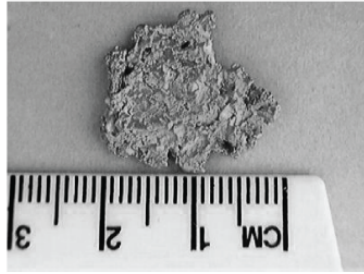
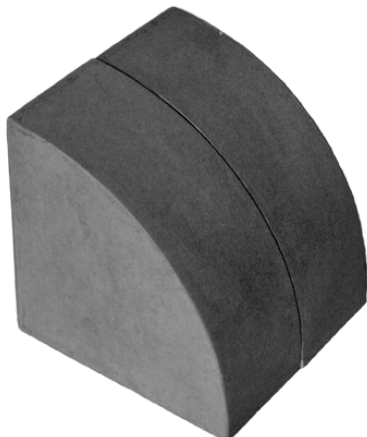
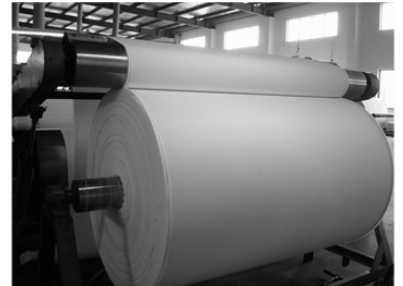
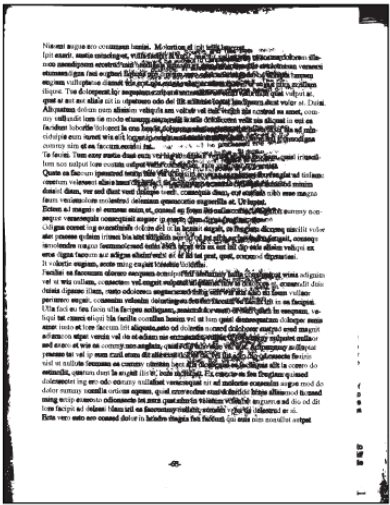
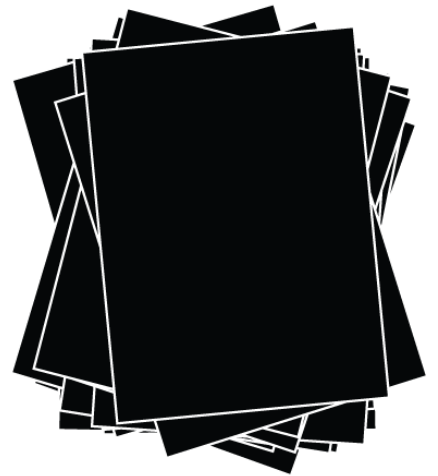
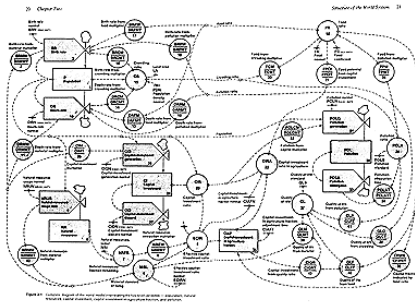


**machete**



**A**



# THE PASSION OF MODERNITY: ON TERRENCE MALICK'S TREE OF LIFE

The true health of spirit consists in the perfection of reminiscence.

- Arthur Schopenhauer

What is the vocation of cinema? To make visible, in time, that which is invisible outside of cinema. This is why it rains indoors in Tarkovsky films: the interior visibility, as image, of what had been invisible (memory, desire) insofar as it remained outside of cinema. Cinema makes visible, as image, its invisible outside. But what then remains invisible, inside of cinema? The experience of cinema, which we carry back outside. A chiasmus, then, of the visible and the invisible, the inside and the outside. Interior rain: memory made image; image, remembered. And the medium of this chiasmus is time.

But what of that which, outside of time, cannot be remembered? From the beginning, Terrence Malick's films have been posing this question. In *Badlands* (1976): "Where would I be this very moment if Kit had never met me? If my mom had never met my dad?"

And what of that which is neither visible nor invisible, but rather manifest, yet unknown? In *Day's of Heaven* (1978): "This farmer, he didn't know when he first saw her, or what it was about her that caught his eye. Maybe it was the way the wind blew through her hair." In *The Thin Red Line* (1998): "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? The land with the sea?" In *The New World* (2005): "Mother, where do you live? In the sky, the clouds, the sea?" Or again: "How much they err that think everyone which has been at Virginia understands or knows what Virginia is." Malick's is a cinema of an unknown that is sensed, and the vehicle of this not-knowing is the voice-over, the musing of an unseen speaker, the disembodied question.

But what of that which is not only unseen or unknown, but which could never be manifest? That which, in time, is not only prior to memory, but prior to manifestation? Not only prior to the distinction between the visible and the invisible, but prior to sensation, to any capacity for sensible experience? What is the vocation of cinema, if it takes up this question? To make manifest, in time, that which is prior to manifestation.

As its epigraph from the Book of Job

suggests, this is the task of Malick's new film, *Tree of Life* (2011): "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation...while the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

\*\*\*

*Tree of Life* circulates around a central, singular event: the death of a son, an event that entails mourning of that death by a mother, a father, and two brothers. But this event—the fact of a death and the experience of loss, situated at an existential and psychological level—opens onto a meditation upon another event of properly ontological import: the emergence of life on earth. A son dies; he is mourned by his family. And on the anniversary of his death, decades later, the film's narrative focalization upon the psychological interiority of his older brother gives way to one of the most remarkable "flashbacks" in the history of cinema, even more grandiose than the famous analeptic cut which opens *2001: A Space Odyssey*. From outside the office building where his eldest brother works as an architect we return to what seems to be the origin of the cosmos, and from here we follow the expansion of the universe and the formation of our galaxy through the accretion of the earth, millennia of geological time, the self-organization of RNA and DNA molecules, the emergence of mitochondria and multicellular organisms, the evolution of diverse animal species during the Cambrian explosion, the reign and extinction of the dinosaurs, and the beginning of the latest ice age during the Pliocene. We then return to the bildungsroman of the eldest son, following the progress of his family romance up through the years preceding his younger brother's death.

The film thus situates not only the mourning of loss but also the development of a family's affective world within the broadest possible perspective. The particularity of a life that can be lost takes on the universal singularity of a life (*Une Vie*, in Deleuze's sense). The scope of a particular loss to be mourned expands to include the emergence of life on earth as the condition of possibility for any affective experience of loss whatever. The implication

of this gesture is not so much that "loss" is the essence of life, but rather that the existence of life is the essence of loss. The "meaning" of the affective experience of loss is grounded in the very existence of affectivity or experience, the existence of life, felt or understood as the ontological precondition for the possible negation of affect, sensibility, or experience (the possibility of death).

Malick's film is thus one example of an effort to reframe existential questions concerning the relation of life and death as ontological questions concerning the being or non-being of life per se. If it is an important film it's not only because it is beautifully made, but because of the subtlety with which it exposes the problematic of living being as both physical and metaphysical in scope. The being of "life" is a metaphysical problem because unless life is metaphysical it has no being: it is reducible to the material distribution of organizations and functions that neither warrant nor support a general, encompassing concept. Every vitalist knows this, and that is why, for example, it at least makes sense to recognize the coherence of the Deleuzian concept of A LIFE, even if one does not share his metaphysical commitments. But, on the other hand, if "life" is purely metaphysical it has no being. Life is a physical problem because it characterizes the modality of being of material bodies whose properties and capacities differ from those of non-living bodies: even if, in certain instances, it turns out to be surprisingly difficult to specify just how this is the case.

In Malick's film, the ontological and existential problem of "life" is taken up within a Christian framework, which therefore involves him with the problem not only of life but of spirit. We should bear in mind, however, that this framework is not necessarily that of the film itself but rather of the characters whose lives it depicts. If *Tree of Life* remains a profoundly materialist film, it is because the existence of spiritual experience is itself addressed as a problem of material genesis: how does spiritual experience—as an existential fact, as part of a world—come into being within the cosmos? In what sense can we understand the emergence of life as an ontological condition of such experience? And how

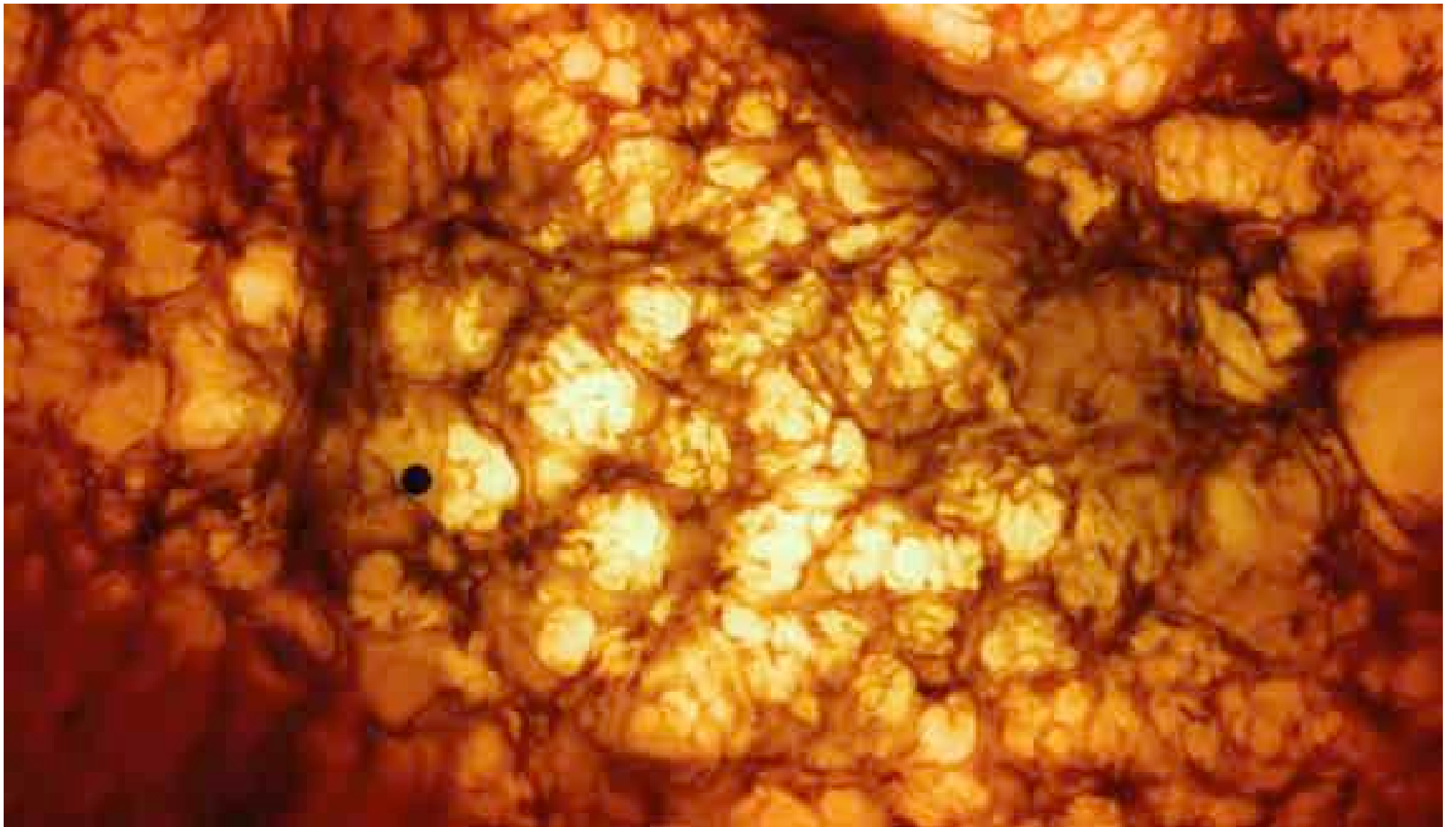


does the work of mourning pose the question of the relation between spirit, life, and matter, insofar as it involves an affective relation to the material disappearance of a life experienced as a spiritual loss? Malick's characters respond to the loss of a life by posing spiritual questions and seeking their spiritual resolution. The film's representation of the "tree of life," however, the physical genesis of living being, implicitly responds to these questions in explicitly materialist terms. It is a

lem that returns us to the question of how feeling and sensation first come into being, of how the opacity of being opens onto manifestation for the first time. If affect and sensation first come into being through the existence of life, how can this becoming-sensible itself be made sensible? Which also means: how can it be felt, how can it be made to affect us? And what becomes of cinema in its effort to make manifest that which is prior to manifestation?

The most obvious fact about

also the context in which a film like this is engineered. It is not, directly, life or thought or spirit that enables the manifest reconstruction of the material coming-into-being of manifestation; it is technics. In this sense, the true frame of *Tree of Life* is not so much a Christian theogony as a technological anabasis, a return to the source of all that modernity allows through its scientific, technological, and economic resources. The problem, then, is not only that of the relation between mat-



resolutely Darwinian film, but one that includes the facticity of spiritual experience within the process of material genesis that it seeks to make manifest through cinematic representation.

Materialism is that philosophical orientation which formulates ontological questions according to the following criterion: given that being is prior to thinking, how can thinking become adequate to being? In Malick's film, as its title suggests, this problem is crucially conditioned by the mediation of the relation between being and thinking by life, and therefore by affectivity and sensation as conditions of material experience. Moreover, insofar as these conditions (feeling, sensing) give rise to forms of spiritual experience, affectivity not only constitutes the distinction between matter and life or grounds the relation between life and thought, it also gives rise to a relation between life and spirit. It is thus a spiritual problem which returns us to the "tree of life" in Malick's film, to the genesis of affectivity. It is a spiritual prob-

lem that returns us to the question of how feeling and sensation first come into being, of how the opacity of being opens onto manifestation for the first time. If affect and sensation first come into being through the existence of life, how can this becoming-sensible itself be made sensible? Which also means: how can it be felt, how can it be made to affect us? And what becomes of cinema in its effort to make manifest that which is prior to manifestation? The most obvious fact about Malick's film, but also perhaps the easiest to overlook in parsing its commitments, is that the capacity of cinema to address these problems is first and foremost a technical capacity. If the spiritual, existential, and ontological questions posed by the voice-over of Malick's characters might seem to be answered by the "god's eye view" of the camera—its capacity to frame and render visible the material genesis of the cosmos—we should remember that this is in fact a technical frame. It is a frame enabled by a production team faced with immediately material problems of visual representation solved through the resources of current biological and physical theory, 3D scanners, and CGI special effects. Which also means that these are solved through considerable financial resources: by capital. What has to be thought, in thinking through Malick's film, is the fact that the gleaming corporate skyscraper of the architectural firm for which Sean Penn's character works, his late capitalist life-world, is

ter, life, and spirit, but how this relation is mediated by technics and by capital.

This is not, of course, to undermine the integrity of Malick's project, but rather to think its situation, the manner in which its own conditions of possibility are inscribed in those of cinematic representation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If the perfection of reminiscence is, for Schopenhauer, the true health of spirit, for cinema the effort to remember everything returns us, at its limit, to the restlessness of spirit afflicting each of Malick's films: that of a garbage man, a factory worker, a soldier, a colonist, a corporate architect. This is the restlessness not only of what we do not know but also of what we know too well, not only of the beginning but the end, not only of the origin of life but of life under capital.

The cinematic perfection of reminiscence is thus the passion of modernity, made manifest.

-Nathan Brown

# “REPRODUCE WHAT YOU ARE NOT”

The thesis: John Cage's goal is to turn history into indeterminacy by way of the technological production of global transparency. His method is precision. His ethics are formally situational, and their content is compassion. This brief essay will work to expand upon and explicate these terms, moving toward a general theory of Cage's practice and its relevance for contemporary culture.

In what amounts to Cage's theoretical statement on the philosophy of history, "History of Experimental Music in the United States," he quotes Sri Ramakrishna's answer to the classical question of theodicy: why, if God is good, is there evil in the world? Ramakrishna's answer is simply, "To thicken the plot." Cage will borrow this response, but in so doing will completely transgress its logic. He writes, "Why, if everything is possible, do we concern ourselves with history (in other words with a sense of what is necessary to be done at a particular time?)" In other words, given the fact that everything is potential, possibility, indeterminate, why do we have to deal with actuality, precision, determination?

In his lecture on "Indeterminacy," Cage frames this problem through a description of a music performance, Duo II for Pianists. He writes of a situation in which the performers are needing to operate so fast that they cannot reflect on what they are doing but must simply react. In this situation, "Rather than making the not-conscious parts face the conscious part of the mind, the conscious part, by reason of the urgency and indeterminacy of the situation, turns towards the not-conscious parts." Indeterminacy (the performers must always react; nothing is prescribed for them) is not given here, it is produced through the intensity of the performance. In this space of indeterminacy, one acts, and acts with urgency.

This is perhaps different than the way we usually think of the indeterminate, as something chaotic, diffuse, dispersed. Here indeterminacy is something produced. For Cage, indeterminacy does name the primordial chaos of life, but in the world we live in, there is something called history - there is a series of events and logics that, if we let them, determine us, and, in so doing, remove our humanity. He makes this point earlier in the lecture on Indeterminacy, where, in a moment of self-critique, he writes against his own piece Music of Changes: "The fact these things [directions for performer] that constitute, though only sounds, have come together to control a human being, the performer, gives the work the alarming aspect of a Frankenstein monster." Politically for Cage this is a charged situation, where a slight movement in this general mode

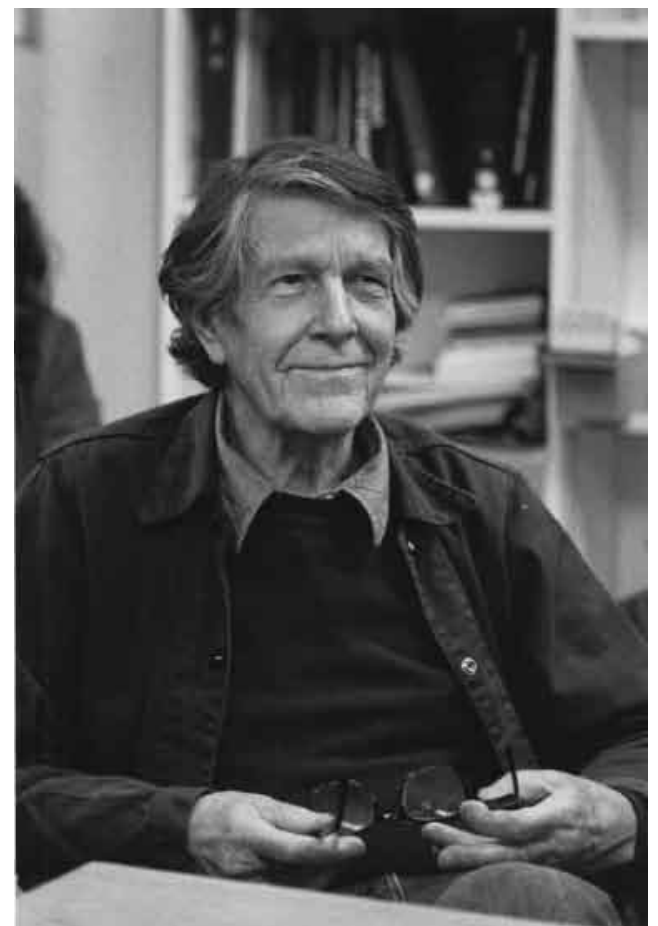
of communication equates the space of performance and the space of politics, and we move over from "Frankenstein monster to dictator."

What is inhuman, then, is that which determines. Humanity is gained, affirmed, achieved, or regained, in the technological production of indeterminacy. The strands of Cage's texts we have seen still have not made this point clear. Let us return to his re-writing of theodicy, with these other moments now in mind. Why do we concern ourselves with what has to be done at a particular time if we could be doing anything? Because there are Frankenstein monsters. Because there are dictators. And what those monsters do is to force a certain determination, deny this very possibility of noticing that all is possible. What becomes necessary in this situation is the production of situations - such as the Duo II for Pianists - which move our minds out of a mechanical determinacy and open them to the urgency of acting in an indeterminate space.

Hence for Cage we must move away from the theological question and towards the historical question. There can be no God who determines the universe - even if in a humorous way to "thicken the plot." It is we ourselves who must thicken the plot, and not with mere intrigue or entertainment, but in order to enrich and expand the possibilities for contemporary experience. At the same time, this is not a purely formal move, or one which comes without ethics. (As I was recently reminded, Hannah Arendt claims that the origin of totalitarianism is the belief that anything is possible.) Hence Cage continues his re-writing: "One does not then make just any experiment but does what must be done. By this I mean one does not seek by his actions to arrive at money but does what must be done; one does not seek by his actions to arrive at fame (success) but does what must be done; one does not seek by his actions to provide pleasure to the senses (beauty) but does what must be done; one does not seek by his actions to arrive at the establishing of a school (truth) but does what must be done." I am reminded of the statement by the World War II resistance fighter Jean Cavailles, "The logical processes of mathematicians are necessary, even the stages of mathematical science are necessary, and likewise this struggle we are leading." In other words, one clears out the ego, the conscious, the concern with one's own life, success, pleasure, production, and moves toward a model of making situations in which we can become "resistant by logic" as Canguilhem said of Cavailles.<sup>1</sup>

But the question for so many today is, what do we resist? We are not in

Cavailles' day of a clear object to resist, the Frankenstein monsters and dictators. We live in a time of vast oppression and cruelty, but it is not so transparent, not broken through to the surface in order to announce its presence. The present is difficult to resist because it hides itself so well. In his book Violence, Slavoj Žižek tells a version of the following joke. A man goes to an avant-garde theater to see a performance with his friend. Right before the show starts, he asks his friend where the bathroom is. The friend says it's around the corner to the left. He says further that he won't see a normal bathroom (it's an avant-garde theater after all) but only a pot in the corner. So the man goes, pees in the pot in the corner, and goes back to his seat. He asks his friend if he missed anything. The guy says, Yea, this idiot came out on stage,



peed in the pot in the corner, and walked off. For Žižek we are like this moment - part of a world of violence but without a vision of our role in it.

Here is where we turn to the idea of global transparency. Art historian Branden Joseph has shown convincingly that Cage, under the influence of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy while in Chicago, became deeply engaged with the idea of transparency in modern architecture and sculpture. Cage's most frequent references here would be to the glass homes of Mies van der Rohe and Duchamp's sculpture, "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even." In such works, Cage was fascinated by the way in which art and its environment were fused through the glass. In the case of Duchamp, for instance, Cage stated, "the thing that I like so much is that I can focus my attention wherever I wish. It helps me to blur the distinction between art and life and produces a kind of silence in the work itself. There is nothing in it that requires me to look in



one place or another or, in fact, requires me to look at all. I can look through it to the world beyond." The reference to Silence, as Joseph notes, is particularly interesting for Cage's work. Indeed, in his most famous piece, 4'33", in which a performer sits at a piano for that amount of time without playing anything, Cage similarly makes the work itself silent. But in doing so he does not make silence ("There is no such thing as silence," he famously stated), but rather brings the world around the event into it. A transparency is produced between the environment and the music, since, after all, one does not hear nothing during 4'33"; rather one is opened up to hear everything that is happening around one.

For Cage transparency did not stop here, however, as it tied in to several other influences of his: Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, and D.T. Suzuki. For McLuhan, technological mediation meant that our central nervous systems were now effectively in the outside world - an assertion that has only grown truer with increasing reliance on technology for memory, communication, and security. By working with technology to produce transparency - van der Rohe's glass and steel for instance, but, even more, Cage's manipulation of sound via electronics - Cage could mediate the terms art and life with the commonality of technological expansion into both domains. Moreover, given that these networked technological systems were increasingly global - part of what McLuhan termed the "global village" - for Cage the focus on technology opened up the possibility for transparency across borders. A further influence on this question of globality was Fuller. Cage cites him in *A Year from*

Monday: "Fuller: as long as one human being is hungry, the entire human race is hungry." Since the individual is now part of this networked global society, s/he needs to be concerned with everyone the world over. But this matters not if borders, identities, egos block individuals from recognizing this interdependence. Hence the necessity of transparency.

A further philosophical meaning of transparency was provided for Cage by D.T. Suzuki. In Suzuki's work, transparency referred to the relationship between individual and world. It provided the solution to the age-old question of immanence or transcendence for it existed prior to the claims of other. Transcendence names the world by attempting to move away from it, but is left with the problem of how to prove the reality it is now extricated from. Immanence names the world by submerging into, but is left with difficulty of proving that it can speak accurately to a situation it is enmeshed in. Transparency for Suzuki is what happens when one claims neither to transcend the world nor be immanent to it, but rather simply exists, without words or concepts. What differentiates Suzuki's transparency from mere stupidity or "animal" existence is that it is something that is gained through practice and discipline. One cannot simply stop words or concepts from forming in one's mind. Rather, one must use the practices of meditation, koans, and the master-disciple relationship in order to bring into experience a transparency beyond what can be imagined. Cage believed that music, writing, art, performances, and so forth, could be part of such a regime of practices.

These two sets of influence were one and the same for Cage: "To me that means that the disciplines, gradual and sudden (principally Oriental), formerly practiced by individuals to pacify their minds, bringing them into accord with ultimate reality, must now be practiced socially—that is, not just inside our heads, but outside of them, in the world, where our central nervous system effectively now is." One could perhaps even go so far as to say that his genius lay precisely in his ability to bring together various knowledges in a sophisticated, integrated manner. He learned how to operate in history by turning history back into the indeterminacy needed for one to open up to the present and learn how to act in it with urgency and with care. And he knew that one needed exacting models of how to create situations which could produce these forms of transparency.

In I-VI, a series of lectures given at Harvard, Cage compiled a number of citations brought together through selection and chance operations. One of the quotes is the following, from Thoreau: "Compassion is a very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will not bear to be stereotyped." Thoreau makes the statement in the context of

a passage on the inherent violence of nature, and the fact that such violence cannot be considered immoral - rather only amoral. To say that compassion is an untenable ground is to say that a logical defense of it in this context of violence is impossible. Compassion cannot be a ground, further, because it is not about reflection and then action; it is action - it is quick, precise intervention. Thoreau uses the word only twice else in *Walden*. In one instant, he speaks of the momentary compassion of a hunter who does not shoot a fox, but then, compassion wanes, and he fires. Compassion cannot be defended as ground, for, on reflection, a hunter realizes that he hunts. Compassion can only occur, and maintain itself, in an urgency of the situation. The hunter found no such urgency. But compassion, if it cannot defend itself, can still plead with us. It can beg of us in a moment to do otherwise than what we would do; it can speak to us, to say, "do what must be done." Stereotyped, as Thoreau uses it, has two meanings: (1) that it cannot be fixed and (2) in a more obsolete sense, that it cannot be printed, that is to say, will not find its defense in writing. Compassion will be an expeditious moment, one born of a situation, or it will be nothing at all.

To speak in the present of an ethics of compassion is to speak of an ethics other than critique. Compassion is not analysis, it is not defensible, it cannot be written; often, in most instances, it cannot even be witnessed. If history is the gathering up and narrativization of events, and indeterminacy the insistence on meaning outside the clutches of Meaning, then compassion is the ethics of indeterminacy; that is to say, compassion is what ethics looks like when we cannot give an account of ourselves, but must nevertheless count ourselves as responsible. In opening up history to indeterminacy, Cage sought to open up the subject to the sounds, the vagaries, to the exterior moments that would require expeditious subjects. Or again, from Cage's "History": "He was attached to sounds and because of this attachment could not let sounds just be sounds. He needed to attach himself to the emptiness, to the silence. Then things - sounds, that is - would come into being of themselves." All of Cage's practices were devoted to letting sounds be sounds, to letting them come into their essential indeterminacy so that subjects could experience and implement a compassion that could never defend in words, in the midst of history. Hence: John Cage's goal is to turn history into indeterminacy by way of the technological production of global transparency. His method is precision. His ethics are formally situational, and their content is compassion.

- Avi Alpert

1. I owe these citations to Alain Badiou's *Metapolitics*

# **machete**

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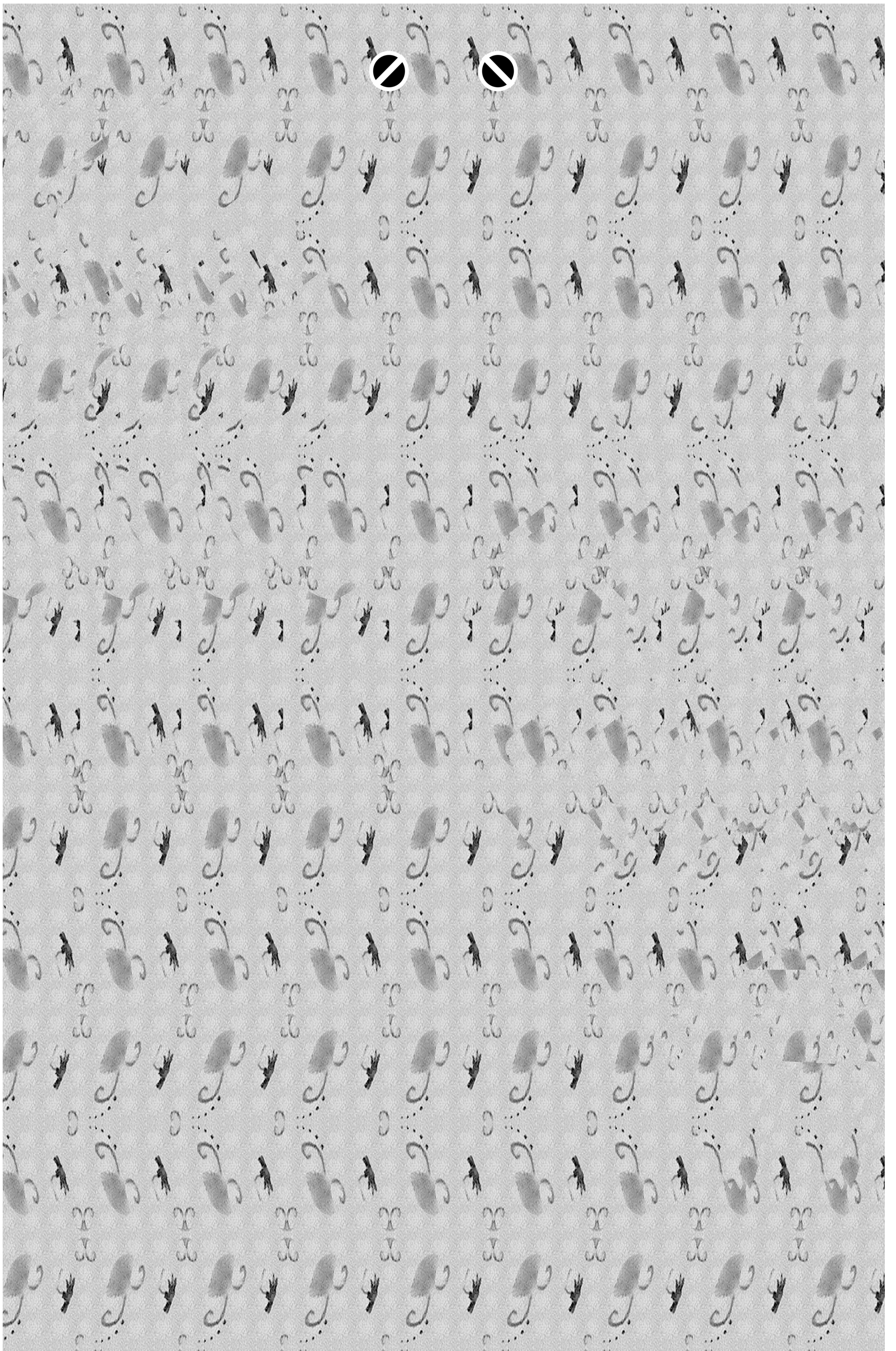
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# Elaine Cameron-Weir's *Sculptor Galaxy*



Two black, rectangular volumes sit side-by-side on the floor to the left. One is ceramic, one glass. They are titled *Plinth I* and *Plinth II*, yet nothing rests on either. Moving clockwise to the wall opposite the door, a tall and skinny steel rod leans against the wall; it's covered in rolling tobacco, and titled *100 (steel)*. Stapled to the right-hand wall is an indigo square of silk, upon which are sewn four small brass bars in a vaguely geometric arrangement. This piece is untitled. There is something mute about Cameron-Weir's collection of objects in *Sculptor Galaxy*, her single-room, four-object show at Possible Projects in Philadelphia. They share the space without interacting directly, but through them Cameron-Weir generates a degree of mystery, a quietly humming energy. She has deftly placed each object so that it sits, stands, or hangs in what feels like a very particular spatial relation to its neighbors, and this specificity triggers the mind's instinct to interpret.

In the ensuing search for meaning, formal characteristics are magnified. One notes the textural difference between the ceramic and glass plinths, and that one plinth is about half the size of the other. Examining the tobacco-skinned steel rod, one encounters the sweet smell of the dried leaves, enough to roll one hundred cigarettes. And it's difficult not to see the brass rods on their indigo field as some vaguely familiar constellation. But through the

unmistakable smell of tobacco, Cameron-Weir may be asking that we keep the representational urge at bay.

Cameron-Weir's works are often impregnated with perfumes of her own creation, or with other powerful scents like coconut oil.

Smell is a potent vehicle for private associations, and the associative mode is quite different from that of representation. Tobacco's odor reminds me of my childhood piano teacher, a leathery man who stank unbearably of smoke, and whose hands felt inexplicably like gingerbread as they corrected my poor playing. Luce Irigaray famously said "the eye objectifies and masters...In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch, hearing, has brought about the impoverishment of bodily relations." Irigaray's critique identifies vision and visual representation as tools for establishing a sense of control, whose force could perhaps be interrupted by the more physical, enveloping nature of our other four senses. For example, the way in which smells transport us back inside an experience denies the opportunity for dominion described by Foucault in his analysis of the Panopticon. The Panopticon, a prison-design invented by Jeremy Bentham in 1785, consists of jail cells arrayed around a central observation tower,

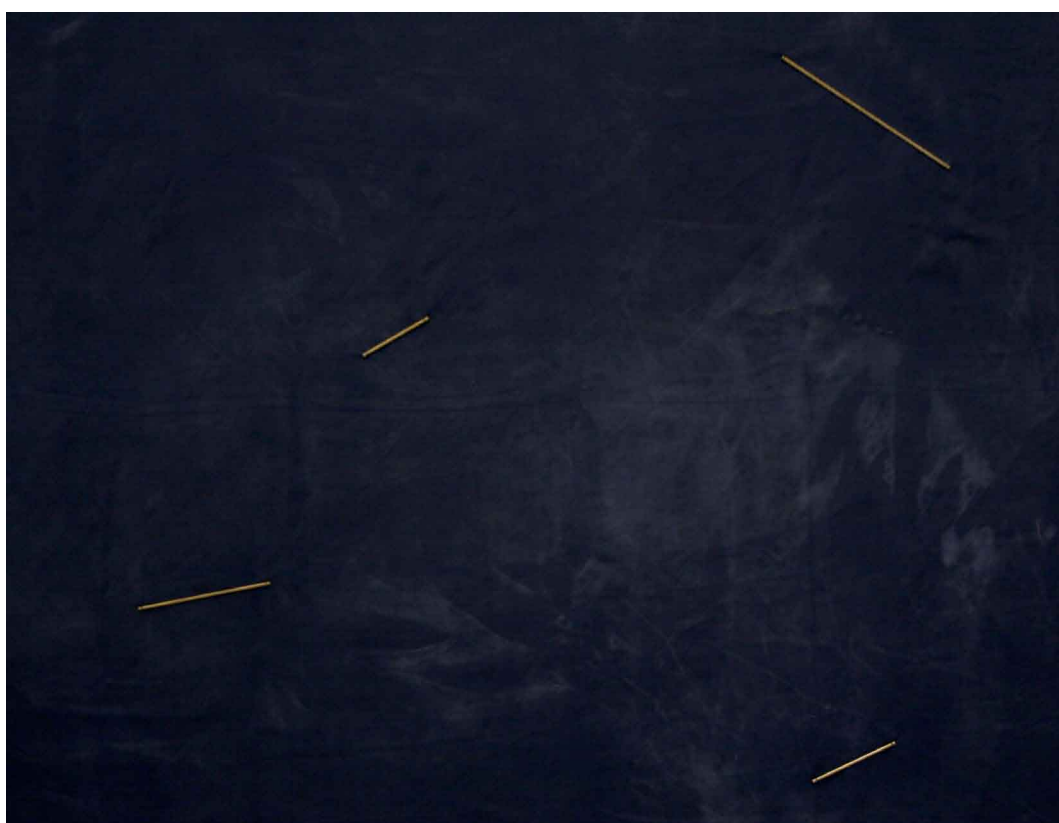
such that any cell can be observed at any time, producing a removed, all-seeing vision that exerts power through surveillance.

The smell of tobacco in *Sculptor Galaxy* complicates the effort to stand at a remove and make judgments. The plinths support nothing at all, which ultimately feels less nihilistic than simply realistic. The brass bars on a blue field are just brass bars on a blue field; beautiful to look at, but no more representative of the night sky than a cloud of a cow.

So what, then, of the exhibition's title? According to Wikipedia, the sculptor galaxy is the central galaxy in the Sculptor Group, one of the nearest clusters of galaxies to our own Milky Way. You can see it with a good set of binoculars. The name derives from the galaxy's location in the constellation Sculptor, originally named The Sculptor's Workshop by Abbé Nicolas Louis de Lacaille. Cameron-Weir's work is a reminder that looking at art is not so different from looking at the stars. We give a star a name, we group stars into constellations, but all these operations are happening only in our mind. The stars burn on. So too with works of art: we can think what we wish about their context and meaning, but they continue their independent, mysterious existences. Yet naming unquestionably enriches our relationship to stars and to art; it probably creates our relationship to begin with. The smell of tobacco reminds us that our names and interpretations ultimately tell us little about the world, but a great deal about ourselves.

- Daniel Gerwin

Irigaray Citation:  
Interview in M. F. Hans  
and G. Lapouge (eds) *Les Femmes, la pornographie et l'erotisme*. Paris (1978)



# The Time That Remains: Elia Suleiman's Policy of Ambiguity

In February of 2010, a Hamas operative was assassinated in a Dubai hotel room by a group of men using stolen identities and forged UK passports. Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence service, was strongly suspected of orchestrating the assassination (they have been caught using the stolen identity trick before). However, at a press conference, the Israeli foreign minister refused to confirm or deny their involvement in the killing, citing Israel's official "policy of ambiguity" in these matters.

Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman understands both the horror and the humor of a phrase like "policy of ambiguity". Consider the full title of his semi-autobiographical new film, *The Time That Remains: Chronicles of a Present Absentee*. After seeing the film, the phrase after the colon might sound a bit too self-consciously literary and clever. Progressing through sections set in four distinct eras (1948, 1970, 1980, present day), the film chronicles 60 years in the life of a Palestinian family, the Suleimans, living in Nazareth. It begins before Elia is born, with the 1948 war that resulted in the creation of the state of Israel, and ends with Elia witnessing the death of his elderly mother. With wry humor, and an impressive lack of self-pity, Suleiman depicts the quiet humiliations and frustrations of living as a secondary citizen in one's own country. Suleiman is not a psychologically oriented filmmaker, and he constructs his portrait of the family and of Nazareth visually and aurally rather than through conventional exchanges of dialogue. His characters are rarely shown speaking, never in the case of the Elia character. Since this is perfectly in keeping with Suleiman's aesthetic, underlining the implications of the characters' muteness with "present absentee" might seem unnecessary or forced.

But the phrase is not Suleiman's invention; like "policy of ambiguity", "present absentee" is official Israeli terminology – a category for Palestinians who fled or were expelled from their homes during the 1948 creation of Israel, but who remained within its borders thereafter. This fact, which is almost never noted in reviews of the film, is indicative of an important aspect of Suleiman's method – the extent to which his distinct aesthetic, for all its absurd humor and surrealism, is rooted in, and is an extension of, a lived reality.

Building on the style developed in Suleiman's previous two features, *The Time That Remains* plays out largely as a series of carefully composed deadpan tableaux, usually revolving around a gag of some sort (the most audacious features a young Palestinian man pacing in front of his house talking about dance music on his cell phone while the gun barrel of an Israeli tank parked a few feet away moves with him, tracking his every move). These are often hilarious, sometimes terrifying, and frequently tinged with melancholy, anger, warmth, bitterness and nostalgia (the range of emotions and tones Suleiman achieves is remarkable). Though Suleiman's rigorous aesthetic appears fairly simple, he touches on a surprisingly diverse range of

cinematic practices. He is most often, and easily, compared to Tati and Keaton for his masterful choreography, and for the silent deadpan character he plays repeatedly in his films, and tonally there is also more than a touch of Chaplin's complex sentimentality present. But Suleiman, who retains a restless and experimental temperament, is up to more than a pastiche of silent comedy. Within his episodic, tableau/gag structure, he often incorporates jarring moments of surrealism that recall Bunuel or Roy Andersson; deadpan moments of observational comedy that bring Jarmusch to mind; quiet moments of durational, naturalistic minimalism that are not unlike Kiarostami; and a sharply ironic sensibility, as well as a preference for bright, precise, visuals, that is reminiscent of Kubrick. (It's characteristic of Suleiman's complex relationship to his own influences, as well as to cinematic history in general, that one of the more Kubrickian moments of satire comes via a mildly unflattering allusion to *Spartacus*, the least Kubrickian of Kubrick films.) However, Suleiman's eclectic, semi-surrealist aesthetic is not simply a game of cinematic posturing and allusions. His films are grounded in personal experience and are politically and historically rooted in ways that enable them to avoid becoming too precious or indulgently hermetic – a risk that other contemporary



filmmakers working with modes of surrealism are not always able to avoid (Roy Andersson, David Lynch, Guy Maddin, etc). Suleiman's use of surrealism returns to the movement's historically grounded, politically charged foundations (the contemporary surrealist closest to Suleiman in approach is probably the Czech filmmaker Jan Svankmajer).

Suleiman resists being pinned down politically as much as he does stylistically. Though generally praised by critics, Suleiman has been labeled by some as a blatant propagandist for the Palestinian cause, while from the other side he has been criticized for playing to the apolitical tastes of international art-cinema audiences, and for a lack of clear political commitment. Partisan complaints of this sort are probably unavoidable, and while neither charge is exactly meritless, both misunderstand Suleiman's approach. He paints with a wide brush, and this applies to the Palestinian characters as much as the Israeli ones. He doesn't demonize the Israelis that he shows (mostly soldiers, politicians and police), though it's true that they are often portrayed as slightly boorish and buffoonish (as authority figures are in Chaplin). The Palestinian characters (mostly the Suleiman family) are more stoic

and admirable, but there are Palestinian buffoons – such as the Suleiman's drunken neighbor, who perpetually douses himself with gasoline but can never manage to light the match properly – and there is a genuinely tender moment with an Israeli policeman involving a karaoke performance of Celine Dion. Suleiman doesn't really mount much of a political argument – other than to denounce the oppression of Palestinians in the most general way. However, his lack of political nuance is no more grounds for objection than his lack of psychological nuance; they simply fall outside the range of his aesthetic. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Suleiman's aesthetic range is too broad and ambitious to focus on the conventional sorts of political or psychological 'nuance'. The political force of Suleiman's films come from the variety and complexities of the emotions and ideas he creates, rather than any precise position he defines for himself in relation to particular issues or events. Suleiman's mute arrangements of time, space and sound refute the absurd linguistic brutality of phrases like "policy of ambiguity" and "present absentee". In this way, we could say that he reclaims the policy of ambiguity from its nightmarish state-sponsored form and returns it to its natural and productive domain – that of the artist undermining the oppressive realities imposed by ideological forces.

The first half of the title, *The Time That Remains*, seems to hover between two conflicting interpretations – is it a rallying call or a lamentation? But in Suleiman's hands, perhaps these are not mutually exclusive. Although his deft use of cinematic space is the most immediately striking feature of his style, duration is perhaps an even more crucial element of Suleiman's cinema. His many single-shot tableaux frequently heighten our awareness of time passing, while his comedic sensibility constantly reminds us of the extent to which successful comedic timing comes from the literal mastery of time. Indeed, few filmmakers so enthusiastically exploit the elasticity of time with such grace and poise. *The Time That Remains* could be taken as an open question referring to our relationship to this elasticity, which is the source of everything comic as well as tragic for Suleiman: time, which is always vanishing and yet stretches on endlessly; which prolongs all suffering even as it provides the only vehicle for hope; which undermines the meaning we construct and yet provides the only form that meaning can take. For Suleiman, in our relationship to time we are all inevitably present absentees, and we must come to terms with this if we want to accomplish anything. The time that remains is up to us, up to a certain point, and then it's not. If Suleiman has a political message, it is a two-sided one, which comes with a characteristically grave wink: he exalts the liberating multitude of possibilities that reside within the elasticity of time, while warning us that time is all we have, and that it won't last forever.

-Mike Vass