SPACE, REPRESENTATION, AND REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN ART CINEMA

By

CLAYTON DILLARD

Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Greensboro, NC
2010

Master of Arts in Cinema Studies
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA
2012

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Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Graig Uhlin

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Jeff Menne

Dr. Timothy Murphy

Dr. Louise Siddons

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Name: CLAYTON DILLARD

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Abstract: This dissertation analyzes a select group of contemporary films that can generally be categorized as European art cinema by focusing on how space, representation, and realism operate within them. The study concentrates on how these films utilize cinematic space as part of a more general critique of representational realism. Contemporary, in this case, means European films made between 1990 and 2019, given that 1989 marks the fall of the Berlin Wall and thus a postrevolutionary Europe. This study, however, is not explicitly concerned with a strict periodization or chronology of (trans)national cinemas. The focus of this study falls upon formal analysis as it informs the efforts of a range of filmmakers to further shape the aesthetics of European art cinema beyond the dominant mode of vérité-style realism. The films and filmmakers featured in this dissertation comprise selective examples that stage a meaningful intersection between socio-political subject matter and a resistance to realism as the aesthetic means of addressing that subject matter. The overall focus is less with examining films that have been overlooked, underappreciated, or rejected than with focusing on *why and how* these filmmakers consciously turn away from dominant forms of realism and socio-political messaging to interrogate significant contemporary issues within European life, which often includes issues such as decolonization, migration, poverty, and global capitalism. The case studies also embark, in part, upon relocating cinephilia within the landscape of contemporary European art cinema by teasing out throughlines that lie beneath the surface of films, almost like fault lines waiting to be activated. Cinephilia assists in the process of spatial and representational analysis by encountering those aftershocks that encompass the body of European cinema from a different vantage point, one in which identitarian logic works alongside cinematic history and theory, not in place of it.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: SPACE, REPRESENTATION, AND REALISM

When critics call the films of Romanian director Cristi Puiu "realist," he disagrees with their assessment. "I do not think realism exists," he says. "It is merely a label."[1] In the same interview, however, Puiu says, "When I was studying cinema in Geneva, I realized that I was very much interested in realism, but only insofar as it implies a possible meeting with the other, that is, a meeting with the world that is outside your own mind."[2] Realism actually does exist, it seems for Puiu, but as a means to encounter something or someone else, *not* as a term with which to describe his filmmaking. Puiu, who is one of the central figures of what has been widely deemed the Romanian New Wave, works in a style that is typically defined by "lengthy tracking shots, [a] handheld aesthetic, and [a] dreary milieu," as *Film Comment* noted of *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Romania, 2005), which depicts an ailing man's search for medical care over the course of a single night.[3] In other words, the film bears the hallmarks of contemporary realist style.

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[1] Monica Filimon, *Cristi Puiu* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 258.
[2] Filimon, *Cristi Puiu*, 258.
[3] Mark Cummins, "Interview: Cristi Puiu," *Film Comment*. May-June 2006. https://www.filmcomment.com/article/a-painful-case-cristi-puiu-interviewed/

The magazine added, though, that these visual traits are misleading: in Puiu's film, they aren't indications of "a familiar kind of [vérité style] art film" that is "social-realist in its content," but are instead characteristic of how Puiu "convert[s] banal material into surreal encounters."[4] Simply put, the outward appearance of realism pivots toward *something else*; in Puiu's case, it might be surreal encounters. In other films from the same era of twenty-first century European art cinema, the pivot may be toward expressionism, theatricality, the grotesque, or forms of audiovisual dissonance, among other options. The pivot away from realism, though, is crucial for Puiu, and it's equally important for the films and filmmakers taken up in the study that follows.

This dissertation analyzes a select group of contemporary films drawn from what is generally categorized as European art cinema which utilize cinematic space as part of a more general critique of representational realism. For these filmmakers, realism is a problem: it is something to be met with suspicion and avoided, or at least pivoted away from. Some are, like Puiu, anti-realist, while others exhibit realist tendencies that eventually collapse under the weight of a pivot toward alternative aesthetic modes. These films are more focused on space and spatial logic than character interiority or empathetic identification—they interrogate how questions of margin versus center, especially the circumstances of African migration to Europe, assist in articulating the spacing of contemporary Europe as a political, cultural, and economic project.

Contemporary, in this case, means European films made between 1990 and 2019, given that 1989 marks the fall of the Berlin Wall and thus a postrevolutionary Europe.[5]

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[4] Cummins, "Interview."

[5] Philipp Ther marks 1989 as the defining point of "postrevolutionary Europe," and explains his rationale as such: "The demonstrations in fall 1989, the rejoicing when the communists stepped down, the excitement at

This study, however, is not explicitly concerned with a strict periodization or chronology of (trans)national cinemas. A number of monographs and edited collections have surveyed much of this history and these cinemas, typically by organizing their analyses around questions of cultural identity and mobility/migration.[6] Instead of once again taking up these issues, the focus of this study falls upon audiovisual analysis as it informs the efforts of a range of filmmakers to further shape the aesthetics of European art cinema beyond the dominant mode of vérité-style realism.[7]

Part of the tension inherent to this discussion of realism as a dominant cinematic style concerns how filmmakers in Europe negotiate their artistic ambitions within the industrial constraints of funding and representation. As Marco Abel argues in relation to the "counter-cinema" of the so-called "Berlin School" (the name given to a group of contemporary German filmmakers), traditional, representational realism encourages us to conceive of the world through identitarian frameworks that discourage other contexts and possibilities in pursuit of promoting messages of equality, tolerance, and cosmopolitanism. Abel cites filmmaker Ulrich Köhler on this topic, who explains how

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the first free elections—this all seems very distant, not least because so much changed during the nineties, not only in the lives of the over 330 million citizens of postcommunist countries in Europe but ultimately for all Europeans." *Europe Since 1989: A History*, trans. by Charlotte Hughes-Kreutzmüller (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 13.

[6] Select titles include, but are not limited to, Luisa Rivi, *European Cinema After 1989: Cultural Identity and Transnational Production* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2007; *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 2010; *European Cinema After the Wall: Screening East-West Mobility*, eds. Leen Engelen and Kris Van Heuckelom (New York: Rowan & Littlefield), 2014; *Europe, Migration, and Identity: Connecting Migration Experiences and Europeanness*, eds. Jan Logemann, Donna Gabaccia, and Sally Gregory Kohlstedt (New York: Routledge), 2014; Guido Rings, *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema: Imagining a New Europe?* (New York: Routledge), 2016; Aine O'Healy, *Migrant Anxieties: Italian Cinema in a Transnational Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 2019.

[7] As Rosalind Galt makes clear, the events of the late '80s and early '90s "made a collective demand on the idea of Europe as a psychic, cultural and geopolitical location," and so both the continent and its cinema became "a question of space." *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 1.

one of the "surest ways to receive public funding for film productions in Germany is…to make topical, message-driven films that package political enlightenment in stories."[8] For Köhler, this is a regrettable feature of the system. The implication from Köhler's interview and Abel's analysis is that the European Union (EU) and other affiliated sources of public funding, such as the MEDIA program, use their resources to back films that will complement a political pursuit of unity among member nations and their peoples as broadly perceived by predominately neoliberal institutions.[9] If films can be reduced to political messaging and made profitable while simultaneously being celebrated as artistically significant by industrial outlets such as film festivals, film criticism, and awards academies, then a cultural stronghold persists. Formulaic filmmaking turns progressivism less into difficult formal questions that dynamize or challenge representational politics than into representational binaries, conceived along economically beneficial or political lines, that are thoroughly rooted in identitarian logic.

The films and filmmakers featured in this dissertation comprise selective examples that stage a meaningful intersection between socio-political subject matter and a resistance to realism as the aesthetic means for addressing that subject matter. Little

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[8] Marco Abel, *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18. Köhler goes on to say such films are the embodiment of "the aesthetic program of social-democratized cultural politics."

[9] On its website, the MEDIA sub-program of Creative Europe says its mission is to "support European film and other audiovisual industries. It provides funding for the development, promotion and distribution of European works within Europe and beyond." "Shaping Europe's Digital Future," *Europa*. https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/media-sub-programme-creative-europe. While that sounds neutral, Daphney Pernola Barr explains in a dissertation on the EU's media policies how the "linkage of creative enterprise—including audiovisual media goods—to economic prosperity is indicative of the overall push toward neoliberalist ideals to further extend commodity terms to goods that also serve as conveyors of culture." *Conflicted Union: Culture, Economics, and European Union Media Policy*. Dissertation. The University of South Carolina, 2014. 30.

consideration has been made for whether the films proved profitable; in fact, some of them have been quite popular with audiences, while others have been confined to the festival circuit and museums. The overall focus, then, is less with examining films that have been overlooked, underappreciated, or rejected than with focusing on *why and how* these filmmakers consciously turn away from dominant forms of realism and socio-political messaging to interrogate significant contemporary issues within European life, which often includes issues such as decolonization, migration, poverty, and global capitalism.

The three key terms of space, representation, and realism, while encompassing distinct areas of research within film studies, help draw our focus to what's at stake in engaging with the turn away from cinematic realism from an aesthetic and political perspective. The answer to the why and how here cannot be reduced to a simple response or summation, and so the five chapters of this dissertation chart various trajectories that provide specific responses to realism's limitations. Broadly speaking, however, we will see that there is a reluctance on the part of these filmmakers to represent social problems directly. To borrow the terms of experimental filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha from her film *Reassemblage* (Vietnam/Senegal, 1982), these filmmakers "do not intend to speak about" but to "speak nearby." While the films analyzed in this dissertation are not experimental ethnographic documentaries like Trinh's, they often evince a similarly reflexive or irreverent logic that views a straightforward reality effect as the antithesis to political consciousness. They share, in order words, the sentiments of Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki, who said this of the representational dilemma of dramatizing the experiences of African refugees: "to hell with realism."

This study comes, in part, out of an interest in further understanding the hostility toward realism as a representational strategy that Kaurismäki, Puiu, and other filmmakers often express. Cinephilic film criticism often "champion[s] extremes," as Adrian Martin has indicated. Of "critics who are truly cinephiles," he writes:

> They go for the highest and the lowest. They champion the most difficult, severe, rigorous, minimalist, experimental films; and, equally, they also champion the often despised, maligned and overlooked products of popular culture—like vulgar teenage comedies, gross horror, trashy exploitation, ultra-violent action, even pornography.[10]

This form of criticism has confronted the consolidation of realism as the preferred style of art cinema. Martin notes how the initial canon that became known as art cinema emerged, in the aftermath of World War II, as a response to the influence of Italian neorealism as an aesthetic practice rooted in humanist values and naturalism. This canon, Martin argues, "champions films it perceives as timeless, universal, and noble."[11] Whereas Martin wants to expand the canon, Susan Hayward offers a defense of social realism as a type of middlebrow cinema that is capable of addressing sociopolitical issues. As Hayward explains it, social realism became a popular, "well-attended" form of filmmaking in France during the 1950s, of which she concludes that social-realist films "demonstrate that middlebrow cinema, both accessible yet also inspirational and sometimes educational, may be especially well-suited to exploring [various] difficult

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[10] Adrian Martin, "Light My Fire: The Genealogy and of Film Canons," *Film Critic: Adrian Martin*. February 2008. http://www.filmcritic.com.au/essays/canons.html

[11] Martin, "Light My Fire." Martin's point is a contentious one: he is advocating for a rejection of this canon in favor of "an alternative canon" that would "embrace those extremes of cinema" by engaging in "a long and bloody battle with the old canon." While this dissertation offers no explicit commentary on this particular debate, I point this conversation out to demonstrate how taste cultures work to shape conceptions of style in relation to politics. For Martin, the shift toward extremes is about "revitalizing" forgotten "dead classics," and it's also about finding the "radical force that is waiting" in the extremes.

issues."[12] According to these conceptions, extremes are more about form (and, thus, likely to be affiliated with art cinema), while middlebrow social realism is about content meant to educate a public about "difficult issues." What's intriguing about these conceptions is how each camp views the appeal of its chosen form as being about a confrontation with "difficult" matters; both Martin and Hayward use this word to describe their chosen area of study despite their opposite focus and perspectives.[13] While Hayward isn't explicitly advocating for a shift in canon formation like Martin, the notion that middlebrow cinema is "especially well-suited" to examining social issues entails an implicit evaluative judgment that advocates its suitability in opposition to a film style that would be inaccessible (instead of populist), pessimistic (instead of inspirational), and abstract (instead of didactic or educational).

Cinematic realism has also been defended for the comparatively straightforward way that it is imagined as forging a politically activated audience in response to its "transparent" depiction of societal problems. In *The Politics and Poetics of Cinematic Realism*, for example, Hermann Kappelhoff uses rhetorical theory to establish the link between politics and poetics in cinema as they help form a "public space"; by this, Kappelhoff refers to how "aesthetic strategies and poetic practices emerge to reposition

[12] Susan Hayward, "Middlebrow Taste: Towards a New Middleclass—a Certain Tendency of 1950s French Cinema," in *Middlebrow Cinema*, ed. by Sally Faulkner (New York: Routledge, 2016), 48.
[13] These ideas would be contested, in part, by the emergence of what has become known as the New French Extremism in the first decade of the twenty-first century: a group of films that often push the presentational boundaries of violence against bodies. While formal extremity can be a trait in these films, which have been categorized differently by various scholars, it's the content that ultimately makes them "extreme." See Martine Beugnet, *Cinema of Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 2007; *The New Extremism in Cinema*, eds. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 2011; Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press), 2011.

audiences…with respect to their reality as participants in political communities."[14] Put simply, cinema engages in the struggle to relate audiences to their contemporary moment, and it does so through a fusion of the world of the film and the spectator's own world, with the end product being something we can call realism. These ideas differ from how Martin and Hayward conceive it; rather than seeing realism as something related directly to forms of representation, Kappelhoff conceives of it as an encounter between the world of the film and the spectator. Cinematic realism, then, is the combining of the poetic and the political (cultural practices that establish who can freely articulate themselves within a community) in ways that allow "spectators to imagine worlds that could be different from everyday lived reality."[15] The imagination, in Kappelhoff's view, is what allows for the spectator to have one foot off the ground while keeping the other firmly planted. Still, realism is not the only route to creating political communities, and that is the main argument of this dissertation. Moreover, realism can obscure how the filmmaker conceives of space and representation by insisting the spectator accepts its evocations of social life through empathy and proximity. Kappelhoff's approach is useful for how it aspires to encompass a transhistorical and transnational approach (his case studies span various eras and draw from numerous national cinemas) to cinematic form, as a focus on community, a concept drawn from both Richard Rorty and Jacques Rancière, helps explain a "contingent historical reality" that is "refigured through naturalization and local reforms."[16] These parameters, though, are more abstract than my own focus in this study

[14] Hermann Kappelhoff, *The Politics and Poetics of Cinematic Realism*, trans. by Daniel Hendrickson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), IX.
[15] Kappelhoff, *Cinematic Realism,* X. We can see here a kinship with Puiu's claim from earlier in the chapter that realism "allows a meeting with the world that is outside your own mind."
[16] Kappelhoff, *Cinematic Realism*, XI

because they want to conceive of cinematic realism as a philosophical concept rather than a practical one. The case studies in this dissertation are, overall, less concerned with approaching realism from a philosophical perspective than considering how filmmakers often set themselves in opposition to realism through alternative aesthetic modes. Though I share in Kappelhoff's aim to interrogate realism as a defining term of cinematic production, I am invested in what we, as spectators, gain from encountering films that withdraw from more realist forms of empathy as a mode of identification. The filmmakers in this dissertation are likewise interested in resisting, forestalling, or otherwise frustrating spectatorial responses rooted in sympathetic identification.

While the films I analyze break in significant ways from realist modes of representation, they never fully leave realism behind, often using it as a point of departure or inflecting its conventions differently. Some recent scholarship has engaged with the dominant role that realism plays in contemporary conceptions of art cinema, especially how those films that are associated with a transnational film festival circuit has prompted filmmakers and film scholars to engage with and confront the limitations of realist style to address the sociopolitical issues facing Europe in the period of supranational integration under the EU. A key touchstone in these debates over realism stems from a 2007 issue of the journal *Studies in European Cinema* which published a special issue devoted to "Realism in European Cinema and Beyond." In their introduction, Danielle Hipkins and Paul Cooke explain how the issue came out of a conference, called "Screening Identities: Reconfiguring Identity Politics in Contemporary European Cinema," held in 2005 at the University of Leeds, which aimed to "reflect the current

range and vitality of critical interest in European cinematic realism."[17] The conclusion reached in these essays, as Hipkins and Cooke have it, is that contemporary European cinema has failed to "imagine 'realism' as anything more than an unproblematic historically accurate reconstruction" of historical events, on the one hand, but has shown a capacity to "rise to the challenges of realism" by making "ignored or unseen communities, spaces, and histories visible" on the other.[18] A recurring theme in rising to the challenges of realism in various films involves "turning to moments of fantasy" in an otherwise realist milieu to encompass an "unspeakable trauma," reversals of victim/perpetrator arrangements along historical lines (we might call this revisionist history), and intertextuality with previous models for European cinematic realism.[19] Overall, those films that rise to the challenges of realism consider how the past and present intersect, while also leaving themselves open to the possibility of dipping out of a predominately realist setting into passages of fantasy or dream logic.[20]

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[17] Danielle Hipkins and Paul Cooke, "Introduction: Realism in European Cinema and Beyond," *Studies in European Cinema* 3, no. 3 (2007): 171.

[18] Hipkins and Cooke, "Introduction," 171-72. The initial point about an "unproblematic historically accurate reproduction" is in reference to *Downfall* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, Germany/Italy/Austria, 2004), in which the film fails because it "fails to acknowledge the existence of any representational dilemma" in depicting Hitler's last days, moving "without self-reflexivity between the documentary and the fictional rendition."

[19] Hipkins and Cooke, "Introduction," 171-73.

[20] Thomas Elsaesser conceives of European cinema in relation to Hollywood films in the twenty-first century as a matter of difference at the level of European cinema's freedoms from "hav[ing] to prove that it is 'post-9/11' or 'post-racial.'" He says further: "European cinema can, as a consequence, more easily [than Hollywood] transcend or ignore the geometry of window and mirror. It is these fixed spatial coordinates—such would be the argument—that make such ideological readings possible in the first place, because of the mimetic-representational correspondences they imply about the relation of cinematic realism (however stylized) to physical reality (however ideological)." For Elsaesser, European cinema requires its own theorization separate from Hollywood and other continental cinemas. *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: Film as Thought Experiment* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 8.

Debates over realism stem from whether depictions of social problems are sufficient as a representational response. Realism tends to focus on character interiority and sympathetic identification; by contrast, the majority of the filmmakers in this dissertation work to transcend these limitations by creating obscure or allegorical cinematic depictions in relation to sociopolitical problems, by "emptying out" characters and making identification difficult by rendering characters opaque or non-expressive, by unapologetically aestheticizing reality in order to defamiliarize our standard responses to it, and by paying critical attention not only to the people at the heart of these issues but to the spaces they inhabit. These factors, in turn, make clearer the systemic conditions that oppress them by asking the spectator to inhabit uncomfortable spaces where images, sounds, feelings, and sensations are allowed to operate without the demand that they immediately correspond to clear and direct meaning.

Methodology

In breaking from social-realist conventions, the films highlighted by this project have as their primary reference point not social reality itself, as recorded by the indexical image, but other images, whether as expressed through genre conventions or intertextual references to past films, in particular those drawn from earlier periods of modernist film. In addressing this allusive aspect of these works, I examine space in two primary ways: as a textual space in its dual purpose of establishing narrative diegesis as a marker of the real historical space recorded on film, and as an intertextual correspondence between contemporary art cinema and its historical forebears. A brief history on the relationship

between art cinema and genre theory is necessary to establish the significance of this second spatial point.

Mark Betz outlines the history involving genre analysis and theories of art cinema in *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema*, in which he argues that a backlash occurred in the late 1960s and mid 1970s—often periodized as the height of European art cinema—against the "elitism of a film canon based on the legitimizing rhetoric of cinema as Art."[21] The result, as Betz shows at length, is that film genre study becomes the dominant mode of film studies to the detriment of other modes of inquiry—and particularly that of art cinema—because it utilizes an easily identifiable iconography that demands a certain criterion which, paradoxically, places genre as "simultaneously conservative and innovative," which has in turn created a "model of aesthetic history" that sustains "the drive to contain the aporias of filmic meaning through generic codification."[22] The way to interrogate these tensions is through new theorizations that consider genre when it helps flesh out the industrial components of global filmmaking. I am looking for a more specific, spatial means to comprehend contemporary European art cinema and how it remains in dialogue with previous manifestations, be it neorealism, political modernism, the avant-garde, or exploitation filmmaking.

One of the originating questions of this dissertation involved the relationship between contemporary European art cinema and genre filmmaking. For example, in *Ghosts* (Christian Petzold, Germany, 2005), a teenager named Nina (Julia Hummer), who lives in an orphanage, encounters a woman named Françoise (Marianne Basler), who

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[21] Mark Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2009), 218.
[22] Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle*, 219.

believes Nina to be her daughter. In Hollywood, this might be the set-up for a thriller or courtroom drama. In Europe, it's more a metaphorical basis with which to explore space and identity. There are no actual ghosts in the film, but the return of the past as it affects the present becomes a form of haunting unto itself. In Petzold's film—and in many European films post-1989—the premise of a ghost takes the form of a spatial question as it pertains to European history, cinema, and culture. As Jaimey Fisher writes, in response to Petzold's *Ghosts*, the film's spaces "underpin *Ghosts'* unusual narrative approach of basing a film not on plot, but on the (private and public) aftershocks of a plot."[23] The term aftershocks encompasses the ghostly in European cinema: it spatializes trauma, anxiety, and historical reckoning as the visible and mappable essence of contemporary life. Ghostliness, as a structuring mechanism, thusly informs how numerous European filmmakers conceive of cinematic space: narratives often take the form of historical reckonings, both with Europe itself and past European cinema.

The border between past and present, living and death, being within and without, citizen and alien: these are bound up in ghostliness, which in *Atlantics* (Mati Diop, France/Senegal, 2019), a film analyzed in the second chapter, becomes a structuring mechanism for interrogating the urge African laborers have to risk their lives in pursuit of more wealth and stability in Europe. In *Atlantics*, the template of the horror film (the return of a repressed entity) intersects with spatial terms of neocolonialism as it still exists between Senegal and Europe. When I examine works of cinema as representations of any given space, I am prompted to consider how what appears on the screen

[23] Jaimey Fisher, *Christian Petzold* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2013), 87.

corresponds with some notion of the real that exists beyond it, certainly, but I also consider what *other* films or works of art it alludes to or draws upon for its own envisioning of space.

The tension between accessing reality through the medium of film (the social-realist imperative) and a use of the medium that privileges artifice, performativity, or even different tonal registers, lies at the heart of many of the films analyzed in this dissertation. The perceived failure of art cinema—and left politics—in the late 1960s to upend dominant social, political, and economic models has further led to the sense of art cinema as being lacking in purpose and meaning beyond its elitist origins. However, in *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map*, Rosalind Galt aims to read the augmentation of European space cinematically and provides close readings of various art films from the 1990s that take the past, and especially the 1940s, as their subject. Galt pursues an explanation for how "European cinema represented revisions of European space narratively, formally, and stylistically, and, indeed, how the terrain of 'European cinema' itself was acted on by the forces that were reshaping the continent."[24] Galt wants to adhere to "the spirit of mapping" by "tracing some of [European cinema's] disputed borders: that is, to consider the debates in and around which an analysis of European films can be located."[25] Galt focuses this study on a series of categorizations, such as the heritage film and the status of what she calls the "spectacular image," and films dealing with "historical loss," particularly films made in the 1990s whose narratives focus on 1945 to 1948, or the immediate postwar years in Europe.[26] Galt responds to ways

[24] Rosalind Galt, *The New European Cinema*, 1.
[25] Galt, *The New European Cinema*, 7.
[26] Galt, *The New European Cinema*, 21.

critically maligned or controversial films such as *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, Italy, 1988) and *Underground* (Emir Kusturica, Yugoslavia/France/Germany/Hungary, 1995), respectively, represent landscapes in their national contexts to articulate a complex mix of nostalgia and concern for the present.

Galt's focus on space and mapping is indicative of a broader movement in cinema studies, particularly those focusing on European cinema, away from matters of narrative in terms of cultural representation and social realism toward how the formal elements of cinema, including editing, sound, *mise-en-scène*, and cinematography, construct spaces that express or channel the affective experiences of being European.[27] The broader name given to this trend is the "spatial turn," which geographer Edward Soja says reflects "the uneven development of historical versus spatial discourse," and is "fundamentally an attempt to develop a more creative and critically effective balancing of the spatial/geographical and the temporal/historical imaginations."[28] The spatial turn clarifies European cinema as an amorphous formal and textual notion that is being built by those who participate within its industrial parameters. Nevertheless, a number of studies of European cinema focus on matters of representation absent formal explication, as in Yosefa Loshitzky's study on diaspora and migration. Loshitzky writes,

> The present book, drawing more on a cultural studies reading of films than on a specifically cinematographic analysis, is not a historical and ideological in-depth study of the overall corpus of European cinema about migration and diaspora…but an attempt to discuss the projection and negotiation of European

[27] My dissertation focuses on space within cinematic terms, though there is a much broader focus on space, technologies, and Geographic Information Systems that represents an even larger turn in the humanities towards confronting matters of space. For more on this form of spatial study, see *The Spatial Humanities: GIS and the Future of Humanities Scholarship*, eds. David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M. Harris (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 2010.
[28] Edward Soja, "Taking Space Personally," in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Barney Warf and Santa Arias (New York: Routledge, 2014), 12.

> identity through an analysis of films that constitute unique sites of struggle over identity formation and meaning, and further open and broaden the public space for debating the issue.[29]

While it may be tempting to construct two methodological camps, one pursuing analyses of films through form and others looking to the same films for content, notice the overlap between Galt and Loshitzky's claims in terms of space. While Galt looks to the aesthetic terms of image analysis and finds analytical avenues when spectacle and narrative intersect, Loshitzky, though professing a cultural studies pursuit, still conceives of analyses that "broaden a public space for debating the issue." Indeed, herein lies my own engagement with these matters of space. The films themselves must be understood as producing space (in their elaboration of diegetic space from profilmic space) and necessitating attentive readings while also participating in a broader "public space" that encompasses the critical reception and distribution networks that shape how these films are received. I aim to continue the inquiry into cinematic representation in terms of spatial practice by focusing on films that pull away from social realism and pivot toward other, minoritarian aesthetic traits that often have components of realism, but cannot be reduced to that term alone. These other aesthetic categories or traits include trash(y), disjunctive sound, expressionism, mimesis, and deadpan.

One of the major developments in the spatial turn of studying European cinema has been identified as "post-representation," which encompasses conceptions of space that extend beyond identity and realist structures of representation. Gozde Naiboglu has written a significant study that engages European filmmaking using such a framework of

[29] Yosefa Loshitzky, *Screening Strangers: Migration and Diaspora in Contemporary European Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 10.

spatial study by mapping out the spatial turn as it helps inform the growing body of scholarship on Turkish German Cinema. As Naiboglu traces the genealogy, the basis of this turn relates to a shift in films outside of domestic or interior confines and toward settings within "urban cosmopolitan cityscapes," with various scholars claiming space as the framework for judging gender and cultural difference, but also, in the case of Barbara Mennel, for thinking through "political and aesthetic traditions in both Turkish and German cinema."[30] Naiboglu, however, views spatial practice as a means for rethinking representation at an ontological level, thereby creating the notion of what she terms "politics beyond representation." In fact, by calling upon a host of theories including those of Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi, Naiboglu conceives of an "approach to migrant and diasporic cinema" that also engages "with the temporal aspects of film in order to explore the transformation of the social sphere beyond dualist structures and identities."[31] It's precisely this impetus to move away from realist frameworks of representation and toward a formalist methodology that analyzes cinematic space for close readings in conjunction with the space of cinema (its production, distribution, and exhibition) that constitutes an original and useful methodology. This study follows in its footsteps by considering how representation intersects with intertextuality and cinephilia.

Part of the methodology inherent to this dissertation has been to think about the landscape of contemporary European art cinema through a "cinephiliac spirit," as Christian Keathley calls it. I define cinephiliac moments in this study as those which prompt the cinephile to begin considering one film in relation to a past one, especially

[30] Gozde Naiboglu, *Post-Unification Turkish German Cinema: Work, Globalization and Politics Beyond Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 9-10.
[31] Naiboglu, *Turkish German Cinema*, 17.

when those alignments reveal insights about more than just the films: they indicate ways of thinking about history and filmmaking as being linked at the level of image and thought. In the case studies that follow, contemporary European art films are often considered in relation to other films from across the globe for how they seem to be in dialogue with them. Sometimes, the prompt for study or comparison is the entire film, but just as often it is a moment, a shot, or a brief scene that recalls a significant moment in another film. The cinephiliac spirit has been relegated within film studies, Keathley says, to "a historical object of study" that lacks viability in academia because the discipline came to think that "crossing that threshold into scholarly legitimacy meant leaving the cinephilic spirit behind."[32] Keathley's own project is devoted to "finding a way to remobilize and reintegrate the cinephiliac spirit into contemporary film studies," which means, inspired by Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, seeking out the "kinds of filmic details that are most often the occasion for cinephiliac moments," which entail "sites of both a challenge to historiographic practice and an opportunity for its transformation."[33] Reclaiming cinephilia requires a clear sense of its usefulness in historicizing and theorizing cinema beyond that of "uncritical buffism," which is often the affiliation made among those hoping to keep cinephilia in the realm of film criticism.[34] The case studies that follow embark, in part, upon relocating cinephilia within the landscape of

[32] Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4-5.
[33] Keathley, *Cinephilia*, 9. Benjamin's *Arcades Project* was an unfinished collage of elements from nineteenth century Parisian culture, though it was mostly comprised of photographs.
[34] Rashna Wadia Richards explain, in an introduction on cinephiliac historiography, how the emergence of structuralism and psychoanalysis in film studies during the 1970s not only relegated cinephilia to an uncritical buffism, but even aligned it with "scopophilia, voyeurism, and fetishism." *Cinematic Flashes: Cinephilia and Classical Hollywood* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 3.

contemporary European art cinema by teasing out throughlines that lie beneath the surface of films, almost like fault lines waiting to be activated. Cinephilia assists in the process of spatial and representational analysis by encountering those aftershocks that encompasses the body of European cinema from a different vantage point, one in which identitarian logic works alongside cinematic history and theory, not in place of it.

Overview

This dissertation explores how certain contemporary European filmmakers depart from social realism by making films that either straddle the line between fact and fiction or unfold adjacent to that line. The main objective in pinpointing films for analysis was to find works that are pitched against a realist imperative and which spatialize matters of center/margin. Certain themes will emerge and recur, including migration, identity formation, racism, and/or historical memory. My intention is to focus on *how* these themes snake through a range of films that address them in often completely different manners. The case studies are not unified by more conventional terms, such as national cinemas or periodization. If anything, individual filmmakers receive focus in terms of a body of work or because of a recognizable authorial style. However, not all the chapters are oriented around a particular director, so it would also be inaccurate to call this an exclusively auteurist study, concerned with filmmakers though it is. Above all, this work is an attempt to think about connections between films that might not always be readily apparent and argue that such connections elucidate the intersection between social issues, cinema, and film form.

The second chapter frames the question of the limitations of social realism through an examination of some of its most representative figures, Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. Their depiction of marginalized and impoverished subjects by means of a realist style informed by documentary techniques established an influential aesthetic template for art cinema's approach to representing individuals and communities displaced by a neoliberal economic order. I designate this a "realism of trash" for its emphasis on a proximate encounter with and empathetic response to scenes of hardship. I provide a close reading of *La Promesse* (Dardennes, France/Belgium, 1996) in which I argue that the film fails to meet the terms of what André Bazin designated as "supernatural realism," because the film adheres to the surface of things rather than looking for the interiority of its characters. As a counterpoint to the Dardennes' influential position, I take up what I call "trashy realism" through two films by Olivier Assayas: *demonlover* (France, 2002) and *Boarding Gate* (France, 2007). In positioning "trashy" as a modifier of realism rather than referencing narrative content, I mean to signal that Assayas's "degraded" and "exploitative" formal approach better indexes neoliberalism's cannibalization of bodies and spaces. Assayas utilizes realist techniques to a point, but it is in his departures from a social realist aesthetic that a different approach to the depiction of marginality emerges. Images of labor under globalization are not taken, as they are under a realist paradigm, as straightforwardly veridical. Instead, their status as images is emphasized as the formal correlate of neoliberalism's own remapping of real spaces.

The third chapter examines two films — *Touki Bouki* (Djibril Diop Mambéty, Senegal, 1973) and *Atlantics* (Mati Diop, France/Senegal/Belgium, 2019). Beyond the

family relation between their directors (Diop is Mambéty's niece), both films address Senegalese subjects who entertain a fantasy of migration to Europe. These narrative preoccupations with escape engage broader questions of African cinema's relationship to European art cinema. This chapter attempts to think through the fraught question of influence, how Senegalese filmmaking might utilize conventions and techniques shared by European filmmakers but inflect them differently. *Touki Bouki* is framed as a significant break from the social realist tendencies found in the work of Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembéne, and *Atlantics* is then characterized as carrying forward non-realist modes of narration into the contemporary moment.

The fourth chapter argues that the migrant takes up the cause of spiritualizing human emptiness as a cinematic project in the work of Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa. Costa resurrects several aesthetic principles of modernist art cinema by reworking them into films that focus on the impoverished citizens of Fontaínhas, a slum in Lisbon, in which a number of Cape Verdean migrants reside. Rather than employing realist visual and narrative devices, Costa utilizes a spectrum of alternative formal tools including the painterly, expressionism, and photography to embrace a form of theatricality that places the migrant at the center of contemporary art cinema. These films accomplish what *La Promesse*, discussed in chapter one, fails to: they find the interiority of their characters by inhabiting their trauma without reenacting it as an historical event, stating it directly, or viewing it from a distance. They transcend the limitations of realism by imagining an alternative to it that still inhabits the history and memory of true-to-life subjects. These films—*Colossal Youth* (Portugal, 2006) and *Horse Money* (Portugal, 2014), in particular—work to redefine human emptiness through a postcolonial lens that searches

for subjectivity in conjunction with the migrant laborer: the figure on whose back global capital has been made. This proves to be a commitment to modernism: Costa's mosaic approach, the underlying goal of rediscovering the subjectivity of its marginalized and abandoned figures, is pursued from film to film with an unwavering dedication.

The fifth chapter analyzes the aesthetics of violence and racism in contemporary France as depicted in two films: *Le Havre* (Aki Kaurismäki, France/Finland/Germany, 2011) and *P'tit Quinquin* (Bruno Dumont, France, 2014). Each of these films concerns, whether as its primary narrative (*Le Havre*) or a subplot (*P'tit Quinquin*), the status of an African-born teenager who faces both the prospect of deportation and physical harm. Both Kaurismäki and Dumont express in interviews a virulent opposition to realist cinematic principles, which prompts them to turn toward forms of grotesque comedy that often integrate slapstick moments within scenes representing deadly serious geopolitical issues. In both cases, a community of (mostly) native French citizens determine the final status of the teenager. Because the results differ significantly (one is guided to probable safety, while the other engages in terroristic violence and eventually commits suicide), each filmmaker's choice to use the template of a slapstick comedy is notable, as the films contain irreverent humor and non-realist formal techniques as an aesthetic counterpoint to social realism when addressing migration and racism. Moreover, both filmmakers call upon an intertextual template to relate their contemporary work to a variety of genre films and styles of film from the past. Taken together, these films propose an alternative to starker versions of social realism through humor and intertextuality: they deliberately place spectators in an uncomfortable position by asking them to laugh, and even be

shocked, at circumstances that would more conventionally be treated as serious matters of ethical concern.

In the sixth chapter, I examine a handful of films that utilize deadpan realism as an expression of marginality. These films contain realist elements, but forestall their effects by taking social misfits, who typically engage in anti-social behavior, as their subjects. The chapter's focus is on several Greek films made by Yorgos Lanthimos and Athina Rachel Tsangari, who are the names most readily associated with what's been called the Greek Weird Wave. Unlike the four previous chapters, which analyze films that are in some way concerned with the endeavors of African migrants, this chapter shifts its focus toward native-born Greek social outsiders who variously preoccupy themselves with bizarre reenactments of crimes, engage in unorthodox behavior while working menial jobs, or play extended games that seem to lack a clear set of rules. Their status as outsiders is largely determined by their actions and attitude rather than their social or economic class. Deadpan works in these films as a realist mode for thinking about space when it considers how the borders between inside and outside, or center and periphery, translates into a generalized, even inarticulable feeling of displacement. These films also suggest that, for these filmmakers, the act of filmmaking is, itself, akin to a game played through experimentation and scatological humor.

CHAPTER II

THE CITY AND TRASH AS AESTHETIC METAPHOR IN THE DARDENNES' *LA PROMESSE* AND OLIVIER ASSAYAS'S *DEMONLOVER* AND *BOARDING GATE*

This chapter argues that "trash," taken metaphorically, helps classify forms of realism through the lens of space within contemporary European art cinema. In the context of African cinema, Kenneth Harrow has made the case for reexamining methodologies around the concept of trash. He argues that the "theorizing around trash moves from the material to the psychological, sociological, and political, with regimes of trash recycling discarded objects from one order to another." Entailed in this are "states of exception returning the margin to new centers; worthless films from sites where they lie forgotten, and then revived, reformulated, redeemed."[35] Concepts of space lie at the heart of Harrow's analysis, which reconceives trash beyond the high and low logic that often informs taste cultures. Harrow focuses on how "the materiality of trash" registers "the forlorn sense of loss incurred by a liberal humanist order that has proved itself totally helpless before the vicious onslaught of the neoliberal economic order."[36]

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[35] Kenneth Harrow, *Trash: African Cinema From Below* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 3.
[36] Harrow, *Trash*, 70. Harrow explains the detrimental effects of neoliberalism later as such: "The global north has been the locus of commodity capitalism, recently taking neoliberalism as its model, and Africa the site where the excretion of waste of that consumerism has been dumped" (84).

Harrow's implication is that neoliberalism, with its focus on free market economies, open competition, and limited government intervention, structures the world system in a hierarchical manner so that Africa remains marginalized. Accordingly, the marginal and minoritarian status of discarded trash asks that one reconsiders the spatial order of things.

As depicted in the films featured in this chapter, the contemporary European cinema is shaped by the socio-economic forces of neoliberalism. In their introduction to an edited collection on "dreamworlds of neoliberalism," Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk argue that the spatial logic of neoliberalism "revives the most extreme colonial patterns of residential segregation and zoned consumption."[37] It does so by untethering both cities and their labor forces from a discernible politics that would help abolish segmentations between classes; thus, the city comes to be seen as a cold, isolating space of non-residence, where the precarious economic status of individuals disaggregates them from thriving communities. This is particularly true for immigrants or refugees, whose labor may be easily exploited. The space of the neoliberal city is therefore structured around a division between, on the one hand, ordered and regulated spaces, optimized for the flows of global capital and the mobility of privileged sectors of the population (EU citizens, the wealthy, and tourists), and on the other hand, disordered and unregulated spaces, marked by extra-legal or black-market economies and by the immobility of its marginalized subjects.

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[37] Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk, "Introduction," in *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (New York: The New Press, 2007), ix-xvi.

In this chapter, I examine European films produced in varying realist styles that focus on aspects of globalization. I distinguish between two forms of realism. The first is associated primarily with Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, whose narrative films *La Promesse* (Belgium/France, 1996) and *Rosetta* (Belgium/France, 1999) were received by international film festivals with overwhelming acclaim, with the latter film winning the Palme d'Or at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival. These two films chronicle groups of people living at the margins of society because of economic precarity; they are either reduced to living in squalor to pursue a sliver of stability as migrants in Liege (*La Promesse*), or they face unemployment and poverty, which is exacerbated by uncaring employers who scoff at their predicaments (*Rosetta*).[38] This form of realism, sometimes called a "responsible realism," earns praise for its depiction of marginalized and impoverished subjects, but as I will argue here, still remains confined within or limited by neoliberal ideology. The second form of realism, which I call a "trashy realism," is linked to two films by French filmmaker Olivier Assayas: *demonlover* (France, 2002) and *Boarding Gate* (France, 2007). In positioning "trashy" as a modifier of realism rather than referencing narrative content, I mean to signal that Assayas's "degraded" and "exploitative" formal approach better indexes neoliberalism's cannibalization of bodies and spaces. Assayas utilizes realist techniques to a point, but it is in his departures from a social realist aesthetic that a different approach to the depiction of marginality emerges. Images of labor under globalization are not taken, as they are under a realist paradigm, as

[38] The Dardennes, once documentarians, turned to feature filmmaking because they wanted more control over their films; says Jean-Pierre, "In documentaries, you're confronted with reality, and you cannot manipulate or move it. It's given to you the way it is, and in narrative fiction you can manipulate it a bit." Bert Cardullo, "The Cinema of Resistance: An Interview with Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardennes," *Studies in European Cinema* 7, no. 3 (2010): 181.

straightforwardly veridical. Instead, their status as images is emphasized as the formal correlate of neoliberalism's own remapping of real spaces.

A Responsible Realism?

The most common contemporary permutations of cinematic realism are narrative films employing documentary effects, which may include but are not limited to non-professional actors, a "shaky" or handheld camera, and poorly recorded or deliberately muffled diegetic sound. The handheld camera has been thoroughly linked with realism by mainstream filmmaking in the era of so-called "found-footage" horror films, inaugurated by *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, 1999). As Cecilia Sayad explains, this subgenre adopts an "aesthetic of realism" that was established in 1970s independent horror films and "takes this to extremes by literally framing the film as factual." The handheld camera, by means of its "shakiness" and "abrupt zooms," suggests an uncontainable frame, and therefore creates the illusion of danger by subjecting the vulnerable frame to an "invasion of what lies beyond its borders."[39] These films are grounded in the sense that the camera seems to travel like someone moving on foot: the camera shakes because of the unseen person's footsteps. Mobility is tied to fear: to what or who might be attempting to infiltrate the space of the world that's already been established. That same spatial logic applies to films that use documentary effects in the register of social realism, though often the fear is tied to other matters, such as global labor and migration. This is not to say the films or the filmmakers fear an "invasion of

[39] Cecilia Sayad, "Found-Footage Horror and the Frame's Undoing," *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 2 (2016): 43-66.

what lies beyond [their] borders," but that the handheld camera reinforces spatial instability in environments where there is often also socio-economic instability.

In *La Promesse*, the handheld camera reinforces a realist aesthetic, as it's largely set in tenement housing on the outskirts of Liege, which is overseen by a corrupt landlord. The film promotes a sense that lives become reduced to the status of trash when such conditions persist, though it does so by shrinking its world down to a handful of characters and their interactions. The film does not, for example, represent a governing body that is trying to combat poverty or root out black-market labor operations involving exploited migrants.

The handheld, social-realist style of the Dardennes has developed into a dominant visual logic in contemporary European art cinema as a means to express an empathetic and tolerant response to issues of migration and assimilation: all terms that have been associated with what Walter Benn Michaels calls "neoliberal aesthetics."[40] At a fundamental level, neoliberalism invites a "transformation in the spatial and temporal coordinates of the labor market," and the "geographical mobility of capital permits it to dominate a global labor force whose own geopolitical mobility is constrained."[41] In terms of representation, the Dardennes are focused on labor at the local level—they do not aim to represent the form of an underlying system that creates the circumstances for exploitation in the first place. According to this realist strategy, the film is ethically responsible in its depiction of society at the margins merely by making these margins

[40] Michaels argues that social movements in the U.S. and Europe are "entirely compatible with the evolution in capitalism that has matched the increased intolerance of discrimination in all its forms not just with an increased tolerance of but with an actual and spectacular increase in the gap between the rich and the poor." *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 62.

[41] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 168-9.

visible. For instance, in his book on the Dardennes, Philip Mosley says the filmmakers' work constitutes a "responsible realism," which refers to, according to Mosley, how their "relation to cinematic realism is as nuanced and complex as the notion itself," because of how they demonstrate their "acute awareness of a need for both individual and collective responsibility in human relations."[42] Their awareness, for Mosley, links with "ethical concerns" to "dramatize these concerns in uncompromising portrayals of individual lives that play out against a visibly bleak socio-economic backdrop."[43] Mosley's analysis equates cinematic representation with ethical practice. The realer it seems, the more ethical it becomes, and realism here is directly attributable to the degree of dirt, grime, and refuse that is visible.[44] It is the "visibly bleak socio-economic backdrop" that, per Harrow, equates with "the trope of trash to define the lives of the poor."[45] In the analysis that follows, I explain how trash and realism, as aesthetic concepts, articulate the ways in which the "mobility of capital" enforces the geopolitical immobility of the labor force.

According to Mosley's analysis, a film's ethical position is assessed by its aesthetic commitment to marginality, where the *most* uncompromising depictions are those that present a bleak situation with as much fidelity to the real circumstances as

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[42] Philip Mosley, *The Cinema of the Dardenne Brothers: Responsible Realism* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2013), 1-2.
[43] Mosley, *Dardenne Brothers*, 2.
[44] Stephen Hunter of *The Washington Post* makes the connection to trash in his description of the central narrative circumstances as "garbage in, garbage out." "'La Promesse' Delivers," June 27, 1997. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1997/06/27/la-promesse-delivers/f8ac971d-258f-49d1-a19c-06884f8d48f2/; scholars Benoît Dillet and Tara Puri have described the Dardennes' films in relation to their "left-over spaces," a term that refers indirectly to excess and trash. "Left-Over Spaces: The Cinema of the Dardenne Brothers," *Film-Philosophy* 17, no. 1 (2013): 367-382.
[45] Harrow, *Trash*, 1. Harrow further explains how trash "has haunted African cinema from the start, when the decision was made not to make films that would be Hollywood dream machines, not films of escapism but of reality, even of harsh reality, daring to portray those who take advantage of their power and means to cheat others." Given that *La Promesse* concerns, in part, the plight of African migrants, it's reasonable to say the film participates in this tradition.

possible. Joseph Mai further defines the Dardennes' realism by terming their work "sensuous realism," which conceives "a pure form of realism" through filmmaking techniques such as dispensing with excessive expository scenes, a frequent use of the *plan sequence*, or long take, and abrupt cuts that "tak[e] us out of one action and plung[e] us *in medias res* into another."[46] "Pure," for Mai, means filmmaking that eschews narrative conventions and fly-on-the-wall documentary technique in favor of an active, mobile camera, capable of following its characters in real time.[47]

My intention is not to dispute the specificity of the Dardennes' cinematic technique; after all, it's irrefutable that they employ such methods in producing their films. Rather than deeming their work "responsible realism" or "a pure form of realism," I examine how understanding their work under the aesthetic heading of a "realism of trash" deals with their filmmaking in spatial terms that intersect with the specificity of their subject matter: *La Promesse* spatializes the city by orienting it around a realist framework that embodies the logic of a neoliberal economic order. It also evinces how, under neoliberal ideology, humans become *homo oeconomicus*: human beings are defined by their desire to possess wealth and then judged by a society based on the level at which they succeed.[48]

In many respects, an opposite arrangement of form and content operates within *demonlover* and *Boarding Gate*: these are films that employ a trashy realism and are set in the worlds of multi-million-dollar corporations and business executives. Let's be clear

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[46] Joseph Mai, *Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2010), 53-54.
[47] Mai, *Dardennes*, 53. One point here, though: even if one accepts Mai's terms, it would seem "pure," as a benchmark, is fundamentally unattainable because once the experimental becomes convention, as has been the case with the Dardennes, it returns to manufacturing artifice.
[48] Ther, *Europe Since 1989*, 19.

on the distinctions here. In *La Promesse*, the central figures are a marginalized assortment of migrants, laborers, children, and the slumlord who oversees their continued exploitation. The film employs realist aesthetic devices to "better" present the conditions of the exploited. In Assayas's films, rather, the central figures are largely wealthy industrialists and entrepreneurs who have financially benefited from those people who are toiling at the margins. However, these are also figures steeped in an underworld of dance clubs, illegal narcotics and arms operations, and they circulate within noirish environments marked by violence or compromising sexual behavior. The "real" circumstances of their lives may look quite different from impoverished conditions of the Dardennes' subjects, but the "unreality" of their privilege better indexes the asymmetrical operations of global capital. That is, this form of trashy realism offers a more revealing glimpse at the systematic causes of exploitation and marginalization.

In fact, Assayas's films were implicitly received by film critics as being unseemly, trashy; critics variously invoked notions of sleaze or excrement in relation to them.[49] Herein lies the key distinction: *La Promesse* uses its realist aesthetic to denounce the exploitation of vulnerable people, while the two Assayas films could be understood as contemporary examples of exploitation filmmaking, as some have gestured to previously.[50] The point is, both modes conceptualize trash in relation to the neoliberal

[49] Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* called *demonlover* "flatulent;" Roger Ebert said he realized his description of the film made it sound like "a sleazy bottom-feeder;" J. Hoberman of *The Village Voice* called *Boarding Gate* "meta-sleazy;" Owen Gleiberman described its dominant tone as "murk;" David Denby of *The New Yorker* says Assayas is "a fairly traditional movie sensationalist;" David Edelstein of *New York Magazine* laments how the film was made "quickly and cheaply;" and Russell Edwards of *Variety* deemed it a "limp, sleazy inanity."

[50] Michael Koresky, in his review of *Boarding Gate*, writes: "Assayas's later career has been a heady stew of class and crass, yet not even in his excellent, audience-baiting pseudo-technothriller *demonlover*, with its corporate-girls-gone-wild for the smart set, did he flirt with exploitation as heavily as he does here." "Gross

order, but they do so through opposing means. Indeed, Steven Shaviro argues that the value of Assayas's films, in relation to "neoliberal globalization," is that within them the "very opposition between reality-based and image-based modes of presentation breaks down."[51] In discussing reality versus image-based modes, Shaviro explains how Bazinian realism, with its preference for filmmakers who "put their faith in reality," no longer holds purchase, because today the "most vivid and intense reality is the reality of images."[52] Shaviro is certainly correct that the lines between reality and the image have been blurred to the point of being nearly indistinguishable from one another. In the realm of representation, however, verisimilitude's reality effect still tends to operate if it's attached to depictions of marginalized societal figures. That is, in *La Promesse*, there is an element of social realism that unites its realist aesthetic with the liberal humanist order. This stands in contrast to *Boarding Gate*, of which David Denby of *The New Yorker* claims it "may have something serious to say about the brutal impersonality of global capitalism, yet [it's] caught somewhere between insight and exploitation."[53] It's the "being caught somewhere between" that is of interest to this mode of trashy realism: as the adjective suggests, it is a realism of poor or marginal quality. Both of Assayas's films convey this through their visual composition, which varies from a handheld camera, to more formally composed tracking shots, to grainy digital footage that bears a kinship with the "found-footage" horror film. The spectrum of visual techniques suggests another

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National Product," *Reverse Shot*. March 20, 2008. http://www.reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/1842/boarding-gate

[51] Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Washington: Zero Books, 2010), 36-8.

[52] Shaviro, *Affect*, 38.

[53] David Denby, "Faraway Places," *The New Yorker*. March 17, 2008. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/24/faraway-places. According to various aggregate review sources, *Boarding Gate* is the worst reviewed film of Assayas's career.

form of spatial instability, in which the camera adapts to the environment it inhabits, much like the noirish figures of neoliberal capital work as chameleons, moving their way through spaces by using their bodies as their primary means of accruing capital, be it economic or social. Unlike in either Assayas film, there are not genre terms in *La Promesse*: the events unfold closer to the realm of documentary, in which these young and/or non-professional actors are chosen for how they look *in opposition* to their attractiveness or charm; they aren't sharply dressed, and nor are they attractive relative to the premise of transnational stardom that Assayas implicitly engages in both films.

A Realism of Trash

As I read *La Promesse*, its aesthetics largely *replicate* the narrow ideology of the European male subject, thereby promoting empathy and care as the response to neoliberalism's immiserating and dehumanizing effects. The film uses largely objective, realist visual devices and it conceives of its social relations in individualist terms. Thus, while the film aims to represent the alienating labor of contemporary Europe, in which migrants are funneled into tenement housing to be exploited, it stops short of challenging its own underlying presumptions about perspective and space.

My reading of *La Promesse* asks that we extricate ourselves from the discursive, commercial space of film festivals that has largely shaped the film's reception. Film festivals reinforce certain narrow conceptions of realism. My approach to the Dardennes' film locates its roots in neorealism, specifically through what Bazin called "supernatural realism." The Dardennes are generally seen as one of the contemporary inheritors of neorealism, but their film fails to inhabit what a supernatural realism would look like in

the time of supranationalism.[54] While the term supernatural carries with it suggestions of ghosts or hauntings that linger from a previous corporeal existence, in this context the term is more meant to designate a fundamental tension of the "Bazinian dialectic between the inherent realism of the image and the aestheticism of the director at the helm: each implies the other, and the cinema's power derives from their interaction."[55] The aestheticism of the director, in the Dardennes' case, is how they align their vision with the European male subject and use him as the conduit for empathy between the film's African characters and the spectator. These outcomes are the result of the Dardennes' realist orientation, one which less blurs a distinction between the subjective and objective than it utilizes a limited form of subjective style as an approximate double for the filmmakers' own perspective. Supernatural realism wants to look beyond the surface of things by gesturing toward character interiority and directorial presence into something that creates a transcendental value. In short, where can we discern the director's perspective and how does that inform a realist orientation? In a later close reading, I will further situate the Dardennes as social realist filmmakers rather than supernatural realists for how they replicate rather than transcend the dominant logic of neoliberalism.

Moreover, and in relation to a realism of trash, neorealism is a cinematic site where "filmmakers' depiction of the residual is synecdochic of an artistic vision that endeavors to capture reality at its most unprepared and, subsequently, comes to represent

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[54] Bazin uses the term "supernatural" as an imprecise term to designate something that "expresses the hidden accord which things maintain with an invisible counterpart of which they are, so to speak, merely the adumbration." Put another way, a representation of a destination that is either hard to grasp or, in a psychological sense, untraceable or even unconscious. I draw much of my discussion of these conversations from Justin Horton's highly perceptive reading of Bazin. "Mental Landscapes: Bazin, Deleuze, and Neorealism (Then and Now)," *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 2 (2013) 23-45.
[55] Horton, "Mental Landscapes," 29.

the increasing complexity of the mimetic undertaking in an Italian society thrust rapidly into the late stages of capitalism."[56] A realism of trash encompasses the stages of capitalism in the '90s, which also intersects with burgeoning concerns over cultural assimilation, economic inequality, and labor migration. This pertains to the tension at the heart of European cinema in the EU-era as well, because filmmakers are grappling with cinema's capacity to portray the empirical world through cinematic processes that accurately reflect its conditions. Let us consider how this process governs the impetus for *La Promesse,* which is among the first internationally recognized European films produced from the vantage point of "the New Europe," to confront the legacy of neorealism, both at the level of its filmmaking and at the level of the image. Rather than focusing on the more superficial ways *La Promesse* links to neorealism, such as its use of a young male protagonist, non-professional actors, and longish handheld takes that often track behind the subjects, this reading maps how the film stages its reckoning at the level of establishing the space of the neoliberal city, which contrasts with those of the *Nouvelle Vague* in France at the end of the 1950s.

The Realism of Trash in the City

The opening of *La Promesse* establishes several of the visual and thematic contexts of this analysis. The film is set in Liege, Belgium, where Igor (Jérémie Renier) first appears in the midst of his apprenticeship at an auto shop and is approached by a Belgian woman needing a routine car inspection. When Igor diagnoses the problem as

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[56] Adam-Muri Rosenthal, *Residual Visions: Rubbish, Refuse, and Marginalia in Italian Cinema from Neorealism to the Present*. Doctoral dissertation. Harvard Univeristy. 2014. Rosenthal's dissertation examines how "themes of garbage and refuse pervade" important works in Italian cinema.

being so minor that his labor does not even warrant compensation, the woman responds, "No, you can't work for nothing." In the tight, close focus on Igor and the woman, the spectator is left to wonder where the scene is taking place and to guess the precise significance of this interaction. It's hardly the last time Igor will interact with a woman he doesn't yet know; in fact, the narrative centers around, in reference to the titular "promise," the subsequent bond between Igor and Assita (Assita Ouedraogo), a migrant woman from Burkina Faso who has come with her infant child to meet her husband, Hamidou (Rasmane Ouedraogo), who lives and works with other migrants and refugees in low-rent housing owned, operated, and exploited by Igor's father, Roger (Olivier Gourmet). Later in the film, Igor withholds from Assita the news of her husband's death.

The Belgian woman's statement (or is it advice?) to Igor echoes the seemingly contradictory tension at the heart of neorealism as pointed to by Bazin in his reading of *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, Italy, 1949). He calls the film "the ultimate expression of neorealism" because "few films have been more put together, more pondered over, more meticulously elaborated, but all this labor by De Sica tends to give the illusion of chance, to result in giving dramatic necessity the character of something contingent."[57] This sense of contingency emerges, in other words, from De Sica's absolute control. It's his labor that produces the impression of its absence. Labor is a question for both the filmmaker and for his subject, an impoverished Italian man who cannot find a job to sustain himself and his family. "You can't work for nothing" thus requires our reading for its literal statement of fact, i.e., "you need money to succeed in a neoliberal system,"

[57] André Bazin, "Vittorio De Sica: Metteur en Scène," in *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism*, ed. Bert Cardullo (New York: Continuum, 2011), 80.

but it also necessitates that the spectator see it reflexively, as in "as a filmmaker, your labor is what creates the illusion of authenticity." While there is certainly a difference between working for nothing and working toward nothing, the statement captures the consistent association between the depiction of poverty and immiseration and a realist style that absents itself, as a type of artistic labor emptied of its appearance as such—its absorption, in a word.

In the opening sequence, Liege is an afterthought given the absence of an establishing shot that might at least announce where the film is set, let alone display an affection for the city of its setting. This is significant for how it differs from much European art cinema of the 1960s. In *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*, Lúcia Nagib conceives of "physical realism" as that which uses "physicality as a mode of production and address." Nagib understands realism as a "link between subjectivities at the opposite ends of the film spectrum, one at its production, the other at its reception, both unified by the desire for realism, which is embodied in the film itself."[58] Both production and reception contexts perceive the filmic world as constituting a believable, in some cases even verifiable, construction. With the emergence of "new wave" cinemas in the '60s, the meaning of realism shifted to accommodate disjunctive narratives that sought to revise the terms of classical Hollywood cinema without entirely abandoning them.

One of the earliest examples, and a film that *La Promesse* shares a certain narrative DNA with, is *The 400 Blows* (Francois Truffaut, France, 1959). Writing about

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[58] Lúcia Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (London: Continuum, 2011), 25-6.

the film in terms of its partial classicality, Nagib attributes to it "an ethics of realism manifested in tropes whose originality derives from their being reenacted in physical reality."[59] One such trope is found in the film's opening credits sequence, which locates the film on the streets of Paris, with particular attention given to the Eiffel Tower. The indexical record of the tower, when seen from the distanced street-level perspective of the film's first shot, presents a postcard view of the city space. However, when Truffaut's name appears as the film's director, his credit displays from under the tower's base. The camera has moved closer and now gazes upward, as if mimicking the awestruck eyeline of a would-be tourist. Per Nagib, the shot can be read as revealing "nothing other than a heavy iron cage," within which Truffaut's name is "imprisoned" because the urban environment is merely another manifestation of "material reality and offer[s] no escape from a society represented throughout the film by the metaphor of the cage."[60] In short, the Eiffel Tower transforms throughout the sequence from being an inviting monument into an imprisoning edifice.

The sequence expresses a growing pessimism in modernist art cinema about the city as being, in tandem with its visible attractions, a prison for those who inhabit it. By the time of *La Promesse*, the neoliberal city has only intensified its sense of the city as a site of incarceration and as the restrictive containment of exploited laborers. Nagib's reading "[unravels] the indexical quality of *The 400 Blows* from its tightly woven fictional mesh," and it does so by examining how particular shots suggest possibilities of meaning that are potentially counterintuitive to what's being presented on screen.[61] By

[59] Nagib, *Realism*, 64.
[60] Nagib, *Realism*, 68-9.
[61] Nagib, *Realism*, 65.

implicitly addressing the effects of geography through a play with proximity, *The 400 Blows* provides something like a reverse shot of the city as a romantic, symbolic myth: what initially seemed ideal as a correspondence with a touristic gaze now reveals itself as merely a construction, built by the hands of laborers and assembled as a conspicuous gesture toward the city's underlying structures of confinement.

Mise-en-scène is one of the primary means by which spatial readings operate through its engagement of proximity, distance, and the construction of space. The important role ascribed to *mise-en-scène* derives in part from its foundational usage by the critics-turned-filmmakers of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, who viewed it as "the very essence of cinema," as a term that encompasses "the gestures its stars perform, the fashions they wear, the cities they navigate, the objects they covet and discard, the buildings that surround them, the neon signs that illuminate their way, and the images plastered on walls and billboards."[62] For James Tweedie, these attributes collectively constitute the "*mise-en-scène* of modernity," primarily because *mise-en-scène* is the "mechanism for depicting a transformative event…manifested not through grand ideological statements but through a pervasive, commonplace, and over time almost pedestrian transformation of everyday life."[63] The pervasive, commonplace, and almost pedestrian transformation of everyday life appears in *La Promesse* as entirely lacking anything potentially exciting or enticing: all that's left are the cold, iron bars of the cage.

Tweedie extends his analysis of the city as depicted in the *Nouvelle Vague* to "the globalization of the city film" in Taiwanese cinema, and though he doesn't put it in

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[62] James Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 51.
[63] Tweedie, *New Waves*, 52.

precisely these terms, one can think of the turn toward a "*mise-en-scène* of globalization." This designation would register a shift from the conditions of modernity to a world-system where borders are less stable and capital flows are even less perceptible. These transformations relate to both a realism of trash and trashy realism for how they inform a shift toward neoliberal economic policies, which "hinge on belief in the efficiency of the markets and the rationality of market participants."[64] In both the case of a realism of trash and trashy realism, an implicit critique mounts against the power imbalances that result from the imposition of these ideas of efficiency and rationality in the organization of urban space.

Supernatural Realism

In *La Promesse*, the *mise-en-scène* reveals anonymous forms of manual labor, where the effects of globalization are starting to reach the mainland. Igor receives the wisdom of modernity from the Belgian woman, but *La Promesse* (and the Dardennes) will teach him the reality of an era that has since moved past these once-gospel truths because, in fact, the contemporary era is often about scrounging for scraps, as the "individualized and relatively powerless worker…confronts a labor market in which only short-term contracts are offered on a customized basis."[65] As both an apprentice and a free-hand in his father's human trafficking operations, Igor, who is exploited as a laborer, is one of the new subjects of the contemporary city.

[64] Ther, *Europe Since 1989*, 17.
[65] Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 168.

In *La Promesse*, Liege is not depicted through any discernible economic policies or representative politicians; the closest to any such figures are several labor inspectors, working to detain illegal immigrants, whose sole appearance comes just as Hamidou has fallen to his death from a scaffolding. A pair of men appear, ask to see a few peoples' papers, and then depart. Roger is told by an associate early in the film, "The press is hounding the mayor about foreigners," yet there is no spatial articulation of this effect or its potential significance. By minimizing the actual presence or even mediated proximity of the larger dilemmas facing the city, *La Promesse* promotes the logic of neoliberalism itself, zoning its characters and their societal imprisonment in the name of authenticity; that is, the more the handheld camera trains itself on their squalid domestic space and sense of forlorn, the more Liege recedes as a place and becomes a space needing definition in order to reestablish itself as such. This is because, under the logic of neoliberalism, alternative social forms "fill the void left behind as state powers," and "political parties and other institutional forms are actively dismantled or simply wither away as centers of collective endeavor and of social bonding."[66] One could read the film's adoption of this logic two ways: as a critique—as a proclamation of neoliberalism's faulty efforts to account for such environments—or as the visible evidence of poverty being all that's needed to extrapolate the causes of its effects. Lauren Berlant offers an incisive explanation for how the relationship between character psychology and space operate in the film, explaining how gestures by Igor and others to establish a sense of normativity "are not themselves objects of desire but a tightly

[66] Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 171.

proximate cluster of placeholders for what everyone seems to want, a space of a collective relief from the ongoing present in which living on is an activity of treading water and stopping loss amid unreliable dependencies."[67] The city thus becomes a place of both refuge and imprisonment, with neither being independent of the other. Mireille Rosello helpfully frames the question accordingly: "If the city of refuge can only offer freedom within its own borders, if the guests know that they are at risk if they leave, if they are aware that they cannot leave the city without losing their rights or perhaps endangering their lives, will the city of refuge start resembling a prison rather than providing freedom?"[68]

Indeed, the city becomes a prison when there is no government oversight and is limited by either budgetary concerns or black-market forms of corruption. There is a larger example of labor exploitation almost immediately in *La Promesse*, as Roger's income derives from the illegal transportation of migrants from across the globe into a tenement housing where he extorts them for rent and labor, prompting them to work in exchange for both residence, documentation, and security from immigration officials. If there are women among the arrivals, Roger often tries to traffic them for sex. As Roger and Igor shuttle a new group of migrants across a bridge to their housing, the father and son point out the window at all of the exciting opportunities that await the arrivals, saying, "The Meuse river. Big factories. Much money." The touristic and bourgeois possibilities contained in Liege are essentially a mirage, a false narrative constructed to

[67] Lauren Berlant, "Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*," *Public Culture* 19, no. 2 (2007): 292.
[68] Mireille Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 160-1.

alleviate the realities of the city's actual circumstances. Indeed, the underlying premise of neoliberalism is the promotion of wealth as a means of defining the self through consumerism. As David Harvey says, adjusting the terms of Descartes's proposition, "'I shop therefore I am' and possessive individualism together construct a world of pseudo-satisfactions that is superficially exciting but hollow at its core."[69] Thus, if Assita is a victim, then Igor is a victim on altered but similar terms, and yet so is Roger, albeit in relation to the larger premise of his being flung to the lower rungs of neoliberal capital in pursuit of personal wealth. The film, though, minimizes this latter point by relying upon Roger's volatility as the perpetuator of the neoliberal space. While the Dardennes create a space of victimhood that cannot be entirely explained through the bad deeds of human agents, Roger is, in effect, the characterological explanation for the problem. In turn, the implication becomes *less* that it is the space or system that is producing these conditions than individuals who exploit labor for personal gain. It is Roger, as the film has it, that's the problem, not necessarily the conditions of neoliberalism itself. The usage of documentary effects alone, when coupled with a narrative of varying levels of victimhood within lower-class dwellings, replicates the premise that those in poverty are the victims of individuals rather than a system of broken logic—the very idea of neoliberal free markets. By setting out to depict the terms of impoverished imprisonment in these realist terms, the Dardennes partially replicate those conditions instead of creating an ethics that could potentially work to help extricate them from it.

[69] Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 170.

For African migrants in the mid '90s, the circumstances have not changed significantly in the thirty years since the era of decolonization. If anything, the conditions have become more dire in how migrants are immediately pushed into grimy conditions and left to languish apart from any sense of communal belonging. Assita's hopeful gaze out onto the Meuse cannot help but recall a comparable scenario in *Black Girl* (Ousmane Sembène, Senegal/France, 1966), in which Diouana (Mbissine Thérèse Diop), a Senegalese woman, is brought by a bourgeois family to Antibes, France by ship on the premise that she will look after the family's children. Instead, she is asked to fill the role of a maid and cook. Nevertheless, her stated dream of arriving in France is that she will be paid, and that her employer will show her the city. She says in voiceover, "Cannes, Monte Carlo…I will buy pretty dresses and silk undies, new wigs." Part of the logic of neoliberalism is to dispossess the autonomy of women within "household production/marketing systems" and relocate that capital into those male-dominated commodity and credit markets. Even if the exact policies of neoliberalism were absent in France during the 1960s, the circumstances rhyme with the aforementioned "colonial patterns of residential segregation and zoned consumption," given that Diouana not only never gets her shopping spree but is driven to suicide by the proto-neoliberal terms of her exploitation.[70]

In *La Promesse*, Liege provides little freedom. It outwardly rhymes with the films of Italian neorealism—films in which Rome is, even for its Italian inhabitants, unwelcoming in its construction of labor and degradation of the elderly. A citizen, in

[70] Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 170.

other words, is nearly as susceptible to exploitation as an immigrant. With that in mind, *La Promesse* often positions the migrants *and* Igor as prisoners; Igor, in particular, is seen in two separate shots standing behind a doorway divider, where the strands of ribbon and beads, respectively, leave enough space to resemble bars. The only time Igor has any autonomy is when he rides his motorized scooter through the streets of Liege; it's for this reason, too, that it's one of the few times the camera isn't either tightly focused on someone's face or contained within a car or building. Perhaps modernity and neoliberalism share this in common, in terms of space: the vehicle that propels the subject through the city, even if itself an extension of consumerism, at least engenders the illusion of momentary freedom. That's also where the central aesthetic distinction between the two lies: if the *Nouvelle Vague* found political potential in "an interface with actual spaces beyond the studio lot," it was also an image-based treatment of those spaces that helped define that potential.[71] The political potential in *La Promesse* ends at its enunciation of a neoliberal aesthetics, and it therefore engages in a replication rather than a critique of its logic.

Though *La Promesse* articulates what can be identified as a neoliberal aesthetics, it's also thoroughly entwined, in cinematic ways, with the legacy of neorealism. *La Promesse* confronts the legacy of neorealism in allegorical terms, both in the *mise-en-scène* of its filmmaking and at the level of its narrative, as a way to potentially understand the conflicts between labor and culture that exists at its textual core. The standard reading of Bazin's conception of neorealism in the essay "An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic

[71] The quote comes from Tweedie, *Age of New Waves*, 63; the statement that image-based treatments define such potential is my own.

Realism and the Italian School of Liberation," links it with certain filmmaking effects, such as long takes and deep-focus cinematography.[72] However, as Justin Horton asserts, the crucial aspects of Bazin's theory and readings cannot be condensed into such terms to fully account for the full effects of cinematic realism. While the spectator is brought in close relation with the image through what might be termed "perceptual fidelity" given the indexical nature of the image, what's imperative is how the filmmaking techniques imbue an "ambiguity into the structure of the image," which in turn calls for an active spectator.[73] One way to understand the aims of neorealism in relation to the era of *La Promesse* is how Bazin's proposed mental attitude on the part of the spectator is apt to be inclined toward doubt and mourning rather than leavened by a sense of hope. Rosalind Galt makes this point by explaining, in the context of popular Italian melodramas produced in the early '90s, that neorealist films are "concurrent with the moment of political optimism that the 1990s films mourn."[74] Yet the greater point in the comparison resides in whether or not neorealism is concerned, as a whole, with the surface of things or if it seeks a transcendental value. That's what Bazin meant by "supernatural": it's that which exists within or beyond the natural realm in an intangible sense. If neorealism can be supernatural (that is, if it can enable the filmmaker and the spectator to see beneath the profilmic), then how might that impact its reading in cross-cultural contexts? In the era of neoliberalism, a concern for supernatural realism must involve a transcendental sense of expressing the experience of peoples who have travelled from beyond Europe's borders

[72] André Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of Liberation," in *What is Cinema? Vol. II*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 16-40.
[73] Horton, "Mental Landscapes," 27-8.
[74] Galt, *New European Cinema*, 56.

and are now manifest within it. The impasse of how to represent the cultural practices of an Other, in short, as *more than* a gesture of inclusivity, presence, and empathy is the fundamental dilemma that *La Promesse* wrestles with in the film's second half, and one which it never successfully configures. Moreover, the inability to discover this possibility on the Dardennes' behalf in part reinforces a neoliberal aesthetic that prioritizes their own elevated status as vérité-style realists within global filmmaking industries.

At the film's end, Igor, who has been withholding the reality of Hamidou's death throughout, finally confesses to Assita that he has known the truth all along. The film positions Assita with her back to Igor, so that her face remains hidden as it registers the information. Rosello reads the ending by explaining how "this could be the moment when the two worlds slowly created by the movie (Africa versus Europe)…are finally brought together: the two entities may be irreconcilable, but at least the two characters acknowledge each other's reality," even if the Dardennes have "opted out of that possibility and chosen an unexpected way of filming this final dialogue."[75] The lack of a "conclusive discovery," per Rosello, means that, as Assita, her baby, and Igor subsequently make their way down a train terminal, the "camera is happy to let [them] disappear under the credits at the end of the corridor: it does not seem to know whether the corridor in question opens onto some kind of future for the two immigrants and [Igor]."[76] The question of a future, I contend, should have spectators loop back into the narrative to rediscover exactly what is at stake in withholding Assita's face from view

[75] Rosello, *Hospitality*, 139. I would modify the notion of the filming being "unexpected" to say it's "unconventional," if only because the notion of expectation suggests the spectator is consciously predicting how the film will be resolved.
[76] Rosello, *Hospitality*, 146.

during this crucial moment. I take Rosello's proposed staging of "Africa versus Europe" to be an imperative one which helps clarify the neorealism debate as it has been constructed by the film. The basis for grasping how to proceed under the assault of neoliberalism revolves around the differing versions of empirical processes that each of these continents (albeit broadly framed) take as their epistemological basis. In short, Igor adheres to a positivist logic that functions in binaristic conditions of sight and response. His witnessing of Hamidou's death, and its withholding from Assita, becomes the film's primary source of suspense because the spatial construction by the Dardennes also adheres to these terms: they keep Assita at a remove by never allowing her perspective—her ideas of the space on potentially subjective terms—to inhabit the film. The spectator awaits the moment when Igor will divulge what he knows to be fact: Hamidou is dead. However, *La Promesse* presents Assita within a different system of knowledge revolving around rituals and mysticism, none more prominently placed than her belief that she can read her husband's whereabouts through the innards of a chicken. Assita's status as an African migrant is enough to Other her in the space of Belgium, but it's the differing cultural and epistemological practices that even further displace her from the provision of a potential European citizenship.

Igor first encounters the unfamiliar rituals of Assita and Hamidou when he enters their apartment to deliver their passports and residence certificates. With the camera tracking behind Igor, the shot reveals the African couple cleaning their child in, what seems to Igor, an unusual manner. When Igor asks what they're doing, Hamidou responds that their child "must be protected against evil spirits in his new home." As Igor responds that there are no evil spirits in Liege, Assita assures him that there are, saying

"We don't see them, but they see us." After Igor leaves the apartment, the shot cuts to one of Igor on his motorized scooter, traveling from his home to his apprenticeship. As the camera reframes his movement across the city, Assita enters the frame on the right, walking on foot while carrying her baby on her back and a feathered chicken in her right hand. The framing captures this epistemological confrontation in visual terms; Igor navigates the city to satisfy the short-term labor demands of a neoliberal order, while Assita secures the means to either nourish herself and family, or, indeed, continue practicing rituals that appear foreign to Igor's Belgian eyes. When Igor and Assita are later on the run from Roger—and Assita defers to the chicken that she previously used to determine her husband's fate—Igor shouts, "To hell with the chicken!" as a refutation of what he perceives to be her irrational belief system and its lack of purchase in the cold space of Liege. While the film's realist structure orients the spectator to adopt Igor's perspective, it does not entirely do so at the expense of Assita's, even though, through dramatic irony, the viewer is aware that the innards of the chicken, which Assita reads as an affirmation of Hamidou's being alive, have provided her with the wrong conclusion. At least, it's wrong in the literal sense, but perhaps not at the realm of feeling and hope. That is, Assita's beliefs are still leavened by a sense of hope, but by the film's end she will wordlessly become much like the contemporary European spectator who's geared toward doubt and mourning. To what extent Assita believes in Hamidou's passage into an afterlife and how that pertains to her physical rootedness in Liege remains unresolved within the film's realist, largely objective perspective, which equates actuality with appearance: all that is known is that which can be made visible.

The film's spatializing of this tension between the empirically verifiable and the supernatural, in Bazin's sense, reaches its peak when Igor and Assita are accompanied by an acquaintance of Assita's to an African shaman residing in a nearby apartment. The *mise-en-scène* first shows the man's hands as he readies them for the upcoming ritual. In Assita's child, he sees "an ancestor protesting in rage" as an explanation for the baby's sudden fever. Igor stands in the background during this opening shot until the camera is once again in tight close-up, framing his face as he watches the proceedings. The spectator might feel as though the sudden shift in perspective has created a certain slippage between the action of the ritual and the production of its performance as a spectacle for the uninitiated. It's that precise slippage that constitutes the inherent tension between the two perspectives, and yet there's not a moment when the slippage occurs in the opposite way: from spectacle back to realism, or toward a tight close-up of Assita. Once the camera takes hold of Igor's face and his suspicious gaze, *La Promesse* also creates a distance from the event by implicitly questioning its value as anything more than a performance. As a cut takes the camera to a lower position, with Igor's head in the left foreground and Assita seated with the shaman behind him, the consultation continues to unfold at a remove. Assita asks whether her child's father is "with the ancestors," and the shaman begins a process involving sand, an assortment of stones, and Assita's concentration. Throughout this procedure, Igor's perspective is prioritized in shot-reverse-shots. Although the film does not use voiceover or any such technique in directly expressing it, his emotional state is apparent and readable on his face: he's trying to reconcile his irreducible knowledge of death with what's taking place in front of him, the

character as viewer.[77] At the end of the ritual, as the shaman claims to see "nothing to indicate he's dead," Igor has already excused himself from the room, claiming heat exhaustion.

One might be reminded here, in absence of Igor's immediate response to the shaman's verdict, what filmmaker Luchino Visconti once said about the profilmic body, and how the "moral weight and aesthetic fullness of the image" derives from its inscription: "The heft of a human being, his presence, is the only thing which fills the frame…The most humble gesture of a man, his face, his hesitations and his impulses, impart poetry and life to the things which surround him and to the setting in which they take place."[78] As the on-screen spectator and conduit for the off-screen spectator, Igor relays only the skepticism of his cultural difference; as he wipes sweat from his brow, the shot records less an imparting of poetry or life than the certainty of a lie that's being perpetuated by silence. The Dardennes cannot relinquish their cinematic gaze to anyone other than the Belgian boy, because their grappling with neorealism in the present is as hesitant as Igor himself, ready to depict the machinations of subaltern religious practice without the faculties to process it in a meaningful way beyond a limited form of subjectivity. Here is where the Dardennes remain social realists rather than supernatural realists: their sense of realism lacks any transcendental value. In this scene, Igor's hesitancy is the equivalent of withholding Assita's facial expression to hearing of her husband's death at the film's end. In turn, the film reveals its inner grappling with how to

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[77] This, says Deleuze, is one of the conditions neorealism generates through the time-image. *The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989), 3.
[78] As quoted in Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision: The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2013), xv.

render the real when it can no longer be known as such; the terms of collaboration across cultures cannot reconcile this divide in its narrative contexts. Igor contains no sense of outward joy or pain, no nostalgia for a past and no longing for a future; emptied of melodramatic structure or signification, *La Promesse* configures its neorealism for the neoliberal era, in which labor no longer has even the dignity of pursuit, nor the means to accommodate the "poetry" of the profilmic body.

Trashy Realism

In *demonlover*, the major business deal at the center of the film concerns a joint venture between a French and Japanese company interested in cornering the burgeoning global market of anime pornography. Assayas shoots the first meeting between the entrepreneurs in a series of mostly static reverse shots, a matter-of-fact presentation given the extreme subject matter of their conversation. Technically what they are discussing is legal, but legality here only facilitates the transnational exchange of goods, while leaving untouched the exploitation underlying the production of those goods, which is here both economic and sexual. When negotiations over the business deal eventually fall apart and selfish, underlying motives are revealed, as is the case in both Assayas films, the end result is violence, driven by sexual hostility and greed. Assayas's trashy realism develops from the recognition that a critique of neoliberalism's exploitations means straddling the divide between formalist critique and exploitation genres. This makes it difficult to recognize such films as critical, since they seem to be participating in the very base pleasures (the confluence of sex and violence) they are meant to be condemning. This ambiguity becomes more pronounced when one considers how a film like *Boarding Gate*

was marketed to audiences [figure 1]. The French poster for the film juxtaposes overtly sexualized imagery of actress Asia Argento with the promise of "un film de Olivier Assayas," a "distinguished iconoclast" of French cinema.[79] Spectators might expect an iconoclast to challenge beliefs and institutions through a clearly formed narrative argument, and yet the poster seems to primarily promise pleasures of the flesh. The films are trashy, in part, for how they critique sexism yet rely on sex to sell the films to audiences. Trashy realism, then, both engages the aesthetic terms of the lower depths (film noir, gangster films, horror) to interrogate actual global spaces while also aiming to profit off sexploitation: precisely the subject that lies at the narrative heart of both films.

Assayas uses an array of camera set-ups and styles in terms of handheld and static takes throughout both films that are consistent with dominant, contemporary realist styles, while also muting the color palette to give the film a lower-grade look. Like *La Promesse*, its sense of place is rooted in realism, but that is complicated by having trashy sensibilities that place its images into a "new genre," according to film critic Denby: the "vicious globalist thriller."[80]

[79] Tim Palmer grants this label to Assayas in *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 58.
[80] Denby, "Faraway Places."

(figure 1)

Because both Assayas films consider the *mise-en-scène* of globalization through the thriller genre (involving gun play, sexual entanglements, stylishly dressed characters), they invoke the terms of the global underground where legitimately illegitimate types persist; in other words, to be illegitimate is now to be perfectly legitimate, as the spaces of work and leisure are increasingly indistinguishable (a business deal is as likely to happen at the gun range or a nightclub as in the board room). Corruption in the form of exploiting free markets and their workers for individual profit is the rule of neoliberalism, and therefore not its exception.

Boarding Gate opens with a handheld, blurry image of two men standing around a gun range in Paris [figure 2]. André (Alex Descas) steps forward and fires his weapon until the clip is empty. He extends the gun to Miles (Michael Madsen), as the handheld

camera begins circling and cutting into their conversation. Its proximity to their faces and bodies mirrors that of the Dardennes: the spectator is immersed in the corporeal sense of the characters because of how aware the spectator is of the camera's relationship to them. As Miles puts on ear protection, he fires the gun almost directly into the camera, at which point the loud sounds of gunfire transform into the even louder sounds of a plane engine roaring. There's also a cut to another out-of-focus image, this time of a plane emerging from the depths of the frame. It turns out to be a transition point, as the film's title appears just long enough in the black of the plane engine before cutting back to the two men, now getting into an SUV.

The trashiness of these disjunctive audio/visual choices lies in their drawing attention not only to their construction, but also to the indecorous behavioral traits that might be stereotypically seen as hypermasculine: gun play, an aggressive and mobile camera, and abrasive sounds that are equated with a certain bravado, both on the part of the characters and the filmmaker. The visual style is much the same as the Dardennes, but the spectator isn't following a criminal toiling at the margins of society by exploiting immigrants: the spectator is charting the actions of an underworld entrepreneur and owner of significant securities shares whose penchant for cruelty and taste for money is matched only by his antipathy for the women in his life.

(figure 2)

Trashy, in this case, is playing off of another aesthetic category: pretty. Rosalind Galt defines pretty as that which is "precisely defined by its apparently obvious worthlessness," and it's this apparent obviousness of pretty's inferiority that makes it "the perfect term to describe the structural devaluation of the decorative image in cinema."[81] Galt also understands the persistent rejection of pretty images as "grounded in ideas of geopolitical difference in the same way it is structurally contingent on gender regardless of the theme or content of the image."[82] The pretty's relationship to gender extends to trashy's relationship with how its realist aesthetics straddle being both frank and seductive. That is, trashy realism wants to tell it like it is, so to speak, while also leaving the space to revel in the pleasures of the image absent any obvious social message. Trashy realism wants to display the terms of stereotypical masculinity as they intersect with aspirational urban life. Trashy is not opposed to pretty (that would be ugly); in fact, it's closer to prettiness than it is to ugliness because of the focus placed upon its

[81] Rosalind Galt, *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7
[82] Galt, *Pretty*, 27.

straddling of the line between being desirable and repellant. It could, in some ways, even be understood as the gendered correlative to pretty: it deals in opulence via male desire that is directly related to the terms of neoliberal capital.

Consider a sequence from *demonlover* in which a wide shot of the cityscape cuts to a wide shot of downtown Tokyo, then cuts to a low-angle shot within a dance club that focuses on a woman dancing on stage [figure 3]. A series of cuts frame different parts of the dancer's body as a kaleidoscopic rendering what being inside the club would feel like. The film transitions from the anonymous exterior of the city and into the seemingly personalized audiovisual experience of dancing in the club.

(figure 3)

The juxtaposition reveals two sides to the city that cannot be reconciled except as a simultaneously alluring and dangerous facet of city culture. The images are realist in the sense that they are handheld and approximate the experience of being inside the club without an excessive or even apparent manipulation of the images. As the camera becomes mobile and, in a lengthy take, captures the activity of several DJs playing behind turntables and gear, it charts the space with a searching eye comparable to how

the Dardennes' camera pans back and forth in a single take depending on who's talking. Still, the club is wholly excessive in relation to the kinds of events and incidents the Dardennes depict with their camera. As a cultural space in which sounds and images overflow, no one wants for food, shelter, or dignity. Men in suits and women in dresses consume alcohol: here is the leisure side of neoliberal space, but also a trashy one. As Ben Malbon explains relative to the time period of this film, the "twin notions that clubbing as a form of social space is qualitatively different from the 'city streets' beyond and that clubbing involves alternate orderings, codes, and modes of social interaction are linked."[83] In this instance, Diane (Connie Nielsen) and Hervé (Charles Berling) are French executives inside a Tokyo club who lack a social connection with the space. It serves their momentary purpose as a rendezvous point for networking and securing capital within their ongoing negotiations, further reinforcing the uncertain terms of such spaces.

Later in the film, after their relationship has deteriorated and it's clear Hervé means her harm, Diane seduces Hervé and then shoots him in the head so that she can escape. An identical encounter happens in *Boarding Gate* between Miles and Sandra (Asia Argento), who kills her ex-lover after he states his intention to rape her and refuses to let her leave his apartment. These overlaps indicate how exchange and violence are inextricable in the era of neoliberalism. As Iro Filippaki explains in relation to *Personal Shopper* (France/Germany/Czech Republic/Belgium, 2016), another of Assayas's films, "Gift-giving reminds characters that boundaries have been violated, indexing the market

[83] Ben Maldon, *Clubbing: Dancing, Vitality, Ecstasy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 46. In an interview shortly thereafter, one clubgoer says, "What I really like about going clubbing is…just the trash Western, hedonistic nonsense of it all."

logic of neoliberalism. Although murderous violence is profoundly affecting for characters in [this] film, violence reflects and is made possible by every day transgressions and horrors integral to the West's neoliberal ethics."[84] Indeed, the inextricability of exchange and violence rests at the heart of Assayas's sense of a realist aesthetics in which the trashy nature of how men and women communicate with their bodies becomes one of the determining factors in the marketplace. In *demonlover*, as Hervé watches a scene from a pornographic manga in which a woman is being violently penetrated, he sarcastically says, "She's in a tight spot." His crude punchline is untranslatable for the Japanese business partners, who shrug at his comment, but it epitomizes the realist nature of Assayas's trashy aesthetics, in which speaking from below—engaging the basest sexual and violent urges of "male-dominated commodity and credit markets"—means speaking from an elevated socio-economic strata in which characters are actively concerned with and influencing the flow of neoliberal capital; they are not simply cogs in its machine as in *La Promesse*.[85]

Confusion and incongruity become in Assayas's films the end result of trashy realism—as aesthetic characteristics, they move closer to articulating the mindset of a globalized existence while often adhering to the visual terms of realism. Both *demonlover* and *Boarding Gate* leave their central female characters scrambling for meaning, as they're being tracked and charted by violent underground forces that pull the strings on the above-ground operations, though these movements remain mostly off-screen. If in *La Promesse* the social welfare and bureaucratic programs remain almost entirely hidden, in

[84] Iro Filippaki, "Violence as Embodied Neoliberalism in the Neurothriller," *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 30, no. 2 (2019): 144.
[85] Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 170.

Assayas's films the same applies to shadowy figures who actually oversee (or undersee, as it were) the flow of global capital.

To be clear, as a filmmaker, Assayas is not operating "from below" in the sense that he is outside of industrial centers; on the contrary, his films debut at festivals, star notable actors, and receive significant attention from critics and commentators. The point is that these two films ask the spectator to see the spatialized terms of globalized labor in relation to a realist paradigm without insisting that one accepts them as real: these are images that correspond to an approximation of reality but are not beholden to the edifying aims of social realism. It's precisely that combination that proves trashy and entrenched in articulating the sensorial conditions of neoliberal logic: these films are caught, once again, articulating the conditions of global capitalism while also inhabiting the conventions of exploitation films. If this seems confusing, it's this very confusion that is the productive site of Assayas's work.[86] It isn't in my reading that reality-based and image-based modes of presentation have broken down, as Shaviro asserts; on the contrary, it's any such "faith in reality" that now proves artificial and false. There can be no more faith once the illusion of a collective cooperation has been displaced by the global emphasis on an individual's accumulation of wealth.

This chapter has examined *La Promesse* as an example of the limitations of a social realist style that concerns itself, above all, with the surface of things—with the

[86] The same can be said for *Miami Vice* (Michael Mann, U.S., 2006), which is similar in style to both of Assayas's films for how it interprets genre and realism. Unlike Assayas, who shoots on 35mm, Mann shot the film on the Thomson Viper FilmStream Camera, a digital movie camera developed in the early 2000s. Mann shoots many scenes handheld and the mobile camera, in combination with a sound design that remains faithful to the actual sounds of gunshots, among other diegetic elements, combines hyperrealist gestures with genre filmmaking.

visibility of "trash"—but not with how such formations generate in the first place. Its commitment to verisimilar representation visualizes the cold and isolating terms of neoliberal space, and while there are gestures toward reconciling that space in relation to either characters or systemic oppression, it's the character of Roger rather than the terms of neoliberalism that are made visible as a source of oppression. On the other hand, in *demonlover* and *Boarding Gate*, a trashy realism straddles the divide between formalist critique and exploitation genres. Accordingly, these films come closer to envisioning both a neoliberal space and logic that speaks to a world-system where borders are unstable and capital flows are becoming imperceptible.

CHAPTER III

MIGRATION, DUST, AND DIASPORIC SPACE IN DJIBRIL DIOP MAMBÉTY'S *TOUKI BOUKI* AND MATI DIOP'S *ATLANTICS*

In a 2019 interview with *Film Comment*, composer Fatima Al Qadiri explained that she approached the music for *Atlantics* (Mati Diop, France/Senegal/Belgium, 2019) as "digital dust," saying it's "like if you were to touch it, it would slink through your fingers. There's something very dusty about it, but I really get that because I come from an insanely dusty place."[87] The fact that Al Qadiri, who is a Senegalese-born Kuwaiti musician, correlates the film's score (which has a low-fi quality) with its setting is not especially novel for a film composer discussing their work; what is insightful, though, is how the implication of coming from a dusty place speaks to the geopolitical history of Senegal and France. As historians have shown, an opposition was created through advertising, literature, and cinema in 1960s France between the French people and the African peoples of newly decolonized nations, such as Algeria and Senegal.

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[87] Sierra Pettengill, "Digital Dust: Fatima Al Qadiri," *Film Comment*. November-December 2019. https://www.filmcomment.com/article/digital-dust-fatima-al-qadiri/. Qadiri adds: "There's something that is digital about Dakar, sound quality–wise. I feel like the music of Senegal, and of West Africa, Central Africa, South Africa, is all like mp3s and recorded on whatever is around. Some of it is with real instruments, some of it is not. So it has that vibe of being neither here nor there."

Dust has been a metaphor used by historians and theorists to understand archaeologies of knowledge and how places, as physical locations, come into being. In fact, contrary to the previous chapter on trash, dust "speaks of the opposite of waste and dispersal," because it comprises "a grand circularity, of nothing ever, ever going away."[88] Dust functions as a complex metaphor. First, it suggests that the past is something that leaves a trace and waits to be uncovered—a hidden artifact or buried secret that remains from having been in a particular place. Second, it may indicate a residue or feedback that prevents something, like sound quality, from being "clean." Al Qadiri implies both meanings in commenting on her music, and her explanation invokes a broader historical discourse pertaining to French and Senegalese geopolitical relations.

European cultural concerns with cleanliness were one of the primary symbolic ways that decolonization participated in the "reordering of French culture," as Kristin Ross puts it in her book *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*. In her discussion of an essay about skin cream in Roland Barthes's 1956 collection *Mythologies*, Ross writes that Barthes uncovers France's "deep psychic need, which he names but does not analyze…to be *clean*."[89] It is this relationship between cleanliness and modernization in postwar France, says Ross, that is a consequence of the turn toward consumerism, as the "colonies are in some sense 'replaced,' and the effort that once went into maintaining and disciplining a colonial people and situation becomes instead concentrated on a particular 'level' of metropolitan existence: everyday life."[90]

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[88] Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2001), 166.
[89] Kirsten Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 73. Emphasis original.
[90] Ross, *Clean Bodies*, 77.

Insofar as consumerism is invested in a social and cultural discourse about cleanliness, a class divide is made apparent. Those who can afford to withdraw from manual labor by joining the middle class—whether working in the clinical confines of an office building or not working at all—can remain clean and untaxed by either climate conditions or movement that would produce perspiration. These details are both psychological and physiological: they are inherent to the demands of an increasingly globalized marketplace. As Ross also explains, "Without the labor of ex-colonial immigrants, France could not have successfully 'Americanized,' nor competed in the postwar industrial contest… France made use of the colonies 'one last time' in order to resurrect and maintain its national superiority over them—a superiority made all the more urgent by the ex-colonies' own newly acquired nationhood."[91] If one considers these years from the perspective of African film production, they are especially important for Senegal, whose independence from France came in 1960 when Léopold Senghor became the nation's first president. The first feature to be produced and distributed partially through independent financial means as a Senegalese/French co-production was *Black Girl*, also discussed in the previous chapter, which follows the hardships of a young Senegalese woman named Diouana who is hand-picked from the streets of Dakar by a wealthy Parisian woman. The woman hires Diouana with the intention of having her care for her children. To reiterate the plot, when Diouana arrives, and longs to visit the surrounding city, she's confined to the apartment and made to cook and clean. When Diouana speaks of getting paid, her stated desires are especially of note in relation to

[91] Ross, *Clean Bodies*, 9.

Ross's insights: "We'll look at all the pretty stores…I'll buy pretty dresses, shoes, silk undies, and pretty wigs." This desire is stated shortly after her employer berates her for wearing the same dress (the implication being that it is unwashed) for three weeks straight. Becoming French, for Diouana, means entering a social class that makes her capable of purchasing a form of cleanliness that conforms with societal expectations. When denied this and confined to performing the domestic duties of cleaning up after her employer, Diouana sums up her experience as such: "For me, France is the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom, and my bedroom." In short, France, for this woman from Senegal, is a form of neocolonial confinement, where she is enlisted to clean up the messes left behind.

Al Qadiri's invocation of digital dust, then, carries with it a politicized suggestion about place: the creation of a sonic form that evokes the clean/dirty, center/periphery dichotomies that have shaped Senegalese and French relations. Against the backdrop of these historical relations, this chapter will examine two films at length: *Touki Bouki* (Djibril Diop Mambéty, Senegal, 1973) and *Atlantics*. To analyze *Atlantics* through this lens, one first needs to understand Mambéty's project. I argue that the *mise-en-scène* and sound design of *Atlantics* refer to the spatial and cinematic geographies of Europe and Senegal. They do this, in part, by implicitly engaging with Mambéty's ideas about filmmaking. That Mati Diop, the film's writer/director, is Mambéty's niece helps concretize the connection beyond formal traits alone, especially as Diop has not only made a short film about *Touki Bouki* called *A Thousand Suns* (France/Senegal, 2013), but has also spoken of her uncle's influence in interviews. 46 years prior, *Touki Bouki* was made in Senegal without French financial support; in fact, it was among the first films

made in Senegal in which the French Ministry of Cooperation's Bureau du Cinema had no say in its content, style, or production methods.[92] In the analysis that follows, I argue that *Touki Bouki* is productive in furthering transnational examinations of artistic production through a historical lens that examines the significance of influence (both from European and African sources) and identity formation within Senegalese filmmaking. It does this primarily by deviating from social realism and asking for formal experimentation within African cinemas.

A Context for Analyzing Senegalese/French Cinemas

Manthia Diawara's *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* is a work of film history that explains contemporary African cinema by means of the aesthetic traits of the New African Cinema Wave and Nollywood, terms referring to the latest developments in (trans)national African cinemas.[93] Diawara begins with a lengthy chapter about the establishing of a specifically African cinematic voice. Here, he foregrounds Ousmane Sembène, the writer/director of *Black Girl*, who is held up as the central figure in articulating an African voice in film. Diawara explains:

> For Sembène, the essential African image had first of all to encounter the Eurocentric preconception of Africans as infantile, primitive, and without culture or civilization. By positing images and characterizations that show what it means to be African in the world, Sembène found a new language to define his own cinema: a cinema that took its strength from contradicting and rewriting the representation of Black people by mainstream cinema. Sembène's images of Africa are opposed to anything seen before in European films about the continent; they have no reference point in the Western iconography of Africans. His African images criticize Western images for their age-old reduction of Africa to silence

[92] Anny Wynchank, "Touki-Bouki: The New Wave on the Cinematic Shores of Africa," *South African Theatre Journal* 12, no. 1-2 (1998): 53-72.
[93] For an excellent and detailed study on these formations, see: Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008.

> and to invisibility, and for maintaining Africans in a traditional and permanent village posture in order to exploit and marginalize them and to impose the centralizing beauty and superiority of the European image on them.[94]

For Diawara, Sembène founded "a new language" for African cinema through the means of positive representation, where prior instances of negative imaging were replaced with rounded and developed narratives and characters. Sembène did this, Diawara writes elsewhere, by engaging a "social realist tendency" that uses elements of "melodrama, satire, and comedy," and which "describe the plight of the marginalized in the postindependence era."[95] What's notable in Diawara's analysis is how renewed or altered content in Sembène's films constitutes a break from "mainstream cinema," by which Diawara seems to mean "Western" cinema. Regardless, Sembène's relevance to Black African cinema is frequently evaluated as such.[96] For Diawara and others, Sembène's influence on African cinema has been its impulse to oppose and rewrite the representation of Africans in European films through social realist means.

Another way to understand the relevance of Sembène's social realism is as part of a resistance tradition in African art. Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o poses the question in this way: "Can a people who have been denied the use of their languages effectively participate in the shaping of the country's destiny within the nation and between nations?"[97] Thiong'o's primary reference is to literature, but the question of language

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[94] Manthia Diawara, *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Prestel, 2010), 30-1.
[95] Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics & Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 141.
[96] Melissa Thackway calls Sembène the "doyen of Black African cinema," and explains how his focus on "thematic activism and social realist style immediately set a trend that would remain predominant in Francophone African film circles for many years to come." *Africa Shoots Back: Alternative Perspectives in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 8.
[97] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Critical Theory of the Arts and State in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

could be applied to cinema through an examination of visual styles and sound design rather than either a use of language or content analysis alone. Thiong'o claims these distinctions are not only difficult to theorize but potentially impossible to practice because of the "two mutually opposed forces in Africa today: an imperialist tradition on the one hand, and a resistance tradition on the other."[98] *Black Girl*, with its stark and austere formal style, emphasizes Diouana's interiority and, in turn, denounces the French exploitation and fetishization of the African subject. The film is, however, largely conventional in terms of filmic narration, as it adheres to many strictures of the classical Hollywood cinema, including a flashback structure, voiceover narration, and psychologically motivated characterization. Therefore, while it is part of the resistance tradition that Thiong'o writes of in terms of its politics, its form is a secondary concern: that is, it works in service of narrative meaning. A resistance tradition, though, might also pursue resistance at the level of film form and production contexts. This would entail a turn away from social realism and toward experimental styles that would constitute a form of resistance in their own right, even if their political relevance becomes harder to decipher given the absence of a didactic voice. Experimental works, more vulnerable to misinterpretation and/or incoherence, also hold the capacity to create new ideas and new forms of communication.

Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* constitutes a significant break in Senegalese film from social realism. Formal considerations are its primary concern, arguably rendering content-based questions of immigration, postcolonial luxuries, and tourism-as-reciprocity

[98] Ngugi was Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (Oxford: East African Educational Publishers, 1997), 2.

secondary concerns.[99] The film has been said to be "unlike anything in the history of African cinema," and that's largely due to its radical departure from a social realist style.[100] While Diawara's monograph on African cinema mentions *Touki Bouki* only in passing,[101] Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike more extensively situates the film within the post-1970s "introspective phase" of African cinema, in which films became even more "directed toward addressing contemporary African issues."[102] For Ukadike, *Touki Bouki* breaks the preceding "aesthetic gridlock" in African cinema by finding a "spirit of filmic innovation," and by having a "well-integrated symbolism of typical African sociocultural codes, effective visual metaphors, and [an] intelligible juxtaposition of images of reality and fiction which force frequent action and reaction between opposite poles."[103] Ukadike adds that Mambéty uses "disjunctive editing, jump cuts, and calculated disparities between sound and image."[104] These formal techniques had already been in widespread use by French filmmakers and those of other European nations throughout the 1960s, as the jump cut and new applications of Eisensteinian montage were becoming not only common, but even exhausted by the end of the decade. In just eight years of making reflexive films in the name of challenging continuity-based principles of filmmaking,

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[99] Though the film's narrative concerns France and features several French actors, the production was entirely financed for roughly $30,000 within Senegal. See Heather Snell, "Toward 'A Giving and a Receiving': Teaching Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki*," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 2 (2014): 127-139.

[100] Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, *Questioning African Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002), 122.

[101] In Diawara's monograph on African cinema, the only mention of *Touki Bouki* is in reference to its "editing style" within the context of a broader discussion about FEPACI: the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers. *African Cinema*, 49.

[102] Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 166.

[103] Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*, 173. Ukadike attributes this to how Mambéty "deplores the exasperating simplicity of African cinema." 176.

[104] Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*, 173.

Jean-Luc Godard largely abandoned narrative feature filmmaking to make political documentaries with Jean-Pierre Gorin, as the pair made five films over 1968-1971 that followed in the wake of the student uprisings in May of ‘68.[105]

Political and formal aims comingle in *Touki Bouki* as well, but for much different reasons, which will be discussed later in this chapter. For now, it is important to note that examinations of African cinema necessitate analysis that doesn’t situate it only in relation to European cinema. This is precisely the impetus that Diawara and Ukadike take up, and it has been one of the major projects in African film scholarship since.[106] Therefore, scholars would be remiss to assert *Touki Bouki*’s own usage of a Godardian style without probing the question of influence as it pertains to representations of colonialism within the film. Indeed, while Mambéty employs something resembling Godardian technique, it’s as a satirical gesture that speaks *against* French neocolonialism. That is, if Godard’s films from the late ‘60s, such as *Made in U.S.A.* (France, 1966), focused on critiques of the American consumerism and cultural influence in France, then *Touki Bouki* functions in a comparable manner, only it primarily deplores the French presence and influence in Senegal.

Consider, for a moment, in *Black Girl*, how the family hangs an African mask on their living room wall [figure 4], as if the decorative gesture not only asserts their

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[105] These began with *A Film Like Any Other* (France, 1968), a documentary that chronicled interactions between automobile workers and student revolutionaries.

[106] *African Diasporic Cinema: Aesthetics of Reconstruction*, a recent monograph by Daniela Ricci, explains how the need for new voices—especially those from within Africa—about African cinema are needed. As filmmaker Burkinabè filmmaker Gaston Kaborè explains, “During my master’s degree in history [in France], I noticed that Africa was always recounted almost exclusively by non-African anthropologists, ethnologists, or sociologists.” (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2020), 26.

cosmopolitan interests, but also solidifies their sympathetic identification with African peoples. This should be understood, rather, as little more than a signifier of globalization

(figure 4)

and exploitation, the mask traversing continental borders in a manner that nullifies not only Diouana's fantasy of travel, but also prompts her to realize the conditions of what amounts to a contemporary slave trade. Mambéty asserts a similar concern himself, stating in an interview: "When I begin to dream of other places, to be obsessed by them to the point of becoming a stranger in my own country like Mory and Anta in *Touki Bouki*, my natural instinct is to refuse the temptation. That is what has set the course of my life; I have always found it sad to be away from home."[107] That sadness, presumably, is bred from similar realizations that Diouana has in *Black Girl*, which ends with her suicide. It's a sadness that suggests not just melancholy, but resentment toward colonial powers that theorize African experience purely in terms of exotic difference. Such

[107] Ukadike, *Questioning African Cinema*, 131.

questions of a potentially politicizing condition, rather than an historicizing one, have become an important point in recent studies of African cinema. K. Martial Frindéthié, for example, argues that there "remains a demonstrable paucity of African film studies whose primary concern is less about periodizing than about exploring the conceptual connections between African cinema and contemporary literary theory and political imagination."[108] Periodizing as an operative, and nearly singular, mode of treating African cinema is, symbolically, the neocolonialization of African art, where its works are still treated as a mysterious Other, which inevitably results in, as Frindéthié writes, "a museumification of African cinema."[109] Periodizing studies, intentionally or not, may resurrect an imperialist/resistance tension. Lest this dichotomy remain firmly in place, it's important to consider how transnational theories and methodologies can help to relieve this tension. In cinematic terms, resistance has been most often linked with social realism, and thus the model put forth by Sembène. We can see in *Touki Bouki* a realist impulse that is upended by a turn toward non-realist formal experimentation. This helps to move our examination away from focusing on the surfaces of national spaces through verisimilitude and toward how images and sound can become their own forms of thought. The following section explains how *Touki Bouki* initially seems to be engaging in a social realist framework itself, only to radically break from it through an array of techniques that form a pointed critique of France's ongoing physical and mental neocolonization of Senegal. It is not simply part of a resistance tradition, though it certainly qualifies as such in its own innovative way: it's also a significant intertextual work that is in simultaneous

[108] K. Martial Frindéthié, *Francophone African Cinema* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2009), 3.
[109] Frindéthié, *Francophone*, 3.

dialogue with *both* African and European art. This analysis of *Touki Bouki* helps contextualize a subsequent reading of *Atlantics*, in which Mati Diop, Mambéty's niece, makes a film that pays homage to her uncle's ideas and style while also reconsidering the contemporary spatial relationship—economically, cinematically, geopolitically—between Africa and Europe.

The Fantasy of Migration in *Touki Bouki*

Touki Bouki employs a fantasy framework to interrogate an inescapable confrontation with the traces of colonialism for Mory (Magaye Niang) and Anta (Mareme Niang), both college students whose political interests the film never explicitly addresses, even though each of them dreams of migrating to Paris for reasons that seem as much driven by advertisements from the local tourist office as by their own innate desires. The film is structured around moments that cannot be distinguished as either reality or fantasy, especially after it appears that Mory may have been murdered by a group of local men who, in an early scene, accost him and strap him to the back of their truck. As Anta runs, seemingly aware that this is happening despite her distance from the event, the film crosscuts between three planes of action, with Anta running, Mory being dragged, and a goat being slaughtered by a pair of unidentified men. Diegetic sound gives way to the non-diegetic tones of metal clanging, which steadily increases in volume before abruptly cutting out shortly before the sequence ends. In this sequence, Mambéty remaps realist space into a formalist one through an intricate use of crosscutting and sound design. The remainder of the film largely plays out the previously underlying fantasies of wealth and migration through locations and characters that enter and exit the film without

explanation; suddenly, Mory is not dead, as has been implied, but alive and well. Suddenly, he and Anta are greeted by locals as royalty, despite having done nothing to obtain this reverence. Yet, despite their newfound status in Dakar, the couple still dreams of hopping a ship to Paris, which by the film's end becomes even more reminiscent of *Black Girl* given that the ship they intend to leave on looks identical to the one Diouana arrives on at the start of that film.

Ross explains how, in the '60s, the "new French couple" became a bourgeois concept that was "not only a class necessity but a *national* necessity as well, linked to the state-led modernization effort."[110] These circumstances helped create the idea of "a new image of society *as* a city," and further identified how cities "possess a center and *banlieues*, and citizens, those on the interior, deciding who among the insiders should be expelled, and whether or not to open their doors to those on the outside."[111] By hoping to migrate to Paris, Mory and Anta become, as constructed by Mambéty, enmeshed in this spatial order as outsiders both within their own country and the one they aspire to migrate to. They also subscribe to a neocolonial logic that prevents Senegal from creating a meaningful social and political ecosystem of its own. Mambéty, then, is critical of *both* the operative neocolonial logic of contemporary France and of the desire to defect from Senegal by a younger generation who has potentially bought into the consumerist logic of which Ross speaks.

Postrevolutionary cinema in Africa, just like post-'89 cinema in Europe, wrestles with configurations of space and ethnicity organized arounds relations between inside

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[110] Ross, *Clean Bodies*, 148. Emphasis original.
[111] Ross, *Clean Bodies*, 150. Emphasis original.

and outside. These matters of space and ethnicity should also be considered for how locating the specificity of a voice means constantly thinking transnationally without losing the overarching question of "whose history" and "whose memory," as Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg put it in reference to "cinema as a prime site not just for the negotiation of migrant and diasporic identities, but also for the (self)-articulation of the collective histories of Europe's respective communities."[112] *Touki Bouki* unfolds in an effort to think through what's at stake in the ongoing spatial relationship between Senegal and France, which is what this next section takes up.

This chapter further examines the hybridity between various forms of art cinemas, transnationality, and geography through the space and sound design of *Touki Bouki* and *Atlantics*. *Touki Bouki* creates geographies on two distinct levels. On one level, it offers visible evidence of Dakar as a place. That is, it engages in filmmaking as a means of showing actual spaces and the people who inhabit them. Even in its most disjunctive moments, the images perform this operation. On another level, the film creates a geography of allusion: it directs our attention to other films, primarily Senegalese and French, in order to draw intertextual comparison between them.

Studies in global cinemas in recent years have been helpful in clarifying the flow of influence and intertextual relations between (trans)national cinemas as multidirectional. Whereas nationalist methodological models utilize notions of appropriation and exploitation, transnationalism examines how ideas and images cannot be understood to travel through power dynamics alone. In fact, transnationalism has been

[112] Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg, "Locating Migrant and Diasporic Cinema in Contemporary Europe," in *European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*, eds. Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 16.

employed by several film scholars as a critical methodology unto itself, which means "meeting a cinematic text *on its own terms*, engaging in a dialogic relationship with its form and context while resisting the fixity that comes from asserting one's own national identity or cultural background too forcefully."[113] Working transnationally means reading with a certain flexibility that simultaneously looks outward and toward other cinemas, but without losing sight of the specificity and significance within.

To summarize, reading *Touki Bouki* transnationally means interrogating its engagement with French and American culture, its sense of what's at stake in migrating from Africa or staying, its ideas about the purpose and function of African cinema, and how it provides a context with which to read *Atlantics*, which will be taken up in the latter portion of this chapter.

Dakar, Realism, and Politics

Touki Bouki is a geographically complex work that has been written about through close readings that make sense of its dense, folkloric narrative structure and allusions to "Western" culture; put another way, *Touki Bouki* is as much about the geography of art cinemas as it is the geographical specificity of Dakar, where it is set. To that end, this section analyzes *Touki Bouki* as it visualizes the city, specifically, and considers the value that such an analysis holds for transnational art cinema. The film's spatial arrangements constitute a deviation from social realism in Senegalese cinema for

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[113] Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, *Movie Migrations: Transnational Genre Flows and South Korean Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 7. Emphasis original. As Chung and Diffrient also state, one is likely to experience in South Korean cinema a "pilfering" of American cinema, but that same sort of pilfering is evident in the films of Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino, whose filmographies are filled with references and even remakes of films from other national cinemas. 5.

the purpose of finding alternative means of expressing African experiences, art, and culture. In the 2010 edited collection *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories*, Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover provide film scholars with a cogent and clear-eyed sense of why art cinema, as an aesthetic and geopolitical category, continues to have relevance as "the critical category best placed to engage pressing contemporary questions of globalization, world culture, and how the economics of cinema's transnational flows might intersect with trajectories of film form."[114] The authors' desire to free cinematic discourse from the confines of both nationalist and auteur-driven strictures finds purchase in what they call "art cinema's mongrel identity," an identity that, because of its amorphousness, necessarily places art cinema at the center of global film studies. Subsequently, Galt and Schoonover assert that, "as a principle," art cinema "can be defined by its impurity."[115] By homing in on its impurity, art cinema may be free from both its inherent Eurocentrism and the stigma of elitism that has defined its reception. Put another way, art cinema can be an empowering concept for how it reveals transnational cinematic channels of communication that would be lost by focusing on national models alone. Its impurity lives there—in transcending the labels of national or even regional cinemas.

Touki Bouki is characterized by an amorphous, experimental use of sound design and spatial orientation, the latter of which is indicated by the film's original poster, where the Eiffel Tower not only appears upside down, but also appears to be floating in a body

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[114] *Global Art Cinemas,* eds. Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.
[115] Galt and Schoonover, *Global Art Cinemas*, 6.

(figure 5)

of water [figure 5].[116] To reiterate, the film follows Mory and Anta, a Senegalese couple who wish to flee Dakar for France by ship. In a more conventional reading, one could see the film as drawing oppositional poles between "Africa and the West," and, as such, condoning a clear spatial separation between the two places. But here's where contingency illuminates a less binaristic politics, since *Touki Bouki* not only casts doubt on the legitimacy of Mory and Anta's desires to flee, but also on whether or not those desires are even unfolding *as such*, due to the fantasy framework discussed above. From the film's first scene following a credit sequence, there are simultaneous engagements with varying formal styles, in which a topography of Dakar is complemented by experimental, Eisensteinian montage techniques. In an early scene, just after the credits

[116] The upside-down Eiffel Tower has become a reference point in posters for films about migrating to Europe, as the poster for *Synonyms* (Nadav Lapid, Israel/France/Germany, 2019), which is about an Israeli man migrating to Paris, uses the same gesture.

sequence, images of walking and ground-level activities are initially presented with verisimilitude, surveying the terrain absent any self-reflexive formal devices. As the sequence progresses, however, sound becomes disembodied and spatio-temporal legibility becomes abstracted. The sequence glimpses numerous geographical markers that reveal various portions of Dakar. Again, these places are initially shown in a fairly realist manner. There is a mailman walking across a bridge; there is a high-angle wide shot of a neighborhood; and, there is a wide shot of a busy street, with a large crane in the right side of the frame. These seemingly quotidian behaviors, free of noticeable authorial intrusion, portray the kind of African space that, as David Murphy has argued, satisfies critics who champion an "authentic" African cinema, one which deals explicitly and exclusively with African stories, politics, and culture. In short, these images are affiliated with social realism and even documentary filmmaking for how they present the city "as it is."

Mambéty, though, announces his film's abdication of realist space with the off-screen sound of a plane, which is immediately paired with Anta, a student and aspiring revolutionary of some sort, whose placement within the *mise-en-scène* is at odds with a causal presentation of space. In fact, none of the sounds heard while Anta is seen writing at a desk outside her home—an airplane, a baby crying, a prayer—receive a visible diegetic referent. Accordingly, the film immediately casts doubt about its fidelity to the geographical specificity of Dakar. This does not appear to be a film offering touristic glimpses of Dakar to audiences who've never seen the city, on film or otherwise.

Chantal Akerman has said there's no such thing as a European film. That is, there is no such thing as "European style," since the very marker of "European" consists of too

many concepts and approaches to locate a singular aesthetic. Mambéty makes a comparable observation by suggesting there can be no such thing as an "African" film as long as Dakar's geography is riddled with brand names of Western products and corporations. Having said that, there's a curious effect to how the film deploys depth of field by using these logos to deepen the frame. In one early shot, the previously seen postman stands at the edge of a road in the foreground, but it's the large Mobil refinery in the background that Mambéty organizes the image around, placing the human figure in proportion with a distant object and articulating depth along the image's Z-axis. This spatial arrangement is replicated, and made even more explicit, during a later fantasy sequence, as Mory and Anta drive through the city during a parade. The diagonal trajectory of the onlookers leads all eyes to the Pepsi Cola logo, as a seeming reminder that even dreamed geographies cannot escape the influences of global capital or, even stronger, that geography shapes human behavior or consciousness as much as human action shapes geography.

That *Touki Bouki* kills its male protagonist in the initial third is not to be understood as an injustice of neocolonialism, given that he's killed by African men within his own country. That is, at least, what Mambéty suggests by having the men disagree along ideological lines but share the same ethnic and national background. Mory does not meet the fate of Diouana in *Black Girl* because his entrapment comes from within both his own country and, one could argue, from himself. Throughout the dream, Mory and Anta abscond with a "Mr. America" car, are treated to a parade of their own, and plan a vacation to France with a local travel agent. The vibrant colors of the travel agency are red, white, and blue, matching the colors of the Mr. America car, the Pepsi-

Cola ad, and the Mobil oil tank. Thus, colors of freedom in the West become colors of oppression in Senegal, where the red, yellow, and green of the nation's flag is often featured in the *mise-en-scène*, particularly in a striking shot of several rows of flower beds late in the film. The Senegalese flag appears throughout the film, but often in the distance, no larger than the colonial advertising. Though Mambéty clearly longs for a distinctly African form of filmmaking, *Touki Bouki* is not a nationalist rallying cry at the level of its narrative. Its *mise-en-scène* remains far too cryptic for such an easy assessment.

In the film's prolonged dream, Anta and Mory have shirked their interest in revolution for an indulgence in luxury, as they wantonly smoke cigars and hand out money to the dancing locals who seek to impress them. The comprehensive shift seems to be a comment on the fraught task of rebuilding the culture of a people. As Jenny Lau writes, the "pride of success in the restructuring of society, and in the resulting capacity to create material abundance compatible with that of the contemporary West, is accompanied by the anxiety of recognizing that such material advancement involves an unprecedented receptiveness toward Western ideas, manifested via financial and technological investments."[117] For Mory and Anta, the wealth of the West is desirable until it's actually time to leave the country. Once that decision has to be made, Mory abandons ship—perhaps the same one that transported Diouana in Sembène's film—to return to Dakar.

[117] Jenny Kwok Wah Lau, "Introduction," in *Multiple Modernities: Cinemas and Popular Media in Transcultural East Asia*, ed. Jenny Kwok Wah Lau (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 1.

Touki Bouki's entire narrative structure functions as an allegory for the impossibility of imposed boundaries, since each character's desire and, by extension, cinema itself, cannot be easily defined or confined to a specific order of meaning, national or otherwise. David Murphy claims that "*Touki Bouki* is imbued with a skeptical but distinctly Senegalese Sufi aesthetic and, despite the director's ambivalence towards religion, the visual style and narrative structure are informed by the values and worldview of the mystical and highly syncretic form of Islam that exists in much of Senegal."[118] While the references to components of African culture and thought are imperative, the film is by no means an ethnographic portrait of Dakar. That is, the "real" Dakar is shaped as much by images of the place as it is by the geographical site itself, where both image and site are constructed both from within and without. If cartography can function as a form of control, through its mapping of space, Mambéty effects a loosening of control over his narrative bearings throughout, to the extent that it is ultimately impossible to know whether the events in *Touki Bouki* are "real," i.e. narratively logical, imagined, or taking place in a kind of dream state. And, the film suggests, drawing these distinctions is entirely beside the point.

On *Touki Bouki* and criticism, Mambéty said, "Each time a foreign critic stresses a construction flaw or a shortcoming in an African film, the filmmaker rides his high horse and proclaims it as a stylistic component related to his African personality. I want to be judged through my works without people taking into account the fact that I am either Black or African. I want to be judged like any other filmmaker."[119] Mambéty's

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[118] David Murphy, "Between Socialism and Sufism: Islam in the Films of Ousmane Sembène and Djibril Diop Mambéty," *Cinema in Muslim Societies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 1.
[119] Ukadike, *Questioning African Cinema*, 130.

position runs counter to the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers, who in 1975 proclaimed a commitment to developing an African cinema that would represent Africa from an African point of view and, in doing so, reject commercial, Western film codes.[120] But it's also useful to note its overlap with Akerman's claim for her cinema, as voiced in the 2017 documentary *I Don't Belong Here Anymore: The Cinema of Chantal Akerman*; in it, the late filmmaker says "I don't want to take part in gay or women's festivals. I don't want to take part in Jewish festivals; I just want to take part in regular film festivals." Though Akerman and Mambéty have no historical or geographical linkage, their sentiments pair them as filmmakers advocating an unprecedented and, perhaps, unpopular view of their own films. A transnational cinematic methodology asks that, while the lenses of scholars can stay fine-tuned to a specific national cinema, they also need to broaden out periodically to think through the images, ideas, and media of other nations.

Touki Bouki and Cinematic Geography

This section argues that *Touki Bouki*, while presenting a disjunctive and non-realist depiction of Dakar's physical space, simultaneously engages with other films, filmmakers, and philosophies relating to the cinematic image. The film contains or could be said to contain many intertextual references to European and American filmmaking. These textual allusions are an extension of Mambéty's concern with the neocolonial occupation of Senegal, and they provoke, once again, the question of how to speak in a

[120] The document was called "The Algiers Charter on African Cinema in 1975."

specifically African voice when the domestic production of images is no less colonized than the country itself. Mambéty creates these intertextual relationships not as a matter of imitation but in order to inflect their meaning differently. For example, the opening sequence of *Touki Bouki*, with its realist treatment of landscape and space, could be from one of the ethnographic documentaries of French director Jean Rouch, such as *Moi, un noir* (France/Ivory Coast, 1958), in which Rouch speaks in voiceover about his plans to "make a film together" with a migrant worker in Abidjan. But Mambéty's use of a crane shot in this opening sequence suggests another possibility, since this camera movement reflexively calls attention to the constructedness of this geographical space rather than naturalizing it. Perhaps then this sequence is a critique of *cinema vérité*'s claim to any sense of an objective reality and an indirect rebuke to Rouch's article "The Camera and Man," which was published in 1974—the same year *Touki Bouki* was released in France. In that article, Rouch says he prefers a mobile camera capable of creating interaction with the subject, and that distant, observational shots which survey people from afar appear voyeuristic.[121] In a disavowal of Rouch's association of the use of particular camera technique with a predetermined meaning, *Touki Bouki*'s opening sequence calls attention to the camera's production of space by alternating between close framings of subjects moving on a bridge and distant shots surveying the city. This has the effect, at least retroactively, of a mock-ethnographic survey. The proximity of the camera to its subject is neither good nor bad, but contingent upon its use within larger imaging structures, on the one hand, and also who's behind the camera, on the other. Rouch seldom

[121] Jean Rouch, "The Camera and Man," in *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. and trans. by Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 38.

acknowledges power relations in his writings because he's invested in the premise of collaboration, but Mambéty clearly thinks otherwise. If one follows Rouch's restrictive notions of documentary style or formal construction, these films would be nothing but pre-packaged knowledge, which essentializes rather than experiments. By taxonomizing film form, Rouch prefers a cinematic geography overrun with walls and barriers.

Moreover, each of the shots in the opening sequence of *Touki Bouki* comes from a different position within the city and creates a juxtaposed assemblage of geographical markers. The postman that walks on foot is *Touki Bouki's* literal grounding figure, a roaming presence throughout the film that contrasts the couple's aspirations of flight and fleeing. But the figure is also a direct allusion to a similar character in Sembène's *Mandabi* (Senegal/France, 1968), one who "delivers hope in the form of the film's political message of social solidarity."[122] While many critics have recognized this allusion to Sembène's film and pointed to the inclusion of the Mobil sign as an indicator of Mambéty's disdain for the intrusion of Western culture, more can be said of the *dual* criticisms taking place side-by-side here: one of Sembène's social realism, with its lack of formal experimentation, and another of Dakar's geographical shaping from "outside" influences. In a 1988 interview, Mambéty said, "I feel that a filmmaker must go beyond the recording of facts. Moreover, I believe that Africans, in particular, must reinvent cinema…either one is very popular and one talks to people in a simple and plain manner, or else one searches for an African film language that would exclude chattering and focus more on how to make use of visuals and sounds."[123] In a single shot [figure 6], Mambéty

[122] David Murphy, "Africans Filming Africans," in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 31.
[123] Quoted in Ukadike, *Questioning African Cinema*, 123.

evokes this philosophy through framing. Moreover, by setting up a dichotomy between the “very popular” filmmaker who “talks to people in a simple and plain manner,” and himself as one who “searches for an African film language,” Mambéty sets his film in opposition to Sembène’s filmmaking. The equal footing within the shot makes the message clear: popular African films that focus on “chattering” and Western capitalism are both matters Africans need to resolve themselves.

(figure 6)

The opening shot of *Touki Bouki* shows a young boy leading a herd of bulls to the slaughter. It’s not clear from this opening, which shows the actual slaughter of livestock, what the purpose of this scene means for the rest of the film. The scene initially appears insular and isolated; the spectator may think it’s part of the film’s realist, documentary presentation of Dakar. That is, until a goat is slaughtered later into the film, and the thematic, Eisensteinian relationship between the slaughtering of an animal and a people’s culture becomes clearer. The on-screen killing of animals has a history in French cinema, from the hunting of rabbits in *The Rules of the Game* (Jean Renoir, 1939) to the slaughterhouses on the outskirts of Paris in the short documentary *Blood of the Beasts* (Georges Franju, 1949). Both of those films draw parallels between killing animals and

human complacency. Whether for sport or industry, the bloodshed of animals typically remains hidden or at least relegated to a contained space. By making it visible on the screen, filmmakers implicitly challenge conventions and decorum. That is part of its purpose in *Touki Bouki*: the killing of animals on the screen aligns Mambéty's filmmaking with the irreverent art cinematic tradition of Eisenstein, Renoir, and Franju. It also, though, participates in transforming an African film into a confrontational artwork that speaks to European cinema in terms of what that slaughter means. If, as Ukadike writes, Mambéty "deplores the exasperating simplicity of African cinema," then spilling the blood of animals on the screen, in conjunction with experimental formal techniques, works to complicate the aesthetics of African cinema in terms of how and what it says about its current geopolitical conditions.[124]

Speaking of metaphors built around bloodshed, the bright red blood spilt from the bulls in the opening sequence appears symbolically later as a visual reference point when the group of local rabble-rousers drive a bright red truck and harass Mory for his appearance as "a cowboy." Their allegation is perplexing; Mory does not resemble a cowboy in dress or demeanor. Yet Mory does attend college with Anta, whom the men taunt previously with the salutation, "So much for the sacred revolution!" The invoking of revolution and cowboys in close proximity seemingly has no direct meaning for the film's narrative, but, once again, the crosscut to the postman walking across the roads of Dakar is relevant. The composition could be mistaken for one from a John Ford western. The red, white, and blue letters of the Mobil tower simultaneously invoke the U.S. and

[124] Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*, 176.

France. *Touki Bouki* is not influenced by Ford in any reverential sense; instead, it's more productive to think of Mambéty's images as a constructivist gesture, where the simultaneous presence of colonialism and burgeoning globalization cannot be denied, but they are relegated to the background of the frame. Red, in particular, becomes the color of bloodshed, of harassment, of industry, and of neocolonialism. It links with the "Western," almost as a pun on the idea of Western culture versus the Hollywood genre. It seems, if Mory migrates to Paris, he becomes a cowboy, in a pejorative sense, in Mambéty's eyes as well.

The end of *Touki Bouki*, in which Mory finally decides to remain in Dakar, should be read as an ironic statement given that Mory's decision occurs within the broader dream structure of the film's narrative: a dream from which no one in the film awakens, since the end of the film returns to the beginning, with the same young boy leading a group of bulls to the slaughter. A title card reading "fin" concludes the film following a freeze-frame. The use of French for the title card rather than its equivalent in Wolof, which is the dominant language used by the African characters in the film, is a final gesture of an oppressive neocolonial presence, where the last word is communicated through the colonizer's language. It is also an allusion to *The 400 Blows* (Francois Truffaut, France, 1959), one of the inaugural films of the *Nouvelle Vague*, which ends with the word "fin" superimposed over a freeze-frame of Antoine Doinel, the film's young protagonist. Doinel was in trouble throughout that film, but not much more than a rambunctious sort, as is revealed in subsequent films also directed by Truffaut featuring the character (Mambéty, on the other hand, would not direct a feature film for another twenty years after *Touki Bouki*). In Truffaut's creative realm (he wrote and directed three

sequels featuring the character), Doinel overcomes his confinement and becomes a successful intellectual that explores his knowledge and sexuality without much concern beyond the preoccupations of his bourgeois entanglements. The child that opens and concludes *Touki Bouki*, however, cannot even be given a voice, perhaps because there's a confounded sense of what form, symbolically, that voice would take. The spectator might wonder if by the film's end Anta or Mory will be that voice. For Mambéty, no: "Anta and Mory do not dream of building castles in Africa; they dream of finding some sort of Atlantis overseas. Following their dream permitted me to find my own dreams, and my way of escaping those dreams was to laugh at them. Mory and Anta's dreams made them feel like foreigners in their own country."[125] The dream of finding an Atlantis overseas spells death to Mory and Anta, because it means forsaking their homeland in pursuit of a status and psychology that Mambéty believes will never produce more than a perpetuation of the very logic that maintains the neocolonial presence in Senegal. Whether this perspective is unfair to Mory and Anta is, for now, irrelevant. What's clear, though, is how thinking through the space of *Touki Bouki*, both at the level of space and cinematic allusion, reveals its significance as a transnational work: it, above all, looks outward without losing sight of the specificity of what lies within.

"Digital Dust": The Legacy of *Touki Bouki* in *Atlantics*

[125] Ukadike, *Questioning African Cinema*, 124.

In interviews for *Atlantics*, Mati Diop, who was born in Paris, has spoken directly to the matter of hybridity and diaspora within her own filmmaking and career. When asked about her personal relationship to France and Senegal, Diop responded:

> It's a very complex experience to be mixed, to be crossed by different cultures. It's a really complex subject on its own and a lot of it is expressed in my film. It's not really that binary. It's a more fragmented and hybrid landscape. It's not French or African. It's more Western versus the rest of the world. It's hard to talk about it as a subject in general, because it's quite complex, but I think that the film is really a response to the very fragmented and kaleidoscopic relationship I have to the diversity of my influences, and also the need not to be defined or confined into any category, both aesthetically, cinematographically, or in terms of gender and race. The film is really an invitation to get rid of any categories and it really breaks a lot of molds.[126]

Atlantics is a French/Senegalese/Belgian co-production that uses both French and Wolof languages (just like *Touki Bouki*) in its story about migration, labor, and Senegalese customs relating to marriage.[127] Like in *Touki Bouki*, sound and image often form a disjunctive relationship. The film opens with the sounds of gentle waves over credits. These are tranquil sounds, not crashing or violent. If the spectator knows *Atlantics* is a film about migration by sea, these sounds carry a certain geopolitical significance. Even before an image has appeared on-screen, Diop is invoking a dominant trope of contemporary European cinema through sound design: that of the boat, filled with African migrants, trying to cross into Europe. Indeed, *Atlantics* will be in part about precisely that, but the opening sounds run counter to the sounds and images of migration

[126] Carlos Aguilar, "A Language Possessed and Reconquered: Mati Diop on *Atlantics*," *rogerebert.com*. November 14, 2019. https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/a-language-possessed-and-reconquered-mati-diop-on-atlantics

[127] *Atlantics* is historic as a benchmark for films in competition at the Cannes Film Festival, as Diop became the first Black female director in contention for the Palme d'or: the festival's top prize.

that could be routinely seen on the nightly news.[128] As the credits continue in *Atlantics*, sounds of wind and traffic noise enter too. No longer is there a suggestion of a tranquil ocean: we are likely within the confines of a city, though the spectator cannot be sure. As the first image appears on the screen, the setting is near the ocean off the coast of Dakar, but it is just out of sight. Immediately, as in *Touki Bouki* during the sequence in which Anta writes at her desk, there is an absence of realist correspondence between sound volume and camera proximity. What is plainly in sight, however, is an enormous, futuristic looking skyscraper looming out of the frame and towering over several construction workers below [figure 7]. In the space of a single image, in addition to an intricate, layered sound design, the film introduces the primary terms that have defined both spatial and cinematic geographies as they pertain to the relationship between Europe and Senegal.

(figure 7)

[128] Another recent film, *Fire at Sea* (Gianfranco Rosi, Italy, 2016), significantly withholds images and sounds of migrants as they're arriving onto Lampedusa, a Sicilian island. There has been a growing effort among European filmmakers to think through the ethics of showing African migrants and refugees in realist terms. See Chapters 3 and 4 for more on this conversation in relation to the films of Pedro Costa and Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre*, respectively.

The shot resembles an early one in *L'Avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, Italy, 1960), in which a construction worker walks toward large edifices in the background. As Gene Youngblood argues in his reading of this scene from Antonioni's film, "These buildings are not symbols…they aren't metaphors, they are actual concrete examples of [industrialization]…they are metonyms."[129] Youngblood points this out to explain the relationship between human beings and industry in postwar Italy: in effect, the buildings, which loom over the people, are the actual subjects of the film. They reveal the terms of wealth, modernization, and an emergent globalization by being visible evidence of it, even if, like the Mobil tower in *Touki Bouki*, they're only visible markers of space for the spectator. The same also applies to the opening shots of *Touki Bouki*; in those shots, which initially seem like documentary footage taken from actual places and of actual people in Dakar, the spectator encounters what seems to be a real space in which labor reveals the spatial conditions of Senegalese independence. The *mise-en-scène* of globalization begins by acknowledging that labor goes unacknowledged, and that in order to understand urban space, the background needs to be moved into the foreground.

In *Atlantics*, however, the shot of the massive tower is composed using CGI—it is an artificial edifice that does not, as of yet, actually exist in Dakar.[130] Is this building a stand-in for global industry if it exists within the diegesis but not in the actual, lived space of the city? As D.N. Rodowick explains, the "transformation of the concept of materiality is the key to understanding some basic distinctions between the analog and digital. Comparing computer-generated images with film reaffirms that photography's

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[129] "Audio Commentary by Gene Youngblood," *L'Avventura*, Criterion Collection, 2014. Blu-ray.
[130] Jonathan Romney, "Film of the Week: *Atlantics*," *Film Comment*. November 14, 2019. https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/film-of-the-week-atlantics/

principal powers are those of analogy and indexicality."[131] The digital images of *Atlantics* demand a different orientation than indexicality, and so I analyze the film through the lens of cinematic allusion as it conceives of the global city. In this case, there is a thoroughly transnational precedent that encompasses regions beyond Europe and Africa. As discussed in chapter one, the *mise-en-scène* of globalization concerns the proliferation of neoliberal economic policy as it impacts the shaping of the city and its inhabitants. Large, domineering structures can involve the disruption of lived communities and an exacerbation of existing inequalities, and in turn create an inhospitable environment in which people are left with little, and with few options but to flee to find "minimal" forms of hospitality.[132] The large structure in *Atlantics* appears as a purposeful inclusion of the ruins of industry, on the one hand, and the untrustworthiness of reality as both a concept and an image, on the other. Rather than claim a realist space, *Atlantics* maps a trajectory of reference points that situate its narrative and its form in relation to a meaningful arrangement of interlocuters, both near and far.

The question of digitally rendered versus analogically recorded space also demands consideration of how much narrative weight the large structure carries within the film. The story revolves around how Suleiman (Ibrahima Traoré) and numerous other laborers haven't been paid for their work on the building in months. Desperate to break free and make a living, they decide to flee for Spain by boat: a sojourn that leads to a tragic end. At least, that's the implication: Diop refrains from representing the trek at all,

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[131] D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.
[132] Jennifer Fay makes this argument in relation to *Still Life* (Jia Zhang-ke, China, 2006), a digital film in which the Three Gorges Dam in the Hubei province creates the sense of "an invitation to an unknowable future." *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19.

and, instead, she turns the focus to Ada (Mama Sané), with whom Suleiman is having an affair despite Ada being promised in marriage to another man. Before that, however, is a lengthy take of Suleiman traveling in the back of a truck as the camera slowly zooms in on his face. It's at this point that Al Qadiri's score first appears on the soundtrack and the music gradually replaces any diegetic sounds or dialogue. The score becomes a prominent non-diegetic addition within the space; its gradual increase in sound reveals Diop's directorial hand and dispels the notion of what's been unfolding as a realist documentation of a labor dispute.[133] By denying the viewer a strong impression of realist space, the film acknowledges its inherited style from *Touki Bouki*, primarily through sound design rather than editing. Though, by holding a long take on Suleiman that slowly zooms in on his face, *Atlantics* reverses Mambéty's formal choices (long take versus montage editing) but does so in pursuit of the same effect: as Al Qadiri's score replaces any diegetic sound throughout this shot, the spectator is in the realm of a filmmaker whose construction of a space is privileged over the referentiality of that space.

Al Qadiri's score, Diop notes, is also significant for its cultural specificity. As she explains, "Fatima comes from the Middle East, and Arab and Muslim culture are very important in Senegal and to the film, also all of the mythology around Djnns is something that Fatima knows by heart. Her music is a Djnn itself. Exactly like with the actors, no other musician could have done what she did for the film."[134] A Djnn is a supernatural

[133] A similar opening occurs in *Uncut Gems* (Josh and Benny Safdie, U.S., 2019), which opens in the Welo mines of Ethiopia as laborers gather around a man who has just suffered a compound fracture in his leg. The difference in this case is that the score has been present since the film's opening logos and production credits. In short, *Uncut Gems* immediately establishes its formalist intentions (the scene functions as a prologue before abandoning the location entirely), whereas *Atlantics* invites the spectator into a realist world before performing a Brechtian gesture that draws attention to its artifice.
[134] Aguilar, "A Language Possessed and Reconquered."

creature derived from Islamic mythology, and this evocation demonstrates how Diop conceives of the film as thinking in a transnational manner. I will call this diasporic space, especially since Diop, born in France, carries on a particular legacy of Senegalese cinema despite not actually being from Senegal. Avtar Brah defines diasporic space as a "conceptual category…where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is a native."[135] Mambéty would surely be skeptical about this definition or its possibility given his statements in interviews, but diasporic space is nevertheless an essential component of transnational thought as it intersects with intertextual considerations. And so, unlike Mambéty, who grew up and was schooled in Senegal, Diop was born in Paris and studied at the Le Fresnoy National Studio of Contemporary Art in Tourcoing. In that sense, *Touki Bouki* and *Atlantics* belong to the same cinematic diasporic space: each speaks to both France and Senegal, only from adjacent vantage points.

Moreover, Diop initially rose to international prominence as an actress, most notably in *35 Shots of Rum* (Claire Denis, France, 2008). Critic Amy Taubin gestures to Denis's own "clear" influence on *Atlantics*, but further consideration is warranted.[136] The most prominent reference point in Denis's filmography for *Atlantics* seems to be *Beau Travail* (France, 1999), both in terms of select compositions and the use of music as a form of non-diegetic intrusion. In that film, which is loosely based on Herman Melville's unfinished novella *Billy Budd*, members of the French Foreign Legion are stationed in Djibouti and tensions gradually rise between the men. There are also a number of women in the film, though they are often glimpsed only in scenes that function as musical

[135] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 209.
[136] Amy Taubin, "Ada, and Ardor." *Artforum*. November 14, 2019. https://www.artforum.com/film/amy-taubin-on-mati-diop-s-atlantics-2019-81293

interludes, dancing to loud, pulsating music that appears without the accompaniment or dialogue or diegetic sound. While there are similar scenes of the primary female characters of *Atlantics* in a nightclub, that proves to be more of a superficial corollary. What's more intriguing is that *Beau Travail* unfolds as "a revisionist sequel" to *Le Petit Soldat* (Jean-Luc Godard, France, 1960), in which Michel Subor plays the same character 40 years later.[137] Each film grapples with the central issue of colonial relations between France and a colonized nation. In *Le Petit Soldat*, Subor's character is a French secret agent working against an Algerian terrorist network. In *Beau Travail*, the same character is commanding a division of Legionnaires in Djibouti, only now as an elder statesman who has lost the ideals he possessed in Godard's film.

The direct relationship between the two films invites us to consider Denis's influence as not only stylistic, but conceptual in how Diop structures the narrative in *Atlantics*. Accordingly, I see Diop's film as something like a revisionist remake of *Touki Bouki*; after all, both films revolve around a young couple who is caught between their desires to remain local on the one hand and travel beyond Dakar's confines to Europe on the other. More deeply, I'm arguing that the perceptions of *Touki Bouki* as being a kind of Godardian-influenced African film link up with Diop's own polyvalent aims and influences. The point, above all, is that Diop is by no means making a Godardian work, or a Denisian work, or a Mambétian work: she is engaging with contemporary life in a

[137] The term "revisionist sequel" is taken from Justin Vicari, who uses it, along with "art-film sequel" to explain how one might understand Denis's film in relation to Godard's. "Colonial Fictions: *Le Petit Soldat* and Its Revisionist Sequel, *Beau Travail*." *Jump Cut*. Spring 2008. https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/PetitSoldatDenis/

manner that implicitly comments on the notion of lineage and influence: both as life and as cinema. On this precise matter, Diop has this to say:

> The premature passing of my uncle [Mambéty] forced me to position myself even more clearly in terms of which cinema I wanted to defend. As a French woman, I could have decided to shoot films in France, with people of my background there. My first feature was initially supposed to be a quite dark teenage film that happened in France in French and with white people, which wouldn't have been less me, because it's also part of me. But the dilemma was about what cinema do I really want to defend today, and what do I think the cinema needs the most, which group of people and which kind of subjects need to be represented the most?[138]

Atlantics addresses questions of its own transnational relevance on multiple levels. It is doing so in terms of its audiovisual construction by deviating from the realist norms of depicting migrant subjects in a manner that focuses more on a clear-cut commentary about social and spatial problems. It offers a revisionist remake or art-film remake of an essential Senegalese film that directly engages the matter of migration, diaspora, and global cinema by updating the terms of the contemporary moment. And finally, it interrogates how the individual filmmaker might function within the circulation of global

(figure 8)

[138] Aguilar, "A Language Possessed and Reconquered."

images and sounds. Diop occupies a unique position, both as a French actress and Mambéty's niece, to consider these various dilemmas. *Atlantics*, because of its polyvalent capacity to engage all of these matters at once, exemplifies how the discourse surrounding diasporic identity and film form need to remain tapped into these networks of confluent thought and representation. In *Atlantics*, socially relevant issues, cinematic allusion, formal experimentation, and personal identity are inextricable from one another.

Back to the opening sequence of *Atlantics*—back to dust. In the images above [figure 8], a herd of cattle moves across two different versions of Dakar. On the left, in *Touki Bouki*, the young boy, and a man in the background, convey the city as belonging to its inhabitants. In the shot on the right, from *Atlantics*, the total absence of human figures is more indicative of the Anthropocene: the *mise-en-scène* conveys how "our collective efforts to make the planet more welcoming, secure, and productive for human flourishing…are precisely the measures that have made this a less hospitable earth."[139] Dust runs counter to the cylindric shape in the background, which conveys human progress only through the terms of global industrialization. The "opposition between the Western and the traditional," or national, has only further collapsed: there is only global space, it seems, and it's unfit for human inhabitation, especially one that's meant to uphold individual identity.[140] If the presence of Western brand names in Dakar proved intrusive, both spatially and psychologically, in *Touki Bouki*, in *Atlantics* there is initially

[139] Fay, *Anthropocene*, 1-2.
[140] The phrase "opposition between the Western and the traditional" comes from Fredric Jameson, who explains how cities no longer operate under the logic of modernity, and that "notions of national or ethnic identity (of the modernist type) are equally threatened by postmodernity." *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 117.

a vacant consciousness altogether, as space becomes, paradoxically, further flattened as buildings are erected higher and higher.[141]

As Diop explains above, though, her film is driven by the question of which "group of people and what kind of subjects need to be represented most." This feeds into a diasporic space in which, to reiterate Brah's definition, the "native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is a native." These are transnational configurations that, like dust, suggest traces of the past more than a tangible hold on the present. The people are not gone, but they are becoming increasingly unwelcome.

Migration, in the final analysis, means something entirely different in Diop's film than in Mambéty's. Laborers and women are, in *Atlantics*, part of an underclass that remain subjugated by the invisible forces of global capital overseas, while, within Dakar, the wealthy heads of building projects withhold pay from workers without explanation. Lacking meaningful legal recourse or an alternative, even temporary, means of employment, the men flee to Spain by boat. On a parallel tract, Ada, and the other girls-becoming-women of a similar age, are expected to uphold traditional gender roles within their families and Senegalese society. They, too, lack recourse because of local social customs. Labor, then, as a global matter of ethics, intersects with gender as a local matter of tradition. At least, that's the conceptual form that diasporic space takes at a narrative, and therefore spatial, level within the film. It means acting out of a desire to achieve individual expression when the circumstances of the local, now acting as an even more

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[141] *Homo Sapiens* (Nikolas Geyrhalter, Austria/Germany/Switzerland, 2016) documents building projects that have been either abandoned or eroded due to budgetary concerns or climate, ranging from cities in Japan, such as Fukushima, to those in Bulgaria. The film is entirely absent human beings: not a single one appears in the entire film.

fortified arm of the global, no longer hold the possibility of revolution or hope. Dakar becomes a prison for Suleiman and Ada, whereas the lure of Paris was one for Mory and Anta (and Mambéty). Diop burrows into the characters' desperation by spatializing their conditions in conjunction with the specific socio-political moment.

By recasting the narrative, visual, and aural techniques of *Touki Bouki* in 2019, Diop asks the spectator to examine how perspective, on the part of the filmmaker, and space, in terms of physical locations as they intersect with conceptions of them as ideal places, bleed into one another to define a contemporary, diasporic voice that recalls, even if only as a trace, the past. This is dust: it is the grand circularity of nothing—whether spatially or cinematically—ever going away.

CHAPTER IV

A COMMITMENT TO MODERNISM: THEATRICALITY AND THE LEGACY OF CINEMATIC MODERNISM IN THE FILMS OF PEDRO COSTA

This chapter argues that the migrant takes up the cause of spiritualizing human emptiness in the work of Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa. Such a cause was a central component of cinematic modernism in 1960s European cinema, and it was largely dedicated to representing the youth and intellectual classes of the era. In particular, the concept of human alienation, which became foundational in the works of Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni and French filmmaker Alain Resnais, takes root in Costa's work in the estranged and isolated Cape Verdean migrants of contemporary Portugal for whom space, and the uncertainty of their own placement within a society as citizen, alien, or even a kind of ghostly figure, becomes impossible to navigate. By unsettling and making ambiguous a social commentary that typically accompanies a realist style, Costa's films ask that spectators keep seeing their world anew and seldom settle into a fixed understanding of what's unfolding on-screen. Moreover, these films work to redefine human emptiness through a postcolonial lens that searches for a new subjectivity in conjunction with the migrant laborer: the figure on whose back global capital has been made.

This proves to be a commitment to modernism: Costa's mosaic approach, the underlying goal of rediscovering the subjectivity of its marginalized and abandoned figures, is pursued from film to film with an unwavering dedication.

Nothing Happens?

In the short film *Chantal + Pedro* (Júlio Alves, Portugal, 2020), two other short films, one by Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman and one by Costa, are overlaid and juxtaposed to one another on the screen. No explanation is given in text or voiceover for the images or for the reason that these two filmmakers have been chosen. In my reading, the pairing of these two filmmakers, Akerman and Costa, stems from the routine charge that they make art films, though of different stylistic approaches, in which nothing happens. They also often take the dispossessed and marginalized as their subjects. Nothing happens in their films, one could say, relative to films more conventionally driven by plot, character development, and conflict, especially those that unfold in the mode of social realism.[142] What emerges in place of representation as a product—a story meant to be marketed and sold to mass audiences—is something else which cannot be so readily defined and accessed. For many spectators, these two filmmakers are, at best, next to impenetrable, and at worst, a complete waste of time.[143] While their filmmaking could

[142] Realism need not be defined entirely separate from modernism. Richard Porton makes the case that British filmmaker Mike Leigh works in a style that could be called "modernist realism" for how Leigh's films, while taking up the "kitchen-sink realism" of the 1960s, are also indebted to "British comic traditions and the theater of the absurd." "Mike Leigh's Modernist Realism," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. by Ivonne Margulies (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 165.
[143] I recall showing a clip from *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Akerman, Belgium/France,1975) in an introductory film course, to which a student replied: "That's five minutes of my life I will never get back."

be called ambiguous, in the case of Akerman and Costa it's often something more (or less): the difficulty of even recognizing the on-screen events as comprising a narrative.

To that point, film scholar Ivone Margulies, in her book *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, examines how Akerman's work intersects with the development of cinematic modernism during the 1960s and 1970s. For Margulies, the notion of "nothing" is solicited by a combination of aesthetic traits such as theatricality, minimalism, and hyperreality, the latter of which "displays a concern with the phenomenology of the everyday."[144] Typically, it's the perception by the spectator of an unnecessary duration that creates the sensation of excess; as Margulies writes, "repetitive compositions and extended real-time shots [raise] questions about the destabilizing, supplementary effect of detailed description. The insistence on remaining with the scene even after its narrational or referential information has been decoded inevitably solicits an estranged experience of the image."[145] This aesthetic act of defamiliarization, of making circumstances and images strange, has historically been at the core of cinematic modernism, which complicates realist perceptions of time and space through an array of representational alternatives.

In the case of Costa's films, sometimes there isn't even the reassurance of there having been "narrational or referential information," meaning scenes that propel the narrative forward. His films are not hyperrealistic; they are often expressionistic, and they

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[144] Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 49. Margulies goes on to explain how "blurring the line between reality and representation was the impetus behind a variety of art of the period from the mid-'60s to the mid-'70s," and that "hyperrealism, through its overdetailed reproduction of reality or of a mediated image, problematizes referentiality."
[145] Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, 69.

depict people who appear more as figures or even ghostly apparitions than fleshed-out characters. They appear to have pasts that once included interpersonal relationships, but in the present their blank facial expressions suggest they have been drained of their capacity for emotion, with a few notable exceptions. Their humanity, it seems, has been extinguished. As in a painting, the space hemmed in by the frame seems to be self-contained, isolated from the rest of the world. Characters are barely introduced, nor given a clear entry point into the world of the film. Just as extended duration contributes to the spectator's possible estrangement from the image, the spatial components of the image likewise resist spectatorial involvement. It's not only that the characters themselves are displaced or lacking in diegetic urgency, but also that the image itself displaces the spectator from the legible orientation usually provided by traditional narrative storytelling. To watch Costa is to wonder, above all: *where* are we?

This formal displacement, in its resistance to a realist conception of space, risks being misunderstood as textual incoherence. Are these filmmakers just being difficult and obtuse, or does their estranging style gesture toward a distinct purpose?[146] One possible answer emerges in Kalling Heck's monograph *After Authority: Global Art Cinema and Political Transition*, which conducts case studies of four films from world cinema that utilize ambiguity as a means of rejecting, or at least challenging, centralized forms of authority.[147] Indeed, in using the term "dominant" in this chapter to describe conventional

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[146] One recurring charge against both Akerman and Costa has been their intellectual orientation to their subject matters. To that point, one might consider Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb's *Just Being Difficult? Academic Writing in the Public Arena* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2003, which examines the function and perception of academic writing by and for those outside of the university.

[147] David Bordwell's foundational essay, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," argues ambiguity is the art film's solution to the incommensurability of realism and authorship. Bordwell sees the use of ambiguity as a process, where the filmmaker first exhausts the possibilities of realism, the style of the

aesthetic forms, I'm acknowledging spatial considerations of power that cohere around the centralizing of authority, be it political or cultural. For Heck, ambiguity opens up possibilities of thought that might otherwise remain hidden; these films turn, in Heck's assessment, to ambiguity as a gamble:

> The positive outcome of this gamble is that these films might result in thought…the negative outcome is that these films might remain absent of meaning, and that on the rare occasion that meaning does arrive, they offer no mechanism for universalization. There are therefore risks involved in these undertakings: the risk of irrelevance, the risk of inaction, the risk of appearing to say nothing at all.[148]

Heck identifies how strands of contemporary art cinema share the aims of political modernism of the 1960s and 1970s, or filmmakers and theorists generally organized by their "interest in critiquing the dominant ideology, which they often achieved by exploring the ways that pernicious ideas are coded into the basic configuration of commercial cinema."[149] It's precisely this configuration, Heck argues (and D.N. Rodowick prior to him), that "reproduce[s] an uncritical realism based on an ease of seeing…[commercial films] function not just to entertain us but also to convince us of the proper place of things in the recognizable world that the spectator and film seem to share."[150] Therefore, the colloquial response that "nothing happens" indicates, on the spectator's behalf, as much a political as aesthetic recognition that the order of things is

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author emerges in its place. Ambiguity is, then, the purpose of the film, because we "are to watch less for the tale than the telling, that life lacks the neatness of art and this art knows it." *Film Criticism* 4, no. 1 (1979): 61.

[148] Kalling Heck, *After Authority: Global Art Cinema and Political Transition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2020), 139. See also D.N. Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism: Criticism and Ideology in Contemporary Film Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1994.

[149] Heck, *After Authority*, 140-41.

[150] Heck, *After Authority*, 141.

out of place, and it's precisely that displacement that forms the thematic core of both Akerman and Costa's filmmaking.[151]

If one accepts that political modernism entails a spectrum of visual and tonal techniques that run counter to both dominant aesthetics and ideology, then one can ask to what extent this conception of political cinema still has viability within the twenty-first century. In fact, one scholar makes the claim that cinematic modernism has exhausted its generative principle and that by 1980 had given way to postmodernism. In *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980*, András Bálint Kovács identifies this initiating cause as the philosophical concept of nothingness, taken as the central tenet in cinematic modernism's self-definition. Kovács, however, doesn't mean "nothing" in the sense that Margulies does; instead, nothingness here refers in large part to Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical writings on the concept in *Being and Nothingness*, published in 1943. Kovács says that nothingness indicates the "shade of vanished metaphysical powers" which helps "conserve the subject-object dualism thereby generating a new metaphysical myth."[152] Contrary to what it outwardly suggests (that is, the absence of being), nothingness is directly represented by being, and it functions as "the negative power of lost humanistic values."[153] Kovács's central contribution is his demonstration of how nothingness comingles with the ambitions of cinematic modernism; he says, "Nothingness became in modernism the only verifiable reality behind the surface of the

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[151] Both chapters one and two have analyzed tropes that structure space and "the order of things." Chapter one examines trash as an aesthetic metaphor, while chapter two looks to dust and migration as visual themes for helping define a diasporic space between Senegal and France.
[152] András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 91.
[153] Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, 96.

empirical world…the end of the modernist paradigm can be detected where this sense of empirical reality in the form of nothingness disappears."[154] The turn toward postmodernism, then, rests in transforming individuals into objects—or making them indecipherable from objects—and forsaking the "spiritualizing [of] human emptiness," which was cinematic modernism's overarching aim, according to Kovács.[155] If indeed late capitalism has discontinued the need or desire to see human beings as subjects rather than as commodities or moving parts within the broader mechanisms of global capital, then Kovács would be correct.

Based on the evidence of *La Promesse*, *demonlover*, *Boarding Gate*, and *Atlantics,* it would appear that neoliberal economic principles have been successful in diminishing or attenuating the human spirit. Costa's films, however, reassert this latent presence of the human spirit through radical formal means. They work to resurrect the aesthetic principles of modernist art cinema by reworking them in relation to the impoverished citizens of a slum in Lisbon, in which a number of Cape Verdean migrants reside. Recall Mambéty's plea in the previous chapter for an African film language that would "exclude chattering and focus more on how to make use of visuals and sounds."[156] While Costa is not of African descent, his cinematic aims, geared around a unique arrangement of images and sounds, respond to Mambéty's cinematic plea by structuring an entire sequence of films around a postcolonial aesthetics of African bodies and

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[154] Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, 395.
[155] Kovács aims to clarify this by comparing *Blow-Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, Italy/U.K./U.S., 1966) and *The Draughtman's Contract* (Peter Greenaway, U.K., 1982), and demonstrating how the former evinces modernist tendencies, while the latter embraces the postmodern. The evidence of one film's refusal to spiritualize human emptiness is lacking as a call for "the end of modernism."
[156] Quoted in Ukadike, *Questioning African Cinema*, 123.

experience in Portugal. These are not neocolonial gestures; they are a postcolonial application of modernist principles to contemporary circumstances that define a central component of the new Europe.

Therefore, this chapter argues that Costa's feature films—especially those produced from 1997 to 2019—help to rekindle the flame of cinematic modernism by doing precisely what Kovács claims films can no longer do: they spiritualize human emptiness by utilizing the aesthetic terms of political modernism—in this case, theatricality—to give a face to Cape Verdean migrants currently living in Lisbon and beyond. There is a paradoxical power to this, given how the films' narratives exist in an unstable space between reality and expressionistic dream. That is, even while the spectator looks at the ghostly figures of Cape Verdean migrants as presented in these films, the spectator also sees their absence—that is, their marginalization and their representative absence from the larger geopolitical structures of European life.

Costa's films implicitly challenge the premise of a lacking cultural subjectivity—especially the premise that human beings are more akin to objects than to subjects—which emerges, it might be noted, right at the moment when many African nations were first achieving independence. By focusing solely on European cinema, Kovács keeps films from Africa out of sight, especially one like *Touki Bouki* that both falls within the time period of Kovács's study and directly challenges the premise of an exclusively "Westernized" form of modernism. Seeds of discontent, and of spiritualizing how Africans become autonomous in the aftermath of oppression, are stitched within Mambéty's filmmaking, so to claim an end to cinematic modernism based on the evidence of a few European films not only minimizes the geopolitical import of

decolonization, but also seems to arbitrarily and unconvincingly periodize within continental borders for the sake of a neater timeline and argument.

Rather than document real-life subjects in the more conventional terms of direct cinema or social realism, Costa's films grapple with how vision and space determine narrative, be it that of the historical record in Portugal as it relates to the nation's colonial past and the Carnation Revolution of 1974, or how contemporary art cinema itself operates within a media landscape in which the prioritizing of didactic humanist messaging renders appeals to form itself secondary or even irrelevant. To reiterate Heck's point about the possibility art cinema holds for seeing events anew: Costa's films "ask that the audience arrive at some understanding in the absence of readily available meaning; in this way *they ask for thought*."[157] The remainder of the chapter will clarify how Costa's theatrical use of *mise-en-scène* achieves precisely that—a plea for thought—within the context of broader geopolitical concerns within Europe since the late twentieth century.

Theatricality as a Cinematic Mode

Despite dubiously claiming 1980 as the end of cinematic modernism, *Screening Modernism* provides an excellent overview of theatrical styles in modernist filmmaking. Kovács outlines two general forms of theatrical style in modern cinema: one is excessively unnatural, exaggerated, and abstract, while the other utilizes visibly artificial sets and expressive lighting that generally differs from realist technique. Essentially, the

[157] Heck, *After Authority*, 145. Emphasis original.

latter form works more as a flourish or gesture within a naturalistic narrative, whereas the former might dispense with any notion of the naturalistic altogether. Ingmar Bergman and Alain Resnais are among the more notable 1960s filmmakers who had a background in theatre; the latter's *Last Year at Marienbad* (France, 1961) not only opens with an audience watching a play, but even has the audience freeze and unfreeze in place, as if mannequins on a stage. This artistic choice prefers abstraction to psychological realism.[158] It also employs "sharp chiaroscuro effects" to "create an atmosphere of unrealness and mak[es] the setting look like a theatrical stage."[159]

Psychological realism is not only the chosen aesthetic mode for mainstream Hollywood cinema, but also for films like *La Promesse* that employ a reality effect to mount a social critique. Even when they end without clear resolution, as that film does, it's less utilizing ambiguity for the purpose of altered audiovisual thought than engaging in a situational irony that carries bleak sociological overtones. I do not, however, make a binary distinction between formalist abstraction and psychological realism; doing so taxonomizes styles in ways that may restrict close readings and more comprehensive understandings. Instead, the comparison continues to be useful for defining what *often*, rather than always, distinguishes art cinema from mainstream filmmaking.

I take this overview as a starting point to consider how a similar effect functions within an art-cinema mode that doesn't merely contain instances of theatricality, but which is entirely (or almost so) dedicated to a theatrical visual style, which is evidence of a commitment to modernism. In this case, cinematic modernism works to engage with

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[158] These terms are taken from Kovács in *Screening Modernism*, 193.
[159] Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, 193.

matters of social issues, space, and the role of spectatorship. Costa revives a form of cinematic modernism by spiritualizing human emptiness through theatricality, and it's clear from looking at European cinema during the '60s and '70s how that relationship was formed. In short, the chapter will argue that Costa's films take what could be the basis for so-called social debate (ongoing news topics such as poverty, migration, and neocolonialism form the broad thematic basis of Costa's films) and pushes them toward the periphery while allowing faces and an expressionistic, theatrical usage of light to emerge in their place. Close-ups on faces are in Costa's films the central cinematic gesture for confronting the spectator with, after repeated usage and exposure, an excessive humanity, as long takes in close-up using a static camera are a recurring visual choice. They announce, in part, that this is cinema, not theatre, but that distinction is no mere formalist postulation: it is, instead, the basis for Costa's consideration of combining theatre and cinema as a suitable medium for visualizing the contemporary world.

Theatricality might be used, for instance, to merge reality with memory and dream—a point which will become more relevant later in the case studies of Costa's films. This use can be traced to the *nouveau roman* that appeared in literature in the late 1940s and was adapted to cinema in the '60s. A central figure in both literature and cinema in this regard is Alain Robbe-Grillet; of the writer/filmmaker, Roland Barthes wrote: "He teaches to see the world not through the eyes of the confessor, the doctor, or God…but through the eyes of a man who walks in the city with no other horizon than the spectacle, with no other power than those of his eyes."[160] For Kovács, Barthes's analysis

[160] Quoted in Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, p. 233.

expresses how Robbe-Grillet "extracts a traditional humanistic approach from [a] description of space and character representation…Robbe-Grillet's writing is a result of a conscious reduction of the relationship between man and the environment to an immediate visual contact."[161] I want to press the idea of "immediate visual contact" here as the imagistic basis for Costa's engagement with nothingness. As a filmmaker, Costa works to establish this visual contact as the central function of his art by not only making visible the faces of the marginalized and dispossessed, but also by getting so close, and lingering for so long, that the resulting effect pushes past a realist orientation. Intense, excessive visibility, in other words, is a form of nothingness in how the details of the face invoke something larger than the individual. That something is a people—it is an idea of a ghostly humanity that lingers in the aftermath of war and devastation, and it cannot be expressed through the terminology of universal humanist experience.

While Barthes was referring to writing in his analysis, I take the idea of the eyes—the figure who dwells in the city with no other horizon than memories of the past—and apply it to Costa, whose work has exclusively involved close contact and collaboration with impoverished, drug-addled, and spatially displaced subjects. Costa's films examine the process by which the filmmaker, as artist, makes sense of their own artistry in relation to a subject, or group of subjects, who may have no control over the camera's gaze, but who do emerge from an actual place and portray, often through what appear like moments of reenactment, approximate versions of themselves. Reenactment

[161] Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, 233.

here does not designate the reinhabiting of a past experience; rather it indicates a theatricalized distancing of the self as a means of working through emotional trauams.

Costa employs an array of non-professional actors beginning in *Casa de Lava* (Portugal, 1994), which he takes to further extremes in later films, so that by *In Vanda's Room* (Portugal, 2000), the majority of the nearly three-hour film takes place in a single room, features a non-professional actor named Vanda Duarte, and is shot with a static DV camera framing conversations that have little bearing on the narrative. Costa turns to making films in which the historical contexts of Portugal stay largely outside the frame; the subjects are "authentic" insofar as they are non-actors playing variations of themselves, but their lives are not of immediate concern in the manner that they would be if Costa were making a performative documentary. To be clear, these are narrative feature films that display a significant attention to framing and *mise-en-scène*.

To summarize, theatricality works, in Costa's films, against psychological realism by merging reality, memory, and fantasy into subjective expressions of individual experience. These expressions take shape in relation to Portuguese history, Cape Verdean migrancy, and the bodies of those people living in Fontaínhas. The analysis in this chapter will primarily focus on two of Costa's three most recent feature films, all of which take a Cape Verdean immigrant named Ventura as their lead. In *Colossal Youth* (Portugal, 2006) and *Horse Money* (Portugal, 2014), in particular, the terms of Costa's spiritualizing of human emptiness come into full view. References will be made to *Vitalina Varela* (Portugal, 2019), but it does not receive a significant close reading, as it is, in large part, a stylistically consistent companion piece with *Horse Money*.

Costa's Turn Toward Fontaínhas

In turning toward Africa as the spatial and historical locus for his films, Costa cites as his impetus the moment when Portugal acceded into the EU. While this chapter will not focus more than in passing on Costa's production or industrial contexts, his explanation of how he decided to shoot *Casa de Lava* in 1993 in Cape Verde is illuminating:

> That was the moment when Portugal was turning to the right politically, the social democrats were coming to power, and there were all the treaties about entering the European Community, so the poorest country in Europe all of a sudden had to go very fast economically — it was very bad. It was also the period when private television was beginning in Portugal, before that it was all state-run. So of course that completely ruined the funders. I was so disgusted that I told Paolo [Branco] that if he'd give me some money I'd go to Africa and make something there. It was a reaction out of anger. So I went to Cape Verde and started rewriting, but the film has much more in it about Portugal than anything else. It's still very hard for me to speak about that film. It's kind of like speaking about the house you left behind.[162]

Costa explains that his "anger" is in response to Portugal's integration within the EU since it impacts his domestic funding sources, thereby drawing an analogy between the political status of the nation and his ability to make films. The turn to Africa is not out of a desire to make a film about Africa, but to use Africa as a displaced location from which to speak about Portugal, about Costa's own condition as an artist who finds himself without a home.[163] So, the question of space—of how to represent it and how to inhabit

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[162] Mark Peranson, "Pedro Costa: An Introduction," *Cinema Scope* 27, Summer 2006. 11.

[163] Other "Western" filmmakers have travelled to Africa to make a film about the local people, including Jean Rouch and Lionel Rogosin, who in the late 1950s made the vérité documentaries *Moi un noir* (France/Cape Verde, 1958) and *Come Back, Africa* (South Africa/U.S.,1959), respectively. While there is a certain precedent to European filmmakers aligned with art cinema travelling to Africa, these films are of a different sort than Costa's; they engage in a form of collaboration that relates to the specific, realist socio-political conditions of the time period. Rouch's protagonist tries to find work in Abidjan and Rogosin's characters struggle to survive in Johannesburg.

it—becomes literally dependent on financial factors, both for the filmmaker and the people involved in the film, albeit relative to their varying degrees of social and economic class.

Costa has been forthcoming in interviews about his relationship to and working methods within Fontaínhas, the slum in Lisbon, which first came to his attention after filming *Casa de Lava* in Cape Verde when members of the cast and crew gave him letters to deliver to friends and family in Lisbon. Once he spent time in Fontaínhas, he became dedicated to it and, from 1997 to 2019, made five features and two shorts in cooperation with several members of its community.[164] For many of the months during those years, Costa lived among its members, making *Ossos* (Portugal, 1997) on 35mm along with cinematographer Emmanuel Machuel, who had previously shot films for French auteurs Robert Bresson and Maurice Pialat. After its completion, Costa felt he still had more to say about Fontaínhas, but couldn't proceed without a change; he became "fully attentive to what it means to bring a camera into another person's private sphere," and at the behest of Vanda, who demanded that he "stop the faking," Costa switched to a Panasonic DV camera and shot over 180 hours of footage across the next six months.[165] Costa also vowed not to rearrange objects in rooms or homes to set-up shots; instead, he would focus on experimenting with lighting. The turn from shooting on film to DV in the name of capturing reality links the use of a handheld camera—one that is mobile and lightweight—to that process. Indeed, the use of handheld cameras in Italian neorealism

[164] See "Pedro Costa and Jean-Pierre Gorin," for the full conversation. "Colossal Youth," *Letters from Fontaínhas: Three Films by Pedro Costa*, The Criterion Collection, 2009. DVD.
[165] Akiva Gottlieb, "A Cinema of Refusal: On Pedro Costa." *The Nation*. August 11, 2010. https://www.thenation.com/article/cinema-refusal-pedro-costa/

confirms this general perception, something more recent works of "mockumentary" or "found footage" intensify through a technique known as "shaky-cam." However, Costa's switch to DV is not in pursuit of mobility throughout Fontaínhas, nor is it utilized as a hallmark of verisimilitude for a reality effect. Though these cameras are more typically chosen for their capacity to capture movement, nearly every shot in Costa's twenty-first century feature films is a static, immobile take. Therefore, Costa utilizes the cameras to work against the grain of dominant, realist filmmaking trends—another element of his modernist mode.

Until 2020, the majority of scholarly writings in English about Costa's filmmaking was to be found in edited collections on Portuguese cinema or slow cinema, select journal articles, or in the philosophical works of Jacques Rancière, who has taken a special interest in Costa's work as it relates to matters of imagery and politics.[166] Nuno Barradas Jorge's *The Films of Pedro Costa: Producing and Consuming Contemporary Art Cinema*, however, provides a comprehensive summation of the filmmaker's work and legacy up unto this point. In the passages that follow, I will summarize Jorge's major points about Costa's filmmaking and explain how my own contribution adds to this growing body of work.

Jorge considers Costa's work from the perspective of authorship and explains how Costa's aesthetics are "imprinted in the materiality of the production process of his films," and "become refined and redefined at the level of consumption through first-

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[166] The most relevant titles here include: *Portugal's Global Cinema: Industry, History, and Culture*, ed. Mariana Liz (New York: I.B. Tauris), 2018; Anna White-Nockleby, "Textured Cuts: The Demolition Cinema of Pedro Costa and José Luis Guerín," *The Journal of Visual Culture* 17, no. 4, (2018): 117-138; Jacques Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema* (New York: Verso), 2014.

person strategical value negotiations and in collective evaluating and discursive practices."[167] Jorge is above all interested in elucidating how Costa's unique production practices inform his filmmaking, and I will focus on how Jorge's insights into the production of *Horse Money* (his book ends before *Vitalina Varela* was released) help establish a basis for my own textual analysis. Jorge's central focus is on what he terms "collaborative authorship," which refers primarily to the working relationship between Costa and Ventura; as Jorge notes, Ventura "provided Costa with access to a personal universe which is reflected in the themes and narrative structure of the film."[168]

Collaborative authorship is a helpful way to understand how Costa and Ventura aimed to exhume Ventura's experiences during the 1974 Carnation Revolution, of which Costa says he and Ventura worked out through mapping, "as though we were making a chart on a table."[169] Jorge doesn't take up theatricality as a concept in his analysis, but it's particularly helpful in understanding how the collaboration between Costa and Ventura works. Costa and Ventura engage Ventura's memories not in the form of reenactment, but in sequences that often place Ventura in an enclosed, claustrophobic space resembling a stage. These sequences blend reality, memory, and fantasy—the core components of Costa's theatricality—into a visual style that works away from history as an objective fact and more toward the individual as an exigent, subjective figure of great importance. Ventura's sense of trauma is most pronounced in a prolonged sequence from

[167] Nuno Barradas Jorge, *The Films of Pedro Costa: Producing and Consuming Contemporary Art Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 2.
[168] Jorge, 131.
[169] Aaron Cutler, "*Horse Money*: An Interview with Pedro Costa," *Cineaste* XL, no. 3 (2015). https://www.cineaste.com/summer2015/horse-money-pedro-costa-aaron-cutler

Horse Money inside an elevator, in which Ventura cowers, crying, and engaging in a dialogue with a bronze soldier whose lips never move [figure 9].

(figure 9)

When Ventura shouts “Viva the Revolution Army!” it spills out as a seemingly involuntary response; that it occurs among other lines of dialogue that make little to no explicit sense suggests the trauma of his past, but without a simplified narrative to process the significance of these events. The claustrophobic confines of the elevator become like a stage, and the fantastical quality of the sequence, hovering between hallucination, memory, and madness, invokes the formal feeling of being trapped as Ventura evinces his own psychological ruins. The theatrical staging affirms Ventura’s feelings of traumatic emotional confinement, but Ventura’s words never place that trauma into cathartic terms that would suggest he’s working through or overcoming it. The sequence reveals Costa’s unwillingness to structure Ventura’s feelings within a narrative that would take political sides or deliver a didactic message. Instead, Ventura’s face and voice are the message; so, too, is a theatrical space that gives him a stage to speak from.

Costa began making films about Cape Verde because he, too, was displaced, preventing him from making a film as he'd planned to in Portugal. This isn't to say that Costa aligns himself with Ventura's past or even his experiences, but that the two men share a kinship of trying to find meaning in the release that art or collaborative efforts have the potential to yield. Consider *Casa De Lava*, which begins with lava erupting from a mountainside, as close-ups survey the territory without context or exposition. These spurts of molten liquid announce that Costa's imagery will be affiliated with various forms of death and decay. Indeed, the volcano's presence only returns once Leão (Isaach de Bankolé), a Cape Verdean immigrant worker, is transported there from Lisbon by Mariana (Inês de Medeiros), a Portuguese nurse, following an off-screen accident. Comatose and bandaged, Leão becomes the figure of a zombie in the pre-George A. Romero sense, affiliated with exoticism and voodoo. The cinematic touchstone for this imagery is *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, U.S., 1943), in which a Canadian nurse is sent to care for the wife of a sugar plantation owner on a Caribbean island. In fact, Jorge argues that *I Walked with a Zombie* was not just "a tangential referential experience," but a central source material for the film's production.[170]

I want to understand this referencing in *Casa de Lava* in relation to atmosphere, that which creates "affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of mood."[171] Costa's theatrical style, directed toward the exorcising function of emotional reenactments, appeals to this "spatial bearer of mood." Indeed, given Costa's background as not only a

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[170] Nuno Barradas Jorge, "Pedro Costa and the Island of the Dead: Distant Referencing and the Making of *Casa de Lava*, *Adaptation* 7, no. 3 (2014): 253-264.
[171] Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 119.

film student but also an avid cinephile who openly talks in interviews about his influences and particular adoration for the films of John Ford and producer Val Lewton, the space of Costa's theatricality must include a consideration of the transformation that takes place when classical Hollywood films become the basis or inspiration for Portuguese art films. In this conception, atmosphere is not something "free floating," but "something that proceeds from and is created by things, persons, or their constellations."[172] In short, atmospheres are created by filmmakers and they are an effect of the film's spatial elaboration. Costa crafts *Casa de Lava* to position Leão's comatose state in relation to a lineage of corpses that have occupied the current space. As a doctor tells Mariana, this "was a leper colony. People came and never left. Everyone had a mum or a dad rotting here. No one wants to remember. The Slow Death Camp." The veracity of this story cannot be ascertained, either within or outside of the film's diegesis, because the Cape Verde rendered by Costa's atmosphere is made manifest by the intersection of film history and the postcolonial present. The past, in a geopolitical and film historical sense, is paradoxically a reference point and a means to create the present geography. The film depicts a decolonized Cape Verde where "the dead dance," as Bassoe (Raul Andrade), a local musician, tells Mariana, though the film never makes clear precisely who those dead are, whether members of the leper colony, other ancestors, or a spiritual dead with no corporeal form. Indeed, the matrix of colonial relations includes Mariana's exoticizing of Leão, who is not the quiet, endearing man she envisioned once he awakens from his coma. Death and life, as well as sleeping and awakening, become confused, so

[172] Böhme, "Atmosphere," 122.

that when Tano (Cristiano Andrade Alves), a Cape Verdean boy, surmises that the "dead are as scary as the living," the reverse works too, that "the living are as scary as the dead." Here there is a flattening of the gap between life and death into a singular cinematic space. Studies in atmosphere acknowledge how "in the classical ontology the property of a thing was thought to be its occupation of a specific space and its resistance to other things entering this space."[173] Thus adapted, atmosphere is a destabilizing force, "spheres of the presence of something" which are neither objective nor subjective but "subjectlike," something "sensed in bodily presence by human beings," which can, by extension, neither be confined within the local or allocated to the global.[174]

While *Casa de Lava*, with its expansive wide shots and moving camera, was made before Costa's turn to a theatrical style, its evocation of space as a mood became the basis for his subsequent work. Costa initially embarked upon the project in Fontaínhas because he wanted to switch from the expansive natural setting of *Casa de Lava* to "a kind of cinema that shows how people live, that shows their houses. I love that kind of thing."[175] In doing so, he embraced a form of filmmaking that pushed against naturalism; the use of light, the lack of camera movement, the engagement with time and space as sectioned off from history or an outside world: these became the basis for his commitment to a modernist style that would discover people who might otherwise remain hidden.

With its runtime of over two and a half hours, *Colossal Youth* has a sprawling scope of space and time that frustrates any claim to capture a particular socio-economic

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[173] Böhme, "Atmosphere," 121.
[174] Böhme, "Atmosphere," 122.
[175] Peranson, "Pedro Costa," 10.

condition through its highly ordered *mise-en-scène*. In broad terms, the narrative tracks Ventura after his wife leaves him. He ambles around within the ruins of Fontaínhas, which are now "empty lots, weeds, and rats," Ventura says, in pursuit of nothing tangible, other than a past which cannot be regained. As Rancière explains, unlike in decidedly political films such as those of Francesco Rosi and Jean-Marie Straub, Costa's work contains no assertion about economics and politics; nor are there any entities resembling a bourgeoisie or a proletariat, so that the subjects come to seem less exploited than abandoned.[176] Indeed, the socio-economic relations in Portugal between its government and its citizens finds no purchase in *Colossal Youth*, in which sounds, repetitious words, and self-affirming monologues conjure not narrative progression, but the creation of Ventura as "subjectlike;" he's made into a postcolonial specter that's neither verifiable within the film as a mortal subject nor object, and yet it's Costa's continued investment in him and his experience that bestows upon him a spiritual essence that indicates, through his face and body, a reinvestment in nothingness as a transcendental value. It's the liminal status of subjectivity that's key here: it's as though Ventura is caught between living and dying, waking and dreaming. These uncertain conditions parallel the broader geopolitical implications of an eroding planet, global economic precarity, and the abandonment of entire swaths of the European population.

Moreover, the lack of certainty in Ventura's corporeal body as a narrative subject does not detract from his absolute certainty as a cinematic subject, nor does it omit an

[176] Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema*, 128.

intensive focus on the details of Ventura's past. In one notable scene, Ventura walks under some trees while talking to himself, saying:

> August 19, 1972. I was on a big jet with 400 immigrants, plus the serving girls. It was me and my cousin Augusto. Once in the air, he started to cry. They served us horse steak and table wine from Castelo Branco. He didn't eat. I ate his entire portion. At the airport, we met his uncle. He took us to Salitre Street. The next day, we started work with Construção Técnica on the Borges Brothers bank downtown. I earned 1800 escudos every two weeks. At the barracks, a parrot would sing, 'Nigger, nigger, stinky face!' I left to work for Gaudêncio Construction. They sent me here to the Gulbenkian Museum…

The overwhelming specificity of dates, locations, and events contrasts with Costa's denial of any corresponding representative visuals or relation of how these details define Ventura's life. An upturned camera takes note of the trees in an undisclosed location and gradually tilts down to find Ventura; unlike in works of canonical neorealism such as *Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, Italy, 1945), which uses verisimilitude to legitimize its eponymous setting, *Colossal Youth* provides no image to corroborate Ventura's story which, absent an indexical guarantor, becomes more an incantation of a possible humanity—of a lost cause of human livelihood—than a humanizing gesture. The fact of testimony alone, whether oral or visual, cannot account for Ventura's lingering trauma. Nothing Costa could represent or depict could encompass that. The fetishistic recounting of narrative detail, then, becomes specific to the point of incomprehension, much like the use of excessive close-ups throughout the film. These details render the "story" useless as a humanizing device, meaning that they do not evoke psychological interiority. Some might prefer to call this "bad" storytelling, but that would misunderstand its function within *Colossal Youth* as a gesture of distantiation, pushing the spectator toward the sense of Ventura's words rather than a rational comprehension of

their meaning. As referenced in the introduction, Costa aims to "speak nearby" to Ventura's experience and trauma rather than attempting a direct representation of it. Per Rancière, Costa finds Ventura in isolation, a purgatorial being removed from the geopolitical specificity of contemporary Europe. Ventura's constant invocation within the film to 1972 stakes out a time before the turn from dictatorship to democracy. This by no means romanticizes that period; on the contrary, the film pushes Ventura's physical space to a point of total abstraction as he repeatedly tours an apartment complex, asking for more rooms for children that he doesn't have. Painted entirely white, the apartment places Ventura nowhere, as the sole window contains not a view of the surrounding terrain, but a corresponding white, blown-out background.

(figure 10)

The visual technique recurs again near the beginning of *Horse Money*. The first sight of Ventura is from behind; shirtless and shrouded in darkness, he descends a long flight of stairs, inside a tunnel-like structure that provides no identifiable spatial or temporal markers. Once through a gate, the camera is now at the bottom of the stairwell, with

Ventura making his way toward the camera. The seemingly extreme change in angle is actually nothing more than an unusual shot-reverse-shot. Moreover, the two shots combine to capture Ventura completing the action of moving across an entire space, so that this flight of stairs is itself a microcosm for completion: of beginning and ending. Costa highlights the z-axis of depth by placing the only light deep into the frame. Thus, Ventura's emergence is caught between birth and death: is he emerging into or out of a world? *Horse Money* is rife with such ambiguous images of liminal spaces; the dark passageway is shortly thereafter given an inverse inside a hospital room during a visitation from Ventura's friends and family, where a blown-out background [figure 10] erases any possible detail outside of the window.

(figure 11)

It's this blown-out space that defines the most essential location of Costa's films: Portugal as a non-place, an uncertain place, where memory, body, and testimony are no longer capable of reclaiming the national, as was thought possible with neorealism, and is inching even further into a realm of atmosphere that entirely transfigures narrative into a theatrical embodiment of perpetual trauma, approximate to horror. *Horse Money*

introduces Vitalina, an acquaintance of Ventura's, who arrives (or simply appears, it's not clear) to Ventura from Figueira das Naus, specific places once again having bearing on conversation and personal testament, not visual correlation. Vitalina proceeds to read and reread aloud letters from the Portuguese government detailing her husband's death. Vitalina even reads her husband's death certificate verbatim, though she stops short before reading his cause of death. As she reads these documents, she whispers in monotone, her face in chiaroscuro close-up. Costa presents the most mundane act one might conceive—reading the details of a government issued document—by shooting the reading in a manner that highlights its artificiality as a theatricalized *tableau vivant*. Vitalina is depicted less as an indexical subject for narrative fulfillment than, once again, as something subjectlike, and she is therefore neither psychologically developed nor given the status of an object. As tears roll down her cheeks, they're a direct indication of her interiority, but not of anything resembling an identifiable psychology [figure 11]. Costa's camera captures Vitalina's visible emotions in this moment, but makes nothing of them, either with a camera move, a cut, or a music cue (there is never non-diegetic music in Costa's Fontaínhas films). By remaining locked onto Vitalina's face in expressionistic close-up, the camera sees her as a shell of a former self; her emotions can be activated, but the shot produces nothing other than the visible evidence of the tear itself. The spectator sees her, but the spectator cannot know her. Closeness alone cannot produce knowledge of human suffering in an empathetic sense.

The close-up of Vitalina further defines Costa's theatricality as a realm where the recognition of national space continues unabated, but where narrative falters and the cinematic actions that were once capable of narrative—both on the part of the actor and

the filmmaker—continue on as a purgatorial loop with no end point. Herein lies Costa's contribution to contemporary filmmaking. Costa's ongoing alignment of his own displacement within the form and content of his work registers the impossibility of a reconciliation between the demands of global thinking and national identity for Europe. Portugal is a unique case in that as a part of Western Europe, the nation found itself occupying multiple geopolitical spaces at once. That Costa takes on the supranational matter of Portuguese identity through intertextuality, stasis, displacement, and digital technologies signals his work's urgency in grasping the status of both contemporary European geopolitics and moving-image aesthetics. The next section will further examine how theatricality works to articulate Costa's subjects.

Theatricality in Costa's Filmmaking

In 2001, Costa made a documentary titled *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* that documents how filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet produce their films and how they operate within the contemporary film industry. Straub and Huillet are arguably the filmmakers most attached to theatricality in European art cinema, such that their work has been analyzed in direct relation to Bertolt Brecht and what Nenad Jovanovic terms "Brechtian cinemas," which is defined, in part, as an attempt to "cinematically adjust Brecht's theatrical strategy of foregrounding the constructedness of a presentation to aid the spectator in creating a critical distance from it."[177] Jovanovic analyzes Straub and Huillet's work in accordance with five primary factors: (1) Their

[177] Nenad Jovanovic, *Brechtian Cinemas: Montage and Theatricality in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Peter Watkins, and Lars Von Trier* (New York: SUNY Press, 2017), 2.

films are reworkings of previous texts; (2) Their films are frequently set in past epochs; (3) Their films invariably use direct sound; (4) Their films are often set in nature; and (5) Their films frequently rely on available lighting.[178] While these factors collectively help define the filmmakers' theatricality, only the use of direct sound could be applied to Costa's films. In fact, Costa is much the opposite: his works are original, they are set in the present, they eschew any settings in nature for, especially after *Casa de Lava*, almost exclusively interior and claustrophobic settings, and they utilize heavily manipulated and artificial lighting techniques.

Jean-Pierre Gorin notes how *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* works more as a "portrait" rather than engaging in hagiography, and the distinction is telling for how it emphasizes Costa's painterly sense of theatricality.[179] After the turn to DV with *In Vanda's Room*, with its use of static takes and expressionistic lighting within small spaces, Costa fully embraces the mode of the *tableau vivant* in *Colossal Youth*, which opens in long shot as large objects are being dropped from a window and crash to the ground. The house's façade resembles something from German expressionism, with its jagged-looking surfaces and flat, set-like appearance. Expressionism, like Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, works to "reject the codes and logic of realism" by "locating the defining traits of their artistic programs in the overt exploitation of theatre's 'stagedness.'"[180] To reiterate Heck's central point from earlier in the chapter, theatricality

[178] Jovanovic, *Brechtian Cinemas*, 66-67.
[179] Quoted from a translation in Jorge, *The Films of Pedro Costa*, 76.
[180] Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, "Theatricality: An Introduction," in *Theatricality*, eds. Postlewait and Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 12. It is worth nothing, in the context cited above, that the authors are referring to Orson Welles i.e. "genius" for how he, among others, "created a new theatricalism in the architectural components of the *mise-en-scène*."

"asks for thought" because it appeals to an imagination that goes beyond realism and helps create a potential space for inquiry. And yet, despite the look of Fontaínhas being that of a set or stage, it *is* an actual place, and Costa has not transformed it through extensive set decoration or treatment. Instead, he has focused on lighting, camera angles, and the *mise-en-scène* as ways to see beyond the social possibilities of narrative that would more generally accompany the shooting and framing of non-professional actors within a narrative feature.

Rancière takes up the matter of Costa's politics by addressing general criticisms of his work, particularly that "his central subject is at the heart of contemporary politics—the fate of the exploited, of those who have come from the former African colonies to work on Portuguese construction sites."[181] For some, as Rancière notes, the accusation is "aestheticism," meaning that Costa exploits the exploited further by utilizing their circumstances for artistic clout. And, to a certain extent, Costa might agree, as in *Ossos* (1997), he did focus on rearranging items in the background for certain shots, a practice he ceased thereafter.[182] Accordingly, theatricality in Costa's filmmaking becomes a means to consider the ethics of space. Rancière's conclusion, after a discussion on *Colossal Youth* in particular, is worth noting in full:

> Cinema cannot be the equivalent of the love letter or the music of the poor. It can no longer be the art that gives back to the humble the palpable riches of their world. It should consent to merely being the surface on which the experience of those relegated to the margins of economic circuits and social pathways seeks to be ciphered into new forms. That surface should welcome the split between portrait and painting, chronicle and tragedy, reciprocity and fissure. One art should take shape in place of another. Costa's greatness lies in accepting and

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[181] Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema*, 127.
[182] Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema*, 129.

rejecting this alteration at the same time, making in the same single movement a cinema of the possible and the impossible.[183]

I want to press upon several of these points in relation to how theatricality helps resurrect the existential terms of "a cinema of the possible and the impossible" by spiritualizing human emptiness through the postcolonial migrant. Once again, it's essential to focus on the liminality of this—the straddling of possibilities and impossibilities—as these reflect the spatial terms of both Costa's theatricality and emotional reenactments. Rancière argues that cinema becomes more like a surface akin to a canvas or a stage that welcomes contradictions or tensions. The cinema cannot seek to resolve social or political issues because it cannot function as an umbilical cord between viewer and the subject. Instead, filmmaking will displace the viewer and subject *further*, another straddling, bringing them closer together through the distanciation of spectatorial uncertainty.

(figure 12)

Consider a recurring scene in *Colossal Youth* featuring both Ventura and Vanda sitting on a bed and watching television [figure 12]. There is scarce light within the

[183] Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema*, 142.

frame, especially in the first sequence, as the two are almost entirely covered by darkness. Captured in a single static take each time, the sequences involve the two speaking of nothing in particular. That is, nothing that would help to explain either of their conditions as a form of exposition for the purpose of conventional narrative. In fact, without having seen *In Vanda's Room*, the viewer will have little to no clue who this woman is aside from being a friend of Ventura's. The revolving door nature of Costa's Fontainhas films proceeds accordingly. While Ventura emerges as the central figure of *Colossal Youth* and *Horse Money*, in *Vitalina Varela* he's a supporting figure who appears in a comparable manner to Vanda in *Colossal Youth*. Moreover, Vitalina appears in *Horse Money* as a supporting figure, then becomes the central focus of the subsequent film. I will ironically call this Costa's Cinematic Universe, but whereas in the Disney-owned Marvel or *Star Wars* franchises such world-building is a facet of ensuring a never-ending supply of new chapters and sagas, in Costa's films these characters are essentially playing themselves, inhabiting some of the actual spaces of their lives, and are enmeshed in both the geopolitical and postcolonial circumstances that determine their conditions. Within the space of global cinema, the Fontaínhas films are an implicit commentary on the nature of character as a fortifying tool of global capital for ensuring ongoing financial interest, with regard to diversifying casts and characters along lines of ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. The non-professional actors in Costa's films become characters only insofar as they have names, appear on-screen, and cannot be comprehended as documentary figures.[184]

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[184] Costa has himself discussed the industry of filmmaking according to "sides," and he seems to draw the line in terms of mainstream auteurs ("regular craftsmen," he calls them) and those working outside of Hollywood. Of David Fincher, in particular, he says, in reference to having just seen *The Girl With the*

Let's contrast these scenes from *Colossal Youth* with a similarly expressionistic one from *Horse Money*, in which Vitalina appears for the first time. In *Colossal Youth*, both Ventura and Vanda remain in medium shot and often in enough darkness to make their faces difficult to discern. For *Horse Money*, Costa exaggerates the low-contrast lighting even further, but he also opts for several, extreme close-ups on faces, with the first being several extended shots of Vitalina just after she has come to Portugal from Cape Verde. She speaks in a monotone voice, as if even uttering the words is difficult. She begins, "It happened on June 23rd, 2013. My sister Isabel showed up with the heart-stopping news." The news in reference is her husband's death, and she reveals she missed his funeral, to which Ventura responds: "Vitalina, your husband is here with me. He has the same sickness as me. Nervous disease…he's skinny, but he's alive." Ventura has his back turned and is overlooking "Lisbon" as he speaks, though there is no visible space beyond him. Costa's framing and staging invokes an atmosphere of horror for its use of shadows and suggestions of ghostliness, as Ventura's claim suggests some kind of supernatural events. While more is "happening" in this sequence than in large portions of *Colossal Youth*, the framing of action still minimizes exposition in favor of having the spectator examine Vitalina's face and the back of Ventura's head. That is, the tight close-up of a woman's face, which in classical Hollywood might invite eroticism or beauty, in Costa's films asks for us to experience the sequence as simultaneously authentic and artificial. To reiterate Rancière's words, the sequence "mak[es] in the same single

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Dragon Tattoo, "Everything is wrong, of course. He shouldn't be doing this. He should be doing things on my side. He would probably be much better than me." David Jenkins, "Some Violence is Required: A Conversation with Pedro Costa," *Mubi*. March 11, 2013. https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/some-violence-is-required-a-conversation-with-pedro-costa

movement a cinema of the possible and the impossible." These are purely matters of space: of where we may sit or stand within both the film's diegesis and the broader geopolitical landscape as we try to discern its form and function. All we can know for certain are the faces we see, and that their livelihood has been compromised by often intangible forces that are beyond their (and our) comprehension and control.

Technological Humanity

This final section will consider how Costa's technological and aesthetic choices help further define a plea for a rekindled humanity. The relinquishing of 35mm for DV and then HD in *Horse Money* and *Vitalina Varela* implicitly acknowledges both the dwindling economic conditions of much contemporary art cinema and how only well-backed figures such as Quentin Tarantino and Christopher Nolan have the luxury of fetishizing celluloid in the name of preserving a certain model of theatrical exhibition. Of course, the narrative of cinephilia that's contained within this also doubles as a marketing tool for the filmmaker's bonafides that will cater to certain moviegoers.

Horse Money, for example, begins not on Ventura, but a series of twelve photographs taken by Jacob Riis, from *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, published in 1889, in which men and women living in poverty are shown amid their homes, neighborhoods, and public spaces, such as bars and streets. The context of these photographs bears immediate intertextual relevance to Costa's previous films, particularly *Ossos* and *In Vanda's Room*, where the interiors of homes and public transit serve as backdrops for the often sullen faces of their occupants. Moreover, several of the photographs show Black men congregating alongside white

members of the tenements. Riis captures ethnic variance in addition to the material conditions of poverty by making appeals to discrepancies of living conditions between upper and lower classes of people. One could read their inclusion at the opening of the film straightforwardly: the framing of Costa's own immigrant subjects finds corollary with Riis's insofar as their conditions cannot be reduced to ethnicity or economic lack, for there is the deeper force of collective consciousness contributing to their marginalization. One central difference between the two comes with context, however: Riis actually lived in the tenements, whereas Costa visits Fontaíanhas as an artist whose visa expires once his work is complete.

Therefore, Costa is not trying to replicate Riis's images with his own in any strict sense. On the contrary, Riis's photographs should be read as an historical reference point meant to contextualize the impossibility of returning to Riis's moment—a moment when the conditions of photography as non-art held an urgent autonomy that, given the exigency of extreme poverty, also carried an essential socio-economic purpose. Yet, there is something of an affinity between Costa and Riis that cannot be overlooked. As Costa explains, "in [Riis's] photographs you can see a bunch of drunkards on a street corner, or a guy being mugged, but if you look closely, you will also notice one of them smiling and the con being revealed."[185] In Costa's reading of Riis, the photographs are a collaborative staging of an idea of poverty between the artist and the subjects that reveals an essential point about how image making can be deceptive, and how it has changed in the digital era. Costa expresses an appreciation for this con, which can be understood as an outward

[185] Cutler, "An Interview with Pedro Costa."

aestheticizing of poverty that is modulated by the fact that Riis was himself an immigrant—a citizen-photographer who lived among his own subjects. In other words, Riis was not visualizing the tenements as an outsider, but as a confidant and an instigator who quite literally sheds light on the darkened dwellings. A Portuguese national not of immigrant origins, Costa is not this: his relationship with Ventura and the Cape Verdean immigrants of the films is more like that of Luchino Visconti to the Sicilian fisherman of *La Terra Trema* (Italy, 1948)—he's an artist borne from modernist notions of the confluence between aesthetic purpose, national past, indexical figures, and bodily specificity. Costa's relationship is not entirely comparable to that of Visconti's in that Ventura and others are not strictly speaking outsiders to Costa's national origins: they are Portuguese citizens that have been living in Portugal for more than 30 years. Costa renovates the notion of national fraternity and extends it to Ventura to utilize him, and the performance of his own personal narrative, as the basis for a pair of films.

The matter of authorship, particularly within the context of so-called collaborative filmmaking, draws a question to the forefront: whose story does the inclusion of Riis's photographs speak to and whose point of interest do they serve? In effect, the matter concerns the relationship between diegesis and artist, and also asks: how is Riis's work staging an entrance into the space of the film? In short, how is the spectator to comprehend their inclusion if not as a direct commentary on the artifice of staging anything in front of camera? Costa is direct on this question: the photographs speak to issues of art beyond Ventura's and the other immigrants' purview. When asked what Ventura thinks of Riis's photographs, Costa replies:

> Ventura saw them in our film, but he didn't make any comment about them. You see, Riis is for me: he is part of my research work, a piece in my construction plan, and a protective presence that I like to have around. It was the same feeling with Robert Desnos during the making of *Colossal Youth*: Ventura doesn't need to know much about Robert Desnos, his books, or the history of the surrealist movement. What's important is the moment in which a letter by Desnos, translated from French to Creole, meets a letter written by Ventura: these two letters come together in one text/poem/letter, and it becomes a meeting of famous men.[186]

Costa's response drives a wedge between the notion that he and Ventura are striving toward the same aesthetic goal, something the interviewer takes as a given. That is, the notion that Costa and Ventura are both invested in "art" as the reason for the film's existence precedes the inquiry. Costa's response epitomizes Rancière's notion of a "plurality of human activities" that results in "the distribution of the sensible," whereby work becomes "a necessary relegation of the worker to the private space-time of his occupation."[187] Costa's art rises above the level of work, and while Ventura's work i.e. the use of his hands to make a living remains not a choice, but a necessary fact of the conditions of his poverty, Costa both aligns himself and Ventura as equals and draws a distinction between how each of them factors into creating a work of art. Recognizing this does not lead to a charge of exploitation on Costa's behalf. After all, any Italian neorealist film operated in much the same manner. What's imperative here is not a condemnation of the artist—I will not, in the final analysis, charge Costa with aestheticizing Fontaínhas. I will, instead, understand the constellation of photography, the painterly, and digital cinema as a theatrical space that transforms reality into an aesthetic mode that recognizes, above all, the ongoing search in human life for being and presence.

[186] Michael Guarneri, "Pedro Costa: Documentary, Realism, and Life on the Margins," *BOMB Magazine*. July 16, 2015. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/pedro-costa/
[187] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 42.

CHAPTER V

"TO HELL WITH REALISM": VIOLENCE, HUMOR, AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN AKI KAURISMÄKI'S *LE HAVRE* AND BRUNO DUMONT'S *P'TIT QUINQUIN*

This chapter analyzes the aesthetics of violence and racism in contemporary France as depicted in two films: *Le Havre* (Aki Kaurismäki, France/Finland/Germany, 2011) and *P'tit Quinquin* (Bruno Dumont, France, 2014). Each of these films concerns, whether as its primary narrative (*Le Havre*) or a subplot (*P'tit Quinquin*) the status of an African-born teenager who faces both the prospect of deportation and physical harm. In both cases, there are a community of (mostly) native French citizens that determine the final status of the teenager. Because the results differ significantly (one is guided to probable safety, while the other engages in terroristic violence and eventually commits suicide), each filmmaker's choice to use the template of a slapstick comedy is notable, as it deploys irreverent humor as an aesthetic counterpoint to social realism when addressing migration and racism. In what follows, I consider the perspectives of Kaurismäki and Dumont as they discuss each of their respective interests; for Kaurismäki, the interest is in situating contemporary social problems and critique of government in a way that oscillates between scenes of seriousness and comedy.

For Dumont, the bumbling detective narrative—with its forebears running from early Sacha Guitry to Inspector Clouseau of *The Pink Panther* franchise—serves as the unlikely vehicle for a thematic interest in the body in pain and humanity's capacity for cruelty. Taken together, these films propose an alternative to starker versions of social realism through humor: they deliberately place spectators in an uncomfortable position by asking them to laugh, and even be shocked, at circumstances that would more conventionally be treated as serious matters of ethical concern.

Given that this dissertation looks to contemporary alternatives to realism in depicting ongoing social, historical, and political issues, analyzing humor is beneficial for how it reflects a conscious rejection of realism. Kaurismäki and Dumont have been adamant in discussions of their work about how realism impedes their creative expression. In an interview with *Film Comment* in 2011, Kaurismäki explained his decision to make a film depicting the contemporary "migration crisis." Originally, this project was going to utilize verisimilar approximations of real-world scenarios. One scene in question involves Inspector Monet (Jean-Pierre Darroussin), who oversees an immigration task force, finding more than a dozen African refugees inside a misdirected shipping container. As Kaurismäki explains, "I had written that the container with the refugees is filthy, and that some of the immigrants had died. I could not go through with that, and I thought I'd do the complete opposite [figure 13]: instead I'd show them wearing their respectable Sunday best—to hell with realism."[188]

[188] Peter von Bagh, "Aki Kaurismäki: The Uncut Interview," *Film Comment*. September/October 2011. https://www.filmcomment.com/article/aki-kaurismaki/

(figure 13)

Kaurismäki shoots the scene in a succession of close-ups—in a *tableau vivant* style—so that the revelation of the refugees as meticulously posed runs counter to viewer expectations informed by documentary footage of refugees, whether from news broadcasts or raw Internet footage, that is often selected for its harshest and most degrading moments. It's important to consider Kaurismäki's declaration, "to hell with realism," as something both he and Dumont have in common (and is something that recurs across the films analyzed in the chapters of this dissertation). For these filmmakers, realism is an inadequate form of representation; it misdirects the spectator away from how images are constructed by filmmakers and toward the raw content itself. Realism tells lies, for these filmmakers, because its implicit positing of truth belies its construction through editing, camera movement, and the elimination of certain footage which might complicate the issue.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons that *P'tit Quinquin*, as a nearly three-and-a-half-hour miniseries that originally aired on French television, refuses naturalistic scenarios in favor of a labyrinthine, circuitous conception of truth and evidence that, even by the end

of its runtime, has resolved next to nothing of its narrative. As Dumont explains, "I am not a naturalistic filmmaker at all. My work is all about transfiguration. It's an entirely poetic world. But the only way to strive for reality is to go through reality. That's the paradox."[189] By going "through reality," Dumont means taking potentially realist subject matter and transforming it into something else. The focus on transfiguration, then, provides Dumont license to deny narrative closure or even avoid characterological concerns. In a different interview, the critic asks how Dumont avoids condescending to his characters or making them into victims of his own devising. Dumont's response proves instructive: "They're instruments, they're not characters. The question you're asking is a moral one, about relationships between people. I don't think that's relevant. A film is an assemblage, in a sense it's beyond good and evil. It's my character, so by definition I can't condescend to him. I'm not making a documentary."[190] Both Kaurismäki and Dumont's insistence that their films not only deny realism but actively assault it or "go through it" indicates the role of violence in how they address real-world events or moral questions. For them, realist representations are false, though not false in precisely the same manner. Further analysis will take up how the two filmmakers differ in their approaches; for instance, despite *Le Havre*'s adamant rejection of realism, the film still retains humanism as a core value of contemporary society. It's ultimately invested in characters and their well-being. *P'tit Quinquin*, on the other hand, upends any

[189] Ricky D'Ambrose, "Interview with Bruno Dumont," *Mubi*. February 03, 2015, https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/interview-with-bruno-dumont
[190] Nicholas Elliott, "Bruno Dumont." *BOMB Magazine*. January 08, 2015. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/bruno-dumont/

faith in humanity whatsoever, and its use of dark humor, often involving bloodshed and murder, refuses to affirm humanistic values.

Just as Dumont's detective references its cinematic forebears, Kaurismäki's sense of history and humor exhibits an intertextual interest in how European cinema has historically interlaced conceptions of difference with archetypal outsider figures. Namely, Kaurismäki routes his migrant narrative through the archetypes of the gangster and the clown. These two figures, variously defined by their relegation to the margins of society, inform Kaurismäki's reflection on how contemporary cinema can think through humanism in forms other than social realism. For Kaurismäki, these ideas are less conscious than the end product of a process, which he explains by saying, "When I write, I almost completely work in terms of my subconscious. I digest the theme of the film and what I know of the basic story. Then I wait for three months for my subconscious to finish its work. My writing is very unanalytical, but the final outcome is a pretty precise script."[191] Kaurismäki is clear that, as he writes, he is not intentionally drawing from a specific set of references. "It is impossible to analyze influences," he has said. "The head is a big cooking pot in which all ingredients are haphazardly mixed: everything you have experienced, read, seen in films. Then you ladle it out with what I hope is some kind of logic."[192]

The intertextual references at work in Kaurismäki's film, though, plays a more significant role than he lets on; later in the same interview, he acknowledges that a minor character played by Jean-Pierre Leaud in *Le Havre* is "an informer straight out of the

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[191] Von Bagh, "Ali Kaurismäki: The Uncut Interview," 2011.
[192] Von Bagh, "Ali Kaurismäki: The Uncut Interview," 2011.

world of [Henri-Georges] Clouzot's *The Raven.*"[193] The reference to Clouzot's 1943 detective film reveals that the process is not entirely related to the subconscious; indeed, the assortment of character types and representational tactics at times emerges in the form of a conscious choice.

Accordingly, my analysis of *Le Havre* explains how the racial unconscious of the 1930s and 1940s French films, often deemed "poetic realism," serves as the basis for setting *Le Havre* in its eponymous harbor town. This setting traces across the Mediterranean to Africa, but also from France to the U.S., since the classical template of film noir (a Hollywood style innovated by European émigrés) is likewise relevant for *Le Havre*. This cineliterate approach argues that *Le Havre* yields worthwhile contexts to better define its contribution to the global visual construction of African migrancy.

(figure 14)

I take the same approach to *P'tit Quinquin* in terms of tracing aesthetic precedents, but I do so in a different register. Dumont's process entails placing his instrument-characters in

[193] Von Bagh, "Ali Kaurismäki: The Uncut Interview," 2011.

moral and ethical dilemmas that they often do not fully understand. Describing his aesthetic approach, he says, "It's a kind of instability vis-à-vis our academic and even moral canons. We're used to going in one direction, that's it. It really shakes you up to be tossed around between the grotesque, the comedic, and the absolutely serious, with deeply banal sociological and even historical elements thrown into the mix."[194] Dumont's focus is on violence as a seemingly irreversible fact of humanity and contemporary life, even for a small French village largely inhabited by rural farmers, clerics, and a small community of immigrants. The latter includes Mohamed (Baptiste Anquez), an Arab-European teenage boy met with racist hostility from Quinquin (Alane Delhaye), an adolescent boy [figure 14], and his group of friends, who are native white French and who hurl racial epithets at Mohamed whenever they see him. Quinquin appears to have an intellectual disability of some kind. Also, his older brother is severely mentally handicapped and requires care and attention on their farm. These are factors no one in the film acknowledges, and they are not addressed in relation to how racism and intellectual disability interact. As the adolescent boys intensify their vitriol when they witness Mohamed speaking with white teenage girls, their hateful response implies they feel sexually threatened. By the film's final chapter, these games of hate and chance prompt Mohamed to take up arms inside an apartment tower, shooting at the ground below while shouting "Allahu Akbar!"

As Dumont states, the mix up between "the grotesque, the comedic, and the absolutely serious" finds its most direct expression in this sequence, which I will analyze

[194] Elliott, "Bruno Dumont," 2015.

in a later section. For now, I want to highlight how Dumont's use of stereotyping, both of the rural, racist adolescents and the radical, religious Arab, should not be read as a thoughtless caricature, but as a form of spectacle that recognizes difference as the basis for many contemporary social conversations. Therefore, the violence within *P'tit Quinquin* is both actual, in the form of tragedy and bloodshed, but also self-reflexively textual, in its irreverent upending of social realism. Alluding to this aesthetic framework, Dumont says, "That's what the film is about—it's borderline immoral, reactionary, [in]decorous. Some people are shocked…I was quite surprised, because the film is wacky enough to avoid that kind of ambiguity. But some people disagree. Because the ambiguity is violent; it's not clear."[195] This chapter clarifies how each of these films utilize humor as an alternative to social realism by asking the spectator to grapple with the contradictions inherent to contemporary life. To be laughing one moment and confronted with shocking violence in the next has become commonplace in France and elsewhere, and so the film inherently embodies that feeling.

Grotesque, Art Cinema, and Migrancy

Aki Kaurismäki's films have been extensively analyzed and routinely catalogued under the heading of "deadpan," which critics and scholars describe as a "signature" aesthetic style that defines, primarily, the acting style and comedic aspects of his films.[196] The aim of "Kaurismäki's deadpan mannerist style," as these accounts have it, is to help

[195] Elliott, "Bruno Dumont," 2015.

[196] The two major texts on Kaurismäki's films are Andrew Nestingen, *The Cinema of Aki Kaurismäki* (New York: Wallflower Press), 2013, and *The Films of Aki Kaurismäki* ed. Thomas Austin (New York: Bloomsbury), 2018.

the filmmaker tap "into a rich melancholic vein of compassion and tenderness."[197] Deadpan is also thought to characterize the "minimalist point of view" of Kaurismäki's camera and a relatively homogenous visual style.[198] However, this characterization unsatisfactorily accounts for Kaurismäki's concern for the geopolitical arrangements of contemporary Europe; as Thomas Elsaesser argues, Kaurismäki's cinema is less about stylized comedy than creating works that, in the twenty-first century, offer "a serious, comic, and subversive contribution to the debate about the nature of European governmentality in times when there is little room for solidarity or kinship loyalty."[199] Serious, comic, and subversive—such is a tripartite formation one more typically associates with aesthetic styles related to the grotesque. In Kaurismäki's films, the grotesque is far less about having bodies splayed open than distorting reality from a minimalist, often comedic perspective. It's a space where the politics of the present day are treated with ridicule: in short, it expresses "the gap between imagined possibility and reality."[200]

Le Havre depicts the quotidian routine of Marcel Marx (André Wilms), a shoeshiner working the docks of the eponymous city. He works with Chang (Quoc Dung Nguyen), a Vietnamese immigrant with a Chinese passport, has a wife named Arletty (Kati Outinen), and frequents a local pub, run by Claire (Elina Salo). The narrative hinges on the arrival of a misdirected crate from Gabon, a country along the Atlantic coast of

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[197] Gavin Smith, "21st Century Blues," *Film Comment* 38, no. 4 (2002): 67.
[198] Jaakko Seppälä, "Doing a Lot with a Little: The Camera's Minimalist Point of View in the Films of Aki Kaurismäki," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 6, no. 1 (2016): 5-23.
[199] Thomas Elsaesser, "Hitting Bottom: Aki Kaurismäki and the Abject Subject," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 1, no. 1 (2010): 105.
[200] Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 17.

Central Africa, which contains numerous refugees, including Idrissa (Blondin Miguel), a teenager, who successfully flees the crate to evade capture by police. When Marcel happens upon him during a lunch break, he hatches a plan to give Idrissa shelter at his home, teach him the ropes of his shoeshining business, stay out of sight of the police captain Monet, and, eventually, help him hop another boat to London, where he hopes to meet up with his mother.

In *Le Havre*, Kaurismäki's representation of the contemporary "problem" of African refugees landing in Europe addresses the gap between imagined possibility and reality, particularly as the film makes increasingly clear its imagination of safety, community, and goodwill. These traits come into being within Kaurismäki's world, and in that sense they are grotesque: they imagine (fantasize about, even) an outcome in which those in danger are kept out of harm's way. The citizens of Le Havre, almost all white, are themselves marginal figures as presented by Kaurismäki. They congregate in dive bars, have little by way of money or resources, and work menial jobs. And yet, within the film, their lives are treated entirely with affection. Unlike Pedro Costa, who burrows into his subjects' trauma through expressionistic sequences that straddle reality and dream, Kaurismäki acknowledges this potential for pain and suffering by having situations that *could* turn violent or tragic, but they never do. As is consistent with Kaurismäki's reticence to depict refugees in "filthy" conditions, the film resists realist inclinations by approaching them and then diverging into bits of humor or sight gags. Compare this with *La Promesse*, discussed in chapter one, in which the Dardennes stage their film entirely according to its capacity to visualize "trash": that is, a realist depiction of what it looks like to live at the margins of a major European city. Both films take up

the subject of African migration to Europe, but their aesthetic approaches are largely opposed.

Le Havre frames African migration to Europe within Kaurismäki's intertextual aesthetic practices (or "big cooking pot," as he puts it). The focus here is on looking to contemporary art cinema for its challenges to the dominant perceptions of cinema as sociology; rather than analyzing films for their sociological value, my discussion interrogates the issue of migration through the lens of film history and theory.

My analysis in the next section contextualizes *Le Havre* in relation to its intertextual forbears in order to establish how the film constitutes a critical response to the racial unconscious of both poetic realism and film noir. The following section then addresses Kaurismäki's use of humor and the grotesque, which traces *Le Havre* to the cinematic lineage of Federico Fellini, and in particular the figure of the clown. In the conclusion, I synthesize these two seemingly disparate approaches to offer a revised conception of how intertextuality speaks to notions of commonwealth as Europe continues to grapple with its insufficient social and political response to having, as the late Zygmunt Bauman phrases it, "strangers at our door."[201]

Intertextuality in *Le Havre*

Le Havre draws on the template of film noir in its classical contexts, which includes films that have been more typically called poetic realism. Accordingly, the film evokes film noir's "racial unconscious," a relationship analyzed by Julian Murphet.[202]

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[201] Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door* (Malden: Polity), 2016.
[202] Julian Murphet, "Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious," *Screen* 39, no. 1 (1998): 22.

Despite recognizing *Le Havre*'s references to prior films and modes of cinema, no English-language essay has contextualized the film's relationship to the colonialist and racist dimension of either film noir or poetic realism. These are useful links for how they reveal the underside of social life; film noir and poetic realism are seldom concerned with racism as their explicit subjects, and yet, drawing forth marginal characters or hidden spaces from those films, one can see the racist assumptions of the time.[203] This section further examines why *Le Havre* takes the template of noir to stage a refugee narrative that engages African migrancy as an urgent contemporary subject.

Le Havre is a French-Finnish-German co-production that is typical of Kaurismäki's minimalist blending of humor, seriousness, and critique. Rather than search the film's *mise-en-scène* for the archetypal characters of noir[204], I look to the chronotope of noir to explore its racist infrastructure as specified by Murphet. For Murphet, noir is an allegorical expression of white male social anxieties. However, contrary to the significant amount of analysis that places the working woman, or femme fatale, as the personification of white male anxiety, Murphet theorizes that the women of noir are actually a placeholder or "surrogate figures for African Americans, whose growing presence on the streets of New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago was a far more likely source of the 'fear and hatred' that is spread over the noir chronotope like an

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[203] Laura Rascaroli focuses on the film in its relation to the post-1989 supranational project and conceptualizes the film's focus on "the major and the minor," drawing from Deleuze and Guattari., "Becoming-Minor in a Sustainable Europe: the contemporary European art film and Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre*," *Screen* 54, no. 3 (2013): 325.

[204] Though one need not look far within the film to see a character named Arletty, which is a direct reference to the actress of the same name who starred in two canonical works of poetic realism: *Hotel du Nord* (Marcel Carné, France, 1938) and *Le Jour Se Leve* (Marcel Carné, France, 1939).

impenetrable fog."[205] Murphet draws from Étienne Balibar's claim that "sexism and racism are so intimately connected as to be inextricable" to support this association.[206] This connection allows Murphet to draw a number of conclusions that are essential for comprehending *Le Havre*. Murphet explains how the term "film noir," coined by French film critics, emerged at a time when a "select group of marginal U.S. filmmakers burrowed unselfconsciously into the truth content of existentialism's incipient relation to racial politics, which in the history of France at the time was sharpened by the process of decolonization and the emerging Algerian crisis."[207] The French-Algerian context is key here because it conveys noir's overdetermined status, with its very name relating to the "existential void [of] lonely streets," which depend "upon a repression of the black quotidian sphere."[208] That repression extends to absence or marginality; in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, U.S., 1944), Black characters work as garage attendants or elevator operators at night. They interact with the main character as he comes and goes, trying to cover his tracks. They are affiliated with the night; accordingly, the "dark" streets are themselves chronotopes of an unconscious fear for something other than the actual spaces of the city. This fear is given diegetic expression in what Vivian Sobchack calls "lounge time," which "emerges as a threat to the traditional function, continuity, contiguity, and security of domestic space and time."[209] Although Sobchack's essay does

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[205] Murphet, "Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious," 27.
[206] Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1991), 27.
[207] Murphet, 22-23.
[208] Murphet, Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious, 30.
[209] Vivian Sobchack, "Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: California University Press, 1998), 157.

not discuss the racial implications addressed by Murphet, it recognizes noir's expression of an "idle moment in our cultural history." These points are meant to suggest noir and poetic realism as tropes of feeling and anxiety; while they overlap in significant stylistic ways, there are also significant differences between France and the U.S. regarding their histories of racism and how they perceive, even, definitions of "blackness."[210]

The eponymous setting of Kaurismaki's film, a port city in the Normandy region of France, has a specific film historical lineage associated with poetic realism, particularly *Port of Shadows* (Marcel Carné, France, 1938), which follows Jean (Jean Gabin), an army deserter, as he hitches a ride into Le Havre, where violence and corruption await, all of which culminates in both his committing a murder and, subsequently, being murdered himself. That these narrative events could be easily found in noir suggests an overlap between noir and poetic realism, something Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland have addressed by explaining how the "postwar embrace of American noir at the expense of the French tradition was less about making convincing distinctions between national cinemas that had always been international" than it was "part of a broader European reckoning with the postwar global geopolitical and economic order, presided over by America."[211] I contend that the French noirs of the late '30s can be understood as a pretext, particularly in relation to the racial unconscious and France's

[210] A comprehensive book on this subject is the edited collection *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, eds. Tricia Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Tyler Stovall (Durham: Duke University Press), 2012. As the introduction to the collection states, even as "new waves of scholarship and anti-racism associations focused specifically on "les Noirs" in France continue to emerge, the co-existence of the in/visibility of blackness as a conspicuous body antithetical to a universal norm *and* as something simply unreadable as universal in dynamics of race and racism is far from a full excavation specific to 'Afro/Black Europeans' in France and Europe" (2). Put another way, the history of blackness in France remains unfinished and necessitates further work.
[211] Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland, *Film Noir: Hard-Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 19.

geopolitical relationship with Africa, to grasping the nature of *Le Havre*'s own composition.

The era of globalization produces only technological and bureaucratic malfunction in *Le Havre.* In fact, one of the film's primary critiques relates to the treatment of perceived criminals by police. This theme is also relevant in *Pépé Le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, France, 1937), a film which contains the most explicit relationship between the white noir protagonist and Africa. In *Le Havre*, before police officers find Idrissa in the crate, Monet and several officers look through delivery schedules and determine the freight was bound for London but ended up in France because of "a computer error." This technological flub provides a mirror image for the way documents and legal badges are both displayed within the *mise-en-scène* and alluded to via dialogue throughout the film. Whenever Monet's authority comes under question, he flashes his badge for either admittance to a potential crime scene or as an appeal to his position of authority on the police force. While such an appeal is commonplace in films and literature concerning police officers, it takes on a secondary level of meaning in relation to migrants and refugees, whose lack of property and legal documents renders them marginal figures. *Le Havre* further suggests their marginality by placing indications of it within the *mise-en-scène*, and often at the margins or in the background of the frame. In Claire's bar, a document, prominently framed and displayed on a back wall, reads: "Protection of Minors: Prevention of Public Drunkenness." The irony is clear: the law "protects" minors in one sense, but it will dispense with such protection for non-citizens. This happens explicitly when a French police officer raises his assault rifle to take aim at Idrissa while he flees capture. Monet steps in and makes the officer lower his weapon,

saying to him: “Are you mad? It’s a child.” Kaurismäki shows that lawmaking, under neoliberal governance, prioritizes legal outcomes over human well-being. “Madness,” as it were, actually characterizes an approach to law enforcement that treats human beings with less regard than both property and symbolic pieces of paper.

The focus on the ineptitude of police and law enforcement in *Le Havre* is itself an allusion to *Pépé Le Moko*. In the film, Jean Gabin plays the eponymous character, a criminal who maneuvers through the Casbah quarter of Algiers to evade police detection. In the end, he commits suicide rather than going to jail as he watches his lover’s boat depart for France. As Janice Morgan explains, blame for the end result should not be placed on the colonial subjects who entrap Pépé, but on the inept colonial police: they “win,” despite the film exposing their “ineptitude and lack of understanding.” Indeed, it’s their careless and indifferent treatment of Pépé that results in his death, yet they will take responsibility for his capture.[212] Fay and Nieland explain, in turn, how this kind of reading helps explore what they term a “colonial unconscious”: this would explain how the “tragedy of Pépé, a white Frenchman, is to be treated more like a colonial Algerian by his own government.”[213] The film makes explicit that the existential white male fear under the conditions of colonialism is that he may be reduced to the status of the colonial Other.[214] The change in *Le Havre* to having Idrissa escape death in the end inscribes Kaurismäki’s faith in the possibility of well-being through the efforts of a collective; it’s

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[212] Janice Morgan, “In the Labyrinth: Masculine Subjectivity, Expatriation, and Colonialism in *Pépé le Moko*,” *The French Review* 67, no. 4 (1994): 646.
[213] Fay and Nieland, *Film Noir*, 168.
[214] These are anxieties in French culture that would become more apparent in the era of decolonization, as Kirsten Ross discusses in her book, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 1995.

Marcel's egalitarian community that helps Idrissa escape, but it's also Monet, the inspector, who finally has a chance to capture Idrissa but lets him go. *Le Havre* redresses the racial unconscious of noir by offering a hopeful vision of the local community, who rallies around the migrant subject rather than abandoning him. The community works to help create a heterogeneous space predicated on, not a "lack of understanding," as in *Pépé*, but a renewed form of compassion.

As Murphet acknowledges, the protagonist of noir is "little more than a characterological vehicle who steers" the viewer through a film's spaces.[215] The same could be said of Marcel Marx, whose ramshackle approach to work, neither hired by an employer nor running a brick-and-mortar operation, makes him a wanderer with idle time, moving throughout Le Havre's various spaces in search of work. Despite his suggestive name, he spouts no political ideology. He frequents local vendors and social spaces, primarily at La Moderne, a local bar that, per Sobchack, functions as the source for Marcel's "lounge time."[216] However, La Moderne is no sinkhole for wayward city dwellers; its occupants are seen as integral members of a space approximating an egalitarian community that, despite the sense of its homogeneity, is actually informed by European population mobility in the twenty-first century. In an early scene, the camera surveys several, ongoing conversations in static medium shots, each of which involves multiple patrons discussing different facets of culture and work. Marcel sits at the bar and chats with Claire about his marriage. Marcel explains how Arletty is "protective," and "couldn't watch me lie in the gutter. A man in his prime." Claire responds: "Foreigners

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[215] Murphet, "Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious," 25.
[216] This space is comparable to Panama's Bar in *Port of Shadows*, only at La Moderne, there are no characters looking to take advantage of others.

see bums in a considerably more romantic light than we French." Claire's remark proves puzzling if the viewer is not familiar with the metatextual implication here; actress Kati Outinen, who plays Arletty, is Finnish, though the same national status or origin is never explicitly granted to her character within the diegesis of *Le Havre*.

Moreover, her name, Arletty, refers to the prominent French actress of the same name in the late '30s, who starred in poetic realist works, such as *Hotel du Nord* (Marcel Carné, France, 1938) and *Le Jour Se Leve* (Carné, France, 1939). In fact, Outinen, just like Kaurismäki, does not speak French; in the film, she reads her lines phonetically. Thus, Claire's suggestion is not only a cineliterate reference to Outinen, but to Kaurismäki himself, whose *La Vie de Bohème* (Finland/France/Sweden/Germany, 1992*)* can be read as casting bums (or, in this case, struggling artists) into a romantic light. One of those characters was Marcel Marx, the same character in *Le Havre*, also played by André Wilms. The entire exchange could be read merely as a wink for knowing viewers, but leaving the analysis there would overlook the subtextual commentary on both Finland and France giving over parts of their national identities to Europe and of relinquishing some national autonomy in favor of collective cooperation within the EU. The intertextual aspects of *Le Havre* gradually reveal a layering of transnational dimensions that can be read to stretch across France and Gabon, across Europe and Africa, and across Europe itself. These formations interrogate how the notion of a border, whether in the form of a body or geography, and the uncertain attempt of its undoing, informs the film's subtext of reading the plight of another person, or another nation, as simultaneously the plight of oneself. One could call this empathy, but that term implies emotion rather than action. It's active compassion, then, that Kaurismäki pursues as a narrative course.

Without stretching the relationship too far, Kaurismäki and Costa, discussed in the previous chapter, share an interest in understanding their own aims as filmmakers in relation to the people they depict. In each case, the filmmakers have interwoven aspects of themselves—their own nationality, their own willingness to travel to make films, their own sense of working at the margins of a global film industry—into films that also reflect the minor conditions, relatively speaking, of their own careers.

The Clown, the Grotesque

Another intertextual reference point in *Le Havre*, related to its use of the grotesque, pertains to the figure of the clown. This reference point is most directly articulated in a dialogue-free opening sequence in which Marcel and Chang solicit customers. Behind them, the chipped paint of the Le Havre station offsets an oddity on the walls: a vibrant poster for "Cirque Sabrina Fratellini," presumably a nearby circus performer. A subsequent shot shows the men looking off toward an approaching figure, billed in the end credits as "The Italian," who sits on Marcel's stool as a paying customer for a shoeshine. Chang's eyeline notices The Italian has a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist. As Marcel finishes his job, a pair of men in trench coats, hats, and sunglasses encircle the scene. The camera cuts into their blank, expressionless faces. As The Italian pays and exits the frame, a succession of sounds (tires screeching, a woman screaming, several gunshots) announces his probable death. Marcel plots his escape from the murder scene, and elects to take the evening train, remarking that money "moves in the shadows."

This curious pre-credits sequence, seemingly straightforward in its light tone and sonic slapstick, may be read as a cinephilic address of the grotesque as an alternative to realism. The grotesque is inherent to the figure of the clown, who in European art cinema is most readily affiliated with the films of Federico Fellini. According to André Bazin, after Fellini finished *Nights of Cabiria* (Italy, 1957) he sought "the other side of things" and set out in his subsequent films to find a new "realism of appearances."[217] The "Cirque Sabrina Fratellini" poster in *Le Havre* offers the first indication of an allusion to the grotesque turn in Fellini's career, which becomes even more overt in a later shot where one of the trench-coated henchman fronts a larger poster promoting a 'Western Circus," with a smiling clown prominently featured underneath. In fact, the clown on the poster bears a remarkable resemblance to one of the figures in *The Clowns* (Fellini, Italy, 1970) in both make-up and expression. The poster, contrary to its promise of joyous spectacle, is directly juxtaposed with a figure of impending death in the silent assassin, whose image surely calls to mind for knowing viewers the wardrobe and stoic expression of Alain Delon in *Le Samuraï* (Jean-Pierre Melville, France, 1967). A later iteration of French noir in *Le Samurai* meets what David Lavery calls the "Fellini-Grotesque," which comprises a reversal of the "bodily canon" and a return to the so-called "pre-modern" fascination with the body as a site of transgression.[218] While *Le Havre* omits the more scatological elements that can be found in *Fellini's Roma* (Italy, 1970) and *Amarcord* (Italy, 1974), the contorting of cinematic periods and references comprises a similar gesture directed at the corpus of European art cinema as it visually demarcates the notion

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[217] André Bazin, "*Cabiria*: The Voyage to the End of Neorealism," in *What is Cinema Vol. II*, ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 88.
[218] David Lavery, "'News from Africa:' Fellini-Grotesque," *Post Script* 9, no. 1-2 (1989/1990): 82-98.

of citizenry and humor. Kaurismäki's irreverence here is meant to draw on the possibility of progress without bodily deformation—without having to offer up a martyr or keep its refugee narrative in the shadows. The clown, for Kaurismäki, is not a figure that invites violence or transgression, per se, but one that represents a kinder form of critique. As Thomas Austin remarks in the introduction to his edited collection about Kaurismäki, the filmmaker has, in interviews, oscillated between being a "gloomy clown and [a] highly competent cinephile."[219] These are also the major aesthetic reference points for *Le Havre*. Marcel Marx could be called a clown, at times a gloomy one, but in the end he assists Idrissa in getting to London. Despite Marcel's often sullen demeanor, he functions as an agent of understanding and action.

In conjunction with establishing the neighborhood's egalitarianism, *Le Havre* is aware of how this quality must remain open to integrating the bodies of subjects who, without their support, would be under the legal and administrative control of the nation-state, or worse. In fact, Marcel's urgency in helping Idrissa to set sail for London occurs only after he visits the detention camp in Calais, which Kaurismäki shoots without ascribing its prisoners, who appear to be of varying ethnicities, a particular quality or personality. Neither meant as objects of pity nor outwardly hostile to Marcel's presence, these faces, just like those of Gabonese refugees and residents of Le Havre before them, are treated as similar, but not interchangeable. The vanishing past of Le Havre meets the new future of Europe in these moments. Idrissa is not only refugee; he's made into a new version of Gabin's gangster archetype. Whereas the former died because of an inept

[219] Thomas Austin, "Introduction," in *The Films of Aki Kaurismäki*, ed. Thomas Austin (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 7.

police force, Idrissa moves on because of an emergent compassion within Le Havre. In accordance with Kaurismäki's proclivity for wordplay, *Gabin* is embodied by a refugee from *Gabon*, and so the possibility of a new Gabin for European cinema is passed onto Idrissa: in contemporary Europe, he is the unwilling, rather than the unwitting, outlaw. Yet *Le Havre* also positions Idrissa as the inheritor of Marcel's business practice and even as the replacement for Marcel, the clown, in this new Europe. The future of Europe rests in Idrissa's hands. Thus, Idrissa is both gangster and clown: he's the intertextual product of Kaurismäki's own cineliterate, gently grotesque form of humanism.

P'tit Quinquin: Grotesque French Nationalism

Though Bruno Dumont's films have premiered and shown at numerous international film festivals, they remain relatively unattended to within English-language scholarship. As of 2021, there has yet to be a monograph or edited collection devoted to his filmography (despite spanning twelve feature films across more than two decades), which is something that cannot be said of Kaurismäki, who has several.[220] Dumont's first film, *La Vie de Jésus* (France, 1997), won the Prix Jean Vigo, which is given annually to a French film made by a young director for its stylistic originality. His follow-up film, *L'Humanité* (France, 1999), won the Grand Prix in competition at the Cannes Film Festival, which is the second highest prize. Dumont is by no means an obscure figure,

[220] These are Andrew Nestingen, *The Cinema of Aki Kaurismäki* (New York: Wallflower Press), 2013, and *The Films of Aki Kaurismäki*, ed. Thomas Austin (New York: Bloomsbury), 2018. A short book, titled *Bruno Dumont*, was released in 2001 from the independent press Dis Voir, but this book is limited to reviews, commentary, and interviews about Dumont's first two features.

and yet his films are typically discussed as fitting into the often difficult categories of the unwatchable and the austere.[221]

Broadly speaking, Dumont's films have been analyzed by film scholars along two trajectories: religion and philosophy, as well as landscape in relation to them.[222] I will, however, focus on the aesthetic traits pertaining to the grotesque that make *P'tit Quinquin* of note in relation to larger discussions of space, representation, and realism. *P'tit Quinquin* aired in France as a four-part miniseries, but it was distributed and screened elsewhere as a three-and-a-half-hour feature in four chapters, each preceded by a title card. As Nikolaj Lübecker explains, one of the most difficult tasks in viewing *P'tit Quinquin*, aside from the question of why Dumont opted to make a film for television, is making sense of its invitation to laugh (at? with?) the film's events, which concern the probability of a serial killer roaming the French countryside. Lübecker suggests the "stifled laugh" as a possible means to understand the effect, as it "puts the spectator's cognitive and emotive faculties under pressure."[223] The spectator becomes caught between two states, of wanting or feeling the compulsion to laugh, but remains uncertain of whether such laughter is warranted or appropriate. The film is set along the northern French coast, where most of Dumont's work takes place. Like in *Le Havre*, the location is removed from major metropolitan areas of France and confined to the provincial

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[221] Chelsea Burks and Lisa Coulthard, "Divine Comedies: Post-Theology and Laughter in the Films of Bruno Dumont." *Film-Philosophy* 23. no. 3 (2019): 247. Dumont has also been aligned with the *cinéma du corps*, which is Tim Palmer's term for "France's most experimental and textually fraught art cinema." *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 11.

[222] James S. Williams speaks informatively to these relationships in Dumont's films in *Space and Being in Contemporary French Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 2015.

[223] Nikolaj Lübecker, "Bruno Dumont's Comic Look: *P'tit Quinquin* (2014) as a Social and Ethical Intervention," *Studies in French Cinema* 18, no. 1 (2018): 89.

townspeople who populate the countryside. The first major plot point concerns the discovery of a dead cow, which contains the headless body of a woman. As Inspector Van der Weyden (Bernard Pruvost, a non-professional actor) and his partner, Lieutenant Carpentier, investigate, the spectator is gradually made aware of Van der Weyden's unusual behavioral tics: he spasms as he stands and speaks in such a way that makes him raise his bushy eyebrows after every sentence. Even when he isn't asking a question, he gesticulates as if he is. When the pair are called to investigate the scene and discover that someone has written "the human beast" in blood, Carpentier considers it: "It's Zola, Capt'n." Van der Weyden pauses, then says: 'We're not here to philosophize, Carpentier." The stifled laugh rears its head; the spectator is watching the aftermath of a horrific crime scene, but the bumbling detectives, incompetent and inattentive to detail, can't make heads or tails of it. Is this funny?

By framing the exchange in relation to other films, such as *The Pink Panther* (Blake Edwards, U.S., 1963), I understand Van der Weyden as an update of Inspector Clouseau, played by Peter Sellers. Sellers, well known by that point as one of cinema's great clowns, would put audiences at ease even if he were investigating a heinous crime. Laughs need not be stifled, and nor does the spectator feel any pressure on their cognitive and emotive faculties. The spectator laughs without hesitation because the genre and the star allow it to happen. With Pruvost, an actor that the spectator has never seen before, nothing more than the scene at hand offers a clue as to its tone and intention. The spectator might want to laugh, but then the spectator also knows this is a Bruno Dumont film, and things historically don't end well in them. People die, lives are ruined, and the film's events often rip up the social fabric of the community.

(figure 15)

Let's step back for a moment and consider a scene from *La Vie de Jésus*, which involves a group of white French twentysomethings sitting in a café and directing racist behavior and slurs at a family of North African immigrants. When one of the white men hears the father of the immigrant family speaking behind him, he leans into the table and speaks gibberish, but in way that mimics the cadence of Arabic. The others begin doing the same, taking turns and laughing. Dumont shoots the sequence in tight, static shots that cut between the racists. Finally, one of the men says, "Fuck your mother, you dirty Arab," but in a manner that remains consistent with the previous behavior. That is, the epithet isn't shouted or demonstrative: it's directed away from the immigrant table, as the man ducks his head down and peeks at the nearby table. As the sequence now cuts to the family, the son, who is the approximate age of the men, is being calmly restrained by his father. It's unclear if the family speaks French or understands the specificity of the epithets, but it's clear, from how Dumont cuts into a close shot of the father's face, that the idea of the aggression is understood. When Freddy—the film's protagonist—says,

"Shut up, towel heads," in a similar manner as his friend, the father instructs his family to leave [figure 15].

The sequence could seem straightforward in its construction as a representation of racist hostility. What troubles this reading, though, is that Freddy and his friends are, like Quinquin, intellectually disabled, though the extent of their disability is something the film never addresses. The spectator knows that Freddy has epilepsy, but that cannot account for his hostility. These are, at their core, matters of empathy: to whom are our emotions tied in the scene? If the table of white French people were of obvious mental ability, the circumstances would be clear-cut and without complication: they would be obvious racists. One way to process the dynamics of the film, then, is as a critique of empathy, which often asks that the spectator place themselves in the position of another person. Placing ourselves in the mind of a clear-cut racist prompts empathy for the victim and antipathy for the aggressor. When, however, one adds a wrinkle such as intellectual disability to the equation, empathy becomes a complicated proposition. Psychologist Paul Bloom argues that empathy, as an attempt to feel another's pain, is "morally corrosive" for how it clouds judgment; he prefers "reason and cost-benefit analysis," which draws on a more "distanced compassion and kindness."[224] Recall Dumont saying, earlier in the chapter, how moral questions are "irrelevant" to his project, and that a film should go "beyond good and evil." One way to comprehend Dumont's going beyond, then, is by how he integrates aesthetic and narrative elements into his films that make moral

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[224] Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 39.

readings difficult; in short, they foreclose the possibility of empathy by opting more for a grotesque rather than realist expression of social decay.

As with the migrant narrative of *Le Havre*, in Dumont's films there is a consistent depiction of the difficulties inherent to assimilation with a particular focus on how racism impedes that process. In addition, characters like Freddy and Quinquin, because of their evident mental and physical disabilities, struggle to navigate their own assimilation into a new France in a manner that creates a useful textual parallel between the two. If the tragic dimension of *Pépé Le Moko* was the title character's fall from the status of a Frenchman to being treated like a colonized Algerian subject by his own government, in Dumont's films a similar idea persists in the form of contemporary French nationalism. That is, the antagonistic racism on behalf of native-born French toward those trying to assimilate is itself a matter of failed assimilation. The native French have not assimilated to the reality of an increasingly ethnically and racially diverse nation. In *P'tit Quinquin*, the eponymous character and his friends, who are at least ten years younger than the characters in *La Vie de Jésus*, also torment a peer of Arabic descent named Mohamed, using racial epithets and chasing him on their bikes. By using adolescents rather than adults to spout racist language, Dumont makes the circumstances even harder to navigate in terms of how to process the events at hand.

Such circumstances of racism directed at North African migrants seems especially relevant to France, where, as explained by Liz Fekete, a "monocultural approach has long been national ideology…France is a country that does not accept that it has ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities, as evidenced by its reservation to Article 27 (minority

rights) on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."[225] For Dumont to place this monocultural approach in the hands and mouths of intellectually disabled characters epitomizes how his work troubles realism—and its conventional reliance on clear moral and ethical perspectives. The films ask the spectator to process assimilation as *both* a political and aesthetic process: in short, the means of depicting issues of contemporary geopolitics necessitates forms of filmmaking that can rise to the challenge by thinking through, or beyond, realism.

In the light of how French nationalism has sought to retain a monoculture, it's clear that Dumont's refusal of empathy and an easily configured consideration of assimilation gestures toward the grotesque. In one sense, this is a specifically postcolonial grotesque, concerned with a "postcolonial crisis of identity," which relates to, among other factors, "a valid and active sense of self…[that] may have been destroyed by cultural denigration."[226] The postcolonial grotesque addresses these disparities and imbalances of power by redefining space and shifting perceptions of spatial concepts like center and periphery; as Edwards and Graulund write, "In the postcolonial context, grotesquerie can highlight 'difference' by identifying old and new spaces of centrality and normalcy, if only to transgress the boundaries that have been established by the forces of a colonial power."[227] If nation-making is a political and aesthetic process, then

[225] Liz Fekete, *Europe's Fault Lines: Racism and the Rise of the Right* (New York: Verso, 2018), 69-70. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966 entry into force 23 March 1976.
https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx#:~:text=Article%2027,to%20use%20their%20own%20language
[226] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 8-9.
[227] Edwards and Graulund, *Grotesque*, 124.

the body is synonymous with that process, and its physical state attends directly to it. Physicality can help explain why Dumont consistently works with intellectually disabled, non-professional actors. Their disabilities often marginalize them in society, and so their bodies, like those of immigrants, become the primary site on which Europe must seek to comprehend its ever-evolving identity.

Dumont's aesthetic approach, then, dispenses with matters of morality that would explain narrative events, sidelines empathy as a dominant trait, and opts for sequences of stifled laughter as an operative means of structuring conflict. Consider the sequence near the end of *P'tit Quinquin*, in which Mohamed has secluded himself in a tower with a gun. The chapter, titled "…Allah Akbar!" stages an immediate encounter with the Arabic language that the white men in *La Vie de Jésus* mocked.[228] In fact, as Khaled A. Beydoun explains, the phrase "Allahu Akbar" (and even the Arabic language as a whole) has become synonymous in the eyes of right-wing nationalists with Islamophobia and terrorism.[229] The words carry vastly different meanings based on who perceives or hears them. Context is key, and here the signs are clear: the excessive body in *P'tit Quinquin* is the nationalist subject who refuses to acknowledge reality, i.e. France's rejection of Article 27 on Minority Rights, and the changing ethnic and cultural demographics of the nation. The white native French become excessive *from within*. The grotesque is French nationalism: it eats at the political and aesthetic infrastructure. It's precisely this gnawing,

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[228] On the Region A Blu-ray release of *P'tit Quinquin* from Kino Lorber, the subtitles spell the phrase as "Allah Akbar," while the European spelling is more typically "Allahu Akbar."

[229] Khaled A. Beydoun, "Opinion: The Perils of Saying 'Allahu Akbar' in Public," *The Washington Post*. August 25, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/08/25/the-perils-of-saying-allahu-akbar-in-public/

this irrational demanding that the body-as-state remain monocultural and self-contained, that produces decay.

(figure 16)

Dumont, however, refrains from casting the film's events into binary terms by staging a sequence as one of patent absurdity that critiques both a French and Muslim perspective, with Mohamed firing shots from the tower with the French flag draped over an open window [figure 16]. The boy's violent actions are obviously excessive, and they're tied to religious dogma. As Van der Weyden and Carpentier approach, Mohamed fires, yelling, "Allah Akbar! Shame on the French!" To this, Van der Weyden says: "Nutcase! The kid's gone ballistic." In each case, both Mohamed's and Van der Weyden's, the spoken words denounce an idea of the other's perceived perspective without attempting any form of rational compassion or distance from their own subject position. This is far less excusable for Van der Weyden, who doesn't merely lack empathy—he lacks all consideration for context, procedure, and decorum. He is, incidentally, Kaurismäki's worst nightmare: a clown whose behavior results in violence, misunderstanding, and death. Considering the aggressor is a teenage boy, Van der

Weyden's response is especially grotesque in its excessive unwillingness to approach the conditions with the calm of a negotiator, or at least detachment from his own ideas of what constitutes mental stability. When Carpentier suggests the boy might be lashing out over his father's death, Van der Weyden responds with a detached, analytical tone, but his actual words demonstrate nothing of the sort: "No way, you crazy? His homeland, France...he just can't stomach it. We didn't accept him, so he went berserk. Then they find religion, Islam, and all that…it's a lot for kids like that. They go berserk and they end up doing this. And what he's doing now, it's beyond comprehension. That's it." Despite claiming earlier to Carpentier that "We're not here to philosophize," Van der Weyden offers an absurdly baseless psychological reading of Mohamed that displays intense levels of his racist unconscious and also evinces a clear allegiance to the terms of French nationalism. That Van der Weyden rolls across the ground for cover shortly thereafter in a manner consistent with a slapstick comedy invites laughter from the spectator, but it's entirely incongruent with the previous diagnosis and prevailing circumstances. Not only is the laughter stifled in this instance: it might be consciously met with scorn by the spectator. Even though what's on the screen invites the spectator to laugh, the film offers it facetiously: if one laughs, one does so purely at the character's ungraceful action out of context. In short, the sequence challenges the spectator to reckon with their cognitive and emotive faculties at not only the level of meaning, but also the possible need to reach a conclusion that could dispense with ambiguity through empathy. At the end of the sequence, after Van der Weyden carries Mohamed's body out of the tower (the boy has committed suicide off-screen), both the inspector and his lieutenant step into frame for a prolonged two-shot, in which neither of them speaks, before they

both offer the equivalent of a facial shrug and walk back to their police car. While one could see this as a form of closure in that nothing is funny now, the spectator is still in the presence of our bumbling detective and his unusual facial gestures. Comedy has not so much been eradicated by a pendulum swing—it has been forestalled by obviously tragic circumstances. That *P'tit Quinquin* leaves the space to laugh, though, indicates its worldview of the grotesque: even when things fall apart, the spectator still has the peculiarities of human behavior and thought to consider and, perhaps, laugh at.

One possible conclusion to reach about *P'tit Quinquin* relates to Dumont's atheism, which he has made clear, saying in a 2012 interview: "There is no God. I am an atheist. Cinema is my religion."[230] Jonathan Romney says that *P'tit Quinquin* is "a critique of fundamentalism, both Islamic and Christian," and that's essential to understanding how empathy fails to go beyond the terms of an immediate exchange that would tout tolerance as the source of spirituality and progress. Dumont, speaking with Romney, says "For me, the religious is something that hardens the soul. We need spirituality and we can find it in art, but not in religion, which simply obscures things and makes people superstitious. I can't believe we're not already done with all that."[231] Despite being in disbelief about religious fundamentalism's persistence, Dumont uses irreverent humor to think from both Islamic and Christian traditions and, at the same time, from neither of them. Kaurismäki and Dumont use varied but overlapping forms of humor and the grotesque to address contemporary racism in Europe; in doing so, they

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[230] Karen Badt. "French Director Bruno Dumont on Outside Satan: 'No God But Cinema,'" *The Huffington Post*. November 21, 2011. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/outside-satan-bruno-dumont_b_1102680
[231] Jonathan Romney, "Interview: Why France's God of Grim Made a Knockabout Clouseau-style Comedy," *The Guardian*. July 8, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jul/08/bruno-dumont-ptit-quinquin-comedy-

engage in intertextual forms of address that ask for cinematic knowledge, geography, and politics to become integral, inextricable components of an irreverent form of filmmaking.

CHAPTER VI

SPATIAL METAPHOR AND MIMESIS IN THE FILMS OF YORGOS LANTHIMOS AND ATHINA RACHEL TSANGARI

The Greek Weird Wave (GWW) is a term that has been applied to an emergent group of Greek films that challenge easy access to or readings of their meaning due to their focus on non-normative human behavior. That these films have been deemed "weird" by critics and scholars demonstrates how difference from dominant modes of filmmaking becomes a defining factor in the global cinematic marketplace, even if it's meant, as is the case here, to be more or less a moniker of affection.[232] As Rosalind Galt points out, though, this designation is problematic because it signifies an "Orientalizing" perspective, in which the films are deemed weird because they "are hard to read [and] characterized by a narrative opacity that is often understood as allegorical."[233] Opacity is attributed to films that are difficult to interpret; as in chapter three with Pedro Costa's films, this characterization emphasizes the lack of realist narrative and visual

[232] The term first appears in Steve Rose's article for *The Guardian*, "Attenberg, Dogtooth, and the Weird Wave of Greek Cinema." August 26, 2011. The term caught on in subsequent articles and reviews, and has since become synonymous with Lanthimos and Tsangari, in particular. It remains in contemporary use, as evidenced in the book by Marios Psaras, *The Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethics, Politics, and the Crisis of Meaning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2016.
[233] Rosalind Galt, "The Animal Logic of Contemporary Greek Cinema," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 58. no. 1-2 (2017): 7.

grounding, which in turn draws forth the spectator's frustration about the seeming absence of meaning.

A number of the Greek films affiliated with the GWW, however, actually *do* have something resembling a realist aesthetic that often conforms to the conventions of social realism in European cinema. Consider the opening scene of *Kinetta* (Yorgos Lanthimos, Greece, 2005), in which a man stands and stares at an overturned car. As he walks, the handheld camera moves with him, to the point that it becomes uncomfortably close; it's barely giving him the space to move. While that might sound unusual or overly stylized beyond realism, it actually mirrors the opening take of the Dardennes' *Rosetta*, in which the eponymous character frantically paces through her place of employment after having just been informed that she's being terminated. The difference between the two films rests on the question of how thoroughly spatial elaboration is narrativized. In *Rosetta*, the spectator soon learns of the character's predicament: faced with unemployment, her desperation (and, thus, the camera's claustrophobic orientation) becomes attached to narrative logic. *Kinetta*, on the other hand, offers no narrative explanation for the camera's closeness or realist perspective. The name "Kinetta" refers to a Greek seaside resort, whereas "Rosetta" refers to the film's central character. The similarity in title names should catch our eye and alert us to an ironic relationship, but so should the differences between the films. Whereas the Dardennes are concerned with subjecthood, Lanthimos deemphasizes character interiority in order to foreground place and tone.[234]

[234] A comparison in *Film Comment* in 2005 between the two films is the only recognition of this relationship that I can find, though the author stops short of asserting there is an implicit commentary on the style of *Rosetta* in *Kinetta*: "Imagine a minimalist anti-CSI with almost no dialogue, an elliptical narrative and the most vertiginous, twitchy handheld camerawork since the Dardenne Brothers' *Rosetta* and

In fact, as the yet-unnamed character not only looks at an overturned car, but then stands in a cemetery looking at a gravestone, and finally walks across a bridge, the spectator is given little more than a series of movements and actions within different spaces that receive no immediate explanation. For that matter, they mostly receive no verbal explanation at all, as the film goes more than 50 minutes without a meaningful scene of dialogue. We can see in these directorial decisions something like a parody of the dominant realist style, one that drains the diegesis of recognizable emotions or human responses. In short, the effect might be called deadpan realism.[235]

In this chapter, I examine a handful of films that utilize deadpan realism as an expression of marginality. Unlike the four previous chapters, which analyze films that are in some way concerned with the endeavors of African migrants, this chapter shifts its focus toward social outsiders or misfits who variously preoccupy themselves with bizarre reenactments of crimes, engaging in antisocial behavior while working menial jobs, or playing extended games that seem to lack a clear set of rules. Their status as outsiders is largely determined by their actions and attitude rather than their social class. Deadpan works as the subtle skewing of a realist mode in order to think about space where unclear borders between inside and outside, or center and periphery, translates into a generalized, even inarticulable feeling of displacement.

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you're in the right ballpark." Gavin Smith, "Film Comment Selects Program 2006," *Film Comment*. https://www.filmcomment.com/film-comment-selects-program-2006/

[235] Lanthimos explained the shooting style of *Kinetta* as follows: "We were trying to break away from [the commercial] aspects of filmmaking…we wanted it to be dirty…we were trying to discover what we felt was important from each scene, even if in the end you just saw a part of someone's hair." "In Conversation with Director Yorgos Lanthimos," *Kinetta*, Second Run, 2015. DVD.

Deadpan has become an integral component of what is often termed slow cinema; in fact, it is the title of the first chapter in *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action*. In that text, Ira Jaffe acknowledges that any singular definition of deadpan proves elusive; it often takes the descriptive form in criticism of "blank affect," or as a way to describe a particular feature of the film, such as dialogue or humor.[236] Just as slow cinema can be understood as a counter to fast cinema (or, at least, a cinema of conventional narrative pacing), so too does deadpan demand an opposition that it may be defined against. The emptying of gesture and emotion from the face produces blankness; where an identifiable or explicit response should exist, there is none. Deadpan must be understood in opposition to the presence of affect or emotion that would impart a distinct feeling or response. This may also be related to "unreadability," as Peter Verstraten explains. Verstraten examines "deadpan irony" in relation to contemporary Dutch films, and he explains how deadpan irony works to "confuse the viewer" by denying generic expectations.[237] Confusion, ambiguity, and uncertainty: these are the cornerstones of deadpan as it challenges taking anything at "face value" given the general minimization of facial expression in these films.

Slow cinema is a phenomenon of global cinema that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century in the works of, among others, Andy Warhol, Chantal Akerman,

[236] Ira Jaffe, *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2014), 16. Jaffe analyzes the term in relation to the films of Jim Jarmusch and Alexander Sokurov.

[237] Peter Verstraten, *Humor and Irony in Post-War Dutch Film* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 289. Ironic deadpan can further be a way to dispel the dominance of realism. Verstraten explains how *Spetters* (Paul Verhoeven, Netherlands, 1980) has evaded "the yardstick of realism" in recent years because audiences are now more familiar with Verhoeven's subsequent films and therefore see the deadpan potential in his previous film, which was taken at face value in its violence and questionable cultural politics upon release.

and Greece's own Theo Angelopoulos.[238] These films are often affiliated with long, unbroken takes that display an action (or inaction) as directly as possible. That is Tiago de Luca's understanding of it; de Luca says slow cinema constitutes the reemergence of cinematic realism because it "is steeped in the hyperbolic application of the long take, which promotes a sensuous viewing experience anchored in materiality and duration."[239] This is a Bazinian realism, for de Luca, because it largely adheres to the aesthetic terms of neorealism as conceived by Bazin in the 1940s. Emre Çaglayan disagrees with de Luca, however, saying that a distinction needs to be made between Bazinian realism and slow cinema: "Bazinian realism is invested in the objective and unfiltered representation of reality in cinema, while slow cinema recasts this mode of realism as a different, exaggerated, mannerist, and quite often distorted subjective perception of reality."[240] Despite the questionable reduction of Bazinian realism to the terms of "unfiltered representation," Çaglayan is correct that it seems necessary to distinguish slow cinema from Bazinian realism. Slow cinema is an amorphous category that often involves a subjective perception of reality, one that cannot be encompassed by an easily definable set of visual, spatial, or temporal characteristics.[241]

The Greek-produced films of Lanthimos and Athina Rachel Tsangari are ripe for analysis as a form of slow cinema, though few scholars have mentioned their films in

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[238] Recent scholarship on slow cinema makes the argument that Warhol is a progenitor of slow cinema through his "post-Romantic boredom." Kornelia Boczkowska, "Boredom Revisited, or how Andy Warhol Predated Slow Cinema," *Short Film Studies* 10, no.2 (2020): 157-162.

[239] Tiago de Luca, *Realism of the Senses in World Cinema: The Experience of Physical Reality* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 1.

[240] Emre Çaglayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema: Nostalgia, Absurdism, Boredom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 12.

[241] From the three books discussed on the subject alone, there are chapters examining the following aesthetic categories: deadpan, stillness, long shot, wait time, drift and resistance, death-drive, rebellion, nostalgia, absurdism, boredom, and drifting, among others.

relation to it.[242] Perhaps that's because the films are, in large part, tonally inconsistent with the serious and deliberate pacing of much slow cinema: the Greek films freely roam through events and sequences without a clear commitment to meaning or purpose, and they often feature characters that engage in unsettling behaviors. In this chapter, I examine this intersection between slow cinema, realism, and deadpan through two overarching traits: spatial metaphor and mimesis.

Spatial Metaphor

Greece's recent role within the geopolitics of the EU is rather unique. Speaking about "border areas," Étienne Balibar says Greece is "not marginal to the constitution of a public sphere," but rather it is "at the center…if Europe is for us first the name of an *unresolved political problem*, Greece is one of its centers…because of the current problems concentrated there."[243] Despite noting how Greece holds a marginal political status in Europe, Balibar argues for recognizing its importance to the EU. Greece will remain geographically marginal, of course, but politically minded thought can conceive of a system in which it becomes the center, the focal point of efforts to understand the complexities of European politics. Therefore, periphery becomes the center and vice versa: notions of spatial organization are malleable to the sense of their centrality at the level of "political problems." If one understands this to mean that even conceiving of Greece in relation to Europe as a whole is a problem of space, it is productive to examine

[242] The sole monograph that discusses these films at length, Marios Psaras's *The Queer Greek Weird Wave: Ethics, Politics, and the Crisis of Meaning*, makes no mention of them as being related to slow cinema.
[243] Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. by James Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 2. Emphasis original.

how Lanthimos and Tsangari represent the space of the city, its bodies, and its landscapes. These filmmakers play with visual proximity and often cast their characters into spaces where they, too, have difficulty discerning fact from fiction, center from periphery. Moreover, the settings are, in a sense, marginal: the films take place away from Athens and other urban milieus, and they are typically set in smaller, seaside towns. By evincing a fundamental investment in visualizing these spaces and these characters, the filmmakers link their investment in a deadpan realism to broader geopolitical matters.

The GWW has often been understood in relation to the 2008 global financial crisis, particularly Greece's economic downturn. In *The Guardian*, Steve Rose asked whether "the brilliantly strange films" of Lanthimos and Tsangari were "a product of Greece's economic turmoil"—a question that seemed to assume neither filmmaker had made a feature prior to 2008 that was consistent with the style of their films after it (they both had—*The Slow Business of Going* [Tsangari, Greece, 2000] and *Kinetta*).[244] In light of this, the economic crisis alone cannot work to explain what's at stake in these films.

Rather than situate these films within the logic of the nation's post-2008 economic challenges, I focus on matters of space, both within the diegesis and outside of it, as I work to show how Tsangari and Lanthimos are actively in dialogue with one another at the level of spatial metaphor. Spatial metaphor refers to how images and language connote feelings or emotions in terms of humans' experience of space. One might say, for example, that misfits or outsiders often "feel lost" because of their precarious status in the eyes of others. This is the attribution of something like an

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[244] Steve Rose, "Attenberg, Dogtooth, and the Weird Wave of Greek Cinema," *The Guardian*. August 26, 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/aug/27/attenberg-dogtooth-greece-cinema

existential uncertainty ("What should I do with my life?") to the experience of space itself and to the feeling of being out of place. Spatial metaphors visually communicate meaning where words are either absent or inadequate.

In *Attenberg* (Tsangari, Greece, 2010), the camera's closeness to certain events contrasts with its distance from others, which articulates the aesthetic tension of deadpan through unspoken spatial means. Marina (Ariane Labed) lives in the industrial, seaside Greek town of Aspra Spitia, where she works at a local steel mill. The location is less the film's outward focus than Marina's sexual awakening, though that term suggests something much more conventional than Tsangari has in mind. The opening scene involves Marina and her friend Bella (Evangelia Randou) licking each other's tongues and spitting at each other in a manner that plays up and demonstrates the film's deadpan tone. By taking a misfit like Marina as the protagonist living in a true "border area," given that it's by the sea, Tsangari confronts us with the very problem of spacing, both in terms of narrative action and place. That is, the spectator is uncomfortably close to the opening moments—a long take with the women in two shot—as they lick at each other's tongues in a detached, animal-like manner.[245] The fact that neither woman acknowledges these actions as unusual also reinforces a sense of deadpan realism: the spectator is watching two actors perform these actions, and there is no sense of it having been simulated. The long take reinforces the spectator's sense of being caught between action and meaning.

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[245] Galt explains the interaction as such: "Marina and Bella [are] kissing in a completely alienated fashion, with Marina acting like this is the strangest possible thing to do with her body. As Bella gives directions, human sexual acts are denaturalized—their discursive contingency laid bare." "Animal Logic," 18.

In a scene shortly thereafter, a shot framing the steel mill in front of a mountain range provides a fruitful contrast; if the opening image is confrontational and bordering on grotesque, the subsequent wide shots are tranquil and potentially idyllic, but coming on the heels of the opening scene, one continues to wonder how these seemingly disparate parts relate to one another. Moreover, one cannot say Tsangari somehow manufactures the landscape image, unlike the overt and claustrophobic staging of the two women that opens the film: the landscapes appear to actually exist in the real world and the camera's position documents them as such. The clear authorial spatial metaphor drawn between the camera's closeness to licking and spitting, on the one hand, and the distance from the surrounding natural setting on the other articulates the aesthetic tension of deadpan through unspoken spatial means. That is, both the interaction and the shots are impassive: they relate to a lack of emotion, and the jarring combination of being close one moment, distant the next, expresses a spatial metaphor of instability. It's the camera, not the characters, that tell us how to feel. These feelings will resound within Marina later as well; should she get close to anyone through sex and emotion, or should she keep herself withdrawn from society to wall off intruders?

Tsangari's decision to set *Attenberg* in Aspra Spitia rather than in Athens or even a mid-size Greek city indicates an investment in thinking about questions of margins and centers. It also parallels the setting of *Kinetta*, the earlier Lanthimos film, which takes place during the off-season at a Greek seaside resort named Kinetta. It's worth noting that Tsangari produced *Kinetta*, though to what extent she offered or provided creative input is unclear from interviews and commentary on the subject. There is a strong documentary effect in *Kinetta*, as a shaky handheld camera is used to shoot nearly each scene.

Characters move through spaces, and long takes are few and far between, but the lack of dialogue and refusal to make narrative meaning is consistent with the frustrations viewers often feel in the presence of slow cinema. In the film, a trio of unnamed people (a hotel maid, a photographer, and a police officer) who seldom speak to one another (or anyone for that matter) spend much of their free time reenacting violent crimes previously undertaken against local women. In these reenactments, the maid plays the woman, the police officer plays the assailant, and the photographer films it. A reflexive releationship between the reenactments of the characters and the nature of the filmmaking itself is apparent: no matter how real either becomes, they are bound by artifice, fetishization, and obsession. The characters totally lack interiority; there is no sense of what compels them to reenact these crimes. They seem to want for an authentic experience of their own, but they remain without the means to find that beyond retreading a reality that has already passed. They feel nothing emotionally, and their deadpan faces reflect this absence. Filming their reenactments proves unfulfilling as well; the act of shooting themselves only further deadens them to the surrounding world. As they become lost in the pursuit of placing themselves into images rather than creating new, authentic experiences, they slide further into antisocial mindsets, and eventually engage in actual forms the violent behavior they reenact. Lanthimos structures sequences around how, despite the characters' efforts to get so close to the actual events they reenact, they cannot. That is, the characters seem to think that proximity and intimacy are won through repetition and memorization. They perform these events for each other (and for the spectator), but it still yields no feeling, no depth. They strive for the real and find only simulation.

Although *Kinetta* screened at the Toronto International Film Festival and the Berlinale in 2005, it received no distribution outside of Greece until a DVD was released by Second Run in the U.K. in 2015. Moreover, the film was never distributed in the U.S. until Kino Lorber acquired the film in 2019, and then gave it a limited theatrical run and Blu-ray release. The 2019 release gave U.S. film critics the occasion to review the film with not only distance from its debut, but also with the knowledge of Lanthimos's and Tsangari's subsequent filmography in mind. Nevertheless, critics remained largely resistant to the film, with the only appreciative major review saying it might hold "some pleasures for patient viewers."[246] A *New York Times* critic said: "Time hasn't made it more than a cryptic curiosity…Lanthimos shot much of the film with a hand-held camera, a device more irritating than purposeful."[247] To the *Times* critic, the camera in *Kinetta* is irritating *because* it appears to lack purpose that would reveal either social conditions needing reform or character psychology. The characters' deadpan faces, combined with a languorous pace and the unclear relationship of it all to narrative or thematic meaning, creates frustration and impatience in the viewer. The seaside town in *Kinetta* looms over and around its characters in ways that parallel its presentation in *Attenberg*. Mountains sit in the distance behind a large resort and a vacant lot where the trio perform their reenactments. In both cases, the town and the surrounding milieu are often presented in wide shot, as if they might offer some comforting notion of place and contentment. Instead, both the shooting style and character behaviors function as a counterpoint to this

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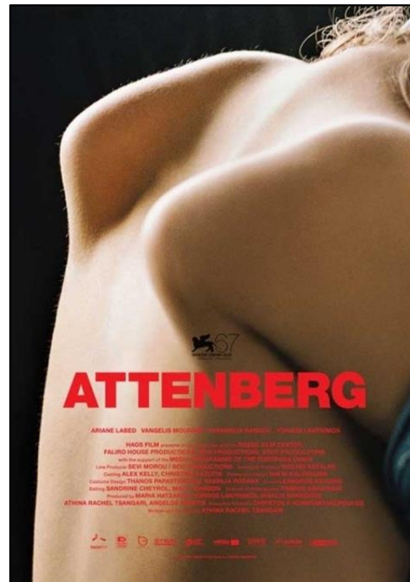
[246] John DeFore, "Kinetta: Film Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*. October 16, 2019. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/kinetta-1248353

[247] Ben Kenigsberg, "'Kinetta' Review: Cryptic Seeds of Yorgos Lanthimos's Imagery," *The New York Times*. October 17, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/17/movies/kinetta-review.html

possibility. Days seem to crawl by, as the hotel maid writhes around on one of the hotel room floors, alone, while pretending to strangle herself. In moments such as this, the character desires meaning and emotion but is unable to obtain it, and this dynamic undergirds the film's deadpan style. Whatever idea the spectator potentially has of Greece as a place rich with history and touristic possibility is quickly short-circuited by instances of antisocial behavior and confrontational filmmaking. These filmmakers reject the dominant realist perception of filmmaking as an invitation inward, to experience something authentic as seen in the travel guide. Empathy has no place here. Narrative meaning slips through our fingertips. The spectator "feels lost," like the characters (like Greece?), because the spectator has no clear ground on which to stand.



(figure 17)

The poster for *Attenberg* [figure 17] demonstrates how an unsettling image or behavior might produce a unique spatial response. It shows Marina's contorted back, in close-up, as her shoulder blades appear to jut out at a potentially alarming angle that

makes her appear either injured or abnormally jointed. If I have the joke correct, we are "taken aback": we viscerally respond to the image by wanting to move away from it. If one hasn't seen the film, this image is surely unsettling, or at least confounding in how it suggests the combination of human and animal bodies. Within the film, the scene is still unique: it features Marina removing her shirt as the camera cuts in to a close-up of her back, in which her shoulder blades wriggle. She seems to mimic the movements of a bat. These movements parallel similar moments from *Kinetta*, notably the aforementioned scene where the hotel maid writhes on the floor while pretending to strangle herself. Given that *Kinetta* is about people who perform reenactments of violent crimes, it's worthwhile to contemplate *Attenberg* as akin to a reenactment of Lanthimos's film: that is, it recreates much of the setting and scenarios of the previous film, only they're remade within the parameters of Tsangari's own sensibilities. To further this point, Lanthimos plays Marina's lover in *Attenberg*, who is named The Engineer; it's as if the diegesis of the film were being conceived in direct approximation of *Kinetta*, which, once again, Tsangari also produced. This overlap between the two films redoubles the notion of slow cinema as less a realist endeavor than, to quote Çaglayan again, "a different, exaggerated, mannerist, and quite often distorted subjective perception of reality."[248] These are films made by two directors, appearing in and/or working on each other's films, who treat the endeavor as a game or an exercise. To be clear, *Attenberg* is not a literal remake of *Kinetta*, but one that recasts its realist deadpan style with a different set of characters who exist in a similar space as before. One can surely follow *Attenberg* without knowing of

[248] Çaglayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema*, 12.

Kinetta, but to fully grasp the significance of the work, which is to spatialize both Greece and the careers of these two filmmakers on-screen, the spectator should become attuned to how Lanthimos and Tsangari play off of one another's work.

Lanthimos and Tsangari refuse to play the roles of Greece's tour guides on the global cinema stage. Their cinematic aims concern how one defines the self, and they create films that consider whether one can ever successfully accomplish an identity purely through imitations of it. *Kinetta* and *Attenberg* possess a strong documentary effect due to their locations and, in *Kinetta*'s case, its camera style. Both *Kinetta* and *Attenberg* suggest that authenticity can no longer be found—that "personal truth" becomes a diminished value when all that remains are the fragments of a previous place and its identity. And yet these traits cannot be explained through Greece's relationship with the EU alone. These are artistic gestures by Lanthimos and Tsangari that equally thematize their own circumstances as filmmakers in Greece, and their own aesthetic perceptions of cinema and life as a whole. Rather than making films that might imitate other European or Hollywood films, they have created a pair of films that interrogate the notion of authenticity, of and how one plays a role that overlaps between fact and fiction. They do this through visual spatial metaphors that indicate sensations which language cannot. Those sensations are predicated on a consistently deadpan tone that intersects with realism to suggest its own, subjective iteration of slow cinema. One is left feeling displaced from these films, perhaps, but the spectator also recognizes how the desire to look and comprehend relates to space: in theory, we might want to get close enough to an event or a group of people to see for ourselves, but if we find images or actions that confuse and/or repel us, we'll quickly retreat on the path we came. The next section will

further consider how imitation is likewise foregrounded in the subsequent films of Lanthimos as a means toward confronting both the contemporary circumstances in Greece and conceptions of cultural imperialism as they relate to identity formation.

Mimesis

When Greece's economy collapsed over the course from 2008 to 2010 after years of unpaid debts and rising inflation, these events prompted commentators to consider the allegorical aims of a resurgent Greek cinema. After all, a decade prior in 2000, when Greece joined the EU and converted to the Euro, many economists incorrectly believed the move would help stabilize rather than exacerbate Greece's debts.[249] In effect, aspirations of integration and the self-stripping of economic autonomy and/or cultural identity led to bankruptcy and disintegration, the severity of which has yet to be resolved, as pundits and analysts continue to debate whether a "Grexit" should take place; that is, whether Greece should withdraw from the EU.[250]

Rather than once again pursue this logic, in which Greek films after 2008 are all thought to be allegories for the economic crisis, I wish to extend the spatial metaphor of the previous section to *Dogtooth* (Lanthimos, Greece, 2009) and *Alps* (Lanthimos, Greece, 2012) in order to understand them as films which depict the failure of mimetic imitation to secure identity. While neither film outwardly discusses or even seems to be concerned with any realist documentation of contemporary Greece (these films, unlike

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[249] Harry Wallop, "Greece: Why Did It's Economy Fall So Hard?" *The Telegraph*. April 28, 2010. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/greece/7646320/Greece-why-did-its-economy-fall-so-hard.html

[250] Ino Terzi, "Grexit and Brexit: Lessons for the European Union," *E-International Relations*. May 4, 2020. https://www.e-ir.info/2020/05/04/grexit-and-brexit-lessons-for-the-eu/

Kinetta, take place largely indoors), Lanthimos reroutes any explicit geopolitical concerns toward the transnational circulation of popular culture, especially as its Greek characters are immersed in, learn from, and finally repeatedly imitate commercial American cinema as their primary means of expression. The *mise-en-scène* of each film implicitly denies a conventional spatial logic—they become, instead, deadpan in how they frame action as either deferred or delayed. These films retain *Kinetta*'s deadpan tone, but they are notably removed from much of the handheld, realist aesthetic, and instead are composed largely of static long takes that more conventionally resemble the visual terms of slow cinema.

Dogtooth represents the construction of identity through imitation. The film concerns a family of five, secluded away from the rest of society. The Father (Christos Stergioglou) manages a factory of some sort, while the Mother (Michele Valley) stays at home with their three adult children, a Son (Hristos Passalis), an Older Daughter (Aggeliki Papoulia) and a Younger Daughter (Mary Tsoni), all of whom have no knowledge of an outside world other than the altered, redacted stories they hear from their parents. They learn new words every day, but with altered meanings, as to erase any concept of movement or migration away from the household. The parents function like radical isolationists, so fearful of the outside world that they impose psychotic levels of confinement and brainwashing techniques onto their children. Within the film, shots are stable, observant, and devoid of attempts to heighten the emotional content of the scene. Often, characters' heads will be just out of frame when talking, a device that unsettles a diegetic space that is all about uniformity and stability. The unsettling effect comes not through quick editing or canted angles; in fact, much of the film is shot in long takes and

with little movement. Nevertheless, the effect functions as an auto-critique of the fascistic, patriarchal construction of society that exists within the household. The juxtaposition is in many respects straightforward: the content of the family's daily life is so absurd that the clinical observance of it creates the film's ironic and deadpan traits.

In *Dogtooth*, innocence is disrupted by the infiltration of technology and outside cultural constructions. Certainly, the sexual "lessons" taught by Christina (Anna Kalaitzidou), a worker from the Father's factory who is essentially used as a prostitute for his Son, becomes a source of temptation and change. She teaches the Older Daughter about sex by pointing out her erogenous zones and asking her to perform cunnilingus in exchange for a minor object or trinket. It all serves to corrupt and deteriorate the heavily ordered and ritualized space. When the Older Daughter asks to trade sex for one of Christina's VHS tapes, the space is even further pushed to the brink of collapse. The sex, though influential, is not what drives the Older Daughter's decision to flee the domestic space (the children are told they may leave when their "dogtooth," or what is more generally known as a cuspid, falls out); it is her mimetic desire—her interest in imitating others as a form of defining herself—that prompts the Older Daughter to understand that she's been lied to. Although never directly represented on screen, it is implied that Christina has been exchanging tapes of popular American studio films with the Older Daughter for sex; in various later moments of the film, the Older Daughter acts out scenes that appear to come from *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, U.S./Hong Kong, 1973), *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, U.S., 1975), *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, U.S., 1976), and *Flashdance* (Adrien Lyne, U.S., 1983), which is what drives her toward wanting to flee the home and enter the outside world. In *Dogtooth*, the initial patriarch, the Father, gives

way to the cultural hegemony of popular Hollywood films. Devoid of any production context or an ability to interpret the language of the films, the Older Daughter is left with no form of meaning or significance beyond carrying out an empty mimesis—empty, that is, because there is no one watching, paying attention, or even capable of understanding the significance of her performances (except for the film's spectator). The situation echoes that of Greek cinema, in general, as a national cinema that has historically been paid little attention by the surrounding world at large.[251]

The desire to be self-sufficient is paradoxically complemented and challenged by wanting to parrot scenes from films as a form of establishing an identity of one's own. As discussed in the previous section on spatial metaphors, the movies conjure emotions that (false) words cannot: they summon an excessive desire that literally spills over by the film's end in the form of bloodshed, as the Older Daughter bludgeons herself in the mouth with a stone in an attempt to forcible remove her "dogtooth." This sense of being caught between two states—neither a child, nor an adult (despite being thirtysomething, in Older Daughter's case)—provokes an overarching anxiety that escapes an easy identification or definition. Desire cannot find an outlet for its expression, and so it becomes absurd. It reenacts movies out of context; it forces self-mutilation when it's totally without reason or even a form of meaningful desperation. The prevailing condition in these films, once again, returns to a form of deadpan realism that indirectly recognizes

[251] Thomas Elsaesser, writing in 2004, explained that certain European countries often thought to be "smaller," like Greece and Portugal, appear to outsiders to have limited cinematic assets which are largely concentrated around one filmmaker (Theo Angelopoulos, in Greece's case). Until the emergence of Lanthimos and Tsangari, Greek cinema held a relatively minor position even by the scale of international film festivals. *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 15.

absurdity as the best means of conveying feelings of displacement in contemporary Europe.

The integration of popular Hollywood films from the '70s and '80s in *Dogtooth* provides the film a means to displace any clear relationship with Greece's own financial and/or identity crisis. That is, images are inherently mimetic—they often approximate actual movements, speech, and behavior—and so popular films become a proxy for interrogating how Greece, a so-called "minor nation," stands little chance of maintaining a cultural or financial identity independent of the EU. In *Alps*, Lanthimos's subsequent film, he takes this indirect facet of *Dogtooth* and brings it to the forefront. Essentially, *Alps* involves a quartet of amateur actors who decide to begin a business: they will act as replacements for deceased loved ones, "auditioning" and hiring themselves out for live, often-reenacted moments from the past. For instance, Aggeliki Papoiulia plays a night nurse who fills in for a young female tennis player killed in a traffic accident. Rather than interacting with the parents for new experiences, they request that she look, dress, and act like their daughter from past moments, such as finishing a tennis match or caught getting a little too close with her boyfriend. The nurse eventually begins to confuse reality (original) and fantasy (imitation), and the film, itself, begins to blur the lines between actual living and performance, once again staging the mimetic dilemmas from Lanthimos's previous films.

Like *Dogtooth*, there is a key patriarchal figure in *Alps*, who dons himself "Mont Blanc," because, "it is the biggest of all mountains." Monikers and linguistic exchange/confusion play a significant role in both films, especially in the latter's concern with pop cultural influence. The film's recurring joke is that people are often defined by

their favorite actors or musicians. Riding in the back of an ambulance with a dying girl, Mont Blanc squeezes her hand: "Who is your favorite actor? Brad Pitt? Johnny Depp…what, not Johnny Depp?" Likewise, another deceased person is said to have been a "big fan of Morgan Freeman. He saw every single one of his films." Characters openly and often discuss their favorite pop cultural figures as if it were akin to having a personal experience: it's the most essential question anyone can ask because it's the dominant ideological premise of the limited orbit these characters occupy, and so it becomes its own form of reality. These events once again unfold without clear emotional or affective registers, deadpan through and through. Part of the intrigue in watching *Alps* is wondering to what extent these are approximations of actual people or if people like this actually exist beyond the realm of the screen. Because the film draws so little connection to a discernible reality outside the world of its characters, the events feel increasingly isolated, performative, and without coherence. The *mise-en-scène* confirms this feeling of isolation, as characters are, as in *Dogtooth*, often placed near the edges of the frame, so that a significant portion of their bodies are kept out of sight. The spectator is left with subjective impressions of space, and the line between reality, fiction, documentary, and reenactment becomes increasingly harder to discern.

On that point, I want to end this section by further discussing the opening scene of *Attenberg*, which begins with Marina and Bella in a two-shot licking each other's tongues in a manner that more suggests an animalistic encounter than a sensual kiss. It's as if the characters are deliberately mimicking an idea of sexual embrace rather than trying to make it seem and feel natural. The actions play out in a single take, furthering the sense that what's taking place is both real and hasn't been manufactured in any way. Near the

end of the sequences, Marina says, "I've never had something wriggling in my mouth before," and compares the sensation to what she imagines a slug would feel like. Shortly thereafter, the two women get down into a stance that resembles that of a lion and pretend to battle one another as if they were in the wild. While this sequence is blatantly absurd in terms of character behavior, it's clear the actresses are actually performing these gestures and, to a certain extent, the point of the scene is precisely that. Tsangari holds on the clear contact of their tongues as they lick each other for a prolonged period of time, and the detached, bordering on non-human response of each woman creates a sensation of uncertainty on the spectator's part. Are these women of sound mind? Are these actors or real people? Should we be watching this until we know the answer? These questions help relay how the deadpan element functions as a device that works to unsettle the viewer and leave them at the intersection of fiction and documentary. Tsangari is asking the spectator to sit with the visible evidence of this unusual interaction. So, while the characters are imitating and performing an idea of intimacy and close contact, the actors are indeed *actually* swapping spit and, well, as some would have it, behaving "weirdly." But more to my point, the scene evinces the clear intersection between the tenets of slow cinema, realism, and deadpan as the characteristics that define the works of Lanthimos and Tsangari.

The Game of European Cinema

As is evident in the textual overlap between *Kinetta* and *Attenberg*, and the thematizing of the mimetic impulse in *Dogtooth*, *Alps*, and *Attenberg*, it's clear an element of play informs the cinematic sensibilities of Lanthimos and Tsangari. In

Chevalier (Tsangari, Greece, 2015), that element becomes the basis for the entire narrative, in which six men—all on a fishing trip aboard a yacht on the Aegean Sea—agree to participate in a game with unclear rules and with seemingly spontaneous challenges, all in pursuit of obtaining the elusive title of who is "the best in general." A series of nearly impenetrable deadpan interactions follows, capped by a musical number in which one of the men lip-syncs to Minnie Riperton's "Lovin' You."[252]

The game in *Chevalier* could be read as a mode of performance that parallels the incompetent and self-interested machinations of the predominantly male members of the European Troika, a decision group formed by members of the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank. Tsangari has gestured in interviews to her dilemma over whether to represent the Troika directly.[253] These are intriguing developments, primarily because they find a correlate in a segment from the Portuguese film *Arabian Nights* (Miguel Gomes, Portugal/France/Germany/Switzerland, 2015), titled "The Men with Hard-Ons." Gomes's film, released the same year as Tsangari's, uses the template of *One Thousand and One Nights* folktales to create

[252] There might be more to be made of lip-synching in contemporary European cinema as a commentary on the emptiness of performance and imitation as a form of meaningful expression or action. In *Nocturama* (Bertrand Bonello, France, 2016), which chronicles a group of young people (predominately, though not exclusively, white) who commit acts of terrorism, one of them performs a lip-synched rendition of Shirley Bassey's cover of Frank Sinatra's "My Way." Given that the film concludes with each of the young people being systematically executed by a SWAT team, their misguided attempts at "playing" radicals extends to the clothes they wear and the music they emulate.

[253] Tsangari says: "When I started thinking about *Chevalier* and writing the script with Efthymis Filippou, I wanted to avoid direct references and didactic or meaning-producing statements. I am really scared of that stuff; that's why I always try to abstract as much as possible. I believe if we started the development by saying we are going to make a film that is a direct comment on these poor little men who are leaders, it would have ended up being a failed movie." "Playing a Game: An Interview with Athina Rachel Tsangari," *Mubi*. June 13, 2016. https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/setting-the-rules-playing-a-game-an-interview-with-athina-rachel-tsangari

scenarios revolving around contemporary Portuguese and European issues. In this segment, several men, all affiliated with the European troika, speak crudely ("You go privatize a dick up your ass!" being one notable example), antagonize one another, and then fall into the hands of an African wizard who gives all of them permanent erections. Like in *Chevalier*, the men are belligerent and entitled, though here the depiction borders on total lunacy. The Buñuelian scenario evinces how the logic of the game, which Gomes is fond of referring to filmmaking as, creates the basis for relating contemporary politics to a fabulist form of play. Prior to this segment, Gomes appears on-screen as himself and comments on making a film that will meld fact and fiction, but which will retain a certain militancy. He says, in voiceover: "You can't make a militant film that soon starts forgetting the militancy and escapes reality." When I interviewed Gomes in 2015, he commented on this bit, saying: "When you're playing a game, you have instructions—the rules of the game. Most of the time, cinema tries to hide the structure. For me, it's important to share it with the viewer, to play the game together…I don't know why people aren't more angry. Apparently, people have accepted their fate."[254] If *Chevalier* lacks the anger of *Arabian Nights*, both express the kinship between "minor nations" like Greece and Portugal over having to constantly think through the impact of the EU both in relation to politics and filmmaking. The game becomes a means to stepping not away from the real world, but sideways: toward abstraction, toward absurdity, and toward a minoritarian aesthetic form that intersects the terms of slow cinema, realism, and deadpan. These films, like all the films in this dissertation, take up the relationship

[254] Clayton Dillard, "Interview: Miguel Gomes on the *Arabian Nights* Trilogy," *Slant*, December 1, 2015. https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/interview-miguel-gomes/

between the reality of thinking through and across borders—whether national, continental, or aesthetic—and conveying it through cinematic means. Gomes indirectly encapsulates these imperatives as follows:

> There are these moments that come from reality and it's something we share as a society in general, and some of them are pretty much dramatic and, at the same time, I didn't want to renounce the possibility of having this fictional, delirious world. This moment in the beginning, I think it's like the instructions for the film, about how the film and the viewer should make this trip together.[255]

The straddling between reality and a delirious, fictional world encompasses the general idea of European filmmakers who see value in calling upon representational measures other than empirical reality as their basis for engaging contemporary social problems. Spatial metaphor, mimesis, and games: these are facets of a move away from realism that the films of Lanthimos and Tsangari engage in, and they do so by thinking of space and marginal characters as the means to effect a parody of the dominant realist style, one that drains the diegesis of recognizable emotions or human responses, which can be thought of as deadpan realism. In the conclusion that follows, I finalize and clarify the argument of the dissertation, consider the possible limitations of my methodological approach, and further address the political nature of these films—specifically, the struggle with the fact that, as Gilles Deleuze says, "the people are missing."

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[255] Dillard, "Interview."

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has argued for the aesthetic significance of a selection of films that pivot away from realism within contemporary European art cinema. Some are anti-realist (*Le Havre*), while others have realist tendencies that eventually collapse under the weight of a pivot toward an alternative aesthetic mode, such as exploitation, disjunctions between sound and image, theatricality, or deadpan. These films, given their general turn away from character interiority as a primary concern, are more focused on space and spatial logic—how questions of margin versus center, especially the circumstances of African migration to Europe, assist in articulating the spacing of Europe as a political, cultural, and economic project. Moreover, intertextuality becomes a relevant component with which to read these films because the filmmakers often frame their engagement with contemporary European life through the lens of previous films or eras of filmmaking. In turn, the cinephilic perspective becomes a privileged site of spectatorship because the films evince a clear interest in placing themselves in conversation with other films. This fact does not foreclose the possibility or primacy of other subject positions or reception theories, but it is the case that if a viewer shares in the filmmaker's particular knowledge of cinema or the director's body of work, then certain meanings are made available.

I want to say more about this latter point, which remains implicit throughout much of the analysis in this dissertation. One of the potential restrictions inherent to my line of study here involves its methodological interest in cinephilia as a pre-condition for viewing these films. However, that pre-condition only exists if one wants to think about the relevance of intertextuality to contemporary film studies, and in particular contemporary European art cinema, where cinematic allusion is one of the hallmarks of the form because such allusions indicate the presence of a filmmaker. The recognition of the filmmaker's hand is in itself an acknowledgement of at least a partial opposition to realism; one of the most canonical examples in European art cinema is the opening credits sequence of *Contempt* (Jean-Luc Godard, France, 1963), in which a camera tracks toward the camera shooting the sequence while a narrator says the credits in voiceover. The recognition of the camera's operation—that it is being moved and choices related to framing and composition are being made—provides the spectator a look *behind* the camera, as it were, which assists in dismantling any illusion of unfiltered realism on the screen. At the same time, the shot is completely in one take, and it reveals the act of how a camera moves on a dolly during a tracking shot. In that sense, the visual material *is* realist. It's the seeming paradox here, caught between realism and anti-realism, that informs some of the aesthetic impetus that undergirds art cinema as a mode of filmmaking.

The concept of the auteur has remained essential to much study of international art cinema and even Hollywood filmmaking in film studies, with monographs devoted to individual filmmakers comprising a significant and consistent stream of publications among university presses. Intertextuality, though, is something that has proliferated in

both commercial and more marginal forms of filmmaking, albeit with different aims and purposes. For example, the emergence of franchise filmmaking in Hollywood, now predicated on a crossover business model in which a "universe" is created across a constellation of films that eventually leads to the characters in individual films being in the same film, relies heavily on the spectator's familiarity with previous films and characters within the franchise. Certain attributes, like easter eggs (hidden or encoded meaning intended for discerning viewers) or post-credits teasers, reflect how attentive spectatorship is "rewarded" in the sense that even more narrative meaning can be extracted. This form of intertextuality is, above all, concerned with narrative meaning at the level of the diegesis and at the level of the mythology within the given cinematic world. Art cinema, on the other hand, often inscribes intertextual meaning as an indication of its construction by a particular filmmaker or artist. As Jean Ma explains in an essay about the work of Malaysian filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang, who Ma regards as an exemplary case of the auteur in contemporary global cinema, the "heightened textual presence of the director…marks the art film genre."[256] Ma further details how Tsai's oeuvre contains an extensive intertextual dimension that "makes it impossible to understand [the films] in isolation from one another, eliciting the recollection of a preceding filmography in the course of the individual screening, on the one hand, while also retroactively revising the meanings of his earlier films as the viewer's memory of these is activated, on the other."[257] Thus, analyzing the director's oeuvre and the relationship between individual films and the collective is a dominant mode of reception

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[256] Jean Ma, "Tsai Ming-liang's Haunted Movie Theater," in *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 346.
[257] Ma, "Tsai Ming-liang's Haunted Movie Theater," 345.

within the study of art cinema because the films seem to ask for such a mode of thought. One could certainly read these films through the lens of other methodologies, but the premise of the director as author and as an organizing research method speaks to the logic inherent to the industry and economy of art cinema.

These qualities of intertextuality pertaining to a director or distant eras of filmmaking, though, implicitly risk turning art cinema into an elitist, exclusionary mode that necessitates a viewer's comprehension of a director's work, and the possible intention therein, in order to *best* comprehend the films. At least, this would be the case if the claim of intertextuality's relevance to the work of an individual film or filmmaker meant that it was the preferred method for interpreting the work. That is not my methodological claim or intention here; I am not arguing for the exclusion of alternative methodologies or the elevation of my own above others. On the contrary, this work only reflects that my knowledge as a scholar is best suited to this particular line of inquiry, and so the contexts of this dissertation indicate the knowledge basis of its author, not a claim that my own subject position is the best or most appropriate means with which to read these films. What is inescapable, however, is that I am potentially something like the ideal spectator in the eyes of these filmmakers: a cinephile and an aspiring scholar with an interest in socio-political subject matter and films that take an alternative or adjacent approach to social realism. Given that the economy of art cinema revolves in part around precisely this sort of spectator, it is important to not only recognize the status of my own subject position, but to seek out, as a reader and thinker, alternatives to it that can reveal other facets of how art cinema circulates and shapes the circumstances and perceptions of both filmmaking and various socio-political questions related to it.

What I have sought to articulate, in part, in this dissertation is how the cinephilic subject position brings to light certain allusions and references that are encoded within the contours of the filmmaking. This is less a means for deciphering the filmmaker's intended meaning than asking how previous films or modes of filmmaking may help situate one understanding of a given film while also establishing relationships between films. Regarding *Le Havre*, for example, my analysis argues for the relevance of films generally deemed poetic realism, and their underlying implications regarding racism and space, to framing contemporary questions of migration and being a fugitive in a land that is not one's own. In this sense, I am writing to anyone who has an interest in the relationship between contemporary European art cinema, socio-political thought, and cinematic allusion. That is likely to be other film scholars who are conversant in the relevant films, or it might be scholars/intellectuals of any sort who could take an interest in the subject matter and seek out the films under discussion to determine the efficacy of my argument. This methodology does not reinscribe the cinephilic subject insofar as it does not argue for the elevation of the cinephilic subject over other subject positions. It is the case, however, that art cinema has historically been created with such a subject position in mind; that is, the very notion of an art cinema entails films and filmmakers that set out to address or reflect something about cinema, whether as a medium or in relation to previous eras. So, engaging the films from this subject position means doing so in a manner that has been idealized by the exhibition and reception contexts of art cinema as a whole since at least the 1960s.

These components of who art cinema addresses, though, cannot immediately articulate the political project endemic to these films, which is to find in creations of a

non-realist or anti-realist space the means of visualizing the circumstances and dilemmas of contemporary life in Europe. In that respect, the films offer the potential for providing a clarifying perspective on matters of migration, marginality, and how to proceed, socially and politically, in a meaningful, humane, and informed direction. Recall, as cited in chapter three, how Kalling Heck argues that certain forms of art cinema "offer up a series of familiar-looking but otherwise difficult-to-order images and ask that the audience arrive at some understanding in the absence of a readily available meaning: in this way *they ask for thought*."[258] Heck juxtaposes meaning against thought, with thought being the basis for these films' "political concerns." Thomas Elsaesser's notion of the "thought experiment," footnoted in the introduction, echoes these ideas about twenty-first century European art cinema, in that a certain marginal status opens up the space for formal experimentation and more minoritarian aesthetic forms. Elsaesser, though, also refers to Europe itself as a thought experiment, one that proceeds from a series of deficits, specifically a democracy deficit, a multicultural diversity deficit, and a social justice deficit.[259] In combining Heck and Elsaesser's ideas, the apparent usefulness of films asking for thought, as Heck frames it, is that they aim to resolve these deficits that Elsaesser outlines in ways that have not yet been conceived. I accept these claims and find them relevant to my project, because my own methodology is informed by the spirit of this thought experiment, which is defined by its unstable form and its aim to generate thought rather than impart meaning. To what extent these experiments generate thought is

[258] Heck, *After Authority*, 145. Emphasis original.
[259] Elsaesser, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy*, 85.

precisely the question, and thus why they might be thought of as experiments: they guarantee nothing other than an attempt at creating some form of thought.

Overall, the pivot away from realism in these films, in conjunction with their allusive aspects, opens up the possibility for new forms of thought. It would be too strong a claim to say all the films discussed in this dissertation are anti-realist, though it is certainly the case that some of the filmmakers have expressed an anti-realist stance in interviews. The pivot away from realism more typically results in a straddling aesthetic mode that can look realist in one moment and non- or anti-realist in the next. Such a fragmenting in the mode of address creates an awareness on the spectator's behalf of the constructedness of the film, its characters, and its spaces, and it asks that the spectator consider the usefulness of such an approach. From my subject position, the value in blending realist with non-or-anti-realist form is placing cinematic epochs in conversation with identitarian concerns. That is, these films afford the spectator the opportunity to consider the extent to which contemporary art cinema may still have a political value at all. Certainly, these filmmakers believe that their work engages with political questions, that their contributions prove worthwhile because of their unique, individual perspectives, and that spectators will benefit from their intervention.

Given that these films, in all cases, are the work of a writer/director, the mode of art cinema implies an individuated vision that needs to be charted from film to film in order to comprehend the specificity of the authorial voice. Moreover, the institution of art cinema itself, whether thinking through the industrial terms of exhibition spaces like film festivals and art-house theaters or the financial components of the available resources to filmmakers aspiring to make a film that might have questionable commercial prospects,

perpetuates the idea that these films have a political relevance by awarding and marketing them with the purpose of drumming up as much financial interest as possible. This is not to say that the sole purpose of film festivals can be reduced to their capacity for creating financial potential, but one should not ignore questions of economy within art cinema lest one inscribes a rigid binary that sees art cinema as an artistically pure and politically rigorous arena that opposes the fundamentally commercial logic of Hollywood filmmaking. No films are exempt from being considered through the lens of economy, nor are they automatically valuable simply because they utilize an aesthetic mode that deviates from more dominant forms of social realism, narrative closure, and thematic clarity.

I want to conclude by addressing how the potential for a political project in these films relates to the absence, or anticipated coming, of a people that are missing. This terminology comes from Gilles Deleuze, who says if there were a "modern political cinema, it would be on this basis: the people no longer exist, or not yet…*the people are missing*."[260] By this, Deleuze refers specifically to the "third world," where "oppressed and exploited nations remain in a state of perpetual minorities, in a collective identity crisis."[261] Such an identity crisis has become a relevant question for both Europe and European cinema in the twenty-first century; as framed by Elsaesser, the "apparently fatal weakness" of European cinema's relegation to being a marginal cinema "can yet be turned [into an] advantage," which means these films can "so easily become Deleuzian, in the sense that *their inconsequentiality either in economic or ideological terms frees*

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[260] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 216. Emphasis original.
[261] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 217.

them from the burden of being 'representative': it allows them to develop 'lines of flight', a different kind of affective presence, and above all, a new kind of autonomy."[262] The premise of European art cinema's newfound marginality derives in part from the premise of modernism's failure to create either political revolution or a space for its continued relevance in contemporary life. Elsaesser gets at this idea as well, noting how European films have lost "the (illusory) status of not only standing for 'art,' but also for integrity and authorial independence."[263] The lack of interest in European cinema, as a location of significance within "a disinterested universe," as Elsaesser writes, can in part be rooted in the absence of a viewing body politic that looks to the cinema for political guidance. This was the premise of cinematic and political modernism: not only did the "interrogative or modernist text" seek to disturb "the unity and self-presence of the reader by discouraging identification and by drawing attention to the work of its own textual processes,"[264] but it necessitated a forum in which such practices carried at least the illusion of significance for broader political concern.

The crisis of political modernism has become in European cinema the crisis of a missing people for whom such work is relevant, let alone urgent, and for whom cinema is no more than either a form of escapism or the means for building social connections with others. That hasn't stopped filmmakers like Pedro Costa from trying to resurrect the aims of modernism as a means of addressing impoverished Cape Verdean communities in Portugal, but as Jacques Rancière says of Costa's films, they are "immediately labeled as film-festival material, something reserved for the exclusive enjoyment of a film-buff elite

[262] Elsaesser, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy*, 7-8. Emphasis original.
[263] Elsaesser, *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy*, 7.
[264] Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism*, 13.

and tendentiously pushed to the province of museums and art lovers."[265] While this is true—one is unlikely to see a Costa film playing at a multiplex—Rancière's gripe operates on a potentially faulty premise: that if mass audiences were given the chance to see a film like *Colossal Youth*, they would be touched or impacted by it in ways that would assist in realizing "the missing people." Whether this is true—that the industrial restrictions which often keep commercial and art cinema separate are what's preventing political modernism from being resurrected—is difficult to say with any certainty. For Rancière, the problem is about a lack of visibility or access. It's true, however, that Costa's films have received DVD releases from The Criterion Collection in North America, just as *La Promesse*, *Touki Bouki*, and *Le Havre* have (in fact, every film discussed in this dissertation is available through a Region 1 DVD release). These films, marginal in certain ways, have been credentialed by Criterion, the highly regarded, boutique home-video distributor, which means they are widely visible to many, including those who would not identify as a cinephile. Therefore, the political relevance of these films remains, in part, their grappling with their own minoritarian status relative to larger, escapist forms of filmmaking, but also that cinema cannot actually become political in-and-of itself. That is, neither the cinema nor a filmmaker can reconcile the aporias facing a continent that is simultaneously in the process of "becoming" but is as equally in a state of dissolve, of a collective unrest that is inherent to the project of a unified Europe. The films in this dissertation get at these issues in diverse ways, but their political status cannot be claimed beyond a certain threshold of effectiveness or relevance, especially

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[265] Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Pedro Costa," *Diagonal Thoughts*. https://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=1546

once both the economic and historical dimensions of political modernism are closely examined. European art cinema, now in the "condition of minority," as Deleuze initially wrote in relation to "third world cinema," becomes a thought process with the potential to generate new possibilities for vision more than an exigent political form. While a certain value remains in the project of a political European cinema, its present limitations require spectators and scholars alike to grapple with the realities facing contemporary Europe—and ask where, when, or how the "missing people" could be actualized.

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VITA

Clayton Mark Dillard

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: SPACE, REPRESENTATION, AND REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN ART CINEMA

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in English at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in May, 2021.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in Cinema Studies at San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California in 2012.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina in 2010.

Experience:

Lecturer in Film at the University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, Texas, Fall 2019—present.