

American Cinema (and Hou Hsiao-Hsien) in 2005~6

In a room surrounded by chairs and lights, a man with long blond hair and black women's underwear sits on the right side of the screen facing a sofa, and an afro-american man in a fat suit sits on the left. The afro-american man is trying hard to get confirmation about his job, selling ads in the phone book. The transvestite, on the other hand, seems to realize that the afro-american man is talking to the wrong person, but he is still trying to adapt and listen to the end of the conversation. The afro-american man, having heard what he needs to hear, says hello and is about to leave the room when he realizes he has forgotten his papers and returns to find his listener, a transvestite, asleep. After the afro-american man leaves, a business card falls from the transvestite's hand.

In this scene, the composition of the furniture in the foreground and background, which makes the human figure look small, and the strong bluish-green screen, which seems to have been deliberately colored to resemble the old Sovicolor, show that Gus Van Sant's *Last Days* (2005) is strongly influenced by Aleksandr Sokurov's *Whispering pages/Тихие страницы* (1994), among others. This is clear despite the fact that the director himself claims that *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and this film were influenced by Tarr Béla and Chantal Akerman. Other Sokurov influences include: a moving shot that follows the protagonist Blake (Michael Pitt) as he wanders alone; a distant view of him sitting and standing by the water's edge, having escaped the detective and the man who came looking for him; a shot that captures Blake in an odd position in the middle of his back, standing still for a long time, then crawling straight to the floor; and a shot of the double-exposure shot of Blake's spirit taken from the gaze of the gardener who discovers his body....

As Godard inserted in his own *Histoire du Cinema* (1988~98) and Leos Carax chose the film *Whispering pages* as one of carte blanche for the 2005 Vienna Retrospective, it is true that Sokurov at the end of the 1980s, still before the collapse of the Soviet Union, is already a classic for Western filmmakers. It is understandable that some people would criticize *Last Days* as if it were just a copy. But perhaps *Psycho* (1998), which "traced" Hitchcock's film like a Warhol portrait that accurately traced the outline of Marilyn Monroe while its brushstrokes added something new, was some sort of preparation for such a film. What makes the film *Last Days* interesting is its willingness to use the most Russian of images to depict the last days of the most American rock star, who got the idea from Kurt Cobain's death. The most beautiful scene is the one in which the performance peeks through the window of the cabin where Blake is holed up. As the screen zooms back in, a guitar, then vocals, then drums, and then a song by Sonic Youth fills the screen, followed by a close-up of a woman played by Kim Gordon, a member of Sonic Youth, in silence (1). Unlike the other characters who come to the cabin and try to use Blake for themselves, this short scene, in which she is the only one who urges Blake to leave in order to free him, is very touching.

By the way, this film consists of several parts, one from the point of view of Blake and the other from the point of view of the people who come to the cabin. In other words, the time depicted from one point of view is later repeated from another angle. When the people leave the villa and Blake is alone, his life is over. Gus Van Sant himself claims that he borrowed this "one time seen from multiple points of view" technique from Tarr Béla's *Satantango* (1998), which he also used in *Elephant*. He also claims that the idea for the cereal and pasta cooking scenes came from Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). However, as has gradually become the case with the films of Tarr Béla and Akerman, and with Angelopoulos after *Voyage to Chythère* (1984), everything in these films is so perfectly controlled that all that is visible is the power and superiority of the filmmaker. It is wonderful that they have achieved such perfection, but because they are so self-sufficient in their perfection, the only thing we can see is the tedious assertion that "I am the one who controls everything," which always stands above the power of the system that sustains itself. For example, in the long scene in *Werckmeister Harmony* (2000) in the store where people come in and the beginning or the scene where people turn into a mob, there is no moment at all where the choreographed movement of people and cameras makes the audience feel that the scene risks jeopardizing its own realization because of its length. In contrast, a great filmmaker's work, like Hitchcock, like Rob Tregenza's *Talking to Strangers* (1988), or like Dreyer, makes the audience sweat by revealing the "risk" of exposing the limits of the system on which he or she relies.

Interestingly, Gus Van Sant, in an interview at the time of the release of *Gerry*, said that Hitchcock did not break convention for various reasons when he used one scene and one shot in *Rope* (1948), and that in Tal Béla's film the shot around a person is just for that purpose and "just a long The shot is long, and the shot, the action, and the story seem to blend together," and that, he says, is what is new about it (2). But now we see that *Rope* is a great work because it is a historical document that exposes the limitations of a system captured by its various reasons and conventions, as mentioned above.

André Bazin once wrote in "What is Cinema?" as a principle to be relied upon, "When the nature of an event requires the simultaneous presentation of two or more elements of an action, montage is forbidden" (3), and about Robert Flaherty's seal in *Nanook of the North* (1922) with its seal and Eskimo waiting to be harpooned, "it is inconceivable that they are not shown in the same shot," while he wrote about Hitchcock's *Rope*, "whatever its artistic importance, I will even say that in this film a classic decoupage has taken place" , but that "the film is not a montage." But then, the "risk" that Hitchcock was taking was probably lost on Bazin.

As we read in "The Evolution of the Language of the Image," also in "What is Cinema?", for Bazin at that time, the "spatial depth" of Orson Welles and William Wyler, who respected the "spatial unity" that guaranteed authenticity, was new and had to be defended because it "incorporated montage as one of its own formative elements" in

contrast to the classic pre-1939 film découpage. It is no secret that this led Jean-Luc Godard to write a response "defense and illustration of the classic découpage technique", and that Bazin, in his defense of William Wyler, negatively criticized John Ford and Jacques Becker as typical examples of "films that use classical découpage. However, in regard to Wyler's use of spatial unity in his direction, we can take, for example, Betty Davis fainting and collapsing on the floor when she is told that a letter of invitation addressed to her lover, whom she shot dead, has been found in *The Letter*, or Herbert Marshall, the husband has a heart attack in *The Little Foxes*, and then his wife Betty Davis sits in his chair and looks at him and says, "I'm sorry, but I can't help it." The scene of Herbert Marshall collapsing on the stairs behind his wife Betty Davis, who abandons him in her chair (unlike Bazin's description, the shot is not fixed but a slight forward movement), though perfect in itself, is captured in a spatial identity too carefully prepared, instead of Hitchcock's *Rope* with its risk of "walking on a tightrope". In other words, because the shot "perfectly anticipates" the falling and collapsing of the film, even though it is an "adventure" to keep the movement within a single spatial identity.

And in a scene taken as an example from *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), where Dana Andrews calls Theresa Wright to say goodbye while being watched by Fredric March, who is listening to Harold Russell play piano with his prosthetic hand in a bar owned by Hoagy Carmichael, the scene is also "perfectly anticipated". As Bazin notes, although in Wyler's film, panning shots by Greg Toland appears to give the audience free choice in the object of their gaze, in fact, the dominance of the distant telephone over the foreground piano performance is demonstrated by the insertion of a screen that captures only March and Andrews together. The same can be said of the final scene, also analyzed by Bazin, in which Russell's wedding scene actually becomes the location for the reunion of Andrews and Wright. In other words, unlike Jean Renoir, who was similarly defended by Bazin, in Wyler's films "spatial unity" is rather a "risk aversion" to manipulate the audience and a means to determine hierarchy. In contrast, Becker's *Antoine et Antoinette*, which has been compared to *The Best Years of Our Lives*, is a film in which, in its découpage, there is no break in the action until Antoine remembers where he placed his lottery ticket after hitting his head in a fistfight, due to its insistence on continuity. In 1950, there was a lot of location shooting, and the film was shot and edited in a classic découpage style to keep up with the rhythm and direction of the film, as if the characters were running. The difficulty of maintaining continuity was overlooked in *Antoine et Antoinette* (and in Becker's later work), where classical découpage was presumably essential for editing.

In the same text, Bazin points out the true goal of the most moving images in Flaherty's *Nanook*: "The relationship between Nanook and the seal, the actual length of the waiting time," which, unlike Becker's case, could have been pointed out in the dramatic films of Roberto Rossellini, whom Bazin himself fought as the defender.

However, after the tuna fishing in Stromboli (1950), when Rossellini depicted this "time of waiting" also for the manifestations of thought and love, as in Europe '51 (1952) and Viaggio in Italia (1954), these thoughts and loves, unlike hunting and animal predation in documentaries, are unpredictable in terms of when they will happen, and therefore, "the time of waiting" is not a "time of waiting. Therefore, they could not remain in "spatial unity. The pioneer, of course, is Erich von Stroheim, whom Bazin, along with Flaherty and Murnau, cites as an example of opposition to expressionism and montage, but does not mention in specific detail. When the shot-counter-shot of close-ups of the dentist Gibson Goland and his patient ZaSu Pitts in Greed (1922) appears during the dentist is being mesmerized his patient's sleeping face, or when the scene of Faye Ray seeing off her beloved Captain whom Stroheim himself plays and Mrs. Captain in the torrential rain at the end of The Wedding March (1928) is relentlessly prolonged, the viewer is aware of time as a subject even more than all the details. The relentlessness of the montage is perhaps due to the fact that at the time of silent cinema, there was no other method, and Rossellini also said, "Without montage, Stroheim's films would not exist» (4), which again records the historical limits of the means.

By the way, this is by no means an attempt to criticize Bazin's text, which is still important 50 years later. However, unlike in the 1950s, when Bazin's text was written, the spectacle of one-shot images has been depicted as a series of "shocking images" to fill in the gaps in the daily news programs, and the advanced processing technologies such as computer graphics are threatening the assurance of truth. I would like to say that what was latent in the films of Becker and Rossellini, but not pointed out in the texts of Godard's time, is now emerging with unprecedented importance for those of us living in the 21st century, who are influenced by images on a daily basis. On the other hand, it should be noted that the more self-sufficient a film is in the documentary genre, the more it risks becoming a pawn in the manipulation of information because it is unaware of the fact that it is losing its ground due to the excess of images and the loss of assurance of truth. Already in 1946, Bazin had pointed out in Capra's Why We Fight, which easily shifted the prewar image of the "beautiful country of Japan" to that of the "Planet of the Apes," that "the main driving force of that mechanism seems to me to be particularly dangerous for the future of the human spirit." This is by no means limited to the propaganda genre.

Gus Van Sant's words about Hitchcock lack this historical awareness of continuity and the visual present. Not that I particularly blame him, but that, for example, seems to me to be the limitation of the fascinating film Gerry. The use of Argentine landscapes to create a sense of nowhere by mixing in landscapes that are hardly American, and the techniques of micro-light photography and special effects that make us lose our sense of time, in fact, conceal the film's own "outside" – the opportunity for the film to come into contact with its own historical limits. But the charm of Gerry lies in details that do not strive for perfection, such as the liberating atmosphere of the two actors in the unassuming distant shot of the comical

scene in which Casey Affleck is unable to descend from the top of a huge rock. By leaving imperfections outside of the authority of Tarr Berra and Akerman's films, Gus Van Sant barely seems to be in touch with anything "outside" his system, which cannot necessarily be reduced to the themes of sexuality that are so prevalent in the trilogy, which also includes *Elephant*. The same is true of Michael Pitt's performance in *Last Days* and Kim Gordon's amateurish dialogue as mentioned above. Furthermore, what is beyond the protagonist's final gaze in *Last Days* is "outside" the frame, never captured, and the audience is never able to know what it was. Here, Gus Van Sant also joins the works of contemporary auteurs in the vein of Roberto Rossellini, along with the limitations of cinema as a medium.

For example, in the opening episode of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Three Times* (2005), a scene of a man and a woman poking a ball in a billiard hall in 1966, the camera follows the two figures as they hold, poke, and alternate where the ball is going, alternating between Shu Qi and Chang Chen, who are in love, one by one, while the camera never lets the audience know how the game is developing. In other words, it is important to keep observing only the bodies of the couple as they share their time playing the game. Here, Hou Hsiao-Hsien also follows in the footsteps of Rossellini. For Hou, on the other hand, modernity is portrayed as a world of lost places, such as the billiard hall and the brothel in the 1911 episode that deepened *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998) into a silent film (which recalls the retrograde rediscovery of Italian cinema's ancestor Giovanni Pastrone, in Visconti's *L'innocente* (1976) and in Sicily in Coppola's *The Godfather Part 3* (1990)).

In the 2005 episode, Shu Qi, who has lost such a shared space, can only be captured in the brief moments when she reads her lover's suicide note, her face expressing sorrow. For Hou Hsiao-hsien, *Three Times* is a film that demonstrates the difficulty of finding a time and place to depict in the present age, and of course the connection between time and the moment of emotional revelation is Rossellini-like here as well. In other words, it is easy to point out that Rossellini's films are still the lifeblood of these active filmmakers, even before the 100th anniversary of his birth is celebrated or not.

And like Gus Van Sant, Terrence Malick's *The New World* (2005) is also tied to a Soviet filmmakers. Like Malick's previous film *The Thin Red Line* (1998), this film about the legend of the Native American princess Pocahontas is guided by multiple Virginia Woolf-like monologues that are the internal monologues of the characters. First, a green reflecting water surface is projected, and the voice of Qulianka Kircher, who plays Pocahontas, calling the spirits, is heard. Various hand gestures of Pocahontas appear, various gestures that we will see many times in the film: trying to reach out into the water, holding hands, and even holding her hands up to the sky. This opening section will immediately remind anyone of Godard's *Nouvelle Vague* (1990), but of course, if you remember Godard's frequent references to Alexandre Dovzhenko's wife, Yulia Sontseva, in the past, you can sense that these images of greenery and trees have undergone a cinematic stratification. The British ship at sea

is next on the screen. And John Smith, played by Colin Farrell, emerges from the darkness of the ship's bottom, holding up his bound hands as if in response to Pocahontas' hands. As the natives watch from the shore, the ship comes ashore, and as the captain, Christopher Plummer, begins to talk about his post-landing plans, a series of short landing shots accompany him. The relationship between the natural light and water inundating the images and the appearance of the voices of these people is such that the onscreen development seems to fragment, skip, and compress rapidly as the voices continue. The audience is then guided more by the repetition of Wagner's "Rhinégold" and Mozart's piano phrases and silence in the soundtrack and the voices than by the wild images.

In this regard, Malick appears to be referencing Alain Resnais. Although the film does not, as in Godard's case, have text and multiple voices unrelated to the characters in sound at the same time, but uses a lot of moving handheld and Steadicam footage and jump cuts, while the dialogue in Resnais' "a film that gives the impression of being in motion all the time and yet standing still" continues. The off-screen monologues never completely leave the psychology of the characters or the screen, as in the relationship between the images as an ever-changing background. The film remains old-fashioned in this sense, but near the end, Pocahontas/Rebecca boards a ship with her husband to go to England and meets a man who is Native American like herself. Unlike the woman, who already lives and dresses in white society, the man remains in his native garb. And when he appears in an English garden more reminiscent of *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961) than Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), looking around curiously, it suddenly reveals something that is rare, especially in Hollywood films, even though it is not at all unnatural in terms of the narrative development. It is not that the combination of the English garden and Native Americans is strange or unnatural. It may be that the veil of fiction that had been prepared and gradually removed by several elements, such as Pocahontas' modern costume and makeup, and the blood that does not splash at all in the sword-wielding battle scene, has been lifted here. The death of Pocahontas is announced by the voice of her husband reading a letter to their son, and after the screen shows her room, which is already deserted, a Native American man suddenly runs out of the doorway. What was that? Pocahontas, who is supposed to be dead, jumps and rolls on her side as if she had been freed from something, still in the costume she wore in England. But when did this really happen? How was it possible for a woman of this period to do a cartwheel in this costume? And so on.

After passing through these doubts about time, the river that reappears at the end of the film seems to flow from the period depicted in the film (fiction) into the "outside" of fiction. There again we are reminded of the timeless old man in Dovzhenko's *Zvenigora* (1928). That old man had already foretold the dizziness of transcending time and fiction as he dutifully digs in the gold mine, transcending the boundary between newsreel and fable, transcending time from beyond prehistoric times to the modern city. Whether Malick was referring to it or not is not clear. But there is a

desire there, rare in American cinema, as with Gus Van Sant, to point "outside". Of course, I have no intention of saying that this is a sign that American cinema is changing. For example, Monte Hellman, who recently made a new film, is one of the few American filmmakers who has often presented such "outside" (the protagonist and the shooter in *The Shooting* (1966) are reversed images of the same actor, the screen itself burns at the end of *The Two Lane Blacktop* (1971), and the man Everett McGill plays can control everyone is no particular psychic power in *Iguana*(1988)). But this has led him to Hollywood's ostracization and lack of understanding. But knowing that the United States has traditionally been a country that has popularized and used images to incorporate and dominate others in its own fiction rather than to show the "outside" of fiction, it is only natural that we cannot help but be interested in these minor domestic resistances and changes.

In *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), Clint Eastwood tells the tragic story of an Indian soldier (played by an actor somewhat reminiscent of Robert Blake in Abraham Polonsky's *Tell Them Williw Boy is Here*(1969)) in the aftermath of war who is used as a hero by the US government and dies an alcoholic death. Eastwood places it in a dual voice level of recollection from the soldier's point of view and the monologue of the soldier's son who interviewed him. That monologue was, in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, which however poetic, remained inside the fiction. Eastwood further elaborates on the fictionalization by showing in the credit titles photographs of the model soldiers and shots of the memorial erected on present-day Iwo Jima. But it is the other way around, in the context of the current war in Iraq, where perhaps 100 U.S. soldiers are dying in a month.

The film's guiding is the voice, for example like a cry "Iggy! I've been shot by my own side!" that brings the protagonists back to the battlefield from the radio broadcast announcing Roosevelt's death, that is consistent. The dark shadows and darkness of the night, a trademark of Eastwood's films, not only add to the beauty of the images, but also manipulate the audience's gaze by covering the bodies of soldiers blown away by the blast and the dismembered bodies, limiting their visible range. This shows that the director Eastwood himself is manipulating the viewer's gaze in the same way that the media intentionally manipulates to make the soldiers into heroes. In this respect, the film is much more complex than Joe Dante's excellent *Homecoming* (2005), which was also a critique of the Iraq War. The disastrous scene in which the protagonists must climb a model Iwo Jima island to raise money for the war effort, evoking memories of friends killed by friendly fire, would not have been possible without the darkness of the night and the light that illuminates it. This is a film that references and betrays on *Citizen Kane* (1941). The director Orson Welles criticized more than 20 years ago, "nowadays, when they shoot in color, they pay actors \$4 million and they don't care if they make it so dark you can't tell who is speaking(5)". But *Flag of Our Fathers* is a masterwork that reminds us of the existence of a rare filmmaker and his method of media (self-)criticism in the realm of Hollywood films with the goal of spectacle.

(1)For more information on the sound design of this film, see
http://www.fipresci.org/undercurrent/issue_0106/shatz_klinger.htm

(2)http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/winter2002/features/sands_time.php

(3)André Bazin, "What is Cinema?" Vol. 2: The Problem of Visual Language, japanese translation by Eiji Koumi, Bijutsu Shuppansha. The following references are to the same volume.

(4) Intervista con i Cahiers du Cinema (2), par Fereydoun Hoveyda and Jacques Rivette (Il Mio Metodo, Roberto Rossellini, edited by Adriano Apra, Marsilio Editori, p175)

(5)Troisieme entretien,in Cahiers du Cinema(Hors Serie No.12), interview by Bill Krohn,1982.2.19~20

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