is an empathetic disposition, a permanent gap that must be continuously filled and yet must never be completely so, lest the relationship become useless due to an excess of identity. This disposition involves a carefully crafted and specific treatment of form—that is, space—and of background—that is, time—achieved primarily through rhythm and sonic depth, which endow the transfer of experience with its full emotional power. [...] It is the necessary and indefinite incompletion, the asymptotic approach to the other, through which one recognizes them, draws closer, and yet always maintains a distinction (Piault 2018, 365, my translation).*[1]

This concept resonates with the idea of opacity as a right to difference, central to Édouard Glissant's *poetics of Relation*. The Martinican philosopher envisions the world as a web of interdependent connections, where cultures are linked through processes of exchange, hybridity, and multiplicity. His approach, rooted in the experience of Antillean creolization, is closely tied to the notion of a "rhizomatic identity"—an identity conceived not as a single origin, but as one formed through intertwining roots that reach outward to connect with others (Glissant 1997).

Building on this framework, we argue that Glissant's *poetics of Relation* resonates deeply with Alice Diop's cinema. Her openness to alterity—the "Diverse," in Glissant's terms—is evident in the way she explores relationships between characters and their urban environments, as well as in how her personal history informs her gaze and subjectivity. Diop seeks to shift the cinematic gaze away from the metropolitan center, reinterpreting space and memory through a pluralistic lens. In this sense, her films offer a creolized vision of Paris, reconfiguring the urban landscape through layered histories and perspectives. Ultimately, her narratives bridge the intimate and the collective, engaging with the complex postcolonial realities that shape diasporic communities in contemporary France.

The politics of place, as articulated by diasporic thinkers and artists, understands identity, history, and culture as shaped by specific geographic, social, and historical contexts, with location formed through an intertwining of times and spaces. British artist of Ghanaian descent, John Akomfrah, captures the existential tension of this positionality through the notion of the *doppelgänger*—a diasporic double consciousness marked by cultural and psychological fragmentation. Reflecting on the motivations behind his work with the Black Audio Film Collective in 1980s England, Akomfrah emphasizes the urgency of transforming this experience of dislocation into a militant aesthetic gesture, using hybrid identity as the very ground from which to speak (Akomfrah and Debuysere 2013). In a similar vein, the politics of place that underpins Alice Diop's cinema does not assert a fixed identity or rooted belonging but rather

1 This translation is based on the Brazilian edition *Antropologia e Cinema* (2018), originally published in France under the title *Anthropologie et Cinéma* (2000).

emerges from a conscious inhabiting of one's position of enunciation. Subjectivity thus becomes a precondition for engaging with alterity. The individual and the collective, identity and otherness, are constantly intertwined.

This political commitment is particularly evident in her treatment of traces and absences, recurring motifs in her work. As Diop remarks: "It's to deal with the fact that I don't have traces of my parents, and this is where the personal becomes political, because in France it is a political issue of whose story we tell, whose story gets to be told, whose story is legitimate" (as quoted in Quinlan 2022). For her, filmmaking becomes a way to repair what has not been narrated and to explore the contemporary world from her own position—an approach that, she insists, should not concern only Black communities, but everyone, since it speaks to the world we all inhabit:

> *What my filmmaking seeks to redress is the invisibility, the absence, the silencing, the marginalization [of certain people] and to place at the center of the shot bodies who have been historically and politically pushed to the margins of dominant forms of representation. (as quoted in Price 2023).*

In *Vers la tendresse*, Alice Diop adopts cinematic strategies that engage with the Other by speaking nearby and subjectivizing marginalized bodies, while intentionally preserving a degree of opacity in their representation. Within the film's narrative, space does not operate as a fixed or merely functional element that situates the viewer within a coherent diegetic world. Instead, it emerges as a space of possibility—a sensory hypothesis that opens affective resonances (Dinić 2015, 221). As Gilles Deleuze proposes through the notion of the affection-image, this spatiality exceeds geographic or narrative anchoring and is defined by its potential to evoke affective responses.

ALICE DIOP'S LANDSCAPES OF DISPLACEMENT

For Avtar Brah, the space of the diaspora is a site of transformation and intersection, giving rise to syncretic formations and challenging the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and otherness, "us" and "them" (2005, 205). Brah argues that bodies carry borders from birth but also create them through experiences that carry meaning and become markers of fluid identities. Homi Bhabha (1994) conceives the idea of the "third space" as a zone of cultural hybridization where different identities and cultures intersect and blend, generating something new. According to Bhabha, this space should not be understood as a mere fusion or synthesis between two cultures, but rather as a field of constant negotiation and transformation, where binary categories of identity are challenged and redefined. Thus, the "third space" paves the way for the emergence of new subjectivities and forms of resistance shaped by cultural

interactions.

As seen in *Vers la tendresse* and other works by Alice Diop, such as *Nous* (2021), the *poetics of Relation* and the politics of place converge to shape what we may call *landscapes of displacement*—a cinema that constructs narrative from the margins. Displacement manifests in the fragmented editing, spatial displacements that weave together peripheries and centers, and in a non-linear temporality that resists a singular history. This is, therefore, a decentered politics of place, where the landscape emerges as a relational field in flux—one that resonates with Bhabha's notion of a "third space" of resistance and discursive innovation, enabling new voices and identities to emerge by contesting dominant forms of power in postcolonial contexts.

In these *landscapes of displacement*, space does not function as a mere backdrop to the narrative but as a sensitive surface, charged with affects and traces of personal and collective histories. These spaces make visible the condition of being *out of place*, as formulated by Edward Said (1999)—an experience of affective and cultural uprooting lived by diasporic subjects on the margins of major urban centers.

Cinematic narratives that prioritize the continuity of affects over spatial-temporal coherence invite the viewer to a fluid experience. This fluidity occurs not only within the frame, which opens onto a spiritual dimension, but also throughout the narrative itself, now traversed by sensory impressions and ambiguities of meaning. Like a nomad, the viewer moves through what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) define as "smooth space": a territory shaped more by affects than by fixed properties. Affective landscapes invite us to understand space and place beyond their physical attributes, acknowledging that this "beyond," comprised of imaginary geographies and intangible yet real elements, both shapes and is shaped by material spaces and social relations. As Berberich et al. (2013) argue, it is within the interplay of the material and the virtual that an affective cultural politics arises. This dynamic allows people to form or sever attachments to place in complex ways, endowing landscapes with deep emotional resonance and making them sites of intense contestation over meaning and authority.

In this context, Jacques Rancière's theory of aesthetics also offers a valuable framework to connect affect and politics. He defines politics as the construction of specific spaces—arrangements of shared experiences and objects that are collectively recognized and open to common decision-making (Rancière 2012, 24). Politics, for Rancière, is deeply tied to visibility and voice: it concerns what is seen and said, who is allowed to see and speak, and how space and time are configured (Rancière 2009, 13). The political task, then, lies in redistributing the sensible—reshaping perception itself to create new modes of sensing and meaning (Berberich et al. 2013, 5).

Through the approach to *Vers la tendresse* by Alice Diop we've observed that the director's subjectivity serves as a starting point for her engagement with otherness. This relation of alterity manifests in the proximity between the characters and in the connection the director establishes between the

subjects and the urban landscape of the Paris suburbs. This landscape reveals the symbolic "out of place" occupied by diasporic communities in France—composed of individuals inhabiting spaces shaped by exclusionary policies and the production of invisibility. By exploring these urban margins, Diop presents the landscape as an affective territory, where the fractures of uprootedness and identities formed between different languages, cultures, and geographies become palpable.

By foregrounding these affective geographies, Alice Diop engages both the intimate and the collective, shedding light on the complex postcolonial dynamics that shape contemporary French society. The *landscapes of displacement* in her cinema function as sites of political inscription as well as relational fields where diasporic identities are continually reterritorialized. Her cinematic writing operates through a process of decentering, opening *lines of flight* that dismantle fixed regimes of representation and give rise to multiple voices, identities, and forms of belonging. This gesture traces the shifting borders of zones that are at once proximate and distant, creating counter-hegemonic narrative forms.

Through this approach, Alice Diop weaves a fragmented and plural portrait of France and constructs a visual archive that expands the field of the visible. Her diasporic experience gives rise to a rhizomatic cinema that resists linearity and conventional forms of representation, allowing us to interpret the *landscapes of displacement* both as a political gesture and as an opening toward a *poetics of Relation*.

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BEYOND CINEMA

Analyzing *the Mitchells vs. the Machines* (Rianda 2021) Through Cinema and Media Theories:

Toward a Media-Oriented Techno Literacy Framework

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In this study, I propose that Mike Rianda's *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* can serve as a model of a learning object that fosters a specific form of technological literacy. Within the current international educational landscape, institutional guidelines recognize the critical role of media in shaping citizenship, particularly in light of the growing prevalence of digital and visual phenomenological forms in everyday technological life. From this perspective, *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* is a valuable model for addressing various media-educational themes. However, its relevance extends beyond this: the film's content can also be interpreted as a representation of specific theoretical approaches within media studies –such as media archaeology, technological post-phenomenology, and the neuro-cognitive approach to cinema and audiovisual media– which currently rank among the most widely debated topics in the field. I propose that it is possible to metaphorically 'put one's hands into the film', 'touching' its components to understand the interactions among its various elements and acquire a set of pre-knowledge that may be helpful in other aspects of everyday life. To do so, my theoretical analysis establishes a concise dialogue between media archaeology, film studies, and neuroscience to support the hypothesis that *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* constitutes a prototype for technology literacy pathways.

Keywords
Human-Technology Interaction; Audiovisual Media; Media Archaeology; Neuro-Cognition And Cinema; Techno Literacy
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INTRODUCTION

In April 2021, Netflix released the animated family film *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* available on its platform. Directed by Mike Rianda and produced by Columbia Pictures and Sony Pictures Animation, the film follows the Mitchell family: Linda, an elementary school teacher; Rick, a well-intentioned yet technologically inept father; and their two children –Katie, a young student on the verge of enrolling in a prestigious film school in California, and Aaron, a shy boy with a deep passion for dinosaurs. The family is completed by their peculiar dog, Monchi, whose distinctive physical and behavioral traits play a crucial role in the resolution of the narrative. The plot centers on the family's journey to accompany Katie to her new school; however, along the way, they unexpectedly become humanity's last hope against a machine uprising. Led by the malevolent artificial intelligence and virtual assistant PAL, the machines rebel against

humans, posing an existential threat. Seeking revenge against its creator for attempting to replace it with humanoid robots, PAL hacks into their systems and transforms them into a personal army. Through ingenuity, resourcefulness, and their eccentricity, the Mitchells ultimately defeat PAL, restoring humanity's freedom.

As will be explored in the following sections, the characters' varying levels of technological proficiency –understood as their ability to use tools belonging to different technological epochs and ontological paradigms– serve as their primary means of countering PAL. Another central film theme is the dynamic relationships between family members and the strength of their familial bond. This aspect is influenced by the malfunctioning robots Eric and Deborah, who aspire to experience human emotions and, in doing so, integrate into the Mitchell family, which further emphasizes the relationship.

Mike Rianda's film offers a compelling representation of everyday life in the digital postmodern era, particularly concerning human interactions with technology. The *onlife* condition, theorized by Luciano Floridi (2014, 2015, 2021), serves as the broader framework within which the Mitchells' actions, experiences, and aspirations unfold. Each family member embodies a distinct mode of engaging with and accepting digital technology: Katie represents the digital native who envisions a future shaped by technology, particularly audiovisual media; Linda is the nurturing mother drawn to the idealized yet often misleading portrayals on social media; Aaron is the instinctive digital native who interacts seamlessly with media; and Rick is the digital immigrant who struggles with new technologies despite his best efforts.

Beyond its purely narrative aspects, *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* serves as a valuable tool for addressing a range of issues central to contemporary Media studies and supporting the hypothesis I introduce in this contribution. Rianda's film offers significant insights into a series of interrelated and complementary themes, which I will briefly outline, moving from the most explicit and evident to the more profound ones. The film proves helpful for: a) a media educational reflection, particularly concerning everyday interactions with media and the dynamics between different generations (such as parent-child relationships, etc.); b) a preliminary analysis of the human-technology relationship, specifically regarding the use of smart devices (including the aforementioned generational differences), as well as human-machine interaction (HMI) and human-robotics interaction (HRI), with their respective subcategories (such as communication with machines, identification with robots and vice versa, etc.)[1]; c) exploration of cinematic language, the film's meta-linguistic character, and its nature as a "media object" characterized by its specific complexity and materiality. Thus, we can consider *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* at least in two ways: a tool for analyzing media education and literacy frameworks (with particular attention to Remix Culture, the logic of mash-ups, and the concept of cultural remediation);

1 See Sandry (2015, 2017).

a medium to provide a methodological framework for investigating the technological stratifications –and their interrelations– that are simultaneously diegetic and extra-diegetic in the film while also reflecting contemporary techno-media everyday life.

THE MITCHELLS VS. THE MACHINES: THEMES, AND ITS ROLE IN THE HYPOTHESIS

In this study, I propose that Mike Rianda's *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* can serve as a model of a learning object that fosters a specific form of technological literacy. Within the current international educational landscape, institutional guidelines[2] recognize the critical role of media in shaping citizenship, particularly in light of the growing prevalence of digital and visual phenomenological forms in everyday technological life. Film and audiovisual media –conceived as products, objects, "things", and experiences– have increasingly been integrated as educational and didactic tools within this framework. Historically,[3] still and moving images have played a central role in theoretical and empirical research exploring their effectiveness –sometimes assumed, sometimes empirically supported– in knowledge transmission. The emergence and subsequent dissemination of theoretical models and diverse methodological approaches further underscore the significance of these research trajectories on a global scale. From this perspective, *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* is a valuable model for addressing various media-educational themes. However, its relevance extends beyond this: the film's content can also be interpreted as a

2 In the International educational landscape, although with varying approaches and speeds of change due to geographical and cultural inclinations and sensitivities (Reid, 2018), the digitalization of the 2000s has led to an increase in media-related activities, including the use of audiovisual materials in schools. In Italy, for instance, the Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito launched a *Piano Nazionale per l'educazione visuale a scuola* (2016) with the aim of "promoting the teaching of cinematic and audiovisual language in the classroom" to facilitate the acquisition of "tools and methods of analysis to understand the grammar of images and to develop awareness of their nature and specific functioning." This study primarily examines the Italian educational context, focusing on the *Indicazioni Nazionali* issued by the Ministry in 2012 and revised in 2018.

3 In the early 20th century, Thomas A. Edison, following the invention of the *Edison's Home Kinetoscope*, strongly advocated for the widespread introduction of moving images in American educational practices, emphasizing the powerful impact of visual (and narrative) materials on young learners' cognition (see Keeler, 2012; Saettler, 1990). Starting from the 1920s in the United States, *Visual education* emerged as a dynamic field of theoretical and empirical research (Brooker, 1947; Keeler, 2012; Paxton and Marcus, 2018). Today, various research strands related to this topic –such as *Film education* and *Film literacy* –fall within the broader domain of *Media education* and the multiple literacies that stem from and complement it. In recent years, discussions on *Film education* and *Film literacy* have gained increasing prominence in the policy guidelines of various national governments across the European Union "Burn and Reid 2012; Reid 2018".

representation of specific theoretical approaches within media studies –such as media archaeology, technological post-phenomenology, and the neuro-cognitive approach to cinema and audiovisual media– which currently rank among the most widely debated topics in the field.

The film can potentially cultivate a broader form of media (and visual) awareness than what is typically considered in school-based media education programs. These programs, despite strategic directives, often focus primarily on understanding how to use technological tools for strictly didactic purposes. In this sense, I refer to a form of technology literacy that aims to deepen knowledge of media theories and expand technological awareness beyond the strictly educational context and the instrumental use of digital tools.

The Mitchells vs. The Machines has been identified as a paradigmatic case study to support this objective. As a family-oriented film, it is designed to engage a wide age range, all interacting daily with digital technology. The film portrays these generational differences in technological engagement, mirroring real-world dynamics. Like other films with similar themes,[4] it is an animated production. This characteristic enhances its appeal and emotional resonance, particularly among the demographics most immersed in digital culture (children and young people).[5] However, unlike many other animated films, Rianda's work operates on a meta-linguistic and, more specifically, meta-cinematic level. The narrative directly engages with cinematic materiality (Katie is a filmmaker; various phases of video production are depicted throughout the film, etc.), establishing a more direct connection to theoretical research in cinema, and media studies. Moreover, the film can be an accessible introduction to artificial intelligence and its growing role in everyday life. It offers a compelling depiction of screens' ubiquity and the evolving human-technology relationship, making it a valuable tool for fostering critical engagement with contemporary media environments. All these themes contribute to positioning Rianda's *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* as a helpful tool for *Technology education* (Pappa et al. 2024a, 2024b) and *Technology literacy* (Williams 2009; Davies 2011; Cassinadri 2024). The film can serve both as an introduction to technological tools in school curricula and as a resource for developing effective teaching and learning methodologies using these tools –ranging from computers and mobile devices to educational robotics, AI-driven apps, and platforms.

However, as previously stated, this contribution adopts a theoretical orientation

4 Among the many animated productions, I cite *The Iron Giant* (Bird, 1999), *Robots* (Wedge and Saldanha, 2005), and *Ron's Gone Wrong* (Smith and Vine, 2021). Among live-action films, notable examples include *Bicentennial Man* (Columbus, 1999) and *A.I. – Artificial Intelligence* (Spielberg, 2001), alongside the broader genre of works exploring the relationship between humans and machines, such as the TV series *Westworld* (Nolan and Joy, 2016–2019). With the exception of Columbus's film, all these productions adopt a strongly dystopian perspective. Conversely, films like *Wall-E* (Stanton, 2008) focus on a more humanized form of robotics, though without portraying a genuine relationship between humans and machines. Regarding *Wall-E*, see Sobchack (2009).

5 See Chu et al. (2015).

grounded in cinema and media studies. The approach adopted here is thus grounded in media theories, incorporating insights from post-phenomenological (Ihde 1990; Verbeek 2005; Rosenberg and Verbeek 2015; Ihde and Malafouris 2019), phenomenological, and neuro-cognitive perspectives (Sobchack 1992, 2004; D'Aloia and Eugeni 2015, 2017; Parisi 2019; Fingerhut 2021). These perspectives suggest that the human-technology relationship should be examined through the lens of everyday life, considering the broad experiential spectrum that emerges from interactions with technological artifacts[6] and the reciprocal exchange between human and technological agents –while assuming the materiality of the technical object as a fundamental premise. Accordingly, this article aims to promote a form of *technology literacy* that aligns with Hansen's view of education as a means to "empower people to live life well and to positively influence their environment" (2003, 117) and with Williams' definition, which emphasizes "an awareness or appreciation of the relationships between technology, society, and the environment" (2009, 246). *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* effectively illustrates these dimensions. The notion of *technological thinking* –beyond using tools to perform specific actions– is repeatedly foregrounded throughout the film. Similarly, the film's meta-cinematic and meta-media nature offers a tangible engagement with the cinematic apparatus itself, allowing viewers to grasp the heterogeneity of components that shape and sustain the creation of a filmic product.

The theoretical analysis presented in the following sections establishes a concise dialogue between media archaeology, film studies, and neuroscience to support the hypothesis that *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* constitutes a prototype for technology literacy pathways.

THE "HANDS-ON" TENDENCY OF TECHNOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE: SOME THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES

The core of my hypothesis revolves around the possible pre-knowledge and practical competence effects that the user-viewer[7] may develop through watching Mike Rianda's *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* and engaging with the

6 In this regard, it is essential to consider, for example, studies on screens (Carbone, 2016; Carbone and Lingua, 2023), media apparatuses (Casetti, 2015; Eugeni, 2021), visual culture (Pinotti and Somaini, 2016; Wulf, 2022), as well as research in anthropology and cognitive aesthetics (Malafouris, 2013; Dissanayake, 2015), among others.

7 I define the viewer as a *user*, following the terminology adopted by Fickers and van den Oever (2018, 2022) in their analysis within the EMA framework. As these scholars emphasize, the term is intended to encompass both the *user* and the *use*, serving as a synonym for both meanings. Moreover, the concept of a *user*-viewer aligns with the idea that the viewer is active, engaging with and responding to what they see.

film's very 'body'. To support this proposal, I consider *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* as a media object endowed with concrete materiality and depth in a pretty literal sense. In this and the following sections, I propose that it is possible to metaphorically 'put one's hands into the film', 'touching' its components to understand the interactions among its various elements and acquire a set of pre-knowledge that may be helpful in other aspects of everyday life. To do so, I will establish a dialogue between different theoretical perspectives from media studies.

Andreas Fickers and Annie van den Oever (2014, 2018, 2019, 2022) offer a compelling approach to media archaeology with experimental media archaeology (EMA). The scholars argue for the value of "seeking a physical, sensual engagement with [...] historical artifacts" to "stimulate our imagination of the past" (2019, 46). This engagement allows researchers to "reflect critically on the hidden or non-verbalized, sensorial, corporal, and tacit knowledge that informs our engagement with media technologies" (ibid.). Their objective is thus to understand "how historical objects of media technology can be used as sources for a sensorial-focused history of technology and the media" (ibid.). Fickers and van den Oever's media-archaeological approach is rooted in *re-enactment*, a concept developed in historiography by Roger Collingwood (1946). According to Collingwood, historical knowledge consists of "the perpetuation of past acts in the present" (as quoted in Fickers and van den Oever 2019, 54). Historical actions –belonging to the past– can be reactivated through thought reproducing them. However, Fickers and van den Oever take this rational engagement further, transforming it into a practical and tangible experience. Their EMA is predominantly tactile, relying on real sensory engagement with media artifacts. In this regard, EMA resonates with *learning by doing* and constructivist approaches, aiming to be "a springboard for action". The scholars suggest that user interactions with technological devices emerge through activation, and activities such as handling old technological artifacts in media archaeology laboratories (an approach that fosters "hands-on" knowledge) can stimulate these interactions.

I would like to extend this argument further. The issue is that Fickers and van den Oever's activities require physical, genuine interaction with technological artifacts. As I have already emphasized, EMA is based on direct, bodily (and therefore sensory) engagement with the object of study. This approach opens up an additional line of inquiry: Could a similar kind of manipulation and discovery experience occur just through watching a film –by handling it with one's eyes[8]?

8 As will become evident in the following section, I employ this expression metaphorically, as vision is only one of the senses involved in the cinematic experience. In this regard, I align with Sobchack (2004, 64-65), who argues that "vision is not isolated from our other senses. Whatever its specific structure, capacities, and sensual discriminations, vision is only one modality of my lived body's access to the world and only one means of making the world of objects and others sensible –that is, meaningful– to me. Vision may be the sense most privileged in the culture and the cinema, with hearing a close second; nonetheless, I do not leave my capacity to touch or to smell or

Let us explore how this might unfold in *The Mitchells vs. The Machines*. The film's characters engage in various actions that involve manipulation and artistic-aesthetic construction through technology. As a result, the *user-viewer* may unconsciously acquire certain pre-knowledge and skills –or, at the very least, undergo a *techno-experience*– during the film's runtime. This aspect occurs through intersubjective positioning with the characters who use (or interact with) technological artifacts. In this light, *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* could be a visual-media environment where user-viewers can practice interacting with technology, guided and structured by the film's narrative. Much like a physical object or environment, the film may contain *affordances* (Gibson 1979; Carocci 2018; Ronzhyn et al. 2023) –that is, physical features that suggest possible actions to the user-viewer. In this way, the filmic product could become an experiential and educational tool that can be explored through experimental activities. Consequently, the film may serve as an actual media environment where viewers can act and engage in a series of indirect educational experiences. This concept aligns with the complex mechanisms of *embodied simulation* (Gallese 2007, 2015; Gallese and Guerra 2015), through which cognition can produce simulated experiences even when engaging with an aesthetic event.

To fully articulate this perspective, it is necessary to introduce, albeit briefly, some theoretical considerations on *embodied cognition* (Gallese 2007; Gallese and Guerra 2015) and its relationship with aesthetic and cinematic experience; the enactivist approach to human perception within environmental contexts (Noë and O'Regan 2001; Noë 2004); and relevant studies on the intersection of cinema, media, and cognition (Grodal 1997, 2009; Carocci 2018; Tikka 2008; Tikka et al. 2023).

According to Gallese (2007, 2015), the activation of so-called mirror neurons occurs both "when executing a motor act, such as grasping an object or making communicative gestures with the mouth, and when observing another individual performing a motor act" (Gallese and Guerra 2015, 57). Our brain can thus simulate an action simply by seeing it.[9] Gallese speaks of *embodied simulation*, referring to the cognitive ability to perceive through the body and simulate actions. Likewise, a similar process manifests when emotions and the capacity for empathy are involved: "[s]imilarly, it has been shown that experiencing an emotion or a sensation, observing it when experienced by others, and imagining it are underpinned by the activation of partly identical brain circuits" (Gallese 2007, 3). When we experience an aesthetic event (watching a film, reading, observing a painting, etc.), our simulative condition is enhanced, as our cognition is entirely directed and immersed in the fictional reality. In essence, being aware of the

to taste at the door [...]".

9 "To see an action means, perceptually speaking, *also* to simulate it within one's own motor system, through one's own motor system" (Gallese and Guerra 2015, 57, my translation, emphasis in original). It is important to specify that the activation of mirror neurons occurs only if the action –whether performed or observed– is goal-directed. See Caruana and Borghi (2016).

fictional nature of what we are witnessing allows us to experience it fully, with a maximum degree of immersion and identification. In a state resembling catharsis, we may experience extreme emotions (such as anger, terror, or pleasure) without actual risk, yet live that experience in a totalizing manner. Gallese defines this condition as *liberated embodied simulation* (ibid.; Wojciehowski and Gallese 2011; Gallese and Guerra 2015), referring to the process that enables strong empathic adherence to the character and the situation being experienced.

According to the enactivist approach of Alva Noë and Kevin O'Regan (2001), seeing involves inherently action, and the perceptual act enables interaction with both the object and the environment in which we find ourselves. As Carocci (2018) emphasizes, perception ensures a genuine exploration of the environment and that any interaction with it or with an object goes beyond understanding its form and morphology. Through perception, we already know how to use a particular object "since perception is perception of *affordance*, that is, [...] of what objects and the surrounding world *offer* us and invite us to do" (Caruana and Borghi 2016, 37, emphasis in original). Additionally, some interpretations of media theories and visual culture (Pinotti and Somaini 2016; Cometa 2020) suggest images themselves can constitute an environment rich in meanings: this refers to a space in which one can live, experience, and perform actions (for instance, in virtual reality spaces), and with which one can interact[10]. Thus, even a media space –a film being a functional representation of such[11]– can be an environment that facilitates "activations" and offers orientations toward action. Narration can also function similarly, providing cues for action: embedded within it are universal and general behavioral patterns of problem-solving (Grodal 2009; Gottschall 2012; Calabrese and Conti 2020; Tikka et al. 2023),[12] which thus ensure modes of learning (under conditions of pre-reflexivity) concerning the dynamics of everyday actions.

In conclusion, EMA is based on a "hands-on" approach to technology, allowing for manipulating a device to understand how to use it and, potentially, to generate new knowledge (Ellis and Williamson 2020). However, if we can, merely through sight (which is, in reality, the ability to "see" with the whole body), identify with a character by simulating their actions, empathizing with them, and co-experiencing their actions, then perhaps we can acquire pre-knowledge regarding the actions and use of objects and artifacts present in the narrative, through the viewing and paradoxical *simulated manipulation* of a film. Referring to the case of *The Mitchells vs. The Machines*, one might hypothesize that it facilitates pre-knowledge and initial competencies related to technological

10 For a deeper exploration of eco-media, see Fuller (2007), Parisi (2019), and Cometa (2024). From a different perspective, concerning so-called "media and technological environments" refer to Montani, Cecchi, and Feyles (2018), as well as Ciano et al. (2019).

11 Both as a "body" with which to establish a relationship (Sobchack 1992, 2004) and as a form of cognitive extension, see D'Aloia and Eugeni (2015, 2017); Carocci (2018).

12 Wolfgang Ernst (2005) argues that narration should also be considered as a technical element, and that it is essential to engage with it as a form of technology.

artifacts and human-technology relationships, thereby fostering a particular form of technology literacy that is more oriented toward media studies.

THE MANIPULATION OF THE MITCHELLS FAMILY: SOME EXPLORATORY EXAMPLES

The film offers potential 'hooks' for media literacy and audiovisual language from the first shots. The introductory screen presenting the Mitchell family features at least three types of graphic choices: in the lower part of the frame, the drawing is two-dimensional, used to depict the protagonists of the story in a comic book style; the typography of the phrase "Worst family of all time" resembles those commonly used in graphic art and comics; the three-dimensional rendering, typically found in cartoons created with computer graphics. Hand-painted textures further expanded the film's technical (and technological) scope, as confirmed by the production team and director Mike Rianda.[13] This stylistic blend recurs throughout the film, emphasizing key narrative moments while externalizing the protagonist's emotions, Katie.

Beyond its semiotic function, this layered style may be an initial mode of discovering audiovisual language and graphic techniques. It is as if, by metaphorically placing our hands 'inside' the film,[14] we can begin to grasp certain aspects of the discursive level of the cinematic product. In the opening scenes, Katie introduces her family members, employing different graphic levels and mash-up dynamics typical of *Remix Culture* (Lessig 2009; Manovich 2010; Sonvilla-Weiss 2010). For instance, Katie explicitly compares her father, Rick, to a screaming gibbon, a comparison made visually explicit in the film: her father's image is alternated with footage of the animal in a montage sequence (introducing yet another stylistic contamination –animation juxtaposed with live-action footage). Their faces are superimposed, placing the gibbon's screaming face onto Rick's animated body as a "montage of attractions". The film references the video-sharing platform YouTube and intertextual connections to blockbuster films, primarily within the disaster and dystopian genres. The presence of Remix Culture elements allows for initial consideration. These instances may be interpreted as examples of *re-enactment*, drawing on the concept proposed by Fickers and van den Oever. However, in contrast to the historical direction of Collingwood, from which the two scholars derive the idea, here the re-enactment serves to bring back into the present technological objects that played a significant role in the collective imagination of their original era, fully belonging to Pop culture (e.g., the 1990s Furby toy, which in the film becomes an

13 https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/the-mitchells-vs-the-machines-animation-netflix-1234633881/

14 Parikka (2012) emphasizes that one of the primary goals of Media Archaeology is to dig into the media to understand their functioning and the relationships that exist within and between them.

ally of the PAL operating system). This situation could be an act of remediation, not merely as a cognitive, pragmatic, and aesthetic reorganization of the media experience but rather as a resemanticization of the technological object in its materiality. Following EMA, I propose this as an initial form of re-enactment, not of thought (as in Collingwood's theory, later adopted by Fickers and van den Oever), but rather as an act of mnemonic reproduction or, more precisely, of excavation and rediscovery of a media object or practice. This act is followed by a subsequent reinvention of the action or technological object, functioning as a mechanism of appropriation (or re-appropriation) of its function and meaning, shaped by the action and interaction –whether actual or simulated– with the object itself. Ellis and Williamson specify that EMA "makes the historian a co-constructor of [...] multiple meanings, past and present" of technologies and that one must use "practice and experience as bases for producing new knowledge about old media" (2020, 2). In our case, the *user*-viewer watching the film would also assume the role of a media historian. A quick clarification is necessary here. Based on this initial consideration, the position of the *user*-viewer watching the film appears to align with the "*imagined* user" category. According to Fickers and van den Oever (2018, 2022), this pertains to an action derived from past experiences engaging with fiction materials (imagined, utopian, dystopian, etc.), which are then projected into the future. By contrast, as defined by these scholars, the "*re-enacted* user" is the only case in which re-enactment serves a media-archaeological research purpose, as it arises from direct, tangible, physical interaction with a technological device.

The hybrid approach of simulated manipulation that I am hypothesizing could effectively activate a process of re-enactment in the sense intended by these scholars.[15] In alignment with the enactivist perspective, I argue that recollection/reinvention corresponds to an (at least partially pre-rational) understanding of a given object, along with the associated sensorimotor activation that could lead to its hypothetical use in another context (a physical rather than exclusively symbolic-representational context, from which it originally derives). For example, in many scenes of the film, Rick frequently references his screwdriver and the various tasks he can accomplish with it. Katie's father is passionate about DIY projects and considers the screwdriver an essential tool always to have (in fact, all family members possess one). Observing how the protagonists use the screwdriver seems to allow the *user*-viewer to imagine its function –even though, in this case, it is a well-known tool– and, hypothetically, to comprehend it.[16] The potential acquisition of knowledge and competence could occur through embodied simulation, mainly since the screwdriver is a strategic medium in

15 Furthermore, Fickers and van den Oever aim to "make an interesting contribution to a media and technology historiography that draws inspiration from the *sensing* of the past" (2022, 33, emphasis in original).

16 In this situation, we could speak of an *imagined* user. However, if my hypothesis of a simulated manipulation makes sense, we might already be dealing with a *re-enacted* user.

narrative moments marked by emotional intensity. As we discussed in previous sections, these are instances in which viewers are more likely to be emotionally engaged in the action they are witnessing –an effect of intersubjectivity. In this sense, engaging with technology –even analog– could suggest modes of use in a broader context, potentially serving as a behavioral model for problem-solving in other situations. Katie shares her passion for cinema early in the film, showcasing the different stages of creating her stop-motion short films. These scenes offer a glimpse into and, to some extent, an assimilation of basic production techniques: puppet construction, animation, and filming, often carried out using a Handycam. Once again, each narrative sequence (diegetic and extra-diegetic) containing these elements may serve as a techno-cognitive affordance for learning procedural aspects through embodied simulation. In general, the entire narrative provides the opportunity to 'touch' the filmic medium –to 'dig' into the cinematic construct: it allows one to observe the mechanics of narrative and discursive structures (a common meta-linguistic reflection) and to explore potential technological approaches to creating visual and graphic objects. According to Fickers and van den Oever, since the objective of EMA is to offer "a full-bodied and sensory approach to media technology" (2018, 200, my translation), Rianda's film once again proves to be a valuable object for excavation and deconstruction, enabling "a better understanding of the 'constructivist nature' of media technology products (photographs, films, audio recordings, etc.) as historical sources (e.g., handling them as 'staged performances' rather than 'snapshot versions of life', that is, questioning the 'visual' or 'sonic' evidence of audiovisual sources)" (2014, 277).

However, as stated earlier, excavation is an act that primarily entails a media-archaeological and technological approach. In this sense, delving into and within the medium is an effective action for the hypothesis of a media-oriented *Technology literacy*, a process of technological knowledge and re-cognition based on the mixed approach of EMA and embodied simulation I am describing. The excavation and deconstruction (simulated yet paradoxically motor-driven) of the cinematic object should enable the learning of fundamental aspects of human-machine interaction and technology. Let us examine several key elements from *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* that may help illustrate this argument more effectively.

TOWARDS A MEDIA-ORIENTED TECHNOLOGY LITERACY

All the media and technologies depicted in the film provide insights into the historical period to which they belong and, most importantly, their specific uses. The existential journey of Katie, partially recounted through flashbacks, is a process of personal growth and self-awareness that unfolds in parallel with technological evolution. Throughout the film, we witness a gradual transition

from the Handycam, which young Katie used to create her first recordings, to the smartphone, which the college-aged Katie engages with and uses to produce videos as an adult. Simultaneously, the smartphone that her mother, Linda, uses to chat and post content on Instagram is juxtaposed with both the corded telephone and physical phonebook Aaron uses to connect with fellow dinosaur enthusiasts and, more significantly, with the near-total lack of digital proficiency exhibited by her father, Rich, who favors more analog tools, such as the screwdriver mentioned above or the crossbow he employs against the robots. The film's "archaeological" nature permeates the entire narrative, which ultimately revolves around a confrontation between humans and machines. The former are technologically less advanced than the latter, and various objects in the film emphasize this disparity. For instance, the Mitchells' old car is a metaphor for this technological backwardness, contrasting with the androids controlled by PAL. The USB drive that Katie attempts to use to upload the robot deactivation code, along with the screwdrivers that help the Mitchells escape from the prison spheres, stand in opposition to the futuristic spacecraft meant to launch humanity into space. Monchi the dog's crossed eyes also disrupt the robots' recognition systems, undermining PAL's technological singularity.

Despite these contrasts, the storyline emphasizes that the interplay between humans and technology is fundamental to resolving the central conflict. In this regard, the film aligns with certain principles of post-phenomenological theory concerning human-technology mediation[17] while engaging with cognitive archaeology elements.[18] These aspects contribute to developing the media-oriented technology literacy I aim to introduce. As previously noted, a key function of cinematic media is to enable potential actions and cognitive feedback loops for the viewer, cultivating an ecological relationship with the medium and its content. The two humanoid Pal Max robots, Eric and Deborah, initially hostile to the Mitchells, provide the clearest example of this human-machine relationship. Following a turbulent beginning, the robots develop an attachment to the family, ultimately siding with them against PAL and becoming integrated into the Mitchell household. Throughout the film, the two Pal Max robots attempt to simulate human emotional responses, for example, by painting facial expressions such as smiles or tears onto their screens[19].

Technology provides interpretative keys and intentional affordances throughout the narrative –suggesting actions that extend beyond the plot and reference

17 See Ihde (1990); Rosenberger and Verbeek (2015).

18 See Malafouris (2013, 2021); Ihde and Malafouris (2019).

19 Paul Dumouchel and Luisa Damiano (2016) provide an important contribution to the analysis of the increasingly close (and empathetic) relationship between humans and robots. In the final part of their essay, the authors discuss the latest studies in robotic epigenetics, whose goal should be to create machines capable of genuinely experiencing emotions, rather than merely simulating them. For this reason, the authors emphasize the importance of an enactivist approach, according to which machines and humans should interact within affective loops, allowing for a continuous and mutual intentional exchange. I also refer to Denicolai (2022) on this topic.

our post-media condition. The various levels of human-technology relationships Don Ihde (1990) identified in his post-phenomenological framework closely align with the film's narrative and contribute to articulating a form of technology literacy. Let us briefly examine the most salient aspects with reference to the film. Ihde distinguishes four types of relationships, each differing in the degree of awareness with which humans engage with technological objects. The broader context of the film represents our contemporary *onlife* condition, which, in line with Ihde, can be classified as an *embodiment relation*: the characters' actions result from radical mediation (Grusin 2015) and a continuous dialogue with technology. In this sense, their relationship with the world is entirely mediated. When the robots shut down Wi-Fi globally, widespread panic ensues: people willingly enter the prison spheres, drawn by the promise of connectivity and an unspecified yet enticing digital entertainment experience. However, a brief exchange between Rich and Katie provides an even more explicit illustration of this condition. At a dinosaur-themed rest stop, Rich reprimands his daughter for perceiving reality solely through the lens of her devices. Katie counters his remark, asserting that her relationship with technology is her way of experiencing the world. This exchange ultimately delineates two distinct human conditions: the analog (representing digital immigrants) and the digital (representing natives). Katie playfully superimposes a kitten filter over her father's face to punctuate her perspective in real-time.[20] This dialogue is particularly compelling for its implications within eco-media and enactivist perspectives[21] and this analysis of human-technology interactions. While the film primarily operates within an embodiment relation, we can also discern traces of an *alterity relation*. According to Ihde (1990), this mode of interaction requires a genuine dialogue between two entities. In the scene discussed above, however, this exchange remains 'silent' as it lacks a direct action-reaction dynamic. Yet, it remains tangible as it emerges through an assemblage –an *apparatus* formed between humans and machines (Denicolai, 2022). PAL's actions, in a dystopian manner, exemplify a *background relation*, meaning that they occur without continuous human awareness. In daily life, humanity is surrounded by machines that operate autonomously, often in ways that serve human well-being (e.g., air conditioners, refrigerators, etc.). Similarly, algorithms collect and process data, presenting users with personalized information. In this regard, Eugeni highlights the existence of *pseudo-organisms* –machine-prostheses that, in ecological interaction with

20 R: "You could experience things a whole lot better without that camera. Your eyes are nature's camera". K: "I am experiencing it. This is how I experience things". R: "I don't think you are. You're hiding behind that phone". In response to this statement, Katie frames her father with the smartphone and, in real-time, applies a ridiculous filter to his face. (tc: 00:25:27-00:25:45).

21 Noë (2015) focuses on the now common practice of experiencing live events through the lens of the camera, highlighting the need to share a performative moment and, consequently, live it not "with the naked eye" but already mediated by the smartphone's lens. In this way, a continuous relationship, also cognitive, of action and feedback becomes evident between the entities involved.

human agents (but often unbeknownst to them), "frequently perform certain organism-like functions with a high degree of automatism" (Eugeni 2021, 249, my translation). Lastly, the *hermeneutic relation* allows humans to interpret otherwise imperceptible data or phenomena. In the film, this is evident when the Pal Max humanoids visually represent their plans for conquest. However, this relation can also serve a metalinguistic and, consequently, an investigative function. From this perspective, I consider the presence of graphical elements that frequently enrich the film's frames and diegesis as a form of hermeneutic relation. The use of graphic overlays –ranging from varied artistic styles to slow-motion sequences and filters– enhances the emotional states of the characters, enabling the viewer to engage more deeply with the unfolding action.

Finally, I wish to touch upon a crucial issue embedded within the film –one whose awareness may be regarded as an initial step toward achieving this media-oriented technology literacy. The entire narrative revolves around humans and technology's active and reactive relationship. As the story progresses, the issue becomes increasingly evident: at first, post-media, digital, and immersive technology is present in the actions of all the Mitchells except for Rich. However, Rich is not inherently less technological than the others; the plot's resolution hinges on his analog media (the screwdriver, the crossbow) and his skills (DIY craftsmanship, tool usage, woodworking[22]). This situation suggests the coexistence of different levels of technology in terms of their material evolution (from the screwdriver to the USB drive, for instance) while reaffirming the necessity of continuous co-action between humanity and technology. Metaphorically and in everyday life, this relationship persistently and in real-time shapes both agents involved.[23] Indeed, Rich gradually embraces digital technology, just as Katie recognizes –or rather, rediscover, reimagine, *re-enact*– the analog. A form of technological thinking emerges, allowing the *user*-viewer to engage with these dynamics and internalize them through the simulated manipulation I have proposed.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have attempted to propose a heuristic mode of media investigation, with particular attention to the audiovisual and cinematic product, aiming to provide (but not exclusively) schools and younger generations with a methodology to 'enter' the media object and deepen their understanding both from a specific linguistic and stylistic perspective and, more importantly, from a media and technological standpoint. In this regard, I am introducing, in an entirely exploratory manner, the possibility of identifying a specific technology

22 The small wooden carved moose head, sculpted by Rich and given to Katie by the man, symbolizes a metaphorical passing of the baton of a series of knowledge, principles, desires, and techno-media awareness.

23 See Malafouris (2013, 2021); Parisi (2019).

literacy rooted in media studies as an approach to exploring and discovering the relationship between the human agent and the technological object. To this end, within media theories, I endeavored to create a dialogue between media archaeology lines and certain neurocognitive studies foundations as applied to aesthetic and cinematic experience.

The Fickers' and van den Oever EMA approach is advantageous, as it is based on the necessary manipulation of the technological object to establish a relationship with it and, consequently, to 'live' an experience, which may also be semantic, with it. My proposal is further developed by suggesting that such manipulation could also occur through embodied simulation (thanks to the neural mechanisms of our cognition), enabling the filmic object to be considered in its three-dimensionality –both as an object and as a 'box' into which we can look and experiment not only with sensations or emotions but also with modes of action. This simulated manipulation is still embryonic and requires further exploration and verification, including through potential experimentation and assessment in learning contexts.

To support this hypothesis, I considered the film *The Mitchells vs. The Machines* as a paradigmatic example of a media object and environment because it contains a series of inputs and affordances that could help elucidate my model. Consciously, I focused only on certain salient aspects of the film, highlighting those I considered most functional in supporting my starting hypothesis. I remain convinced that Rianda's film exemplifies a way of living with technology in our everyday lives and is a vibrant educational tool for media literacy activities.

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REVIEWS/COMPTES-RENDUS

Miriam De Rosa

Camille Henrot, Grosse Fatigue:

Notes on Desktop Cinema

Milano-Udine: Mimesis-EX Series 02, 2024, pp. 168

DOI https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/29021

The computer graphic interface, or desktop, is so pervasive as to have become almost "invisual" (Parikka 2023, 75 quoted in De Rosa 2024, 71) and certainly unremarkable. Recently, an IT specialist took remote control of my screen in search of corrupted files. I was immediately disconcerted, as the rogue cursor sped across the surface, opening and closing my folders. The experience was as affectively invasive as if someone had read my diary or was rummaging through my drawers. I felt kind of exposed. In other words, the familiarity of the desktop is such that it feels like it's mine, but it is also yours and ours. Towards the end of her book, *Camille Henrot, Grosse Fatigue. Notes on Desktop Cinema*, Miriam De Rosa encapsulates this slippery, capricious nature when she describes desktop cinema as "a method to make sense of something that is not fixed" (154). Reading these words, I imagine the ears of scholars of experimental cinema, video and artists' moving images pricking up. For De Rosa phrasing seems to point to the opening maneuver of a long tradition of critical cinema, as per Scott MacDonald's series of books (see, for example, MacDonald 1998) to examine films that make the conditions of production and consumption of a particular medium strange. Certainly, it is the case in this book that those interested in how desktop cinema interrogates the desktop will find their curiosity sated. But it is to De Rosa's credit that, via the heterogeneity of this surface, she intertwines significant recent debates around media archaeology, post-cinema, digital aesthetics, and the post-digital. In desktop cinema, De Rosa argues, we witness "things happening, ongoing, unfolding" (69) resulting in spectatorship being dominated by a "processual aspect" (130). Crucially then, *Camille Henrot, Grosse Fatigue. Notes on Desktop Cinema* draws our attention to the desktop as a verb.

Herein, then, lies a valuable study of the emerging genre of desktop cinema. This term was first used by De Rosa to describe Kevin B. Lee's video-essay *Transformers: The Premake* (2014) (De Rosa and Strauven 2020). The term captures work that includes the desktop environment in the diegesis and that may include "pre-recorded desktop footage and other sources, including original or found footage, as well as PC-delivered data" (De Rosa and Strauven 2020, 248). Let us not forget though the excuse for such a study: visual artist Camille Henrot's 2013 video artwork *Grosse Fatigue*. In a recent poll of the 100 best artworks of the 21st century (Anon, ARTnews, 5 March 2025), *Grosse Fatigue* was allotted 7th place. The intention of the poll was not to be exhaustive, but rather to draw attention to works that characterise art of the first 25 years of this century. Miriam De Rosa concurs with the editors of the poll when she claims that *Grosse Fatigue*

should be seen as the first example of desktop cinema. We can see these two different claims as showing how Henrot's video serves two masters: first, it engages and holds attention as a double-sided single screen hung in a gallery that refers to desktop subjectivity; second, Henrot's video bears scrutiny as an exercise in becoming critical about the artistic affordances of the unfixed nature of the desktop.

As one might expect of a study focused on a single work, the book includes a wealth of visual material. High resolution screen shots from specific moments in the video that are discussed by De Rosa are combined with images from other examples of desktop cinema, cited in later chapters. The images from *Grosse Fatigue* are essential since they reiterate how the video serves two masters. Not only do the images illustrate how the visual appeal to perambulating art visitors is sustained by an array of brightly coloured desktop backgrounds, but they also record medium specific techniques, such as mise-en-abyme, to interconnect images opened on the desktop (24), and "stacking" (66) of numerous open windows, which contributes to creating a sense of depth on the surface. Sadly, absent though are shots showing how the video has been installed. Returning to its appeal when it is exhibited, the video attracts visitors through visuals and a powerful, driving soundtrack. Aurally, the video involves an iterative poetic narration that draws from "a variety of creation myths [...] from Navajo to Shinto, from Islamic sacred texts to Kabbalah" (124), accompanied by percussive instrumentation. Crucially, the aural components extend the artwork's reference points from digital art towards narrative and performance art. In acknowledgement of the importance of the latter, De Rosa dedicates one chapter to sound and includes a transcript of the narration. Yet the former, the exhibition of the video, is not recorded visually. The fact that it is not dwelt upon reveals De Rosa's otherwise implicit agenda, encapsulated in the two parts of the book's title, which appears to be using *Grosse Fatigue* as a point of origin, but not a final destination.

Enacting her agenda, De Rosa structures the book as a dispersal from the singular video, which is used to locate the origins of desktop cinema, to an array of other examples, culminating in a round table involving scholars in digital aesthetics—Darren Gary Berkland—and post-cinema—Shane Denson—and makers—Iris Blauensteiner, Belit Sag, and Suneil Sanzgiri. Such a structure is effective in opening up rather than closing down an area, in anticipation of further research. So, what does De Rosa establish, and what remains to be studied through desktop cinema? For those inspired by media archaeology, with its interest in materiality, the continuities and differences explored between "desk top" and "desktop" (see also De Rosa and Strauven 2020) are suggestive of the need for continued excavations, following in the weighty footsteps of Giuliana Bruno's study of surface/s (2014). Post-cinema scholars, when approaching desktop cinema, should be mindful of how the weave of the desktop as a "networked texture of everyday life and practices" (De Rosa 2020) both calls to us (as per the affective attachment I described at the start of this review) and keeps us at a distance. Finally, understandings of the post-digital are enhanced by considering the oxymoronic ways in which the two-dimensional materiality of the desktop surface is able to make tangible our multi-dimensional experience of life in 21st century (35-36). To encapsulate De Rosa's evolving thesis, we could say that this book contributes to our understanding of how "spectator-surface" relations work in the 21st century.

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The World Through AI

Curated by Antonio Somaini

Associated Curators: Ada Ackerman, Alexandre Gefen, Pia Viewing

Jeu de Paume (Paris, 11 April – 21 September 2025)

DOI https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/29022

Rediscovering the "real" world upon exiting the Jeu de Paume after the exhibition *The World Through AI* means coming to terms with a sense of the end. We feel that our perception is anachronistic, limited, and fragile; we feel that we are naively attached to things, and we look at those things, that light, those colors and shapes, already with a hint of nostalgia. At the Jeu de Paume, the decentralization of the human being that has long been discussed in various fields of culture and science, in the name of the Stieglerian neganthropocene, is not something that is learned, but something that is experienced step by step, room by room. For a few hours, we become thinking, sentient machines, learning to adopt their mathematical *gaze* and even their capacity for hallucination; this is why returning to using our eyes at the end of this extraordinary experience is almost moving.

This is a great achievement for this exhibition on AI and art—the first major exhibition entirely dedicated to this theme—curated by Antonio Somaini, in association with Ada Ackerman, Alexandre Gefen, and Pia Viewing. *The World Through AI* aims to take stock of an elusive subject undergoing rapid transformation, managing to tell us what AI was in the first season of its life; what it has been, and above all what artists have done with it so far, in order to understand and question it critically.

The World Through AI is divided into four main sections that move from matter to words in a circular journey that echoes two archaic elements of human expression. In this passage, which is at once technical, cultural, and political, artificial intelligence is interrogated not only as a technological object, but also as a device that reflects and reshapes the structures of thought, language, and power. Each section is accompanied by archaeological media showcases that convey the *longue durée* of the themes addressed, highlighting the continuity between 18th-century automata and chatbots, 19th-century phrenology, and face recognition.

The *overture* is as unexpected as it is incisive; in the first room, we find Julian Charrière's geological compositions (*Metamorphism LI*, 2016), which force us to confront the often-ignored material foundations of artificial intelligence: the minerals it consumes, the landscapes it marks, the silent toll it imposes on the planet. Reflections on the ideology and political and ecological weight of AI accompany the entire exhibition and are further clarified by the imposing murals by Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler (*Calculating Empires: A Genealogy of Technology and Power Since 1500*, 2023); enormous genealogical maps that allow us to visualise the underground connection that links Dürer's grids to pixels.

This broad socio-political premise introduces the first thematic macro-section of the exhibition, dedicated to the so-called "analytic AI"; the deep learning algorithms through which large amounts of data can be classified and categorised. Through these algorithms, machines can "see", i.e., recognise things and humans, revealing to us—perhaps more than we would like—aspects of ourselves, our hierarchies and categories of thought. For example, *Exposing.ai* (Adam Harvey 2021) discloses the constant theft of images uploaded online for the creation of algorithmic training data sets, while *Faces of ImagNet* (Trevor Paglen, 2022) highlights the political complexity of artificial vision, exposing the opaque structures of bias that shape databases, to the point of interpreting our image according to identity stereotypes of absurd specificity. Finally, Hito Steyerl's work *Mechanical Kurds* (2025), created specifically for this exhibition, presents the contemporary click worker as the most up-to-date version of the eighteenth century chess-playing automaton (a machine that actually contained a human being). The alienating working conditions of a Kurdish person grappling with image labelling are a way of revealing how the dream of complete automation of intelligence always conceals the exploitation of subaltern identities.

The second thematic macro-section of the exhibition is dedicated to "generative AI", i.e., works created through learning algorithms that generate new data, such as texts and moving images, from gigantic databases. This is the heart of the exhibition, which explores the ability of algorithms to replace or integrate the most strictly creative functions typical of human beings. The entry point into these complicated generative processes is the notion of "latent space", introduced by Antonio Somaini as "the abstract space within which complex, high-dimensional data structures (such as images, texts and sounds [...]) are represented in a more simplified lower dimensional form, in order to be processed through different mathematical operations" (2025, 21). Latent space is therefore the warehouse where an enormous quantity of texts and images is stored in compressed and diagrammatic form. We understand its function thanks to one of the archaeological media cross-sections in the exhibition, which reminds us that the compression of data within spatial constructs is part of our history as human beings; maps, atlases, and even catalogue cards were systems of compression and displacement of information that are not qualitatively different from the coordinates in which data coagulation points are located in latent spaces.

The new creativity distributed between humans and machines is therefore nothing more than a new way of operating on latent space, as shown by the work of filmmaker, writer and researcher Érik Bullot. His *Cinéma vivant* (2024) is a series of 12 photorealistic digital images generated by a text-to-image algorithmic model. The prompts are the words of the symbolist poet Saint-Paul-Roux (1861-1940) and his cinematic utopia transformed into images in the conditional past tense (*images that could have been*), i.e., endowed with a completely new temporality that breaks down and blurs the sense of linear time. By tapping into AI's paradoxical sense of time, Bullot also manages to give shape to Abel Gance's unmade film, which the director talked about in a 1956 radio show. The images and sounds of his *Le rêve d'Abel Gance* (2025) are entirely generated by AI and open the field to what could become a history of potential cinema. Conversely, Gwenola Wagon's work rethinks a masterpiece of the past, *La Jetée* (1962), rewriting it through uncanny images of our media-saturated present, to the point of blurring memory and premonition. Her *Chroniques du soleil noir* (2023) is a film that prompts us to question what art of the twentieth century might become in the age of artificial intelligence. What can cinema become when its series of frames can be continuously interrupted and interpolated in an invisible way, or covered with an ever-changing skin? What can video become when

its intrinsic narcissism is enhanced by AI tools, as in the room entirely dedicated to Gregory Chatonsky and his memorial film—not of the life he lived, but of the life he could have lived—which the machine generates in ever-changing sequences? Each visitor witnesses a version of the artist's life, each viewer sees their "own" film linked to the contingency of the moment in which they stand in front of the image.

Questions about the fate of the media remain open and extend beyond cinema, as in the more photographic section, where AI is both a tool of control and a means of compensating for neglected identities and bringing to light what has been discarded by history (as in *The Archive of Unnamed Workers*, by Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert & Alexia Achilleos, 2022). The exhibition curated by Somaini, Ackerman, Gefen and Viewing is a call to discover a technique on the verge of completely obscuring its own functioning, beyond philanthropic prejudices and technophile enthusiasm.

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Gregory A. Waller

Beyond the Movie Theater:

Sites, Sponsors, Uses, Audiences

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For a long time, the history of silent cinema exhibition in the United States has accounted for the ways motion pictures were delivered to seemingly undifferentiated audiences, in purpose-built venues loosely associated with broad terms such as "nickelodeons" or "movie palaces". The institutionalisation of American cinema in the first two decades of the twentieth century, marked by the flourishing of commercial movie theatres all over the United States, has been the object of many studies concerned with industrial, economic, political or sociocultural issues. But while, on the one hand, the New Cinema History approach has expanded this field by considering the historical variables that determined the cinematic experience lived by empirically grounded spectators in equally grounded projection sites, on the other, much is to be written about the presence of films in circumstances that cannot be considered in terms of profit or entertainment. This is precisely the aim of *Beyond the Movie Theater*, an outstanding monograph on the non-theatrical use of moving pictures in the U.S. during the 1910s, written by a leading scholar in the field of cinema history, Gregory A. Waller. This contribution to the history of American cinema in the years of its full affirmation as an industry decisively broadens the picture of the uses and social significances assigned to films by public and private institutions, associations, companies, and audiences.

As Waller states in the volume's introduction, the term *non-theatrical*, used by the author to describe the wide array of non-commercially driven cinematic experiences in the period under scrutiny, is not to be understood as a homogeneous whole that is clearly distinct from the more traditionally conceived exhibition network. In fact, the most apparent feature of non-theatrical cinema as conceptualised by Waller is its unsystematic, acephalous, unorganic quality, that itself calls for a careful and specific historical approach to the matter. This lack of holistic coherence in this historical phenomenon is reiterated over and over throughout the chapters of the book. It is also what basically drives the astonishing archival research conducted by the author, in turn consistently presented as such, i.e., as a heterogeneous reconstruction of numerous microhistories, which derives its methodological justification and its overall strength from the very heterogeneity of this other cinema. It could be argued that the most striking aspect of this volume is the extremely wide range of case studies taken into consideration and examined through a plethora of diverse, yet rigorously and convincingly recalled archival sources, which provide us with a complex picture of what the movies meant in 1910s American society. The vast coverage of non-theatrical events along the decade by local

newspapers and periodicals, especially motion picture trade press and magazines, tells us that even the sources most traditionally associated with commercial cinema exhibition history have much more to say about a medium that was omnipresent but also extremely varied in terms of discourses and practices. Both these aspects are constantly examined and contextualised by Waller, whose in-depth research extensively relies on, but is not limited to, digitised press articles, advertisements, and reports. Other sources are recollected as well, ranging from ephemera to official government reports, from postcards to magazines like *Scientific American*, which had little to do with cinema as an entertainment industry.

At first glance, it may seem that such a multifarious array of sources and case studies discussed throughout the pages of *Beyond the Movie Theater* (which begins with the occasional private exhibition of the educational film *Twilight Sleep* in Wilmington, North Carolina, and ends with the ubiquitous presence of film screenings in "non-theatrical theaters" at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition held in San Francisco) could not be structured to give a macro-historical insight into this fragmentary cinematic reality. Indeed, even if we look at the numerous examples of non-theatrical cinema provided, some are just tangentially cited while others are discussed in depth, within specifically devoted paragraphs. However, as the author states, the aim of this volume is neither to simply catalogue the various instances of this kind of cinema, nor to understand them under a theoretically comprehensive master narrative. Rather, Waller structures his volume according to four leading features which could in principle be found in any non-theatrical occasion, but which also had countless internal variations, depending profoundly on historically specific variables. These four features are discussed in the volume's first four chapters, each of which, in describing the peculiarities of this sponsored, multi-purpose, multi-sited and audience-specific cinema, gives us invaluable information on the historical status of cinema as a whole.

The first two chapters focus respectively on the various actors who sponsored and controlled non-theatrical cinema, and on the various practical uses of film projections other than simply entertaining, strongly emphasising the social role of the movies in the Progressive Era. This utilitarian, morally uplifting use of moving pictures, as intended and promoted by a host of subjects concerned with shaping public life, gives a broader picture and deepens our perception of the harsh debate which in the same period spread over the legitimacy of films as an entertainment form and of movie theaters as part of the public sphere. The volume scrutinises not only the social functioning of non-theatrical cinema, both imagined and put into practice, but also its complex relationship with commercial exhibition. For example, Waller considers the "municipal", free and unsegregated public screenings held in St. Louis' parks, contested and labelled as unfair competition by theatre owners; a case study that, although singular, is telling about the lack of clear-cut distinctions between theatrical and non-theatrical public events. Another point is made clear and repeatedly stressed over the following chapters ("Multi-sited Cinema" and "Targeted Audiences"); even though multi-purpose, sponsored cinema was promoted as ubiquitous, in the service of the entire society and virtually adaptable for any use, in reality its presence was exclusive, uneven, and strongly dependent on factors which ranged from economic and logistic availability to safety regulations varying from State to State. Waller discusses cinema experiences that were by no means "egalitarian" or "democratic" (words often loosely assigned to nickelodeons), but aimed at homogeneous, specific, preemptively targeted segments of the audience. Moreover, such extensive use of films was not affordable by everyone; this point is further discussed in the final chapter, which delves into heavily advertised major events such as Land Shows and International Expositions.

In conclusion, *Beyond the Movie Theater* stands as an intriguing, enlightening, much needed contribution to American cinema history. Although the title may suggest a specific focus on exhibition, every aspect of non-theatrical cinema is considered, from production to distribution, from promotion and advertising to censorship and reception—and, of course, also exhibition. A whole microcosm of non-profitable, useful, educational, or promotional cinematic events held in schools, fairs, hospitals, public halls, both inside and outside the U.S., is yet to be discovered, to understand better what "cinema culture" could have been over the past century; Waller's volume represents a valuable step in this direction.

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LXXXI Venice International Film Festival

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The 75th Venice Film Festival unfolded along a spectrum between two extremes: the rigid narrative structure of Alfonso Cuarón's *Disclaimer*, and the excessive and unclassifiable nature of Harmony Korine's *Baby Invasion*. In both cases—albeit for different reasons—we are confronted with the notion of cinema seeking new ways to explore the present elsewhere, relocating itself beyond its traditional forms (Casetti 2015). While Cuarón guides the viewer through an unsettling exploration of the capacity of evidence to recount a traumatic past, juxtaposing different testimonial regimes (from documents to victim narratives), Korine literally detonates the cinematic form, taking it even further than in his previous work, *Aggro Dr1ft* (2023). In *Baby Invasion*, editing appears to relinquish its traditional ordering function in favour of a continuous livestream. Here, vaporwave aesthetics and generative artificial intelligence's ability to alter faces and spaces transform the film into an almost hallucinogenic experience. This elicits a bodily reaction in the viewer, reminiscent of Williams's (1991) observations on "body genres".

Despite their formal differences, these two works share a capacity to depict a world "out of bounds", facing an imminent crisis that can no longer be postponed. Many of the films presented in Venice appear to engage with the notion of an impending end, urging us to consider the present and the future in light of an unavoidable trauma and a necessary rupture. In this sense, Thomas Vinterberg's foray into televised drama with *Families Like Ours* (*Familier som vores*) is emblematic in its depiction of the dissolution of social bonds in the face of ecological collapse. As Denmark dissolves and homes are abandoned, the director's unflinching social critique highlights the fragility of our beliefs, as epitomised by a gay couple sheltered by their class privilege who strive to defend a border that no longer exists.

The imminence of the end, which is cosmological in Vinterberg's view, also runs through some of the most hotly debated films at the festival, albeit in a more individual way. In *Maria* (directed by Pablo Larraín), the existential arc of "la Callas"—masterfully portrayed by Angelina Jolie—is presented as a spectacular hallucination. Here, the approach of death blurs the boundary between reality and delirium as the character is consumed by her own spectrality, in a fully Fisherian sense (2013). The peril of life-consuming risk lies also at the heart of the widely discussed *Babygirl* (Halina Reijn), where it is not the heavily publicised erotic element that strikes the viewer most, but rather Nicole Kidman's performance, which skillfully captures the complexities of mature stardom.

Moving towards an ideal synthesis of the themes found in the films of Larraín and Reijn is *Queer* (Luca Guadagnino), one of the director's most intriguing works and an adaptation of Burroughs' 1985 homonymous novel. The relationship between Lee (Daniel Craig) and Allerton (Drew Starkey) is presented in a structured series of chapters that gradually emphasises the impossibility of desire and the power dynamics it inevitably entails. Their journey into the jungle in search of Yagé provides an opportunity to explore the capacity of cinema to capture the spectrality of desire, a theme

further enhanced by Guadagnino's sophisticated use of superimposition to visualise the rhythms of love and imagination.

Traces of Guadagnino's influence can also be seen in Giovanni Tortorici's debut feature, *Diciannove*. This film stood out for its deeply personal reworking of coming-of-age tropes, which were used to portray the malaise of a generation unable to find its place in the world. Harmonising influences from television seriality with the legacy of a courageous strand of Italian cinema, the film delivers a personal yet stylistically mature work.

Less acclaimed during the festival but certainly deserving of attention is *Joker: Folie à deux*, in which Todd Phillips continues his personal deconstruction of the DC character by pairing him with Lady Gaga in an unusual pop musical. Though it was met with undue critical coldness, the film impresses with its complexity and postmodern flair, playing with audience expectations shaped by his previous *Joker* (2013).

By contrast, *The Room Next Door*, recipient of the Golden Lion, was met with an almost unanimous praise. This powerful melodrama uses strict compositional and aesthetic rigour as a backdrop to a profoundly emotional story, with outstanding performances from Tilda Swinton and Julianne Moore. Building on the trajectory of *Dolor y gloria* (2019), Pedro Almodóvar creates a suspended space for a story set entirely in the present, in which the anticipation of death becomes a real ordering principle.

The documentary section remains one of the most compelling parts of the festival, and one of the most appropriate audiovisual styles for exploring the complexities of our time. Within a highly varied line-up, where archival footage is frequently used as a tool by which to analyse the contemporary world, Errol Morris's *Separated* stands out for its overtly political nature. Focusing on migrant family separations at the US–Mexico border, the film dares to speak out against practices that often transcend the bounds of legality, using powerful testimonies and emotionally charged reenactments.

Equally compelling is *Israel Palestina på svensk TV 1958–1989* (Göran Hugo Olsson), which is a notable example of cinema's political significance. Spanning 206 minutes, the film presents archival footage from Swedish television on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict which inevitably intersects with well-known contemporary events. The excavation of archives and the editing of diverse, unaligned materials becomes a genuine act of care, demanding that filmmakers and audiences take a position and engage in an interpretative process that cannot be postponed. The same impulse also animates *Russians at War*, a compelling documentary that chronicles Anastasia Trofimova's extended presence on the Ukrainian front alongside the Russian army. By progressively immersing herself in the mindset of the soldiers and sharing with them a space where her life is constantly at risk, the filmmaker reveals a hidden aspect of the conflict, filling a significant void in the war narrative and presenting the human side of an army comprised of traumatised individuals on both sides, all of whom are part of a hopeless youth.

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PROJECTS & ABSTRACTS

Crystal Gazes:

Moving Images, Commodity Staging, and Display Practices of the Modern

Anna Franceschini / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract, 2021[1]
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The present research aims to reread the aesthetics of the modern through the mapping of recurring forms traceable in different spheres: in early twentieth-century cinema, in places designated for consumption, and in the artistic practice of the historical avant-gardes.

The first chapter of the thesis is devoted to essential terminological issues, and, within the section, terms such as *display*, *dispositive* and *medium*, which are most commonly used to refer to the constellation of forms, architectures and technologies examined, are contextualized (see, among the vast literature on the terminology: Agamben 2006; Albera and Tortajada 2015, 21–44; Baudry 1970, 1975; Bellour 2012; Bolter and Grusin 2000; Casetti 2005, 2015; Deleuze 1988, 185–95; Foucault 1975, 1969; McLuhan 1964; Simondon 1958, 2014; Staniszewsky 1998; Wollen 1995).

The main object of research was then identified: the store window. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the storefront embodies the manifestation of consumption in the form of image. Single framing or montage in the continuity of urban space, the window turns out to be one of the gestures of showing (Friedberg 1993, 73–83). The analysis of the history and development of the store window (see, e.g., Kiesler 1930; Friedberg 1993; Chung, Inaba, Koolhas, Leong 2000), the materials used to compose it (see, e.g., Benjamin 1999 and Nichols 2013, 23–46, among the others), and its imposition as a form and as a cultural form (Benjamin 2002, vol. 2, 734), made it possible to detect the relatedness of these displays to the order of visibility established by cinema and their contiguity with the cinematic device. Genealogies of the cinematic device and consumer architectures were traced, describing their display component and respective spectatorship (Friedberg 1993, 47–94, 109–48). The tools of film and media archeological investigation were applied to the storefront, bringing out a construction which recalls the one adopted by the "cinema of attractions" and, at the same time, an organization comparable to the display of goods in a storefront was recognized in the space of the cinematic frame (Gunning 1983, 1989; Gaudreault 2006; Musser 2006). It investigated the migration to places of consumption of the aesthetic codes developed by the avant-garde to renew the exhibition space (Gough 2003; Levi 2010, Klonk 2009, 87–134; Staniszewsky 1998, 1–58), marked by a recurring *cinématisme* (Eisenstein 2009, Somaini 2014,

1 Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Professor Luisella Farinotti (Università IULM, Milan) and Professor Emanuele Coccia (EHESS, Paris). Ph.D. dissertation date: 21/07/2021.

2017), a kinetic tension that moves visitors' gaze and thought. The first part of the thesis constitutes an interdisciplinary and composite mapping of the visible, strained between the virtualization of the gaze that characterizes the cinematic viewer and its simultaneous re-materialization at the moment when, outside the theater, he finds himself immersed in a city-exhibition space, whose fragmentary surface is littered with *quasi-filmic* devices.

The second part of the text explored the theory and practice of Frederick Kiesler, one of the most representative figures of the aesthetic renewal taking place at the beginning of the last century. The description and analysis of the practice of the architect, theorist and artist—Viennese by birth and American by adoption—testified the successful integration of the aesthetic codes of the avant-garde into extra-artistic and extra-European spheres (Makaryk 2018; Held 1982, 42–47). Kiesler's Correalist theory is introduced, although fully formulated by the author only later (Kiesler 1939, 1949, 1965), as anticipated, during the early 1920s, by group show installations and thematic exhibitions where he has the opportunity to test his intuitions regarding the balance of forms and bodies in space, as in the Viennese exhibition *Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik* in 1924. The Correalist thought, rooted in the theories of the De Stijl movement, is brought into dialogue in an unprecedented way with the philosophy of technique, in particular with Gilbert Simondon's theories regarding the genesis and development of technical objects and the human need from which they originate (Simondon 2014).

Kielserian thought finds accomplished materialization in revolutionary technical innovations for the display of artworks, such as the "Leger und Trager" system, which, by dislocating the works in an insular pattern allows for complete navigation of the exhibition space (Klonk 2009, 114), and in visionary scenic interventions for the theater, such as 1923's Berlin staging of Karel Čapek's play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (*R.U.R.* 1920), a media apparatus that transforms the stage into a viewing machine and anticipates future media such as closed-circuit television and virtual reality (Held 1982, 15; Graham 2013, 112–42; McGuire 2019). Kiesler is concerned, in theory and practice, with issues related to the cinematic device and in particular the screen, which he relates to other viewing technologies (McGuire 2007). In 1929 in New York, he set up the Film Arts Guild Cinema which included a new type of modular screen, the "Screen-o-Scope," and a never fully used multiple projection system (McGuire 2007, 52; Bruno 43-4), the "Project-o-Scope". In the manifesto *100% Cinema*—published in the magazine *Close up* in 1928 - he takes a position in the lively debate on the technical reproduction of film, taking angles shared or opposed by his contemporaries (see, e.g., Arnheim 1957, 4–6, 33, 75, 84, 106–11, 204–5, 217, 218, 226 and Kiesler 2014, 31–32).

The fourteen storefronts set up by Kiesler between 1927 and 1928 for Saks Fifth Avenue in New York manifest, again, the ideal of spatiotemporal continuity pursued by the architect. They construct a seamless narrative path, a sequence where the rarefied narrative is activated by a carefully emptied profilmic (Phillips, 2017; Haran 2013; McGuire 2017). Kieslerian window displays and the utopian designs for museums and consumer spaces collected in the volume *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display*, published in New York by Brentano (Kiesler 1930), take up the dual significance of the *screen* concept: on the one hand a generator of visibility and, at the same time, an instrument of masking (on this subject see, e.g., Huhtamo 2006; Casetti 2014; Rogers 2019; Carbone, 2020). The architect, in the final chapters of the volume (Kiesler, 1930, 100–42), envisions the scenario of the development of consumer architectures through the evolution of storefronts on the *façade*, anticipating the emergence of the shopping mall as a place of spectacular entertainment (Friedberg 1993, 122) and foretells the transformation of spectator and

consumer behavior through the penetration of European avant-garde thinking into American everyday life.

To the conclusions of the thesis, through the analysis of a corpus of filmic works—which comprises *Ghiro Ghiro Tondo* (Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi, 2007), *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962), *One from the Heart* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1981); *The Creators of Shopping Worlds* (Harun Farocki, 2001), *Nocturama* (Bertrand Bonello, 2016)—is delegated the problematization of the opposite and complementary issue to the crystallization of the storefront window as a *para-cinematic* device. If the storefront offers itself as a device that produces images and shapes a new gaze—the mobile, episodic but not yet virtualized gaze of the cinematic image—conversely, cinema can become a display and space of the staging of object repertoires and identities mediated by the relationship with commodities.

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Alice Guy's Film Debut:

The Restauration of a Herstory (1895-1907)

Coraline Refort / Ph.D. Thesis Abstract[1]
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This thesis aims to reconstruct the filmography and historical memory of Alice Guy (1873-1968), a pioneering figure as the world's first female film director, producer, and studio head. Despite Alice Guy's foundational influence on early cinema, her contributions have been marginalized or misattributed, with her legacy often overshadowed by disputes over her authorship and first works. Using an interdisciplinary approach—bridging microhistory, gender studies, and early cinema studies—this research critically reexamines her career at Gaumont studios, from her entry in 1895 to her departure for the United States in 1907.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Alice Guy's career developed during the nascent phase of cinema, a period marked by industrial fluidity, allowing greater diversity in film production roles than during the structured era that followed. By revisiting her early years at Gaumont, where she directed or supervised over 150 films, this thesis highlights Alice Guy's influential role in shaping cinematic practices at a time when the film industry was still in the process of defining itself. Despite her achievements, the historiography of early cinema has frequently overlooked Guy's contributions, often due to the undocumented, unsigned, or lost status of her films, a challenge exacerbated by the absence of a formal directorial title during this period.

The feminist resurgence of the 1970s reintroduced Guy's work into academic discourse, aligning her rediscovery with broader efforts to unearth female contributions to cinema history. Yet, misconceptions about her filmography persist, spurred by contradictory archival evidence and the prevailing invisibility of early female filmmakers. This thesis therefore adopts an integrative methodology, engaging with diverse archival sources, including advertisements, film catalogues, previously unexplored archives, personal letters, and production stills, to establish a comprehensive filmography and accurate account of Guy's career in France.

CHALLENGES IN ATTRIBUTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY

A significant portion of this research addresses historiographical challenges surrounding the

1 Thesis supervised by Professor Cristina Jandelli (Università di Firenze) and Professor Laurent Véray (Université la Sorbonne Nouvelle). Ph.D. dissertation date: 28/06/2024. For information: coralinerefort@yahoo.fr.

dating and authorship of Guy's first films. Early scholars attributed conflicting production dates for *La Fée aux choux*—variously identified as having been made in 1896, 1900, or 1902[2]—reflecting broader issues of ambiguous authorship that characterize early cinema. This ambiguity has often reduced Guy's twenty-year career to a limited discourse on her initial film's provenance, marginalizing her extensive contributions. By examining her work through a microhistorical lens, this thesis repositions Guy as a central figure in the early cinema industry, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of her agency within the evolving practices of the Gaumont studios.

Guy's autobiography, *Autobiographie d'une pionnière du cinéma 1873-1968* (Guy 1976), serves as a critical source for this research, providing insights into her professional ethos and the challenges she faced. However, the memoir's subjective nature necessitates a balanced approach, integrating corroborative archival data to distinguish factual elements from personal narrative. This investigation thus navigates the tension between Guy's self-representation and external accounts, addressing the gaps that obscure her early career. Additionally, the study considers how contemporary feminist historiography has constructed and reshaped Guy's legacy, identifying her as a symbol of early female agency yet constrained by the historic erasure that plagues pioneering women in cinema.

FILMOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL IMPACT

Beyond reconstructing Guy's filmography, this thesis examines the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of her films within the socio-political milieu of the Belle Époque. Employing the concept of intermediality (Gaudreault 1999), the analysis situates her works within broader visual and performative traditions, exploring how they reflect and subvert contemporary social norms. For instance, *La Fée aux choux* (1900) and *Sage-femme de première classe* (1902) are analysed in terms of their representation of fairy tale archetypes and gender roles, while *La Vie du Christ* (1906) is considered for its innovative staging and religious iconography, bridging biblical spectacle with cinematic expression.

The thesis' final chapter focuses on gender performativity in Guy's films, examining cross-dressing and other narrative techniques that challenge gender expectations in works like *Madame a des envies* (1906) and *Les Résultats du féminisme* (1906). By drawing on queer theory and Judith Butler's (1990) notion of performative gender, the analysis demonstrates how Guy's films critique conventional gender roles, positioning her as an early innovator in challenging societal norms through cinema. This interpretation contributes to ongoing discussions on early film as a medium for subverting traditional narratives and provides insight into how Guy's work addressed gender and identity within a rapidly modernizing France.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL RECEPTION

The historiographical section traces the evolving scholarly and public reception of Alice Guy, particularly from 1910 to the present, illustrating how interpretations of her work have mirrored shifts in feminist film theory and historical paradigms. Identifying three key phases—1910-1976, 1976-1993, and 1993-present—this section argues that the resurgence of feminist historiography during the 1970s played a pivotal role in reestablishing

2 Jean Mitry (1964) places her debut in 1899, Francis Lacassin in 1897 (Guy et al. 1976), Frédérique Moreau (1986) in 1896, Victor Bachy (1993) in 1896, Alison McMahan (2002) in 1896, and Maurice Gianati (2012) in 1902.

Guy's presence in film studies. However, while her profile has increased through biographies, documentaries, and popular media, these representations often oversimplify her legacy, focusing on her role as the "first" female director without recognizing the full scope of her influence and agency.

This study positions Guy as a central yet controversial figure whose career challenges conventional narratives of cinema history. Examining her relative obscurity in canonical film texts, it considers how the early cinema's archival practices have contributed to the inconsistent transmission of her legacy. The analysis also addresses how modern commemorative practices, such as exhibitions, documentaries, and the creation of the Alice Guy Prize in 2017, have helped counter historical erasure while sometimes contributing to mythologizing her life and career. Thus, this work highlights the need for a balanced historiographical approach that honours Guy's achievements without reducing her legacy to simplified narratives.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMINIST CINEMA STUDIES

This research provides a comprehensive re-evaluation of Alice Guy's contributions, advocating for her rightful place in film history as a pioneering creative and industrial force. Through the meticulous reconstruction of her French filmography, this thesis contributes to a more accurate understanding of early cinema and the structural barriers that female filmmakers faced. The interdisciplinary approach not only recovers the historical memory of Alice Guy but also situates her work within the broader context of feminist film history and gender studies.

The study's findings have broader implications for feminist cinema studies, demonstrating how the archival marginalization of figures like Guy perpetuates gender-based exclusions in historical narratives. By integrating perspectives from archival studies, feminist theory, and early cinema scholarship, this thesis argues for an inclusive historiographical practice that acknowledges the complex identities and contributions of pioneering women in film. This research calls for continued investigation into early female filmmakers and highlights the importance of preserving diverse voices within cinema's historical record.

In summary, *Alice Guy's Film Debut: The Restoration of a Herstory* (1895-1907) addresses historiographical, archival, and cultural dimensions of early cinema, challenging the reductive narratives that have historically minimized Guy's legacy. This thesis contributes to the redefinition of cinema history by positioning Alice Guy as an essential figure whose work played a foundational role in early filmmaking practices.

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Gender Equality

in the Public Financing Framework of the Italian Film Industry

Flavia Sorbo, Ph.D. Thesis Project[1]
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The research project aims to investigate the system of public funding for the film industry, with the goal of providing an overview of gender equity practices within the public support mechanisms for contemporary Italian cinema.

The project follows two parallel lines of research: on the one hand, it reconstructs gender policies, best practices, and gender-based criteria adopted by the main public institutions which allocate funding for film production, allowing a clearer understanding of the context in which projects apply for funding. On the other hand, the film analysis of selected movies that received one or more public grants during the chosen timeframe (2019–2023) serves as a tool to understand how this context takes shape in practice.

The research focuses on three territorial levels that structure the film industry's organizational framework. The supranational level is examined through the analysis of the two main European programs: the MEDIA program of Creative Europe (with a focus on its development schemes) and the Eurimages program of the Council of Europe (specifically the co-production fund). The national level is investigated by analyzing the funding allocated by the Italian Ministry of Culture through the General Directorate for Cinema and Audiovisual (DGCA), with particular attention to funds dedicated to the development and production phases. The subnational level is addressed through an examination of the funding provided by two regional Film Commissions operating in Italy, which represent the research's case study.

The theoretical framework of the research adopts an approach that increasingly combines the dimension of gender with that of labor in the cultural industries. As demonstrated, among others, by the special issue of *Comunicazioni Sociali*, titled *Gender and Labour in the Italian Audiovisual Industries: Critical Research Approaches and Methods*, edited by Rosa Barotsi, Gloria Dagnino, and Carla Mereu Keating (2023), and by the *CineAF* project, curated by Rosa Barotsi and Mariagrazia Fanchi[2], studies of gender representation (female and beyond) are being integrated with research on film production and the media industry.

The dual nature of the project requires a set

1 Project supervisor: Professor Giovanna Maina (University of Turin), Project co-supervisors: Professor Marica Spalletta (Link Campus University - Rome), Professor Federico Zecca, (University of Bari "Aldo Moro").

2 The project is funded by the European Union's "Marie Skłodowska-Curie" program and is hosted by the Department of Communication, Visual and Performing Arts and ALMED (Graduate School of Media, Communications and Performing Arts) at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan <https://ricerca.unicatt.it/ricerca-progetti-in-corso-cineaf> [accessed 5 June 2025].

of theoretical and methodological tools drawn from different research areas: film economics, production and media industry studies, film and media studies and cultural analysis with gender studies, providing a privileged perspective to investigate the dynamics at the heart of this research.

This transdisciplinary approach allows an analysis of audiovisual products not only as creative artifacts but also as part of industrial routines, shaped by hierarchies and dynamics (in this case, gender-related) that tend to replicate the broader socio-cultural systems in which they operate.

The initial phase of the research focused primarily on mapping the regulatory framework that structures public intervention in the audiovisual sector in Europe and Italy, with specific reference to gender equality. In this respect, Italian Law no. 220/2016 (the so-called *Cinema Law*) and its implementing decrees have represented one of the primary objects of study. From there, the investigation moved on to a more detailed analysis of funding activities carried out by key public institutions both at European and national levels, through a review of individual calls and the application forms made available by funding bodies. The aim is to identify any adopted gender policies—when present. In this context, reports from the European Audiovisual Observatory[3] and the annual *Valutazione di impatto della Legge Cinema* by the DGCA[4] provide valuable resources for contextualizing data on gender dimensions within public funding—especially regarding the main professional roles in the audiovisual sector.

At regional level, the research is currently analyzing the grants provided by the selected Film Commissions. This part of the work involves collecting quantitative data on professionals involved in the projects that applied for one or more funding calls during the specified time frame. To this end, the application forms of each project submitted to the relevant fund(s) are being examined. Particular attention is paid to data concerning direction, screenwriting, editing, production, and the age of the director—which are among the key indicators used in the "Gender Equality and Diversity" section of the Valutazione d'impatto report.

Harmonizing these indicators as much as possible allows the results from regional data collection to be placed within a broader context that also includes the national level.

From these initial research phases, some critical issues emerge, mainly concerning the collection and processing of data. First, the volume of data to be managed is substantial, and access to certain information is challenging, especially for non-digitalized documents.

Another highly relevant issue concerns the very nature of the available data and, inevitably, how they are collected. The binary categorization of "gender" is extremely limited and limiting: it excludes any other subjectivity from the statistics (and beyond), denying them visibility and recognition, and it distorts binary gender data by including individuals who do not identify within male or female categories. Keeping this in mind, the research explicitly frames this as a methodological limitation in its foundational premises.

In conclusion, the research project's goals concern two distinct yet converging aspects of the public funding system, which together help outline the national—and broader—landscape in which Italian cinema is situated.

On the one hand, the project aims to provide

3 The European Audiovisual Observatory is part of the Council of Europe. The Observatory was created in 1992 in order to collect and distribute information about the audiovisual industries in Europe. Among other, it produces reports on female professionals working in European audiovisual productions, all of which are available for download on the website <https://www.obs.coe.int/en/web/observatoire/publications> [accessed 5 June 2025].

4 All the report are available for download on DGCA website <https://cinema.cultura.gov.it/comunicazione/pubblicazioni-dgca/valutazione-di-impatto> [accessed 5 June 2025].

a tool which improve access to information on gender equity within the public funding system for the audiovisual sector (particularly in Italy) by mapping—albeit not exhaustively—the gender policies that shape public funding at the three territorial levels described above. The goal is to gain a general overview that highlights any shortcomings or gaps concerning gender equality, which might, hopefully, be addressed.

Alongside this structural objective, two guiding questions have emerged during the research, functioning as a subtext to the film analysis of funded works. The first concerns the role that gender dimension plays within what Giacomo Manzoli and Marco Cucco call '*cinema di Stato*' (2017), that is, films that are at least partially funded by public resources. The second, closely tied to the first, considers which films represent the identity of our Country and what role gender plays in that representation—for instance, in terms of characters portrayed, storyline and the representational models employed.

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