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"THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE OF REALITY": SHAKESPEAREAN ADAPTATION AND THE CINEMATIC SUBLIME

TUTOR:

Ch.mo Prof.

Maurizio Calbi

COORDINATORE:

DOTTORANDA:

Serena Parisi

Ch.ma Prof.ssa

Lucia Perrone Capano

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Every night,
Peacefully,
Set the world on fire

Mew

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Introduction

The main purpose of the following thesis is to explore filmic adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare's plays in their interaction with contemporary cultural, social and political issues. The analysis takes the hint from a theoretical background focused on the materialist implications of the philosophical realm of aesthetics, and the role the sublime plays in bringing them out.

After retracing its origins as a rhetorical and philosophical notion intertwined with the history of aesthetics, I shall consider the sublime as an aesthetic category rooted in formal disorder and disproportion, which finds its concrete sources in the work's overall disunity, incompleteness and fragmentation. As its etymological meaning of "height", "peak", "exaltation" suggests, the sublime in the aesthetic is still related to the 'elevation' of the mind, raising excitement and astonishment in the audience. Considering the "dismantling" function that the sublime has historically assumed in nature as in art, my interest is to analyse how such a notion is created within the artwork and operates in relation to material reality. In doing so, my aim is to demonstrate that the sublime opens the work of art to an exchange with the actual context of both its production and reception, by which it ultimately *elevates* the mind of the receiver to the awareness of reality's own conflicts and crises.

My analysis intends to explore how the notion of sublime can work within the cinematic medium, and in particular, with cinematic adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare's plays. The passage from the Shakespearean source to the cinematic medium is already significant in this regard. As a matter of fact, the openness and incompleteness of Shakespeare's texts have paved the way for their ongoing re-interpretation and re-creation, by which issues of different eras could be variously voiced or acknowledged. Since no univocal, totalising vision emerges from the text nor holds it together, every performance of Shakespeare can be considered an adaptation already, while also inviting more radical appropriations. With the adaptation to the cinematic medium, the Shakespearean source text is necessarily made *fit* for different historical, cultural, linguistic or socio-political contexts, which often encourages readings from new or unconventional points of view. What follows is often a more or less explicit engagement with both cultural and socio-political issues of a specific historical moment, as well as the personal, intellectual response they may provoke in the adaptor/movie director.

My purpose is to examine the personal and historical concerns that can be involved in different Shakespearean adaptations/appropriations, and how the cinematic medium

carries them out. In order to do this, I define a concept of "cinematic sublime" as given by a series of cinematographic techniques and devices that carry the dismantling function of the sublime within the work of art, triggering an active, participatory response in the audience. The fundamental quality of the cinematic sublime is that it opens the work of art to a dialectical relationship with the cultural and social context in which it was produced and received. Consequently, I chose to focus on Shakespearean adaptations/appropriations which, while adjusting Shakespeare's texts to the cinematic medium, openly re-interpret their conflicts and ambiguities in the light of new personal and historical contexts and of different political, social and cultural issues. These films seem more apt to being analysed according to the notion of cinematic sublime because, far from being contained within the safe boundaries of fiction, they tend to exasperate the fissures and faultlines of their source texts. By questioning pre-established rules and given categories of representation, they destroy the totalising illusion of unity, and expose the disharmony and disproportion of their form. In this kind of adaptation, the peculiar relation between the cinematic medium and material reality is what creates the call for surprise or shock in the audience, the urge of raising doubts and uncovering clashes usually associated to the sublime. My work aims at showing how the sublime in art, through the subversion of traditional modes of representation, instead of relaxing or appeasing the audience, has them accordingly shocked or astonished, 'elevated' to the consciousness of reality's own fundamental disorder.

While looking for a cinematic form that could embrace such issues, I turned to the work of those filmmakers for whom the Shakespearean material could be considered an *instrument* and not the purpose of their art. This implies a personal and often daring reworking of the source texts, and Orson Welles is certainly a groundbreaking director in this regard. The first adaptation I chose to analyse is *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), as it inventively reworks the character of Falstaff by drawing on different Shakespearean plays, mainly *Henry IV*, Parts I and II, with brief borrowings from *Richard II*, *Henry V*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. My analysis takes the hint precisely from the "incredible unevenness" of the film, its apparent aesthetic and technical erring, since Welles's radical manipulation of the source texts is able to create an interaction with the material context in which the film was shot. The radical cutting and rearranging of the source texts is considered first of all as a means to expose and re-interpret the conflicts and ambiguities of which the Shakespearean texts themselves are made in the light of the director's own artistic and intellectual intent, and of contemporary socio-political issues as well. Furthermore, technical flaws, associated to extreme aesthetic choices, distract from the sound in favour of the image, leading to a

consequently more direct, astounding sensory impact on the audience. The overall stylistic disorder and instability of the film is what gives rise to the cinematic sublime in *Chimes at Midnight*: while retracing the interplay between Shakespeare's texts, Welles's re-creation of them and its reception, I will look at the film's 'faultlines' as a means to displace rhetorical readings of Shakespeare's plays, and to question univocal, pre-established interpretations of history and contemporary reality.

My work then focuses on Pier Paolo Pasolini's short film *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* (*What Are the Clouds?*), a 1968 appropriation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. As with Orson Welles, the Shakespearean source offers Pasolini a hint to explore his own artistic and intellectual interests; and even more so, since the Italian poet and filmmaker felt more clearly unbound from the constraints of Shakespeare's language and texts. What seems particularly relevant to the notion of cinematic sublime is the role of the Shakespearean material in leading to a new phase in both the director's cinematographic production and ideological concerns. Performed by semi-human puppets in a marionette theatre, the play is "incorporated" within a web of visual and verbal intertexts, shifting among a plurality of styles and media. While retracing the strategy of appropriation that structures the film, my analysis considers the "incorporation" of *Othello* in an intertextual discourse as a way to uncover and exasperate the rules of mimesis. In doing this, my aim is to underline the role of the cinematic medium in escaping and dissolving the boundaries of mimetic representation, allowing content to speak in its immediate materiality. According to Pasolini, cinema is structured by our very sensuous perception of the world, and thus *reproduces* reality instead of merely representing it, carrying the spectators to the same level of, or "within", reality itself. In *Nuvole*, the continuous tension between form and content carries out the disrupting effect of the cinematic sublime: it liberates *Othello* from the bounds of fiction, subtracts it from the reifying power of representation, allowing the film to re-discover a direct, unfiltered way to express a new, ever-changing reality with its own language.

Finally, I take into consideration a highly idiosyncratic Shakespearean appropriation, Gus Van Sant's 1991 *My Own Private Idaho*. The way this movie is relevant to the main interest of my thesis is twofold: besides daringly incorporating Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays within the context of early 1990s American street life, the film also appropriates and reinvents the visual style of Orson Welles's *Chimes At Midnight*. *My Own Private Idaho* is apparently a very deliberate effort to do something new and culturally specific with the source material: it creatively reworks the characters of Prince Hal and Poins as two adolescent gay hustlers, Mike and Scott, who belong to a family of street boys whose

'father', an old fat drug-addict named Bob Pigeon, is shaped on Welles's own portrait of Falstaff. The Shakespearean core of the film is in its turn entangled in a net of quotations where different media, genres and styles are intermingled, responding to the overall strategy of 'repetition with a difference' on which *Idaho* is built. Van Sant's relocation of the Shakespearean source so that it speaks through the 'outsiders', the socially, economically and sexually marginalised of the contemporary American landscape, discloses the dismantling effect of the cinematic sublime: the hybrid structure of the film, its open, unfinished form in continuous movement, pushes the spectator in a constant status of liminality, and it is from this in-between status that ideological distinctions between 'self' and 'other' can be seen as undermined.

The analysis of these three case studies according to the notion of "cinematic sublime" intends to demonstrate that the work of art is itself part of sensuous reality, inseparable from other realities – such as economic production, social conflict, political upheavals. The filmic adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare's plays chosen are particularly apt to show a deep engagement with contemporary cultural, social and political issues, since their form opens them to a vital exchange with the actual context of both their production and reception. Shakespeare's texts, reinvented through thought-provoking and daringly personal filmmaking strategies, testify not only for the directors' own artistic and intellectual experience and feelings, but also for the historical scenario in which the film is materially immersed. Thus, history, war, the body, social and economic unrest, sexual marginalization – all find their way to and from the movies themselves, creating a dialectic relationship between the work of art and the material background it springs from. The films considered, by means of a series of cinematographic techniques, intertextual and meta-textual devices, and repetition strategies, defy traditional rules and categories of representation, challenging the audience into re-thinking boundaries. Their aesthetic of the sublime, in relation with the material conditions of production and reception, is thus capable to uncover clashes and dismantle pre-established or univocal visions of reality, *elevating* the mind of the spectator to the awareness of the conflicts and crises in history and contemporary reality as well.

CHAPTER I

Aesthetics and the Sublime

The concept of aesthetics has historically covered a variety of subjects, caught up as it has been within a network of distinct discourses which both complement and compete with each other, and that, consequently, have opened it to constant redefinition. Nowadays, *aesthetics* does not only designate the philosophical discipline associated with critical judgement concerning works of art, but is also used in a more general sense with reference to beauty, quality, taste, and the distinguishing characteristics of a culture as manifested in art.[1]

In its original formulation by the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten, aesthetics does not refer in the first place to art, but "is born as a discourse of the body."[2] In accord with its etymological derivation from the Greek *αισθητικός* ("perceptive, sensitive, sentient"[3]), in turn derived from the verb *αισθάνομαι* ("to perceive, to feel, to sense"[4]), the term a*esthetic* distinguishes the material against the immaterial; those perceptions and sensations bound up with life as opposed to the conceptual domain of thoughts and ideas. Such a category, both etymologically and philosophically considered, can be said to concern the most concrete dimension of the human, to be rooted in the realm of everyday experience. In the words of Terry Eagleton, the territory of aesthetics

is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion in the world. The aesthetic concerns this most gross and palpable dimension of the human, […]. It is thus the first stirrings of a primitive materialism – of the body's long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical.[5]

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[1] See Pierre Destrée, Penelope Murray, "Introduction" to Id. (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015, p. 2.
[2] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 1.
[3] See "αισθητικός – ή – όν", in Franco Montanari, *Vocabolario della Lingua Greca*, Torino: Loescher, 2004, p. 98. The translation from Italian to English is mine.
[4] See "αισθάνομαι", in *ibid.* The translation from Italian to English is mine.
[5] Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

Being a discourse on sensuous perception, aesthetics speaks of art as of a "material" reality, which is inseparable from other realities such as the body, modes of production, class conflict, the state – so that "in speaking of art, [the aesthetic] speaks of these other matters too."[6] There follows that attitudes and responses to art, and the very status of artworks themselves, are inevitably conditioned by the wider concerns of society and of the historical period considered. The connection between works of art and the context of the material development of their historical moments becomes especially relevant in relation to manifestations of the *sublime* in art.

The term "sublime" has its origins in the Latin adjective *sublimis* (*sub-* "up to" + a second element perhaps related to *limen* "threshold", or to *limus* "oblique"), meaning "high, elevated" or, metaphorically, "noble"[7]; its appearance in English dates back to the late 16th century from Middle French *sublime*, in the sense "dignified, aloof", especially referred to the manner of expressing lofty ideas. Colloquially referred nowadays to anything either "lofty, grand, or exalted in thought, expression, or manner"; "of outstanding spiritual, intellectual, or moral worth", or "tending to inspire awe usually because of elevated quality (as of beauty, nobility, grandeur) or transcendent excellence"[8] – the sublime is a broadly aesthetic concept whose very complex development is intertwined with linguistic changes as well as the history of rhetoric, literary and art criticism, and philosophy.

Understanding it first of all as a category of aesthetic judgement and value, the sublime can be viewed as the most intense and vibrant dimension of any aesthetic experience: it singles out moments of increased contact on the part of the Beholder with any given aesthetic object, when what is touched, heard, seen, or felt almost seems to come alive for the Beholder. The impact of the sublime on the perceiving subject can be disorienting, exhilarating, or supremely quieting; this is due in part simply to the intensity of the experience itself, since the sublime captures ordinary experiences in their extraordinary quality.[9]

In order to understand the work of art as a means of lighting up a range of wider cultural, social and political issues, I shall first outline a brief history of the linkage between aesthetics and material reality and of the peculiar place that the sublime holds within it.

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[6] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[7] See "Sublimis", in Luigi Castiglioni, Scevola Mariotti, *Vocabolario della Lingua Latina*, Torino: Loescher, 1990, p. 1092. The translation from Italian to English is mine.
[8] "Sublime", in *Merriam-Webster.com*, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sublime>.
[9] See James I. Porter, "The Sublime", in Pierre Destrée, Penelope Murray (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 401-402.

1.1 Art as *Μίμεσις*

1.1.1 Plato's Condemnation of Imitative Poetry

Even though the aesthetic as such is born only with the rise of modern philosophy, art and its role within society have been central questions since the dawn of Western thought. Some of the first known examples are given by the work of archaic Greek poets themselves (from the seventh to the beginning of the fifth century B.C.), where they would incidentally allude to questions concerning poetry or art in general. Pronouncements on the origins and the aim of poetry can be found both in early epic writers (Homer and Hesiod) and in lyric and elegiac poets (Archilochus, Solon, Anacreon, Pindar and Sappho). On the whole, the archaic poets shared a common view which saw the source of poetry in divine inspiration and its aim in providing pleasure to and enchanting the listener; nonetheless, art was still not treated independently, but was perceived as nothing different from other aspects of life.

During the classical period, works of art continued to be a source of observations on aesthetic matters, but by then philosophy had widened its range from natural to aesthetic phenomena, becoming, from then on, the main representative of aesthetic ideas. Merging with philosophy meant that aesthetics developed not in isolation, but within each philosopher's own system of thought; that is, in conjunction with the rest of human quests. The first major contribution to classical aesthetics (and to aesthetics of antiquity as a whole) is represented by Plato's considerations on art in his dialogues *Ion* and in part of Books II, III and X of *The Republic* (4th century B.C.). The latter dialogue is significant as to Plato's account of what effects imitative arts – arts which do not produce, but *reproduce* things – have on the individual and within society. Socrates and Glaucon, the interlocutors, undertake to sketch the essentials of an ideal just city, among which they quickly come to agree in accounting people who act as "guardians": an army against outer enemies and similar to police in inner affairs. Profiling the ideal character of the future guardians occasions a long excursion concerning their education, which includes gymnastics for the body and instruction in the fine arts for the soul. Concerning the latter, the dialogue offers a detailed discussion on the pedagogical impact of poetry and music:

For a start, then, it seems, we must supervise our storytellers. […] We shall persuade nurses and mothers to tell children the approved stories, and tell them that shaping children's minds with

stories is far more important than trying to shape their bodies with their hands. We must reject most of the stories they tell at the moment. […] The ones Hesiod and Homer both used to tell us – and the other poets. They made up untrue stories, which they used to tell people – and still do tell them.[10]

According to Socrates's explanation, young people should be warned against learning from storytellers who "give us the wrong impression of the nature of gods and heroes"[11]; for, if they hear and absorb false opinions from myths and tales, it will be hard to erase these opinions in the course of their adult lives. The negative impact on the souls of the young is said to be increased by the imitative nature of poetry: Socrates believes that young people will imitate the characters of the stories they hear, and that those traits will enter into their own habits and nature:

So if we stick to our original plan, which was that our guardians should be released from all other occupations, and be the true architects of freedom for our city, and that everything they do must contribute to this end, it is essential that they do not do or imitate anything else. If they do imitate anything, then from their earliest childhood they should choose appropriate models to imitate – people who are brave, self-disciplined, god-fearing, free, that sort of things. they should neither do, nor be good at imitating, what is illiberal, nor any other kind of shameful behaviour, in case enjoyment of the imitation gives rise to enjoyment of the reality. Have you never noticed how imitation, if long continued from an early age, becomes part of a person's nature, turns into habits of body, speech and mind?[12]

The last Book of the *Republic*, in particular, deals with the necessity not only to exclude imitative poetry from the education of philosophers, but also to banish poets and painters, for Plato deemed art dangerous to the stability of what he envisioned to be an ideal republic or city-state. Plato's argument against art has to be understood in relation to his metaphysical theory of Forms or Ideas, according to which the non-material world of Ideas is the highest and most fundamental level of being. The further ontological level is that of nature, where perceptible objects reproduce the Ideas materially; lastly we find the products of poetry and painting, in their turn the reproduction of natural things through their shapes and colours only. Thus, from the perspective of ontological classification, in relation to an absolute Reality incarnated by the Ideas, the work of art finds itself demoted to the rank of

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[10] Plato, *The Republic*, ed. by G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. by Tom Griffith, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 61-62.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 62.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

imitation in the second degree. In the famous analysis of Book X of the *Republic*, the work of art is defined "*μίμεσις μιμήσεως*" ("imitation of an imitation"): just an *image* (*εἴδωλον*) of perceptible objects – in their turn the earthly imitation of the Ideas – with no connection to the 'true' realm of Ideas. So, being "two removes from the truth"[13], art is more of an illusion than ordinary experience, for it involves only the unsteady and deceitful *appearance* of sensuous objects, which lack ontological reality. Instead of elevating the soul towards knowledge or the intuition of the Ideas, then, art just lowers it more to the world of sensory appearance:

> [T]he art of imitation is a far cry from truth. The reason it can make everything, apparently, is that it grasps just a little of each thing – and only an image at that. […] In that case, shall we say that all artists, starting with Homer, are imitators of images of goodness and the other things they create, without having any grasp of the truth?[14]

This attack on imitative poetry is based on the example of the painter, who can paint anything without knowing what makes its true essence, that is, whether it is good or bad:

> As we've just been saying, the painter will create what looks like a shoemaker, though he himself knows nothing about shoemaking and the kind of people who look at his painting know nothing about it either. They judge things by their colours and shapes.[15]

In the same way, poets in the tragic tradition are as ignorant of virtue as painters are of the uses of the things they paint, for they can tell of the actions of heroes and gods in their poetry without knowing whether those actions are good or bad:

> The same goes for the poet, too, I take it. We can say that he colours his pictures of all these skills with his words and phrases, and that the only thing he knows anything about is imitation. The result is that people like himself, people who judge things on the basis of language, think that what he has to say seems excellently said – whether he is using his metre, rhythm and harmony to describe shoemaking, or generalship, or anything else. Such is the power of bewitchment naturally possessed by the tools he uses.[16]

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[13] *Ibid.*, p. 317.
[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 317-320.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 320.
[16] *Ibid.*

Art's connection to sensory experience goes well beyond sight or hearing, and affects human emotions as well. Plato's argument against it goes on to explain that its corruptive power derives from upsetting the balance among the soul's parts with its representations of characters driven by false virtues. Imitative poetry – tragedy above all – shows men behaving contrary to the dictates of reason, guided just by the overflow of their passions. Confronted with such a display of emotions, the spectators' reason is appalled, whereas their impulses rejoice in the emotional release. This way the dramatic illusion weakens the rational impulse's control over sensuous drives and desires, lulls men's moral and social vigilance, and binds it to the passions it portrays:

[The poet's] products […] are inferior by comparison with the truth, and he resembles [the painter] also in associating with an inferior part of the soul, not with the best part. […] [Poetic imitation] feeds and waters these things [all the desires, pains and pleasures in the soul which we say accompany any of our actions], when they ought by rights to wither away. And it makes them our rulers, though if we want to be better and happier rather than worse or more wretched, they ought to be ruled by us.[17]

Plato outlaws imitative poetry since it harms the soul by exciting inappropriate emotions and aiming at pleasure – mimetic artists, then, just need to know how to please the people, and in doing that will be pulled away from the truth. Although his condemnation of art and its effects has traditionally been interpreted only as a debasing rejection of it, it nonetheless bears out one of the first assertions of the strong connection between works of art and the sensuous world. His notorious critique against poetry, as a matter of fact, would not make sense without the supposition that poetry, like the other arts, is embedded in society and has an ethical function, both by its content and its effects on an audience. Plato's vision of art was to be inherited – though empirically and analytically reworked – by his most prominent follower, Aristotle, whose *Poetics* (4th century B.C.) is the first known treatise entirely dedicated to the description of poietic art and of its function.

1.1.2 Aristotle's Pleasure of *Μίμεσις*

As with Plato, crucial to Aristotle's definition of art is the notion of *μίμεσις*, which, however, is appropriated within the latter philosopher's own metaphysical system, where the

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[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 326-328.

Ideas are deprived of their transcendence and become immanent to natural things themselves. In such a context where there are no different ontological levels, imitation does not imply the inferiority of art to nature nor its epistemological vacuity; on the contrary, imitation now means that the process of artistic creation equals that of natural creation, establishing a dynamically structural relation between life and the work of art. As a matter of fact, the activity of *ποιετική*, being for Aristotle on a par with the mimetic process, has its origins "deep-rooted in the very nature of man. To imitate is, even from childhood, part of man's nature […]; and so is the pleasure we all take in copies of things […]."[18] Aristotle thus relates the development of poetry to human nature itself, which makes the products of this kind of *μίμεσις* not just appearances, empty images (*φαντάσματα*, as Plato calls them), but *εικόνα*, images that are ontologically connected to the natural objects and phenomena they *represent* (and not just reproduce).

So, whereas Plato was struggling with the problem of the relationship between mimesis and truth, Aristotle shifted to the notion of *verisimilitude* (*εικός*). According to the philosopher, "poets take their *μίμεσις* from men in action"[19]; that is, the object of mimetic poetry (tragedy and epic) is human existence such as it presents itself to our eyes. As such, it is just a raw, unformed and disordered material, to which poietic art must give the shape that Aristotle calls *μύθος* – "the putting together of the events"[20] internal to the work of art. Poietic art is thus able to mould real life into an organic form (the artful organization of the tragic material), whose characteristics of unity and necessity transpose life itself from the contingency of mere existence to the universal plan of verisimilitude. Such universal qualities allow poetry to be a representation of *likely* events – events that did not necessarily happen but that are likely to have happened – and therefore to be plausible enough to engage emotions roughly in the same way that real-life events engage emotions, which is what confers imitative poetry a high epistemological value.

Besides starting their learning through it, Aristotle makes clear that all humans take delight in mimesis. Such a delight is in turn explained first as part of the pleasure that everyone takes in learning (probably by imitating others), and then as the delight that one takes in recognizing a product of mimesis to be a representation of something that one has seen before. What in the philosopher's view distinguishes art products from the rest is the fact that they aim at entertaining and providing pleasure instead of fulfilling life's

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[18] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. and with a commentary by George Whalley, ed. by John Baxter and Patrick Atherton, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997, p. 57.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

necessities; more specifically, "the poet must procure the pleasure coming from pity and fear through mimesis."[21] Alongside the pleasure of a form of learning or understanding, poetry can evoke pleasure from pity and fear precisely because it is a *mimesis* of terrible deeds: if we did not have the clear awareness, in the back of our minds, that this is all mimesis, we would not experience pleasure from these emotions, but pain.[22] It is as a source of such a pleasure connected to pity and fear that poietic art, instead of being corruptive like Plato deemed it, acquires a new, self-sufficient status. Following the definition of tragedy central to the *Poetics*, we see that it

is a *μίμεσις* of an action that is morally serious and purposeful, having magnitude; uttered in heightened language and using each of its resources separately in the various sections of the play; presented by people acting rather than by narration; bringing about through a process of pity and terror the purification [*κάθαρσιν*] of those destructive or painful emotions [*παθήματα*].[23]

Although the remark about *κάθαρσις* remains cryptic (it is still not clear whether it is the spectator that is cleansed of tragic emotions or it is the tragic emotions themselves that are in a way cleansed of their excesses), and it is only marginally mentioned here (the term in this peculiar meaning is not taken up again in the remainder of the text), the notion of *κάθαρσις* is central to the effects and social function that Aristotle attributes to the work of art. A more accurate description of this purifying process can be found in the dissertation on music from Book VIII of the treatise *Politics*, where, after distinguishing harmonies into moral, practical and enthusiastic, the philosopher assigns to moral harmonies the purpose of education; as for the practical and enthusiastic ones, they both are associated to the purposes of catharsis and entertainment or "relaxation from the uneasiness of the mind"[24], so as to relieve people who fall into a quasi-pathological state of mystic or religious frenzy:

[F]or that passion which is to be found very strong in some souls is to be met with also in all, but the difference in different persons consists in its being in a less or greater degree, as pity, fear, and enthusiasm also; which latter is so powerful in some as to overpower the soul: and yet we see those persons, by the application of sacred music to soothe their mind, rendered as sedate and composed as if they had employed the art of the physician; and this must necessarily happen to the compassionate, the fearful, and all those who are subdued by their passions: nay, all persons, as far

[21] *Ibid.*
[22] See Pierre Destrée, "Pleasure", in Pierre Destrée, Penelope Murray (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 479.
[23] Aristotle, *Poetics*, op. cit., pp. 67-69.
[24] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html>.

as they are affected with those passions, admit of the same cure [κάθαρσις], and are restored to tranquillity with pleasure. In the same manner, all music which has the power of purifying the soul affords a harmless pleasure to man.[25]

Transferred to tragedy, the process of catharsis originates when "a person who hears the events unfolding trembles and feels pity at what is happening."[26] Such emotions as ἔλεος and φόβος are at the roots of the cathartic process: ἔλεος (usually translated as "pity," "compassionate grief," and the like) was thought to be essentially connected with the undeserved misfortune of other people – whenever one observes another's unmerited suffering, one comes to experience a certain share of this same suffering. Such a phenomenon might be due to an anticipation of harmful things that could happen to us, as Aristotle himself claims defining this emotion as aroused by evils "that one expects himself or one of the people close to him to suffer" (*Rhet*. II.8, 1385b14–5). Since the spectator's grief about the fate of the tragic character is inextricably connected with the vulnerability of his own existence, ἔλεος becomes a mechanism that functions as an emotional tie between the spectator and the tragic hero leading up to φόβος ("terror" or "fear"). Because of what happens to the tragic characters, the spectator experiences an unpleasant worry about imminent future harms or evils, since he fears he is similarly vulnerable to the sort of misfortune they suffer, and that such misfortune would strike him quite as unjustifiably as it strikes the tragic heroes.[27]

The capacity of tragedy to arouse such feelings of pity and terror is for Aristotle an essential part of the work of art itself, coming from its very structure (μῦθος); that is, the crafty combination of plot, characters, thoughts and language. But since the spectator is facing just a μίμεσις of life, being taken over by those passions in this situation allows him/her a purification from such extremes in order to act reasonably and temperately in real life. Tragedy's mimetic nature, instead of allowing those irrational feelings to take over the soul as Plato believed, becomes for his follower the source of a purification from excesses. Although Aristotle himself does not define nor explain any further the consequences of this process, it can be assumed that κάθαρσις allows to qualify the pleasure produced by tragedy as neither morally nor socially harmful. By making precisely the production of this kind of *pleasure* the only distinctive goal of tragedy, Aristotle treats poetry as an autonomous art: he does not deem it a danger for man's soul, nor does he demand exclusively that it should be

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[25] *Ibid.*
[26] Aristotle, *Poetics*, op. cit., p. 99.
[27] See Christof Rapp, "Tragic Emotions", in Pierre Destrée, Penelope Murray (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 446-447.

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morally instructive, so that poietic art seems to be emerging as a self-sufficient endeavour to be judged by principles of its own.[28]

1.1.3 Longinus's Rhetorical Sublime

A concern with the responses that art has on the individual and on society is also evident in ancient discussions of rhetorical style, which incorporate an aesthetic dimension notwithstanding their practical function. Such is the case of the treatise *Περί Ὕψους* (*On the Sublime*), which brought about the first known appearance of the sublime within literary debates. Both date and authorship of the book are still a matter of controversy: it was believed for a long time to belong to a third century A.D. Greek rhetorician named Cassius Longinus, but since nowadays the essay has generally been dated back to the first century A. D., doubts were cast upon this paternity, and the issue still remains unsolved.[29] What we can safely say is that it is the first proper treatise of literary criticism to be known to us, which belongs to a period – between the Hellenistic and the Imperial Ages – when great attention was paid to matters of style and eloquence of discourse. This was a comparatively uncreative period for Greek literature, whose language was still the language of the Attic classics, written four or five hundred years before. Such a language was everywhere taught in schools (to Greek speakers as to the cosmopolitan urban populations of Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor) with the aim of instructing people in the art of writing and speaking, the so-called "rhetoric": a massive doctrinal system embracing the content, arrangement and style of every kind of writing.[30]

Responding to the demands of the time, *On the Sublime* is primarily a manual of composition, where the author's main purpose is to give rhetorical instructions. The subject of the treatise is first of all related to the basic distinction between three degrees of style (*χαρακτήρ* or *genus dicendi*), which goes back a long way in Greek thinking. An established tradition of describing speech since Aristotle distinguished between a 'grand' or 'high style'; a 'middle' or 'smooth style'; and a 'slight' or 'plain style'. 'Sublimity', then, clearly refers to the older rhetorical concept of the 'high style' achieved by means of certain precepts concerning diction, sentence-structure, figures and rhythm.[31] But as a matter of fact, Pseudo-

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[28] See Elizabeth Asmis, "Art and Morality", in Pierre Destrée, Penelope Murray (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 495-496.
[29] See D. A. Russell, "Introduction" to 'Longinus', *On Sublimity*, trans. by D. A. Russell, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. x.
[30] See *ibid.*, p. xi.
[31] See *ibid.*, pp. xii-xiii.

Longinus's teaching goes far beyond the description of the traditional rhetorical concept of sublime as 'high style'. Closer to the etymological meaning of the ancient Greek term ὕψος-ους as not simply "height", but "summit, peak; exaltation"[32], Pseudo-Longinus's fundamental interest lies in identifying the characteristics that mark out an emotionally intense and elevated tone of writing from the merely pleasing and soothing, whose aim should specifically be the production of a certain kind of *effect* on the hearer/reader.[33] Although it is necessary to keep in mind that such a notion is still strictly linked only to the dimension of words and the different ways of arranging them together, the sublime "tone of writing" is much more than just a matter of form as it is a matter of *emotional response* to a certain form.

'Sublimity' is defined as "a kind of eminence or excellence of discourse"[34] that results in an "ecstasy"; a "combination of wonder and astonishment" which is able to "exert invincible power and force" and "tears everything up like a whirlwind"[35]. This strength, though, is at place only when nature and art work together, which means that, nature being the "law unto herself in matters of emotion and elevation"[36], method is nonetheless necessary to mould it up, "to provide […] correctness in training and application."[37] The combination of nature and art in order to create sublimity also emerges from the account of the five sources of the sublime, which the author exemplifies as: greatness of thought; strong emotion; certain figures of thought and speech; noble diction; dignified word arrangement. The first and most important one, "natural greatness"[38] (μεγαλοφυΐα), introduces a matter of considerable importance and originality within the literary criticism of antiquity, which seems to prelude to the digression on 'genius' further on in the text:

Even if it is a matter of endowment rather than acquisition, we must, so far as is possible, develop our minds in the direction of greatness and make them always pregnant with noble thoughts. […] 'Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind'.[39]

Sublimity, then, is also related to ethical ideals: not everyone indiscriminately is capable of producing it; there needs to be a certain amount of moral predisposition to

[32] See "ὕψος-ους" in Franco Montanari, *op. cit.*, p. 2126. The translation from Italian to English is mine.
[33] See W. H. Fyfe, D. A. Russell, "Introduction" to 'Longinus', *On the Sublime*, trans. by W. H. Fyfe and revised by D. A. Russell, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 153.
[34] 'Longinus', "Preface", in Id., *On Sublimity*, op. cit., p. 1.
[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] 'Longinus', *On Sublimity*, op. cit., p. 9.
[39] *Ibid.*

accomplish the refinement of judgement, of imitative ability and imaginative effort, and this in order to know "what is *really* valuable, and […] distinguish it from the sham", to know one's "place as a citizen of the *kosmos*", one's "greatness and […] limitations."[40] One of the best exemplifications brought by the author of the 'greatness of thought' is Homer, who is able to accompany the choice of cosmic subjects (storms; divine epiphanies; the wonders of anatomy or astronomy) and violent emotion with that kind of 'elevation' of mind capable of knocking the reader out, raising in him both "excitement" and "astonishment."[41]

Due to the lacuna of the 'emotion' ($\pi\dot{\alpha}\theta o\varsigma$) section, the text skips to the discussion of those figures of speech and thought which conduce to sublimity, making "style more emotional and excited, and emotion is as essential a part of sublimity as characterization is of charm."[42] Since the way of arranging words and thoughts results in a marker of real emotion, figures are seen as "a means by which, […] imitation approaches the effect of nature. Art is perfect when it looks like nature, nature is felicitous when it embraces concealed art,"[43] which statement reinforces the notion of the blending of nature and art as the ground upon which the sublime is free to flourish.

The section on 'diction', apart from some general remarks about "the choice of correct and magnificent words" that "gives things life and makes them speak,"[44] comprises the digression on 'genius' ($\varphi\dot{\upsilon}\sigma\iota\varsigma$), which is the most eloquent part of the book, and central to its message. Genius, even when it makes mistakes, is preferable to impeccable mediocrity, because by nature it is the greatest works, those that go up to the limit (*sub-limine*), that our admiration is driven to, not to mere prettiness or exactness in detail:

[Nature] implanted in our minds from the start an irresistible desire for anything which is great and, in relation to ourselves, supernatural. The universe therefore is not wide enough for the range of human speculation and intellect. Our thoughts often travel beyond the boundaries of our surroundings. […] It is a natural inclination that leads us to admire not the little streams, however pellucid and however useful, but the Nile, the Danube, the Rhine, and above all the Ocean. Nor do we feel so much awe before the little flame we kindle, because it keeps its light clear and pure, as before the fires of heaven, though they are often obscured.

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[40] D. A. Russell, "Introduction" to 'Longinus', *On Sublimity*, op. cit., p. xiv.
[41] 'Longinus', *On Sublimity*, op. cit., p. 20.
[42] *Ibid*., p. 35.
[43] *Ibid*., p. 29.
[44] *Ibid*., p. 36.

[…] : the useful and necessary are readily available to man, it is the unusual which always excites our wonder.[45]

The same goes for literature: since it is *by nature* that man is endowed with the power of speech, grandeur is admired in nature as well as in writing. That explains why the sublime is attributed only to the work of great geniuses, who, "for all their faults, tower far above mortal stature. […] [S]ublimity raises us towards the spiritual greatness of god."[46] The prize of their sublime effect is the transgression of boundaries, the abandonment of the common rules that restrict creativity, and the burst forth which inspires and is inspired by a divine spirit of something bigger than us. This central passage, though ambiguous at times, does not simply state nature's predominance over art; it reaffirms the necessity of their combination instead, as, the author concludes, "[i]mpeccability is generally a product of art; erratic excellence comes from natural greatness; therefore, art must always come to the aid of nature, and the combination of the two may well be perfection."[47]

There follows in the treatise the section on 'word arrangement', where the author provides examples of the ways in which *rhythm* is decisive for producing the sublime effect and also common words can be given grandeur by skillful placing. The ethical concern of the treatise becomes still clearer towards the end, where we find an appendix in form of a dialogue between an unnamed philosopher and the author, in which the causes of the contemporary decline of 'sublime' writing are debated. Whereas the philosopher attributes this failure to the loss of free speech and political liberty, the author himself counters this view, ascribing the present dearth to a moral collapse rather than to external circumstances. Opposite to the philosopher's accusation of political slavery, Pseudo-Longinus places his denunciation of mental slavery to such passions and desires as avarice and love of pleasure. "Amid such pestilential corruption of human life, how can we expect any free, uncorrupted judge of great things of permanent value to be left to us?"[48] he finally asks the philosopher.

Such final considerations may be the key to reading the whole treatise, by which we come to appreciate Pseudo-Longinus's contribution in turning a previously merely rhetorical and stylistic notion as that of the 'sublime' into an 'elevation' or 'excellence' of discourse with deep ethical implications. For some, rhetoric was simply a tool, capable of good or bad use; Pseudo-Longinus, on the other hand, insists that the writer or the orator (the "public

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[45] *Ibid*., p. 42.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] *Ibid*., p. 43.
[48] *Ibid*., p. 53.

man") should also be a man of worth and of noble thought: in order to achieve sublimity of discourse, it takes a 'sublime' mind. Pseudo-Longinus's moralism may be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the literary issues of his times, most probably the Augustan Age, a 'Renaissance' situation in which reaction to staleness in literature rose both in form of the purists' restrained and spotless imitation of the classics, and in form of the bold re-creation of their greatness by means of the *ingenium* (invention), which approach is namely the one praised by Pseudo-Longinus in *On the Sublime*. Nurtured in the study of the classics, the mind develops its own intellectual and emotional response to life, by which personal capacity only is it able to create a brilliant and tense context in writing.[49] This means that the same greatness as that of the classics can also be achieved without strictly imitating the earlier writers, but rather, by imitating nature.[50] The restraining rules of purists led, in the author's view, to impeccability and to dullness as well; to avoiding mistakes, but also to pedantry and frigidity. Pseudo-Longinus's systematization of the 'rhetorical sublime' thus represents the first known establishment of some degree of freedom from rules, and of boldness of thought, whose tradition is going to inform repeatedly the transformational capacities of the discourse on the sublime. Besides, the treatise's vocabulary of the effects of sublimity ("astonishment"; "enthusiasm"; "ravishment"; "transport") does service within both a rhetorical and an emotional framework, establishing a link between practical criticism of texts and an ethical account of human nature. It can be said, then, that "the sublime begins in rhetoric and ethics, and that the history of the discourse on it describes the complex set of relations which pertain between the three overlapping domains of rhetoric, ethics and aesthetics."[51] As a matter of fact, Pseudo-Longinus's work was hugely responsible for the role the theory of the sublime was about to play in modern aesthetic speculation, where its rhetorical conceptual base came together with issues connected not only to the moral, but also physiological and social dimensions.

After being constrained within a metaphysical/transcendental framework for about a thousand years by the theistic conception of art of the Middle Ages, aesthetics in the Early Modern period slowly started reconsidering the role of sensuous reality. In light of its reworking of philosophical ideas from antiquity – above all, those linked to the Neo-Platonic tradition and to the newly-discovered *Poetics* by Aristotle – the Renaissance marked the

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[49] See D. A. Russell, "Introduction" to 'Longinus', *On Sublimity*, op. cit., pp. xiv-xv.
[50] See 'Longinus', *On Sublimity*, op. cit., p. 50.
[51] Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, "Introduction" to Id. (eds.), *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 11.

success of the classical concept of art based on the imitation of the harmony of nature. A variation in such a conception of art was ushered in only with the advent of the so-called Mannerism (from the early decades of the 16th century on), when artists refused sheer imitation of natural beauty and began to look for expressiveness, guided by newly formulated doctrines such as that of the Genius and its ability to conceive the *idea* of nature by itself. The following rejection of uninspired imitation and its rules brought to a revaluation of deformity and disproportion, contributing to the emergence of a certain degree of subjectivity in art. The same tendency to put in the limelight those elements that classical aesthetics had left behind because 'irregular' is to be found throughout the Baroque period, which "witnessed a growing taste for the extra-ordinary, for those things that arouse wonder"; in such a cultural climate, moreover, "artists explored the worlds of violence, death and horror, as happened with the works of Shakespeare and of the Elizabethans in general, […]."[52]

In such a context, Pseudo-Longinus's treatise – and with it the notion of the sublime – had been acquiring new popularity, being rather widely distributed through new editions, and translations in the early-modern European languages between the late sixteenth and the seventeenth century. But it was only with Nicolas Boileau's 1674 translation of it into French (*Traité du Sublime ou de Merveilleux dans le Discours, Traduit du Grec de Longin*) that *On the Sublime* was brought in the limelight, becoming a central text in European criticism throughout the eighteenth century. It may sound rather puzzling that a treatise such as Pseudo-Longinus's was significantly championed for the first time in the history of modern literature by a Neo-classicist writer such as Boileau, since Neoclassicism is generally understood to emphasise the correct application of rules to art, and to call for measure and reason, so that it should be regular, rational and harmonious. *On the Sublime*, despite some degree of ambiguity, points undeniably to elevation of mind and intense passion, and so to 'excess', as a means to achieve successful writing, and states clearly enough that rules are insufficient to make a composition sublime, so that something additional – to be found only *beyond* those rules – is required in order to reach 'sublimity' in art. Accordingly, Boileau defined the Sublime in the "Preface" to his translation as a " 'je ne sais quoi' that is easier to feel than to speak about;"[53] "the extraordinary and marvellous

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[52] Umberto Eco (ed.), *On Ugliness*, trans. by Alastair McEwen, London: Harvill Secker, 2007, p. 169.
[53] Nicolas Boileau, *Traité du Sublime ou de Merveilleux dans le Discours, Traduit du Grec de Longin*, Paris: ed. Antoine Adam and Françoise Escal, 1966, p. 1, in Emma Gilby, "The Seventeenth-Century Sublime: Boileau and Poussin", in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, January 2013, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/emma-gilby-the-seventeenth-century-sublime-boileau-and-poussin-r1133014>.

which can strike us in discourse, making a work lift us up, ravish us, transport us."[54] Nonetheless, Pseudo-Longinus's ideas were quickly absorbed into Neoclassical artistic theory, up to the point that they were also made to serve as a supplement or a counter-tension to the establishing of the correct techniques for the creation of art; or just as a support to Neoclassicist practice, as Boileau himself did with his *Critical Reflections on Some Passages from Longinus*, one of the central texts as far as the seventeenth-century "Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns" is concerned.[55]

As we have seen, sublimity has been up to here still tied to the dimension of discourse and language (the 'rhetorical sublime'), but the interest for this notion brought about by seventeenth-century theorists and translators was soon to have it shifted to the 'natural' and then 'transcendental' sublime, within larger philosophical realms.

1.2 Aesthetic Ideology

1.2.1 A Science of the Concrete

The turning point which brought to the thorough consideration of aesthetics as a modern philosophical category in its own right is represented by Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750). Baumgarten appropriated the term "aesthetic" for the first time in his discourse on the "criticism of taste" *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnulis ad poema pertentibus* ("Philosophical considerations of some matters pertaining the poem") in 1735 and in his later fragment *Aesthetica* (1750-1758), where it was first treated as a modern philosophical category in its own right. "Aesthetica […] est scientia cognitionis sensitivae"[56] ("Aesthetics […] is the science of sensible cognition"), Baumgarten defines it in the opening line of the Prolegomena to this work. Conceptualising the aesthetic discourse for the first time in modern European thought, Baumgarten applies it to the field of human sense perception as a whole, and finds its object in the study of sensory cognition as opposed to the knowledge acquired by the mind. Following on Baumgarten's footsteps, from the eighteenth century on, the affective or aesthetic moment became central to human

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[54] *Ibid.*, p. 338.
[55] See Emma Gilby, *op. cit*.
[56] Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica/Ästhetik*, edited by Dagmar Mirbach, 2 vols., Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2007 (originally published 1750 and 1758), in Pierre Destrée, Penelope Murray, "Introduction" to Id. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 2.

experience as such, so that what was thought and said about artworks became tightly bound up with what was thought and said about the nature of human experience in general.

By bringing to the philosophical limelight "the science of sensible cognition", Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* is a significant and innovative introduction of the whole terrain of sensation to the govern of reason. According to the German philosopher, aesthetic cognition reconciles the universalities of reason with the particulars of sense: while participating in the perfection of reason, its elements still resist the separation into discrete units characteristic of conceptual thought.[57] Sensation is in fact characterised by an irreducible particularity, a series of determinate specificities which threaten to go beyond the bounds of abstract thought itself: "Individuals", writes Baumgarten, "are determined in every respect […] particular representations are in the highest degree poetic."[58] Aesthetics emerges as a theoretical discourse that incorporates the domain of senses into reason and Enlightenment rationality. As a hybrid form of cognition, the aesthetic can organise the raw stuff of perception, revealing for the first time the inner structure of the concrete. If reason as such is necessarily detached from the lowly particulars of the concrete, the aesthetic, in Baumgarten's view, finds its reason to exist as the 'sister' of logic – a sort of *ratio inferior* at the level of sensuous life, whose task is to order this domain in an autonomous manner, though similar to the way reason proper operates.[59]

Thus, aesthetics as a category is given by the necessity to attribute to the world of perception and experience its own appropriate discourse and inner logic, instead of merely letting it derive from abstract universal laws. "Science", Baumgarten writes, "is not to be dragged down to the region of sensibility, but the sensible is to be lifted to the dignity of knowledge."[60] Being a kind of "concrete thought" or sensuous equivalent of the concept, the aesthetic mediates between the rational and the real.[61]

1.2.2 Burke's Physiological Sublime

While early German aesthetics was needed in order to descend from the universal to the particular, elaborating a kind of 'concrete logic' which would bring Reason down to the level of the senses, the British approach to such a category went quite the other way around.

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[57] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
[58] Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. by K. Aschenbrenner and W. B. Holther, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954, p. 43.
[59] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
[60] Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, op. cit., p. 340.
[61] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Moving from the particular to the universal, British philosophers tended to start from the individual body's affections to get to the collective sphere of 'moral sense'. The exploration of affective experience was actually the starting point of most philosophical considerations related to the rising modern subjectivity, and it also led to a renewed interest in the sublime.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the notion of the sublime had been consolidated through a vivid speculative tradition of 'Longinian' derivation. The enormous influence exerted by Pseudo-Longinus's Περί Ύψους, partly due to his 'classical' authority and partly to the prestige of Boileau, not only gave rise to the so-called 'rhetorical sublime', but was also determinant for those further theories of sublimity that developed the rhetorical conceptual base into the ethical and political domains. The debate on the sublime carried on by British philosophers in the eighteenth century, in particular, is centred on recognising the interconnections between the subject's aesthetic experience and its ethical and social conduct.[62] As the aesthetic, based on affective experience, is then inevitably in association with other forms of understanding and experiencing the world, so does the sublime take the hint from a physiological dimension to infiltrate the ethical and socio-political realms. Such is the approach of what we may call the first modern phenomenology of the sublime, Edmund Burke's 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful.*

Moulded by eighteenth-century empiricist thought, Burke's research is directed at finding the sublime not anymore within the outer world of the objects that arouse it, but within the interior landscape of mental affect. Attention shifts, therefore, from the 'sublime' qualities possessed by an object to the mental processes of the subject which register and react to them. Shifting to the perceiving subject, such an approach implies exploring the physiological and psychological nature of sublime feelings and the way they impact and move the judging mind.[63] This is very clearly stated in the title itself he gave to his work, since its aim is that of examining the "passions in our own breasts; […] the properties of things which we find by experience to influence those passions, and […] the laws of nature, by which those properties are capable of affecting the body and thus of exciting our passions."[64]

The senses being the starting point of Burke's inquiry, *sensations* of pain or pleasure are the primary element in processing the aesthetic experience, to which is then added the

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[62] See Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, "Introduction" to Id. (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.
[63] See Vanessa L. Ryan, "The Physiological Sublime: Burke's Critique of Reason", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62:2 (April 2001), <http://www.englweb.umd.edu/englfac/KChuh/Ryan.pdf >, pp. 265-266.
[64] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, New York, 1900, p. 1, in Vanessa L. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

power of the *imagination* of operating on those ideas, and, finally, *judgement* – the reasoning faculty – concludes this process by relating them to the human passions, manners and actions.[65] The experience of the sublime and the beautiful is therefore primarily linked to feeling certain passions; namely, Burke categorises beauty under the label of passions "which belong to *generation*", having "their origins in gratifications and *pleasures*"[66] and being "directed to the multiplication of the species,"[67] sublimity is said to "concern *self-preservation*", and to "turn mostly on *pain* or *danger*"[68]:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.[69]

This is the first, plainly physiological definition of the sublime we encounter in the *Inquiry*, to which Burke adds some further explanations:

> When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we everyday experience.[70]

The sublime has its source not just in the ideas of pain and danger, but rather in their negation, in the relief from them: this makes it not a positive pleasurable sensation as it would be the case with sheer beauty, but a *negative* pleasure instead, coming out of the privation of pain, to which Burke, for a matter of scientific precision, attributes the name of *delight*: "Whatever excites this delight, I call *sublime*."[71]

The sublime, in its turn, casts the mind in a state of *astonishment*,

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[65] See Edmund Burke, "Introduction on Taste", in Id., *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, in Id., *The Works*, Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1975, pp. 82-95.
[66] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, cit., p. 112.
[67] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
[69] *Ibid.*
[70] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[71] *Ibid.*, p. 125.

in which all its motions are suspended, […] the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, […]. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.[72]

The related paralysis of our rational capacity is the exemplary reaction to the sublime, which is aided by those things in nature showing properties rooted to fear and terror,

[f]or fear being an apprehension of pain and death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too. […] Indeed terror is in all cases whatsoever, […], the ruling principle of the sublime.[73]

There follows a deeper research into the principles according to which the properties of things in nature excite our passions. Moving from the external object to the mental processes of the perceiving subject, Burke goes on to explore the material causes of the feeling of sublimity and the way it affects the mind, among which he places *obscurity* first:

To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. […] [H]ardly anything can strike the mind with its greatness, […] which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; […], and this sublimity is principally due to the terrible uncertainty of the thing described […],[74]

which definition reminds very closely of Pseudo-Longinus's explanation of our admiration for anything in nature that goes beyond certain boundaries, reaffirming formlessness and disproportion as sources of greatness – with the addition of an element of *uncertainty*, the 'uncanny' undecidedness of the nature of the object considered.

The second fundamental property conveyor of sublimity for Burke is *power*: "I know of nothing sublime, which is not some modification of power,"[75] which again agrees with the Longinian tradition of stressing the overwhelming control of the sublime over the mind. Burke states very clearly that this power is tied up to destruction: "Look at a man, or any other animal of prodigious strength, […] the emotion you feel is, lest this enormous strength

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[72] *Ibid.*, p. 130.
[73] *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.
[74] *Ibid.*, pp. 132-137.
[75] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

should be employed to the purpose of rapine and destruction."[76] This dominative and destructive power marks the sublime as a natural force beyond man's ability to control, impervious to any human effort at conquering, domesticating or exploiting it. Burke goes on to add a whole lot of causes of the sublime, such as *privation*; *vastness*; *infinity*; *difficulty*; *magnificence*; *loudness*; *suddenness*; *intermitting*; thus giving shape to that peculiar 'sublime' imagery which was going to achieve a huge success among Romantic poetry and visual arts.

Following on the analysis of the 'material causes' of the sublime is that of the 'efficient causes', by which Burke means "affections of the mind [which] produce certain emotions on the body" and those "distinct feelings and qualities of body [that] shall produce certain determinate passions in the mind."[77] Shifting definitely to what happens *inside* the perceiving subject, Burke explores how the material causes of the sublime previously explored relate to the subject by specific operations of the body and of the mind. We are shown how physical sensations (tension) act on mental affects (terror) so as to produce the sublime *within* the subject:

Having considered terror as producing an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves; it easily follows, from what we have just said, that whatever is fitted to produce such a tension must be productive of a passion similar to terror, and consequently must be a source of the sublime, [...].[78]

The sublime becomes thus internalised as an 'affectation' of the mind caused by certain external physical conditions[79] that we may come so far as to name a kind of 'physiological' or 'psychological status'.

The consequences of Burke's reformulation of the sublime are manifold. By arguing that the sublime and the beautiful are mutually exclusive, and placing the sublime in antithetical opposition to the classical notion of beauty as a pleasurable experience, Burke suggests that formlessness and disproportion are sources of an aesthetic experience in its own right, capable of instilling intense emotion derived not from pleasure but from pain (or the absence of it). The most obvious consequence of these reformulations is the disruption of

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[76] *Ibid.*, p. 139.
[77] *Ibid.*, p. 208.
[78] *Ibid.*, p. 214.
[79] See Vanessa L. Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

the Neoclassical order, as concerns both its notion of 'form' and its subordination to 'rules', applied to the natural and to the aesthetical realm as well. There follows that the aesthetical experience is not anymore restricted to the rational, the harmonious and the flawless, but finds its most effective sources in disproportion and disorder instead.

As we have already seen, the sublime goes well beyond the basic level of the senses, reaching out to the ethical and social spheres as well. As a matter of fact, Burke depicts his 'physiological sublime' as an overpowering force that limits our reasoning capability and produces an "unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves."[80] Similar to exercise or labour, this force is at once painful in its exertion, yet pleasurable in its arousal of energy: "As common labour, which is a mode of pain, is the exercise of the grosser, a model of terror is the exercise of the finer parts of the system."[81] Whereas the beautiful is connected to those passions belonging to 'generation', such as pleasure and lust, the sublime is connected to those that belong to 'self-preservation' (pain and danger). As a kind of terror pushing on self-preservation, the sublime implies a constant confrontation with human finitude and limitedness, from which arises a strong sense of humility that crushes man into submission. It thus resembles a coercive rather than a consensual power, engaging our respect but not, as with beauty, our love: "we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other flattered, into compliance."[82] The sublime, with its "delightful horror", is thus able to counteract the indolence and dissipation that the beautiful may bring about in a given social order by raising the individual, at the same time, to the awareness of his own strength. The moral and social action of the sublime experience as described by Burke lies in its acting as a counterbalance: it subordinates the individual to the whole by giving it the strength to rise above the whole itself.

[The sublime] is beauty's point of inner fracture, a negation of settled order without which any order would grow inert and wither. The sublime is the anti-social condition of all sociality, the infinitely unrepresentable which spurs us on to yet finer representations, the lawless masculine force which violates yet perpetually renews the feminine enclosure of beauty.[83]

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[80] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, cit., p. 214.
[81] *Ibid.*, p. 181.
[82] *Ibid.*, p. 161.
[83] Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

1.2.3 Kant's Reconciliatory Aesthetics

Immanuel Kant's contribution to modern aesthetics mediates between the role merely supplemental to reason of Baumgarten's "science of the concrete," and the cognitive prominence of the body against the mind of British empiricism. His *Critique of Judgement* (1790), the last book of the three *Critiques,* corresponded to the purpose of drawing an *a priori* (or transcendental) philosophy of taste. Accordingly, it presented itself as a reconciliation of "the pure concept of objects of possible empirical cognition" and "the principle of practical purposiveness, which must be thought in the Idea of the *determination* of a free *will*"[84] – that is, of pure and practical reason, of the conceptual and the empirical.

As a matter of fact, Kant was writing to confute, on the one hand, the empiricism of Locke and Hume (hence his likewise confutation of Burke's treatise), which claimed that all we know comes from the experience of our senses. On the other hand, the philosopher refuted the Rationalism and Idealism of the Neoplatonic tradition as well, for which the only true knowledge comes from the direct intuition of Ideas, pure forms which pre-exist our sensory experience. Halfway between these two extremes, Kant argued that knowledge cannot be entirely derived from sensory experience, but neither do we have direct access to some divine truth. He suggested that there are certain categories which are innate to man and determine his sensory experience: some *a priori* Ideas that originate in the supersensuous faculty of Reason, and without which he could not make sense of the phenomenal world (such as Infinity, Unity, Freedom, Justice, the Absolute, and so on). As creatures whose lives are determined by such Ideas, then, human beings share a dimension which 'transcends' the empirical or phenomenal world they move in. Kant named this philosophical vision "transcendental Idealism," and in it the aesthetic has a considerable role "as a phenomenalized, empirically manifest principle of cognition […] since the possibility of philosophy itself, as the articulation of a transcendental with a metaphysical discourse, depends on it."[85]

By participating equally in the cognitive principle of Reason and in the empirical principle of Nature, the aesthetic mode of judgement harmonises pure reason with practical reason, so that "the empirical world appears in its freedom, purposiveness, significant totality and self-regulating autonomy to conform to the ends of practical reason."[86] If the

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[84] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. by J. H. Bernard, London: Macmillan, 1914, p. 41.
[85] Paul de Man, "Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant," in Id., *Aesthetic Ideology*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 73.
[86] Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

aesthetic object, being an empirical phenomenon, cannot be incorporated into any universal law, it seems nonetheless stirred by an inherent finality, a sort of accidental yet ungraspable law inscribed in its very material form, thus connected only to its unique structure. Such an object, by displaying a purposive unity that is not deducible from a concept of the understanding, but comes spontaneously from the phenomenon itself, is in-between Reason and Nature: it does not involve cognition, but addresses the subject's *capacity* for cognition in general. Aesthetic beauty, according to Kant, reveals that the world is comprehensible to the subject, adapted to its mental faculties, for "[i]f the aesthetic yields us no knowledge, then, it proffers us something arguably deeper: the consciousness, beyond all theoretical demonstration, that we are at home in the world because the world is somehow mysteriously designed to suit our capacities."[87]

Only in the aesthetic is the subject able to envisage itself in the act of knowing, that is, of reaching out to the object: in the aesthetic, it begins to grasp the relation of its capacities to material reality, and how fittingly its inmost structure seems predisposed to the comprehension of the real. Although it is not possible to know if things are actually shaped for the subject's faculties or not, it does not matter: what is central is that it allows the sense of purposiveness, centredness and significance the modern subject was in need of.[88]

A privileged place in Kant's third *Critique* in which to observe the congruity of the aesthetic to the order of empirical reality as well as to that of pure reason is the "Analytic of the Sublime." Following the section on the Beautiful, the sublime is first defined in contrast to that notion:

The Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries. The Sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought. […] [A]s the mind is not merely attracted by the object but is ever being alternately repelled, the satisfaction in the sublime does not so much involve a positive pleasure as admiration or respect, which rather deserves to be called negative pleasure.[89]

Kant's idea of the sublime, like aesthetic experience in general, originates from the relation of the subject's capacities to material reality. But if in the presence of beauty those

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[87] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
[88] See *ibid.*
[89] Immanuel Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

faculties are foregrounded so as to experience their adaptation to reality, the presence of the sublime draws attention to their limitations instead. The emotional, agitated response that the sublime produces in the beholder can be referred back to the limitations of knowledge, on the one hand, or, on the other, to the limitations of desire. To the first kind of response corresponds what Kant called the *mathematical* sublime, "that *sublime* which is *absolutely great*, […] what is great beyond all comparison"[90] – whose experience is occasioned by an almost ungraspably vast, formless object, which, as such, can never be accessible to the senses. This "absolute magnitude" (*die Größte*) belongs in fact to a different order of experience, which requires, on the level of understanding, the so-called "comprehensio logica" and, on the level of reason, the "comprehensio aesthetica." While the first mode of understanding conceives infinity as purely logical procession, the second one requires constant totalisation or condensation in a single intuition. But since the infinite is not comparable to any finite magnitude, the mode of understanding called "comprehensio aesthetica" is not sufficient: it cannot progress beyond a certain magnitude, which marks the limit of the imagination.[91] The failure of the articulation between *comprehensio logica* and *aesthetica* translates into the failure of the imagination to synthesise the immediate perceptions into a full and unified image, to represent to our finite senses the idea of Infinity itself. Imagination, as the subject's ability to grasp absolute magnitude with 'the mind's eye', is thus overwhelmed by the suprasensory realm of Reason.

In the presence of the mathematical sublime, the subject realises that finite and infinite entities are not comparable with each other, and so cannot be inscribed within a common system of knowledge. Human cognition (*Erkenntnis*) is simply not able to recognise the sublime as a comprehensible concept. This, on the one hand, reminds of the limits of human imagination and cautions that to grasp the world as infinite totality is beyond the subject's epistemological capacities, causing in it the pain of inadequacy and incompletion. The sublime appears at first as a awe-inspiring, humiliating power, which makes the subject aware of its own humbling finitude, and of the fact that it is not the centre of the universe: thus decentred, the subject is consequently thrown into a painful loss of identity.[92] Yet, if the struggle between imagination and Reason is initially such a displeasing and chastening experience, on the other hand,

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[90] *Ibid.*, p. 100.
[91] See Paul de Man, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-77.
[92] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

[o]ut of the pain of the failure to constitute the sublime by making the infinite apparent (*anschaulich*) is born the pleasure of the imagination, which discovers, in this very failure, the congruity of its law (which is a law of failure) with the law of our suprasensory being. Its failure to connect with the sensory would also elevate it above it.[93]

The failure of the imagination becomes "the distinguishing characteristic of the sublime: it transposes or elevates the natural to the level of the supernatural, perception to imagination, understanding to reason."[94] Thus, although the object may seem at first to overwhelm the subject, it is only its sensory capacities that are threatened, because while the imagination strives against Reason, the subject is made aware that there are suprasensory Ideas which transcend the material object. Drawing away the subject from sensuous experience towards the recognition of the higher, transcendental power of Reason within itself, the sublime – instead of uncovering, like the beautiful, the purposiveness of Nature – helps disclosing the teleology of the subject's own faculties. Whereas the beautiful is seen as a metaphysical principle, the sublime aspires to being a transcendental one, which involves the recognition of the supersensible dimension of Reason, shared by the subject only by transcending the limits of the world as given by the senses. It is this supersensible capacity of the mind that can be properly called *sublime*, and not those objects in nature which have been traditionally associated with sublimity (merely formless, horrific, chaotic objects). The sublime does not reside in nature, but is simply occasioned by "an object (of nature) the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature regarded as a presentation of Ideas."[95] "[T]he sublime is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of Sense."[96]

Kant's analysis goes on to distinguish the *dynamical* sublime as coming from "[n]ature considered in an aesthetical judgement as might that has no dominion over us."[97] Such an enormously powerful natural force seems initially to cause the inadequacy of human capacities – the subject feels small and weak, like it could be easily overwhelmed and annihilated. However, Kant suggests that when faced with no immediate danger, we can recognise this force as fearful without being afraid, so that

[93] Paul de Man, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
[94] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
[95] Immanuel Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
[96] *Ibid.*, p. 102.
[97] *Ibid.*, p. 111.

we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height, and discover in us a faculty of resistance of a quite different kind, which gives us courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature.[98]

This faculty of resistance is the sign of "a superiority to nature even in its immensity. […] Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in anything of nature, but only in our mind, in so far as we can become conscious that we are superior to nature within, and therefore also to nature without us […]."[99]

The sublime capacity of the mind to overpower the forces of nature introduces the concept of morality, for "a feeling for the Sublime in nature cannot well be thought without combining therewith a mental disposition which is akin to the Moral."[100] As for the beautiful, it also contains a moral element, even if less apparent, in the autonomy of aesthetic pleasure from sensuous pleasure. As for the sublime, the connection with morality is instead much more evident, because "morality is involved, not as play, but as legal or law-directed labour" that acts through "positively valorised sensory experiences"[101] – specifically, the passage from the affect or mood of shocked surprise (*Verwunderung*) to that of tranquil admiration (*Bewunderung*)[102]:

The initial effect of the sublime, of a sudden encounter with colossal natural entities such as cataracts, abysses, and towering mountains, is one of shock or, says Kant, astonishment that borders on terror. […] By a play, a trick of the imagination, this terror is transformed into a feeling of tranquil superiority, the admiration one expresses for something or for someone one can afford to admire peacefully, because one's own superiority is not really in question.[103]

The dialectic of imagination and reason is here mediated by affects, moods and feelings rather than by rational principles: instead of indulging in the (delightful because unreal) terror of the mightiness of nature confronted, the imagination shifts to the tranquil satisfaction of superiority, submitting to the power of reason. As Kant himself put it, "the absence of affection (*apatheia, phlegma in significatu bono*) in a mind that vigorously follows its unalterable principles is sublime, and in a far preferable way, because it has also

[98] *Ibid.*, p. 112.
[99] *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.
[100] *Ibid.*, p. 118.
[101] Paul de Man, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.
[102] See *ibid.*
[103] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

on its side the satisfaction of pure Reason."[104] By shifting from a first sensuous reaction of shocked but pleasurable surprise to a sort of 'alliance' with reason, the imagination functions so as to reconquer mastery over a nature, whose most immediate threat has been overcome. This way, the subject achieves a state of self-possession that equals a morally elevated state of mind; such a condition of moral superiority can only be given by the submission of imagination to reason, whereby it spontaneously gives up its own natural freedom to the higher freedom of reason.[105]

The imagination seems to work within the moral design of the sublime in an basically negative way, due to its elevation from a metaphysical to a transcendental or critical principle. In short,

the loss of empirical freedom means the gain in critical freedom that characterises rational and transcendental principles. Imagination substitutes for reason at the cost of its empirical nature and, by this anti- or unnatural act, it conquers nature.[106]

Thus, the imagination can achieve the aim of the sublime: it overcomes and becomes indifferent to the pain of empirical shock, reconciling it with pleasure. The sublime results from this movement of the imagination that organises the affects under the formalised and stable order of reason: "[t]he raising of this reflection of the aesthetical Judgement so as to be adequate to Reason (though without a definite concept of Reason) represents the object as subjectively purposive"[107] – and so, as concerning both reason and practical judgement.

After going through a crisis or loss of identity, together with a massive destabilization of its metaphysical certainties, the subject experiences in the sublime an infinite totality that carries it away from the pleasures of nature and elevates it to the highest moral degree. While its senses are being overwhelmed, the subject is abruptly reminded of its own finitude by having to face its own cognitive limits; in this very moment, still, the subject strains beyond them, which shows – in a sort of 'negative transcendence' – the infinity of moral Reason. In the dynamical sublime, feeling acts in favour of morality: thrown beyond its own sensory limits, the subject *feels* that Reason transcends the senses infinitely, and so that true, 'moral' freedom is beyond sensory cognition.[108] If infinite totality cannot be comprehended nor dominated, it is precisely by *feeling* this lack or

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[104] Immanuel Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
[105] See Paul de Man, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.
[106] *Ibid.*, p. 86.
[107] Immanuel Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
[108] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

incapacity that the subject can grasp the existence of moral Reason and its imprint within itself. Therefore, as one of Kant's commentators put it, "the principle underlying [men's] consent in judging of the sublime is the 'presupposition of the moral feeling in man.'"[109]

Within Kant's philosophical system, the sublime seems to function as the bridge that links the empiricism of the aesthetic to his Transcendental Philosophy, guaranteeing the conceptual and architectonic unity of his system:

In this modality of aesthetical judgements, viz. in the necessity claimed for them, lies an important moment of the Critique of Judgement. For it enables us to recognise in them an a priori principle, and raises them out of empirical psychology, in which otherwise they would remain buried amongst the feelings of gratification and grief […]. Thus it enables us to place the Judgement among those faculties that have a priori principles at their basis, and so to bring it into Transcendental Philosophy.[110]

Accordingly, Kant argued that aesthetic judgements are subjective and universal at the same time: they are particulars incorporated into a law of the understanding, but they originate from a feeling; they appear to explain and organise the world, but in fact they spring from emotion. Nonetheless, since the essence of the subject *transcends* its own needs and desires, a truly subjective judgement would be untainted by its concrete particularity and "devoid of every possible condition which would necessarily distinguish the judge from other people."[111] Because of the nature of our immutable faculties, which are shared by every individual and work the same way in each one of them, Kant believed that subjective judgements of the aesthetic kind would arouse a sort of universal accord. This means that aesthetic judgement is capable of going beyond the accidents that may separate one individual from another, and to involve the very structure of human experience as shared by all of them. So, aesthetic judgement implies that the subject's particular response is actually of the same kind as those experienced by every other individual, and that this necessarily elicits spontaneous and immediate agreement from them all.[112] Aesthetic judgements are thus "impersonally personal,"[113] or, as Kant himself put it, universally subjective.[114]

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[109] J. H. Bernard, "Editor's Introduction" to Immanuel Kant, *op. cit*., p. 12.
[110] Immanuel Kant, *op. cit*., p. 116.
[111] Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer, "Introduction" to Id. (eds.), *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 12.
[112] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit*., pp. 93-96.
[113] Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer, *op. cit*., p. 12.
[114] See Immanuel Kant, *op. cit*., p. 71.

Standing in-between the empirical and the theoretical, Kantian aesthetics reconnects the concrete particulars of reality to a kind of universal law, defining a third realm where individual subjects can revel in the knowledge that their very structural constitution predisposes them to mutual harmony. The aesthetic seems to reveal that human beings are always already in agreement because they are 'fashioned' to be in accord with each other: it is responsible for what Kant calls *sensus communis*, a kind of universal solidarity as opposed to *doxa* or common sense (an unreflective collection of opinions or prejudices on which, historically speaking, bourgeois utilitarianism was going to fuel itself). So, contrarily to the actual political domain, where individuals are bound together just externally and instrumentally to pursue egotistic ends, the 'intersubjectivity' that aesthetic judgement creates outlines a community of subjects united in the very structure of their being. Whereas a purely superficial sociality is restricted to utilitarian behaviour and needs the back-up of coercion, 'aesthetic' solidarity is one of inward, immediate and spontaneous consensus[115], where "every member should surely be purpose as well as means, and, whilst all work together towards the possibility of the whole, each should be determined as regards place and function by means of the Idea of the whole."[116]

What Kantian aesthetics offers, then, is "an ideological paradigm for both individual subject and social order"[117], since the aesthetic dimension here does not simply come from or represent, but *is* itself a society.[118] Besides the production of the artefact and the ideology connected to it, aesthetics in the Modern Age relates to material reality by proposing itself as a paradigm on which bourgeois individual and society can be measured. In opposition to an actual social philosophy that revolved upon egotism and appetite, Kant envisioned in the affective law of the aesthetic that which could bring individuals together more freely and successfully than bourgeois possessive individualism was doing by the end of the 18th century.

1.3 Aesthetics and Politics

Starting out with Baumgarten as a discourse that would reconcile sense and spirit, the aesthetic, up to the second half of the 19th century, has found itself divided between two opposites: an anti-sensuous idealism and an inflexible materialism. Kant's subordination or

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[115] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit*., pp. 96-97.
[116] Immanuel Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 294.
[117] Terry Eagleton, *op. cit*., p. 99.
[118] See *ibid.*

dismissal of sensuousness in favour of Reason in the aesthetic dimension gives way to various forms of idealism – from the subjective idealism of 'Romantics' such as Fichte or Schiller which sees the aesthetic in opposition to material reality, to Schopenhauer's rejection of factual history from the aesthetic, to Hegel's inadequacy of the phenomenal realm to represent the infinity of the idea. It is only with the three most relevant philosophers in the realm of modern aesthetics – Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – that the implicit materialism of the aesthetic is retrieved from the burden of idealism which has hindered it till now. My main focus and theoretical background will be the philosophical revolution brought about by Karl Marx's recollection of the body as the starting point of thought itself.

1.3.1 Marx's Aesthetic Revolution

Marx's early philosophical activity is mostly dedicated to thinking history and society through again from the standpoint of the body. "*Sense perception*" he wrote in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (*EPM*),

must be the basis of all science. Only when science starts out from sense perception in the dual form of *sensuous* consciousness and *sensuous* need – i.e. only when science starts out from nature – it is *real* science. The whole of history is a preparation, a development, for '*man*' to become the object of s*ensuous* consciousness and for the needs of 'man as man' to become (sensuous) needs.[119]

Just as the discourse of aesthetics was born in order to rescue and organise the world of the senses, which an excessively objectivist rationality was threatening to suppress, so Marx warned that "a *psychology* for which this book [of the senses], the most tangible and accessible part of history, is closed, can never become a *real* science with a genuine content."[120] Almost a century after Baumgarten had turned sense perception into a supplement to reason, Marx seemed now to subvert their relationship, calling for a form of knowledge which would be grounded upon the material preconditions that establish different relations with the world. Starting from his Paris Manuscripts, Marx deconstructs the opposition between the aesthetic and the practical which was distinctive of idealist (or bourgeois) philosophy. He reconsiders the sense organs that capitalism has either alienated or

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[119] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in Id., *Early Writings*, ed. Lucio Colletti, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p. 355.
[120] *Ibid*., p. 354.

commodified as historical *products* and forms of social practice. Modern subjectivity is again acknowledged as a sensible *body*, and, consequently, as part of an evolving *material* history. By reconsidering the senses from a set of contemplative organs to the primary form of connection with reality, the German philosopher was able to turn the aesthetic into a sensuously-based science that placed sense perception at the roots of human action. Marx's philosophical reflection has its starting point in the aesthetic belief that exercising one's senses and cognitive faculties as a mere end in itself, without necessarily backing them up with utilitarian aims, is the accomplishment of human subjectivity. The actualisation of the senses is a necessity of human nature pleasurable in itself, so that, like the work of art, it needs no practical justification.[121] Similarly to art, Marx characterises "'true' human production as the impulse to create in freedom from immediate need."[122]

[…] [N]ot only the five senses, but also the so-called spiritual senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, the *human* sense, the humanity of the senses – all these come into being only through the existence of *their* objects, through *humanised* nature. The *cultivation* of the five senses is the work of all previous history. *Sense* which is a prisoner of crude practical need has only a *restricted* sense. For a man who is starving the human form of food does not exist, only its abstract form exists; it could just as well be present in its crudest form, and it would be hard to say how this way of eating differs from that of *animals* [*...*] the society that is *fully developed* produces man in all the richness of his being, the *rich* man who is *profoundly and abundantly endowed with all the senses*, as its constant reality.[123]

In fact, the history of the modern, middle-class subject is for Marx synthesisable as an apparently self-asserting but actually self-defeating process of the human body. By means of those technical 'extensions' of itself such as society and technology, the subject tries to master or 'assimilate' the whole world into its own bodily structure, but finally overplays and annihilates itself, abstracting its own sensuous essence.[124] Bourgeois society of mid-nineteenth century, dominated by capitalist struggle and class conflict, abstracts the human body into a *labouring*, alienated body, in the attempt to appropriate and control its faculties for utilitarian ends. The 'sensuous expression' of this estrangement of the human subject from its own body is the dislocation of its sensuous fullness into the single drive to possess, embodied by private property: "*All* the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by

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[121] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit*., pp. 197-204.
[122] *Ibid*., p. 204.
[123] Karl Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 353.
[124] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-202.

the simple estrangement of *all* these senses – the sense of *having*. So that it might give birth to its inner wealth, human nature has been reduced to this absolute poverty."[125] According to Marx, capitalism causes sensory life to separate in two opposite directions, which are equally unauthentic and grotesque caricature of the human body. First of all, capitalist society reduces the sensuous plenitude of the body to a "crude and abstract simplicity of need."[126] Through the instrumentalization that capitalism makes of it, the human body becomes trapped under a compelling, abstract law that turns it into a mere *labouring* body, from which sheer corporeal pleasure is displaced.

By reducing the worker's needs to the paltriest minimum necessary to maintain his physical existence and by reducing his activity to the most abstract mechanical movement […] the political economist declares that man has no other needs, either in the sphere of activity or in that of consumption […]. He turns the worker into a being with neither needs nor senses and turns the worker's activity into a pure abstraction from all activity.[127]

Thus, the capitalist casts the worker's senses off, as well as his own: "The less you eat, drink, buy books, go to the theatre, go dancing, go drinking, think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save* and the greater will become the treasure which neither moths nor maggots can consume – your *capital*."[128]

After estranging his (and the worker's) sensory life for the sake of the capital, though, the capitalist is also able to re-build his alienated sensuality and transfer it into the capital itself, since "everything which you are unable to do, your money can do for you: it can eat, drink, go dancing, go to the theatre, it can appropriate art, learning, historical curiosities, political power, it can travel, it is *capable* of doing all these things for you."[129] If, on the one hand, sensuous life is reduced to bare need by capitalist society, on the other hand, it undergoes an equally alienating exaggeration: while the worker craves to satisfy basic material needs, the upper-class acquires the opposite desire to gratify his "reified, unnatural and *imaginary* appetites."[130] The human body under capitalism experiences then a profound fracture, which divides it drastically between whimsical idealism and base materialism. The

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[125] Karl Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 352.
[126] Terry Eagleton, *op. cit*., p. 199.
[127] Karl Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 360.
[128] *Ibid.*, p. 361.
[129] *Ibid.*
[130] *Ibid.*, p. 359.

result is that the body's sensory drives, whose capacities are rationalised and commodified, are alienated either as brute appetite or as redundant desires.[131]

As a way to reinstate the body's plundered faculties, Marx prescribes the supersession of private property, which

is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes; but it is this emancipation because these senses and attributes have become human, subjectively as well as objectively. The eye has become a human eye, just as its object has become a social, human object, made by man for man. The senses have therefore become theoreticians in their immediate praxis. They relate to the thing for its own sake, but the thing itself is an objective human relation to itself and to man, and vice-versa. Need or enjoyment have therefore lost their egoistic nature, and nature has lost its mere utility in the sense that its use has become human use.[132]

According to Marx, 'aesthetic' life can be accomplished only by releasing the bodily drives from the tyranny of abstract and universalistic need, and by retrieving the object from utilitarian abstraction to the use-value given by its material particularity. Since the subjective concreteness of the human senses is the product of a complex material history, only an objective historical transformation can bring about the practical conditions in which such a sensuously-centred subjectivity might flourish. This is the point where the aesthetic most clearly identifies with politics: the emancipation of sensory experience from instrumental abstraction can only happen within the appropriate political preconditions – historically speaking, with the overthrowing of the bourgeois state relations.

1.3.2 Marxist Disruptive Aesthetics: Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno

In a combination of both Hegelian and Marxist aspects, it was György Lukács's approach to aesthetics that in a way led the path to the following Marxist philosophers. With the progressive evolution of market capitalism into higher corporate forms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the subject's new experience of itself becomes more and more connected to passively serving a deeper controlling structure that thinks and acts in its place. Instead of the self-determining individual of early bourgeois society, in monopoly capitalism the subject is fractured and alienated from the world, which is impossible to comprehend as the product of its own free activity. What faces the new subject is a self-regulative system

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[131] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-201.
[132] Karl Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

utterly indifferent of human practice, whose processes are merely formal and autonomous from the laws of sensuous reality, which – in the words of György Lukács – "disintegrates into a multitude of irrational facts and over these a network of purely 'formal' laws emptied of content is cast."[133] To such a reified historical condition, where, as in the commodity form, the subject is dreadfully torn apart from an object drained of immanent meaning, form is separated from content, spirit from sense, the solutions that Lukács envisions are two: one is socialism, the other is the aesthetic.[134]

Connecting literary form to ideas of collective historical development, the Hungarian philosopher first developed the Hegelian idea that literature reveals deeply in its form the specific epistemological issues of the age in which it was produced.[135] According to Lukács, the work of art's relation to its historical moment is not that of a simple mirror, but is enabled precisely by its autonomy from empirical reality, its status as a semblance or appearance. This allows the work of art to be essentially 'realistic': the place where phenomena of the material reality are recreated in light of their universal truth, where the artist penetrates "the laws governing objective reality and [uncovers] the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society."[136]

According to the philosopher, the "theoretical and philosophical importance which the *principle of art* acquired" with the rise of bourgeois society is due to its

creation of a concrete totality that springs from a conception of form orientated towards the concrete content of its material substratum. In this view, form is therefore able to demolish the 'contingent' relation of the parts to the whole and to resolve the merely apparent opposition between chance and necessity.[137]

Hence the political address of Lukács's aesthetic realism, according to which "literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected"[138] whose "great social mission" is "a vital relationship to the life of the people, a progressive development of the masses' own experiences."[139]

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[133] György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone, London: Merlin Press, 1971, p. 155.
[134] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, pp. 316-323.
[135] See Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 23.
[136] György Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in Ernst Bloch *et al.*, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: Verso, 1980, p. 38.
[137] György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, cit., p. 137.
[138] György Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," cit., p. 33.
[139] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

If Lukács finds in the artefact a remedy against the reification of the commodity, Benjamin models his revolutionary aesthetics on its very structure only to dismantle it from the inside. With the leaking of inherent meaning from the object, any phenomenon is free to signify anything else: the unhinging of form and content of present society that the commodity embodies becomes the point of departure of the allegorical sign – itself a dead letter or piece of lifeless script. Allegory, like the commodity itself, is born out of the ruins of a lost immanent meaning, but turns the alienating effects of this loss embodied by the commodity into new, politically charged, aesthetic parameters. Benjamin's theory of the allegory, in a way, 'redeems' the split between signifier and signified brought about by the commodity into a semantic polyvalence of the referent. When liberated from all mystifying, univocal immanence, the allegorical referent is left an arbitrary material signifier, a fragment which can be turned into a multiplicity of meanings. As in the commodity, the meaning is always outside the allegorical object, extrinsic to its material being, so that in the work of art they can be woven together in a set of estranging correspondences – as with the practice of the avant-garde, in montage, surrealism, dream imagery and epic theatre.[140]

The work of art becomes thus a concretion of what Benjamin calls a "constellation," which exemplifies his notion that the idea is not what governs the phenomenon as some abstract and immanent essence, but lies precisely in the conceptual articulation of those diverse and contradictory elements that make up its concrete manifestations:

ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements. […] Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. […] It is the function of concepts to group phenomena together, and the division which is brought about within them thanks to the distinguishing power of the intellect is all the more significant in that it brings about two things at a single stroke: the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas.[141]

The individual phenomenon, understood as an extremely condensed image of social processes, needs to be disarticulated and then reconstructed in order to yield them up. Such a fragmentary or 'constellatory' epistemology definitely surpasses the Kantian division of empirical and conceptual: by refusing the idea of some metaphysical essence lying behind

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[140] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-327.

[141] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne, London: New Left Books, 1977, p. 34.

the phenomenon and leaving its heterogeneous component parts contradictorily articulated, it liberates the thing's damaged, suppressed materiality. With its resistance to the abstract power of totality, the concept of constellation is in fact a blow to the heart of the traditional bourgeois aesthetic and political paradigm and its rigidly rationalistic hierarchy of values. Tearing asunder all false organicist unity brings about the emergence of a renewed aesthetic or politics of the body, since "[j]ust as the aesthetic for the eighteenth century involved that whole new programme of bodily disciplines we call manners, […], so for Benjamin the body must be reprogrammed and reinscribed by the power of the sensuous image."[142] If the reinsertion of the body into the concept is the original preoccupation of the aesthetic, it is all the more so with Benjamin, who gives his reflections a thoroughly materialistic inflection.[143]

The return to the body inaugurated by Marxist philosophers is profoundly marked by the awareness that, in the wake of the Nazis, the whole aesthetic issue has become irretrievably disfigured by fascism, which, as argued by Theodor Adorno, "was the absolute sensation."[144] Humanity, according to Benjamin, had reached such a degree of "self-alienation" that "it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art."[145] Fascist ideology – a degeneration of the idealistic identity of concept and phenomenon – is a manifestation of dominative reason, "the belly turned mind,"[146] which appropriates (devours) otherness in order to annihilate it. The horrors of Nazi-fascism, as a matter of fact, originate in the reification of spontaneous aesthetic sensations, which turns them into corporeal pleasures determined and regulated by political ends. This meant that the body and its pleasures had been progressively turned into an absolute, affirmative category. This non-contradictory, organicist transformation would eventually reveal itself as both fictitious and dangerous, as shown by the fact that "in the Third Reich the abstract horror of news and rumour was enjoyed as the only stimulus sufficient to incite a momentary glow in

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[142] Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 336.
[143] See *ibid.*, pp. 328-336.
[144] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott, London: New Left Books, 1974, p. 237.
[145] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in Id., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 42.
[146] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 23.

the weakened sensorium of the masses."[147] Behind the fascist 'aesthetic' state, there is the shadow of Auschwitz, of physical wretchedness, and of sheer, pointless pain.[148]

After being tainted by mass society and fascism, the aesthetic discourse for Adorno can only start again not from the body's pleasure but from the other side of it – the suffering body. Suffering is in fact the direct expression of the internal fissure the subject has experienced with the 'irrational rationality' of the identity principle, for which "there should be no contradiction, no antagonism."[149] What is required now is in fact "a rational critique of reason"[150] that would deconstruct ideology's 'pure identity' and recognise instead "identity's dependence on the non-identical."[151] – a project that Adorno assigns to art precisely on the basis of its autonomous status within society. According to the philosopher, the autonomy of art, its 'otherness' from the social reality it comes from, is the fundamental condition for its very existence: an artwork is created through the inscription of specific contents into a conceptual or mental space, which then has a physical manifestation. Aesthetic space thus runs parallel to 'the real'; it is an alterity to lived experience which exists in a world of its own. In fact, such an autonomy is the enabling basis for art's strong connections to empirical reality.[152] Although Adorno voiced criticism of explicitly political or ideological art,[153] his argument for detached rather than committed art actually demonstrates that all art is *intrinsically* and inescapably political. As a matter of fact, Adorno conceives the aesthetic as essentially detached from the empirical and therefore always an implicit critique of the empirical. Such a notion asserts a socially critical role for all 'authentic' art, and at the same time it warns against falling into some utilitarian commitment to one-sided ideologies,[154] which would spoil art of its true essence.

Therefore, the work of art is a material product of social labour, but it detaches itself ideologically from that very empirical world, by bringing forth another world, made of images, specular to the material one. At once deeply rooted in the productive structure of society and ideologically independent from it, "both autonomous and *fait social*,"[155] art is the epitome of the emancipatory "non-self-identity" principle, for which it can speak critically of the same social system of which it is part:

[147] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, cit., p. 237.
[148] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, pp. 343-345.
[149] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, cit., p. 149.
[150] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
[151] *Ibid.*, p. 120.
[152] See Hugh Grady, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
[153] See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, London and New York: Continuum, 2002, pp. 103-105, 123, and 246-48.
[154] See Hugh Grady, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
[155] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 5.

[Art] is defined by its relation to what it is not. […] [It] acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; […]. Only by virtue of separation from empirical reality, which sanctions art to model the relation of the whole and the part according to the work's own need, does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence. Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience.[156]

According to the philosopher, the less socially referential art is, the more powerful its critique to the very material conditions that produce it is. It is only by virtue of its unperishable abstract form that artworks can speak up for the contingent sensuous world against the oppression of the identity principle, and realise thus a (negative) dialectical reconciliation of subject and object. "In the form of an image," Adorno explains in the essay "Reconciliation under Duress,"

the object is absorbed into the subject instead of following the bidding of the alienated world and persisting obdurately in a state of reification. The contradiction between the object reconciled in the subject, i. e. spontaneously absorbed into the subject, and the actual unreconciled object in the outside world, confers on the work of art a vantage-point from which it can criticise actuality.[157]

Art, as a "non-regressive integration of divergences," overthrows the domination of reason, becoming "the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering,"[158] in which "the hidden irrationality of a rationalised society is brought to light."[159] By emancipating things from their present empirical confinement towards the non-existent, artefacts allow a "negative knowledge of the actual world,"[160] thus expressing an unconscious desire to change empirical reality. [Still, this cannot but remain a desire, for it is only through the unresolved conflict between the rational and the sensuous that the work of art can bring valid consciousness of reality's own dissonance.]

The aesthetic, which was born as a way to reconcile sensuous reality with thought, becomes now what keeps the breach between them open instead: as "the negative imprint of the administered world,"[161] art retains reality's negativity and thus, by acting like "the

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[156] *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.
[157] Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," cit., p. 160.
[158] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 27.
[159] Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 351.
[160] Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," cit., p. 160.
[161] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* cit., p. 31.

critique of praxis as the rule of brutal self-preservation at the heart of the status quo and in its service,"[162] it empties thought of any blindly affirmative urge over it.

1.3.3 Sublime Means Dismantling

In 20th-century philosophy and cultural criticism, the discourse on the sublime seemed to have been losing its central role in aesthetic matters, but then it was vibrantly revived by the end of the century. One of the key thinkers concerned with looking back at theories on the sublime of the past in order to make the present clearer is Jean-François Lyotard, as he does, for instance, when trying to give a proper definition of Postmodernism. In his 1982 essay "Answering the Question: What is the Postmodern?" he pleas against the latent tendency of contemporary times "to give up experimentation in the arts and elsewhere,"[163] which he sees as a conservative strategy by which authority is gained over culture and life in any of its aspects. Lyotard recognises that this tendency is not limited to the contemporary historical period only, but is to be found within thought throughout time, whenever we are faced with "the same call to order, a desire for unity, identity, security and popularity."[164] Inserted in the debate between 'therapeutic' art, aimed at protecting the consciousness from doubt, on the one hand, and, on the other, art that questions the rules of its predecessors bringing a split to the consciousness instead, the sublime becomes a key mode of aesthetic engagement in the postmodern era. As a matter of fact, the philosopher starts reconsidering the Kantian aesthetic sublime as the point "where modern art (including literature) finds its impetus and where the logic of the avant-garde finds its axioms."[165] Understanding the clash between the pain arising from the struggle of the Imagination and the pleasure derived from the superiority of Reason over the Imagination itself in terms of "a conflict between all the faculties of the subject, between the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to 'present' something,"[166] the sublime embodies that crisis in which both the impossibility of the mind to organise the world rationally and its straining beyond its own edges are revealed. The sublime is the notion which displays how inadequate and incomplete any representation of the world which attempts at catching it and making it fully 'presentable' is, as is the case

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[162] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[163] Jean François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is the Postmodern?", in Id., *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence, 1982-1985*, ed. by Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, trans. by Don Barry *et. al.*, Sydney: Power Publications, 1992, <http://www.marginalutility.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/machete_reading_may1_c.pdf>, p. 1.
[164] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[165] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[166] *Ibid*.

with Realism, whereas "Modernity, whenever it appears, does not occur without a shattering of belief, a discovery of *the lack of reality* in reality."[167] Lyotard explains:

> I shall call modern the art which devotes its "trivial technique", as Diderot called it, to presenting the existence of something unpresentable. Showing that there is something we can conceive of which we can neither see nor show [...]. But how do we show something that cannot be seen? Kant himself suggests the direction to follow when he calls *formlessness*, the *absence of form*, a possible index to the unpresentable.[168]

The philosopher then makes the case of modern – that is to say, avant-garde – painting, as founding its axioms on the concept of the "incommensurability between reality and concept implied by the Kantian philosophy of the sublime"[169] and presenting something negatively, by avoiding representation or figuration at all. In doing so, avant-gardes develop the aesthetic of the sublime in terms of a work of 'de-realisation', which continually exposes "the artifices of presentation that allow thought to be enslaved by the gaze and diverted from the unpresentable."[170]

According to Lyotard, the sublime relationship between the presentable and the conceivable which unfolds the 'retreat of the real' and gives birth to modernity, though, can manifest itself in a twofold way: either by stressing the inadequacy of the faculty of presentation, and so the nostalgia for presence; or by stressing the power of the faculty to conceive instead, and the "jubilation which comes from inventing new rules of the game."[171] There follows what Lyotard calls the *differend*, which leads to the formulation of what the Postmodern is:

> [T]he modern aesthetic is an aesthetic of the sublime, but it is nostalgic; it allows the unpresentable to be invoked only as absent content, while form, thanks to its recognisable consistency, continues to offer the reader or spectator material for consolation and pleasure. But such feelings do not amount to the true sublime feeling, which is intrinsically a combination of pleasure and pain [...].The postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unpresentable in presentation itself, which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations

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[167] *Ibid.*, p. 5.
[168] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
[169] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[170] *Ibid.*
[171] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

– not to take pleasure in them but to better produce the feeling that there is something unpresentable.[172]

Thus, Lyotard's definition of the Postmodern allows us to draw and underline in retrospect the most fundamental aspect of the sublime: it always brings about the questioning of pre-established rules and given categories, destroying the illusion to reconcile the concept and the sensible and totalise them into a unity, the price of which illusion is, according to the philosopher, the terror that hides "beneath the general demand for relaxation and appeasement."[173]

Lyotard brings the argument further in his 1984 essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde", taking the hint from Barnett Newman's essay "The Sublime is Now" (1948), which understands the sublime as something 'here and now', to be found within those works of art which do not seek to be a representation of something outside them, but are rather simply a *presentation* of themselves. He starts from this modernist interpretation of the sublime as *the happening* (the Heideggerian *Ereignis*) in order to operate a revision of the notion throughout history that would throw a new light on the present status of art; namely to set out the significance of the avant-garde. With the premise that *sublime* has its nearest synonym in *immanent*, the elements that emerge as underlying every reformulation of the sublime from Pseudo-Longinus to Burke and Kant are: "unsureness" or indeterminacy (Boileau's *je ne sais quoi*); the "discrepancy" between thought and the real world; disarray or destruction of harmony and the abandonment of rules.[174] Lyotard synthesises the characteristics of this disarray as follows:

[T]he artist is no longer guided by a culture that made him the object and master of a message of glory. Instead, he has become the genius, an involuntary receptacle of inspiration which comes to him from some "*je ne sais quoi*." Public judgement no longer relies on the traditional criteria of shared pleasures. […] The question is no longer to please a public by bringing it into a process of identification and glorification, but to surprise it. […] Even imperfections – aberrations of taste, ugliness – play a role in this shock appeal. Art would no longer imitate nature but would create a whole other world, *eine Zwischenwelt* (a between world), as Paul Klee would later say, *eine*

[172] *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
[173] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[174] See Jean François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *Art Forum International Magazine*, New York, April 1984, <http://artforum.com/inprintarchive/id=32533>, pp. 38-41.

Nebenwelt (a side world), one could say, where monstrosity and malformation have rights because of sublime potential.[175]

There lies, according to the philosopher, the significance of the avant-garde's belonging to the aesthetic of the sublime: in its effort to record "the occurrence of a perceivable 'now' as something unpresentable that remains to be presented."[176] The first consequence of the sublime politics of questioning the received state of things is art's abandonment of its traditional identifying role in relation to the community, which is very likely to bring to a situation of isolation and misunderstanding, most of the times to repression too. Sublime art, such as the avant-garde is, is never welcome among communities that constantly strive in its opposite direction – they feed the unity of thought and language, the wholeness of the subject, the uniformity of history; they create appeasement and relaxation so that they can maintain order, security and authority. The sublime, instead, works against the illusion of totality: it focuses on the inexpressible, aggravates identity crises, enlarges the anxiety of the void; "is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be composed in terms of it. Rather, it is what dismantles consciousness, what dismisses consciousness; it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to compose itself."[177]

Lyotard's final remark that "[t]he sense of the sublime is the name of the dismantling"[178] actually sums up the importance of that notion in the history of aesthetics and its real-life implications. Taking the hint from such a theoretical impulse, the following work aims at showing how the sublime can be created within the work of art, and how its dismantling effect works in relation to material reality.

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[175] *Ibid*., p. 39.
[176] *Ibid*., p. 41.
[177] *Ibid*., p. 37.
[178] *Ibid*., p. 43.

CHAPTER II

The Cinematic Sublime

After exploring the origin of the sublime and its role within the history of aesthetics, my purpose in this chapter is to retrace how this notion and its dismantling power comes alive in cinema. What I call the "cinematic sublime" results from the combination of the characteristics attributed to this concept throughout history: as the etymological meaning of the term implies, the cinematic sublime is still a matter of 'elevation' of the mind, raising excitement and astonishment in the viewer. But instead of being connected to a mere rhetorical device, the sublime originates from the whole process of *ποίησις* or aesthetic creation in cinema. As for the cinematic sublime, the call for surprise or shock in the audience, the urge of raising doubts, uncovering clashes, and elevating the mind to the awareness of reality's disorder emerge in the peculiar relationship the cinematic medium establishes with the material world.

2.1 Sublime as "Impure Aesthetics"

The first essential implication of the "cinematic sublime" is the deep interaction between the work of art and the larger social and cultural context in which it is produced and received. As the previous chapter shows, throughout its history, aesthetics has hardly ever been detached from what is often deemed its opposite – the political.

The appearance of the aesthetic as a category in its own right is deeply interwoven with the historical situation of mid-eighteenth-century Europe, to the great revolutions of the Enlightenment and the changes they brought in the ways in which man conceptualised himself, his relations to others and to the world around him. Considering the birth of such a category as a product of modernity, we can observe that the conceptualization of art came alongside, and partly as a consequence of, those economic, social, and political changes running through from the eighteenth century. As a matter of fact, the idea of the aesthetic emerged while Western European societies were experiencing the economic 'take-off' that brought an economy plainly identifiable as capitalist into being. The aesthetic is thus very

closely entangled with the main processes of its time such as the development of commodity-production under capitalism, "simultaneously a mirror-image of and a site of resistance to it."[1] The concurrent emergence of the idea of the autonomous artwork and the development of an autonomous commodity economy is significant to understand the role of aesthetics – as is the more general process of *reification* (the creation of self-perpetuating systems functioning according to their own laws) out of which modernity was born.[2] The epistemological system in which the aesthetic began to rise was characterised by those conceptual differentiations that had already appeared during the Early-Modern era, which inevitably affected the formulation of aesthetics and its subsequent value. In particular, the split between subject and object, the barrier between human perception and external reality (theorised by Kant but retraceable at the roots of the Early-Modern period) conceptualised the world as a fragmented, objectified, alien realm, indifferent or hostile to a separate human subjectivity, consequently immersed in a crisis of meaning and self-definition. The culture of modernity is therefore differentiated, fragmented into separate, autonomous spheres, and that constitutes not just a decisive pre-condition for the emergence of the aesthetic as a category in its own right, but also determined its function. The permanent crisis of meaning that defines modernity is itself – and crucially – the ground that gives birth to the modern notion of the aesthetic.[3]

Increasingly cut loose from the certainties of the old worldview, which grounded and provided guarantees for it, the emerging modern subject must find from within himself the foundations of a modern epistemology. In the context of a new understanding of the human subject, aesthetics is meant to be the 'science' that articulates the complexities of affective experience as a whole – so that what is said and thought about artworks is closely bound up with a developing vision concerning the nature of human experience generally. Aesthetics in this period, then, does not exclusively concern art; rather more widely, it considers how we are formed as subjects, and how *as subjects* we go about making sense of our experience.[4]

Where could [aesthetic pleasure] be placed in a world divided radically between subjects and objects? Was art a commodity, to be measured by the exchange-value it acquired in the market

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[1] Hugh Grady, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.
[2] See *ibid*., pp. 19-20.
[3] See *ibid*., pp. 16-17. See also Mark Robson, "Defending Poetry, or, Is There an Early Modern Aesthetic?", in John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (eds.), *The New Aestheticism*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 119-130.
[4] See Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, "Introduction" to Id. (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

place? Or was it an anti-commodity, one that defied the abstractness and cultural levelling of the market and gave access to a more authentic, genuine realm of market-transcendent values? Could it produce knowledge of this external world and simultaneously begin to give it meaning? Could it function in the new, reified world somehow to bring back into modernity the sense of meaning that was characteristic of pre-modern culture?[5]

The aesthetic was precisely the field in which all of these possibilities began to be discussed, while they were accordingly enacted and explored within the concrete practices of the arts. In all of its autonomy and fictitiousness, the aesthetic seemed to offer a privileged access to the meaning of a reified and irremediably fragmented reality. As Alan Sinfield puts it, art is "one set of practices within the range of cultural production; a "discourse", we might say, meaning the working assumptions of those involved in those practices, together with the institutions that sustain them."[6] Consequently, aesthetics is not an objective category of value, but a discourse that has been built and developed in order to affirm, or challenge, various sets of value in our cultures. The main function of the aesthetic is thus to attend to how art "functions in the social order – considering the kinds of human possibilities that it promotes, and may be made to promote; how it acts to sustain the prevailing power relations, and affords opportunity for dissidence and new understanding."[7]

Going back to some of the basic contributions to the construction of modern aesthetics, even in Kant's ahistorical approach, it is clear that aesthetics was seen from the beginning as a sphere of human interaction with (and organization of) the world. In particular, aesthetic theories in the eighteenth century begin to play an unusually central, decisive part in the constitution of the dominant bourgeois ideology. The emergence of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact itself coincided with the rise of the early-bourgeois class-society, and of a whole new form of subjectivity connected to that social order. What allows this linkage between modern aesthetics and bourgeois ideology is, first of all, the start of a material process by which cultural production becomes "autonomous" of the various social functions it has traditionally served: "[o]nce artefacts become commodities in the market place, they exist for nothing and nobody in particular, and can consequently be rationalised, ideologically speaking, as existing entirely and gloriously for themselves."[8] It is precisely this notion of the autonomy or self-referentiality the 'ideological' peculiarity of the

[5] Hugh Grady, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
[6] Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 29.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

new aesthetic discourse, because it does not simply imply that art is isolated from all other social practices to become a sort of refuge from society's actual values of competitiveness, exploitation and material possessiveness. Rather, art's self-regulating and self-determining mode of being offers the middle class a fitting ideological model of subjectivity. This concept of autonomy is the main contribution of the aesthetic to the construction of the modern subject: while liberating concrete particularity by valuing sensuous faculties as radical ends in themselves, modern aesthetics also serves the external purpose of building up what was going to be the dominative middle-class ideology.[9] The appearance of the philosophical discourse on the aesthetic in the eighteenth century can be seen as part of that historical process by which the modern (bourgeois) subject has built itself both practically and theoretically. In the context of the construction of this new subject and of the relative world order, what matters of the aesthetic is "not in the first place art", but, on a larger scale, its contribute to "the massive introjection of abstract reason by the life of the senses", and to "the process of refashioning the human subject from the inside".[10]

As we have seen, Kant's third area of human judgement, by remaining 'autonomous' or pleasurable in itself, brings to a consciousness of our cognitive faculties, an awareness of human powers over nature. His notion of the aesthetic outlines within the subject's own experience a profound reconnection to material reality, apparently healing the fissure between subjectivity and the phenomenal world. If with Enlightenment rationalism the object is drained of its immanent meaning to restore the subject's primacy, the aesthetic with Kant works as a way to readjust the object's sheer materiality to the subject's transcendental faculties: in the aesthetic judgement, "objects are uncovered which seem at once real yet wholly given for the subject, veritable bits of material Nature which are nevertheless delightfully pliant to the mind."[11] As a matter of fact, the aesthetic seems to offer is the appropriate illusion of a material world which is not indifferent to human beings and their cognitive capacities. As one of Kant's commentators wrote:

It is a great stimulus to moral effort and a strong support to the human spirit if men can believe that the moral life is something more than a mortal enterprise in which he can join with his fellow men against a background of a blind and indifferent universe until he and the human race are

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[9] See *ibid.*
[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

blotted out forever. Man cannot be indifferent to the possibility that his puny efforts towards moral perfection may, in spite of appearances, be in accord with the purpose of the universe [...].[12]

This capacity in turn allows Kant to say that the aesthetic experience harmonises the whole person, laying the basis for his disciple Friedrich Schiller to claim in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* that aesthetics should be the basis of humanistic education.[13] As a matter of fact, Schiller's thoughts on aesthetics were basically a development of Kant's idealistic notion that the aesthetic is a realm of shared human understanding, and that it can bring about a reconciliation of man with the natural. The poet-philosopher reworked Kant's aesthetic realm as part of a historical-ethical theory of human development, a progress of man that goes from a merely instrumental relationship to nature, to a recognition of its beauty, to a final stage of morality. This passage is crucially allowed only by going through the *Bildung* of aesthetic education: by involving both reason and sense, and thus healing the fracture between subject and object, the aesthetic creates a realm of equality on which social harmony can finally be modelled. Following Schiller's utopian and Romantic development of Kant, both Hegel and Marx's aesthetic started from considering the individual, organic artwork within a larger historical context, conceptualising artistic form as essentially imprinted by the historical moment in which the artwork is produced. While Hegel re-thought the aesthetic in terms of his own historicising system as a manifestation of *Geist*, Marx borrowed the vision of art as an expression of an ever-evolving human history, but inserted it in his materialistic rather than spiritual view of such a development. Art, like labour, was thus inevitably involved in the alienating private-property system, and could be distorted into a highly specialised and differentiated activity that became then a commodity on the market.[14] Such materialistic arguments by Marx and his followers established a connection between the aesthetic and the political which is essential to the notion of "cinematic sublime" I am going to develop.

In Marx's philosophical view, aesthetics and politics cannot be distinguished from one another. Unlike bourgeois idealism, he believes that the senses are already both objective and subjective, concrete actuality and individual interiority at once, for the emancipation of which certain objective material preconditions are necessary. Therefore, sensuous faculties

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[12] Herbert James Paton, *The Categorical Imperative*, London: Hutchinson, 1947, p. 256.
[13] See Hugh Grady, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.
[14] See *ibid.*, pp. 11-14.

and social institutions are in a way complementary, different sides of the same phenomenon.[15]

The discourse of aesthetics is thus also a political discourse, which addresses the alienation between reason and sense rooted in modern class-society, where the abstract, universalistic equality of individuals passes over their concrete differences and inequalities. Bourgeois society separates drastically the "abstract, artificial man, man as an *allegorical*, *moral* person" of the political state from the subject of civil society in its "sensuous, individual and *immediate* existence."[16] There follows that, according to Marx, "real human beings, real society" appear only as "formless, inorganic matter."[17]

Such a dislocation between abstract and concrete, spirit and desire, is surpassed within the aesthetic dimension. The work of art embodies in itself a reconnection of the sensuous and the rational, by bringing to light the roots of human rationality hiding in the needs and capacities of the material body. It is in the fully 'aesthetic' realisation of human needs and capacities that the body abandons individualistic, abstract usefulness, and is able to connect with a shared social world, where its own needs and desires are considered alongside those of others. This way, the body and its concrete interests are at the roots of and actually dictate apparently abstract matters such as justice or morality, and all those matters according to which societies are established and administered.[18] Aesthetic emancipation, then, implies or rather contains in itself political emancipation, in which "real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man [becomes] a *species-being* in his empirical life, his individual work and his individual relationships."[19] Within the work of art, abstract function and material condition are one thing: the aesthetic for Marx is thus the practical, critical activity in which – as in the communist social order he prospects – humanity is emancipated from all kinds of instrumentalization and re-conquers power over itself.

Marx's vision of the aesthetic will be variously adapted by the historical-materialist philosophers of the 20th century in light of the new socio-political conditions of bourgeois society, starting from György Lukács. According to the philosopher, the work of art is an answer to the commodified existence that capitalism brings about – in opposition to the commodity, it reunites form and content, subject and object, as each of its elements is at

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[15] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit*., pp. 202-203; 206-207.
[16] Karl Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 234.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 186.
[18] See Terry Eagleton, *op. cit.*, pp. 206-208.
[19] Karl Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

once autonomous yet subordinated to the law of the whole. In the many-sided totality of the artefact, individual particulars are mediated through the structure of the whole, becoming universal with no damage to their sensuous specificity.

Lukács's aesthetics, although it somehow opened the way to Marxist criticism, was nonetheless too structurally faithful to bourgeois aesthetics not to be refuted by the historical materialist philosophers to come. Among them, Walter Benjamin's aesthetic thought disrupts the very possibility of thinking in terms of bourgeois 'totality' or even of Marxist teleological hope. In such a materially and spiritually bankrupt world as that which caused Nazi-fascism and the Second World War, only a fragmentary, chaotic work of art can hold a significant relation towards reality precisely by foregrounding the torments of its time. Benjamin's notion of "constellation" blasts open the *continuum* of a history that is actually collapsing into fragments, and whose meaning can be ripped only from its ruins rather than its fake harmonious unity. Benjamin's revolutionary aesthetics is in fact intrinsically political: the art he envisions, deviant and discarded from the continuum of history, is the attempt to explore and explode the contradictions of a commodified present. The fragmentary work of art, while subverting traditional categories such as beauty, harmony, unity, aims at stopping the totalising, dominative relation between humanity and the world exasperated by the contemporary political situation.

Adorno's re-elaboration of the idea of art as an autonomous semblance is especially relevant to this matter. According to it, the artwork's form, while differentiating it from empirical reality, is nonetheless the result of the very cultural moment that produced it. As Adorno explains,

an emphasis on autonomous works is itself socio-political in nature. […] it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics. […] This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead.[20]

While – and because – not explicitly political, art for Adorno carries significant political implications. Since the aesthetic relations immanent to artworks are in a dialectical relationship with their opposite (that is, the social relations of empirical reality), in the aesthetic form "social development is reproduced without being imitated."[21] It is precisely in the resistance of their form to society that artworks "reveal themselves as the wounds of

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[20] Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," in Ernst Bloch *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 194.
[21] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 226.

society; […] The socially critical zones of artworks are those where it hurts; where in their expression, historically determined, the untruth of the social situation comes to light."[22] The work of art, with its the negation of the dominative 'identity principle,' implies then the destabilization of any totalising visions of reality, so that "[a]bstaining from praxis, art becomes the schema of social praxis: Every authentic artwork is internally revolutionary."[23] The socially critical essence of the artwork becomes visible only in the cultivation of consciousness – in Adorno's historical situation, it is the consciousness of the wounds inflicted on humanity by its own predatory reason that art has to create or to keep alive.

Such a materialist view of aesthetics is the starting point of Hugh Grady's considerations, according to whom "art's sensuousness and playfulness allow it to interrogate the practices of the present and its iron cages of distorting ideology. Art's very playfulness allows it to be a means of political, social, and cultural critique."[24] While its separateness from the material world could make us think of art as a secular religion, the absence of any conceptual truth-claims implied by ordinary discourse makes its status totally fictive, imaginary, and playful. Precisely because of its non-assertiveness or playfulness, art is perceived as dream-like, socially harmless, and is thus allowed to be the depositary of all kinds of 'dangerous' (not purely aesthetic) material – a sort of licensed space where the non-aesthetic can be 'safely' contained and performed. The idea that art's proper reception is one of disinterested aesthetic pleasure, a state of total denial of 'real' matters, leads in its turn to the idea that the aesthetic is a privileged placeholder for those residues of material reality otherwise displaced or repressed.[25] Although the artwork is constitutionally exempt from any form of ideological policing, it not only draws materials from its larger social context, but also gives voice to aspects of reality that escape conceptualization, or cannot be represented by denotative or ordinary language.

In relation to this vision, Grady talks about the occurrence of an "impure aesthetics", which "contains the ugly as well as the beautiful, and references rather than denies reality while acknowledging an element of domination within it as well as one of emancipation."[26] Taking the hint from the Marxist approach to aesthetics of the Frankfurt School philosophers, Grady's argument is part of a larger discourse that reverses the post-structuralist tendency to decontextualize art from its social milieu, purposes, and

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 237.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 228.
[24] Hugh Grady, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
[25] See *ibid.*, pp. 28-30.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

intertextuality. His position actually opposes the reduction of art either to a version of ideology (typical of Communist-influenced critical writings), or to an irrationalist practice (typical of contemporary Postmodernist critics). Grady supports this vision by pointing out that art's irrationality and its radical separation from existing reality is valid only if aesthetics is considered as a narrow discourse about beauty and unity, which denies rather than challenges what is outside the aesthetic realm.[27]

Grady refers to Nietzsche's comment on the relation of the aesthetic to rationality as groundbreaking in this regard. In his very earliest work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, the philosopher defined its two opposing tendencies as the Apollonian and the Dionysian: the Apollonian is the mode of order, logic, rationality, and visual images; whereas the Dionysian is the surging passion, the will-to-power at the heart of Being. Both are crucial aspects of the aesthetic, which find a perfect balance, for instance, in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. As Nietzsche's argument develops, it becomes clear that the Apollonian is actually an illusion of order and rationality, while the Dionysian stands for the true chaos and irrationality of reality. This fundamental Nietzschean insight has been picked up and expanded with Marxist ramifications above all by Adorno, in whose conception art becomes "a revelation of Dionysian forces uneasily contained in Apollonian forms"[28]; as the philosopher eloquently argued:

The definition of aesthetics as the theory of the beautiful is so unfruitful because the formal character of the concept of beauty is inadequate to the full content […] of the aesthetic. If aesthetics were nothing but a systematic catalogue of whatever is called beautiful, it would give no idea of the life that transpires in the concept of beauty.[29]

In opposition to the unity of the artwork promoted by classical aesthetic writers, Adorno re-discovered the aesthetics of disunity, of incompleteness and fragmentation constructed by contemporary Post-modernist art and critical theory. According to the philosopher,

Art must take up the cause of what is prescribed as ugly, though no longer in order to integrate or mitigate it or to reconcile it with its own existence through humour, that is more offensive than anything repulsive. Rather, in the ugly, art must denounce the world that creates and

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[27] See *ibid.*, pp. 1-2.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[29] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., pp. 50-51.

reproduces the ugly in its own image, […]. [A]rt decries power […] and stands witness for what power represses and disavows.[30]

Some of Adorno's remarks review the Kantian concept of sublime also serve the negative dialectics of his aesthetic. Transferring the natural sublime to art, the philosopher creates analogies between the two realms, according to which

[w]orks in which the aesthetic form, under pressure of the truth content, transcends itself, occupy the position that was once held by the concept of the sublime. In them, spirit and material polarise in the effort to unite. Their spirit experiences itself as sensually unrepresentable, while on the other hand their material, that to which they are bound external to their boundary, experiences itself as irreconcilable with the unity of the work.[31]

Kant's doctrine of the sublime is applied to the very concept of art emerging from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* – that is, "an art that shudders inwardly by suspending itself in the name of an illusionless truth content, though without, as art, divesting itself of its semblance character."[32] Originating in nature's escape from the ruling law of spirit, the sublime is thus reinterpreted as eternal dissonance speaking against domination. Accordingly, for Adorno, "[t]he ascendancy of the sublime is one with art's compulsion that fundamental contradictions not be covered up but fought through in themselves; reconciliation for them is not the result of the conflict but exclusively that the conflict becomes eloquent"[33] – which paves the way to an artistic form that reveals reality's own dissonance.

Following Adorno's challenge to the notion that what the Romantics called "organic unity" is the sole aesthetic form, Grady focuses on an expansion of the term 'aesthetics' beyond its traditional attributes, the purely beautiful and the organically unified. The main function of older classical emphasis on unity is to create an Apollonian aesthetic, one that imposed order by suppressing or marginalising the Dionysian, 'dangerous' content of art. On the contrary, as argued by Jonathan Dollimore, the more recent development in critical practice of a hermeneutics that celebrates disunity has opened the text up to reveal its fissures, its faultlines, its 'other'.[34] A challenge to the idea of aesthetic unity is the essential

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[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
[31] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 196.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 197.
[34] See Jonathan Dollimore, "Art in Time of War: Towards a Contemporary Aesthetic", in John J. Joughin and

in order "to think of the artwork as disunified, as constituted by internal clashes of discourse, and by the insubordination of repressed materials."[35] As the history of aesthetics itself demonstrates,

the idea of the aesthetic, like all our concepts, is a social construct, a signifier whose signified derives from a series of intricate networks, within itself, and with the fragmented world of a complex new, 'modern' society. For these reasons, […], the aesthetic is intrinsically 'impure' – it is a place-holder for what is repressed elsewhere in the system; it develops as an autonomous practice but participates in the market economy, the social-status system, the political world, the religious communities, and private life.[36]

Opposed to the classical Apollonian aesthetic and its emphasis on beauty and unity, this kind of aesthetics is 'impure' in that it is made of Dionysian incompleteness and fragmentation, which reject any totalising formal order. This kind of aesthetics manifestly fails to cohere, and consists of fissures and faultlines instead, which expose the artwork's constitutional "openness", and allow its continuous reworking. Such works of art cannot be self-sufficient, an ideal whole, because their form is made by gaps, silences and absences. As Pierre Macherey argues in his *Theory of Literary Production*,

When we explain the work, instead of ascending to a hidden centre which is the source of life (the interpretive fallacy is organicist and vitalist), we perceive its actual decentred-ness. […] The literary work gives the measure of a difference, reveals a determinate absence, resorts to an eloquent silence.[37]

In other words, the inside of such artworks is defined by their outside, by what they are not, so that they inform us of "the precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance, and thus its limits, giving its real significance."[38] History, Macherey argues, is not in an external relation to the work;

Simon Malpas (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 36-50; 42-49.

[35] Hugh Grady, *op. cit.*, p. 4. To quote again from Grady, "[t]he idea of an aesthetics of fragmentation, however, goes back at least to Benjamin's theory of the allegory from the 1920s in his The Origin of German Tragic Drama. However, the theory languished in obscurity until the 1970s." (*Ibid.*)

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[37] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall, London: Routledge 1978, p. 79.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 86.

it is present in the work, in so far as the emergence of the work required this history, which is its only principle of reality. […] Thus, it is not a question of introducing a historical explanation which is stuck onto the work from outside. On the contrary, we must show a sort of splitting within the work: this division is *its* unconscious, in so far as it possesses one – the unconscious which is history, the play of history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges: this is why it is possible to trace the path which leads from the haunted work to that which haunts it.[39]

More than that, we may say that any work of art is "history itself."[40] For instance, Macherey observes that literary language

imitates the everyday language which is the language of ideology. We could offer a provisional definition of literature as being characterised by this power of parody. Mingling the real uses of language in an endless confrontation, it concludes by *revealing* their truth.[41]

This way, literature "*reveals* the gaps in ideology."[42] As a matter of fact, the gaps and faultlines of the artwork manifest moments at which its ideological project is under special strain. As Nicos Poulantzas observed, "ideology has the precise function of hiding the real contradictions and of *reconstituting* on an imaginary level a relatively coherent discourse."[43] Impure aesthetics may thus be considered the other side of ideology – as a discourse that reads for incoherence, inextricably connected to a worldview that constantly threatens disruption and to its unresolved issues.

The "cinematic sublime" I am going to develop relies on this idea of an 'impure' aesthetic, and demonstrates the dismantling effects and intentions it implies. As we have concluded in the previous chapter, "[t]he sense of the sublime is the name of the dismantling"[44]: accordingly, such a concept finds its concrete sources precisely in the work's formal disunity, incompleteness and fragmentation, as given by the negation of traditional rules and canons; the subversion of pre-established categories, and those aesthetic manifestations which make disorder and disproportion their founding elements. The disruptive power of the sublime is triggered through the rejection of the "norms of the

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[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.
[40] See Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., p. 37.
[41] Pierre Macherey, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes*, trans. by Timothy O'Hagan, London: New Left Books, 1973, p. 207.
[44] Jean François Lyotard, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

beautiful life" and the shocking emergence of "those things repressed and denied"[45] in art as well as in society. By admitting displaced, marginalised or repressed material in its *form*, art acknowledges the existence of the Dionysian incompleteness and fragmentation in reality too, contributing to the break from the uneasy Apollonian illusion of unity. As we shall see, the sublime within the work of art proceeds by questioning pre-established rules and given categories, by destroying the illusion of a rational unity between the concept and the sensible, by reproducing reality's cracks and fissures, and bringing the split further into the viewer's consciousness. Both form and subject of such works of art consist of fissures and faultlines, which challenge totalising visions of reality.

Cinema is the field in which I am going to explore the exchange between the work of art and the material context of both its production and reception. In light of the "dismantling" function that the sublime has historically assumed in such a relationship, my interest is to retrace how this notion can work within the cinematic medium – in particular, when it adapts or appropriates Shakespeare's plays. The further step in order to retrace the "cinematic sublime" in filmic adaptations of this kind, then, is outlining the fundamental features of the passage from the Shakespearean source to the cinematic medium.

2.2 Adapting and Appropriating Shakespeare

Etymologically rooted to the Latin verb *adaptare* ("to adjust"; "to alter"; "to make suitable"[46]), adaptation is understood as the process of making a text "fit" for a different generic, temporal, geographical or cultural context. It can be a simple transpositional practice, recasting a text from a specific genre into another, or making it closer to new audiences by means of temporal, geographical, cultural or linguistic shifts ("proximation" or "updating"). Adaptation can also be an amplificatory procedure, more profoundly engaged with the source text either by commenting on its politics, revising it or offering analogues and supplements by means of alteration or addition ("re-writing"; "re-vision").[47] In many cases, adaptations involve the transition to a different medium ("re-mediation"), with the intersemiotic transposition of the text from one sign system to another ("transmutation" or "transcoding"),[48] because, as Benjamin put it, "[t]he medium through which works of art

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[45] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., pp. 48-49.
[46] See "adapto" in Luigi Castiglioni, Scevola Mariotti, *op. cit.*, p. 20. The translation from Italian to English is mine.
[47] See Julie Sanders, "Introduction" in Id., *Adaptation and Appropriation*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 18-19.
[48] See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 16.

continue to influence later ages is always different from the one in which they affect their own age."[49]

The practice of appropriation, on the other hand, is distinguished from that of adaptation on the basis of its affecting "a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain."[50] The source text is moved from one cultural realm or interpretive frame to another, which often radically alters or re-shapes its meaning to different (sometimes opposite) ends. Whereas adaptations usually signal their relationship with an informing source text (as with Olivier and Branagh's *Henry V*), knowledge or awareness of the 'original' may not even be necessary in order to enjoy the product of appropriation as an independent, stand-alone work (although they would certainly deepen and enrich our understanding of it; such is the case of *My Own Private Idaho* by Gus Van Sant). The word "appropriation" itself ("to make one's own") implies not just a transposition, but also "an exchange, either the theft of something valuable (such as property or ideas) or a gift, the allocation of resources for a worthy cause [...]"[51], by which the source material becomes one's own. Springing from Marxist criticism, the term retains the connotation of a struggle in order to reclaim or wrest something of value from unwilling or hostile hands.[52]

But setting aside issues of 'ownership' like originality, authorship and intellectual property rights, the practices of adaptation and appropriation could also be thought of as forms of collaboration across time and sometimes across culture or language that results in manifestly "hybrid", multi-layered works of art or intertexts, similar to "meeting places of different species."[53] The source text, produced in one medium and in one historical and social context, and later transformed into another text, produced in a different context and relayed through a different medium, forms thus "a dense informational network, a series of verbal cues which the adapting [...] text can then selectively take up, amplify, ignore, subvert, or transform."[54] Being the creation and reception of a work of art a material, social and economic matter as much as a cultural, personal, and aesthetic one, the change in the

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[49] Walter Benjamin, "The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages," trans. by Rodney Livingstone, in Id., *Selected Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott *et al.*, ed. Marcus Bullock *et al.*, 4 vols., Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002, 1:235, in John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Winter 2010), University of Chicago Press, p. 321.
[50] Julie Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
[51] Christy Desmet, "Introduction", in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (eds.) *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 4.
[52] See Douglas Lanier, "Introduction", in Id., *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 5.
[53] Robert Stam, "Introduction", in Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (eds.), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, p. 3.
[54] *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

material production is bound to a whole series of alterations – like shifting cultures and therefore sometimes shifting languages or ideological systems, historical and therefore also socio-political situations – that can reveal much about the work's new context. For instance, works of art can acquire different meanings and have a certain cultural and social impact other than that of the source text, sometimes depending on the specific impulses and ideologies (personal and historical) that moved their re-creation. In Hutcheon's words,

[a]daptation, like evolution, is a transgenerational phenomenon. […] Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments *by virtue of* mutation – in their "offspring" or their adaptations.[55]

Adaptation, in this sense, is a process whereby a source text is reinterpreted through new grids and parameters which, in revealing aspects of the period and culture of the source text in question, also tell us something about the ambient and the moment of its re-creation.[56] By giving visible, audible and perceptible form to the objective, material conditions among which the work has been reimagined, "adaptations engage the discursive energies of their time," becoming "a barometer of the ideological trends circulating during the moment of production."[57] As Bakhtin wrote, "[e]very age reaccentuates in its own way the works of [the past]. The historical life of classic works is in fact the uninterrupted process of their social and ideological reaccentuation."[58]

The transition of texts to different contexts or 'owners' that takes place with the process of adaptation/appropriation raises, in the first place, the fundamental ontological question of the nature and identity of the source text itself. This is basically what happens with Shakespeare, whose works are always being made new, re-made, by this process, for "[a]s long as there have been plays by Shakespeare, there have been adaptations of those plays."[59] His works' availability for rewriting means that they are texts in constant flux and metamorphosis within the re-interpretation and re-creation that adaptation entails. As a matter of fact, the ongoing discourse that adapts or appropriates Shakespeare has been valuable or even useful over time as a way of handling each era's own dilemmas:

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[55] Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
[56] See Robert Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", in *The Dialogical Imagination*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 421, in Robert Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
[59] Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (eds.), *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A critical anthology of plays from the seventeenth century to the present*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 1, in Julie Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

Shakespeare is a powerful cultural token. He is already where meaning is produced, and people therefore want to get him on their side – to hijack him, we might say – as they do Madonna or the pope. […] The "universal" Shakespeare usually means the one we want to recruit as ratification for our point of view; with stunning presumption, we suppose that we have discovered the true version, whereas earlier generations were merely partial.[60]

As many scholars have observed, the scarcity of information about the 'historical' Shakespeare is one of the things that make his plays extremely open to interpretation and appropriation.[61] It is all the more so when we consider not only the poet's physical absence (his corpse missing – probably stolen – from his grave), but also his authorial absence from the moral universe of his plays – what Michael D. Bristol calls "Shakespeare's radically disembodied and culturally promiscuous character."[62] The notion of an 'authentic Shakespeare', as that of an authentically Shakespearean text, is actually always a social construct that depends on the historical and contemporary standards of cultural institutions, on their audiences and on their interpretative conventions as well.[63]

So, far from functioning as an objective yardstick against which to measure the supposed accuracy or 'faithfulness' of adaptations, Shakespeare's works are utterly unstable and subject to change, continually taking shape over time. The 'original' text is not a fixed and stable entity that clearly pre-exists the process of adaptation and thus can offer a secure and stable ground for it; on the contrary, it goes through an ongoing development which takes place *within* adaptations themselves, up to the point that "[t]he potentially infinite series of variations by means of which the work is '*ontologised*' (Grigely 110) bears witness to the status of the work as an *irreducibly* unfinished entity."[64] Thus, not only do adaptations emblematise "an iteration that […] invokes and displaces a textual 'origin'"[65], but they also "articulate a process whereby the 'original' is (retroactively) produced and re-marked as that which is being surrogated, and just as it is being surrogated, which confounds the boundaries

[60] Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., p. 4.
[61] See Ivo Kamps, "Alas, poor Shakespeare! I knew him well", in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (eds.), *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 25.
[62] Michael D. Bristol, *Big-Time Shakespeare*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 90, in Ivo Kamps, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
[63] See Douglas Lanier, "Introduction", in Id., *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, cit., p. 19.
[64] Maurizio Calbi, "Introduction" in Id., *Spectral Shakespeares: Media Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 7.
[65] William B. Worthen, "Drama, Performativity, and Performance", *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 113.5 (1998), p. 1104, in Maurizio Calbi, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

between 'before' and 'after', 'cause' and 'effect', 'inside' and 'outside'."[66] The very possibility of adaptation/appropriation seems to contaminate the essence of a work, in that it is (de-)structured from within by reproducibility and iterability[67]: adaptations are in fact texts generated by and generating other texts in an ongoing whirl of intertextual reference, transformation and transmutation that has no clear point of origin nor ending.

As a matter of fact, the identity of Shakespeare's works is intimately related to adaptive issues: Shakespeare himself was an active adaptor/appropriator of myth, fairy tale, and folklore, as well as of the works of various specific writers like Ovid, historians like Plutarch or chroniclers like Hall and Holinshed.[68] He then had to transfer the stories he gathered from his (usually written) sources to the stage and so make them fit for a new kind of strategies, as well as for a new kind of audience. There is a huge difference, though, between recording history in books and *representing* history in the theatre. On the one hand, both individual and cultural memories inevitably shape the past in accord with present desires. Records of events are consequently not neutral, objective facts, but *texts*, etymologically products of the process of *texere* (Latin verb for "to intertwine"; "to fabricate"; "to compose"[69]), which implies the non-homogeneous mixture of different elements. Marjorie Garber, for instance, underlines the deformed nature of texts by pointing out that a writing hand is at the same time the instrument and the most visible sign of the interrelationship between time and deformation.[70] According to the critic, "that which is *written* is deformed, twisted out of shape, imbued with 'strange defeatures'"[71] – a word meaning both "undoing, ruin" and "disfigurement; defacement; marring of features." "*De-feature*" alludes to the double effect of writing, since to deprive one of his/her features is also to cause one's defeat or ruin. Accordingly, the deforming or de-featuring power of writing is at its most with what one age will call 'history writing' and another 'propaganda', often marking political *defeat*.

On the other hand, turning a written text into a theatrical performance takes much of such de-featuring power away. Plays do not tell facts, but make them happen again, enliven them, making the past present and allowing audiences vicarious emotional participation;

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[66] Maurizio Calbi, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
[67] See *ibid.*, p. 18.
[68] See Julie Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
[69] See "texo, is, texui, textum, texere", in Luigi Castiglioni, Scevola Mariotti, *op. cit.*, p. 1142. The translation from Italian to English is mine.
[70] See Marjorie Garber, "Descanting on Deformity: Richard III and the Shape of History", in Id., *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality*, London and New York: Methuen, 1987, p. 79.
[71] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

"[o]n the stage it is always *now*; the personages are standing on the razor-edge, between the past and the future, which is the essential character of conscious being. […] The theatre is supremely fitted to say: 'Behold! These things *are*."[72] The liveliness of the theatrical re*present*ation, its being always *here* and *now*, allows an active and critical response by the audience interacting emotionally with the characters and events; moreover, people watching a play are obviously more ready to express doubts about the credibility of actors playing their parts on a stage than about a printed, authoritative book. In short, theatrical performance implies the transformation of historical facts into fiction (or *μύθος*), a process through which history itself can be exposed in its questionability and denounced as a partial and distorting representation.

Therefore, the peculiar ability of Shakespeare's work to cross the boundaries of historical, cultural and linguistic difference is first of all due to the unstable nature of drama itself, for which every single performance could be considered a specialized form of translation or an adaptation already. Generically situated at the intersection between text and performance,

every drama text is an incomplete entity that must be 'translated' by being put on stage. Adaptation is, therefore, only an extreme version of the reworking that takes place in any theatrical production […]. Theatre is always a form of reworking, in a sense the first step toward adaptation.[73]

As an inherently adaptive art, the dramatic form encourages incessant re-imagining and reworking, up to the point that each staging, as a collective interpretation, changes over time, and often (more or less openly) works so as to acknowledge contemporary issues or concerns. As for Shakespeare's drama, its use of history and other sources is itself part of a process of adaptation that begins with a critical reinvention of so-called 'given' facts. Shakespeare's plays are far from serving as a reliable history, because they do not attempt in any exacting way to recollect or rehearse the past, so that no totalising model of history emerges from them: they do not uniformly enact God's providential design, nor do they inevitably assert the truth of a Machiavellian *Realpolitik*. Even the different formal strategies experimented (such as homiletic tragedy, saturnalian comedy, epic history) are often entangled in unconventional combinations that bring discordant visions of history into

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[72] Thornton Wilder, interviewed by Richard H. Goldstone, *Paris Review* 15 (1957), 37-52, in R. L. Smallwood, "Shakespeare's Use of History", in Stanley Wells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 143-144 (my italics).
[73] Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 7, in Margaret Kidnie, "Introduction" in Id., *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 6.

contact and conflict, oscillating between tragedy and comedy.[74] Historical material is itself often reordered or even ignored; events are selected, sometimes invented, so that the playwright does not merely dramatize what he finds on the pages of the chronicle, but dresses history with dramatic purpose or power, structuring it in order to give it a shape that cannot be found in the historical records. Shakespeare's use of history consists in selecting, shaping, amplifying, and frequently in adding to chronicle material, up to the point that his adaptation of history to theatre results in a dialectical confrontation with matters such as human political behaviour, the desire for power, or men's response to gaining and to being deprived of it.[75] Shakespeare's dramatic reinvention of his sources, through processes of selection and manipulation, brings out clashes and contradictions, disrupting the totalising visions of apparently seamless ideologies like Providence or the State. The aesthetic form of Shakespeare's drama thus inscribes itself more clearly within the dimension of $\mu\acute{\nu}\theta o\varsigma$ as opposed to that of $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma o\varsigma$: its representation of characters and events is unbound from the ties of rational and moral certainties, projecting the spectator among obscure and incomprehensible forces from which no rational order of things can be drawn.

The adaptiveness of Shakespeare's plays is still more evident if we consider how their texts are not even stable in their documented tradition, but maintain the incompleteness or openness of texts that have to be performed, and so constantly modified so as to be *adapted*. Although it is sometimes assumed that the printed text of Shakespeare's plays provides the fixed, 'original' point against which to monitor theatrical production, such appeals are hindered by the inability to determine what actually and practically constitutes that text. Certain irregularities in the text (as in *Hamlet* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) seem to be evidence of multiple, perhaps revised versions; incongruences in (to name but a few) spelling, layout, word choice, word order, and punctuation can be found between different editions of a single play, such as the earliest quarto and the Folio editions; or even variations among copies of a single edition (such as the 1623 Folio) can be due to major improvement of the early modern printing system – these are just some examples underlining the unstable textual condition of Shakespearean drama. To these, current processes of editorial emendation, regularization, and modernization have to be added, because they influence and determine substantially modern editions that circulate today.[76]

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[74] See David Scott Kastan., "Shakespeare and English History", in Margreta de Grazia, Stanley Wells (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 175.
[75] See R. L. Smallwood, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
[76] See Margaret Kidnie, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

Shakespeare's own apparent unconcern for publishing his plays during his lifetime may suggest that he was less interested in preserving them as 'original' texts than in simply providing material for performances – which are by definition only immediately relevant and therefore ephemeral. In a way, each of Shakespeare's plays confirms Kidnie's definition, according to which "a play, for all that it carries the rhetorical and ideological force of an enduring stability, is not an object at all, but rather a dynamic *process* that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities if its users."[77]

Shakespeare's theatre, then, finds its sovereign force in the performative act, as it is not simply a kind of histrionic practice which "recaptures or restates the authority of the text"[78], but an 'opened-up and expanded' transformation of it also by virtue of a dynamic exchange with the audience. Thanks to the literary, rhetorical or compositional quality of Shakespeare's text (a text which is not complete in itself, but constitutionally open and in need of the player's active interpretation), the performance of his plays was able to create a link between the playwright's words and the audience, and contribute to the socially relevant condition of the theatrical institution in the Elizabethan age. The openness of Shakespeare's plays and the ambiguity of their language allow first of all a dialectical relationship with the social and cultural context in which they were produced, by which they were capable of uncovering and exacerbating the crises emerging during the Elizabethan and Jacobean Age. As Alan Sinfield underlines, Shakespearean texts, like other texts, are profoundly embedded in the thick of the cultural production of their time and the histories from which they derive. Shakespeare did not envisage full or even coherent subjectivities nor historical events, but actually caught those ambivalent or partial signs of modernity as they were beginning to emerge in the Early-Modern period. His plays seem to lay out the very process by which the modern subject gets constituted, and by which the modern era is rising – accordingly resulting 'unformed', lacking of coherence and unity.

Indeed, it is because of this that we can appropriate them [Shakespeare's texts] so conveniently – it is the mismatch with present-day assumptions that allows us to make what we will of them. […] The inventiveness of directors and the subtleties of critics are designed, precisely, to

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[77] *Ibid.*, p. 2.
[78] William B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, in Robert Weimann, Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance: Stage and Page in the Elizabethan Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 7.

bridge the historical gap. Shakespeare keeps going because these strategies keep him going; he is relevant because he is perpetually interfered with.[79]

Shakespeare's texts may be a powerful tool for the emergence of certain issues simply because he did not sort them out in what we would call 'modern terms' properly, which makes them fall short of a unitary or univocal vision.[80] Writers such as Shakespeare don't manifest a static and unchanging truth; rather, every reading of a Shakespeare play already invites an appropriation, an active process which involves both its re-interpretation and then its re-creation.

As a matter of fact, the playwright's availability is his most appreciated cultural value, thanks to which "each new generation attempts to redefine Shakespeare's genius in contemporary terms, projecting its desires and anxieties onto his work."[81] Re-inventing Shakespeare according to the different understandings and media typical of each age is a process which already began with the publication of his collected works in the 1623 First Folio, a volume that claimed to transpose (faithfully) Shakespeare's plays from the stage to a printed book. For the following 300 years, Shakespeare was divided between page and stage, which did not just co-exist but also competed for cultural supremacy. The old exchange between page and stage was altered with the cinematic re-invention of Shakespeare's work in the twentieth century, which brought about a whole new series of cultural meanings.[82] In the case of contemporary adaptations/appropriations of Shakespearean plays to the cinematic medium, the generic transposition invariably makes the source text *fit* also for different historical, cultural, linguistic or socio-political contexts. The resulting work is always in a reciprocal relation to the Shakespearean source, for both the subject and the object are changed in the adaptive process.[83] Shakespearean content has in fact been defined as "freely commutable from medium to medium, period to period"[84] – it is neither media- nor historically specific:

On the twentieth century, for example, *Henry V* has been re-envisioned as a play about the Second World War, Vietnam, the Falklands crisis, and more recently the two Gulf wars. If drama

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[79] Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., p. 4.
[80] This is why, according to Sinfield, his plays may incite radical ideas about gender, class, race, and nation. (See *ibid.*, p. 19)
[81] Jean Marsden, "Introduction" to Id. (ed.), *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstructions of the Works and the Myth*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 1.
[82] See Douglas Lanier, "William Shakespeare, filmmaker", in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 73.
[83] See Christy Desmet, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
[84] Douglas Lanier, "William Shakespeare, filmmaker", cit., p. 68.

embodies within its generic conventions an invitation to reinterpretation, so the movement into a different generic mode can encourage a reading of the Shakespearean text from a new or revised point of view.[85]

Retracing Shakespeare's circulation through different ages and places requires thus an engagement with both literary and socio-political history, for "in a sense *all* Shakespeare films are translations," creative attempts "to recast and reimage a work conceived in a different language and for a different culture."[86] Issues of remediation are then inseparably accompanied by issues of historical and ideological recoding: the changes in the genre, narrative, characters, tone or language of the Shakespearean source reveal the lines of cultural force at play in a particular historical moment. Beside situating us in history, moreover, adaptation also shapes and organises the most private aspects of experience, so that acts of appropriation can be intensely personal as well as political: "[t]o the extent that appropriation is a performance of identity, it offers possibilities for cracking the codes of ideology and provides glimpses of realities that as yet have no name."[87] The subversive quality of Shakespeare's genius is then simultaneously aesthetical and political; as John Joughin points out, "in the process of helping to situate and contest existing contemporary cultural norms concerning truth, value and meaning it follows that, just as Shakespeare becomes aesthetical, he becomes political and contentious too."[88] Accordingly, the dialogic interaction between the source text and the new contexts in which adaptation situates it is not only generated by, but also generates in its turn ideological implications. Since my main interest is to examine the specific impulses and concerns, both personal and historical, involved in various acts of adaptation and appropriation of Shakespeare's works, I shall first underline the role that the cinematic medium has in bringing them out.

2.3 "The Written Language of Reality"

As for medium specificity, filmic adaptations/appropriations re-interpret and re-invent Shakespeare by their own cinematic nature. With the move from written text to film, from telling to showing mode, the audience is caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving

[85] Julie Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
[86] Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film*, Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1991, p. 14 in Maurice Hindle, *Studying Shakespeare on Film*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. xiv-xv.
[87] Christy Desmet, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
[88] John J. Joughin, "Shakespeare's genius: *Hamlet*, adaptation and the work of following", in John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 135.

story that involves the realm of direct sensuous perception. Visual, aural and kinetic representations always have a visceral impact, provoking affective responses in the audience: the world that cinematic technology mediates (or re-creates) for us is materially present before our eyes and our ears; yet, it is devoid of its essence, for we cannot physically enter that reality nor act within it. Much of the hostility that early cinematic theorists and spectators have manifested towards the cinematic medium comes precisely from the latter quality, and goes a long way back in Western thought: rooted in the Platonic debasement of the world of phenomenal appearance, the fear and distrust of images is usually motivated by their supposedly dangerous power to corrupt the mind by overwhelming reason and thus raising 'lower', sensuous passions. Far from the invisible and true realm of Ideas, visual forms are traditionally considered ontologically unstable and the material affects that they excite all the more illusory and suspect. Even more related to the problem of cinema's status is Jean-Louis Baudry's reading of Plato's allegory of the cave as a prototype of the cinematic apparatus itself: as Plato's prisoners in the cave mistake the shadows projected on the wall for reality, so do cinema spectators equate screen projections with the real world.[89] Film images, like the shadows in the cave, are considered as a simulated, hallucinatory "impression of reality"[90], "vacuous, degraded, and insubstantial projections" that, "by a kind of ideological-optical illusion", inflame the spectator with a "regressive, fantasmatic desire."[91]

In traditional film theory, cinematic images are then accused of being empty and impotent, unable to support the articulations of discourse or to embody the truth: bodies without souls, they are flat and insubstantial, devoid of interiority and substance, unable to express anything beyond themselves. For this reason, the cinematic image is most of the time described in terms of a *lack*: as Kaja Silverman puts it, "[f]ilm theory has been haunted since its inception by the spectre of a loss or absence at the centre of cinematic production, a loss which both threatens and secures the viewing subject," and which is in the first place one of "the absent real and the foreclosed site of production."[92] Images are thought to be untrue, then, because of their distance from the actual situations which they claim to represent. They are likewise detached from the material conditions of their production –

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[89] See Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema", trans. by Jean Andrews and Bertrand Augst, in Philip Rosen (ed.) *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, in Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 15.

[90] *Ibid.*, p. 302, in Steven Shaviro, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

[91] Steven Shaviro, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

[92] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, p. 2.

nonetheless, they persevere in furnishing deceptive "reality effects" and "compensatory fantasies of plenitude and possession."[93]

Such a prejudicial iconophobia is, at the same time, a demonstration of just how powerfully and unwarrantedly the 'mere' and fictitious image of material reality can affect the human mind and senses. Contrary to the general trends of cinema theory, on the practical side, as spectators, it is difficult to deny that the object of images is quite never felt as missing, neither distant nor absent from them. As Maurice Blanchot suggests, the image – unlike the word or other signs – does not offer a representational substitute for the object, but, rather, is the *material* trace or residue of the object's failure to vanish completely: "[t]he apparent spirituality, the pure formal virginity of the image is fundamentally linked to the elemental strangeness of the being that is present in absence."[94] Like a ghost, "[t]he image is not a symptom of lack, but an uncanny, excessive residue of being that subsists when all *should* be lacking. It is not the index of something that is missing, but the insistence of something that refuses to disappear."[95] The apparent emptiness or superficiality of images could be redefined as a consequence of their residual and iterative nature, which obviously resists any kind of limit imposed by being 'here and now', circumscribed into the definition of space and time. 'In between' truth and illusion, presence and absence, being and non-being, images do not ontologically exist, yet they are under our eyes all the time, re-appearing in an endless repetition. Their fleeting and empty iterations threaten to get back at and confound those very bounds holding together the 'thing' which they reproduce as residual simulacra of it, blurring the difference between 'original' and 'copy', essence and shadow, reality and imagination. Far from manifesting Bazin's "transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction"[96], reality itself is neither transferred nor preserved; rather, it is irreversibly altered by the very act of reproduction and repetition.[97] This "hypermimetic simulation", to follow Deleuze and Guattari, disqualifies both the original and the copy, for "[i]t carries the real beyond its principle to the point where it is effectively produced."[98] The same goes for sounds, which, like images (and images in movement) are isolated by mechanical recording devices from the dominant order of discursive comprehension. Speech acts in film are likewise 'deterritorialised', disarticulated, freed from their referents,

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[93] See Steven Shaviro, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.
[94] Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, ed. by P. Adams Sitney, trans. by Lydia Davis, Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1981, p. 83.
[95] Steven Shaviro, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
[96] André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, p. 14.
[97] As we have seen, the same process happens with adaptations and their source texts.
[98] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 87.

becoming material scraps of sound which reacquire the pure materiality that the abstractedness of the linguistic system had taken away from them. As with moving images, the reproduction and consequent iteration of sounds allow the technology of mechanical reproduction to substitute "a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced."[99] Images and sounds alike are then "reactivated", intensified in their effect (and affect) on the real precisely by being cut off from the referential frame of everyday life and by being remade as part of a (mechanically reproducible) work of art.

Cinema, maybe more than any other art forms, demonstrates how works of art do not merely signify or represent, but ultimately *re-produce* within their formal laws the same processes of the material reality behind them. This implies that cinematic perception is of a different kind from 'natural' perception: what we see and hear on the screen short-circuits the processes of signification by which we identify and give name to things. Hegelian cognition is substituted by raw, artistic sensation, disengaged from the transcendental conditions supposed to ground and organise it, as well as from the referential coordinates that allow us to locate and preserve it: "[s]heer appearance precedes any possible act of cognition; film *shows* before it says."[100] As Pier Paolo Pasolini observes,

mentre la comunicazione strumentale che è alle basi della comunicazione poetica o filosofica è già estremamente elaborata, è insomma un sistema reale e storicamente complesso e maturo – la comunicazione visiva che è alla base del linguaggio cinematografico è, al contrario, estremamente rozza, quasi animale. Tanto la mimica e la realtà bruta quanto i sogni e i meccanismi della memoria, sono fatti quasi pre-umani, o ai limiti dell'umano: comunque pre-grammaticali e addirittura pre-morfologici (i sogni avvengono al livello dell'inconscio, e così i meccanismi mnemonici; la mimica è segno di estrema elementarità civile ecc.). *Lo strumento linguistico su cui si impianta il cinema è dunque di tipo irrazionalistico:* e questo spiega la profonda qualità onirica del cinema, e anche la sua assoluta e imprescindibile concretezza, diciamo, oggettuale.[101]

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[99] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, 1969, p. 221.
[100] Steven Shaviro, *op. cit.*, p. 28; my italics.
[101] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il 'Cinema di Poesia'", in Id., *Empirismo Eretico*, Milano: Garzanti, 2015, p. 177. "Whereas the instruments of poetic or philosophical communication are already extremely perfected, truly form a historically complex system which has reached its maturity, those of the visual communication which is at the basis of cinematic language are altogether brute, instinctive. Indeed, gestures, the surrounding reality, as much as dreams and the mechanisms of memory, are of a virtually pre-human order, or at least at the limit of humanity, in any case pre-grammatical and even pre-morphological (dreams are unconscious phenomena, as are mnemonic mechanisms; the gesture is an altogether elementary sign, etc.). The linguistic instrument on which cinema is founded is thus of an irrational type. This explains the profoundly oniric nature of cinema, as

Irreducible to cognitive meanings and instrumentalities, the cinematic image liberates the spectators from the contingencies of their own existence, so that, both metaphysically and ideologically alienated, they are projected into a world of sheer sensation. Cinematic perception, composed of the unconscious epiphenomena of empirical experience sublated and denied by cognition, is multiple and anarchic, nonintentional and asubjective: "the sensory exploration of the world through film [is] the exploration of the chaos of visual phenomena that fills space."[102] Chaos itself is, according to Pasolini, the source for the cinema author, who, instead of pre-coded signs, is allowed to choose among infinite possibilities or shadows of an automatic, direct and oniric communication.[103] The infinite possible images cinema shares with dreams, memories and fantasies are the most common and at the same time the most private experience one has of reality: as with dreaming, cinema picks up and combines fathom-like reproductions of the world everybody sees everyday into a new, highly subjective compound which is then objectively reproduced. As Pasolini puts it,

i processi dei sogni e della memoria, sia involontaria che, soprattutto, volontaria, sono degli schemi primordiali di una lingua, cinematografica, intesa come riproduzione convenzionale della realtà. Quando noi ricordiamo, proiettiamo dentro la nostra testa, delle piccole, interrotte, contorte o lucide sequenze di un film. Ora tali archetipi di riproduzione del linguaggio dell'azione, o tout court della realtà (che è sempre azione), si sono concretati in un mezzo meccanico e comune, il cinematografo. *Esso non è dunque che il momento "scritto" di una lingua naturale e totale, che è l'agire nella realtà.* Insomma il possibile e non meglio definito "linguaggio dell'azione" ha trovato un mezzo di riproduzione meccanica, […] che ne rispetterebbe la totalità, è vero, ma anche il mistero ontologico, l'indifferenziazione naturale ecc.: una specie di memoria riproduttiva senza interpretazione.[104]

also its absolutely and inevitably concrete nature, let us say its objective status." Pier Paolo Pasolini, "The Cinema of Poetry" (from the French translation by Marianne de Vettimo and Jacques Bontemps in *Cahiers du Cinema* 171, October 1965), in *Movies and Methods.* Vol. 1. Ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, p. 543.

[102] Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, ed. by Annette Michelson, trans. by Kevin O'Brian, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 14-15.

[103] See Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il 'Cinema di Poesia'", cit., p. 178.

[104] Id., "La Lingua Scritta della Realtà", in Id., *Empirismo Eretico*, cit., pp. 216-217. "Processes like dreams and memory, both voluntary and, above all, involuntary, are primordial schemes of a cinematographic language, by which we mean the conventional reproduction of reality. When we recollect memories, we project short, interrupted, twisted or lucid film sequences in our head. Such archetypes that reproduce the language of action, or tout court of reality (which is always action), came into existence through a mechanical and common instrument, cinema. *Cinema is thus nothing but the "written" moment of a natural and total language, by which we act inside reality.* What can rather approximately be called the "language of action" is mechanically reproduced through an instrument […] which seems to leave intact its totality, but also its ontological mystery,

As a most intimate re-creation of reality, cinematic images share the immediate basis of subjectivity of memories and dreams: the filmmaker's choice of possible images is more or less unconsciously determined by his/her own ideological and poetical vision of reality, so that cinema corresponds primarily to an act of communication with oneself or self-expression, which would define it as what Pasolini calls "una lingua di poesia"[105] ("a language of poetry"). On the other hand, the common background from which these images are taken as 'shadows' or 'ghosts' of the real thing makes them also brutally elementary and objective, belonging to a type of 'communication with others', immediate and direct. These two essential and oxymoronic aspects of cinema are inseparably bound together both in the moment of creation and in that of reception.

As a matter of fact, film's objective reproduction is inextricably mingled with an utterly subjective response. Being a work of mechanical reproduction, film is able to break with traditional hierarchies of representation and penetrate with no mediation the matter of life in its constant flux, allowing what Georges Bataille calls "the direct interpretation, *excluding all idealism*, of raw phenomena."[106] When mechanically reproduced, the real is fragmented; beings and things get separated, and their component parts become independent from one another. Any distinction between subject and object, observer and observed is likewise extinguished; categories, parameters and laws are irreversibly altered in the cinematic reproduction of reality.

While being a new, displacing (re-)construction of the real, completely devoid of consistence and mechanically reproduced, film affects in an unmediated and visceral way the spectator's body and mind. In the moment of its reception, a film – physically seen and heard – has a real, concrete impact on the senses: it affects our stomach, heart and skin, and is re-elaborated through neural structures and visuo-motor schemata. When watching a movie, images excite the retina 24 times a second: such a speed is slow enough for stimuli to be impressed and recorded, but it is too fast to allow the viewer to be conscious of such a process. Perception becomes thus unconscious: like dreams, cinematic images are incessantly imprinted upon the retina in such a way as to never allow them to be absorbed

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its natural lack of differentiation, etc.: a sort of reproductive memory without interpretation." (The translation from Italian to English is mine)

[105] Id., "Il 'Cinema di Poesia'", cit., p. 180.

[106] Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. and ed. by Allan Stoekl, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 16.

into aware and immediate processes of comprehension.[107] The world we see through the movie camera is violently imposed upon us spectators, so that it cannot be viewed unaffectedly or from a safe distance as a cognitive, graspable object. Leaving behind the intellectual engagement of the cognitive faculties, perception becomes only a matter of bodily affection and alteration, instead of developing into a series of representations for the spectator to recognise. The experience of watching a movie is obstinately immediate, concrete and pre-reflexive; the spectator is invited, or compelled, by the immediacy, speed and rawness of *this* image and *this* sound to indulge within the orbit of the senses, thus threatening to disrupt his/her frame of reference. Whereas the 'conscious', objectifying contemplation obeys a law of separation that keeps the intense and intolerable presence of Otherness at a safe distance, film ignores (and so subverts) the master-slave relationship between the subject and its world. It compels us to be face to face with that Otherness which can never be incorporated nor expelled, forcing its immediate, affective and non-conceptualizable contact on us. By abolishing the distance between my body and the multiple, changing bodies of Otherness, "the cinematic affect" dissolves any other kind of boundary and outline too. The new, blinding contact with the Real that cinema thus creates, overcoming the acquisitive mastery of the gaze, threatens to rupture also the relations of power it generates. The radical juxtaposition of discontinuous elements created through the editing process, for instance, undermines any possibility of a fixed centre of perception, and the related laws of spatial contiguity, linear temporality and causal succession.

What Benjamin (1969) calls "the physical shock effect" (p. 238) of film viewing disrupts the traditional, historically sedimented habits and expectations of vision; it undoes the transcendental and phenomenological structures that claimed to regulate perception and to ground and unify the ego. [108]

Again similarly to dreams, films affect the spectator by driving him or her into such an excessive intimacy that the contours of the ego are dissolved and the requirements of coherence and closure that govern phenomenal and intellectual experience are transgressed. What engages in a cinematic experience is no longer a 'subject', for the "tactile"[109], visceral contact with images and sounds in which the spectator is drawn tends to efface fixed identities and to blur boundaries between inside and outside, self and other. Within the

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[107] See Robert Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 6; and Steven Shaviro, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.
[108] Steven Shaviro, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
[109] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, cit., p. 238.

spatial and temporal flux that cinema creates, any static reference, identification and objectification becomes impossible. At once desirable and threatening, the cinematic experience dislocates any self-identity and stability of meaning, and substitutes them with the incessant metamorphoses of inconsistent appearances. Such a process is precisely what allows cinema to be in constant interaction with the real; because, as Benjamin puts it, film penetrates into material reality non in spite of, but directly as a result of, its constructedness:

In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure – namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind. The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice, and the vision of immediate reality [has become] the Blue Flower in the land of technology […].Hence, the presentation of reality in film is incomparably the more significant for people of today, since it provides the equipment-free aspect of reality they ate entitled to demand from a work of art, and does so precisely on the basis of the most intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment.[110]

As the product of distorting techniques such as photographic representation, camera movement and – above all – editing, the aspect of reality offered through cinematographic artifice is free of all the cognitive, ideological "equipment" that could obtrude a raw, contingent and multiple approach to sensation. Film has the potential, in other words, not so much to penetrate reality as to penetrate the phantasmagoria that distorts and conceals reality from the human sensory and cognitive capacities; it captures the basic, raw conditions of life and speaks directly to the spectators' unconscious. It does so by furthering "insight into the necessities governing our lives," by accentuating "hidden details in familiar objects," by exploring "commonplace milieu," and by assuring us of "a vast and unsuspected field of action."[111]

Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris. With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly "in any case," but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but

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[110] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version", cit., p. 35.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

discloses quite unknown aspects within them – aspects "which do not appear as the retarding of natural movements but have a curious gliding, floating character of their own."[112]

The deepening of apperception inside the structures of the physical world brought about by cinema is possible thanks to the substitution of a space informed by human consciousness with the unconscious, since "[i]t is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis."[113] With its capacity to isolate, disrupt and deform an object, the camera includes aspects of reality which lie outside the normal spectrum of sense impressions, and whose uncanniness is thus appropriated by collective perception. Given that for Benjamin the cinematic medium gives expression to those fundamental transformations in the domains of form, perception, and even experience that are the signature of a new era, its political ramifications are unambiguous. Thus, his critical attention towards film is not least motivated by film staging most dramatically the interface of aesthetics and politics:

The technical revolutions – these are fracture points in artistic development where political positions, exposed bit by bit, come to the surface. In every new technical revolution, the political position is transformed – as if on its own – from a deeply hidden element of art into a manifest one. And this brings us ultimately to film. Among the points of fracture in artistic formations, film is one of the most dramatic.[114]

According to Benjamin, the shock-quality of film poses a twofold challenge: on the one hand, in its refusal of facile continuity, it corresponds to a collective, distracted model of reception that serves as an alternative to the individual absorption and contemplation characteristic of the bourgeoisie's cult of art. The iconic and privileged status of the individual work of art in Western tradition is founded on the recognition of its uniqueness, authenticity and authority. Its main feature is what Benjamin calls "aura", by which he means "a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be."[115] A work of art may be said to have an aura if it claims a unique status based less on quality, use value, or worth per se than on its figurative distance from the beholder: a kind of psychological inapproachability, or authority, claimed for the work only on the basis

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[112] *Ibid.*
[113] *Ibid.*
[114] Id., "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz", in Id., *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, cit., p. 329.
[115] Id., "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version", cit., p. 23.

of its position within a tradition. For Benjamin, integration into the Western tradition or canon is equivalent to an integration into cultic practices, according to which the work of art, as it is transmitted in time, is also fetishized.

When contemplated as a fetish, a distanced and distancing object that exerts an irrational and incontrovertible power, the work of art attains a cultural position that lends it a sacrosanct inviolability, as well as keeping it in the hands of a privileged few. The "auratic" work of art exerts claims to power that parallel and reinforce the larger claims to political power of the class for whom such objects are most meaningful – that is, the ruling class, for whom the theoretical defence of auratic art is central to the maintenance of their power. The auratic work of art, with its ritually certified representational strategies, not only does not pose any threat to the dominant class, but with the sense of authenticity, authority, and permanence it projects it also represents the cultural validation of their claims to power. The fact that the cinematic work of art is mechanically reproduced, on the contrary, shatters away its aura and enables a whole different kind of reception (based on perceptive closeness) in a whole new kind of spectatorial space (the masses):

It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced.[116]

Thus, mechanical reproducibility confers to cinema not only a social significance, but a fundamental political potential in its "liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage"[117]: the "simultaneous collective reception" [118] of the work of art which has been denied its aura – its uniqueness, authenticity and authority – allows the cathartic destruction of the cultural validation of the traditional ruling class. With the liberation of the work of art from canonical and elitist control, it follows as a consequence that the new spectators, the masses, can now get 'closer' to works of art, so as to be culturally and then politically empowered.[119]

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[116] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
[117] *Ibid.*
[118] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
[119] See Michael W. Jennings, "The Production, Reproduction and Reception of the Work of Art", in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, cit., pp. 14-15.

On the other hand, the filmic experience of shock is able to "routinize" the spectator for the staccato sense-perceptions that are so pervasive in late industrial culture, thereby serving as a sort of "training" for the new tempo and quality of experience in late capitalist urbanism. Since, according to Benjamin, "[t]he function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily"[120], cinema's sensorial recalibration, seen in this light, can be read as a still more urgent practical and political empowerment. As a matter of fact, while it rehearses on a second level the interplay between nature and humanity, film (more than other art forms) is potentially able to "release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity's whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free."[121] This achievement, Benjamin goes on to note, has great appeal for the masses, whose humanity is subjugated by apparatuses daily in urban factories and production jobs:

In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting his humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph.[122]

Benjamin retraces a progressive moment within the reification brought about by cinema by reading in the shock training of film a preparation for a new technical mastery that could, at least potentially, function in the service of a revolutionary project. Film becomes the field of action in which a cinematic audience is transformed – through "simultaneous collective reception" – into a mass in movement, a political body that bears the potential for social change. Benjamin ascribes to what he calls "the optical unconscious" not just the power of disenchantment (the unmasking of "the necessities governing our lives" and with them of "phantasmagoria"), but the power to instruct masses of viewers about the political force that is embodied in themselves. Such a political force is derived from discovering the uncommon aspects and the revolutionary potential of those ordinary and apparently meaningless things, connected to an every-day, yet tactile and immediate experience of the modern world.[123] In a modernity where perception has increasingly been

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[120] Walter Benjamin., "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version", cit., p. 26.
[121] *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
[122] *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[123] See Thomas Y. Levin, "Film", in Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, cit., pp. 316-320.

shaped by the technology of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin sees the paradox according to which "[t]he representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation"[124] – for, according to the philosopher, it is with film that

a *new realm of consciousness* comes into being. To put it in a nutshell, film is the prism in which the spaces of the immediate environment – the spaces in which people live, pursue their avocations, and enjoy their leisure – are laid open before their eyes in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way.[125]

Following Benjamin's path, what Pasolini also sees in the cinematic medium is a way out from the blind pragmatism through which reality itself is seen and controlled in everyday life. In his words, cinema is "the written language of reality": "*Il cinematografo* (con le altre tecniche audiovisive) *pare essere la lingua scritta di questo pragma.* Ma è forse anche la sua salvezza, appunto *perché lo esprime* – e lo esprime dal suo stesso interno: producendosi da esso e riproducendolo."[126] Being neither arbitrary nor symbolic, cinema reproduces reality through reality itself – it does not interrupt its continuum, but, on the contrary, becomes itself a fluid and potentially incessant part of it, so that (at once a passive and active process) it is both the result of the collective forces of its time and one of their causes.

[S]iccome il cinema riproduce la realtà, finisce col ricondurre allo studio della realtà. Ma in un modo nuovo e speciale, come se la realtà fosse stata scoperta attraverso la sua riproduzione, e certi suoi meccanismi espressivi fossero saltati fuori solo in questa nuova situazione "riflessa."[127]

Following Pasolini's suggestion, the cinematographic medium is revolutionary in its exchange with reality, because it brings into consciousness a language – that of reality – which had always been 'natural', and unconsciously recreated. The "written language of

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[124] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version", cit., p. 32.
[125] Id., "Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz", cit., p. 329.
[126] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La Lingua Scritta della Realtà", cit., p. 217. "*Cinema* (and the other audiovisual techniques) *is apparently the written language of this reality.* But perhaps it is also its safety, precisely *because cinema expresses reality* – and it does that from the inside: it originates from reality and reproduces it at the same time." (The translation from Italian to English is mine)
[127] Id., "Battute sul Cinema", in Id., *Empirismo Eretico*, cit., p. 243. "Since cinema reproduces reality, it accordingly brings our attention back to reality itself; though in a new and special way, as if reality had been discovered by means of its very reproduction, and some of its expressive mechanisms had been found out only by being "mirrored" and recreated anew in cinema." (The translation from Italian to English is mine)

reality" will inevitably make us aware, first of all, of what the "language of reality" is, and will at last turn into a conscience of it, for which physical relations with reality will be substituted with cultural ones.[128] At least, that is one of the possible social and cultural effects brought about by mechanically reproduced works of art. The risk that, instead of taking conscience of reality from multiple and possibly infinite perspectives, mechanical reproduction could rapidly *exclude* conscience altogether, substituting cultural relations with physical ones, is for Pasolini always at hand:

Le tecniche audiovisive sono gran parte ormai del nostro mondo, ossia del mondo del neocapitalismo tecnico che va avanti, e la cui tendenza è rendere le sue tecniche, appunto, aideologiche e ontologiche; renderle tacite e irrelate; renderle abitudini; renderle forme religiose. Noi siamo degli umanisti laici, o, almeno dei platonici non misologi, dobbiamo batterci, dunque, per demistificare l'"innocenza della tecnica", fino all'ultimo sangue.[129]

As a matter of fact, while mechanically recreating the very processes of the real world, film not only allows a new way of encountering them, but is itself caught up in the dynamic transformations that constitute the material and social real. Film, in being the "expression of experience by experience"[130], not only deploys kinetic, haptic and sensuous modes of embodied existence, but becomes part of embodied existence itself. The filmic text is utterly engaged with reality in both its directions: in its production, it involves real, fleshly enacted characters, as well as real locales or props. The actual process of making films demands the involvement of practical matters such as the technologies, the material infrastructures and the budget in order to shoot them and the commercial strategies to produce, distribute and possibly make a profit out of them. Apart from technological and budgetary constraints or possibilities, making a film involves issues of collective work, eligible and available actors, studio or producer politics, censorship in terms of performers, screenwriters, editors, and so forth. As a material force of (artistic) production in its own right, then, cinema is an integral part of the net of economic, social and cultural relations like any other modern art form. Its entire practical mechanism – social and economic

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[128] See *ibid.*, p. 247.

[129] Id., "La Lingua Scritta della Realtà", cit., p. 237. "Audiovisual techniques are by now a huge part of our world, that is, the world of an advancing technical neo-capitalism, which tends to deprive its techniques of ideology and make them ontological; to make them tacit and unrelated; to turn them into habits; to turn them into religious forms. We, as laic humanists, or at least as non-misologist followers of Plato, should fight to the last ditch in order to demystify the 'innocence of technique.'" (The translation from Italian to English is mine)

[130] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, in Robert Stam p, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

organization, modes of production and distribution, as well as technology – is shaped on the basis of certain dynamics of the body and seems to work only in relation to it. When the opposite situation happens, and it is such material contingencies, on the contrary, that determine and shape the fundamental materiality of the filmic text, then its "embodiedness"[131] or (direct) engagement with bodies can also work the other way around: the spectators' bodies can be addressed in a way that, instead of liberating them from it, enslaves them even more to the alienation of the apparatus. In today's cultural panorama, the second consequence is probably what takes place most of the time nowadays, where it is our bodies and our perceptions that have been decisively altered by, and sometimes modelled on, the mass media of mechanical reproduction. Such a relationship can be inverted and human perception can keep on shaping motionless technical matter only if "[t]he inert materiality of 'delivery technologies', or the streaming of media content," is "continually reanimated and/or reassembled by the active 'liberal' subject/consumer – sometimes the collective subject/consumer of 'participatory culture' –, a subject that remains sovereign and present to itself in spite of its repeated interfacing with (new) media environments."[132]

The concept I called "cinematic sublime" is intended as a series of aesthetic choices within the cinematic medium that activates such a 'participatory' response in the audience. As we have seen, the fundamental quality of Shakespeare's texts to lack an organic principle assembling the parts of a whole is already relatable to the 'impure' aesthetic of the sublime – where formal dissonances allow the critical representation or reproduction of reality's own dissonance. The use of a source such as Shakespeare, then, already works towards the dismantlement of given truths and the uncovering of their fragmentary and uncertain nature. The cinematic adaptations/appropriations I shall consider, instead of suppressing or marginalising the texts' discrepancies and disproportions creating appeasement and relaxation in the audience, bring Shakespeare's own dismantling power further. In such works, the "cinematic sublime" undoes the Apollonian unity of the whole by means of cinematographic techniques and devices that create disharmony and distortion within the filmic form, question the pre-established rules of representation, and subvert the traditional categories of fiction. While the resulting cinematic aesthetic actively involves the audience with its astonishing or shocking effects that bring them closer to sensuous reality, such a use of the cinematic medium is also capable of 'elevating' their consciousness, leading to the

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[131] Robert Stam, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
[132] Maurizio Calbi, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

awareness of reality's own Dionysian disorder. Relying on the theoretical and practical conditions of the "cinematic sublime" I outlined, I shall retrace the connections that specific cinematic adaptations/appropriations of Shakespeare's plays entail with the new social and political framework in which they are re-created.

CHAPTER III

Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*

The first example of cinematic sublime that I am going to consider is Orson Welles's 1965 adaptation, *Chimes at Midnight*. Starting from what has been judged as the "incredible unevenness"[1] of the film, I shall analyse the apparent aesthetic and technical erring as what originates a sublime aesthetic in the film, considering the way it re-interprets the conflicts and ambiguities of the Shakespearean texts and exposes them to an interaction with contemporary issues.

3.1 Framed within Nostalgia

Drawing on more than just one of Shakespeare's plays, Welles's film reworks primarily *Henry IV*, Parts I and II, with brief borrowings from *Richard II*, *Henry V*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. With *Chimes at Midnight*, the director manipulates Shakespeare's texts even more than with the previous filmic adaptations (*Macbeth*, 1948, and *Othello*, 1952), disassembling the source material and then combining it together into a new, "kaleidoscopic revisualization."[2] The original text is heavily cut, most scenes are set in new sequences, others made of lines from elsewhere in the plays, some of the characters eliminated, and short selections from Holinshed's *Chronicles* are added. Given the institutional and economic constraints governing the production of almost every one of Welles's films (especially his Shakespeare films), rewriting and condensing the texts was partly imposed by the process of adaptation as well as the current policy of filmmaking. Welles's operation, though, seems to go beyond contingent motivations: he radically re-organizes and re-combines lines from the five different plays, erasing borders between them, in order to reinvent them into a personal cinematic compound that would tell Falstaff's story. This extensive textual revision and rearranging is evident from the film's opening

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[1] Jack J. Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977, p. 114, in Andrew M. McLean, "Orson Welles and Shakespeare: History and Consciousness in *Chimes at Midnight*," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 11, 3, 1983, p. 197.

[2] Daniel Seltzer, "Shakespeare's Texts and Modern Productions", in Norman Rabkin (ed.), *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, p. 103, in Samuel Crowl, "The Long Goodbye: Welles and Falstaff", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Autumn, 1980), p. 372.

sequence, which aims at shifting the thematic emphasis away from Hal and toward Falstaff. More than that, it can be considered as the main process upon which a sublime aesthetic is built in the film, originating those 'faultlines' that open up the cinematic work of art to its context.

Chimes at Midnight starts with a partial, open-ended frame on a winter landscape, where two black figures are struggling their way uphill across a barren, snowy landscape, with a large dead tree towering over them. After entering a timbered, heavy-beamed room, we see the two old men – one thin and nervous, the other fat and placid – settle themselves before an immense roaring fire, where they keep on reminiscing "the days that we have seen":

> *Shallow*: Jesus, the days that we have seen! Do you remember since we lay all night in the Windmill in Saint George's Field?
> *Falstaff*: No more of that, Master Shallow.
> *Shallow*: Ha, 'twas a merry night! Is Jane Nightwork alive?
> *Falstaff*: She lives, Master Shallow.
> *Shallow*: Doth she hold her own well?
> *Falstaff*: Old, old, Master Shallow.
> *Shallow*: Nay, she must be old, she cannot choose but be old; certain she's old, and had Robin Nightwork by old Nightwork before I came to Clement's Inn. Jesus, the days that we have seen!
> Ha, Sir John, said I well?
> *Falstaff*: We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Robert Shallow.
> *Shallow*: That we have, that we have, that we have; in faith, Sir John, we have. Jesus, the days that we have seen![3]

The dialogue, borrowed from near the end of *2 Henry IV* (III.ii.187-211[4]), is recast within a new, nostalgic scenario, from which the film's narration departs as an extended flashback focused on Falstaff and his relationship with Prince Hal. Along with the initial lines, the film borrows from the source text the radical instability of its structure, which, by pulling apart the equilibrium between the central characters and the different realms to which they belong in *1 Henry IV*, seems to create a "circumstantial and strategic" sense of

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[3] All quotes from the film are taken directly from it throughout the chapter.
[4] The edition considered is William Shakespeare, *Enrico IV, Parte Seconda*, trans. by Gabriele Baldini, Milano: Rizzoli, 2003. Further quotations from *Henry IV, Part II* refer to this edition.

"constriction."[5] By beginning with lines from near the end of *2 Henry IV*, Welles locates the whole film within the darker world of a play that seems to suggest a more distrustful view of history and power, based on crass individualism and selfishness rather than heroism. Although *2 Henry IV* apparently recapitulates the structure and the themes of Part I, it does so mostly by revising characters and events through a more pessimistic tone, which points out contradictions and questions the validity of a unique interpretation, retrospectively casting shadows on the stylistic and thematic balance of *1 Henry IV*. Moreover, Welles's choice to reposition those lines as an introduction, besides assuring centrality to the character of Falstaff, seems to underscore the darker tone of the source material, lending a weary, desolate atmosphere to the whole movie. According to the director, it is precisely "by focusing on Falstaff" that the "Shakespearean material leads him into dark colours"[6]: as the opening, pre-credit long shot of the two old men struggling across a barren landscape suggests, the film centres on "Falstaff's winter which dominates the texture of the film, not Hal's summer of self-realization."[7]

As a matter of fact, Welles's Falstaff seems to be associated with a pervasive sense of loss and instability, condensed in the reluctant reply that gives the film its title[8]: "We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Robert Shallow." The most immediate meaning of the line is that Falstaff and Shallow have been awake, literally and figuratively, when others were asleep, apparently implying that they have lived life fully. But this seeming celebration of life is at the same time a lamentation for just how much it belongs to the past – as the insistent use of the past tense, of time references and of the iterated adjective "old" suggests. Not only is Jane Nightwork "old", as are Falstaff and Shallow, but they are all probably overdue for death: the phrase "chimes at midnight," "which is given further resonance by the repeated intoning of bells throughout the film, is associated for the audience with sadness and mortality more than with youthful carousal."[9] Whatever were their past glories, they seem now replaced by nostalgia for something that can never be restored (love and youth), and anxiety over further losses that are about to come.[10] "Chimes at Midnight" thus evokes a

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[5] Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible bullets: Renaissance authority and its subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*", in Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (eds.), *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985, p. 39.
[6] Samuel Crowl, *op. cit.*, p. 373.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Whereas the film's onscreen title is actually *Falstaff* (in the USA and UK release), "Chimes at Midnight" was used as its subtitle at first, but soon became popular as the title itself (a literal translation of the phrase, *Campanadas a Medianoche*, is also the title of the Spanish release).
[9] Michael Anderegg, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 125.
[10] See Andrew Barnaby, "Imitation as Originality in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*", in James R.

sense of impending loss, increased by the fact that, when this open frame occurs again later on in the film, it is followed by the news of Henry IV's death and Hal's coronation: in retrospect, therefore, all that remains for Falstaff from that point on is rejection and (eventual) death.

The elegiac tone of the line seems to be underlined in the following sequence: the credits roll against a long shot where vigorous knights on galloping horses (probably going to war) are rapidly replaced by a long, straggling procession of weary marching soldiers (who could be either going to or coming back from war) and ominous corpses hanging in the background (maybe following on the peace-time restoration of order). To the bleakness of the images it is juxtaposed, by contrast, the dynamic pace of a jaunty, festive score. This second open-ended frame (which could be seen as either a sum of what precedes the film's own narration or a prolepsis of what is going to happen) seems to condense the external, political events of the film, and to link them inextricably with the film's core – Falstaff's story and its gloomy atmosphere of impending death. As the sequence comes to an end, in fact, we literally hear the "chimes" tolling like death-bells: they foreshadow the motifs of farewell and rejection that dominate Falstaff's relationship with the future Henry V, as well as the loss of youth, affections and, ultimately, of life he is about to experience.

On the one hand, the elegiac tone that dominates the movie responds to the director's artistic and intellectual intent. According to his own explanation, *Chimes at Midnight* is an elegy for the loss of an older world, "a season of innocence, a dew-bright morning of the world"; a sort of "lost paradise" of which Falstaff is "its perfect embodiment."[11]

The film was not intended as a lament for Falstaff, but for the death of Merrie England. Merrie England as a conception, a myth which has been very real to the English-speaking world and is to some extent expressed in other countries of the Medieval epoch: the age of chivalry, of simplicity, of Maytime and all that. It is more than Falstaff who is dying. It's the old England dying and betrayed. […] In the case of *Chimes at Midnight*, [an era/the sense of moral values has been destroyed] by the interests of power, of duty, of responsibility, of national grandeur, all that kind of thing.[12]

Keller and Leslie Stratyner (eds.), *Almost Shakespeare: Reinventing his Works for Cinema and Television*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004, pp. 26-27.
[11] Orson Welles in J. A. Cobos and Miguel Rubio, "Orson Welles on directing *Chimes at Midnight*", in "Orson Welles on playing Falstaff and reaching his artistic maturity with *Chimes at Midnight*", *Wellesnet, The Orson Welles Web Resource*, May 14, 2009, <http://www.wellesnet.com/orson-welles-on-playing-falstaff-and-reaching-his-artistic-maturity-in-chimes-at-midnight/>.
[12] *Ibid.*

Welles's interpretation of Falstaff is sustained by his belief that Shakespeare's works show that the author was standing 'in between' two ages and two worldviews, but that he was indeed closer to the antecedent ones:

He was standing in the door which opened onto the modern age and his grandparents, the old people in the village, the countryside itself, still belonged to the Middle Ages, to the old Europe... his humanity came from his links to the Middle Ages... and his pessimism, his bitterness – and it's when he allows them free rein that he touches the sublime – belong to the modern world, the world which has just been created.[13]

In this kind of nostalgia for a lost 'innocent' world, Welles felt an affinity for what he thought was Shakespeare's own world perspective: "I think that he was profoundly against the Modern Age, as I am. I am against my Modern Age, he was against his. And I think his villains are modern people, just as they're likely to be continental."[14] According to Welles, Falstaff's role is thus not simply that of a clown or a jolly knight, but rather that of defending the force of the old England that is going down; and he can assume such a role precisely because

he is the greatest conception of a good man, the most completely good man in all drama. His faults are so small and he makes tremendous jokes out of little faults. […] The more I played it, the more I felt that I was playing Shakespeare's good, pure man.[15]

As "a kind of refugee from that world," Falstaff "*has to* "live by his wits, he has to be funny" and "get a laugh out of his patron", in order to "get a place to sleep", to survive:

So it's a rough modern world that he's living in. But I think you have to see in his eyes, that's why I was also very glad to be doing it black and white, because if it's in colour, you must have blue eyes, you know? You've got to see that look that comes out of the age that never existed but exists in the heart of all English poetry.[16]

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[13] Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook and Akira Kurosawa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 120.
[14] Orson Welles in an interview for *BBC Arena* (1982), in Tim2muntU, "Orson Welles on Falstaff" (online video clip), *YouTube*, published on 6 Jan 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHyKbnw734Y&t=1s>.
[15] Orson Welles in J. A. Cobos and Miguel Rubio, *op. cit.*
[16] Orson Welles in an interview for *BBC Arena* (1982), *op. cit*.

His jolliness would thus be the result of a constant *acting* in order to manufacture the appropriate, expected response from his audience. While he plays the clown to please or placate Hal and the other characters (as well as the cinematic spectators), he is actually living a personal and historical tragedy. As a matter of fact, Welles claimed to Peter Bogdanovich that "the closer I thought I was getting to Falstaff, the less funny he seemed to me. […] I found him only occasionally, and then only *deliberately*, a clown."[17] Behind Falstaff's comic mask, Welles saw his inner desperation and the tragedy into which his relationship with Hal would turn; so, he could not let comedy really dominate the film:

I can see that there are scenes which should be much more hilarious, but I directed everything and played everything with a view to preparing for the last scene, so the relationship between Falstaff and the Prince is no longer the simple comic one that it is in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One*, but always a preparation for the end. And as you see, the farewell is performed about four times during the movie, as a preparation for the tragic ending: The death of Hotspur, which is that of Chivalry, the death of the King in his castle, the death of the Prince (who becomes King) and the poverty and illness of Falstaff. These are presented throughout the film and must darken it. I do not believe that comedy should dominate in such a film.[18]

On the other hand, the stylistic and thematic sense of loss and nostalgic regret resulting from Welles's manipulation of his source texts is also able to create a dialectic communication with the actual context in which the film was shot. First of all, the textual rearrangement or reinvention of *Chimes at Midnight* is rooted into Welles's *Five Kings*, a theatrical adaptation of "the whole sweep of the English history plays", in which he condensed the Shakespearean material later used for *Chimes* (the two parts of *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and additional lines from *Richard II* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*). The adaptation premiered in Boston as early as 1939, and periodic revisions of it followed over the decades up until 1960, when a production of *Chimes at Midnight* was performed in Dublin and later defined by Welles as "a sort of tryout for the movie."[19] At the time the film was made, Welles had been residing for extended periods in various locales around Europe in a (more or less) voluntary exile. Practically blacklisted by Hollywood after his very first film, he tried to escape from public scrutiny as well as from his own tarnished myth in 1950s

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[17] Orson Welles in Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
[18] Orson Welles in J. A. Cobos and Miguel Rubio, *op. cit.*
[19] Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, ed. Jonathan Rosenbaum, New York: HarperPerennial, 1992, pp. 259-261, in Anthony R. Guneratne, *Shakespeare, Film Studies, and the Visual Cultures of Modernity*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 198.

USA, where "the proscription of intellectual filmmaking […] went hand in hand with punitive anti-Communism."[20] Once again unable to rely on financial security for the production of his films, Welles had to trick Spanish producer Emiliano Piedra into financing a cinematic version of *Treasure Island* (more liable to be commercially successful, but of which not a single scene was actually shot), alongside which he would shoot his Shakespeare film. So, with mainly Spanish money behind the production, *Chimes at Midnight* was shot in various locales in Spain between 1964 and 1965, while the country was still in the throes of Francisco Franco's military dictatorship. Although, as we have seen, its textual and theatrical origin long predated the director's Spanish sojourn, the film can reveal connections to Welles's intellectual nomadism as well as to the contemporary political scenario.

As a matter of fact, critics and biographers have always been quick to provide all kinds of psychoanalytic explanations for Welles's choice to reinterpret Falstaff's story and also play that character once again at that time of his life and in those circumstances. Jack Jorgens, in particular, observed that perhaps Welles "saw too much of himself in Falstaff," and made the parallels between the film and Welles's personal experience explicit:

To a man who directed and starred in a masterpiece and has since staggered through three decades of underfinanced, hurried, flawed films, scores of bit parts, narrations, and interviews which debased his talent, dozens of projects which died for want of persistence and financing, the story of a fat, aging jester exiled from his audience and no longer able to triumph over impossible obstacles with wit and torrential imagination might well seem tragic.[21]

Chimes at Midnight has actually been described on a number of occasions as Welles's own "testament", and the director himself always mentioned it as his favourite and most personal film. Keith Baxter, from his vantage point of having worked directly with Welles on the film, was ready to point out that "[i]t was his [Welles's] life's ambition to make this film and also to play Falstaff […]."[22] As a matter of fact, Welles might have self-referentially identified with Falstaff's status as a mock king, remarking how as an actor he

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[20] Anthony R. Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

[21] Jack J. Jorgens, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112, in Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139.

[22] Keith Baxter in "Interview with Keith Baxter", in *"Chimes at Midnight": Orson Welles, director*, ed. by Bridget Gellert Lyons, New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988, in Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 82.

himself was a "royal bum" with a crown of "tin", and seeing in the king's betrayal and rejection of the character a mirror of Hollywood's own attitude against him.[23] Such an interpretation has been so strongly felt that it also goes the other way round, up to the point that subsequent adaptations of the Falstaff plays have been hugely influenced not just by *Chimes at Midnight* (like Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*), but by Orson Welles himself (as with Kenneth Branagh's flashback portrayal of Falstaff in his 1989 *Henry V*). As Joss Ackland reports, his 1982 performance of Falstaff was inspired by

the real Orson Welles. […] As a man Welles exploded brilliantly, and then didn't know where to go. Like Falstaff, I believe he could have achieved so much, but it was frittered away. He gives everyone a lot to laugh about and he can laugh at it too. But inside he is crying.[24]

Although it is hard not to feel that "there was a great deal of him in Falstaff – this sort of trimming one's sails, always short of money, having to lie, perhaps, and to cheat"[25], the way Welles's personal experience has contributed to permeate with nostalgia his re-interpretation of Falstaff deserves some more profound considerations.

At the time he shot *Chimes at Midnight*, Welles's sense of intellectual and political alienation was certainly an issue, which the fact that the location for his erratic filmmaking was now Franco's Spain may well have redoubled. When he had been virtually exiled from the industry of Hollywood, with which his nation's filmmaking was identified, he had also experienced a parallel disengagement from his country's political life. After his outspoken support of progressive politics during the Roosevelt years, Welles's name and political activities were not so welcome anymore. As the "Red Scare" began to rise, the director was also reported in the *Red Channels* (1950), the anti-Communist publication that contributed to ban left-wing actors, writers, musicians and journalists suspected of 'communist subversion', fuelling the already flourishing Hollywood Blacklist. By 1964, Welles had been in virtual exile in Europe for several years, and he might have felt even more "quixotic"[26], once again prepared to uphold his artistic fight in the face of low budgets and intellectual solitude, and in a country dominated by political oppression. Artistically and politically detached from both his home and host countries, Welles might be considered as one of those

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[23] See Kenneth S. Rothwell, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

[24] Joss Ackland, quoted in an interview with Jack Tinker, *What's On in London*, June 4, 1982; cited by Barbara Hodgdon, *Shakespeare in Performance: Henry IV, Part II*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 99, in Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

[25] Keith Baxter in "Interview with Keith Baxter", cit., p. 82.

[26] Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

"transnational" filmmakers who, having undergone the "crises and tensions of exilic migrancy," have transformed their "liminality and interstitiality" into "passionate sources of creativity and dynamism."[27] The director's filmmaking strategies as well as the film's technical flaws, in fact, testify for a radical 'in-betweenness', which might well be at the roots of the thematic and stylistic nostalgia of *Chimes at Midnight*. But Welles's being neither 'here' nor 'there' is what paradoxically allows his film to address a double audience – the one left behind and the present one[28] – along with their double issues. The Shakespearean source, reinvented through the lens of Welles's camera in mid-60s Spain, can thus speak not only for the filmmaker's own experience and feelings of alienation, but also, as we are going to see, for the historical context in which it was produced and then received.

3.2 The Voice of History

Shakespeare's Henriad, in tracing the origins of the modern, centralised nation-state, deals with recurrent patterns of violence following Henry IV's illegitimate conquest of the crown, as well as the strategies of this new kind of power to maintain order and contain subversion. In fact, order and subversion are hardly distinguishable from each other: on the one hand, while Henry IV's usurpation of Richard II's throne has led to political unrest, he now needs to defend his power from the threat of further civil broils by those very lords who helped him to the crown and feel they have not been rewarded enough. On the other hand, the heir to the throne designated by Richard II, Edmund Mortimer, is still kept in prison by the present King, who thus violates and tries to defend the divine right of kings at the same time. Welles's film presents this historical situation immediately after the opening flash-forward, with a prologue-like voice-over narration based on Holinshed's *Chronicles*, a major source for Shakespeare's own history plays:

King Richard II was murdered, some say at the command of the Duke Henry Bolingbroke, in Pomfret castle on February 14, 1400. Before this the Duke Henry had been crowned King, though the true heir to the realm was Edmund Mortimer, who was held prisoner by the Welsh rebels. The new king was not hasty to purchase his deliverance, and to prove this Mortimer's cousins, the Percys, came to the King unto Windsor. There came Northumberland, his son Henry Percy called Hotspur, and Worcester, whose purpose was ever to procure malice and set things in a broil.

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[27] Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 13, in Anthony R. Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
[28] See *ibid.*

Official history in the film is reduced to a voice (namely, Ralph Richardson's): like the voice-of-God narrator of documentary, history's presence is authoritative, invisible, apparently imposing facts whose validity seems undeniable by means of clear, assertive statements. Yet, the impossibility to locate or materialise this voice makes the historical narrative also abstract, external and extraneous to the events shown, turning it into something *ob-scene.* This "obscene" narration of the origin of Henry IV's authority can be significantly related to the "obscene" origin of authority itself and of the law: both of which, "being unable by definition to lean finally on anything but themselves, […] are themselves a violence without basis."[29]

Following Derrida's interpretation, the very act of foundation cannot be understood within the logic of what it founds, which opens the institution from the start to an ongoing relation to the violence in and against which the foundation took place. There follows that the institution remains marked or haunted by the violence of the act from which it emerged, which becomes the "essence" of the political as such. Such a paradox is increased by the fact that the founding act, since it precedes the institutional law to which it gives rise, is neither legal nor illegal. But the repetition of that act, by taking place within the institution violently and pre-legally founded, is both legal and illegal, and, while confirming the legality and legitimacy of the institution, shows up at once its illegality and illegitimacy. Since the founding moment of institutions can never be itself "institutionalised", it haunts them as a reminder of their non-legal foundation, and exposes them to the constant risk of being destroyed (or self-destroyed). Institutions are thus corrupted and made fragile from the start by the violence of their foundation, which is at the same time the only measure of their legitimacy.[30] Such a factual truth about the violent origin of institutions – and so of political authority – must therefore always remain "obscene" and be kept as a secret within the state itself if authority is to be maintained.[31]

Fundamentally rooted to an "obscene" violence, Henry IV's sovereignty needs then to justify and preserve itself. According to political philosophers like Carl Schmitt, "[s]overeign is he who decides on the exception"[32], and the film's representation of Henry

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[29] Jacques Derrida, *Force de Loi: Le "Fondement Mystique de l'Autorité"*, Galilée, 1994, p. 34, in Geoffrey Bennington, "Foundations", *Textual Practice*, 21 (2), 2007, p. 236.
[30] See Geoffrey Bennington, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
[31] See *ibid.*, p. 240.
[32] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty,* trans. by George Schwab, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 5, in Bruno Gullì, "The Sovereign Exception:

IV's public image and behaviour can reveal the consequences of such an assumption. As a matter of fact, during the off-scene prologue the film does show the places and the protagonists of this history – a castle (probably Pomfret castle) and Henry IV's enthroned figure (John Gielgud). Similarly to Holinshed/Richardson's voice, they both look like they are cut off and isolated from the 'real' world: the castle sitting atop a mountain, where, as the voice narrates, Richard II was murdered, seems abandoned or dead too; Henry IV, sitting on a throne on a high stone platform, illuminated by shafts of light falling from the windows above, is as otherworldly as a statue in a church. The set for his cold stone court is in fact the Spanish cathedral at Cardona, where, through the camera's low-angle perspective, he looks enclosed, almost imprisoned, detached from the nobility around and in front of him. Gielgud's haughty Henry IV is in fact separated from anything corporeal, and reduced to a nearly disembodied voice, which sounds solemn, almost sepulchral. Although he is hardly ever left alone, he seems to talk only to himself: his words apparently fail at every attempt to communicate, because, as we are going to see, neither can his (verbal) reproaches govern his son, nor can his (verbal) promises tame the rebels. On the contrary, the King's speech – the means and symbol of his authority – is parodied several times throughout the film; Hotspur, Falstaff and Hal all in their turn imitate Henry/Gielgud's grave and theatrical voice. The result is that his richly sculpted, highly rhetorical soliloquies, while meant to hide his own insecurities and fears, finally serve to the exact opposite.[33]

As a matter of fact, king Henry IV is the only character in the film whose speeches are allowed the same weight and tone they have in Shakespeare's texts; still, the king's solemn and sepulchral voice as well as his hieratic posture betray a profound discomfort from the very beginning, which becomes an actual illness as the film goes on. The king's sickness can be seen as the metonymical embodiment of the guilt of usurpation lying heavy over his conscience, and so of the violence on which sovereignty is founded and by which it can be led to self-destruction. As such, not only does it need to be obscured, but also diverted by the state of exception which would justify sovereignty, because "the decision on the exception is a privilege of the sovereign," and "the sovereign is a sovereign precisely in virtue of his capacity to decide."[34] But for the status of sovereign to be (juridically/technically and not ontologically) authentic, the exception needs to be genuine too – which is in its turn only guaranteed by the sovereign's own "genuine" decision.

Notes on Schmitt's Word that Sovereign is he who decides on the Exception", *Glossator*, Volume 1, Fall 2009, p. 23.

[33] See Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

[34] Bruno Gullì, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

Whereas Schmitt's ontological approach takes this "genuineness" for granted, one of the implications of this paradox, as Gullì has pointed out commenting on Schmitt's *Political Theology*, is that

> the exception itself can be a mere fabrication of the sovereign, which acquires dubious legitimacy on the basis neither of ethics nor of a violence travestied as force of law, but of mere and raw violence. In this case, it is not the exception, the state of emergency, which calls forth the sovereign decision, but the other way around, the sovereign decision creates the exception, or state of emergency. Then, the state of emergency is not, in Benjamin's sense, a *real* one.[35]

If we get away from Schmitt's ontological (and theological) dimension, according to which the sovereign *is* the exception, and we see the exception functionally, as the predicate of the sovereign, it may not be the case that the sovereign realizes that there is an objective state of need and thereupon he acts decisively. In fact, the sovereign can also choose which state is to be raised to the level of the exception, or simply fabricate it.[36]

Following this theoretical basis, we can see Henry IV constantly fabricating the state of exception that would legitimate his sovereignty: the very sickness that afflicts him (signifying the violence on which his sovereignty is founded) is strategically rejected outside, turning people around him into a threat for the order and safety of the realm. From his very first appearance in the film's abridged revision of *1 Henry IV*, I.iii, we hear the king blasting the true heir to the throne, whose deliverance from the Welsh rebels he "was not hasty to purchase":

> Shall our coffers, then,
> Be emptied to redeem a traitor home?
> […] No, on the barren mountains let him starve!
> For I shall never hold that man my friend
> Whose tongue shall ask me for one penny cost
> To ransom home revolted Mortimer.[37]

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[35] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[36] See *ibid.*
[37] The lines quoted from the film correspond to William Shakespeare, *Enrico IV, Parte Prima*, trans. by Massimo Bacigalupo, Milano: Garzanti, 1991, I.iii.85-92. Further quotations from *Henry IV, Part I* refer to this edition.

Further on in the film, in a bold mixture of lines from *Richard II*, *2 Henry IV* and *1 Henry IV*, after briefly exposing the malady of his country ("Then you perceive the body of our kingdom,/ How foul it is, what rank diseases grow" *2 Henry IV*, III.i.37-38), the king seems to place the blame not so much on Hotspur, as on his son Henry's behaviour ("Whist I, by looking on the praise of him,/ See riot and dishonour stain the brow/ Of my young Harry. […]" *1 Henry IV*, I.i.84-86; "[…] he – young wanton, and effeminate boy – / Takes on the point of honour to support/ So dissolute a crew." *Richard II*, V.iii.10-12[38]). The same strategy recurs during his first encounter with Hal when, while rebuking his son for his irresponsible behaviour which might cost him the crown, Henry IV soon goes on to attributing a similar unworthy behaviour to the king he dethroned and probably murdered:

> The skipping king, he ambled up and down
> With shallow jesters and rash bavin wits,
> Mingled his royalty with cap'ring fools;
> Grew a companion to the common streets, […] (*1 Henry IV*, III.ii.60-68)

Henry IV's rhetorical strategy to legitimise his power by creating external enemies seems, instead, only to deviate and make impossible real communication, depriving his words of effectiveness and increasing his isolation. As a matter of fact, his promise of peace before the battle of Shrewsbury, sounding void and threatening, is all too easily intentionally misinterpreted by Worcester and transformed into a menace by Hotspur and the rebels. After the battle, when rebellion, the malady of his realm, should have been extirpated, the king's own sickness becomes more and more evident, as the brief narration from Holinshed's *Chronicles* testifies: "From the first, King Henry's reign was troubled with rebellion, but in the year of our Lord 1408 the last of his enemies had been vanquished. The King held his Christmas this year at London, being so vexed with sickness." When Henry IV himself believes to be ailing, he delivers a richly forged, but deeply anguished soliloquy on the burdens represented by the crown lying on a pillow by his head:

> How many thousand of my poorest subjects
> Are at this hour asleep! O sleep, O gentle sleep,
> Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,
> That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down,

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[38] The edition considered is William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. by Stanley Wells, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969.

And steep my senses in forgetfulness?

Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,

Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,

And hushed with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber

Than in the perfumed chambers of the great,

Under the canopies of costly state,

And lulled with sound of sweetest melody?

O thou dull god, why li'st thou with the vile

In loathsome beds, and leav'st the kingly couch

A watch-case, or a common 'larum-bell?

Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast

Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains

In cradle of the rude imperious surge,

And in the visitation of the winds,

Who take the ruffian billows by the top,

Curling their monstrous heads, and hanging them

With deafing clamour in the slippery clouds,

That with the hurly death itself awakens?

Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose

To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude,

And in the calmest and most stillest night,

With all appliances and means to boot,

Deny it to a king? Then happy low, lie down.

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. (*2 Henry IV*, III.i.4-31)

The soliloquy, which Welles keeps in its integrity, maintains the tone of "a private meditation, the innermost thoughts of a troubled, weary man"[39] of the Shakespearean source. According to Greenblatt's explanation, the speech contributes to the ideological justification of kingship that *2 Henry IV* apparently assures. The king's lack of sleep, as a symbol of corporeal suffering, is the cost of power, and so it ratifies his preeminent position, ennobling or even cleansing the crimes upon which such a position depends.[40] However, Gielgud's stagy tone in delivering the soliloquy, as well as the presence of an on-screen audience (the king's dignitaries), seem to betray the intimacy of those lines and remind us of their theatricality, or rather, meta-theatricality. The theme of sleeplessness, in fact, is also

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[39] Stephen Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
[40] See *ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

notoriously recurrent in a play like *Macbeth*, where it is associated to the crime of regicide and the chaos it brings among both the political and natural order ("*Macbeth*: Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!/ Macbeth does murder sleep' – the innocent sleep, […]"[41]; "*Lady Macbeth*: You lack the season of all natures, sleep." III.iv.140; "*Doctor*: Not so sick, my lord,/ As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies/ That keep her from her rest." V.iii.37-39). Watched in its meta-theatrical connection with *Macbeth*, the soliloquy scene, beyond the apparent, ultimate legitimation of Henry IV's power, can also open up to a confession of the betrayal and regicide he committed to get to the crown, which is then the ultimate symbol of the burden of guilt lying on his head.

Opening up the film to the context in which it was shot, the voice-over narration from Holinshed's *Chronicles*, on the one hand, may have sounded like a recapitulation of all too recent history to those who heard it in its original Spanish release in December 1965. On the other hand, Henry IV's soliloquies expose the burdens of (illegitimate) kingship to such a point that, "[h]ad he been more alert, Franco might well have noted the parallels between his situation and that of Gielgud's Henry IV, the latter as overburdened by what is within his head as that which sits atop it, […]."[42] And had the Spanish audience been more alert as well, they might have read in Richardson's and Gielgud's detached voices the displaying of the same political strategies they had been hearing from their leader since 1939. Like virtually all of 20th-century national leaders and/or dictators, Franco's speeches are grounded on a mystifying rhetoric very similar to Henry IV's grandiose and self-shielding soliloquies.

With his voice amplified, made thundering by sound machines, and coming either from the distance of a radio broadcast or from the heights of a balcony in order to reach the whole nation, Franco's speeches were as disconnected from material reality and alien to 'real', dialogic communication as Henry IV's meta-theatrical monologues. Like him, Franco's sovereignty also originated from usurpation and murder: the 1936 overthrow of the democratically elected Second Republic by the Nationalist forces he guided, and the following civil war (1936-39) led to the latter's victory and the inauguration of Franco's military dictatorship (April 1, 1939). He too, then, needed to legitimate his own sovereignty by fabricating a "state of exception", which is already depicted in the speech that accompanied his military coup:

[41] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, trans. by Vittorio Gassman, Milano: Mondadori, 2012, II.ii.35-36. Further quotations from *Macbeth* refer to the same edition.
[42] Anthony R. Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

The nation calls to her defence all those of you who […] swore to defend her to the death against her enemies. The situation in Spain grows more critical every day; anarchy reigns in most of the countryside and towns; government-appointed authorities encourage revolts, when they do not actually lead them; murderers use pistols and machine guns to settle their differences and to treacherously assassinate innocent people, while the public authorities fail to impose law and order. Revolutionary strikes of all kinds paralyze the life of the nation, destroying its sources of wealth and creating hunger, forcing working men to the point of desperation. The most savage attacks are made upon national monuments and artistic treasures by revolutionary hordes who obey the orders of foreign governments, with the complicity and negligence of local authorities.[43]

Franco's rhetorical strategy, like Henry IV's, projects outside on an external enemy the violence on which his authority is founded, and makes himself and his Nationalist forces the defenders of order against the legitimate government; but at the very same time they are overthrowing it, causing a civil war. We can find a further instance of this strategy displayed in his victory speech (broadcasted on May 20th, 1939), where he turns the defenders of the Second Republic into barbarous (ferocious, but also, etymologically, *foreign*) tyrants:

In Madrid, the martyr city now freed from the tyranny of the Barbarians, you have witnessed […] Spain a captive, subjected to a barbarous foreign yoke and sullied with Marxist crime. The martyrdom of Madrid is the gravest charge that can be brought against the Red leaders who, after being beaten in all the battles and hopelessly defeated, sacrificed the capital in vain by shielding themselves behind the non-combatant population, and delivered her over to the perverse methods of Russian Communism.[44]

After the civil war, once Franco's fascist regime has been established, we can still perceive the need for his authority to keep the state of exception alive:

When the Russian Comintern was about to make the country prey of communism, it was a national movement that saved it and gave hopes for the revolution, its channel and direction. […] If we fought hard on our crusade, we would fight even harder if the new danger of new war should threaten us. We know that with us is life, without us, death.[45]

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[43] Francisco Franco, "Speech (17th July 1936)", in *Axis History Forum*, <http://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?t=113672>.

[44] Francisco Franco, "General Franco's Broadcast Speech (Madrid, May 20th, 1939)", *The Tablet*, 27th May 1939, p. 10, <http://archive.thetablet.co.uk/article/27th-may-1939/10/general-francos-broadcast-speech-madrid-may-20th-1.>.

[45] Francisco Franco, "Generalissimo Francisco Franco's Speech to Falangist Party Council praising German,

Reading Franco's speeches in juxtaposition to Henry IV's soliloquies is a subsequent step in my reconstruction of Welles's cinematic sublime. Starting from the Shakespearean textual source itself, and its dealing with the recurrent patterns of violence following an illegitimate conquest of the crown, the film can be significantly opened up to the historical context in which it was produced. As a matter of fact, the problematic representation of history and power it proposes might well have had lively resonances in a country where the scars of a military coup and the following civil war were presumably still pulsating fresh behind Franco's fascist 'order'. But more than that, as noted by Anthony Guneratne, "Welles appears to have contrived a work even more consonant with those of later Spanish directors who, [...], were soon to create an oppositional cinema at once subtle (in its undermining of official discourse) and richly nuanced."[46] The film's peculiar use of visual and aural devices and techniques, as we have seen, while uncovering Henry IV's rhetorical strategies, is able to dismantle their validity. Such a challenging aesthetics, in its dialectic exchange with the contemporary context, can thus allow us to question the univocal image that any form of power gives of itself.

3.3 The Reality of the Image

Further aesthetic challenges to official discourse in *Chimes at Midnight* can be found in the almost overwhelming presence of unofficial history as a carnivalesque parody of the former: the world of Falstaff and his "band of outsiders", characters of lower rank engaged in minor offences, who ramble among taverns and other rustic settings in striking contrast with Henry IV's cold and stony court. Stylistically, the world of history's outsiders is linked to a frenetic visual rhythm guaranteed by peculiar cinematic techniques as well as technical flaws – such as the use of a freewheeling camera, the juxtaposition of shots of uneven length, and a poorly synchronised, sometimes incomprehensible soundtrack. For instance, actors often deliver their lines as they, or the camera (or both) are in rapid motion or from the depth of an extreme long shot; the recording is technically faulty and a number of actors have been dubbed by Welles himself; jarring editing patterns, at last, easily distract the audience from the spoken word.[47] These stylistic idiosyncrasies all contribute to an uncertain

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Italian and Spanish fascism", Madrid, December 8, 1942, in *Historical Resources about the Second World War*, <https://historicalresources.wordpress.com/category/historical-speeches/the-most-famous-speeches/>.
[46] Anthony R. Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
[47] See Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

or uneven relationship between sound and image, and are analysed as a further contribution to the cinematic sublime in *Chimes at Midnight*.

The disturbing action of the image in the film goes up to the point that "[h]istory and (verbal) rhetoric are constantly displaced, replaced by Welles's nervous, erratic, decentred, unstable visual and aural style, a flow of images and sounds that thoroughly dismantle Shakespeare's text, [...]."[48] The consequent downplaying of words in favour of images is thus the downplaying of the whole world of official history, where words are the main means of expression but also the main means to conquer and keep power.

As a matter of fact, within Falstaff's "tavern world", words degenerate into the "incoherent babbling of poseurs, cynics, and fools"[49]: Falstaff's "incomprehensible lies" (*1 Henry IV*, I.ii.175) are so incongruous that everybody can all too easily see through them; Master Shallow's "every third word", according to Falstaff, is "a lie"; Ancient Pistol's high-flown speeches are reduced to a meaningless verboseness; Master Silence is afflicted with such a severe stutter that he barely speaks, and Shallow must annoyingly complete his sentences. Welles's own acting style seems to disparage his notoriously loud and clear vocal delivery by deliberately "throwing away" words, lines and even entire speeches in a vernacular accent that parodies proper Shakespearean diction.[50] The 'tavern world', in its mistrustful toning down of words, tends to be dominated by the sheer physicality of the image instead, starting from Falstaff's huge figure or often his face alone, which sometimes takes over the entire frame. Although he enters the film as a small, round object in the distance of an extreme long shot, Falstaff becomes progressively bigger as he gets closer to the camera, until his face alone covers over three-fourths of the frame, and the wooden space around him always seems too narrow for his passage. The way Welles elaborates on the inescapable physical presence of Falstaff, his girth as well as his old age, seems to suggest that he and the world outside history are "all flesh"[51] (and also, because of that, all the more susceptible to destruction and perishing), thus implying the dominance of the image over words, with a consequent even more tactile or 'real' impact on the audience.

Welles's strategy to undermine words through the sheer physicality of the image contaminates the representation of characters who belong to the world of the court and of official history as well. To begin with, Hotspur's bath sequence is a satirical overturning of

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[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 129.
[50] See *ibid.*, pp. 133-134.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

history's pressing demands, which – announced by the sound of trumpets and galloping horses – turn the young man away from everyday life and twist his language, turning it into a bombastic and belligerent rhetoric:

"The purpose you undertake is dangerous" – why, that's certain! 'Tis dangerous to take a cold, to sleep, to drink; but I tell you, my lord fool, out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety. "The purpose you undertake is dangerous, the friends you have named uncertain, the time itself unsorted, and your whole plot too light […]. Say you so […]? I say unto you again, you are a shallow, cowardly hind, and you lie. […] By the Lord, our plot is a good plot as ever was laid; our friends true and constant: a good plot, good friends, and full of expectation; an excellent plot, very good friends. What a frosty-spirited rogue is this! (*1 Henry IV*, II.iii.1-19)

But as he storms out asking for a horse and crying: "That roan shall be my throne" (*1 Henry IV*, II.iii.68), Hotspur, with what was meant to be an elegant oratorical gesture of the arm, accidentally drops the towel in which he was draped and, turning away from the camera, reveals his bare behind. Hotspur's rhetoric and historical pretensions are thus literally laid bare and comically undermined, so that, retrospectively, the whole sequence is more similar to a comic intermission. On a closer look, Hotspur's words were already being mocked by the trumpeters, whose fanfares sound like echoes to his belligerent pompousness; as well as by his wife's chuckles and lack of attention for his pugnacious rantings. While Hotspur talks of war, in fact, Kate tries to engage him in a facetious, semi-serious exchange about marital obligations. While she apparently imitates and ridicules her husband's excessive talk of war (even in his sleep, so that war becomes a sort of rival to his wife), he still replies opposing warlike, heroic values to her sexual innuendos. In light of Hotspur's declaration to choose war over sexuality, the dropped towel may signal, as Anderegg argues, "the return of the repressed", the revelation of the body he tries to deny or push aside by asserting the word:[52]

Lady: For what offense have I this fortnight been
A banished woman from my Harry's bed?
[…] In thy faint slumbers I by thee have watched,
And heard thee murmur tales of iron wars,
Speak terms of manage to thy bounding steed,
Cry 'Courage! To the field!' And thou hast talked

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[52] See Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

Of sallies and retires, of trenches, tents,

Of palisadoes, frontiers, parapets,

Of basilisks, of cannon, culverin,

Of prisoners' ransom, and of soldiers […]

[…] But hear you, my lord.

Hotspur: What say'st thou, my lady?

Lady: What is it carries you away?

Hotspur: Why, my horse, my love – my horse!

Lady: Out, you mad-headed ape!

[…] I'll know your business, Harry; […]

[…] if you go –

Hotspur: So far afoot, I shall be weary, love.

Lady: […] In faith, I'll break thy little finger, Harry,

An if thou wilt not tell me all things true.

Hotspur: Away, away, you trifler! Love? I love thee not;

I care not for thee, Kate. This is no world

To play with mammets and to tilt with lips.

We must have bloody noses and cracked crowns,

[…]

Lady: Do you not love me? Do you not indeed?

[…] Nay, tell me if you speak in jest or no.

Hotspur: Come, wilt thou see me ride?

And when I am a-horseback, I will swear

I love thee infinitely. But hark you, Kate:

[…] I know you wise, but yet no farther wise

Than Harry Percy's wife; constant you are,

But yet a woman; and for secrecy,

No lady closer, for I well believe

Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know,

And so far will I trust thee, gentle Kate.

Lady: How? So far?

Hotspur: Not an inch further. But hark you, Kate:

Whither I go, thither shall you go too;

[…] Will this content you, Kate?

Lady: It must of force. (*1 Henry IV*, II.iii.36-114)

Hotspur's belligerent rhetoric, after being comically overturned, is once again fatally going to fail him – and any other character as well – when the war he was so enthusiastically looking forward to culminates in the battle at Shrewsbury. The power of Welles's 'tactile' image to destabilise words and the related world of official history is especially at work in the long battle sequence placed at the film's core. Hotspur's mindless enthusiasm for violence ("Harry to Harry, shall hot horse to horse,/ Meet and ne'er part till one drop down a corse", *1 Henry IV*, IV.i.122) and the initial air of jollity carried forward in the processions of soldiers mustering for the battle along with a martial soundtrack is promptly replaced by ominous shots of battlefield preparation, which is a re-play of a shot with mounted soldiers and galloping horses we see in the opening sequence. As they remind us of the grim conclusion of the opening sequence (where they are promptly followed by ominous hooded soldiers and hanged men in the background), it is as if the audience were already aware of the battle's own grim outcome. One is reminded of such crude reality also in some of the (apparently) comic moments; for instance, heavily armoured knights are lowered from trees and derricks on to their horses, while Falstaff, hoisted to the top of the pulley looking like an enormous armadillo, is let fall before a horse can be got under him, and then is seen puffing along well to the rear of the central action or hiding behind a bush. This sight, as well as Falstaff's speech on "honour" later on, besides the apparent comic release, is a crucial reminder of a world which, under its fickle chivalric ideals, is fatally made of flesh and bones. As a matter of fact, Falstaff's "catechism" paradoxically unveils the concept of honour as a mere word or "air", futile and inconsistent; he especially deconstructs its hollowness by underlining its lack of practical and even bodily usefulness, to the living as well as to the dead:

Well, 'tis no matter; honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? How then? Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No. What is honour? […] Air – a trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. […] 'Tis insensible then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon – and so ends my catechism. (*1 Henry IV*, V.i.129-140)

By positioning this speech right before the battle begins, the film introduces the deconstruction of chivalric notions into the following action, thus already depriving war of any ideological justification, and presenting it as a power struggle disguised by empty ideals like "honour" itself. In fact, *Chimes at Midnight* represents the battle of Shrewsbury from *1*

Henry IV with unmitigated directness as an overwhelming physical experience, a climactic explosion of primal, omni-directional violence, chaotic and meaningless. After the opposing armies meet, the scene is totally filled with muddy soldiers brutally killing each other in utterly unheroic hand-to-hand combat with any kind of weapon, from wielded clubs to swinging chain slings, and spiked maces and swords. In an unrelenting savagery, high-angle shots show groups of archers shooting their arrows with clean efficiency and skill, followed in turn by rapid close-up glimpses of men pierced through with arrows and of horses impaled and collapsing in convulsions.

For the battle action, Welles employed a variety of shooting techniques: some shots are photographed with a handheld camera, others filmed with wide-angle lenses; some are in slow motion or even static, others instead are speeded up or shot from a continuously moving point of view. The images are accompanied by different layers of a 'wordless' soundtrack, in which the slow, stressed beats of a dissonant choral accompaniment sung by treble voices is juxtaposed with the frantic rhythms of the battle (whinnying horses, the clash of sword against sword, armour against armour, screams and shouts, gasping, panting, and cracking bones).[53] Welles's use of soft focus silhouette in his close-up concentration, moreover, does not allow a clear identification, so that the raw brutality of man and weapon is isolated from any partisan sentiment. Denuded of all language and rhetoric, the sequence is only made of shocking images of relentless bloodshed, where no distinction – neither between loyalists and rebels, nor between men and mud – is possible anymore. The sequence was at first recorded in long, uninterrupted takes to allow the actors to warm up in the battle, and was subsequently cut up in over 200 separate shots which were then edited together through a tight montage. As Welles himself explained:

On the first day I tried to do very short pieces, but I found that extras didn't work as well unless they had a longer thing to do. They didn't seem to be really fighting until they had time to warm up. That's why the takes were long, since there was no way of beginning the camera later and cutting. But I knew I was only going to use very short cuts. For example, we shot with a very big crane very low to the ground, moving as fast as it could be moved against the action. What I was planning to do – and did – was to intercut the shots in which the action was contrary, so that every cut seemed to be a blow, a counter blow, a blow received, a blow returned. Actually it takes a lot of

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[53] See *ibid.*, p. 132, and Anthony Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

time for the crane to move over and back, but everything was planned for this effect and I never intended to use more than a small section of the arc in each case.[54]

As a matter of fact, Welles's use of "very short cuts" and his shooting with a moving camera drags the spectator into a muddy no-man's land that reminds the spectator of World War I trenches, where a blurry mass of flesh and iron is either fighting over it or uprooting it. Everything is sewn together in such a rapid and fragmented editing that the viewer feels a sense of claustrophobia, of being trapped within a nightmarish sequence of deaths from which no one will be able to recover, thus forming "a major aesthetic disruption from which neither the tone of the film nor the perceptive mood of the spectator returns to its former equilibrium."[55] When the pace of the battle slows down after nearly ten minutes of haptic fight, soldiers seem to have become one thing with mud, from which it is impossible to rise, in an apocalyptic regression to the slime from which man emerged. The end of the conflict does indeed visualise a repeat of the gloomy last image from the opening sequence: framing the battle within repeated images from the introduction may thus suggest not only a repeat of the pattern rebellion-war-punishment, but also that such pattern is one of history's recurring experiences. In light of the following displaying of Henry V's foreign policy, in fact, Henry IV's final remark, "Thus ever did rebellion find rebuke," echoed by the narrator with "At last all enemies [were] defeated," may retrospectively sound as a far too optimistic consideration – if not tragically ironic.

The film's destabilization of words through the overwhelming presence of the image concerns Prince Hal as well. Ambling in between 'two fathers' (King Henry IV and Falstaff) and liminal to both of their worlds, the tavern and the court, Hal (played by Keith Baxter), like his father the King, is mainly associated with words, which betrays his fundamental non-belonging to Falstaff's world; yet, surrounded by a dimension of sheer physicality, his words are deprived of relevance (and sometimes of consistence). For instance, when delivering the "I know you all" soliloquy, Hal is not left alone as in Shakespeare's text, but has a very inattentive audience in Falstaff standing trustingly in the background; besides, his words are at times whispered in such a low voice that some of them are almost inaudible. Not only does the meta-theatricality of the scene, being itself a way to remind us of the fictitious nature of the character and of what he says, unmask the rhetorical constructedness

[54] Orson Welles in Juan Cobos and Miguel Rubio, "Welles and Falstaff," *Sight and Sound*, 35, Autumn 1966, p. 161, in Samuel Crowl, *op. cit.*, p. 378.
[55] Anthony Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

of the Prince's words; but the presence of an audience that does not seem to pay attention or even listen to them also proves their ineffectiveness within the 'real' world:

> I know you all, and will a while uphold
> The unyoked humour of your idleness.
> Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
> Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
> To smother up his beauty from the world,
> That, when he please again to be himself,
> Being wanted, he may be more wond'red at
> […] If all the year were playing holidays,
> To sport would be as tedious as to work;
> But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,
> […] So, when this loose behaviour I throw off
> And pay the debt I never promisèd,
> […] My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
> Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
> Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
> I'll so offend to make offense a skill,
> Redeeming time when men think least I will. (*1Henry IV*, I.ii.185-207)

Hal's winking at Falstaff at the end of the soliloquy before running away – a gesture that usually implies understanding and complicity – seals, on the contrary, his solitary promise to finally betray him, of which Falstaff remains totally unaware and unsuspecting. The Prince's soliloquy, like his father's, is more of a failed attempt at communication, in which his schemes remain unheard or unbelieved. As a matter of fact, while the audience is prepared to Hal's rejection of Falstaff by the several farewell scenes in which he rehearses verbally his ultimate betrayal, his words remain totally ineffective on Falstaff himself and in his world distrustful of rhetoric.

On assuming the crown, Hal is definitely absorbed into the realm of 'official history' and verbal rhetoric as his father Henry IV. His first act as Henry V – the rejection of Falstaff – is actually "a rhetorical act, the new king of England's maiden speech, the son's entrance into the symbolic world of his father"[56]:

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[56] Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.

How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!

I have long dreamt of such a kind of man,

So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane;

But being awaked, I do despise my dream.

Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace.

Leave gormandizing; know the grave doth gape

For thee thrice wider than for other men.

Reply not to me with a fool-born jest.

Presume not that I am the thing I was,

For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,

That I have turned away my former self;

So will I those that kept me company.

When thou dost hear I am as I have been,

Approach me, and thou shalt be as thou wast,

The tutor and the feeder of my riots.

Till then I banish thee, on pain of death,

As I have done the rest of my misleaders,

Not to come near our person by ten mile. (*2 Henry IV*, V.v.46-64)

Hal's elaborate and majestic speech, though, is far less eloquent than the expression on Falstaff's own face, where, in a storm of feelings, the dominant one seems to be disbelief for the words just pronounced by the newly crowned King.[57] It is as though Falstaff is able to see through them and cannot help remaining sceptic in front of their apparent rhetoric ("This that you have seen is but a colour[58]… I shall be sent for soon at night", he confides heavy-heartedly but hopefully to Shallow). On our first sight of Hal after the ceremony of coronation, moreover, he will declare war against France with apparently no reason given but for a sentry's cry of "No king of England, if not king of France!" Like his father, who had usurped the crown from Richard II and had had to cover the illegitimacy of his kingship with a war that would vanquish internal rebellion, Hal's war does not respond to a higher imperative, but is solely a wilful political manipulation. Following the advice his father gave him on his deathbed, war becomes for Henry V too a way to keep minds busy with an external enemy rather than focusing on their own king's conduct:

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[57] See *ibid.*

[58] Welles's amendment of Shakespeare's "This that you heard was but a colour." (*2 Henry IV*, V.v.83-84) to "This that you *have seen* is but a colour" again underlines the importance his film attributes to vision over words.

God knows, my son,

By what bypaths and indirect crook'd ways

I met this crown; […]

For all my reign hath been but as a scene

Acting that argument. And now my death

Changes the mood, for what in me was purchased

Falls upon thee in a more fairer sort;

[…] Yet though thou stand'st more sure than I could do,

Thou art not firm enough, since griefs are green,

And all thy friends – which thou must make thy friends –

Have but their stings and teeth newly ta'en out;

By whose fell working I was first advanced,

And by whose power I well might lodge a fear

To be again displaced; […]

Therefore, my Harry,

Be it thy course to busy giddy minds

With foreign quarrels, that action hence borne out

May waste the memory of the former days.

More would I, but my lungs are wasted so

That strength of speech is utterly denied me.

How I came by the crown, O God forgive,

And grant it may with thee in true peace live! (*2 Henry IV*, IV.v.313-349)

Like Henry IV (whom Hal now resembles uncannily also in his cold, solemn voice and towering, ascetic posture), the future king has to keep the state of exception that would guarantee his sovereignty and justify the violence on which not only his father's power, but also his own, is founded. In Welles's film, however, Henry V's witty rhetoric is punctually juxtaposed with its harsh material consequences: paradoxically, the young king's words act like deeds on Falstaff (and the people belonging to his world), whose sudden death is straightforwardly attributed to his rejection ("The king has killed his heart", says Hostess Quickly in *Henry V*, II.i.86[59]). After the Hostess's laconic account of Falstaff's last moments, we see her watching the funeral procession that bears his coffin to the desolate countryside. The closing sequence culminates the film's dominant strategy to displace words

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[59] The edition considered is Shakespeare, William, *Enrico V*, trans. by Gabriele Baldini, Milano: Rizzoli, 2003. Futher quotations from *Henry V* refer to the same edition.

with the concrete directness of images by juxtaposing the image of Falstaff's coffin passing away in the distance with the narrator's voice reading from Holinshed's *Chronicles*:

Determined to put on the shape of a new man, this Henry was a captain of such prudence and such policy that he never enterprised anything before it forecast the main chances that it might happen. So humane withal, he left no offence unpunished, no friendship unrewarded. For conclusion, a majesty was he that both lived and died a pattern in princehood, a lodestar in honour, famous to the world always.

Holinshed's panegyric of Henry V – which once again represents the voice of history – cannot help being utterly spoiled or betrayed by the spectacle of Falstaff being buried in the midst of a desolate wasteland. In a final irony, this ultimate contrast between word and image completes the whole film's operation to re-inscribe the rhetoric of official history into the crude material reality. As a matter of fact, the ironic discrepancy between them conveyed through the representation of the battle, of the purgative aftermath that follows and of the unrelenting struggle for the crown could find striking resonances in the world-wide situation in which the film was shot and released.

To begin with, the battle sequence at Shrewsbury, in which Welles's soldiers are more like unfortunate wretches who exhaustingly and inelegantly have to clobber one another with their axes, clubs, spears and chains, has always been put in strong opposition to the colourful pageantry at Agincourt in Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944), where immaculate cavaliers on dashing horses "rid[e] out of the castle, and suddenly they are on a golf course somewhere charging each other."[60] In a crudely realistic illustration of Falstaff's understanding that war's appetite is fed by "mortal men," and that war can make all of us "food for powder", the sequence puts the human cost of war in the limelight. Like Falstaff's own "catechism" on honour, in fact, Welles's black-and-white, muddy, wearing wrestling match unmasks the 'heroic' motives that call men to war as empty and grotesquely inhuman ideology. If Olivier's propagandistic rendering of the battle of Agincourt as Hal's unsullied triumph is framed within the patriotic necessity to support England's military effort against Nazi-fascism, Welles's slow, painful, exhausting depiction of a primal destructive rite at Shrewsbury is built instead on the ruins of those wars from which Spain and the rest of Europe had recently been rising – which were nevertheless still visible at the horizon. While

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[60] Orson Welles in Juan Cobos and Miguel Rubio, *op. cit.,* in Kenneth S. Rothwell, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

Chimes was being shot, in fact, an official interdiction in Spain prohibited representations of the civil war[61]; still, a Spanish audience in 1965 could easily be affected by this sequence as a crude reminder of the recent horrors. The rest of 1965-66 Europe too, which had just come out of two world wars and was entering the second decade of a Cold War, could not have remained indifferent at such a view. Within the conflictual climate of the mid-'60s, particularly with the growing escalation of the war in Vietnam, the Shrewsbury sequence in *Chimes at Midnight* has been interpreted by many commentators as an anti-war statement that brought Welles (and Falstaff) close to the growing youth counterculture.[62]

Beside Europe, then, it is the North American audience Welles had left behind that might have felt vibrantly alive issues like the harsh reality beyond what was presented as a crusade against a dangerous (external) enemy. At the time *Chimes* was released in the United States (17 March 1967), the country's involvement in Vietnam, begun right after World War II (September 1950) in support of the French colonial army in what was then French Indochina, had rapidly turned into one of the wars of the Western Bloc in order to contain the spread of Communism. U.S. involvement escalated further in 1964 when, with the so-called "Gulf of Tonkin" incident and the following "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution", President Lyndon B. Johnson was given authorization to increase the American military presence in South-Vietnam. The reasons President Johnson had adduced for committing his country to (an undeclared) war, if not omitted like Hal's reasons to invade France in the film, were at least as arbitrary, and sometimes the result of a wilful manipulation. The Gulf of Tonkin incident – in which the destroyer USS *Maddox* was said to have been attacked twice by North Vietnamese torpedo boats – was in fact used as a deliberate justification for sending U.S. combat units, which glossed over the American interest in preventing a Communist takeover of South-Vietnam and preserving its control over South-East Asia. As the evidence collected for an internal National Security Agency report demonstrated much later (2005), the second Gulf of Tonkin incident Johnson is talking right after never actually happened, and in the first one it was the USS *Maddox* to have opened the fire first on North Vietnamese boats, while the Johnson administration had stated the opposite:

[R]enewed hostile actions against United States ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply. The

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[61] See Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

[62] See Daniel Juan Gil, "Avant-garde Technique and the Visual Grammar of Sexuality in Orson Welles's Shakespeare Films", *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 1.2 (2005), <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/781447/show>.

initial attack on the destroyer 'Maddox, on August 2, was repeated today by a number of hostile vessels attacking two U.S. destroyers with torpedoes. […] In the larger sense this new act of aggression, aimed directly at our own forces, again brings home to all of us in the United States the importance of the struggle for peace and security in southeast Asia. Aggression by terror against the peaceful villagers of South Viet-Nam has now been joined by open aggression on the high seas against the United States of America. The determination of all Americans to carry out our full commitment to the people and to the government of South Viet-Nam will be redoubled by this outrage.[63]

Similarly to the strategy Henry IV suggests to Hal, further legitimacy for the military action in Vietnam was gained over the years through a constant propaganda that would build up an external enemy out of the North-Vietnamese government and the Communist threat it represented in South-East Asia as well as all over the world:

If we are driven from the field in Vietnam, then […] [i]n each land the forces of independence would be considerably weakened, and an Asia so threatened by Communist domination would certainly imperil the security of the United States itself.[64]

Vietnam is also the scene of a powerful aggression that is spurred by an appetite for conquest. It is the arena where Communist expansionism is most aggressively at work in the world today – where it is crossing international frontiers in violation of international agreements; where it is killing and kidnapping; where it is ruthlessly attempting to bend free people to its will.[65]

Besides justifying Johnson's foreign policy in South-East Asia and omitting his change of strategy from defence to aggression, a further discrepancy between 'words' and 'actual reality' in the context of the Vietnam war came from the "policy of minimum candour" the Pentagon employed in its dealings with the media. In official statements, military information officers emphasised stories that portrayed progress in the war that openly contradicted the media's coverage of the war, up to the point of creating a so-called "credibility gap" between the government's claims and the actual situation:

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[63] Lyndon B. Johnson, "Report on the Gulf of Tonkin Incident (August 4, 1964)", *Miller Center of Public Affairs*, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/lbjohnson/speeches/speech-3998>.
[64] Id., "Press Conference (July 28, 1965)" *Miller Center of Public Affairs*, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/lbjohnson/speeches/speech-5910>.
[65] Id., "Speech on Vietnam (September 29, 1967)", *Miller Center of Public Affairs*, University of Virginia, <http://millercenter.org/president/lbjohnson/speeches/speech-4041>.

[A]re the Vietnamese – with our help, and that of their other allies – really making any progress? Is there a forward movement? The reports I see make it clear that there is. Certainly there is a positive movement toward constitutional government. […] There is progress in the war itself, steady progress considering the war that we are fighting; rather dramatic progress considering the situation that actually prevailed when we sent our troops there in 1965; when we intervened to prevent the dismemberment of the country by the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. The campaigns of the last year drove the enemy from many of their major interior bases. The military victory almost within Hanoi's grasp in 1965 has now been denied them. The grip of the Vietcong on the people is being broken.[66]

By 1967, in fact, not only had public trust in government pronouncements begun to be damaged, but a period of great social upheaval was about to start in the U.S.A., in which the hippie counterculture of the forthcoming "Summer of Love" carried on more and more protests against the war in Vietnam and allowed anti-war feelings to reach critical mass in a short time. Aware, by then, of the human price they were paying for their crusade against Communism, part of the American audience might have related to people on 'the other side of history', like Falstaff, who is actually *killed* by words. More than that, a movie like *Chimes at Midnight*, in which rhetoric is distrusted and displaced by the immediate physicality of the image, could easily be associated to the growing counterculture in the U.S.A. that denounced the actual horrors of war against the dominant military propaganda. Commentators like Douglas Brode have carried the connection between the film and the growing youth movement even further:

Filmed during the mid-sixties, mostly in Barcelona and Madrid, *Falstaff* fits the tenor of those times. Welles's vision of the rift between Henry IV […] and Hal […] is formed by the generation-gap conflict, with Falstaff as an aged hippie guru, part Timothy Leary ("sack" substituting for LSD) and part merry prankster Ken Kesey, while the tavern itself is depicted as a virtual commune, an Elizabethan Alice's Restaurant. Battle scenes, brilliantly realized in unglamorous black and white, were aimed squarely at the youth audience during that era of divisive war in Vietnam.[67]

The director himself, after the film's release, began to make slight connections to contemporary events: "[Falstaff]'s good in the sense that the hippies are good […] He's just

[66] *Ibid.*
[67] Douglas Brode, *Shakespeare in the Movies: From the Silent Era to "Shakespeare in Love"*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 75.

shining with love; he asks for so little, and in the end, of course, he gets nothing."[68] On the "Dean Martin Show" in 1968, Welles went as far as to call Falstaff a "swinger": "He [Sir John Falstaff] was a… well, he was a… he was what you might call a "swinger", only 15th century they didn't call them "swingers", but they swung, and nobody more so than Sir John."[69] As a matter of fact, Falstaff's disparaging and mocking of authority has often been interpreted as the ultimate aspect that can make such a character socially relevant, especially within the growing youth movement of the mid-'60s. Falstaff's 'anti-conformism' was also very easily connected to Welles's own artistic and personal biography (particularly in relation to his lifelong challenge towards the Hollywood filmmaking norm and his manifest leftist political views), so that when Bosley Crowther in his harsh review of *Chimes* asked of Welles's Falstaff: "[h]as he, deep down, a spirit of rebellion against stuffy authority? Or is he merely what he looks like – a dissolute bumbling, street-corner Santa Claus?"[70] he is very likely to be speaking about Welles himself. As if to confirm such a comparison, while in Europe he had "entered the treacherous domain of the avant-garde"[71] and achieved the status of international auteur, of a cineaste at the top of the pantheon, Welles was (just like Falstaff) considered as a waste of talent, and once again and definitely rejected by his home country's 'authorities'. Although American reviews of *Chimes* were, all in all, more favourable than it might have been expected, some of the negative ones (like Crowther's) were still so influential as to contribute to the unfortunate release and distribution of the film all over the United States.[72]

Thus, part of the American audience was not only discouraged, but also prevented in a way from watching *Chimes at Midnight* on its first release.[73] Those very qualities that made critics like Crowther call the film "a confusing patchwork of scenes and characters" with a "fuzzy and incomprehensible"[74] dialogue track are here interpreted precisely as the faultlines that bring about the dismantling potential of the sublime in the film's aesthetics.

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[68] Orson Welles in Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, ed. by Jonathan Rosenbaum, New York: Harper Collins, 1992, p. 100.

[69] Id., in TimPBears, "Orson Welles Falstaff Dean Martin Show" (online video clip), *YouTube*, published on 7 Jun 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJ6v7GHYDbM>.

[70] Bosley Crowther, "Screen: Orson Welles is Falstaff in Uneven Film: Cannes Movie Arrives at Little Carnegie", *The New York Times* (March 20, 1967), in "Andrew Sarris vs. The New York Times: a defense of Orson Welles's *Falstaff*", *Wellesnet: The Orson Welles Web Resource*, May 25, 2009, <http://www.wellesnet.com/andrew-sarris-defense-of-orson-welless-falstaff/>.

[71] Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Improving Mr. Welles", *Sight and Sound*, n.s., 12, no. 6 (October 1992), p. 29 in Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

[72] See Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139.

[73] *Chimes at Midnight* has been restored from a long-lost 35mm print and re-released in the U.S.A. in 2016 after being unavailable for decades. Ironically, this time it has been critically acclaimed as the crowning achievement of Orson Welles's film career.

[74] Bosley Crowther, *op. cit.*

Welles's visual style in *Chimes at Midnight* is a continuous challenge to the audience's judgement: through the visibly distorting presence of the camera, the viewer shifts away from the logicality of the events and actions depicted to focus instead on the incoherence between sound and image displayed on the screen. The result is that the film "approaches something resembling pure cinema, images and sounds, that have an emotional and intellectual resonance apart from rational discourse"[75], with a consequent direct, sensory and astounding impact on the audience. Shakespeare's words are deprived of any rhetorical force by being filtered through a disjointed filmic material, whose disassembling action also determines the exchange between the work of art and the material conditions of its reception. Accordingly acting on the audience, the "incredible unevenness"[76] of the film, more than a mere flaw, could be working as a means to awake a parallel process within the spectators' mind, which would lead them to question univocal, pre-established interpretations of both history and contemporary reality.

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[75] Michael Anderegg, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
[76] Jack Jorgens, *op. cit.*, p. 114, in Andrew M. McLean, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

CHAPTER IV

Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?
by Pier Paolo Pasolini

The following chapter is dedicated to Pier Paolo Pasolini's short film *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* (*What Are the Clouds?*), a 1968 appropriation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Although it was released as one of the six episodes of the feature film *Capriccio all'Italiana* (*Caprice, Italian Style*, dir. Mauro Bolognini, Mario Monicelli, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Franco Rossi, Steno, Pino Zac, 1968), *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* was conceived by Pasolini as a fragment of a larger project, "un grosso film fatto di episodi, ora lunghi ora brevi, tutti comici. Doveva intitolarsi *Che cos'è il cinema?*, addirittura, oppure, più modestamente, *Smandolinate*." ("a [long-feature] film made up of episodes; some long, some short, but all comical. The title was supposed to be *What is Cinema?*, or, more modestly, *Smandolinate* [Flattery]."[1]) In Pasolini's intention, such a project should have been a film made up of fairy-tales ("un film che fosse fatto di favole"[2]), a sequence of four comic-grotesque or picaresque short films, all of which should have been interpreted by a young Roman non-professional actor, Ninetto Davoli, and the Neapolitan comic icon Totò (stage name of Antonio de Curtis). The latter's sudden death in April 1967, right after the shooting of *Nuvole*, was what actually impeded the realization of the project, for which only two episodes (*La Terra Vista dalla Luna* and *Nuvole*) were completed. As one of the titles the director already had in mind suggests (*Che Cos'è il Cinema?*, "What is Cinema?"), such a film was meant to mark a brand new step in his exploration of the potentialities of the cinematic medium as the "written language of reality."[3]

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[1] Pier Paolo Pasolini in the interview released on the 10th December 1967 for the RAI television program "Per conoscere Pier Paolo Pasolini", in Gian-Maria Annovi, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", *Pier Paolo Pasolini – Eretico e Corsaro* (Website), 20th March 2014, <http://videotecapasolini.blogspot.it/2014/03/che-cosa-sono-le-nuvole.html>. The English translation is quoted from Laura Betti, Michele Gulinucci (eds.), *Le Regole di un'Illusione: I Film, il Cinema*, Associazione "Fondo Pier Paolo Pasolini", 1996, in Graziella Chiarcossi and Roberto Chiesi (eds.), *My Cinema: Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Bologna: Edizioni Cineteca, 2012, p. 105.

[2] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jon Halliday, *Pasolini su Pasolini: Conversazioni con Jon Halliday*, Parma: Guanda, 2014, p. 133.

[3] See Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La Lingua Scritta della Realtà", cit.

4.1 Adaptation as Incorporation

Pasolini's cinematographic inspiration was born in clear opposition to the naturalistic or documentary poetics of the dying Italian Neo-realism, which at the beginning of the 1960s he found historically overcome and inadequate to express his own "philosophical and reverential love"[4] for reality:

La mia ispirazione cinematografica, sorta nel cuore degli anni Cinquanta, che si è sviluppata ed è in via di costante trasformazione, è nata dalla poetica di Gramsci e dalla sua idea di una grande letteratura nazionalpopolare. Questo ha fatto sì che superassi le posizioni del neorealismo, troppo strettamente liriche e documentarie, in favore di un tentativo di maggiore epicità, che non è l'epicità brechtiana, è un tipo di epicità più latina, classicheggiante. Fondandomi si quest'idea nazionalpopolare di Gramsci, ho dato al realismo una svolta personale che definirei mitica o epica.[5]

Pasolini's rejection of mimetic realism or naturalism in favour of an artistic form that reconstructs or reproduces reality through a self-referential process of "*contaminatio*, a plurality of superimposed styles"[6] was going to find in the cinematic adaptation a very appropriate instrument. As a form of art that entails the coming together of multiple perspectives, adaptation already embodies Pasolini's strategy to create artworks that display the constructedness of their form – which is further developed through the proliferation (typical of the whole of his filmography) of meta-pictorial, meta-theatrical and meta-cinematic devices. Though it runs for barely 22 minutes, *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* is not only exemplary in this sense, but also points to a further progress in Pasolini's conception of the self-referentiality of the work of art. *Nuvole*, more than a simple adaptation or appropriation, can be seen as an overall act of artistic 'cannibalism' or 'incorporation', made in its turn of several other acts of cannibalism. The choice of such words can be explained

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[4] See Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jon Halliday, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[5] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Gideon Bachmann, *Pier Paolo Pasolini. Polemica Politica Potere: Conversazioni con Gideon Bachmann*, ed. by Riccardo Costantini, Milano: Chiarelettere, 2015, p. 38. "My cinematographic inspiration, which was born in the mid-1950s, then began to grow and is in constant transformation, originates from Gramsci's poetics and from his idea of a great national-popular literature. This allowed me to overcome the too strictly lyrical and documentary poetics of Neorealism, and try to reach a more epic quality, not as in Brecht, but as in Latin, classical literature. Based on Gramsci's idea of a national-popular literature, I approached Realism in a more personal way, which I would define mythical or epic." Where not otherwise indicated, the translation of quotes from Italian to English is mine.

[6] Keala Jewell, *The Poiesis of History: Experimenting with Genre in Postwar Italy*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell UP, 1992, p. 24, in Sonia Massai, "Subjection and Redemption in Pasolini's *Othello*", in Sonia Massai (ed.), *World-wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005., p. 96.

with a brief reference to Pasolini's previous film, *Uccellacci e Uccellini* (*Hawkes and Sparrows*, 1966), where a black crow (the incarnation of the Marxist intellectual, like Togliatti or Pasolini himself) preaches to its disciples (already interpreted by the father-son couple Totò-Ninetto Davoli) that "i professori sono fatti per essere mangiati in salsa piccante" ("masters are meant to be eaten in a spicy sauce"[7]) before they dutifully proceed to eat their own master, the crow. As Pasolini himself commented,

I due compiono un atto di cannibalismo, quello che i cattolici chiamano comunione: ingoiano il corpo di Togliatti (ossia dei marxisti) e lo assimilano; dopo averlo assimilato proseguono per la loro strada, così che anche se uno non sa dove la strada porta, è ovvio che hanno assimilato il marxismo. [...] Prima di essere mangiato il corvo dice: "I maestri sono fatti per essere mangiati in salsa piccante." Devono essere mangiati e superati, ma se il loro insegnamento ha un valore ci resterà dentro.[8]

Taking the hint from Jacques Derrida's observations in an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, real and symbolic incorporation or cannibalism has been defined as a fundamental cultural practice related to the dominant "carnivorous" and "sacrificial" structure of the human subject: "The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh." Playing on the double meaning of the French word *chef* (i.e., *chef* as the head of the kitchen; *chef* as the political head of a state), Derrida adds: "The *chef* must be an eater of flesh (with a view, moreover, to being 'symbolically' eaten himself)."[9] What the philosopher suggests is that dominion, including that over one's self, has to do with eating the "other," and that this incorporation, as both a real and symbolic operation, is by its very nature made of repeated performances. Like any other act that aims at the foundation of power, incorporation is in fact not achieved once and for all, in the first place because it is compellingly haunted by the spectre of that which is being incorporated, which makes it potentially reversible.[10] Derrida's discourse on incorporation

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[7] See Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
[8] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jon Halliday, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125. Moreover, incorporation/cannibalism is one of the major themes in Pasolini's play *Porcile* (1966) and in the homonymous film (1969). "They commit an act of cannibalism, what the catholic call 'holy communion': they swallow Togliatti's (that is, the Marxists') body, and they assimilate it; after that, they go on their way, so that, even though we don't know where they're going, it's obvious they assimilated Marxism. [...] Before being eaten, the crow says: 'Masters are meant to be eaten in a spicy sauce.' They need to be eaten and overcome, but if their lesson is of value it will remain inside us."
[9] Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' Or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida", in. Eduardo Cavava, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (eds.), *Who Comes after the Subject?*, trans. by Peter Connor and Avital Ronell, London and New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 114, in Maurizio Calbi, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
[10] See *ibid.*

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implies the psychoanalytic concept of *unheimlich*, or uncanny, defined by Freud as "a class of morbid anxiety" that derives from "something repressed which recurs. […] [T]his uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind, that has been estranged only by the process of repression."[11] The Freudian uncanny delineates the "other" as immanent to the self, bringing it back from the Outside and recognising it in the Within, implying repeated shifts among boundaries that radically dissolve them. Incorporation, as an empowering process through which a subject takes over an object by materially or symbolically eating it, can thus give way to the uncanny. As Derrida himself points out, the very compelling repetitiveness of incorporation makes it potentially reversible: if the primary intention of such a process is that of mastering otherness by dissolving its difference into an unique, enhanced self, the repeated crossing of boundaries actually suspends the difference between 'self' and 'other'. What actively eats is thus at the same time passively eaten itself, and the empowered self is one thing with the disempowered other.

Incorporation, as intended by Pasolini, can be basically connected to representation as a form of power. More than that, we could define it precisely an empowerment-disempowerment process which relies on the relentless, always renewed coming back of what is incorporated. As he briefly explained talking about *Uccellacci e Uccellini*, the masters' bodies (for instance, Jesus's for the catholic, Togliatti's for the communist) need to be eaten and overcome, but in a way they are compelled to leave a residue which always comes back to haunt, renewing and disturbing power relations. Translated to a textual level, this very process of incorporation seems to structure *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?*, where Shakespeare's *Othello* is similarly "eaten and assimilated": it is killed, torn into pieces, and then reborn through a new creation, a re-composition within a rich web of visual and verbal citations. Such a process, viewed as a kind of religious sacrifice that brings new life out of a death, is ideologically based on the continuity between death and life themselves; as Pasolini described it: "L'ideologia di fondo è un'ideologia picaresca, la quale, come tutte le cose di pura vitalità, maschera un'ideologia più profonda, che è l'ideologia della morte." ("The basic structure is picaresque, which, like all things representing pure vitality, masks something deeper, namely, the ideology of death."[12])

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[11] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", in Id., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press, 1955, pp. 25-26.
[12] Pier Paolo Pasolini in the interview released on the 10th December 1967 for the RAI television program "Per conoscere Pier Paolo Pasolini", *op. cit*. The English translation is quoted from Laura Betti, Michele Gulinucci (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 105.

The short film opens with an outline of this very ideology of life and death: the opening sequence shows a garbage man (interpreted by Domenico Modugno, an extremely popular Italian singer, immediately recognisable both by a 1960s and a contemporary audience), who sings a passionate love song while collecting a huge trash can filled with the outtakes of an edited film. In alternate shots, it also shows a puppeteer (played by the poet Francesco Leonetti) crafting a human-sized puppet, whose chocolate-coloured face already tells us he is Othello (Ninetto Davoli). The newborn puppet is soon grouped with the other semi-human puppets (more precisely, they are "pupi", Sicilian Marionettes), among which we can distinguish the puppets of Iago (Totò), with his bright-green-painted face and red tongue; a doll-like and childish Desdemona (Laura Betti); Cassio (Franco Franchi) and Brabantio (Carlo Pisacane). Othello is awakened to his life as a puppet by the garbage collector's passionate love song, which charms him with an inexplicable joy: "Otello il Moretto arde dal desiderio di parlare con qualcuno, di esprimere qualcosa che ha dentro, che non sa cosa sia, ma lo rende espansivo come un cagnolino… Si rivolge al più vicino, alla dolce faccia verde di Jago."[13] ("Othello the handsome/little Moor[14] craves to talk to somebody, to express something he feels inside. He doesn't know what it is, but it makes him expansive like a little dog… He turns to the puppet next to him, to the sweet green face of Iago.")

Othello: Come so' contento!

Cassio: Eh, beato te!

Desdemona: [laughs] Quant'è carino!

Othello: Perché so' così contento?

Brabantio: Perché sei nato!

Othello: Perché? Che vor di' che so' nato?

Iago: Vuol dire che… ci sei.

Othello: Ah…! [he hears the garbage man singing] E questo che è?

Iago: L'immondezzaro che canta.

Othello: L'immondezzaro? E che fa?

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[13] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", in Walter Siti, Franco Zabagli (eds.), *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Per il Cinema: Sceneggiature (e trascrizioni); Commenti per documentari; Sceneggiature in collaborazione e materiali per film altrui; Idee, soggetti, trattamenti; "Confessioni tecniche" e altro; Interviste e dibatitti sul cinema*, Vol. 1, Milano: Mondadori, 2001, p. 936.

[14] Pasolini here creates a pun based on the ambivalence of the Italian word "moretto": colloquially, it means "dark-haired boy" and is used in Roman slang to address handsome boys in a familiar or informal way. Literally, it also means "little Moor", because the Italian word "moro" means both "dark-haired man" and "dark-skinned man".

Iago: E' uno che viene, e se ne va. Sì, viene, prende i morti, prende i morti e se ne va.[15]

In the first dialogue, the joyous, naïve Othello is taught by a wise, paternal Iago about life and death: while his unwitting merriment comes from his mere "being there", that is, by his presence in the world (still limited to the theatre), the singing voice of the garbage man coming from outside signals the existence of a reality beyond the theatre itself – namely, death, which comes and goes taking the dead puppets away. While introducing the thematic connection between life and death, the opening sequence also presents how the film's ideological basis translates into the structural appropriation or incorporation of a multiple, fragmented source 'coming back to life' as a new, personal compound. The love song that the garbage man sings from the very beginning of the film (which takes the title from the film itself, was written by Pasolini and put into music by Modugno) can be recognised as a revision of some of the lines from the Italian translation of *Othello*'s text:

Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole: Ch'io possa esser dannato

Se non ti amo.

E se così non fosse

Non capirei più niente.

Othello (Italian translation): (Otello) Straordinaria creatura! Ch'io sia dannato

Se non ti amo; e quando più non ti amerò

Sarà di nuovo il caos.[16]

Othello: (Othello) Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul,

But I do love thee, and when I love thee not,

Chaos is come again. (III.iii.91-93)

Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole: Tutto il mio folle[17] amore

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[15] All quotes from the dialogues in *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* are taken directly from the film throughout the chapter,. "*Othello*: I'm so happy! *Cassio*: Lucky you! *Desdemona*: He's so cute! *Othello*: Why am I so happy? *Brabantio*: Because you're born! Why? What does it mean that I am born? *Iago*: It means that… you are there. *Othello*: Ah…! And what's this? *Iago*: It's the garbage man who's singing. *Othello*: The garbage man? And what does he do? *Iago*: He's one who comes and goes. Yes, he comes, picks up the dead, picks up the dead and goes away." Where not otherwise indicated, the translation of quotes from the film is mine.

[16] William Shakespeare, *Othello*, trans. by Sergio Perosa, Milano: Garzanti, 2010, p. 103. All of the further quotes from both *Othello* and its Italian translation refer to this edition.

[17] As Anna Maria Cimitile observes, "[s]ince the nineteenth century, Italian translations have rendered 'fond love' as alternatively 'folle amore' or 'tenero amore'. In a twentieth-century translation that would have been available to Pasolini, Emilio Cecchi and Suso Cecchi D'Amico translated 'fond love' as 'folle amore' (*Otello*, in Shakespeare, *Teatro*, Vol. III, a cura di Mario Praz, Firenze, Sansoni, 1964, p. 160). The Italian expression turns 'fondness' into 'folly', as it can also refer to an excessive, literally mad or crazy ('folle') love, and the translators who have adopted it somehow make Othello's remark anticipate the tragic outcome of his feeling, but leave out the sense of true and deep affection implied in 'fond love.'" (Anna Maria Cimitile, "Che Cosa

Lo soffia il cielo

Lo soffia il cielo

Così…

Othello (Italian translation): (Otello) Tutto il mio folle amore lo disperdo

Nell'aria, con un soffio… è svanito. (p. 127)

Othello: (Othello) All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven,…

'Tis gone. (III.iii.452-453)

Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole: Ah! Malerba soavemente delicata

Di un profumo che dà gli spasimi

Ah, ah! Tu non fossi mai nata! […]

Othello (Italian translation): (Otello) O nera gramigna, leggiadra a vedersi,

Profumata da far dolere i sensi,

Se tu non fossi mai nata! (p. 165)

Othello: (Othello) O thou black weed, why art so lovely fair?

Thou smell'st so sweet, that the sense aches at thee,

Would thou hadst ne'er been born! (IV.ii.69-71)

Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole: Il derubato che sorride

Ruba qualcosa al ladro

Ma il derubato che piange

Ruba qualcosa a se stesso,

Perciò io mi dico

Finché sorriderò

Tu non sarai perduta.

Othello (Italian translation): (Doge) Il derubato che ci ride su, deruba il ladro stesso:

Indulgere a un vano dolore è derubar se stesso. (p. 37)

Othello: (Duke) The robb'd that smiles, steals something from the thief,

He robs himself, that spends a bootless grief. (I.iii.208-209)

Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole: Ma queste son parole

E non ho mai sentito

Che un cuore, un cuore affranto

Si cura con l'udito. […]

Othello (Italian translation): (Brabanzio) Ma le parole volano, e non ho mai sentito

Che dall'orecchio si curi il cuor ferito. (p. 37)

Othello: (Brabantio) But words are words; I never yet did hear

That the bruis'd heart was pierced through the ear. (I.iii.218-219)

Pasolini thus literally cuts and pastes what he deems significant scraps of Shakespeare's text to make a passionate love song out of them, which, sung while the garbage man (death) takes the rubbish away, is at once part of a funeral rite. The first stanza and the refrain select the lines which play a central role in the economy of the source text (Act III, Scene iii); namely, lines 91-93, while lyrically giving voice to Othello's love for Desdemona, also suggest the prolexis of his destructive folly, the coming back of "chaos". On the other hand, the refrain (lines 452-453) marks the accomplishment of Iago's poisoning of Othello's ear with the insinuation of doubt about Desdemona's fidelity, his defeat and blind acceptance of Iago's point of view. The lines that make up the second stanza (IV.ii.69-71) are pronounced by Othello as a curse on Desdemona and her deceitful appearance; whereas the third and fourth stanzas go back to the exchange between Brabantio and the Duke in Act I, Scene iii, following Desdemona's betrayal of her father. In answer to Brabantio's lamentations, the Duke points out the futility of despair and regret (lines 208-209), while Brabantio replies underlining the ineffectiveness of words after a loss (lines 218-219).[18]

By picking up words from the source text in such a way as to entwine Othello's vital "fond love" with the necessity to kill Desdemona, the garbage man's song announces that the cyclical connection between death and life sustains *Nuvole* both thematically and structurally. Seen as a prelude to the film, the song may first of all allude to the fact that *Othello*'s text is 'killed' by being torn into pieces. Besides, including a brief reflection on the vanity of words may suggest that a verbal text generally loses importance by being reassembled with music, as well as within the cinematographic medium. As a matter of fact, Pasolini himself wrote in relation to poetry that "in ogni poesia si ha una dilatazione semantica, dallo scarto tra il senso della parola e il suo suono" ("in each poem there is a semantic dilation, produced gap between the meaning of the word and its sound"), and that "[è] il suono che deraglia, deforma, propaga per altre strade il senso" ("It is the sound that derails, deforms, propagates the meaning through other paths").[19] There follows that the

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[18] See Lino Belleggia, "*Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* di Pier Paolo Pasolini", in Agostino Lombardo (ed.), *Shakespeare e il Novecento*, Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 2002, pp. 244-245.

[19] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, Vol. 1, in Id., *Tutte le opere*, Milano: Mondadori,

same process is increased when music is added to the word as in a song, since it "destroys the sound of the word and substitutes it with another one,"[20] namely its own, thus creating an even more significant "semantic dilation." The fact that the interpreter of the song is Domenico Modugno adds to Pasolini's 'creative destruction' of Shakespeare's text and to the consequent distance of meaning from words. Modugno's very personal, passionate singing style links the song inextricably to his performance, where his unique voice and music envelop the words, submerging them in a wave of emotions that muddles their semantic value adding a new meaning of their own. This very process is transposed onto a wider level when we consider the song and its performance as part of a cinematographic work of art. In fact, interposing the shots of the singing garbage man with those of the (silent) creation of the puppet Othello may also suggest that we are going to assist to a re-birth of Shakespeare's text within a medium that uses not only words, but the actions of reality as a whole as its means of expression. This incorporation of one or more texts within cinema as the "written language of reality", with its potentially infinite levels of representation, entails the coming together of a multitude of perspectives, as the second introductory frame in the film demonstrates.

As the camera cuts from the back room where the puppets are stored to the outer wall of the theatre, it focuses on four posters advertising recent and future shows. The first one, lying on the ground covered in dust and partly torn, says: "Ieri: *La Terra Vista dalla Luna*" ("Yesterday: *The Earth Seen from the Moon*"); hanging on the wall there is a "Prossimamente: *Mandolini*" ("Coming Soon: *Mandolins*"); next to which a poster that says: "Domani: *Le Avventure del Re Magio Randagio e il suo Schiavetto Schiaffo* ("Tomorrow: *The Adventures of the Stray Wise Man and his Little Slave Schiaffo*"); whereas the one on the background tells us that the show of today is *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* Shifting from a meta-theatrical to a meta-cinematographic level, the titles of the shows actually advertise the four short films which should have been part of Pasolini's project *Che Cos'è il Cinema?* or *Smandolinate*. As the sequence of the posters highlights, *La Terra Vista dalla Luna* has already been made, while *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole* is the movie we are watching "today", right now; the remaining two posters announce the two episodes which, in Pasolini's intention, should have followed in a short time, but that he never actually completed. To the meta-theatrical and meta-cinematographic levels, Pasolini adds a third one, namely, a meta-

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1997, p. 1597. The English translation in quoted from Daniela Bini, "High and Low Art, Inadequacy of Words, and Self-referentiality in Pasolini's *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*", *Italica*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (Summer 2013), pp. 227-244, p. 238.

[20] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il cinema e la lingua orale" first published in *Cinema nuovo*, 201, September-October 1969, now in Id., *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, cit., in Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

pictorial one, since all of the four posters show reproductions of some of the works by the 17th-century Spanish painter Diego de Silva y Velázquez: *El bufón don Diego de Acedo, el Primo* (1645) for *La Terra Vista dalla Luna*; *El príncipe Baltasar Carlos con un enano* (1631) for *Mandolini*; the portrait of *Felipe IV en Fraga* (1644) for *Le Avventure del Re Magio Randagio e il suo Schiavetto Schiaffo*. At last, the show we are about to watch, *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* is introduced by one of Velázquez's most famous paintings, *Las Meninas* (1656).

As far as we know, the last painting may have been brought to Pasolini's attention by Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses*, which, published in 1966 and translated into Italian the next year, Pasolini had probably been reading right before shooting *Nuvole*.[21] Foucault's philosophical study opens with a detailed focus on *Las Meninas*, analysed as one of the clearest examples of 'representation of a representation', as it shows Velázquez himself in the very act of portraying the royal couple Felipe IV and Mariana of Austria. While we can see the painter next to a large canvas, his models stand outside the 'real' painting, and we can see only their image reflected in a mirror in the background. What we do see is a group of apparently secondary characters: the young infanta Margarita Teresa with her entourage of maids of honour, chaperone, bodyguard, the dwarves Mari Bárbola and Nicolasito Pertusato, and a dog, who are there to observe the portraying of the royal couple's 'official' painting. The subject of the real painting is thus the background of the official one, or what stands behind the act of representation itself, which brings marginal characters like dwarves and maids of honour to the centre of the picture and pushes the royal couple out of focus. Dwarves were also the subject of the paintings by Velázquez previously shown, alone or accompanying the official portraits of royal subjects, which could be consistent with Svetlana Alpers's observation that "[a]t court, as in a picture, order is produced by acts of representation." In her essay on *Las Meninas*, in fact, she argues that "pictorial representation, an aesthetic order, engages also a social one"[22]:

Seen one way, *Las Meninas* is a picture about the role of framing: frames in the form of pictures, a mirror, doors and windows measure out the walls at the back and to the right, while the

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[21] In a 1966 essay entitled "La fine dell'avanguardia" ("The end of the avant-garde"; *Nuovi Argomenti*, 3-4, July-December 1966; now in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Empirismo Eretico*, cit., pp. 128-149), Pasolini mentions "un nuovo libro di Foucault che non ho ancora letto" ("a new book by Foucault which I haven't read yet"); from which we can assume that he began to read Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* a short time after that, between the end of 1966 and the beginning of 1967.

[22] Svetlana Alpers, "Interpretation without Representation, or, The Viewing of *Las Meninas*", *Representations*, No. 1, (Feb., 1983), pp. 30-42, p. 40, <http://ssbothwell.com/documents/las_meninas/Alpers_Svetlana-Interpretation_without_representation.pdf>.

edge of the large canvas intrudes at the left. The king, queen, and their daughter the princess who is posing for them, are known by being framed. But there is contrary testimony offered by the picture as a whole. It is, […], distinctly unframed, admitting of no bounds and thus with its odd disruption of significant size it contradicts the order established in the framing of the court.[23]

If it is true that "[t]he nature and condition of the social order continued to puzzle Velázquez,"[24] and that "[t]he dwarfs and fools at court, like the painted peasants or foundry workers, display a certain misrule,"[25] the disruption of bounds within the painting may have interested Pasolini far more than the potential subversion of court hierarchies. According to Foucault's analysis of the painting, by being pushed out of focus, Felipe IV and his wife are what all the characters in the picture are looking at, and so they are the point around which the whole representation is organised. This way, the whole painting contemplates a picture for which it is, in its turn, a picture to contemplate. In fact, as Carl Justi reported in his study *Diego Velázquez und sein Jahrhundert* (*Diego Velázquez and His Times*, 1888), *Las Meninas* may have been born thanks to Felipe IV's observation that the infanta and her maids assisting to the making of the royal couple's portrait looked like a picture themselves, hence his request to Velázquez to make a painting of them too.[26] This second painting would thus represent a court scene within a court scene, which we can look at from the point of view of the king (whose image appears in the mirror on the opposite wall next to that of the queen) as though we were looking from a stage to the audience[27]: "[t]he observer sees what the royal couple see, not what the painter sees, for he would see his meninas in a mirror hanging opposite him."[28] As a consequence, the invisible point outside the painting where the royal couple, object of the 'painting within the painting', stands, coincides with the onlooker's own point of view:

From the eyes of the painter to what he is observing there runs a compelling line that we, the onlookers, have no power of evading: it runs through the real picture and emerges from its surface to

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[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
[26] See Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *I Burattini Filosofi: Pasolini dalla Letteratura al Cinema*, Milano and Torino: Bruno Mondadori, 2007, p. 94.
[27] See Carl Justi, *Velázquez e il Suo Tempo* (1933), trans. by Mina Bacci, Firenze: Sansoni, 1958, p. 776 ss., in Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
[28] Carl Justi, *Diego Velázquez and His Times*, New York: Parkstone Press International, 2016, p. 209.

join the place from which we see the painter observing us; this dotted line reaches out to us ineluctably, and links us to the representation of the picture.[29]

The painter's gaze, being able to capture all the figures standing outside the painting, turns the onlooker too into the object, rather than just the recipient, of representation:

As soon as they place the spectator in the field of their gaze, the painter's eyes seize hold of him, force him to enter the picture, assign him a place at once privileged and inescapable, levy their luminous and visible tribute from him, and project it upon the inaccessible surface of the canvas within the picture. He sees his invisibility made visible to the painter and transposed into an image forever invisible to himself.[30]

The presence of a round mirror hanging from the back wall adds to the effect of an exchange between the object of the painting and its spectator. Unlike Dutch painters, who introduced mirrors in their paintings to emphasise the mimetic power of their art, the murky surface of Velázquez's mirror gives no mimetic effect nor any additional perspectives on the characters *in* the painting, but could suggest an interaction with what is *outside* it. While the onlooker is led to believe that the painter's models reflected in the mirror might be Felipe IV and his wife, the indefinite reflection in it may also suggest that the mirror could be capturing the onlooker's own image.[31] As Foucault explains:

[The mirror's] motionless gaze extends out in front of the picture, into that necessarily invisible region which forms its exterior face, to apprehend the figures arranged in that space. […] The unexpected mirror holds in its glow the figures that the painter is looking at […] but also the figures that are looking at the painter. […] For the function of that reflection is to draw into the interior of the picture what is intimately foreign to it: the gaze which has organised it and the gaze for which it is displayed.[32]

Foucault's analysis thus at first points out "Velázquez's apparent resistance to his royal patrons by making himself the central figure of *Las Meninas*, standing at his 'full height,' transforming his spectator into an element within the text and the royal entourage

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[29] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 4, in Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5, in Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
[31] See Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
[32] Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9; 17, in Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

into his props."[33] According to such interpretation, the 'representation within the representation' of Velázquez's painting activates an exchange of roles between object and recipient of a work of art, which can blur the boundaries between what is *inside* and *outside* representation, and, ultimately, between fiction and reality. As his analysis of Velázquez's painting proceeds, though, the French philosopher goes on to revealing the orchestration of its elements as a manifestation of the power that belongs to the faces in the mirror in the central axis, those of King Felipe IV and Queen Mariana. Thus placed, the royal couple becomes the true spectator, which makes representation itself part of an organised system in which even aesthetic innovation can only reflect and magnify an act of royal permission. The observer, as a mere witness to this, is granted the illusion of active spectatorship only to be incorporated into the hermetic, officially sanctioned message. [34]

Through Foucault's mediation, Pasolini must have seen in *Las Meninas* the perfect manifesto for his own film, where, as in the painting, the different levels of representation can be intertwined up to the point of fusing one into the other. At the same time, Pasolini might have used the reference to the painting also more critically, as a way to develop a discourse on power that would come to opposite conclusions than Foucault's. As a matter of fact, framing *Nuvole* within a musical rewriting of part of Shakespeare's *Othello* and the meta-pictorial quotation of *Las Meninas*, anticipates the strategy of incorporation of the play-within-the film we are going to watch. By 'eating and assimilating' a variety of verbal and visual quotations, the film becomes a hybrid creature that exposes the liability of the boundaries defining representation. The "otherness" which is being incorporated, in fact, while coming back uncannily to dissolve those boundaries, testifies to the possibility not just to reverse incorporation, but also to resist it, creating a residue that refuses to be 'incorporated' and relentlessly comes back to haunt.[35] The following analysis retraces the incorporation of intertexts that structures *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?*, underlining the role of the cinematographic medium not only in going beyond the source text(s), but also in challenging the traditional order of representation with the subversion of the pre-established rules and delusive categories of fiction. I shall consider Pasolini's filmic adaptation "as a process of selective and partial incorporation of that which cannot be fully consumed,"[36] which finally gives shape to those haunting remainders that totally escape representation. In doing this, my aim is to interpret the reversion of incorporation operated by cinema within

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[33] See Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 230.
[34] See Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-16, in Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 230.
[35] See Maurizio Calbi, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

the dialectic of the sublime, as a way to resist mimetic form and let pure content speak through it in its immediate, astounding materiality.

4.2 "Un Sogno dentro un Sogno"

The marionette show begins with Iago sneaking on a poor stage, smiling and addressing complicit the working-class audience with a Neapolitan-inflected catchphrase: "Adesso vi faccio vedere a questo come lo frego!" ("Now I'll show you how I'll make a fool out of him!") While he winks at them trying to win their attention and sympathy, the one who is going to get fooled, Roderigo (Ciccio Ingrassia), walks in, and, following quite closely the Shakespearean plot, Iago entraps him in his plan against Othello:

Iago: Ah! Tu non ci credi che io a Otello lo odio? Non ci credi, eh? E invece sai dove lo tengo io? Lo tengo qui, sulla bocca dello stomaco!

Roderigo: Ma perché, che ti ha fatto Otello il Moro?

Iago: Che mi ha fatto? Osi domandarmi che cosa mi ha fatto? Ha nominato luogotenente Cassio al mio posto!

Roderigo: Chi?

Iago: Cassio, quel cuore di stracci, quello che si profuma come una vecchia bagascia, e che si lava i denti quattro volte al giorno!

Roderigo: Ma tu sei il suo servo, sei l'uomo di fiducia.

Iago: Sì, eh? Ebbene sì, lo servirò, ma di barba e capelli! Morto lo voglio vedere, quel moro maledetto! Puah! Puah! Puah! Te'! Te'! Te'![37]

The text is of course heavily cut, translated into different regional varieties of Italian: Neapolitan for Iago; Roman for Othello; Sicilian for Cassio. The register is lowered not just because it is a marionette show in a small, poor theatre for a working-class audience, but also through the use of idiomatic expressions, puns and a comical mimicry, as we can see from the very first appearance of Iago and his exchange with Roderigo. As I already mentioned, the puppet of Iago is played by Totò, a very popular Neapolitan actor whose

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[37] "*Iago*: Ah! So you don't believe that I hate Othello! You don't believe it, do you? But I'm telling you, he gets in my hair! *Roderigo*: But why? What did Othello the Moor do to you? *Iago*: What did he do to me? You dare ask me what he did to me? He chose Cassio rather than me as his lieutenant! *Roderigo*: Who? *Iago*: Cassio, that coward, who puts on perfume like an old slut, and brushes his teeth four times a day! *Roderigo*: But you follow him truly. *Iago*: Yes I do, and I will follow him to serve my turn upon him! I want to see that damned Moor dead! Pfui! Pfui! Pfui!" Iago's last exclamations of despise are accompanied by typical Neapolitan gestures that are a comical expression of despise.

unique comical, mask-like style had turned him, as Pasolini himself described him, into "un attore costruito da lui stesso e dagli altri fino a diventare un tipo, […]"[38], whom a 1960s Italian audience could unmistakably recognize through the whole of his prolific theatrical and filmic production. That was precisely the reason why Pasolini had chosen him:

Non scelgo mai un attore per la sua bravura di attore, cioè non lo scelgo mai perché finga di essere qualcos'altro da quello che egli è, ma lo scelgo proprio per quello che è: quindi ho scelto Totò per quello che è. Tanto in *Uccellacci e Uccellini* quanto in *La Terra Vista dalla Luna* volevo un personaggio estremamente umano, cioè che avesse quel fondo napoletano e bonario, e così immediatamente comprensibile, che ha Totò. E nello stesso tempo volevo che questo essere umano così medio, così "brava persona" avesse anche qualcosa di assurdo, di surreale, cioè di clownesco, e mi sembra che Totò sintetizzi felicemente questi elementi.[39]

Totò, among the great comical actors of Italian cinema, was known and appreciated maybe more than any other for his peculiar use of verbal language, which was not properly Neapolitan dialect, but a variety of Italian with a regional inflection typical, for instance, of Neapolitan immigrants in Northern Italy.[40] His language was a unique mixture of Neapolitan idiomatic expressions, puns, or simply distorted words, proverbs and ways of saying, accompanied by an exceptional ability for both face and body mimicry, which has often been described as puppet-like – all traditionally used by comic masks "to deflate the rhetoric of power."[41] Totò's absurd, almost surrealistic language and his overwhelming body language were in fact very clearly part of a 'mask', and at the same time they made his character all so human, naïve, normal and clownish, as Pasolini himself noted.[42] The choice of an actor/person both surrealistic and neo-realistic[43] like Totò as the human puppet playing Iago already tells us something about the film's exploration of a double or multiple

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[38] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jon Halliday, *op. cit.*, p. 121. "An actor whose image had been built by himself and by other people up to the point that he became an archetypal figure, […]."

[39] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Luciano De Giusti (ed.), *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Il Cinema in Forma di Poesia*, Pordenone: Cinemazero, 1979, p. 54, in Emanuela Patriarca, *Totò nel Cinema di Poesia di Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Firenze: Firenze Atheneum, 2006, pp. 140-141. "I never choose actors for their acting skills, I mean I never choose them because I'll have them pretend they're someone else, but I choose them exactly for what they are: so I chose Totò for what he is. For both *Hawks and Sparrows* and *The Earth Seen from the Moon* I wanted an extremely humane character, who possessed that Neapolitan, good-tempered quality so immediately comprehensible, the same as Totò's. At the same time, I wanted such a common, "good-natured" human being to possess something absurd too, something surreal, clownish, and I think Totò sums up all of these elements."
[40] Totò was actually in a similar condition, since he had left Naples and had been living in Rome since his early twenties and until his death in 1967.
[41] Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 228.
[42] See Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jon Halliday, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
[43] See *ibid.*, p. 121.

dimension, also underlined by the interjection in the first sequence of the play-within-the film of countershots from *outside* the stage. They display alternately the audience applauding Iago (at first), the puppeteers moving the strings from above, and the puppet of Othello watching the play from behind the scenes with a sad and interrogative face.

The extras who play the fictive audience are non-professionals, like many of the interpreters of Pasolini's films. Adopting in his own peculiar way a neo-realistic cliché, the director selected these non-actors (street-actors) in the Roman slums to play what they actually were: a group of urban proletarians, entire families but also old fishwives and street boys.[44] This working-class audience is very likely to settle down to an afternoon of family fun such as the one that a little marionette theatre can guarantee. It is not an unwarranted response, especially if we consider that, within a meta-theatrical and meta-cinematographic level, "[t]he play's action up until the reunion of Othello and Desdemona in Cyprus (2.1) is a perfect comic structure in miniature"[45], and that they may recognize Iago as Totò, the trickster of Italian comedy. Although they do not appear in the film, the Brabantio scenes were included in the original script, thus offering a sort of rudely comic interlude at the expense of the black outsider based on racist puns or wordplays. For instance, Iago sums up centuries of disputes about Othello's ethnic background by calling him "Otello il Marocchino! Pardon: il Moro, il Moro! ("Otello the Moroccan![46] Pardon me: the Moor, the Moor!")[47], whereas an outraged Brabantio (Carlo Pisacane) goes straight for "cannibale!" ("cannibal!")[48]. With the Doge's calling of Othello to defend Cyprus from the Turks, which interrupts the scene we actually did not get to see, the character of Cassio breaks on the scene, interpreted by Franco Franchi. Together with Ciccio Ingrassia (who plays Roderigo), he was part of a Sicilian comic duo very popular among a 1960s Italian audience for their appearance in cheap B-movies, most often parodies. Pasolini chose them precisely for the affinity of their comicality with the one usually expected from or associated to a marionette theatre: "Li ho scelti per la loro impronta plebea, che è un po' volgare, come l'avanspettacolo o come il teatro dei burattini più popolaresco: la loro comicità è un po'

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[44] See Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", in Walter Siti, Franco Zabagli (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 939, in Mariangela Tempera, "''Twas Me Who Combed Her Hair': Audience Participation in Two Italian Rewritings of *Othello*", *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 15 (2007): 193-210, p. 196.

[45] Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 74, in Mariangela Tempera, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

[46] "Moroccan" is derogatorily used by many Italians to identify anybody from Africa and by Northern Italians to refer to anybody from Southern Italy. In the script, it also represents an allusion to the journey Pasolini had just taken to Morocco to choose locations for his next film, Oedipus Rex. (See Mariangela Tempera, *op. cit.*, p. 196)

[47] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", in Walter Siti, Franco Zabagli (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 941. The English translation is quoted from Mariangela Tempera, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 942.

abietta, forse, ma è anche immediata."[49] Franchi in particular, with his marionette-like mimicry, is a perfect counterpart to Totò's own body language: following Cassio's comic announcement of the imminent war ("E' la gueeerra!" – "It's waaar!" – he shouts laughably while he shakes his head), Iago's *aside* is shown in countershot, while he gives shape to his hatred by means of comic, childish gestures such as sticking out his tongue accompanied by a typically Neapolitan gesticulation with his arms (quite untranslatable, it usually is a funny way to express scorn or disdain).

The intervals between scenes are accompanied by the sound of mandolins played by a small, poor orchestra, and by the short narrative commentaries of the puppeteer interpreted by the poet Francesco Leonetti, one of Pasolini's best friends, already introduced while crafting the puppet Othello. From above the stage, and looking straight into the camera, he is like a "deus ex machina" that only crafts his creatures and then controls them by pulling their strings and making them follow a script, without direct interventions on nor clear explanations of their actions. Being Leonetti himself a writer and an intellectual, his God-like puppeteer is clearly meant to represent the role of the author towards his characters, with more immediate reference to Shakespeare, Velázquez, and Pasolini himself. His youngest creature, Othello/Ninetto Davoli, is in a way 'created' by the puppeteer, Shakespeare and Pasolini as well. Ninetto Davoli was a young Roman proletarian, whom Pasolini admired for his naivety and enthusiasm for life, and who, like many of the actors in his films, was chosen to interpret precisely who he was in his real life:

C'era da poco questo rapporto in cui Pier Paolo era allo stesso tempo molto generoso e molto Pigmalione… Ninetto si presentava come un piccolo dolce selvaggio, apprendista falegname della periferia, l'ho visto a volte a delle cene con Moravia arrivare dal lavoro ancora con le mani tutte sporche. Ninetto era molto autentico, e Pier Paolo se lo portava sempre appresso.[50]

The child-like innocence of Ninetto Davoli (who was nineteen when the film was shot) and his social and cultural foreignness make his newborn Othello even more easy for Iago to lead into doubt and deceive. Moreover, Davoli's Othello is juxtaposed to Laura

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[49] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jon Halliday, *op. cit.*, p. 139. "I chose them because of their plebeian mark, which is a bit vulgar, like curtain raiser shows or like folksy puppet shows: their comicality is a bit abject, perhaps, but it's also very immediate."
[50] Francesco Leonetti in Laura Betti, Michele Gulinucci (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 152, in Emanuela Patriarca, *op. cit.*, p. 146. "It was not so long since Pier Paolo had been in this relationship where he was at the same time very generous and a sort of Pygmalion… Ninetto looked like a sweet little savage, he was an apprentice carpenter from the suburbs, I saw him sometimes at dinner with Moravia, he came there from work with his hands still all dirty. Ninetto was very authentic, and Pier Paolo used to take him along all the time."

Betti's Desdemona, who, although she looks childish and doll-like here, was a rather daring choice, suggesting quite the opposite of sexual naivety. Another of Pasolini's friends, Laura Betti was at the time better known as a jazz singer than as an actress, popular among the intellectual elite for the unconventional and often scandalous themes of the songs she interpreted.[51] In line with the image such an actress offered of herself, her Desdemona plays a childish but teasing love-duet with Othello before their wedding night. As in a dumb show, they perform almost entirely without words but with an overdone mimicry a prelude to their love-making: they stand face to face, while Desdemona, who is wearing two pairs of bright red, pulpy cherries as a sort of earrings, coquettishly smiles and swings them at her newly-wed. With a lustful gaze, Othello returns the smile and gently takes off of her ear a pair of cherries, kisses one and places it in his mouth. He then offers the other one to Desdemona who does the same, and the scene is replayed with the other pair of cherries.[52] The sexual innuendo of the brief scene is made even more explicit through a last humorous pun, which, while sanctioning the success of the previous gestural communication, also underlines the inadequacy or the superfluity of words: prey to the excitement, Desdemona exclaims: "Signore mio diletto…" ("My beloved master") and the naïve Othello, more at ease with the language of the body, and confused by that of words, misunderstands them and replies[53]: "Ah, già... di letto… Andiamo a letto!" ("Ah… Yes, yes… Let's go to bed!").[54]

The love scene is interspersed with countershots of Iago peeping around the corner unnoticed to spy on Othello's and Desdemona's tender encounter, and making grimaces of hate and despise that irremediably look more like funny faces. When the two exit, Iago, soon followed by Roderigo, is free to give voice to his hatred and disgust ("Zozzoni!" – "Lechers!"), and then, noticing the handkerchief Desdemona has just accidentally dropped, he develops the scheme in which he is going to entrap Cassio, Desdemona and Othello:

Iago: Un'idea! Ha ha ha! Cassio! Cassio!

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[51] See Mariangela Tempera, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-196.

[52] The cherry earrings may be a symbolic connection to Desdemona's handkerchief , which in Shakespeare's text is described as spotted with red strawberries dyed with virgins' blood, thus carrying with it a series of associations to purity as well as sin. As we are going to see, this is the very sequence in which Desdemona accidentally drops the handkerchief, which (with a slight twist from Shakespeare's plot) Iago readily picks up and on which he develops his evil plan.

[53] See Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

[54] The pun is based on the homophony between the Italian word "diletto" ("beloved") and the phrase "di letto" (literally, "of bed", which gives way to the sexual innuendo). Pasolini changed the script slightly to make the scene clearer in the film. In the script, Othello replies: "Ah, già… di letto… Vieni, vieni ..." (Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", in Walter Siti, Franco Zabagli (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 946): while the separation between preposition and noun is immediately caught in reading, it could be missed in listening. (See Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 241) The English translation is quoted from Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

Roderigo: Ma che cassio[55] vai dicendo?

Iago: Lo vedi questo? Questa è una fava, e con questa fava prendiamo due piccioni! Cosa vuoi che duri l'amore di Desdemona per Otello? Quel negro porco, zozzo, puzzolente! E' negro dappertutto, sai? L'ho visto io! Mentre Cassio è giovine, bello, biondo, limpido, focoso, lui; focosa, lei, e vuoi che non avvenga – ha ha ha ha! – il patatrac? Eh![56]

As Iago unfolds the plot, bursting into laughter in a tragi-comic *crescendo*, the puppet Othello overhears from behind the curtains what happens on stage, looking at Iago with sad and incomprehensive eyes. According to Pasolini's own description from the script: "Nell'angoletto dietro le quinte dove si mettono gli attori in attesa che venga il loro turno di entrare nel palcoscenico, Otello accoglie Jago con uno sconcertato sorriso di innocente offeso, che ancora non si capacita della sua triste esperienza."[57] The puppet of Othello, as a backstage spectator of Iago's mischievous plot, is tortured by his facing for the first time the gap between reality and its representation(s). He starts questioning the truthfulness of the words and actions performed on stage, wondering what there is behind them, and addresses Iago as he exits the stage:

Othello: Ammazza, Iago, te credevo così bono, così bravo, così generoso, un pezzo di pane, e invece… Quanto sei cattivo… Ma perché?

Iago: Shhh…!

Othello: Comunque me giudico da me, pure io faccio schifo, mica solo te! Ma perché dovemo esse' così diversi da come se credemo, perché?!

Iago: Eh, figlio mio, noi siamo in un sogno dentro un sogno.[58]

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[55] The assonance between the name "Cassio" and the Italian word "cazzo" (which means "penis" but is also a colloquial exclamation of disappointment, especially within youth language, similar to the word "fuck" in English) creates a sexually implicit pun.

[56] "*Iago*: I have an idea! Ha! Ha! Ha! Cassio! Cassio! *Roderigo*: What the heck are you saying? *Iago*: Look at this! This is a stone, and with this stone we'll kill two birds! How long do you think Desdemona's love for Othello is going to last? That pig, filthy, stinking nigger! He's black all over, you know? I saw him! Cassio, on the contrary, is young, blond, handsome, fair, hot-blooded – and so is she, and how can you not expect that the two will eventually…? Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

[57] "In the corner behind the scenes where actors wait for their turn to go onstage, Othello receives Iago with a bewildered smile, like an innocent man who's been offended, and still doesn't comprehend his sad experience."

[58] "*Othello*: Hell, Iago, I thought you were so good, so generous, instead, how wicked you are… But why? *Iago*: Shhh! *Othello*: Anyhow, you are not the only one, I, too, am awful, I can judge myself, but why are we so different from what we believe we are? *Iago*: Son, we are in a dream within a dream." (The translation of Othello's questions is quoted from Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 230, whereas the translation of Iago's replies is mine) Iago's reply is a clear citation of the play *La Vida es Sueño* (*Life is a Dream*, 1635-1636) by the Spanish 17th-century dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca. The quotation can be examined also in a more complex net of intertextual relations which involves Pasolini's own play *Calderón* (1966) and Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, which I will explain further on in the chapter.

As we saw from the very opening sequence, the puppet Iago is offstage wise and fatherly, "serio e dolce, un vecchio, paziente filosofo"[59] ("earnest and kind, an old, patient philosopher"). He unmasks the fictive, constructed dimension in which they are bound to live as puppets, and reveals to the astonished puppet Othello that their fiction is itself inside a fiction, a 'representation of a representation' from which the truth seems to be too far off to be seen or understood. The backstage of the theatre, being a liminal space in-between fiction and what is outside, offers a momentary escape from mimetic representation, the suspension of whose rules and categories allows the puppets to question and ultimately dissolve them, looking for what is beyond. Like the mirror in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, the behind-the-scenes non-space in *Nuvole* projects the characters outside into a still undefined absence; it suggests the existence of an unsaid "something" that uncannily resists and escapes onstage representation: "Lo specchio di Velázquez e il sogno pasoliniano, nel comune tradimento della mimesi, intrecciano al motivo della visione quello più inquietante dell'elusione, quel non detto che rappresenta la cifra più autentica dell'esistenza dei burattini." ("Velázquez's mirror and Pasolini's dream, by abandoning a mimetic intent, add to the motif of vision the far more disquieting one of elision, of the untold, which represents the most authentic feature of the puppets' world.")[60] Iago's quite sibylline reply is preceded in the script by a brief monologue that Pasolini cut out from the film, where Iago, with a simple, domestic metaphor, explains the rules governing (self-)representation and the plurality of perspectives that it entails:

La nostra vita è come una polenta. Prende le forme della caldara dov'è rovesciata. Ma qual è questa forma? La forma della superficie della polenta contro la parete della caldara, o la forma della caldara, o la forma della parete della caldara che contiene la polenta? Noi siamo la polenta, e il giudizio degli altri è la caldara…[61]

The metaphor brings clearly to the surface the underlying motif of the irremediable distance between reality and the multiple, deceiving shapes it is compelled to take to exist in the eyes of the world and of itself. The characters of Pasolini's play-within-the-film seem to

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[59] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", cit., p. 955.
[60] Alberto Marchesini, *Citazioni pittoriche nel cinema di Pasolini: da Accattone al Decameron*, Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1994, p. 105, in Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 102. The English translation is quoted from Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
[61] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", cit., pp. 955-956. "Our life is like polenta. It takes the shape of the pot into which it is poured. But what is this shape? Is it the shape of the surface of the polenta against the side of the pot, or the shape of the pot, or the shape of the wall of the pot that contains the polenta? We are the polenta, and the other people's judgement is the pot." (The English translation is quoted from Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 231)

embody the tragedy of relativism starting from their very consistence of semi-human puppets, of fictional characters fused with real actors, who shift uncannily back and forth from onstage fiction to backstage liminality. As a matter of fact, "[i]n a short note within the opening stage direction, Pasolini employs a quasi-biblical language to describe the puppets, who are said to be "one and bifold" (Siti and Zabagli 2001: 935), as if their nature constituted a mystery similar to that of the Holy Trinity."[62] Although not explicitly mentioned, such motif cannot help bringing to mind the work of Luigi Pirandello, who was among those writers that made the multiplicity of reality one of the central concerns of Italian and European literature in the 20th century.[63] A passage from his novel *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* (*The Late Mattia Pascal*), in particular, can be significantly linked to Pasolini's *Nuvole*:

Ora senta un po' che bizzarria mi viene in mente! Se nel momento culminante, proprio quando la marionetta che rappresenta Oreste è per vendicare la morte del padre sopra Egisto e la madre, si facesse uno strappo nel cielo di carta del teatrino, che avverrebbe? Dica lei. […] Ma è facilissimo, Signor Meis! Oreste rimarrebbe sconcertato da quel buco nel cielo […] sentirebbe ancora gl'impulsi della vendetta, vorrebbe seguirli con smaniosa passione, ma gli occhi gli andrebbero lì, a quello strappo, donde ogni sorta di mali influssi penetrerebbero nella scena, e si sentirebbe cadere le braccia. Oreste, insomma, diventerebbe Amleto. Tutta la differenza fra la tragedia antica e la moderna consiste in ciò, creda pure: in un buco nel cielo di carta.[64]

Pasolini's Othello seems to have much in common with the puppet of Orestes[65]: until he remains onstage, within the stuffy, circumscribed make-believe world of words, he is not

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[62] Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

[63] Among innumerable other examples, a quote from Pirandello's novel *Uno, Nessuno e Centomila* seems to be in a significant connection with the previous quote from the script of *Nuvole*: "La realtà che ho io per voi è nella forma che voi mi date; ma è realtà per voi e non per me; la realtà che voi avete per me è nella forma che io vi do, ma è realtà per me e non per voi." (Luigi Pirandello, *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, Milano: Mondadori, 1988, p. 60) ("The reality that I have for you is in the form that you give me; but it is reality for you and not for me; the reality that you have for me is in the form I give you, but it is reality for me and not for you.") The English translation is quoted from Luigi Pirandello, *One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand*, trans. by William Weaver, Boston: Eridanos Press, 1990, in Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

[64] Luigi Pirandello, *Il Fu Mattia Pascal*, Milano: Mondadori, 1988, pp. 166-167. "But now listen what a strange idea came to me. Supposing that, just at the climactic moment, when the marionette representing Orestes is about to avenge his father's death on Aegisthos and his mother, a hole should suddenly be torn in the paper ceiling over the stage – what would happen? You tell me. […] But it's very simple, Mr. Meis! Orestes, of course, would be quite shocked by that hole in the sky. […] Orestes would still feel the impulses of vengeance, he would want to give into them with intense passion, but his eyes would turn up toward that hole, through which all sorts of evil influences would come down onto the stage. He would become disheartened. Orestes, in other words, would become Hamlet. The entire difference between the ancient tragedy and the modern comes down to that, I assure you, Mr. Meis – to a rent in a paper sky!" (The English translation is quoted from Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 232)

[65] See Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, pp. 232-233.

aware of being maneuvered by them, and acts according to the script, believing in what Iago tells him without any hesitation. The marionette theatre in the film, as a locus of illusion, is tellingly sealed off from the real world except for a single window, as narrow as a slit[66], a tangible allusion to Plato's myth of the cave according to Sonia Massai[67]; which, on the other hand, signals the existence of a "something" beyond predetermined fiction. When outside the site of official representation, in the liminal non-space of the backstage, Othello is in fact as shocked and confused as Orestes is by the hole in the paper sky: his whole vision of the world, all of his certainties crumble; his thoughts of vengeance are overtaken by doubts just like Hamlet; he raises his head and looks for the truth beyond the 'cave wall' represented by the theatre. As Massai sums it up, "Pasolini's puppets, […], *are* all-too-human, and if they are fashioned by the Shakespearean script while on stage, they are endowed with agency, stoical strength and self-awareness when they linger in the wings."[68]

Rapid shifts from behind the scenes to the stage interrupt the puppets' moments of self-awareness and Othello's search for the truth, throwing them back to predetermined fiction as in a logic of uncanny iteration and indeterminacy. Onstage, a second love duet is played between Cassio and Bianca, who, standing face to face like Othello and Desdemona, play with a tiny stuffed bird and a nest, whose sexual symbolism is even more explicit. Bianca looks invitingly at Cassio and tries to get him to put his bird into the nest she is holding very near her lap, while Cassio eyes her both seductively and laughably, and teases her repeatedly by pretending to hand the bird to her and then suddenly retracting it, much to Bianca's visible disappointment. As Cassio is finally placing the bird into the nest, this pantomimic wooing ritual is abruptly arrested by a group of Cypriots led by Roderigo in disguise, who deceptively accuses him of harassing their women ("Marrano, tu insidi le nostre ragazze…"; "*Marrano*, how dare you harass our women?"[69]). When Othello intervenes to stop the ensuing brawl and demands an explanation, the scene becomes an uncanny repetition of what Othello himself had experienced in front of the Senate (although this previous scene has been omitted in the film). Ironically blind to the similarity between the Cypriots' complaints against the outsider Cassio and Brabantio's earlier accusation against him ("Egli insidia l'onore delle nostre donne, signor Governatore! Scandalo! Scandalo!"; "He injures the honour of our women, Lord Governor! What a scandal! What a

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[66] "Una sola finestrella […], piccola come una feritoia" (Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", cit., p. 935, in Sonia Massai, *op. cit*., p. 103).
[67] See Sonia Massai, *op. cit*., p. 103.
[68] *Ibid*., p. 102.
[69] The English translation is quoted from Sonia Massai, *op. cit*., p. 97.

scandal!"[70]), Othello downgrades Cassio, adopting the same racist logic as Brabantio.[71] Not only is the motif of racial hatred, as Massai argues, shifted "from Iago, the 'insider', to the Cypriots, the 'outsiders'"[72], but also to Othello himself, the outsider par excellence, whose total foreignness, translating into naïve unawareness, becomes paradoxically what makes him so keen on blindly adapting to and then adopting his very denigrators' vision of 'otherness'. Right after the episode with Cassio, the insiders' discriminative vision of women – as another aspect of 'otherness' – is all too readily absorbed by the outsider Othello by means of Iago's insinuations on Desdemona. As Cassio enters the stage, she is rocking a doll in her arms and singing a lullaby (in the script but not in the film): "Povera bambina,/ E' morta per amor/ Povera bambina,/ E' morta per amor./ La gente che qui passa/ Le getterà un bel fior." ("Poor child,/ She died of love/ Poor child,/ She died of love./ Passers-by will drop/ A beautiful flower [on her grave]"[73]). As we have already seen, Desdemona's apparent childishness is deceived by the gloominess of her most intimate fantasies. We cannot avoid the suspicion of doubleness when she says to Cassio, who is pleading her help to be reinstated by Othello: "Sì, sì, sì, sì, la voglio proprio fare questa buona azione! E poi lei è così giovane… così carino… Sì, con tutto il cuore! Con tutto il cuore!"[74]; or even when she carries on singing a lullaby at the end of their encounter. When Othello and Iago catch her talking to Cassio, the erotic connotations of her childish appearance now lead inevitably to Iago's interpretation of her also in the eyes of Othello:

> *Iago*: A me questo fatto… mi puzza di abbruciaticcio…
>
> *Othello*: Ma… ma nun era Cassio quello che stava 'nsieme lì a Desdemona?
>
> *Iago*: Occhio che non vede, cuore che non duole…!
>
> […]
>
> *Iago* [aside to Othello talking to Desdemona]: Era Cassio, era Cassio!
>
> […]
>
> *Iago*: Mah!
>
> *Othello*: Perché dici "mah!"?
>
> *Iago*: Eeh! Eh eh!
>
> *Othello*: E perché dici "eeh! Eh eh!"?

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[70] See *Ibid.*

[71] See *ibid.*

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 98.

[73] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", cit., p. 951. The English translation is quoted from Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

[74] "Yes, yes, yes, yes, I so want to do this good deed! Besides, you're so young… so cute… Yes, with all my heart! With all my heart!"

Iago: No, no, dico, ... Certo, Cassio non ha mica colpa, eh? Eh! Lui è bello, è giovine, è di carnagione bianca, eh eh eh! Chi se lo sarebbe aspettato che Desdemona…

    Othello: Che?! Che?!

    Iago: Ohé, eh! E non t'arrabbiare! Diventi nero! Pare che mi vuoi mangiare![75]

    Othello: Come sarebbe a di' "chi se lo sarebbe aspettato da Desdemona"?!

    Iago: Quello che volevo dire è che Desdemona è come tutte le altre… [the audience protest]

    Othello: Desdemona come tutte l'altre?!

    Iago: Sì, proprio così. Adesso ve l'ho detto, e mi sento con la coscienza a posto!

    Othello: Se è vero la sventro, glie tiro er collo come 'na gallina![76]

When Iago addresses the audience directly at the beginning of the play, trying to gain their approval for his plot against Othello, the audience, recognizing him as Totò, at first applaud his comic wit and ingenuity, and seem to be prepared to let him fashion their responses to the play. As Iago's plot unfolds and he becomes more and more Vice-like, the spectators begin to shift allegiance and deny him any sympathy. The response caused by Iago's mystifying words (starting from "Desdemona è come tutte le altre…") makes the audience increasingly involved in the play: they do not simply sit there and watch, but begin to comment, hiss and shout in protest, try to warn Iago's victims, and eventually turn against Othello too, especially during the 'eavesdropping scene' that follows: "Otello, apri l'occhi!"; "E' stato Iago a da' a Cassio quer fazzoletto!"; "Cassio non parlava de Desdemona! Parlava de Bianca! 'A disgrazziato pure te! Magar'a tocchi Desdemona te famo vede' noi!" ("Othello, watch out!"; "It was Iago who gave Cassio the handkerchief!"; "Cassio wasn't talking about Desdemona! He was talking about Bianca! You're as bad as he [Iago] is! If you lay a finger on Desdemona, we'll teach you!"[77]). Right after the scene closes with Othello's declaration that he is going to kill Desdemona, the camera catches again the puppet of Othello behind the scenes, with tears on his face, blaming himself for what he has become and still not understanding what motivates his actions onstage:

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[75] Again a racial allusion to Othello's potential cannibalism.

[76] "*Iago*: I have a weird feeling about that… *Othello*: Wasn't that Cassio there with Desdemona? *Iago*: What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over…! […] *Iago*: It was Cassio, it was Cassio! […] *Iago*: Who knows! *Othello*: Why are you saying 'Who knows!'? *Iago*: Well! Well, well! *Othello*: And why are you saying 'Well! Well, well!'? *Iago*: No, no, I mean, …Sure, we can't say it's Cassio's fault, can we? Sure! He's handsome, he's young, he's white-skinned… Well, well, well! Who would have expected that Desdemona… *Othello*: What?! What?! *Iago*: Hey, hey! Don't get mad! You're turning black! You look like you're going to eat me! *Othello*: What do you mean 'Who would have expected that from Desdemona'?! *Iago*: What I meant is that Desdemona is like all other women… *Othello*: Desdemona's like all other women?! *Iago*: Yes, that's the truth. Now that I've told you, I have a clear conscience! *Othello*: If it's true I'll tear her all to pieces, I'll wring her neck like a chicken!"

[77] See Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 96. The English translation is quoted from *ibid*.

Othello: Io so' 'n'assassino… Io so' 'n'assassino… Chi se lo credeva… Io so' 'n'assassino, mannaggia! A sor mae', ma perché devo crede' le cose che me dice Iago?! Perché so' così stupido?!

Puppeteer: Forse perché in realtà sei tu che vuoi ammazzare Desdemona.

Othello: Come? Io voglio ammazza' Desdemona? E perché?

Puppeteer: Forse perché… a Desdemona piace essere ammazzata.

Othello: Ah, sì? E' così?

Puppeteer: Forse è così.

Othello: Ma qual è la verità? E' quello che penso io de me, o quello che pensa la gente, o quello che pensa quello là lì dentro?

Iago: Cosa senti dentro di te? Concentrati bene, cosa senti, eh?

Othello: Sì, sì, si sente qualcosa che c'è…

Iago: Quella è la verità! Ma… shhh! Non bisogna nominarla, perché appena la nomini, non c'è più.[78]

Unconvinced by the puppeteer's semi-Freudian explanations about his desire to kill Desdemona, and Desdemona's own desire to be killed, the tormented puppet of Othello turns to the wise puppet of Iago to know what truth is. And it is precisely the puppet of Iago, who on stage uses words to stir from the truth and to create the "net" of a totally deceitful reality, that offstage seems to guide with a Socratic method the puppet of Othello in his search beyond words and the roles he is told to play. Truth, Iago suggests, is something that stirs from deep inside the young puppet's chest, which cannot be given a name nor represented, but just *felt*. Othello is overcome with joy as he notices that he can actually, though dimly, feel "something". There follows that truth cannot be expressed in words, but it can be found only outside language; that is, outside denotative representation.

Once back on stage, though, all of the behind-the-scenes awareness disappears and the fiction of the Shakespearean script, of Iago's web of words, and of the actions the puppeteer leads him into, is the only reality the puppets can see and in which they seem inextricably enmeshed. Desdemona's murder scene has to follow right after all the same: when Othello finds her childishly saying her evening prayers, he rushes to her pushed by

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[78] "*Othello*: I'm a murderer… I'm a murderer… Who would have thought that… I'm a murderer, dammit! Good sir, but why do I have to believe the things Iago says to me?! Why am I so stupid?! *Puppeteer*: Maybe because you actually want to kill Desdemona. *Othello*: What? I want to kill Desdemona? And why? *Puppeteer*: Maybe because… Desdemona likes being killed. *Othello*: Ah, really? Is it so? *Puppeteer*: Maybe it is so. *Othello*: But what is the truth? Is it what I think of myself, or what people think, or what the one in there thinks? *Iago*: What do you feel inside? Pay attention, what do you feel? *Othello*: Yes, yes, I feel that there is something… *Iago*: That is the truth! But… shhh! You don't have to name it, because as soon as you do, it's not there anymore."

Iago, blindly determined to kill her. Desdemona's ingenuous insistence on Cassio's reintegration is inevitably read as another proof of her infidelity, just as her reaction when Othello smacks her. As a matter of fact, although she screams naively, her words evidently indicate that her husband's unexpected violence enflames her with masochistic pleasure: "Sì, mio signore… (*lo schiaffo ricevuto ha aumentato il suo rispetto e il suo amore*) però che schiaffo che mi avete dato! E' il primo schiaffo che piglio! Se volete darmene un altro… (*ha un ambiguo sorriso di sottomissione*)."[79] Accordingly played by the childish and sexually irreverent Laura Betti, Desdemona's actions are determined by a sort of parodic or elementary masochism, which, as we have seen with the puppeteer's explanation to Othello, is the interpretative key that the author has imposed on her. Since she appears on stage, Desdemona seems to be doing everything to disappoint and incite first her father by choosing Othello as her partner; then she provokes her own husband with her too insistent mediations on behalf of Cassio; and now, her enjoyment in being slapped might even suggest that she craves to be killed[80], as the puppeteer had suggested (or better, planned). Othello, enraged by her lustful attitude which seems to confirm his suspects, tries to smother her, encouraged with grotesque ferocity by Iago standing aside ("Ammazzala! Ammazzala!" – "Kill her! Kill her!"). But the audience, shouting furiously in protest, eventually rise up and break in the theatrical action, storming the stage to save Desdemona from Othello's murderous grip, and thus interrupting the play. While the women revive and comfort the tearful lady, the men kill both Othello and Iago and celebrate the triumph of a puzzled Cassio. With the irruption of the audience on the scene and their interaction with the characters and with the play itself, the ultimate disruption of the conventions of theatrical fiction takes place. In Massai's words, "Pasolini's audience breaks the spell of representation, and 'rearranges' it"[81]: unlike the puppets, they do not see any difference between what happens on stage and outside of it, and devastatingly bring reality on the scene, upsetting or rather literally *killing* the delusional mechanisms of mimetic representation.

La scena non è più uno spazio di finzione da rispettare ma diventa uno spazio col quale la realtà può interagire. Gli spettatori, che conoscono la verità, esattamente come la conoscono Otello e

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[79] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", cit., p. 961. "Yes, my lord… (*being smacked has increased her love and respect for him*) …what a slap, though! Nobody had slapped me before! Would you want to slap me once again… (*she has an ambiguous expression of submission on her face*)." (The English translation is quoted from Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 97)
[80] See Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 230.
[81] Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

Jago, possono interrompere la finzione e diventare gli esecutori di una elementare giustizia: Desdemona si salva, Jago e Otello no.[82]

After the audience assault and kill them, the puppets of Othello and Iago are thrown into a trash bin, while their mates cry for their loss. Hence, the garbage man we have seen in the opening sequence collects them on his truck and tosses them into a dump, all the while singing the same song with which he opened the film. This song, which had welcomed Othello's birth as a puppet with the announcement of the story of love and death Shakespeare wrote for him, now cyclically accompanies the puppet as he dies; still, the destiny of the puppet Othello has been interrupted before it could be fulfilled the way Shakespeare, the puppeteer and Iago had 'planned'. More precisely, it has been interrupted at the very moment in which words and their misleading representations were irremediably taking over – a sort of injustice which the audience within the film cannot take. Violently thrown outside the theatre, then, Othello and Iago die as puppets (that is, fictional, predetermined characters) to be born again into the real world (again like Pinocchio, who definitively switches from fiction to reality and becomes a real child just as he is about to die). Their journey to the dump is in fact characterised by an interspersed imagery of death and birth (or re-birth), beginning from the posters in the garbage truck. Behind the head of Modugno, two images of naked women are visible: a photo of Brigitte Bardot, one of the most famous erotic symbols in the 1960s, and a reproduction of Velázquez's painting *Venus del Espejo* (*Venus in the Mirror*, 1647–51), where the entire body of the model is presented to the viewer from the back, in a pose that calls to mind the picture of Bardot that caused the banning of Simone de Bouvoir's book on the French actress.[83] Like *Las Meninas*, the picture of Venus too upsets the rules of representation by directly involving the viewer as the object of Venus's gaze reflected in the mirror, thus completing the frame formed by the dolly shot of Velázquez's paintings in the opening sequence. In perfect symmetry with the beginning, the film flows towards the end interweaving Othello's death as a puppet, the garbage man's song and Velázquez's painting, this time as a prelude of a totally different kind of show. Fulfilling the cyclical connection between death and life that governs the film's structure

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[82] Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *op. cit*., p. 94. "The scene is not a space reserved to fiction anymore but it becomes a space with which reality can interact. Spectators, who are aware of the truth as much as Othello and Iago, are able to interrupt the fiction and become the executors of an elementary justice: Desdemona is saved, Iago and Othello are condemned."

[83] See Daniela Bini, *op. cit*., p. 236.

(and theme), the image of Venus – symbol of life and creation[84] – announces a re-birth. The journey to the dump, which is apparently a funeral rite of the puppets (that is, of Shakespeare's *Othello* and of fictional representation itself) turns thus into a new coming to the world. Heaped with the rest of the rubbish on the truck, Othello and Iago seem to shout in terror, but their screams are muted and we only see their grotesquely comic grimaces apparently miming the trauma of birth. When they are delivered from the truck stopped near a slope where "tutte le cose morte [del camion] rotolano come una colorata vanghetta giù" ("all the dead things roll down the truck just as a colourful little avalanche")[85], the terrified puppets roll down the slope with the rest of the garbage. As they stop at the bottom lying on their backs among the garbage, their eyes see for the first time the immense blue sky where white clouds are sailing past. Othello's eyes sparkle with burning curiosity, uncontainable joy; Iago's are filled with wonder and ecstasy:[86]

> *Othello*: Iiih! E che so' quelle?
>
> *Iago*: Quelle… sono… sono le nuvole.
>
> *Othello*: E che so' 'ste nuvole?
>
> *Iago*: Mah?
>
> *Othello*: Quanto so' belle, quanto so' belle! Quanto 'so belle!
>
> *Iago*: Ah, straziante meravigliosa bellezza del creato![87]

Completing the process of 'incorporation' that dominates the film, the puppets' coming to the (real) world starts in a dump, where the material refuse that is considered dead because it cannot be consumed anymore is cyclically transformed into a source of new life. Now that they are out of the 'cave', freed from the strings that chained them to a predetermined reality, the material world outside fiction is unveiled to Othello and Iago, who, like children contemplating a natural element for the first time, are overcome by wondrous joy. They do not need to know what clouds are to enjoy their beauty: the infinite sky, with the clouds moving swiftly blown by the wind, is a site free from predetermined

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[84] "La donna rappresenta la vitalità. Le cose muoiono e noi ne proviamo dolore, ma poi la vitalità ritorna: ecco che cosa rappresenta la donna." ("The woman represents vitality. Things die and we feel sorrow for that, but then vitality comes back: here's what the woman represents.") Pier Paolo Pasolini talking about his 1966 film *Uccellacci e Uccellini*, in Pier Paolo Pasolini and Jon Halliday, *op. cit*., p. 124.

[85] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", cit., p. 966. The English translation is quoted from Daniela Bini, *op. cit*., pp. 239-240.

[86] See *ibid*., in Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *op. cit*., p. 100.

[87] "*Othello*: Eeeh! And what are those? *Iago*: Those… are… are the clouds. *Othello*: And what are these clouds? *Iago*: Who knows? *Othello*: They're so beautiful, they're so beautiful! They're so beautiful! *Iago*: Ah, heartbreaking wonderful beauty of the Creation!"

knowledge as well as from representation.[88] As a matter of fact, when Othello asks "E che so' 'ste nuvole?" ("And what are these 'clouds'?"), Iago replies: "Mah?" ("Who knows?"), and then the camera moves to the clouds themselves as if to answer through the mere image of them that "clouds are what they are" (with the same naïve tautology we have seen with Don Quixote's reply). It is the camera that reveals the clouds as themselves, because, as Pasolini himself argued several times, the cinematic image is not a representation but a *reproduction* of reality; so that the puppets' discovery of reality is ultimately possible thanks to the potentials of the cinematic medium. This very final image of the clouds, admired for the first time by the puppets as they get born in the 'real' world, synthesizes the astounding effect of the cinematic sublime in the film, connected to the (re)discovery of material reality. In light of the final sequence, I am going to consider the sublime aesthetics in *Nuvole* as originating from the incorporation of intertexts that structures the film, and disclosing upon a meta-cinematic discourse that begins from its very title – a probable reference to the fundamental book of essays on cinema by the French critic and theorist André Bazin entitled *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*[89]

4.3 Breaking the Hegemony of the Text

The myriad intertextual references in *Nuvole* taken from the literary, pictorial and cinematographic tradition, analysed according to the dialectic of incorporation, implies first of all the shifting or complete dissolving of representational boundaries. As a matter of fact, *Othello* itself has significantly proved liable to cause uncanny confusions between fiction and reality; for instance, the history of the reception of Shakespeare's play on stage and on film has very often signalled disquieting and upsetting effects on the audience. Marvin Rosenberg reports that Samuel Pepys's "pretty lady cried out" when she saw Desdemona smothered; and that "a rare 'review' from 1610 [...] tells us that when Shakespeare's company performed *Othello* in Oxford, the actors [...] 'drew tears not only from their

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[88] Again, Pirandello's *Uno, Nessuno e Centomila* seems implicitly present in Pasolini's *Nuvole*; the final sequence, in particular, reminds of an extract from Chapter Nine in the second book ("Nuvole e vento"): "Ah, non aver più coscienza d'essere, come una pietra, come una pianta! Non ricordarsi più neanche del proprio nome! Sdrajati qua sull'erba, con le mani intrecciate alla nuca, guardare nel cielo azzurro le bianche nuvole abbarbaglianti che veleggiano gonfie di sole; udire il vento che fa lassù, tra i castagni del bosco, come un fragore di mare." (Luigi Pirandello, *Uno, Nessuno e Centomila*, cit., p. 54). ["Ah, to be unconscious, like a stone, like a plant! Not to remember even your name anymore! Stretched out here on the grass, hands behind your head, to look into the blue dazzling sky at the white clouds that sail past, filled with sun; to hear the wind, among the chestnuts in the wood, making a sound like the roar of the sea."] See Daniela Bini, *op. cit.*, p. 239.
[89] See Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

speech, but also from their action.'"[90] Although the ending of the play was never altered during the following Restoration by any English actor, in France, for instance, Desdemona's life had been spared until Jean-François Ducis "had at first the temerity to let the heroine be killed."[91] The fact that "the prettiest women in Paris fainted in the most conspicuous boxes and were publicly carried out of the house", convinced Ducis to change the ending back again, although the actor playing Othello demanded the original back to the "peculiar agonies of the most obviously handsome and fashionable."[92] The strong reactions elicited by the staging of the play since Shakespeare's own days have accompanied its performances up until today. Just to mention one example, when talking about his adaptation of *Othello* (2014) in an interview, the Sicilian actor and director Luigi Lo Cascio mentioned that a woman, meeting the actors in the backstage after the show, literally assaulted them, accusing them of instigating feminicides with that play.[93]

As strong as their reactions might have been, though, no real audience of either theatrical or cinematographic productions of *Othello* have been granted the degree of agency enjoyed by the audience-within-the-film in *Che Cosa Sono Le Nuvole*. Only fictional audiences, in fact, exasperating their meta-theatrical potential, have ever been enabled to break the boundaries of representation and confound fiction with reality. One of the literary predecessors of the urban proletariat in *Nuvole* is to be found, for instance, in Collodi's *Le Avventure di Pinocchio* (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*, 1883), as pointed out by Hervé Joubert-Laurencin[94] with reference to Chapter X of the novel, in which Pinocchio walks in a marionette theatre while the puppets of Arlecchino and Pulcinella are fighting on the scene. As they recognise him, they interrupt the play to invite Pinocchio to join them on stage:

Quando Pinocchio entrò nel teatrino delle marionette, accadde un fatto che destò una mezza rivoluzione. […] [A]ll'improvviso, che è non è Arlecchino smette di recitare, e voltandosi verso il

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[90] Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Othello: The Search for the Identity of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona by Three Centuries of Actors and Critics*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1961, pp. 216; 5, in Sonia Massai, op. cit., p. 101.

[91] *Ibid.*, p. 32, in Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.

[92] *Ibid.*, in Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

[93] In the same interview, Vincenzo Pirrotta (who played Othello) reported: "Addirittura qualcuno, una signora, è arrivata in camerino […] dicendo che è un'istigazione al femminicidio…", ("There was even someone, a lady, who came to the dressing room […] saying that it was an instigation to feminicide…"), and Luigi Lo Cascio added: "Fummo assaliti proprio… 'Lei si rende conto che facendo questo spettacolo aumenteranno [i femminicidi]?'" ("We were actually assaulted… 'Don't you realize that by performing this play [feminicides] are going to increase?'") Luigi Lo Cascio and Vincenzo Pirrotta in 'retroscenasat2000', "'Retroscena – I segreti del teatro' - Puntata del 24 febbraio 2015" (online video clip), *YouTube*, published on 3 Mar 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBDApsv3d9w&t=1230s>.

[94] See Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, "Pasolini. Portrait du poète en cinéaste", *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Paris 1995, p. 121, in Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.

pubblico e accennando colla mano qualcuno in fondo alla platea, comincia a urlare in tono drammatico:

"Numi del firmamento! Sogno o son desto? Eppure quello laggiù è Pinocchio!... […]

"Pinocchio, vieni quassù da me," grida Arlecchino, "vieni a gettarti fra le braccia dei tuoi fratelli di legno!"

A questo affettuoso invito Pinocchio spicca un salto, e di fondo alla platea va nei posti distinti; poi con un altro salto, dai posti distinti monta sulla testa del direttore d'orchestra, e di lì schizza sul palcoscenico.[95]

The reference to Pinocchio (already perceptible in the crafting and coming to life of Othello's puppet in the opening sequence) might have been very present to the 'real' audience of Pasolini's *Nuvole*: the film's Iago, Totò, was not only associated to a puppet for his comic mimicry and the picaresque adventures of his character, but actually impersonated Pinocchio several times during both his theatrical and cinematographic career.[96] In the 1952 film *Totò a Colori*, in particular, the character of Totò (Antonio Scannagatti) finds himself in a marionette theatre while escaping from his brutal brother-in-law who is chasing him with a knife. In order to hide from him, he dresses up like Pinocchio and pretends to be a puppet. Once on stage, Totò-Pinocchio performs a marionette-dance, very much enjoyed by an audience of working-class children and their parents (similar to Pasolini's), and apparently fooling his brother-in-law that watches from behind the scenes. But as he smiles, takes off his fake nose, and thanks the applauding audience, his chaser recognizes him and

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[95] Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio*, Napoli: Lito-Rama, 2001, p. 24. "Quick as a flash, Pinocchio disappeared into the Marionette Theater. And then something happened which almost caused a riot. […] The play continued for a few minutes, and then suddenly, without any warning, Harlequin stopped talking. Turning toward the audience, he pointed to the rear of the orchestra, yelling wildly at the same time: 'Look, look! Am I asleep or awake? Or do I really see Pinocchio there?' […] 'Hey, Pinocchio, come up to me!' shouted Harlequin. 'Come and join your wooden brothers!' At such a loving invitation, Pinocchio, with one leap from the back of the orchestra, found himself in the front rows. With another leap, he was on the orchestra leader's head. With a third, he landed on the stage." The English translation is quoted from Carlo Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, trans. by Carol Della Chiesa (1883), *The Literature Network*, <http://www.online-literature.com/collodi/pinocchio/10/>.

[96] "Nella Rivista di Michele Galdieri del '42 [Volumineide] interpretò i panni del noto burattino assieme ad Anna Magnani nel ruolo di Fata turchina e Mario Castellani, nei panni di Lucignolo. Totò interpretò Pinocchio anche due anni dopo nella rivista «Che ti sei messo in testa» [1944], rappresentata durante l'occupazione tedesca dove, fuori copione parodiò Hitler appena scampato ad un attentato e nella rivista "Con un palmo di naso" [1944] dove fece una parodia di Mussolini e di Hitler ormai all'ultimo atto del loro potere. Infine, la più nota scena in "Totò a colori" del '52 immortala un'"esibizione unica e "a colori" del nostro artista disarticolato." ("In Michele Galdieri's 1942 show [Volumineide], Totò played the well-known puppet with Anna Magnani as the Blue Fairy and Mario Castellani as Lucignolo. Totò played Pinocchio two years later too in the 1944 show "Che ti sei messo in testa", performed during the German occupation in Italy, and in which he improvised a parody of Hitler who had just escaped an assassination attempt, and then again in a 1944 show ("Con un palmo di naso"), where he parodied both Mussolini and Hitler, whose power was by then decaying. At last, a known sequence in "Totò a Colori" (1952) sees a unique and 'in colour' performance of Totò as Pinocchio.") Salvatore Cianciabella, "Totò e Pinocchio", *Il Pianeta Totò* (Website), <http://www.antoniodecurtis.org/archive/TotoPinocchio_Art.pdf>.

jumps on stage with the intention to kill him. If, on the one hand, reality seems to storm on stage as in Pasolini's movie, the melodramatic lines of the ireful brother-in-law – together with his Sicilian accent – seem to turn him too into a puppet, thus exchanging reality for a marionette show.

Another literary example of an audience going back and forth between fiction and reality can be found in Chapter XXVI, Part II, of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.[97] Master Pedro's puppet show is representing the rescue of Melisandra, Charlemagne's foster-daughter, from the Moors by whom she was held captive in Zaragoza. Don Quixote follows the play attentively, intervening with some exclamation now and then, until he gets so caught up in the fictional action that, as the Moors are attacking Melisandra running away with her rescuer Don Gaiferos, he rises from his seat, and bursts out:

"I will never consent, while I live, that in my presence such an outrage as this be offered to so famous a knight and so daring a lover as Don Gaiferos. Hold, base-born rabble, follow not nor pursue after him; if you do, prepare for instant battle." As he spoke, he unsheathed his sword, planted himself close to the show, and, with violent and unheard-of fury, began to rain hacks and slashes upon the Moorish puppets, overthrowing some and beheading others, laming this and demolishing that.[98]

A similar episode (and a probable source of inspiration for Pasolini) is to be found in the Neapolitan episode of Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946)[99], where a drunk African-American military policeman and a Neapolitan street kid, running away from the crowd, take refuge inside a marionette theatre. The puppet play going on in there shows the white paladin Orlando fighting against the Moor, introduced by the crusaders' exclamation: "Abbasso i mori!" ("Down with the Moor!"). On watching the duel, the audience get increasingly excited, shouting and miming the action they are watching, and so does the black soldier, who instead identifies with the Moor up to the point that he jumps on stage and joins the fight, taking the place of the Moor puppet. The puppeteers and the audience, enraged, yell and rush against him, until men substitute the puppets on the scene and a real fight involving all of the present takes place there.

As for Don Quixote, he innocently adds an explanation for his behaviour: "I protest to you, gentlemen, that whatever has passed at this time, seemed to me to pass actually and

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[97] See Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97.
[98] Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, trans. by Charles Jarvis, Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1847, p. 181.
[99] See Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

precisely so. I took Melisandra, to be Melisandra; Don Gaiferos, Don Gaiferos; Marsilio, Marsilio; and Charlemagne, Charlemagne."[100] His naive confusion between fiction and reality is signalled by the tautological use of the same name to indicate both the puppets and the real people they represent: language, as well as any kind of representation, implies the substitution of the thing with the name, the signified with the signifier. Such an uncanny blurring of representational boundaries has a strong connection with cinema, especially with cinematic adaptations where *Othello* is turned into a play-within-the-film as in *Nuvole*. As Douglas Lanier points out, films based on the motif of players rehearsing or re-enacting *Othello* have a long history in both European and Anglo-American traditions.[101] Very often, theatrical fiction gets confused with filmic 'reality' – as in Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert's *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945) and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Kean* (1956). This kind of movies brings about the compelling imitation in real life of the tragic plot of *Othello*, which the main characters either perform themselves on stage or watch being performed.[102] What the cinematic medium seems to allow in a peculiar way, in order to let reality out of its own representation, is to destroy the signifier[103], just like Don Quixote, the black soldier in *Paisà*, and the working-class audience in Pasolini's *Nuvole* do.

The symbolic destruction or death of traditional representation is the first operation through which the film can be ascribed to a sublime aesthetic. By 'killing' and going beyond Shakespeare's *Othello* and the myriad textual references incorporated in the film, Pasolini gives shape to a loss of signification, like the one Foucault envisages in *Don Quixote*. The knight is described in fact as "the hero of the same" and his journey as a process of "similitude" that annuls the difference between reality and fiction, thus turning the material world into a concretion of the representative world of language. The result is that representation itself is nullified, as things are just what they are, while "words wander off on their own, without content, without resemblance to fill their emptiness; they are no longer

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[100] Miguel de Cervantes, *op. cit.*, p. 183.
[101] The first film was Danish two-reeler, *Desdemona* [*For Abent Taeppe*] by August Bloom (1910), followed by: *A Modern Othello, aka The Shadow of Night, The Lash of Jealousy, and The Mad Lover* [*Een Moderne Othello*], a full-length Pathe film scripted by Leonce Perret and produced by Harry Rapf in 1917; *Carnival* by Harley Knowles (1921), from the play by Alexander Matheson Lang and H.C.M. Haringe; *Carnival: Venetian Nights*, a sound remake of the Knowles film by Herbert Wilcox (1931); *Men are not Gods* by Alex Korda (1937); *The Strangler* by Harold Huth (1940); and *A Double Life* by George Cukor (1947). See Douglas M. Lanier, "Murdering Othello", in Deborah Cartmell (ed.), *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, pp. 198-215.
[102] See Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
[103] See Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

the marks of things; they lie sleeping between the pages of books and covered in dust."[104] A similar process happens with Pasolini's *Nuvole*, whose structure unveils and exasperates the rules of mimesis with its net of intertextual, meta-pictorial, meta-theatrical and meta-cinematographic references, and the following interaction and shifting of codes one into another. Its semi-human puppets are, on the one hand, tied to strings (through some sort of handcuffs) that force them to re-enact a set of actions predetermined by several 'puppeteers': external to the film, the (although labile) presence of Shakespeare's text; within the film, the actual puppeteer of the marionette theatre; and then, within the play itself, the character of Iago. On the other hand, cinema allows them to move back and forth from theatrical fiction to backstage liminality and then to real life, and thus disrupt the stability of the categories ruling representation itself. The same goes for the audience: if they should be ideologically constructed and their response fashioned by the Shakespearean script, by the puppeteer and by Iago, the existence of a multiple audience (the one inside the marionette theatre, the puppets themselves and the puppeteer behind the scenes, and the ever-changing audience of the movie) also implies the coalescence of different dimensions that challenges predetermined roles. None of the audiences can really be far off and detached from the play they are watching, since all of them are simultaneously addressed by "Iago's gaze, which is clearly aware of our complicity," and "has the same ensnaring power as the painter's gaze in the painting, [Velázquez's *Las Meninas*] which we fall captives to."[105] The fictive and the real audience, collapsed into one another, become in their turn directly involved with the theatrical event, so that, shifting like the human puppets between fiction and reality, they defy the ultimate boundaries that codify representation:

Pasolini tries to reproduce for his viewers the effect of being at the same time outside and inside the film, of being at one with the fictive audience, but also of wandering backstage in search of the elusive author who challenges them to constantly readjust their interpretation of *Clouds* in the light of his references to other authors.[106]

Testifying to how "Pasolini found content pressing against the boundaries of form,"[107] this reversion of incorporation is what gives rise to the 'sublime' in *Nuvole*: the bodily remainder that escapes and defies representation translates into a tension between

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[104] Michel Foucalt, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 53. See Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
[105] Alberto Marchesini, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-101, in Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
[106] Mariangela Tempera, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
[107] Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-232.

form and content that finally re-discovers the direct, unfiltered relationship between a cinematic work of art and material reality. As a matter of fact, the audience's interruption can be seen as a revolution against the boundaries of fiction that metonymically expresses a collective non-acquiescence in the operation of hegemony, rooted in the Marxist vision of proletarian agency. In pointing out that "the camera shapes this reality into a depiction of social structure that gives a decidedly Gramscian twist to Marx's agonistic depiction of class interests,"[108] Guneratne briefly retraces Gramsci's theory of hegemony and social agency within the aesthetic dynamics of the movie. According to Gramsci, social divisions that ensure the hegemony of a ruling elite can be sustained only through the tacit consent and formal acquiescence of individuals within differing social strata. Gramsci's vision of socio-political dynamics seems to be the substratum that permeates the aesthetical (re-)discovery of reality in Pasolini's *Nuvole*. Observing that "Pasolini contrives to group his shots into a rigorous series of compositions in which each actor represents a particular Gramscian social agent", Guneratne accordingly finds in "the author of the spectacle, Shakespeare the perverse puppeteer, […] the hegemon who pulls the strings and determines the extent of Desdemona's masochism, Cassio's complicity, and even the reluctant Othello's violence"; and in Iago "the interpreter of the puppet master's directives, and thus representative of that category of organic intellectual who facilitates the dominance of the 'author's' representational regime."[109] On the other hand, the proletarian spectators who storm the stage bring about effective collective action, breaking as they do the author's (and the source text's) hegemony. As Guneratne goes on to note, "[t]he revolution staged by spectators amidst the Sicilian Marionettes, reminiscent though it may be of Don Quixote's earlier comical attack on Saracen Marionettes in defense of Christianity, does have an impact on the world beyond the theatre."[110] What follows is in fact "the transition between the world of art and the detritus of the real world"[111], mediated by the singing garbage man who also signals the 'death' (through appropriation and desecration) of another intertext, Velazquez's *Venus in the Mirror*, 'reduced' to a sort of pin-up poster in his truck. Mentioning Rabelais's satirical "material bodily lower stratum"[112] as the source of Pasolini's "folksy" twist to the *Venus* preludes in fact to the world we are going to find *beyond* the theatre. Namely, after going through the leftovers of traditional representation (the world's signifiers), the

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[108] Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
[109] *Ibid.*
[110] *Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.
[111] *Ibid.*, p. 231.
[112] *Ibid.*

cinematic medium, being structured on our very sensuous perception of the world, carries the spectators on the same level of, or "within", reality itself:

[Q]uale differenza esiste fra cinema e realtà? Praticamente nessuna. Capii che il cinema è un sistema di segni la cui semiologia corrisponde a una possibile semiologia del sistema di segni della stessa realtà. Così il cinema mi ha obbligato a restare sempre al livello della realtà, "dentro" la realtà: quando faccio un film sono sempre dentro la realtà, fra gli alberi e fra la gente come me e lei; non c'è fra me e la realtà il filtro del simbolo o della convenzione, come c'è nella letteratura. Quindi in pratica il cinema è stato un'esplosione del mio amore per la realtà.[113]

4.4 Cinema as "Being There, within Reality"

In order to understand what Pasolini meant with "love for reality" I would like to consider briefly the connections between *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* and some of the poet's contemporary production. The intertextual net which apparently entraps the film and its characters can in fact be related to Pasolini's own work, beginning from his "Poema per un verso di Shakespeare" ("Poem for a line by Shakespeare"), which appeared in 1964 in his collection of poems *Poesia in Forma di Rosa* (*Poems in the Shape of a Rose*). The line which the title refers to is taken from *Othello*, and is a rather free translation of Iago's final words "Demand me nothing, what you know, you know./ From this time forth I never will speak word." (V.ii.300-1) The Italian version reported by Pasolini, "Ciò che hai saputo, hai saputo: il resto non lo saprai", more than Iago's unwillingness to speak and his refusal to reveal the source of his hate, stresses the inaccessibility of some passive knowledge coming from above (a back translation of the line could be: "What you know, you know: you will not know what remains"). The line is literally incorporated, turned into a material body, and it takes the shape of a grey bird – sometimes looking as white as the morning sun, sometimes revealing its true black colour – coming back from faraway lands to haunt the poet. ("Nella mia pace figliale, ma non crepuscolare, tu dormi,/ dove e come non so, *verso di Shakespeare*,   ritornato per istinto stagionale (?)   da terre che non hanno nulla a che fare

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[113] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jon Halliday, *op. cit*., pp. 51-52. "What's the difference between cinema and reality? Practically none. I understood that cinema is a system of signs whose semiology corresponds to a possible semiology of the system of signs of reality itself. So cinema forced me to stay always on the level of reality, 'within' reality: when I make a movie I'm always within reality, among the trees and among the people like me and you; there's no symbolic or conventional filter between me and reality, as with literature. So cinema has been an explosion of my love for reality."

con noi ecc."[114]) The poet feels compelled to fight against the bird as against the unapproachability or denial of knowledge it embodies ("Non lo saprò? E allora che senso ha avuto una vita che non è altro che passato e con esso nasce ogni giorno, come un rosaio?"[115]); until he finally consigns the line and the truth it tries to hide to an unsustainable past, thus preserving the innocence of future life.[116] ("E, per un po' di scienza della storia che mi dà esperienza/ di quanto sia grande la tragedia di una storia che finisce,/ mi prendo tutta l'innocenza della vita futura!"[117]) The screaming end of the poem sets aside a history he wants to have nothing to do with anymore:

"NESSUNO DEI PROBLEMI DEGLI ANNI CINQUANTA

MI IMPORTA PIU'! TRADISCO I LIVIDI

MORALISTI CHE HANNO FATTO DEL SOCIALISMO UN CATTOLICESIMO

UGUALMENTE NOIOSO! AH, AH, LA PROVINCIA IMPEGNATA!

AH, AH, LA GARA A ESSERE UNO PIU' POETA RAZIONALE DELL'ALTRO!

LA DROGA, PER PROFESSORI POVERI, DELL'IDEOLOGIA!

ABIURO DAL RIDICOLO DECENNIO!"[118]

The poem, in the shape of diaristic snapshots, recasts the outspokenly autobiographical motif of the exploration of the past in search for knowledge within a fever-pitch and chaotic form, signifying the poet's ideological uneasiness in the historical experience he is living.[119] Poetry itself is for Pasolini an instrument of self-awareness in relation to the experience of the world, and the appearance of Shakespeare's text in the shape of a bird may already be significantly revelatory of the role that reworking literary tradition has in the process of (self-)consciousness taking place in his works. After all, a bird, Minerva's little owl, is the symbol of knowledge, philosophy and wisdom in the history of Western thought, and as such, Pasolini himself will employ another kind of bird – a crow

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[114] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Poema per un verso di Shakespeare", in Id., *Poesia in Forma di Rosa*, Milano: Garzanti, 2015, pp. 89-90. "In my filial, but not crepuscular, peace, you sleep,/ where and how I don't know, *line by Shakespeare*, come back by seasonal instinct (?) from lands that have nothing to do with us etc."
[115] *Ibid.*, p. 91. "I won't know that? Then what's the meaning of a life that is nothing but past and with it is born every day, like a rosebush?"
[116] See Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
[117] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Poema per un verso di Shakespeare", cit., p. 103. "And, in exchange for a little bit of history knowledge which makes me aware/ of how big the tragedy of a history coming to an end is,/ I'll take all the innocence of future life!"
[118] *Ibid.* "None of the problems of the fifties/ interests me anymore! I betray the spiteful/ moralists who have turned Socialism into a Catholicism/ just as boring! Ha, ha, the engaged province!/ Ha, ha, the race to be a more rational poet than the other!/ Ideology, the drug for poor professors!/ I abjure the ridiculous decade!"
[119] See Robert Samuel Clive Gordon, *Pasolini: Forms of Subjectivity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, pp. 106-107.

– as the personification of Marxist ideology in *Uccellacci e Uccellini* (1966). However, as famously noted by Hegel, "the owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering"[120], meaning that philosophy comes to understand a historical condition just as it passes away. Minerva's owl, like Pasolini's crow, speaking of the recent past, has to be listened to, the knowledge it brings has to be acquired, and then necessarily overcome (as I already mentioned, the crow in *Uccellacci e Uccellini* is for this purpose eaten, thus literally incorporated). The bird that embodies Shakespeare's line in the poem has the same function: Pasolini is hauntingly obsessed by the line, he forcibly fights against it, and then he seems to let it go, together with the knowledge of the recent past which he totally abjures.

Another of Pasolini's work that clearly shows to be built on this (at times conflictual) dialectic of incorporation is a play, *Calderòn*, which is connected rather tightly to *Nuvole* both for its intertextual references and the time in which it was started. Pasolini began to write it in 1966 and periodically revised it until the final version published in 1973, but it was performed only posthumously in 1978. The crucial intertextual connection in *Calderòn*, as the title suggests, is *La Vida es Sueño* (*Life is a Deam*), a philosophical drama written in 1635 by the Spanish playwright Pedro Calderòn de La Barca. Apart from the names of the characters, Pasolini's *Calderòn* borrows from it the central theme of dream, that becomes also the structure on which the play is built: the episodes represented are dreams in which Rosaura, the main character, tries vainly to take refuge from reality. Each dream sees her in a different social position, and all of them chain her to a series of different conventions and constrictions: first, she wakes up as a member of aristocracy; then as a sub-proletarian prostitute, and finally as a petite bourgeois wife. The present she tries to escape – 1967 Spain – follows her too in all of the dreams, and is often reiterated with deictics underlining its inescapability, such as "questo giorno del 1967"[121] ("this day in 1967"); that is, a day in which Spanish people were in the throes of Franco's dictatorship. From each of those dreams Rosaura is repeatedly forced to wake up by Leucos and Melainos (Greek for, respectively, "white" or "bright", and "black" or "dark"), the servants of Basilio, a recurrent character who personifies power. The meta-theatricality already implicit in the representation of Rosaura's "dream within a dream" is made formally evident first by the intervention of the author himself, whose voice is mediated by the "speaker" who introduces

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[120] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Preface", in Id., *Philosophy of Right*, trans. by S. W. Dyde, New York: Cosimo, 2008, p. xxi.
[121] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Calderòn*, in Id., *Calderòn, Affabulazione, Pilade (Il Teatro I)*, Milano: Garzanti, 2016, p. 51.

each of the three stasima talking straight to the audience about the play they are watching. Further on, *Calderòn* exposes a rich net of intertextual connections in which Velázquez assumes a central role. The third episode, in particular, is a kind of tableau vivent reproducing *Las Meninas* itself, in which Rosaura's aristocratic parents (Dona Lupe and Basilio) are respectively Queen and King, and address their daughter from the mirror as if they were Mariana and Felipe IV, and she the Infanta Margareta surrounded by her dames of honour. The episode, openly described as a dream, unveils the representational dynamics of both the pictorial and theatrical work of art in its own making, together with the codification of roles and behaviours imposed by a class-divided society, to which the artist too seems unable to escape (*Lupe Regina*: "Diego Rodriguez Velázquez stesso!/ […] coinvolto anch'esso/ nel mondo della nostra ricchezza,/ *e, pur guardando da fuori del quadro, ne è dentro!*"; "Velázquez himself/ […] involved in our world of wealth,/ *and, although he looks out of the painting, he is inside it!*"[122]). However, Velázquez is mentioned again in the eighth episode, this time as the name of a character who, like Socrates, has been accused of being a pederast but in fact, as Pablo (one of his pupils) remarks, he is in prison because he has a body[123], because his very reality is a threat to Spanish society.[124] On the one hand, then, Sonia Massai is right in pointing out that Pasolini's *Calderòn* makes the collusion between authorial discourse and power explicit in suggesting "that the painter, despite being the origin of representation and partaking in the process through which representation contributes to reify the subject, is himself at the same time contained by it."[125] On the other hand, though, the play seems to anticipate the destabilizing function the process of 'incorporation' can assume. The intertextual net in which authors like Calderòn and Velázquez are intertwined, by treating them too as "bodies" or reified objects of representation, scrutinizes and decomposes the relationship between authorial discourse and power. The author, as the active subject that 'incorporates', is at the same time the passive object of incorporation, the *bodily* residue ("Velázquez is in prison because he *has a body*") that comes uncannily back to defy the order of representation (which seems to imply a "threat" to social order as well). As a matter of fact, when representation is turned into its very object, the boundary between subject and object, empowering 'self' and disempowered 'other', is in a way overcome, and their apparently overpowering relationship in the process is also subverted, thus depriving the representation of its traditional reifying function. This

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[122] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[123] "Velázquez è in prigione perché ha un corpo." Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Calderòn*, cit., p. 91.
[124] "[L]a vostra realtà/ è una minaccia per la società spagnola." Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Calderòn*, cit., p. 89.
[125] Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

way, like Velázquez's literal "body" best symbolizes, representation can become instead a vital site of resistance against the reification and imprisonment of the object.

The process begun in 1966 with *Calderòn* is carried on by Pasolini in the experimental cinematographic phase of *La Terra Vista dalla Luna* and *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?*, as the fact that the last work and the play are partially connected by their web of intertextual references seems to confirm. The conclusion towards which the intertextual discourse in both short films is inevitably drawn is death, a revelatory passage to a new life that has nothing otherworldly but, on the contrary, is "worldly" in its purest sense: if the moral of a fairy-tale like *La Terra Vista dalla Luna* is that "essere morti o essere vivi è la stessa cosa" ("being dead or being alive is the same thing"), the dead puppets of Othello and Iago in *Nuvole* are finally able to contemplate all the "straziante meravigliosa bellezza del creato" ("heartbreaking wonderful beauty of the Creation"). From a stylistic point of view, *death* can be intended as the overcoming of an already written past, the equally revelatory passage from a stifling textual tradition to a present which cinema is able to re-discover in its immediate, shocking material reality. This short phase (1964-66), often described by critics as "un crinale oltre il quale niente è più come prima"[126] ("a ridge beyond which nothing is like before anymore"), is in fact the premise to a new stage in Pasolini's cinematographic style, characterized by a more decisive turn to the adaptation of "myths". Films such as *Edipo Re* (*Oedipus Rex*); *Medea*, and *Appunti per un'Orestiade Africana* (*Notes Towards an African Orestes*), beyond the simply canonical value of their sources, demonstrate how the founding works of Western civilization can work as the measure against which men's consciousness has been evolving throughout the centuries and up to the contemporary age. Myth (as we have seen with Shakespeare's works) can assume such a role in a special way thanks to its "adaptability", by which the essential core of a story is capable of being adapted, rewritten or re-appropriated through evolving historical situations. Such a blending quality may have been what interested Pasolini the most: adaptation allows the author to transpose to the meta-historical level of myth his own and most intimate, irrational obsessions, and at the same time to rationalize and acquire consciousness of them, by re-inscribing myth itself within a historical and ideological frame, in "un sofisticato processo di destorificazione il cui fine è riconquistare la possibilità di tornare alla storia"[127]

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[126] Walter Siti, "L'opera rimasta sola", in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Tutte le Poesie*, 2, pp. 1897-1946, Milano: Mondadori, 2003, p. 1931, in Tomaso Subini, *La Necessità di Morire: Il Cinema di Pier Paolo Pasolini e il Sacro*, Roma: Ente dello Spettacolo, 2007, p. 81.

[127] Tomaso Subini, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

("a sophisticated dehistorification process whose aim is to reconquer the possibility to go back to history"). Because of their very unstable and ever-changing nature, adaptations are also able to unveil the arbitrariness of so-called meta-historical (or a-historical), absolutist myths, and undermine their legitimizing pretensions. Pasolini's rewritings of Greek myths (as well as his "trilogy of life" and *Salò o le 120 Giornate di Sodoma - Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*) are in fact always immersed into the concreteness of history, becoming a sort of "counter-myths", variations which assume the capacity to destabilize those new "'miti' metastorici, bandiere di assolutezza"[128] ("metahistorical 'myths', flags of absoluteness") created by the dominant classes to legitimize the status quo.

I miti che porta in scena Pasolini […] non sono certo "metastorici". Al contrario, sono calati in un preciso momento storico e in una situazione politica chiaramente connotata. Quei miti riconducono i loro eroi e le loro storie dall'astrattezza senza tempo del racconto autoconsolatorio (e autolegittimante) alle contraddizioni delle situazioni concrete, dei conflitti, degli scontri che in quel momento dividono la società italiana.[129]

In Pasolini's adaptations of myth, too, death assumes a central role within the filmic structure, becoming "la condizione necessaria e insostituibile *per fare della sua* [di Edipo, come degli altri protagonisti] *vita una storia*"[130] ("the necessary and irreplaceable condition *in order to turn his* [Oedipus's, as well as the other protagonists'] *life into a story*"). Such a theory of "death as montage" is ultimately what combines together $\mu\acute{\upsilon}\theta o\varsigma$ and $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma o\varsigma$, making sense of the irrational consciousness of both collective and private past by elevating it to the rational level of history. The need to look for a new filmic structure that would re-elaborate rationally the 'raw' reality such as it is perceived by memory and experience, is ascribable to a change in Pasolini's own perception of the world. This need to find a new stylistic equilibrium, born around the time he made *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?*, necessarily corresponds to a loss of ideological balance in a "civil poet" like Pasolini, and marks the passage from "gli anni della fiducia nella ragione e nella politica agli anni del disinganno e

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[128] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Saggi sulla Politica e sulla Società*, ed. by Walter Siti and Silia De Laude, Milano: Mondadori, 2001, p. 1642, in Oliviero Ponte di Pino, "*Il teatro è come un'ulcera* (Alcuni appunti su parola e corpo in Pasolini)", in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Calderòn, Affabulazione, Pilade (Il Teatro I)*, cit., p. 15.

[129] Oliviero Ponte di Pino, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16. "The myths reenacted by Pasolini […] are certainly not 'metahistorical'. On the contrary, they are set within a precise historical moment and within an unequivocally connoted political situation. Those myths subtract their heroes and their stories from the timeless abstractness of the self-consolatory (and self-legitimizing) tale, and insert them within the contradictions of the concrete situations, conflicts, clashes that are dividing Italian society at a certain time."

[130] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Perché quella di Edipo è una storia", in Id., *Edipo Re. Un Film di Pier Paolo Pasolini*, Milano: Garzanti, 1967, p. 11, in Tomaso Subini, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

del ritorno ai miti irrazionali e alle passioni private"[131] ("the years of trust in reason and in politics to the years of disillusionment and of the reversion to irrational myths and private passions").

Insomma, cos'è che ha *visto* Pasolini in quei due anni [namely, 1964-66], tra le capriole della propria intelligenza? Ha visto sparire la realtà, inghiottita dalla borghesia; e ha capito che in quella mancanza di realtà ("irrealtà" è la parola che gli presta l'amica Morante) non c'è più una sponda sicura per il Poeta.[132]

Around the years 1964-66, a profound crisis shattered Pasolini's political idealism as well as his thoughts about the artist's own engagement within society. Those were the years in which he began to recognize a rapid and radical "anthropological" transformation in Italy connected to the so-called "economic miracle" and the subtle imposition of consumerism as a way of life.

[…] [I]n questo momento sta minacciandoci una vera mutazione antropologica. Questa è la vera minaccia. […] La vera apocalisse è che la tecnologia, l'era della scienza applicata, quella civiltà industriale di cui parlavo, muterà antropologicamente l'uomo, farà dell'uomo qualcos'altro da quello che era prima.[133]

L'Italia nel suo insieme si sta avviando a diventare una società consumistica, un orribile mondo piccoloborghese, […]. Un'epoca storica, l'epoca della Resistenza, delle grandi speranze nel comunismo, della lotta di classe, è finita. Quello che abbiamo adesso è il boom economico, lo stato del benessere, e l'industrializzazione, che usa il Sud come riserva di manodopera a buon mercato e incomincia perfino a industrializzarlo. Vi è stato un vero cambiamento che ha coinciso grosso modo con la morte di Togliatti.[134]

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[131] V. Russo, "Riappropriazione e rifacimento: le traduzioni", in U. Todini (ed.), *Pasolini e l'Antico*, Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1995, p. 141, in Tomaso Subini, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

[132] Walter Siti, "L'opera rimasta sola", cit., p. 1934, in Tomaso Subini, *op. cit.*, p. 81. "In short, what did Pasolini *see* and readily caught with his intelligence during those two years? He saw reality disappear, swallowed by the bourgeoisie; and he understood that that lack of reality ('unreality' is the word he borrows from his friend Elsa Morante) offers no more safe shores to the Poet."

[133] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Gideon Bachmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32. "Right now we're being threatened by a true anthropological mutation. This is the true threat. […] The true apocalypse is that technology, the age of applied science, that industrial civilization I was talking about, is going to transform man anthropologically, is going to turn him into something else than he was before."

[134] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jon Halliday, *op. cit.*, pp. 44; 123. "Italy as a whole is going to turn into a consumerist society, a horrible petite-bourgeois world, […]. A historical period, that of Resistance, of the hope in Communism, of class struggle, is over. What we have now is the economic boom, the welfare state, and industrialization, which exploits Southern Italy as a source of cheap manpower, and even begins to industrialize it. There's been a true mutation that overlapped more or less with Togliatti's death."

The passage from rural poverty to apparent urban prosperity that took place in less than twenty years in Italy is seen as a sort of explosion that involved and transformed the country in the deepest. To the industrial and economic development that was speedily transforming the post-war Italian social structure into a homologated petite-bourgeois mass corresponded a series of pragmatic choices that Pasolini interprets as symptoms of a 'new collective conscience,' whose ideology is the very 'decline of ideology.'[135] Namely, it is Marxist ideology which, in the worldly language of bourgeoisie, 'has gone out of style'[136], and so has the apparent engagement of the intellectual:

Oggi, l'impegno è un alibi ormai inutile per la coscienza della borghesia italiana, che ha superato la miseria e ha valicato il primo traguardo dell'industrializzazione: e la caduta dell'impegno, come nozione-civetta, ha trascinato con sé, nella caduta, la problematicità tout court: la contestazione, l'individuo che protesta, l'anormale, il Diverso ecc. La nuova "coscienza collettiva", in Italia, esclude i problemi.[137]

The new need for stability and homogeneity brought about by neo-capitalist prosperity and 'health' in the mid-1960s causes, in Pasolini's view, an irrefutable cultural change, for which any form of dissention is revived in new, irrational ways, until it can all too easily be turned into a "fashion", and finally re-absorbed within the system that generated it. As early as 1966, Pasolini recognizes this as part of a wider process, a "something" happening in the overwhelmingly bourgeois world that needs to be observed closely and evocated through a new, more appropriate language.[138]

Ma mi sembra che se noi osserviamo quel "qualcosa" che sta accadendo nel mondo borghese, questo rovesciarsi nella quotidianità di valori negativi e ideali, violenti e non violenti: questo ripresentarsi della "povera e nuda" problematicità, forse cominceremo ad avere qualche confusa risposta… […] Questo "qualcosa", dunque, che implica un canone sospeso e una tensione senza meta, che si presenta come una novità nel mondo, se da una parte impegna a un allargamento e

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[135] See Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La Fine dell'Avanguardia", in Id., *Empirismo Eretico*, cit., p. 133.
[136] See *Ibid*., p. 132.
[137] *Ibid*., p. 133. "Today, commitment has become an useless alibi for the conscience of the Italian bourgeoisie that has overcome poverty and crossed the first finish line of industrialization: and the end of commitment as a fake notion has also made the attention to problems tout court disappear: dissent, protests, what is out of the norm, Different, etc. The new "collective conscience" in Italy sets problems aside."
[138] See *ibid*., p. 147.

forse a una modifica metodologica dell'analisi marxista, si presenta tuttavia, almeno in parte e originariamente, come indipendente dal marxismo e quindi dal mondo operaio: è una forza violenta, prefigurata solo parzialmente e nominalmente da precedenti consimili, che scaturisce dall'interno della piccola borghesia, appunto, e dal mondo contadino arcaico e preindustriale (ora in via di sviluppo).[139]

Some of the new forms of consciousness that seem to contradict scandalously both Marxist and bourgeois rationalism are identified by Pasolini as related to realities in progress such as

[u]na rivolta crescente, in forme e quantità finora mai verificate, contro la borghesia in seno alla borghesia: che scandalizzano l'ideologia della non-ideologia borghese, ma, insieme, l'ideologia marxista, che è ancora bloccata, […], alle vecchie, noiose condanne di ogni anarchia, […].[140]

On the one hand, this new kind of bourgeoisie's revolt against itself is first observed by Pasolini in the original context of a "mystically conceived democracy" like the U.S.A., where he sees an authentic revolutionary impulse that could truly lead to a civil war.[141] The social and political ferment in North America is connected to a variety of movements, some of them ideologically opposite to each other: from the groups of the New Left fighting for peace and racial emancipation to the more radical Black Panthers; from the anti-conformism of Beatniks paving the way to the hippie counterculture to the racist, pro-Vietnam-War neo-Nazi revivals. Although he is going to be disappointed by the following rapid absorption of such ferment inside the neo-capitalist system, at first Pasolini recognizes in them a completely new, even if "negative-positive force", which, in its anarchic violence, pacifist

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[139] *Ibid*. "It seems to me, though, that if we observe that 'something' that's happening in the bourgeois world, how negative values and ideals, both violent and non-violent, are spreading into everyday life: this recurrence of the 'poor and naked' problems, maybe we shall begin to find some confused answers… […] This 'something', then, which implies an openness and an aimless tension, and appears as a novelty in the world, if on the one hand requires a widening and maybe a methodological change of Marxist analysis, appears nonetheless, at least partly and originally, as independent from Marxism and thus from the working-class dimension: it's a violent force, only partially and nominally foreshadowed by similar precedents, originating from within the petite-bourgeoisie, as well as from the archaic and pre-industrial peasant world (which now is developing)."
[140] *Ibid*., p. 148. "A growing uprising, in shapes and quantities never seen before, against the bourgeoisie and inside the bourgeoisie: they have a shattering effect on the ideology of bourgeois non-ideology, but, at the same time, also on Marxist ideology, which is still stuck […] to the old, boring condemnation of any form of anarchy […]."
[141] See *ibid*., p. 149.

rage and democratic mysticism, expresses a revolutionary urge alien to both bourgeois and Marxist rationalism.[142]

In America, sia pure nel mio brevissimo soggiorno, ho vissuto molte ore nel clima clandestino, di lotta, di urgenza rivoluzionaria, di speranza, che appartengono all'Europa del '44, del '45. In Europa tutto è finito: in America si ha l'impressione che tutto stia per cominciare. Non voglio dire che ci sia, in America, la guerra civile, e forse neanche niente di simile, né voglio profetarla: tuttavia si vive, là, come in una vigilia di grandi cose.[143]

On the other hand, Pasolini's analysis also recognizes the roots of the following 1968 youth movement in Italy as endogenous to bourgeoisie itself, but extraneous to a sincere revolutionary will, whose absence only keeps it to the level of a contestation, as he most provocatively and polemically exposes in the poem *Il PCI ai Giovani!!* that very year ("Spero che l'abbiate capito/ che fare del puritanesimo/ è un modo per impedirsi/ un'azione rivoluzionaria vera."[144]; "I hope you understood/ that acting like puritans/ is a way to avoid/ a true revolutionary action."). A partner in crime is of course identified by Pasolini also in the blindness of contemporary 'official' Marxist culture, which does not see nor adapt to the latest rapid evolution of neo-capitalism, and, incapable to furnish an authentically revolutionary alternative, helps give way to the triumphant spreading of the bourgeoisie as a new "human condition"[145]:

[…] [D]opo un'improvvisa rivoluzione come quella degli anni Sessanta, di tipo tecnologico, e dopo la falsa rivoluzione del '68, che si è presentata come marxista ma che in realtà non è stata altro che una forma di autocritica violentissima della borghesia. La borghesia si è servita dei giovani per distruggere dei miti che le davano fastidio.[146]

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[142] See *ibid.*, pp. 147-149.

[143] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Guerra civile", in Id., *Empirismo Eretico*, cit., p. 151. "During my brief stay in America, I had the chance to experience the clandestine atmosphere, full of struggle, of revolutionary urge, of hope, which was typical of 1944-45 Europe. It's all over in Europe: everything seems about to begin in America. I don't mean to say that America is experiencing a civil war or anything similar, nor do I mean to prophesy it: nonetheless, people are living there as if great things are going to come."

[144] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Il PCI ai giovani!! (Appunti in versi per una poesia in prosa seguiti da una 'Apologia')", in Id., *Empirismo Eretico*, cit., p. 162.

[145] See *ibid.*, p. 165.

[146] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Gideon Bachmann, *op. cit.*, p. 56. "After a sudden, technological revolution as that of the '60s, and after the fake revolution of '68, which appeared as Marxist but was actually nothing but a kind of violent self-criticism of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie exploited young people to destroy those myths that were standing in their way."

Another of the emerging realities that, according to Pasolini, are giving shape to new forms of consciousness in the mid-1960s is the presence of the Third World; that is, the peasants', pre-industrial world, which is just breaking from prehistory into history. The centre of this world apparently left out of history is indicated by Pasolini in the Afro-American movement in the United States (in which he saw one of the bases for a civil war); but recognizes it also in hotbeds spread worldwide, such as the independence process in Africa, the Algerian and Cuban revolutions, up to including that part of Southern Italy that still resists industrialization and consumerism. The until then overshadowed presence of the Third World necessarily arises thus as a violent, physical revolt, a fight for one's material existence, a desperate need for the most elementary human rights. Unacceptable for a world where the recent development has made prosperity seem so easy to conquer and so hard to abandon, the Third World issue is overall seen as a scandal, and thus rejected 'outside', into otherness, object of the racial hatred of the bourgeoisie and of the substantial incomprehension of official Marxism[147]:

In questo momento storico, mi sembra che l'odio razziale sia l'odio che prova un borghese verso un contadino: ossia l'odio che prova un uomo integrato in un tipo di civiltà moderna e cittadina, contro un uomo che rappresenta un tipo precedente di civiltà, che ancora minaccia la presenza dell'attuale: dimostrando fisicamente che un regresso è sempre possibile (socialmente). Ecco perché si odiano razzialmente i negri, in quanto poveri, e i poveri, in quanto, inevitabilmente, diversi di pelle, essendo addetti ad antichi lavori che comportano necessariamente l'aria aperta e il sole (l'effetto del sole sulla pelle sembra avere un valore decisivo nell'odio razziale di chi vive in case civili, e, se lavora la campagna, lo fa da padrone, o industrialmente). Negri, sudeuropei, banditi sardi, arabi, andalusi ecc.: hanno tutti in comune la colpa di avere i visi bruciati dal sole contadino, dal sole delle epoche antiche.[148]

Pasolini also expresses the need to recognise the arrest and the downfall of a sincere revolutionary thrust in most of those countries where a communist revolution had taken

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[147] See Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La Fine dell'Avanguardia", cit., p. 149, and Id., "Guerra civile", cit., p. 153.
[148] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "L'odio razziale", in Id., *Il Caos*, Milano: Garzanti, 2015, p. 16. "I think that in this historical moment racial hatred is the hatred a middle-class individual feels towards a peasant: that is, the hatred felt by a man integrated in a certain kind of modern and urban civilization against a man that represents an antecedent kind of civilization, which still threatens the existence of the current one: by physically demonstrating that (social) regression is always possible. Here's why black people are object of racial hatred, because they are poor, and the poor are unavoidably dark-skinned, because they traditionally do ancient jobs that require exposure to sun (sun's effect on skin seems to be one of the most determinant causes of racial hatred in those people that live in comfortable, city houses, and, if they happen to work in the country, they are usually landowners or industrial owners.) Black people, Southern Europeans, Sardinians, Arabs, Andalusians, etc.: what they all have in common is being guilty of getting their faces burnt by the sun of peasants, the sun of ancient eras."

place (first of all, of course, in the U.S.S.R.). Once the industrial revolution of rural areas is accomplished, with the consequent modernization of the archaic world of peasants, the initial revolutionary thrust of both workers and intellectuals seems fatally – to use Pasolini's own expression – to sink into a sort of "enormous swamp."[149] Established as the dominant (or unique) ideology of the new state apparatus, Communism is subject to a slow, unavoidable demagogical decline that turns it into a bureaucratic dictatorship such as Stalinism. Pasolini's bitter conclusion is that "dopo ogni rivoluzione industriale contadina ci sarà uno stalinismo (vedi ora, forse, Cuba)"[150]; ("after every industrial-agricultural revolution there will be a Stalinism [see, perhaps, Cuba nowadays])." Besides Cuba, this process can be distinguished in countries such as Czechoslovakia, Romania and Hungary, where – Pasolini observes in a 1966 article – it is possible to perceive an atmosphere of political and intellectual uneasiness and disquiet, which was going to lead to the "Prague Spring" of 1968 and its dramatic repression. The main reason for that is summed up in the fact that the communist revolution had not been carried forward; that is

lo Stato non si è decentrato, non è scomparso, e gli operai nelle fabbriche non sono veramente partecipi e responsabili del potere politico, e sono invece dominati – chi non lo sa, ormai, e non lo ammette? – da una burocrazia che di rivoluzionario ha solo il nome. E che naturalmente, dà dei "rivoluzionaristi piccolo-borghesi" a coloro che invece credono ancora che la "rivoluzione debba continuare."[151]

Summing up, Pasolini notes that a further major issue in need of consideration is the uninterrupted presence of Nazism as the only ideology that has actually sustained the bourgeoisie and still does.[152] The silent background to those emerging realities just mentioned is in fact the persistence of the deeply irrational, conservative instinct that defines the bourgeois individual, and that, apparently rationalized or codified when transposed to a mass level, gives rise to fascist aberration:

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[149] See Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La fine dell'avanguardia", cit., p. 149.
[150] *Ibid.*
[151] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Guerra civile", cit., pp. 150-151. "The State wasn't decentered, didn't disappear, and factory workers do not really participate in political power, and, on the contrary, are dominated – who doesn't know that, by now, and doesn't admit it? – by a bureaucracy which is only formally revolutionary. And which, of course, accuses those who believe that 'the revolution should be carried on' of being 'petite-bourgeois fake-revolutionaries.'"
[152] See Id., "La fine dell'avanguardia", cit., p. 149.

Ma si può parlare di rinascita nazista? E' mai morto il nazismo? Non siamo stati dei pazzi a crederlo un episodio? Non è esso che ha definito la piccola borghesia "normale" e che continua a definirla? C'è qualche ragione per cui i massacri in massa razzistici debbano essere finiti, coi loro lager, le loro camere a gas ecc.?[153]

The bourgeoisie's distorted idea of the self and of reality, increased by the recent pervasive development of neo-capitalism, cannot but originate utterly alienated and unrecognizable feelings such as unmotivated hate (especially racial hate), whose latest most tragic result Pasolini finds in Kennedy's assassination.[154]

These observations, shortly enumerated in the seminal 1966 essay "La Fine dell'Avanguardia" ("The End of the Avant-Garde"), are part of a wider discourse on the need to redefine the role of artistic works in a changing society. The essay begins as a response to Lucien Goldmann and Roland Barthes about the acknowledgement that classical Marxism had entered a state of crisis. Although Pasolini takes issues with them over the terms in which they framed the crisis, he finds himself in agreement with their more general conclusions, which lead him to ascribe Goldmann and Barthes among the so-called "contenutisti", focusing as they do on the content of a work rather than on isolated linguistic features. Pasolini goes on to describing his own tortuous discovery of *contenutismo*; that is, the idea that the content of a stylistically coherent work determines its form, a discovery that prompted him to transfer his attention from the language of the novel to moving pictures.[155] He illustrates it through the plot of the first episode of a film he is planning (the one of which *La Terra Vista dalla Luna* and *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* are going to be the only episodes he completed), in which a teacher (Totò) explains to his pupil (Ninetto Davoli) what cinema is:

Il cinema è una lingua – canta Totò – una lingua che costringe ad allargare la nozione di lingua. Non è un sistema simbolico, arbitrario e convenzionale. Non possiede una tastiera artificiale su cui suonare i segni come campanelli di Pavlov: segni che evocano la realtà, come appunto un campanello evoca al topolino il formaggio e gli fa venire l'acquolina in bocca. Il cinema non evoca la realtà, come la lingua letteraria; non copia la realtà, come la pittura; non mima la realtà, come il

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[153] *Ibid.*, p. 148. "Can we really talk about a Nazi revival? Did Nazism ever disappear? Weren't we crazy to believe it was just an episode? Didn't it actually define the 'common' petite-bourgeoisie and still does? Is there a reason why we should believe that racial mass murders are really over, together with their concentration camps, their gas chambers, etc.?"

[154] See Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Guerra civile", cit., p. 153.

[155] See Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

teatro. Il cinema *riproduce* la realtà: immagine e suono! Riproducendo la realtà, che cosa fa il cinema? Il cinema esprime la realtà con la realtà. […] Così, tutti felici, Totò e Ninetto, escono dalla scuola, e vanno a realizzare la teoria per le strade, per le piazze, tra la gente. E il cinema è questo! Non è altro che stare lì, nella realtà! Tu ti rappresenti a me e io mi rappresento a te![156]

Therefore cinema, as the "written language of reality" that furnishes us with "a semiology of reality in its natural state," leads Pasolini to acknowledge that reality already expresses itself in a language of its own, while in literature reality only expresses itself *in absentia*.[157] Bringing such a discourse to the present uncertain situation of worldwide change, he identifies a series of "principi di situazioni reali che vogliono essere evocate o testimoniate"[158] ("principles of real situations that ask to be evoked or witnessed"), whose very undeniable and pressuring presence testifies to the central thesis of the essay; namely, the necessary and inevitable decline of a literary response like the Italian Avant-Garde. Pasolini's view is that the burning actuality or "senso nuovo"[159] ("new meaning") of these world sceneries is so strong, yet outside any rationalistic codification, as to overcome the old, rationally codified ones and their artistic answers, especially a fashionably inclined and politically elusive movement like the Italian Avant-Garde. In short, the cultural change of the mid-1960s imposes the necessity to express the world with new, appropriate means[160]:

Mi sembra, insomma, che non manchi una "realtà" da evocare – in qualsiasi modo. E anzi che è colpevole il non farlo. E poiché quella realtà ci parla col suo linguaggio ogni giorno, trascendendo – in un "senso" ancora indefinito (è certo solo che è disperazione e contestazione furente) – i nostri significati – è bene, mi pare, piegare a questo i significati! Se non altro per porre, appunto, delle domande in opere anfibologiche, ambigue, a canone "sospeso" […]: ma niente affatto, in questo, disimpegnate, anzi![161]

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[156] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La fine dell'avanguardia", cit., pp. 141-142. "Cinema is a language – Totò sings – a language that forces us to widen the notion of language. It is not a symbolic, arbitrary and conventional system. It does not possess an artificial keyboard upon which you can play signs like Pavlov's bells: signs that evoke reality, just as the bell evokes nothing other than cheese to the little mouse and makes his mouth water. Cinema does not evoke reality as literary language does; it does not copy reality like painting; it does not mimic reality like theatre. Cinema *reproduces* reality: image and sound! In reproducing reality, what does it do? Cinema expresses reality with reality. […] So, Totò and Ninetto, all happy, get out of the school, and go out on the streets, among people to put theory into practice. And that's what cinema is! It is nothing but being there, within reality! You represent yourself to me and I represent myself to you!"
[157] See *ibid.*, p. 144.
[158] *Ibid.*, p. 149.
[159] *Ibid.*
[160] See *ibid.*
[161] *Ibid.*, p. 147. "In short, I think that there is a 'reality' that needs to be evoked – in any way. In fact, not evoking this reality is a guilt. And since that reality speaks to us with its everyday language, transcending – in a still undefined 'way' (only its desperation and furious protest is clear) – our meanings – we should, I think,

Cinema is Pasolini's answer to the urge of letting such an undefined reality express itself in its own peculiar way, in a work that would keep its ambiguity intact, the suspension of meaning proper to an action in progress. *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?*, as part of a never-fully-realized film about cinema, is a concretion of his very idea of *contenutismo*, "an astonishing translation of style (according to him the key missing component of Goldmann's and Barthes's *contenutismo*) into just such a semiology of reality"[162]. This way, the film realizes the uprooting action of the cinematic sublime: in investing cinematic adaptation with the power of cultural critique towards the source(s)[163], Pasolini opens up fiction, annuls its delusive power, and re-discovers a renewed, unmediated sensuous contact with things. The film's sublime aesthetic, built around content's breaking out of form – that 'rip in the paper sky' that discloses "l'immenso cielo azzurro dove corrono veloci delle bianche nuvole"[164] ("the immense blue sky where white clouds are running swiftly") – acts itself as a Gramscian revolutionary agent. As a matter of fact, Pasolini (like Foucault) sees representation as a discourse that, as a form of power, imprisons and reifies, "mercifica il corpo, riducendolo a 'cosa'" ("Power reifies the body, by reducing it to an object.")[165], becoming part of a system of control that, by the mid-1960s, was reaching such a stage of sophistication that its effects almost went unnoticed:

[Il potere di oggi] è un potere che manipola i corpi in un modo orribile, che non ha niente da invidiare alla manipolazione fatta da Himmler o da Hitler. Li manipola trasformandone la coscienza, cioè nel modo peggiore, istituendo dei nuovi valori che sono dei valori alienanti e falsi, i valori del consumo, che compiono quello che Marx chiama un genocidio delle culture viventi, reali e precedenti.[166]

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adjust our meanings to it! With no other purpose than asking questions in amphibological, ambiguous, 'open' works of art […]: but while doing this these works should not be disengaged; quite the opposite!"
[162] Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 229.
[163] See *ibid.*, p. 227.
[164] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?", in Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
[165] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Gianni Borgna, *Pasolini Integrale,* Roma: Castelvecchi, 1995, p. 53. The English translation is quoted from Sonia Massai, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
[166] Pier Paolo Pasolini in an interview taken from the documentary *Salò d'hier à aujourd'hui* (*Salò : Yesterday and Today*), dir. Amaury Voslion (2002). "The power in today's world […] manipulates the body horribly, and rivals Himmler and Hitler in every way. It manipulates the body by transforming it into conscience, the very worst way, establishing new values that are alienating and false. Consumerist values that fulfill what Marx calls a genocide of vital and real earlier cultures." The English translation is quoted from the subtitles in the documentary.

Il regime è un regime democratico, ecc. ecc.; però quella acculturazione, quella omologazione che il fascismo non è riuscito assolutamente a ottenere, il potere di oggi, cioè il potere della civiltà dei consumi, invece, riesce a ottenere perfettamente, distruggendo le varie realtà particolari, togliendo realtà ai vari modi di essere uomini che l'Italia ha prodotto in modo storicamente molto differenziato. […] E questa cosa è avvenuta talmente rapidamente che noi non ce ne siamo resi conto.[167]

In answer to Foucault's notion of pervasive power connected to authorial discourse, Pasolini opposes "an act of faith in human resistance to the tyranny of foregone conclusions, to the authority vested in authorship."[168] *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?*, as a movie that displays cinema's own rediscovery of things afresh in their astounding material reality, can be seen as a prelude to a new stage in human knowledge that subtracts the body from power's subtle imprisonment and reification: "La mia opera – almeno nella mia coscienza – si configura, in ultima analisi, come una lotta contro il potere (ossia la lotta del figlio contro il padre);"[169] ("My work – at least in my conscience – is, to sum up, a fight against power (that is, the fight of a son against his own father"). Pasolini's cinematic sublime works in such a way as to sustain the spectator in regaining consciousness of one's own being in the world, in line with the poet's urgent remarking that "vi sono momenti della storia in cui non si può essere inconsapevoli; bisogna essere consapevoli, e non esserlo equivale a essere colpevoli"[170] ("there are moments in history when we cannot be unaware; we need to be aware, and not being so means being guilty").

[F]inché perdura il sistema che si combatte (nella specie, il sistema capitalistico) esso non va considerato il male, perché anche sotto di esso c'è la realtà, ossia Dio. Infatti la realtà è infinitamente più estesa del sistema, ma il sistema è infinitamente più esteso di noi: e quindi, come il sistema non coprirà mai tutta la vita, noi non potremo mai giungere ai confini del sistema e scavalcarlo. La realtà, di conseguenza, potremo sempre conoscerla 'attraverso' il sistema, mai 'al di là' del sistema. Tutto quello che possiamo fare è modificare il sistema, appunto, rivoluzionandolo, in modo che il rapporto

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[167] Pier Paolo Pasolini in the documentary *Pasolini e la Forma della Città* (*Pasolini and the Shape of the City*), dir. Paolo Brunatto, 1974, <http://www.teche.rai.it/2015/01/pasolini-e-la-forma-della-citta-1974/>. "We live in a democratic regime, but that acculturation, that homogenization that Fascism was not able to create, was created instead by the power in today's world, that is, the power of a consumerist society. The result is that all those different peculiar realities are being destroyed, and all those historically differentiated ways to live that Italy has developed are being taken away. […] And this has been happening all so quickly that we did not even notice."
[168] Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
[169] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "I carcerati di Parma", in Id., *Il Caos*, cit., p. 203.
[170] Pier Paolo Pasolini in Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jon Halliday, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

con la realtà, il suo conoscerla, sia, almeno nelle nostre speranze, più puro e autentico.[171]

[171] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La paura di essere 'mangiati'", in Id., *Il Caos*, cit., p. 24. "While the system which is being fought (in our case, the capitalistic one) lasts, it must not be considered evil, because reality, or God, is behind it too. As a matter of fact, reality is infinitely bigger than the system, but the system is infinitely bigger than us: thus, so as the system will never hide the whole reality, we will never be able to reach the borders of the system and overtake them. Therefore, we can get to know reality always 'through' the system, never 'beyond' it. All we can do is to try and change the system by revolutionizing it, so that our relationship with reality, our knowledge of it is, at least in our hopes, purer and more authentic."

CHAPTER V

My Own Private Idaho
by Gus Van Sant

This chapter explores a highly idiosyncratic Shakespearean appropriation, Gus Van Sant's 1991 *My Own Private Idaho*, which incorporates the *Henry IV* plays within the context of early 1990s American street life via Orson Welles's 1965 adaptation of the Falstaff narrative, *Chimes At Midnight*. The film is basically a creative reworking of the characters of Prince Hal and Poins as two adolescent gay hustlers, Scott and Mike (played respectively by Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix), who belong to a family of street boys whose 'father', shaped after Welles's own portrait of Falstaff, is an old fat drug-addict named Bob Pigeon (William Richert). Twenty-six years after its release, the most exilic and least acclaimed of Welles's films found a compelling afterlife right in his own nation's heartland: the core of Van Sant's movie (the so-called "tavern scenes") is a clear homage to Welles's initially underrated masterpiece, following nearly frame-for-frame those of *Chimes*, sometimes even in their order.[1] This fundamental pattern of intertextuality is of course far from being governed solely by the dictates of *imitation*, as the film appears from the beginning a very deliberate effort to do something new and culturally specific with the source material. As Van Sant himself explained, "I tried to forget the Welles film because I didn't want to be plagiaristic or stylistically influenced by it, even though it had given me the idea. So I referred to the original Shakespeare."[2] He also claimed that even as the film "toned the Shakespeare down" (especially in terms of language) "it was literally , from beginning to end, a restructuring of the *Henry IV* plays"; going so far as to call the Shakespeare scenes in the film "an editing job," one that "didn't involve too much

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[1] See Kathy M. Howlett, "Utopian Revisioning of Falstaff's Tavern World: Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* and Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*", in Lisa S. Starks and Courtney Lehmann (eds.), *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory*, Madison and Teaneck, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2002, p. 165. Van Sant brought this sort of stylistic homage even further in his 1998 remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which literally reproduces shot-for-shot the 1960 film, often copying Hitchcock's camera movements and editing, and reusing both the original and the musical score.
[2] Gus Van Sant in Graham Fuller, "Gus Van Sant: Swimming against the Current" (an interview), p. xxxvii, in Kathy M. Howlett, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

creation."[3] As a matter of fact, whereas in Welles's adaptation the director mentions writing credits for himself, Holinshed, and Shakespeare, Van Sant's movie is presented as his own: the director is the writer, with a credit announcing "additional dialogue by William Shakespeare."[4] While explaining why he first decided to put "a bunch of Shakespeare in the middle of"[5] *My Own Private Idaho* by appropriating the Prince Hal saga as a foundation for the film, the director actually reported to have found inspiration for the screenplay also from works of great literature as George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, Petronius's *The Satyricon* and various bits of Charles Dickens novels ("When you don't have any ideas, steal from the classics"[6], was his semi-ironic explanation for his choice). To put it again in Van Sant's words, although it was *Chimes at Midnight* that had "given him the idea,"[7] he really "started working on this story in 1978. It's based on kids I used to see on Hollywood Boulevard."[8] In the interview with Graham Fuller, he went on explaining:

[I]n *My Own Private Idaho*, I was fashioning those characters after people that I had met in Portland who are street hustlers. […] The original script was written in the seventies when I was living in Hollywood. It was actually set on Hollywood Boulevard. […] Meanwhile I had shot *Mala Noche* and eight years went by. Then I started writing again about these same street characters.[9]

In the same interview, Van Sant stated that his script for *Idaho* combined three previous screenplays, which still did not include the appropriations from Shakespeare and Welles[10], derived from a huge and problematic process of revision. Thus, the documentary narration of the life of street boys, standing alongside with Shakespeare and Welles as the basis of Van Sant's new, personal compound, relocates the Bard's "minions of the moon" (as the script came to be called at one point) to the streets of Portland, among socially and sexually marginalised characters. As Van Sant himself remarked, "[t]he Shakespearean

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[3] Gus Van Sant in Graham Fuller, *op. cit.*, pp. xxv, xlvi, in Andrew Barnaby, "Imitation as Originality in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*", in James R. Keller, Leslie Stratyner (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 40.
[4] See Hugh H. Davis, "'Shakespeare, he's in the alley': *My Own Private Idaho* and Shakespeare in the streets", *Literature/Film Quarterly*; 2001; 29, 2, p. 117.
[5] Gus Van Sant, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues and My Own Private Idaho – Screenplays*, London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1993, p. 37, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* , VI:2 (Oct 2011), <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/782965/show> .
[6] Gus Van Sant in Lance Loud, "Shakespeare in Black Leather", in *American Film*, vol. XVI, n. 9, Hollywood, September-October 1991, <http://www.whoaisnotme.net/articles/1991_09xx_sha.htm>.
[7] Gus Van Sant in Graham Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. xxxvii.
[8] Gus Van Sant (quoted from the jacket of the 1993 laser disc of *My Own Private Idaho*), in Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
[9] Gus Van Sant in Graham Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. xxiii, in Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
[10] See Gus Van Sant in Graham Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. xxvii.

passages [helped him] underscore the timelessness of the story Scott and Mike are enmeshed in"[11], and "the reason the Shakespeare is in the film is to transcend time, to show that those things have always happened, everywhere."[12] In fact, Van Sant's own *repetition with a difference* of Shakespeare, working as a means of giving voice to what is historically specific both in cultural and personal terms, is going to be considered as the main strategy by which the cinematic sublime operates in the film.

5.1 "We Have Heard the Chimes at Midnight"

The Shakespearean core of the movie focuses mainly on the characters of Scott and his two fathers (the blood one, the mayor of Portland, and the chosen one, Bob), in a replay of the Hal/Henry IV/Falstaff relationships of the *Henry IV* plays. While Scott's story is set out verbally in terms of Shakespeare's Prince Hal narrative, it is visually filtered through Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* (Van Sant himself claimed that he "didn't fully know who [Scott] was"[13] until he had seen Welles's movie). Like the king-to-be, Scott is initially on war terms with his father, the mayor of Portland, and the paternal conflict seems to have propelled him into street life as a sign of rebellion to his authority:

Scott: And my dad… he has more fucking righteous gall than all the property and people he lords over. And those he also created… like me, his son. But I almost get sick thinking that I am a son to him. You know you have to be as good as him to keep up. You have to be able to lift as big a weight. You have to be able to throw that weight as far… or make as much money… or be as heartless… to hold your ground. My dad doesn't know that I'm just a kid. He thinks I'm a threat. [14]

As Hal chooses the 'dissolute' Falstaff over his real, royal father, so does Scott, replacing his father the mayor with Bob, a hippysh drug dealer ("I'd say I love Bob more than my father and my mother"; "He was fucking in love with me"). Still, Scott is on the street but not *of* it, because, as he makes clear from the beginning, he is "going to inherit money. A lot of money." His homosexual behaviour is likewise just opportunistic ("I only have sex with a guy for money"), and so is his choice of Bob Pigeon as his "true father" and

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[11] Gus Van Sant (quoted from the jacket of the 1993 laser disc of *My Own Private Idaho*), in Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[12] Gus Van Sant in Graham Fuller, *op. cit.*, pp. xlii-xliii, in Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

[13] Gus Van Sant in Graham Fuller, "Gus Van Sant: Swimming against the Current, an interview by Graham Fuller", in Gus Van Sant, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues and My Own Private Idaho – Screenplays*, cit., pp. xxiii-xliii.

[14] All quotes from the film are taken directly from it throughout the chapter.

lover and of Mike as his best friend. His whole identity as an outcast is a mask, which Scott is planning to "throw off" from the very beginning, just like Shakespeare's Hal with his "loose behaviour":

> *Prince*: I know you all, and will a while uphold
> The unyoked humour of your idleness.
> Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
> Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
> To smother up his beauty from the world,
> That, when he please again to be himself,
> Being wanted, he may be more wond'red at
> […] If all the year were playing holidays,
> To sport would be as tedious as to work;
> But when they seldom come, they wished-for come,
> […] So, when this loose behavior I throw off
> And pay the debt I never promisèd,
> […] My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
> Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
> Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
> I'll so offend to make offense a skill,
> Redeeming time when men think least I will. (*1 Henry IV*, I.ii.185-207)

In *Idaho*'s interpretation of the monologue, Scott makes it clear from the beginning too that, while apparently choosing to stay with an alternative family on the streets, he is all along scheming to return to the inherited luxury and power connected to his father's authority, abandoning his outcast behaviour just as he had previously done with his 'regular' one. Soon after Scott declares his affection for Bob, in fact, he vows to reform his behaviour, anticipating his eventual rejection in a monologue to camera that re-enacts Hal's first soliloquy as played by Keith Baxter in *Chimes at Midnight*, with Falstaff/Bob ingenuously standing in the background:

> *Scott*: When I turn 21, I don't want any more of this life. My mother and father will be surprised at the incredible change. It will impress them more when such a fuck-up like me turns good than if I'd been a good son all along. All my bad behaviour I will throw away to pay a debt. I will change when everybody expects it the least.

What clearly indicates Scott's transitory position within society's left-outs is, moreover, his passage from street language to a sort of 'naturalised' Shakespeare.[15] The language of the Henriad is in fact translated "into an unstable and deliberately disconcerting amalgam of Welles's abridgement, lines drawn directly from the plays, and a patently invented contemporary street hustler argot"[16], giving shape to a sort of "bastardised Shakespearean English."[17] This modernised Shakespearean language, where the original formal or lofty poetry are replaced with colloquialisms and slang words (Keanu Reeves's "Valley-speak", for example), is associated with a visual style that is a clear homage to Orson Welles's 1965 adaptation of the Henriad.

The more strictly Shakespearean/Wellesian nucleus can be found right in the middle of the movie, opened with the introduction of Bob Pigeon (Van Sant's Falstaff) in his exchange with Budd (a young Master Shallow, played by Flea from the rock band Red Hot Chili Peppers). The two picturesque characters enter to the sound of Renaissance faire music on the soundtrack as they come back to Portland from one of their journeys. Bob's enormous and slouching figure first appears with the crazed Budd by his side, in a reworking of *2 Henry IV*, III.ii that closely echoes the opening sequence of Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*:

Budd: Jesus, the things we've seen. Do you remember a thing since we moved from Graffiti Bridge?

Bob: No more of that, Budd…

Budd: Is Jane Lightwork alive, Bob?

Bob: She's alive, Budd.

Budd: Is she holding on?

Bob: Old, old.

Budd: She must be old. She has no choice… Jesus, the things we've seen. Aren't I right, Bob, aren't I right?

Bob: We have heard the chimes at midnight.

Budd: That we have, that we have. In fact, Bob, we have. Jesus, the things we've seen.

As with Scott, Bob and Budd's language is a sort of 'naturalised' or 'bastardised' Shakespearean English, which indicates at once Shakespeare, Welles and – here more than

[15] See Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler, "Kings of the Road: *My Own Private Idaho* and the Traversal of Welles, Shakespeare, and Liminality", *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, 17.2 (Winter/Spring 1998), p. 30.
[16] Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit*., p. 214.
[17] Lance Loud, *op. cit*.

with Scott – the harsh conditions of life of street-boys. The feeling of loss that *My Own Private Idaho* inherits from Shakespeare as well as from Welles assumes, as a matter of fact, a new connotation in relation to a series of social ills, such as stealing, prostitution, drugs, and homelessness[18], as the re-contextualisation of the phrase "chimes at midnight" attests. Pronounced by an old, fat drug-addict to his young, crazed follower, the phrase now stands for all the experiences linked to the marginalisation of those people who have no social status at all: the impoverished, abused, homosexual, homeless, "doomed to hear the chimes at midnight when most people [*regular* people] are at home with their families, asleep in their beds."[19] As Van Sant himself remarked, "[t]he Shakespearean passages [helped him] underscore the timelessness of the story Scott and Mike are enmeshed in"[20]; but his appropriation is at the same time the result of a specific historical moment, and of its new social and cultural significance. There follows that social realities such as that of street hustlers stand alongside with Shakespeare and Welles in Van Sant's new, personal compound. Bob and Budd's arrival introduces both a Shakespearean and Wellesian presence into the group of street-boys, turning the sequence into a 'pastiche' that embraces Shakespearean or poetic figures, Welles's cinematic visual tropes, and a documentary street hustler jargon. The sequence, in fact, goes on as a repeat of Welles's first tavern scene, reworking Falstaff's connections with his gang as a social reality beyond legal constraints and control, outside an "accepted" or mainstream dimension. Although Van Sant declared that his intent was not to be plagiaristic of *Chimes at Midnight*, in this sequence and other instances he literally reduplicates Welles's *mise-en-scène* almost shot for shot – such as with Scott/Hal's declaration within earshot of Bob/Falstaff of his intention to mend his ways (which re-enacts Hal/Keith Baxter's monologue to camera with Falstaff/Orson Welles standing trustingly in the background); or Bob/Falstaff's death scene.[21] Other moments throughout the movie (also beyond the Shakespearean core and in association with Mike) borrow unquestionably Wellesian visual and aural tropes: odd camera angles, fleeting images, dialogue broken and unsettling music, in a sort of homage to the textual anomalies of *Chimes at Midnight*. As a matter of fact, it is the overall "creative resistance" emerging from the film's structure that evokes the influence of Welles's late work – as it results from the disjointed movements of the filmic image, as well as from the intermingling of various

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[18] See Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
[19] *Ibid*.
[20] Gus Van Sant (quoted from the jacket of the 1993 laser disc of *My Own Private Idaho*), in Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
[21] Shortly before Van Sant's film, Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) was likewise partly inspired by the visual style of Welles's *Chimes*, in particular as concerns the flashback on Falstaff's banishment and death.

stylistic codes (theatrical, documentary, avant-garde).[22] Especially if we consider further how, in the course of shooting and editing, written scenes were rearranged, other scenes invented anew for the camera, and scenes functioning like digressions (such as the images of salmon swimming upstream to their place of origin) disjointedly inserted, *My Own Private Idaho* contains a 'Wellesian' quality that is more than an exercise in style for Van Sant.

5.1.1 A Net of Stories and Styles

Many versions of the Shakespearean/Wellesian narrative later, Van Sant combined it with a counterpart, the tale of Scott's friend Mike, who is searching for a family while Scott is running away from his[23]; a role slightly amplified by Welles, but which in *Idaho* is given enough importance to be River Phoenix's most admired screen performance.[24] Mike can be considered Van Sant's personal reworking of Shakespeare's character Poins, Prince Hal's partner in crime in the mockery of Falstaff, but also his brotherly friend. Whereas Poins's intimacy with Hal remains unexplained in the Henriad, in *Idaho* it becomes the homoerotic, unrequited love Mike feels for Scott. As Van Sant himself described his adapting process:

I realized that Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays had this gritty quality about them. They had the young Henry, Prince Hal, who is about to become king, slumming on the streets with his sidekick. The young Henry seemed to be Scott and the sidekick seemed to be Mike, so I adapted the Shakespeare story to modern Portland.[25]

My Own Private Idaho is actually the combination of two individual stories that, like the characters representing them, do not seem to really belong together: a road movie about Mike's fruitless search for love and safety; and a contemporary retelling of Shakespeare, with Scott's character markedly distant from the environment of street-boys he chooses as a family. Indeed, during the editing, Van Sant cut some Shakespeare sections because, he claimed, they were "becoming like a movie within a movie."[26] As a matter of fact,

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[22] See Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler, *op. cit*., p. 33.

[23] See Lance Loud, *op. cit*.

[24] River Phoenix's interpretation in *Idaho* was actually acclaimed with several awards: he received the "Volpi Cup for Best Actor" at the 1991 Venice Film Festival; "Best Male Lead" from the Independent Spirit Awards, and "Best Actor" from the National Society of Film Critics.

[25] Gus Van Sant in Graham Fuller, *op. cit*., p. xxv, in Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit*., p. 41.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. xxxviii, in Susan Wiseman, "The Family Tree Motel: Subliming Shakespeare in *My Own Private Idaho*", in Richard Burt, Lynda E. Boose (eds.), *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 207.

commentators have often talked about *Idaho* as two movies in one, although that might actually risk missing out that it was Van Sant's intention to incorporate the two stories while stylistically remarking that they are worlds apart. So, if it does not come to "a movie within a movie", the presence of Shakespeare in *Idaho* does seem to produce two cohabiting and contrasting narrative strategies that organise the differentiation of Mike and Scott's identities.[27] The use of opposite visual and verbal languages and styles apparently separates the stories of Scott and Mike, so that the spectator perceives them almost as set apart.[28] While Mike's displacement is conveyed visually by means of a fragmented imagery that blurs both temporal and spatial levels, Scott's Prince Hal-like skill in rhetoric, control of dialogue, and its relation to Shakespeare seem instead to require the audience to transfer their focus from the image to the spoken word.[29]

Being born at this intersection of the "practice of reading" and the "practice of viewing"[30] Shakespeare, Scott's story is connected to verbal language, and developed through dialogue-heavy sequences.[31] His (awkward) mixing of street language and a sort of translated or 'naturalised' Shakespeare seem to point out not just his coldness, but also his pragmatic, almost Machiavellian instrumentalization of the experience of the outcast world in order to be successfully granted into "acceptable" society. Either from the cover of a porn magazine or in an updated Shakespearean soliloquy like the one previously quoted, Scott talks directly to the camera on several occasions (unlike Mike, whose speech is vague and fragmentary since he belongs to a non-verbal or pre-linguistic realm). Nonetheless, he does not seem to bring further the complicity Prince Hal could establish with the spectators, especially not as Keith Baxter appears to do in Welles's *Chimes*. Reeves's monologues to the camera, in fact, result less sympathetic than Baxter's, revealing a colder, more self-interested Prince Hal – especially since he is placed in direct opposition to Mike, with whom the audience is led to identify.

Mike, meanwhile, is driven through the narrative by *loss*, by the unconscious unacceptance of his past, the inconsistency of his memories, and his attempt at re-building them ("My mom's house was blue. No, it was green. How could I forget that?"). His search

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[27] See Kate Chedgzoy, *Shakespeare's Queer Children*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, in Susan Wiseman, *op. cit.*, p. 208.
[28] See Susan Wiseman, *op. cit.*, p. 204.
[29] See Scott Tobias , "*My Own Private Idaho* is a personal statement and a River Phoenix memorial", *The A.V. Club*, Mar 21, 2013, <http://www.avclub.com/article/imy-own-private-idaho-iis-a-personal-statement-and-94005>.
[30] See Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[31] See Susan Wiseman, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

creates the crisis that drives the main narrative of the film, which can be represented as a journey. Loss and the following restlessness and urge to move are actually what triggers the action in the whole film: coming from an uncertain background, with no regular family, Mike lives as a total outcast in a postmodern urban wilderness, always on the run, constantly and vainly struggling to go *home* (*Hans*: "Where do you want to go?" *Mike*: "Home"). The search for his mother, who abandoned him in early childhood, brings him to his birthplace in Idaho, then all the way to Italy and then back to Portland. On the other hand, it was Scott who abandoned his wealthy and powerful father to live on the streets, only to finally reject his life as an outcast and get back to the world of money and politics he is going to inherit from him. While Scott's identity goes back to the Shakespearean written text, the notion of selfhood embodied by Mike is entirely connected to a meta-cinematographic discourse: his memories are reproduced as home movies, his trance-like seizures as time-lapse animation. Mike's story relies on those filmic strategies traditionally used to cheat time and space, which allow his disorientation and displacement to be shared by the audience.[32]

But Scott's and Mike's stories are in their turn entangled in a net of other stories, so that Shakespeare is far from being the only intertextual marker in the film. As a matter of fact, we could identify *Idaho*'s relationship with Shakespeare as situated within a broader textual and visual environment giving thus shape to "an intertextual mosaic blending […] Shakespeare with popular culture references ranging from songs on the soundtrack to a Simpsons episode."[33] This merging of canonical literature and popular entertainment is consistent with the film's overall hybrid structure, where different languages, genres and styles intermingle within a form that is in constant transformation – and whence, as we are going to see, originates the disrupting effect of the cinematic sublime. Like most of Van Sant's works, *My Own Private Idaho* exposes the intrinsically metamorphic quality of the cinematographic image, which, reproducing reality (potentially) infinite times and thus always renewing the experience of it, makes film a constitutionally unfinished, open work, in continuous evolution. This stylistic instability, in fact, parallels the centrality of themes such as movement and transformation, which brings the characters in *Idaho* to be constantly on a journey, both literally and allegorically. According to the director himself, *My Own Private Idaho* is about "looking for a home. You may not find one, but you keep looking."[34] As far apart as they may seem, though, their inability to stick anywhere for long makes both

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[32] See Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[33] Hugh H. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
[34] Gus Van Sant in Lance Loud, *op. cit.*

Mike and Scott's identities appear to be fluid or loose, unfixed, always in transformation: it is *movement* that determines their unstable, marginal status, exposing physical, social, as well as cinematic boundaries to constantly re-shape and re-define themselves.

5.2 Repetition with a Difference

In literary as in cinematographic tradition, characters walking or riding apparently nowhere or on a seemingly endless road are one of the most common *τόποι* of transition, a symbol of metamorphosis. Since the last decades of the XIX century, the image of walking men has been object of a renewed interest, also thanks to the contemporary appearance of the cinematographic medium. According to Susanne Liandrad-Guigues, such an image is a "dynamic allegory" which dominates both the scientific and aesthetic imagery of the 19th century, fascinated as it was by the rhythms of pace and by the repetition of a gesture that annuls and repeats itself (potentially) endlessly.[35] Under the focus of both science and artistic avant-garde, the wandering subject begins to be considered not merely a theme, but also an active agent of transformation, a dynamic principle that transmutes the space around him/her, thus bringing about an actual subversion of the traditional, stable categories of representation.[36] From the visual arts to photography, physiology and then cinema, catching the human figure in movement brings about a disconnected and multiplied perception of both time and space, as the late-19th-century technique of chronophotography typifies. Massively developed by French physiologist Étienne-Jules Marey, this technique consists of "a set of photographs of a moving object, taken for the purpose of recording and exhibiting successive phases of motion"[37], which results in the sectioning of movement into moments, of space into time. It becomes thus visually concrete that movement multiplies the body, producing "ghosts" that ultimately confound the boundaries of the moving subject and the space around it[38]: what the exploration of movement brings about is a scenery in constant transformation, by which the human figure is deprived of a stable framework in which it

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[35] See Susanne Liandrad-Guigues, Estétique du Mouvement Cinématographique, Paris: Klincksieck, 2005, p. 111, in Barbara Grespi, "Il cinema metamorfico di Gus Van Sant", in Id. (ed.), *Gus Van Sant*, Venezia: Marsilio, 2011, p. 33.

[36] See Barbara Grespi, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

[37] "Chronophotograph", *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, C. & G. Merriam Co., 1913, retrieved August 23 2017 from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Chronophotograph>.

[38] I report a quote by Marey that briefly mentions this blurring effect of movement: "Non bisogna cercare di ottenere attraverso la cronofotografia le immagini complete del soggetto che si studia, perché esse si confonderanno in modo inestricabile, […]." ("We cannot try to use chronophotography so as to obtain complete images of the subject we are studying, because they will interosculate in an inextricable way.") Étienne-Jules Marey, *Le Mouvement*, Paris: Masson, 1894, p. 61 (the translation of the passage from French to Italian is by Barbara Grespi), in Barbara Grespi, *op. cit.*, p. 35. The translation from Italian to English is mine.

could shape its own identity, and is left stranded in-between, always in the process of looking for one.

As for modern cinema, the erring of characters is considered by philosophers such as Deleuze as their most distinctive trait. In his reflections on the "forme-bal(l)ade" (a term that conveys both the sense of "balade" – French for "trip" – and "ballade", which means "ballad", "song"), for instance, the French philosopher sees in the cinematographic motif of 'wandering' a manifestation of the crisis coming from the disconnection between man and world.[39] In *Idaho*, movement becomes what the film is both thematically and formally built around, its structure being based on main strategies such as appropriation or 'repetition with a difference'. As a dynamic process that constantly renews itself, repetition is the basic creative principle that organises the movie on different levels, aimed not so much at a post-modern formal pastiche, as at creating a movement within the filmic form that inevitably turns into a transition within the mind of the viewer:

"Ebbene, che cosa succede allo spettatore di fronte alla ripetizione con differenza, alla percezione di continui slittamenti di grana, supporti, direzioni e ritmi? L'effetto principale è il movimento, l'oscillazione dell'occhio, il transito mentale fra due poli, e la possibilità di vagare, di fermarsi nel mezzo."[40]

This dynamic experience, which Grespi associates to the one described by Jacques Aumont in reference to a pictorial series (such as Monet's Cathedrals), brings the eye to compare images which are apparently the same but actually different; in which action, Aumont remarks, "lo sguardo acquista di fatto una possibilità nuova: quella di ritrovarsi *fra* tutte e due, là dove non c'è nulla, nulla di visibile. Diventa uno sguardo intermittente, uno sguardo a eclissi"[41] ("the gaze actually attains a new possibility: that of standing in between them, where there is nothing visible. It becomes an intermittent, eclipse-like gaze"). From its inevitable in-betweenness, the cinematic eye becomes capable of pointing out the 'difference within the same' and viceversa. The ultimate consequence of repetition within a cinematographic work, then, is the continuous crossing and redefinition of boundaries,

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[39] See Barbara Grespi, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 31. "What happens to the spectator while facing repetition with a difference, while perceiving continuous shifts of film grain, supports, directions and rhythms? The main effect is movement, the oscillation of the eye, the mental transit between two poles, and the possibility to wander, to stop right in the middle." (The English translation is mine)
[41] Jacques Aumont, *L'Occhio Interminabile. Cinema e Pittura*, Italian trans. by Daniela Orati, Venezia: Marsilio, 1992, p. 62, in Barbara Grespi, *op. cit.*, p. 31. The English translation is mine.

which translates into the challenge to or transformation of traditional categories of representation.

In Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, the 'repetition with a difference', foregrounded by the relocation of Shakespeare's Henriad and Welles's *Chimes* within the new context of early 1990s street life in Portland, is the starting point of my analysis of the film's sublime aesthetic. As the title itself forestalls, it responds to the overall strategy of appropriating or embodying the outside, public space into one's inside, private self, from which it is possible to open the film to its cultural and social background. Drawn from the 1980 song by B-52's, *Private Idaho*, it appropriates the middle-west state of Idaho, turning it into a "state" of mind, a metaphor for one's inwardness, as the song already suggests ("You're living in your own Private Idaho/ Where do I go from here to a better state than this?"). As a matter of fact, the phrase "to live in one's own private Idaho" has become an idiomatic expression, defined by Urban Dictionary as "'living inside an Idaho potato', or a very small place. Metaphorically, it refers to someone who is not paying attention because they are daydreaming, or under the influence, or otherwise wrapped up within their own very narrow sphere of interest or frame of reference."[42] The opening, pre-credit sequence introduces the film by glossing out the dictionary entry of "narcolepsy" ("a condition characterized by brief attacks of deep sleep"), which we are soon going to find out is the pathology by which Mike is affected when placed under stress, and which has roughly the same function as drugs or alcohol in other Van Sant's movies. At the same time, on a meta-cinematographic level, it announces the "symptom" which affects the film's overall structure as well. As a matter of fact, Mike's narcolepsy, being a "trancelike subjectivity, a liminal performance that is neither regulated sleep nor distracted sentience," is enlisted by Van Sant "as a formal device with which to bridge spatial and temporal transitions (when Mike wakes up he is invariably in a new location). It is, moreover, not just a marker but a complex bearer of meaning, a signifier of *transition* as thematic substance of the work."[43] Beyond the mere contents, narcolepsy is also the formal "condition" of the movie, signalling the dreamlike journeys of which it is made, with the abrupt shifting among a variety of tightly interwoven intertextual references, artistic languages, cinematographic techniques, genres and styles. The "setting" of the character's (and, metonymically, the film's) mental condition is then replaced by a different denotative *state*, "Idaho", in a second title. As the

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[42] "Own private Idaho", *Urban Dictionary*,
<http://it.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Own%20private%20Idaho.>.
[43] Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

film begins, we see Mike stranded in the middle of nowhere, on a deserted road somewhere between Portland and Idaho, apparently caught on a journey (we do not know whether it is the beginning or the end). The wide, seemingly endless road in Idaho is one of the many recurring visual landmarks in the film, coming back in the middle and final sequences, and a metonymy of the in-between status Mike finds himself in as a homeless, narcoleptic, gay prostitute. This most immediate symbol of disjointedness, which confounds temporal and spatial dimensions, is to Mike, himself disjointed from all traditional forms of sociality, his only connection, something familiar, human and comforting more than family themselves. The detachedness of the road τόπος produces the paradox of a reassuring familiarity – Mike associates the road to a "fucked-up face", which can be trusted as a familiar presence because it keeps coming back to him. With its persistent recurrence, the road acquires a unifying function in the hybrid and fragmented imagery connected to Mike, as he immediately *appropriates* that nowhere, agoraphobic landscape, turning it into a private, personal place in his mind:

I always know where I am by the way the road looks. Like I just know that I've been here before. I just know that I've been stuck here, like this one fucking time before, you know that? Yeah. There's not another road anywhere that looks like this road, I mean exactly like this road. It's one kind of place, one of a kind, like someone's face, like a fucked-up face.

The déjà vu experienced by Mike anticipates the repetitiveness through which his story is built over the course of the film: his vain and endless search for an identity, a home, and his mother, which seems to envelope him in a spiral with no way out. On an overall structural level, this sense of repetition might also foreground the appropriative strategy around which the whole film builds itself as a 'repetition with a difference' of a wide range of intertexts. Mike claims that he "[has] been there before", marking the beginning of the film's own narrative memory, and meta-cinematographically announcing that intertextual allusion animates its structure.[44] "Mike's déjà vu thus marks Van Sant's own self-consciousness that he is returning us to where we have already been: to Shakespeare's stories of Prince Hal and Falstaff and to Orson Welles' own repetition of those stories in his 1966 *Chimes at Midnight*."[45] Nonetheless, Mike adds that the road is unique, like someone's face (later on, he will call it "my road"). He has interiorised and made *his own* the road: he talks about it as if it were a person, paralleling the camera's job, which builds it as an

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[44] See Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit*. pp. 22-23.
[45] *Ibid*., p. 23.

essential, emphasised character. The image of the road, recurring over and over and bookending the movie, is a metonymic synthesis of the way Van Sant himself deals with his net of intertextual references: in a way, Mike appropriates and moulds that road like a director, detaching it from both time and space, framing it with his own fingers in a meta-cinematographic gesture, and then the whole landscape is enclosed within an iris shot that identifies the camera eye with Mike's, as well as the spectator's.

The shift from the road into Mike's head as he falls into the first of his narcoleptic sleeps is where his (and the film's) journey really begins, made as it is of other journeys, both literary and cinematographic: from *Alice in Wonderland* and *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Wizard of Oz* and road movies such as *Easy Rider*, among which both Shakespeare and Welles play a major role. As for the opening sequence, the beginning of the journey is set by a few clear reminders (looking more like remainders) from Carrol's masterpiece. The clock Mike is distractingly looking at evokes Alice's rabbit, which then appears for real, informally addressed by Mike as his journey mate ("Where do you think you're running, man? We're stuck here together, you shit!"). Although at first he seems obstinately immobile, as if he were literally "stuck" there waiting for something, Mike's journey begins when he is hit by a narcoleptic seizure, and so does the movie. In fact, the whole film seems to be triggered by Mike's narcolepsy: as he is lying on the road having his first fit, we begin to travel with him through time-lapse shots of clouds rapidly shifting and salmon leaping upstream. Suddenly, we shift to half-memories/half-dreams of his mother fused with visions of houses dropping from the sky, which remind of *The Wizard of Oz*. Just as Mike is able to make *a* road *his* road ("I've been on this road before. This is *my* road") by fragmenting bits and pieces out of it (framing the horizon within his fingers or detecting a face out of it), so does Van Sant appropriate his source texts by turning them into disjointed images. He scatters his fragmented intertexts throughout the movie and confounds them with the memories and fantasies of Mike's narcoleptic seizures. In between two sequences, the dream-like shots of salmon fighting the currents of an Oregon river, which keep leaping up and falling back down, suggest Mike's self-destructive and vain urge to return home. The wooden houses dropping from the sky to smash onto the ground convey the surreal displacement of *The Wizard of Oz*; and the clouds flowing rapidly across the sky seem to portray Mike's own detachment from temporal and spatial boundaries. Memories from Mike's childhood are likewise spread from the opening sequence to the whole film: images of his mother or of himself as the dead Christ of Michelangelo's *Pietà* that appear during, or

immediately before, his narcoleptic trance-states, are temporally and physically disjointed, caught in dream visions, photography lapses, and home-movie footage.

The initial sequence already presents the processes by which *Idaho* develops and delivers a rich intertextual baggage – both its thematic structure and formal method.[46] As Arthur and Liebler put it, "the striking disorientation of the opening sequence summarises a stammering narrative journey that is shaped as much by detours and returns, gaps and paratactic leaps, as by direct antecedents or decipherable destinations."[47] Typical of the director's whole filmography, this coming together of different media, such as home-movie camera, television, photography and painting, is in *Idaho* especially related to the character of Mike and his shifting identity. When the focus is on Mike, both the style and the language of the movie reflect the character's: the images fleet within a Wellesian, rapid-paced editing, almost stream-of-consciousness-like, often cutting abruptly from one place or action to another, in such a way as not only to reconstruct Mike's narcoleptic episodes, but also fuse them with the viewer's own experience of the movie. By presenting Mike's narcoleptic hallucinations and memories through different visual orders (besides home movie footage, time-lapse photography or dream-like visions), the opening sequence already announces the whole film's disorderly or 'metamorphic' aesthetic: made of an intricate net of references and styles, rapidly shifting into each other, it becomes all the more ready to melt with the new terrain set out by Van Sant in both personal and historical terms.

5.3 The Fragmented Text-Body

The visual idiosyncrasies and contaminations that determine the dynamic quality of the image in *Idaho* start with the reworking and intermingling of a variety of genres and styles: the Shakespeare/Welles scenes are juxtaposed with the road movie and cinéma vérité/documentary; with home movie footage as well as with tableaux vivants and hallucinatory dreams. As for the Shakespearean core of the movie, the textual body (or bodies) of the Henriad is literally "cut into pieces that emerge, disembodied, at the margins of the cinematic text,"[48] intermingled with the rest of the (textual and human) bodies, and reified by the 'promiscuous' quality of Van Sant's cinematic frame. Although constitutionally transient and intangible, Shakespeare's text apparently brings a

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[46] See Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler, *op. cit*., p. 26.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[48] Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.

'comfortable' or reassuring background to Scott's representational narrative. With their appearance among other intertexts, the shreds of the Shakespearean textual body become synecdoches that signify the haunting or spectral whole[49]:

The fragment of the body, glimpsed at the edges of the text, cannot escape the shadow of the rest of the body that lingers tantalizingly beyond sight. When Shakespeare's text is that body, it is a body known to us, familiar enough that one fragment – "Now is the winter of our discontent…" (*Richard III*, 1.1.1); "To be or not to be…" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.56); "I know thee not, old man…" (*2 Henry IV*, 5.5.47) – is necessarily a synecdoche, allowing us to recognize the whole, ensuring that the nature of that whole – themes, characters, plots – becomes an absent-presence in the new text.[50]

This kind of intertextual relationship, besides the 'comfort' of recognizing something familiar, depends on the audience's interaction by having them add – in their minds – the Shakespearean text-body that lingers outside the movie to the fragments inside. As Linda Nochlin wrote about the partially visible bodies of the French impressionists, props that signify concealed bodies "are connected only through the relation of specularity – and it is really our position of spectatorship, reiterating the original viewing position of the artist, that holds the elements together."[51] Scott's Shakespearean origin, then, is far from making him represent "culture's lasting footprint on the subject"[52]: Shakespeare's familiar text, mirrored and reconstructed through the "specular" eyes of the audience, becomes a "spectral body"[53], disembodied and dissected by the cinematic gaze.

As a matter of fact, the director uses Shakespeare the way he uses quotations from road-movie genres, from the visual arts, from folk, country and rock music, and from popular culture in general. Although allowing viewers to discern the various sources, the disparate forms that contain them conflate in such a way that viewers are somehow forced to treat Shakespeare like a 'cowboy' or a 'punk'. To begin with, pieces of Shakespeare's textual body appear on the cover of a pornographic magazine ("Torso") showing an older man lustfully looming over a boy-actor. Titles of Shakespearean plays are purposefully misquoted to create pornographic puns: "King Leer"; "Two Gentlemen of Pomon";

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[49] See *ibid*.
[50] *Ibid*.
[51] Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, London: Thames and Hudson,1994, pp. 43-45, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[52] See Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[53] See *ibid*.

"Pleasure for Pleasure"; "Julio and Ron Dewet". As the very name of the magazine clearly suggests, Shakespeare becomes one of the fragmented and commodified bodies that seem to abound in this sequence as well as in the rest of the movie. The porn 'Shakespeare' is surrounded by magazines whose covers recreate various and old-fashioned settings, in which a cast of male figures is on display and on sell. As a matter of fact, the Shakespearean magazine is most noticeably placed among a cowboy (Scott) and a Christ (Mike), and generally fetishist images, in a revision of Western cultural, social and religious icons that seems to defy traditional heterosexual hegemony. The porn shop sequence, apparently detached from the rest of the movie, in fact prepares the viewer to the juxtaposition of incongruent intertextual references that governs the whole film. For instance, Renaissance music on the soundtrack of the sequence is later used also to announce the appearance of Bob Pigeon/Falstaff, clearly associated to the Shakespeare quotes. Besides Scott, we see another cowboy figure enter the shop, recalling the most (stereo)typically American literary and cinematographic genres – the Western and road movie – whose tropes are reworked throughout *Idaho*. Finally, Christ recurs impersonated by Mike in several tableaux vivants, which reproduce some of the most famous sculptures or paintings in Western culture (like Michelangelo's *Pietà*). All these intertexts are combined on the shelves of the porn bookshop, where they are displayed as bodily fragments destined to mass consumption.[54] Further on, Shakespeare is also briefly inscribed in the film's moment of vérité filmmaking, when we sharply move to the documentary narration of two actual hustlers in a Seattle café, who address the camera interview style and recount their first times prostituting themselves, while the song "Cherish" by popstar Madonna plays in the background. As the lines go "Romeo and Juliet/ They never felt this way I bet," one of the hustlers simultaneously remarks that his first trick "had this big fucking cock and shit and, um, it was this totally awful experience." The grittiness and authenticity of the hustlers' narratives, who report their stories with a curious lack of emotion, are both contrasted and fused with an ideal and explicitly unreal notion of "Shakespearean" love as recounted in the pop song.[55]

The process of *embodying* (rather than simply enacting) Shakespeare in *Idaho* includes his textual fragments within a series of bodies "on sale", as well as inside a track of popular, commercial music; or, further on, as part of a marketing product, "Falstaff Beer". Besides preluding to Shakespeare's own fragmentation and commodification, such a process

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[54] See *ibid*.
[55] See James Newlin, "The State(s) They're In: Intersections of the Henriad, Hustler Narratives, and Alternative Music in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*", *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference* 3: 1-12 (2009).

contributes to the film's sublime aesthetic by engaging it with *bodily* reality. The conspicuous variety of disjointed, reified visual intertexts of which the movie is made, by reifying Shakespeare too, actually opens up to a not merely updated version of the Henriad, but a renewed one, or "radicalised", precisely because it is being materially re-inscribed within a new reality. In Susan Wiseman's words, "putting *Idaho* through Shakespeare 'radicalizes' Shakespeare, giving Shakespeare's texts new meanings in a modern world."[56] Emblematically, Scott, to whom the most consistently Shakespearean part of the movie is associated, in this sequence appears as a mercenary cowboy, proudly asserting to be willing to "sell his ass":

I never thought I could make it as a real model. You know, fashion-oriented modelling. 'Cause I'm better at full-body poses. It's all right so long as a photographer doesn't come onto you and expect something for nothing. I'm trying to make a living. I like to have a professional attitude. 'Course, if the guy can pay me, then hell yeah, here I am for him. I'll sell my ass, do it on the street occasionally for cash, or I'll be on the cover of a book.

Shakespeare too, inserted within neo-capitalist consumerist society, slums in the alleys like those "street boys", like them becomes an object that is bought and sold, or even prostituted. Van Sant's appropriation does not merely make Shakespeare historically specific, but seems to absorb and re-mould it like a body, materially re-inserting it within the early 90s American underworld. As a result of this process of "radicalization", some themes from the Shakespearean source are either expanded or updated: to begin with, Hal's struggle between his two fathers underlines a rather more radical division between what is socially acceptable and what stands irremediably outside the social order; plus, Poins's intimacy with Hal is recast as Mike's unreciprocated love for Scott. The thematic connections, in fact, seem to be consistent with Van Sant's reading of *Chimes* as "an expression of homosocial intimacy manqué, with Welles's battle between the court and tavern recast as the battle between a lower-class boy hustler underworld and an elite, normative, and adult heterosexuality."[57] While seemingly bringing to the surface sub-textual sexual implications from the source texts, particularly making explicit the homoerotic potential of all-male

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[56] Susan Wiseman, *op. cit.*, p. 209.
[57] Anthony Guneratne, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

gangs that pervades the whole of the Henry plays,[58] *Idaho* claims Shakespeare's cultural heritage for a set of non-dominant values in the contemporary world.[59]

5.3.1 The Otherness of the "Open Body"

The concern with the (real and symbolic) *body* and its implications is related, in the first place, to Van Sant's choice to appropriate the Henry plays, where one of the main themes is the preoccupation with the carnivalesque inversion of power and its expression in the primacy of the body. Clayton G. MacKenzie, in fact, identifies the "motifs of repeating monstrosity in *Henry IV*"[60], the horror of bodily functions, flaws and excesses, which are often used as a visual trope for carnivalesque reversals in resistant or transgressive works of art. Body fragments can actually be both revered and parodied relics; for instance, Bakhtin observes the medieval obsession with relics becoming comic:

There was no small church or monastery that did not preserve a relic. […] Arms, legs, heads, teeth, hair, and fingers were venerated. It would be possible to give a long grotesque enumeration of all these parts of a dismembered body. At the time of Rabelais the ridiculing of relics was common.[61]

The need to somehow preserve the body, or at least its symbolic value of authenticity, and talismanic properties, leads it to be indefinitely fragmented. Thus, the pieces that must synecdochically signify the venerated original get smaller and smaller. At the same time, these progressively reduced relics are also harder to recognize as part of the former wholeness of the body. The increasing distance from the original makes these fragments lose their venerable meaning: they become comically grotesque and an object of parody. [62] From the first speech of *1 Henry IV* on, the centrality of the anatomical trope, with its grotesque and parodic function, is maintained in various forms throughout the plays of the Henriad, where dismembered body parts are enumerated with almost anatomical accuracy. Falstaff's physicality, for instance, besides visually dominating the scene, also

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[58] See Susan Wiseman, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
[59] See *ibid.*, p. 209.
[60] Clayton G. MacKenzie, *Emblems of Mortality: Iconographic Experiments in Shakespeare's Theatre*, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2000, p. 59, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[61] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington: Indiana University Press,1984, p. 350, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, *Shakespeare, Cinema, Counter-Culture: Appropriation and Inversion*, New York and London: Routledge, 2016, p. 35.
[62] See Ailsa Grant Ferguson, *Shakespeare, Cinema, Counter-Culture: Appropriation and Inversion*, cit. p. 35.

dominates the verbal exchanges between Hal and Falstaff. The Prince's comments on the latter's abundant and uneven body shape signal all those transgressions that make the world outside the Court look appealing to Hal's eyes. He literally enumerates the sinful or repulsive items connected to Falstaff's fleshliness, which sound like a parody of "a sonneteer's inventory of the beloved's attractions."[63] Subverting the traditional lyrical praises of beautiful features and virtues, Hal's listing dismembers the body and soul into "monstrous fragments".[64] On his very first appearance in *Henry IV, Part 1*, the Prince operates a sort of "dissection" of Falstaff, an "anatomy of his sins"[65]:

What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the sign of leaping houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no reason why thou should be so superfluous as to demand the time of day. (*1 Henry IV*, I.ii.5-11)

"In the prince's speech," François Laroque points out,

time is seen from the point of view of various concrete manifestations (hours, minutes, clocks, and dials) and it is emblematized in a burlesque procession with Sir John's pet sins marching by: "cups of sack," "capons," "bawds," "leaping houses," and "hot wench." […] Such concrete figuration of the abstract […] comes from an anatomy or dissection of the body."[66]

However, the revered relic turning into grotesque fragment is only one side of the dismemberment of the body, which relates to the carnivalesque world of Falstaff and his gang, and its festive rules. Outside the comic dimension of the carnival, loss of wholeness is feared:

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[63] Paula S. Berggren, "The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays", in Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (eds.), *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983, p. 21, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[64] See Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] Francois Laroque, "Shakespeare's Battle of Carnival and Lent: The Falstaff Scenes Reconsidered (*1 & 2 Henry IV*)", in Ronald Knowles (ed.), *Shakespeare and Carnival After Bakhtin*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1998, pp. 84-85, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.

Bodies that are dead, mutilated, fat, old, sick, weak, pregnant or drunk – the Otherness of the uncontrolled, "open body" – are a dominant trope in *1* and *2 Henry IV*. In the second world, they are enjoyed and parodied; in the "official" world, they are a subject of fear and terror.[67]

If in Falstaff's world the fragmented body has a fundamental grotesque or comic function, the same body also hides those fears connected to disjunction and marginality – the Otherness that threats to uncover the disruptions behind the apparent order. According to Ferguson, "[i]t is these elements of the *Henry IV* plays and the ways in which this fragmentation of the body relates to the Other, the rebel or the criminal threat, that is re-encoded, physically and metaphysically, in Idaho."[68] The film, while reproducing the imagery of body fragmentation and its double function from Shakespeare's plays, also fragments in its turn Shakespeare's textual body; in Ferguson's words, it "both appropriates Shakespearean relics and offers carnivalesque, comic inversions of their accepted meaning."[69] On the one hand, *Idaho* preserves and visually increases the "burlesque procession" of body fragments adopted from the Henriad: when focused on the body, the camera never fully reproduces it. Such is the case with Mike's mom, who appears only 'in absentia', as both temporally and physically fragmented. Alternatively, her site of birth, bottom half, legs and eyes are captured in dream visions, regressions or memories shaped through home-movie footage of Mike's childhood.[70] Likewise, in the quasi stop-motion sex scenes, only torsos, buttocks, legs, hands or mouths remain within the frame, reproducing a style in-between that of porn magazine photo stories and tableaux vivants. On the other hand, the film's approach to the body as a site for grotesque dissection is meta-cinematographically transposed back onto its use of Shakespeare's texts. The fragmentation the film operates on Shakespeare's 'revered' textual *body* can assume the disruptive function related to disjunction and its uncovering of Otherness. Like the recurrent images of bodies disembodied, almost dissected, by the frame, the partially seen textual body of Shakespeare can help recreate in cinematic terms what Linda Nochlin calls "the loss of the whole" out of which "is constructed the Modern itself,"[71] and relate it to issues of marginality in the early-1990s U.S.

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[67] Ailsa Grant Ferguson, *Shakespeare, Cinema, Counter-Culture: Appropriation and Inversion*, cit., p. 36.
[68] Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[69] Ailsa Grant Ferguson, *Shakespeare, Cinema, Counter-Culture: Appropriation and Inversion*, cit., p. 35.
[70] See Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[71] Linda Nochlin, *op. cit.*, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.

It is possible to analyse this process starting from the "anatomy of [Falstaff's] sins"[72] as appropriated and re-invented by Scott. By having Scott lean over Bob's body, it underlines the mockery of Bob/Falstaff's exaggerate physicality. On the other hand, Scott's semi-sexual posture also explicitly addresses the homosexual issue:

What do you care? Why, you wouldn't even look at a clock, unless hours were like lines of coke, dials looked like the signs of gay bars or time itself was a fair hustler in black leather. Isn't that right, Bob? There's no reason to know the time. We are timeless.

The anarchic body imagery connected to Falstaff in the Henry plays is re-interpreted through Scott and Bob with a clear allusion to homosexuality: the "leaping houses" become "gay bars" and the "fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta" is transformed into a "fair hustler in black leather."[73] The fragmentary materialization and reification of "time itself" is already present in Shakespeare's text, where the "blessed sun himself" is turned into the body of the "hot wench" (*1 Henry IV*, I.ii.6-12). We can see that it is Scott himself who appears as "a fair hustler in black leather" (sometimes wearing a biker leather jacket, or showing a punk spiked collar of black leather). He seems to represent himself metonymically as a sexually connoted figure of power: as the "fair hustler in black leather", he is associated to the "time itself/the blessed sun himself", underlining the controlling position (both physical and symbolic) in which he stands towards Bob. Finally, Scott's translation of Hal's speech adds an apparently simple statement, "We are timeless", with a possible implication that "we" extends not just back to Hal and Falstaff, but to Scott and Bob as well, and the subculture they belong to. In a meta-cinematographic discourse, Scott and Bob are at once a concretion of "time itself" and "timeless". They are characters of a movie where the leitmotif of time is, on the one hand, materialised into the present concreteness of fragments or bodies. Starting from the film's opening sequence, time is translated into tangible objects: Mike (*Alice in Wonderland*-like) looks at a clock (whose importance is highlighted by a close-up, central framing), before a rabbit appears, and his and the film's journey begin. At the same time, the movie continually deconstructs the

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[72] Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.

[73] The sequence is opened by Scott drinking from a bottle of beer labelled "Falstaff", which is a metonym of Bob/Falstaff's penchant for alcohol and bodily excesses in general, and also satirizes the use of Shakespeare in marketing.

passing of time and temporally displaces both his characters and the spectators; significantly through Mike's time-lapse dream imagery and the overall lack of temporal cohesion signalled by his narcoleptic seizures. In a cultural and social discourse, on the other hand, "we are timeless" can be extended to the "Otherness" Scott and Bob represent and the fact that, according to Van Sant, "those things" connected to their marginal condition "have always happened, everywhere."[74]

Another of the Shakespearean fragments in *Idaho* that underline their "timelessness" while reconnecting them to a new historical moment is the film's appropriation and reworking of the Gadshill incident. While Bob/Falstaff's gang attacks and robs a group of indie-rock concert-goers (the pilgrims in *1 Henry IV*, Act II, Scene ii), they are in their turn deceived by Scott and Mike in disguise who, like Hal and Poins, steal their loot, robbing the robbers. In Shakespeare's play, Falstaff's retelling of the episode and the outrageous lies is actually the reason why Poins and Hal pulled the joke in the first place:

> *Prince*: Pray God you have not murd'red some of them.
> *Falstaff*: Nay, that's past praying for. I have peppered two of them. Two I am sure
> I have paid, two rogues in buckram suits. I tell thee what, Hal – if I tell thee a lie,
> spit in my face, call me horse. Thou knowest my old ward. Four rogues in buckram let drive
> at me.
> *Prince*: What, four? Thou saidst but two even now.
> *Falstaff*: Four, Hal. I told thee four.
> *Poins*: Ay, ay, he said four.
> *Falstaff*: These four came all afront and mainly thrust at me. I made me no more ado but
> took all their seven points in my target, thus.
> *Prince*: Seven? Why, there were but four even now.
> *Falstaff*: In buckram?
> *Points*: Ay, four, in buckram suits.
> *Falstaff*: Seven, by these hilts, or I am a villain else. (*1 Henry IV*, II.iv.179-95)

Furnishing Poins and Hal with the entertainment they had hoped for, Falstaff reports the event amplifying it with grotesque hyperboles. According to Ferguson, his performance actually exposes – with a parodic result – "the inaccuracies of oral storytelling, but also interrogates the importance or otherwise of 'truth' in retelling, as compared to the gratifying

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[74] Gus Van Sant in Graham Fuller, *op. cit.*, pp. xlii-xliii, in Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

entertainment offered by such acts."[75] In *Idaho*, the image of stealing from thieves can also work as a meta-cinematographic device to highlight the intertextual "theft" from a text (Welles's *Chimes*) which has in its turn "stolen" from another one (Shakespeare's Henriad).[76] Bob's account of the double robbery then re-enacts the Shakespearean passage very closely:

Scott: Thank God you had not murdered some of them.

Bob: Murdered? Well, they are past praying for, I peppered two of them,

two punks in leather jackets.

Scott: What?

Bob: I'll tell you son, these four came in close –

Scott: You said there were two.

Bob: Four! I said there were four, Scott.

Scott: Four.

Bob: Now, these four came from the front kicking at me, pulling their knives

and I whipped out the blade and took all seven as a target, like this —

Scott: Seven? Just a second ago there were four!

Bob: In leather?

Gary: No, Bob, my friend, there was four of them and they all had leather on.

Bob: Seven, by my count!

Idaho's appropriation of the Gadshill incident gives a new significance to the relationship between *Henry IV*'s underworld characters and the hegemonic ones. Through this shift of meaning, the rulers (Jack Favor/Henry IV and his circle) seem to be as criminally disposed as the underclass – or even more mischievously so – starting from the depiction of Prince Hal/the mayor's son, Scott. Whereas in the play it is Poins who convinces Hal to be his partner in crime in the joke/deceit against Falstaff and the gang, here the roles are inverted (*Scott*: "Come on, Mickey, I have a joke I wanna play, a joke I can't pull off alone"). Although the role of Poins is generally absorbed into Mike, Van Sant creates a somehow more criminal Prince in Scott by combining his 'original' rebellious attitude with Poins's mischievous behaviour. As with Hal, Scott retains a position of superiority over Bob only by pointing out the absurd incongruities in his retelling of the

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[75] Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.

[76] See *ibid*.

episode, not because he is led by moral conscience. Scott defies Falstaff's grotesque exaggerations (right after his own deception and double robbery) not because of some moral need to re-establish the truth, but only to be entertained by Bob's "unbelievably huge lies". If Scott is only criminal for the fun of it (but then all the more so), Bob and his streetboys are instead straightforwardly placed within the marginal status of petty thieves, drug addicts and gay prostitutes. In translating Shakespeare's portrayal of groups of "outsiders" or "traditionally anathematized types"[77] into early-1990s American life, Thomas Cartelli notes that *Idaho* "record[s] a shift of sympathetic identification from ruling class to underclass."[78]

Although the presence of sympathetic identification is disputable, a shift of focus towards the underclass is clear from the linguistic changes Van Sant applied to this passage too, which explicitly re-position the characters into a new, but equally marginal cultural and social environment. "Rogues in buckram", for instance, has been transformed into "punks in leather," which can either be taken as a subcultural group, both stylistically and socially opposing the ruling class's conformism; or be interpreted as U.S. youth slang, meaning "losers" or "troublemakers". As in Scott's earlier reference to "a fair hustler in black leather", the repeated allusion to leather reinforces its connotative meaning entailing gay communities, which definitively marks them as "outsiders". As a matter of fact, Shakespeare's language is translated into what has been harshly labelled "the thieves' slang of Gayspeak"[79], referring to urban gay communities' connotative and denotative linguistic idiosyncrasy. According to Ferguson's analysis, the Shakespearean fragments are not altered in order to simply update Shakespeare's language or to cover its temporal distance and incongruity. On the contrary, emphasising the anachronistic contrast between Elizabethan and contemporary slangs seems to respond to an intentional strategy.[80] For instance, in the first passage, the film dialogue chooses not to explicitly adjust the adjectives "fair hot", but to maintain the archaic word "fair" as a pre-modifier to the present-day "hustler in black leather". In the second fragment, the verb "peppered" is not updated but inserted as it is in the new linguistic context of youth or "thief" slang of the end-of-the-century U.S.A. The result is an uneven, anachronistic pastiche that is coherent with the film's overall visual and

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[77] Harriet Hawkins, *Classics and Trash: Traditions and Taboos in High Literature and Popular Modern Genres*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, p. 122, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.

[78] Thomas Cartelli, *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 28, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.

[79] Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*, London: Fontana, 1974, p. 195, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.

[80] See Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.

textual fragmentation, its "disparate performative codes, oscillations between neo-realist transparency and full-blown stylization which undergird a liminal thematic of symbolic death and rebirth."[81]

However, resistance to harmonious integration between shards of the Henriad and of contemporary culture is an intentional aesthetic choice[82]: Van Sant himself has underlined that his use of Shakespeare is "a post-modernist move", according to which his language should function like "valleyspeak", a "secret language" that characters use "when they're together" in order to have "fun".[83] In addition, the director has also suggested to think of it like dubbing, like switching to another language: "So in the movie the characters are the same, but suddenly they're doing Shakespeare, as if they're travelling back to another time, yet where there were characters like them."[84] Thus, Van Sant seems to make a claim for Shakespeare's having noted characters and aspects in social life not that different from the ones he depicts in *Idaho*, which would make "the Shakespearean echoes valuable to us in the present, as we reinscribe their meanings or contest them or produce new ones."[85]

5.4 Sexuality and Ideology

The new dimension in which Van Sant appropriates Shakespeare's texts can be further explored considering Scott's behaviour against social norms in comparison to Hal's. As the film's starting point, Shakespeare's Henriad can be (re)considered as a story of male relationships and (personal but also socio-politically relevant) rites of initiation. As such, it mainly revolves around a "young, wanton and effeminate boy," Prince Hal, and his "unrestrained loose companions" (*Richard II*, V.iii.7-10). The king-to-be spends most of his time in the tavern, and dedicates himself to alcohol, women and petty crimes – all of such activities are immediately signalled as unfit for a future king. This is a central issue in *1 Henry IV*, because it makes Hal not worthy of assuming the crown, especially if compared to his cousin Hotspur. While Hal wastes his time dwelling in the tavern among minor thieves and prostitutes, Hotspur is contrasted to him as a paradigm of warrior-like masculinity. Hal's

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[81] Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

[82] See Kate Chedgzoy, *Shakespeare's Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 37, in Sharon O'Dair, "Cursing the Queer Family: Shakespeare, Psychoanalysis and *My Own Private Idaho*", in Adam Hansen and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. (eds.), *Shakespearean Echoes*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 130.

[83] Gus Van Sant in Amy Taubin, "Gus Van Sant Talks with Amy Taubin", in *Sight & Sound*, vol. I, n. 9, January 1992 , p. 13, in Sharon O'Dair, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

[84] Gus Van Sant in *ibid*.

[85] Sharon O'Dair, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

apparent incapability to fit in Hotspur's standard of manliness is a major source of worry to his father Henry IV. Since 'manly' qualities are strongly connected to power, Hal's initial lack of masculinity would be at the roots of his failure as a king[86]:

> *King*: […] I know not whether God will have it so
>
> […] That, in his secret doom, out of my blood
>
> He'll breed revengement and a scourge for me;
>
> […] To punish my mistreadings. Tell me else,
>
> Could such inordinate and low desires,
>
> […] Such barren pleasures, rude society,
>
> […] Accompany the greatness of thy blood […]?
>
> […] For all the world,
>
> As thou art to this hour was Richard then
>
> When I from France set foot at Ravenspurgh;
>
> And even as I was then is Percy now.
>
> Now, by my sceptre, and my soul to boot,
>
> He hath more worthy interest to the state
>
> Than thou, the shadow of succession;
>
> For of no right, nor colour like to right,
>
> He doth fill fields with harness in the realm,
>
> Turns head against the lion's armèd jaws,
>
> And, being no more in debt to years than thou,
>
> Leads ancient lords and reverend bishops on
>
> To bloody battles and to bruising arms.
>
> […] Thou that art like enough, through vassal fear,
>
> Base inclination, and the start of spleen,
>
> To fight against me under Percy's pay,
>
> To dog his heels and curtsy at his frowns,
>
> To show how much thou art degenerate. (*1 Henry IV*, III.ii.4-128)

As Alan Sinfield points out, women's place in the history plays is very limited because the male characters define themselves against other men; still, the definition of 'male' comes from constant, almost obsessive allusion to ideas of the feminine and the

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female.[87] Taking into account such ideas just to set them aside or reject them altogether is the pattern we can observe with other disorderly elements in the Henry IV/V plays. Genders and sexualities, for instance, are potentially disruptive of the dominant idea of masculinity, so that the king must either incorporate or expel them "in order to appear the undivided leader of an undivided kingdom."[88] Alongside the female, the "feminine" and the "effeminate" appear not only as features that would ruinously 'contaminate' men, but that also constantly threaten to 'contaminate' the state. Outside the Court and the city, in fact, we find Bolingbroke lamenting over the Prince of Wales's dissolute conduct. Wiling away in the taverns with "unrestrained loose companions", Hal's behaviour apparently situates the Court as over-refined or effeminate centre versus manly margin[89]:

> […] he – young wanton, and effeminate boy –
> Takes on the point of honour to support
> So dissolute a crew. (*Richard II*, V.iii.10-12)

"Effeminacy" is a coercive, ideological construct that in early-modern England was relegated to define everything that was excluded from the notion of masculine. Namely, it is founded on the misogynist idea that a male may run the risk of falling away from the proper, rational totality of "masculine essence" – and of being drawn back instead into feminine "incompleteness", into the laxity and weakness conventionally ascribed to women.[90] "Effeminacy" is thus "a way of stigmatising deviation from orthodox gender stereotypes" as part of a "policing of sexual categories […] pinioned by the fears and excitements that gather around the allegedly inappropriate distribution of gender categories."[91] It was recognised as being emotional or, in short, behaving like women. For instance, in *Richard III*, the king is accused of showing "gentle, kind, effeminate remorse" because he is unwilling to depose his brother's son. The attribute 'effeminate' again disqualifies an attitude as not truly royal or connected to power, implying that the king will have to get rid of it for the good of the nation. Spending too much time with or being too much devoted to women also generates "effeminacy"; as is the case with Romeo, who attributes his disastrous incapacity to defend Mercutio to the fact that Juliet's beauty "hath made me

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[87] See Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 128.
[88] *Ibid*., p. 129.
[89] See *ibid*., pp. 130-131.
[90] See Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., p. 15.
[91] *Ibid*.

effeminate." (*Romeo and Juliet*, III.i.116)[92] As for the Henriad, it is Falstaff that embodies this idea of effeminacy. On the one hand, he is too much devoted to women – although he probably amplifies this attitude by talking about it more than actually acting. On the other hand, he also bonds with the "wrong" person, Prince Hal, which leads him to be banished from Court in *2 Henry IV*, and to death in *Henry V*. More specifically, Falstaff personifies "unmasculine *relaxation*"[93]: he is "so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon" (*1 Henry IV*, I.ii.2-4); if his girdle should break, "how would thy guts fall about thy knees!" (*1 Henry IV*, III.iii.150) ; he is the leader of what Bolingbroke called Hal's "unrestrained *loose* companions", whom he blames for causing the prince's own "effeminacy". All his drinking, eating and joking around make Falstaff coincide with "feminine" or "effeminate" loosening, softening, weakening, relaxing. On the contrary, the masculine is seen as "taut", suggesting obvious phallic associations[94]: when encouraging her husband to behave like a man, Lady Macbeth urges him to "Screw your courage to the sticking-place," to which he replies that he "will bend up/ Each corporeal agent" (*Macbeth*, I.vii.61; 80-81). In the history plays, "manliness correlates with Englishness,"[95] hence Prince Hal's "loose" or "effeminate" behaviour preoccupies his father. His lack of *tautness* or proper masculinity would imply an apparent incapacity to assume active male/state responsibility. What it takes for Hal to properly become a king is to keep such "feminine" qualities aside or under restriction – a process that culminates in his final rejection and banishment of the one who embodies those qualities the most, his "loose companion" Falstaff:

> *King Henry*: I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.
> How ill white hairs becomes a fool and jester!
> I have long dreamt of such a kind of man,
> So surfeit-swelled, so old, and so profane;
> But being awaked, I do despise my dream.
> Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace.
> Leave gormandizing; know the grave doth gape
> For thee thrice wider than for other men.
> Reply not to me with a foo-born jest.

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[92] See Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, cit., p. 131.

[93] *Ibid*.
[94] See *ibid*.
[95] Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., p. 10.

Presume not that I am the thing I was,

For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,

That I have turned away my former self;

So will I those that kept me company.

When thou dost hear I am as I have been,

Approach me, and thou shalt be as thou wast,

The tutor and the feeder of my riots.

Till then I banish thee, on pain of death,

As I have done the rest of my misleaders,

Not to come near our person by ten mile.

For competence of life I will allow you,

That lack of means enforce you not to evils;

And as we hear you do reform yourselves,

We will, according to your strengths and qualities,

Give you advancement. (*2 Henry IV*, V.v.46-69)

The restriction of "feminine" softening qualities in favour of "manly" tautness is especially evident as the (masculine, "active") reign of Henry V embarks in a war of conquest against (feminine, "passive") France – metonymically expressed in the crude and rapid domination of Princess Katharine, the king's French fiancée. Metaphors of tautness fill Henry's military talk: "Stiffen the sinews," he orders before Harfleur; "Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,/ Hold hard the breath, and bend up every spirit/ To his full height! […] I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,/ Straining upon the start"; finally explicitly insisting that those not at Agincourt will "hold their manhoods cheap." (*Henry V*, III.i.7; 15-17; 31-32; IV.iii.68).[96] Moreover, the image that both the English and the French project of their countries is that of women needing masculine subjugation, since "the impression of legitimacy depends in part both on the monarch's production of gender difference and on the powerful subordination of the feminine to masculine authority."[97] Accuses of "effeminacy" made by both the English and the French against each other are thus the ideological counterpart of struggles for supremacy. With "masculinity" as a sort of synonym of "power", "[t]he fear of effeminization is a central element in all discussions of

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[96] See Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, cit., pp. 131-132.
[97] Jean Howard, "'Effeminately Dolent': Gender and Legitimacy in Ford's *Perkin Warbeck*", in Michael Neill (ed.), *John Ford: Critical Re-Visions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 275, in Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, cit., p. 132.

what constitutes a 'real man' in the period, and the fantasy of the reversal of the natural transition from woman to man underlies it."[98]

Significantly, "effeminacy" as constructed in Shakespeare's plays is more directly associated with a disastrous regression towards the female, but it is not distinctly linked to homosexuality – neither as defining, nor as a signal of it, as it would be in Western modern cultures. As Eve Sedgwick and others have shown, the consideration of same-sex love was defined by different patterns in early modern England than it is now, since "the structure of homosocial continuums is culturally contingent, not an innate feature of either 'maleness' or 'femaleness'."[99] Whereas in today's cultures the cement of homosocial bonding is (still) in many cases hostility towards homosexuality (repressed and/or overt), constructed as the "Otherness" against which modern societies define themselves, intense relations between men in Elizabethan England do not imply any damaging drawback into the feminine. On the contrary: if happening in a context where masculine/warrior values are dominant, male-to-male relations express the meaning and eventual aim of men's struggles.[100] As Sinfield points out, "[e]ngaging in same-sex practices, then, didn't make you either a homosexual or effeminate; in certain circumstances it made you specially masculine."[101] What is crucial to understand is that during the early-modern Age the boundaries of sexualities were dictated by different criteria than those that determine sexual boundaries in the contemporary world. Accordingly, in Shakespeare's plays there seems to be no suggestion that homosexuality was even defined as a distinct category. As Sinfield further underlines, a notion similar to what in the present-day has been codified as "homosexual individual" may have circulated in early-modern Europe, but probably just among restricted or elitist circles, aside from the dominant idea of sexuality of the time. However, we should always keep in mind that the concept of *homosexuality* as well as *individuality* we tend to apply, actually belongs to the distinct mode of thought of Western modern and contemporary society. Nothing really entitles us to think that such a concept existed or was widely known in such a way as to influence the general patterns of sexuality and gender of the early-modern Age.[102] "So, even

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[98] Stephen Orgel, "Nobody's Perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?", *South Atlantic Quarterly 88* (1989), pp. 14-15, in Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, cit., p. 135.
[99] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 5, in Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, cit., p. 134.
[100] See Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, cit., pp. 134-136.
[101] Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., p. 18.
[102] See *ibid.*, p. 14.

if certain figures were recognizably continuous with our idea of 'a homosexual,' a gay identity might still be inaccessible – incomprehensible – to almost everyone"[103] in Shakespeare's time. What Sinfield demonstrates is that

sexualities, genders, and the norms proposed for them are principal constructs through which ideologies are organised, diversely in diverse cultures but always with reference to power structures that are far wider than individuals and their psyches. They are major sites of ideological production upon which meanings of very diverse kinds are established and contested.[104]

The re-enactment of Prince Hal's confrontation with Henry IV in *My Own Private Idaho* is especially relevant to this relationship between sexuality and ideology. Here, the homosexual issue is highlighted again by Van Sant, since Scott's being a gay prostitute (although just opportunistic and not authentically so) serves this time as the main reason for the schism between him and his father, Mayor Jack Favor (Tom Troupe). To his father's eyes, he is unworthy of being the son of a mayor not just because he has chosen a life on the streets, among thieves and drug addicts; but especially because, as a gay hustler, he does not exist in his world of heterosexual, or conservatively sexual society. The level of Scott's transgression is conveyed through the clothes he is wearing: not only do they signal his streetlife, but he clearly appears as the "fair hustler in leather jacket", with his naked torso visible underneath, a spiked collar, and worn out jeans. "Thus", Arthur and Liebler point out, "all the talk of honour and manly virtue, borrowed more-or-less intact from its Elizabethan source, carries a newly subversive, polymorphous or trans-sexual edge"[105]:

I don't know whether is God trying to get back at me for something that I have done, but… your passing through life makes me certain that you are marked, and that heaven is punishing me for my mistreatings. When I got back from France and set foot in Clark County and saw what your cousin Bill Davis had done with his family's ranch, I thought "By my soul!". He has more worthy interest to my estate than you could hold a candle to. And being no older than you are, he organises operations for state senators, lobbies for the small businessmen, and has an ambitious five-year plan for the "Force" that even I would like to support. And then I have to think of you, and what a degenerate you are…

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[103] *Ibid*.
[104] Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, cit., p. 128.
[105] Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler, *op. cit*., p. 31.

Then, when Mike and Scott end up in Italy looking for the former's mother, Scott finds instead an Italian girl, Carmela (Chiara Caselli), to settle down with: this heterosexual relationship is the beginning of Scott's finally fitting into 'acceptable' societal standards – in particular, into his father's societal standards. Back to Portland, at his father's death Scott inherits his world of money, politics and heterosexuality. The degree to which Scott is totally changed is highlighted by refocusing the narrative on Mike, whose unrequited homosexual feelings for his former friend deepen his outcast status. Literally left stranded in a foreign country by Scott's abandonment, he goes back to his life on the streets as a homeless prostitute. When the film goes back to the Henriad, we see that Scott, like Hal, *had to* shake off him his life as a gay hustler and drug-addict in order to take on what he previously seemed to have refused – the role of a rich, heterosexual politician's son, trying to climb on in the social scale. In *Idaho*, Bob/Falstaff's ultimate rejection scene takes place in an expensive-looking restaurant, where all the fancy people of Portland are shocked at seeing Bob and his gang of hustlers, who do not belong to their world, walk in and address one of them:

> *Bob*: God save you! God save you, my sweet boy. Scottie, my own true friend! I mean you, Scottie. It's me! Bob!
> *Scott* [with his back turned to him]: I don't know you, old man. Please, leave me alone. When I was young and you were my street tutor and instigator for my bad behaviour, I was planning a change. There was a time when I had the need to learn from you, my former and psychedelic teacher. And although I love you more dearly than my dead father, I have to turn away. Now that I have, and until I change back, [turns slowly to Bob] don't come near me.

To the same effect work the final sequences of the film, which (following closely Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*) show the harsh effects of his betrayal upon Bob, who dies of heart-attack ("Scott Favor broke his heart," says one of his boys), Mike and the others. At last we see the earthy, musical, sexual, violent outburst of human emotion of Bob Pigeon's funeral juxtaposed to the conventional interment of Scott's distant father, to which he assists, sitting silently, a few miles away. In circular connection to the opening sequence, the film ends on Mike, stranded on the same road in Idaho on which it began, newly collapsing into his dream world: "I'm a connoisseur of roads. I've been tasting roads my whole life. This road… will never end. It probably goes all… around… the world."

Shifting the focus back to Mike allows to see Scott's transition from a social-sexual outcast into a totally adjusted character from an alternative point of view. It retrospectively sheds a different light on aspects of the Henriad such as Hal's motivations and actions, expounding the importance of constricting definitions of masculinity in his transformation.[106] River Phoenix's performance itself had much to do with the radical function both Mike and Scott assume in the film. As Van Sant himself notes in relation to the campfire scene, Phoenix amplified the initial script that "had Mike less gay and even less capable of being in love. River made the character more gay," Van Sant affirms, "I think that was a political act on his part."[107] Going back to the ideological preoccupations of Elizabethan England as they emerge from *Idaho*'s update of the Henry plays, it becomes possible to shift the boundaries defining sexual and social norms, and thus unmask their constructedness, aimed at guaranteeing the "unity" of both the subject and the state. This comparison can bring to the surface that those beliefs, practices and institutions constituting ideology and working to legitimate the social order, do this especially by representing the interests of the dominant classes or categories as universal ones.[108] This legitimating process is built on the oppression and exploitation of subordinate classes or cultures: not only do they not share the interests of the dominant ones, but they also see their own interests ignored or repressed for the sake of "unity" or "universality". In forming ideology, the dominant class or culture will absorb the minority or the Otherness's voice into their own, and also aggressively reject it from the social order, blaming it for the instability that actually originates in the social order itself. Displacing Otherness is a fundamental passage for the construction and the apparent solidity of any dominant identity (be it class, cultural, racial, and sexual) and the ideology to which they are related.[109] When it comes to the formation of the modern subject, Western societies have progressively redefined gender and sexual norms in such a way as to draw new boundaries that would leave same-sex relations out of the dominant culture. As Foucault argues, homosexuality was actually elaborated in nineteenth-century legal, medical, and sexological discourses, which created new forms of control that claimed to disqualify it as a biological and social deviancy.[110] Talking about the modern construct of the homosexual (whose development was dependent on the

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[106] See Alex Gladwin, *op. cit.*

[107] Gus Van Sant in David Román, "Shakespeare Out in Portland: Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, Homoneurotics, and Boy Actors", Siegel and Kibbey, p. 320, in Nemanja Protic, "Where is the Bawdy? Falstaffian Politics in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 2013; 41, 3, p. 191.

[108] See Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, cit., p. 113.

[109] See *ibid*.

[110] See Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., p. 26.

development of the modern subject and viceversa), Foucault maintains that it involves "a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul."[111] Scientifically coding homosexuality as an "inversion" or "deviation" is then an active part of ideology. When in need to restrain and define modern identity, ideology fashioned it in relation to the allegedly subversion of gender categories.

The "state of play" in the U.S.A. of the early 1990s, as *My Own Private Idaho* was shot and released, was determined by such a dominant culture, which not only regarded homosexuals as abnormal and rejected them, but also blamed them for the current devastating HIV/Aids epidemic. This very oppressive process is what, according to Foucault, can give voice to resistance and dissidence within that same culture, since even a stigmatising discourse may be turned around to signify the opposite. As the philosopher observes, the so-called "deviancy" tends to return from abasement by appropriating those same terms which were used to downgrade and condemn it in the first place: "[h]omosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or 'naturality' be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified."[112] This may imply occasional "great radical ruptures", he goes on; but it is "the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible."[113]

5.4.1 Aesthetic and Political Liminality

This can be a perspective from which to analyse the strategy and the function of *My Own Private Idaho* within the cultural wave that responded to the dominant ostracism towards gay communities in early 1990s U.S.A. – "New Queer Cinema". As a matter of fact, the *leit motifs* of loss and instability in the film are developed in terms specific to the cultural situation of the U.S.A. at the end of the Reagan-Bush era. In that historical moment, the downturn in the economy was starting to exacerbate the socio-political issues concerning those people left behind or misplaced outside the social system. One of the essential cultural contexts that needs to be considered for the film is a cinematographic movement about

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[111] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, vol. I*, *An Introduction*, trans. By Robert Hurley, New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1990, p. 43, in Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., pp. 14-15.
[112] *Ibid.*, p. 96, in Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., p. 26.
[113] *Ibid.*, p. 101, in Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, cit., pp. 26-27.

homosexuality of the early 1990s. It emerged as the height of the HIV/Aids crisis in the U.S. had been increasing the rejection from society of those "sexually transgressive" categories/minorities. Being also held responsible for the illness, these minorities were consequently even more obscured, marginalised and displaced. Famously christened "New Queer Cinema" by the critic B. Ruby Rich[114], this wave of films can be considered as a response to the degrading and stigmatization that the dominant culture was producing against homosexuals during the devastating HIV/Aids epidemic.[115] *My Own Private Idaho* was acclaimed as one of its most famous and most successful examples, and placed among such films as *Philadelphia* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1993) or more avant-garde expositions like *Postcards from America* (dir. Steve McLean, 1994). The urgent desire to challenge traditionally accepted representations of homosexuality on screen is what guides these films into re-working problematically a cultural capital. In particular, New Queer Cinema appropriates the cultural capital associated to Western, white, heterosexual and patriarchal societies, by interweaving traditional tropes, images and moments into a set of unusual, 'transgressive' patterns. After the Aids-related issues had been neglected for over a decade by the U.S. government (President Ronald Reagan did not even pronounce the word "Aids" until years after the emergency began), this cinematographic movement sought to oppose this policy of marginalisation and omission by destabilising conventional representations of homosexuality on screen. New Queer Cinema was animated by the determination to fight against the condemnation and shunning of gay men, transgender folk and queers, which had been exacerbated during the previous decade. By (mis)using and subverting classical Hollywood film genres such as the Western or road movie, directors tried to contest and challenge the relegated status of queer identity and redefine its role within contemporary society.[116] As B. Ruby Rich observed, the movies and phenomenon of NQC present "a new kind of film and video practice, one which takes up the aesthetic strategies that directors have already learned and applies them to a greater need than art for its own sake."[117] According to the critic, NQC directors appropriated established cinematographic genres and techniques with a twofold aim. On the one hand, their use of pastiche pays tribute to creative

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[114] The expression "New Queer Cinema" first appeared in Rich's essay on *Sight & Sound* magazine in 1992.
[115] See Nathan Smith, "Twenty-five years of New Queer Cinema: A look back at a film movement that has challenged stigmas and defended the transgressive", *Times Education Supplement* (February 5, 2015), <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/culture/twenty-five-years-of-new-queercinema/2018251.article>.
[116] See *ibid*.
[117] B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema", *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 2, Issue 5, September 1992, on *My Own Private New Queer Cinema* (Website), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/feature-articles/new_queer_cinema/>.

influences; on the other, it also carries a bold and subversive political assertion, in an exciting "meeting of political engagement and aesthetic invention"[118]:

There are traces in ["NQC" films] of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches, […] these works are irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive. Above all, they're full of pleasure. They're here, they're queer, get hip to them.[119]

Openly defying and re-defining Hollywood codes was then an act of both creative and socio-political defiance: the U.S. film industry had itself been hugely contributing to the repression and stigmatisation of homosexuality with its misrepresentations of gay identity through suicidal, murderous or in some other way unstable and negative characters. Much of NQC, questioning conventional representation, found its key aesthetic elements in the appropriation and reinvention of those traditionally celebrated by the road and buddy movie: the freedom of movement of the road; the liberation of "going West"; the pioneering spirit of the wild, outlaw West. The iteration of stereotypes of masculinity (the Cowboy, male-male friendship and loyalty) in Hollywood buddy/road movies actually uncovered an underlying but subtle or suppressed anxiety about same-sex relations. The necessity to react to the widespread marginalisation of homosexual people in early '90s America is at the roots of NQC films' aesthetic choices. Among these, the subversion of the Hollywood buddy/road movie genre works against the over-assertion of heterosexuality and the latent homophobia it typically conveys.

My Own Private Idaho, while reworking some of the traditional buddy/road movie features (a two-male road trip; sweeping motorcycle rides calling up images of *Easy Rider*-style, or a campfire scene that visually invokes ultra-masculine Westerns), not only works within NQC subversion of genre expectations, but also adds both aesthetical and political challenges of its own. The appropriation and re-arrangement of Shakespearean and Wellesian tropes in *Idaho* does more than paralleling the subversive use of cultural capital typical of the emergent New Queer Cinema. As Thomas Cartelli writes, the film's relocation of the Bard's "minions of the moon" to the alleyways of Portland "makes Shakespeare

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[118] B. Ruby Rich in Jennie Rose, "The Last Refuge of Democracy: A Talk with B. Ruby Rich", *Greencine.com*, May 7 2004, on *My Own Private New Queer Cinema* (Website), cit.
[119] B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema", cit.

function in the interests of its socially and sexually marginalised protagonists."[120] The "recurring themes of fathers and sons, masked motives, and the socio-political callousness of intimate betrayal,"[121] as Richard Jameson calls them, taken as they are from the Henriad as well as from *Chimes at Midnight* and relocated within the end-of-the-century American landscape, put an emphasised focus on

urban youth culture and a series of broader cultural contexts – the disenfranchised within the capitalist system; institutional abuse, the corruptive power of money (which can buy pleasure and privilege), and even the exploitation of sexuality (used by Scott as a way of constructing his identity for public consumption). In essence, Van Sant misreads Shakespeare's and Welles's stories as a dark fable of the American dream.[122]

Thus, the key moments in the *Henry IV* narratives chosen by Van Sant – the scenes in the hotel, the robbery, Hal's confrontation with his father, the final rejection – seem to function as a mediation through which the film points up to a critique of sexual and economic disenfranchisement. My analysis shows that Shakespeare, caught within the sublime or metamorphic aesthetics of *Idaho* as given by the strategy of 'repetition with a difference', and turned into an integral, tangible part of that displaced, marginalised world, can thus undertake a disrupting socio-political function. First of all, the anachronistic pastiche of Shakespearean dialogues and street slang can result hard to follow, with an estranging or unsettling effect both for spectators unfamiliar and (maybe even more) for those familiar with the Henry plays. Van Sant intentionally offers no guidance to his viewers: "like the multicultural world it represents, the film's disparate and competing domains confront its spectators head-on, persistently disturbing and alienating the audience as intruders in Van Sant's *Private* Idaho."[123] Besides, the film's visual style is connected to what Eric Edwards, one of Idaho's two directors of photography, describes as a form of "unlearning", through which the filmmakers abandon accepted methods to do things from a fresh point of view. Van Sant's reinvention of Shakespeare's texts through Welles's editing style (which has been abhorred for a long time by most filmmakers except the most avant-garde ones) is a sort of unlearning for the spectator as well. Van Sant's is a style for which

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[120] Thomas Cartelli, *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 27, in Ailsa Grant Ferguson, "'An anagram of the body': Shakespeare and the Body/Text Commodified in *My Own Private Idaho*", cit.
[121] Richard Jameson (quoted from a blurb for the 1993 laser disc release of *My Own Private Idaho*), in Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
[122] Andrew Barnaby, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
[123] Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

"[j]ump cuts here are a plot device,"[124] and which compels the audience to deconstruct traditional representational categories and re-shape them in their own mind. As a matter of fact, the movement across a series of different cinematographic techniques, styles and languages contributes to a dynamic process, by which Van Sant forces the viewers themselves to *move* among the filmic images, and which ultimately delivers the dismantling power of the cinematic sublime on them. Relating the movements of the camera eye to those of the human eye, this mobile quality of the image in *Idaho* awakens the eye of the spectator, inviting it to not just passively observe frameless bodies, but to watch them intermittently, surround them, follow and imitate their movement. The spectator's experience in watching *Idaho* acquires thus a tactile level, by which the eye is not merely a passive gaze anymore, but participates actively, in contact with the whole of the senses, becoming a body that reacts fully to the image-material it gets in touch with.[125] Van Sant's camera, thus, places the spectator's eye *inside* the film, allowing him/her a sensuous intimacy with the filmed object that erodes the cinematographic frame and creates a mobile point of view that slides back and forth. The whole film's impaired and unstable hold on conventional signifiers becomes thus intermittently isomorphic with the cognitive position of film spectators attempting to sort out *Idaho*'s divergent levels and channels of discourse.[126] As Arthur and Liebler suggest, "the film's categorical collisions" seem related to a fundamental liminality "meant to induce in the consciousness of film viewers a tolerance for unresolved contradictions and a receptivity to unconventional role-playing."[127] With its sublime aesthetics made of uninterrupted transitions, *My Own Private Idaho* has the audience paradoxically 'stuck' in a perpetual liminality, in an unsettling process through which static myths of ideological self-definition are constantly annulled and rewritten.

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[124] Eric Edwards in Lance Loud, *op. cit.*
[125] See Barbara Grespi, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
[126] See *ibid.*
[127] Paul Arthur and Naomi C. Liebler, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

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Abstract

"LA LINGUA SCRITTA DELLA REALTA'"": L'ADATTAMENTO SHAKESPEARIANO E IL SUBLIME CINEMATOGRAFICO

Lo scopo di questo lavoro è analizzare adattamenti, appropriazioni e rivisitazioni cinematografiche di specifici drammi shakespeariani, con particolare attenzione all'interazione che possono innescare con tematiche culturali, sociali e politiche contemporanee. Il sostegno teorico di tale analisi parte da una visione storico-materialistica dell'estetica e in particolare della categoria del sublime, considerata in relazione alle più specifiche problematiche degli 'adaptation studies'.

La nozione di sublime che guida l'intero lavoro è legata a un'estetica del disordine e della disarmonia e al suo potenziale destabilizzante: basata sull'assenza o la violazione di regole formali, la comparsa del sublime sembra scardinare l'unità dell'opera e creare un effetto di sorpresa e shock nel ricevente, in una sintesi delle caratteristiche e dell'importanza attribuita a tale concetto nella storia dell'estetica.

A questo proposito, il primo capitolo propone una sintesi del legame fra la nozione filosofica di estetica e la realtà materiale, sottolineando il ruolo particolare del sublime in tale rapporto. A partire dalla condanna espressa da Platone nei confronti dell'arte mimetica, e dalla successiva rivalutazione del suo ruolo da parte di Aristotele, l'arte è fin dagli albori della civiltà occidentale considerata come strettamente legata alla realtà della percezione sensibile, incidendo in tal senso sia sull'individuo che sulla collettività. In questa direzione si colloca il concetto di sublime, apparso per la prima volta fra il terzo e il primo secolo d. C. nel trattato di retorica *Περί Ὕψους*. Il sublime viene qui associato ad uno stile retorico elevato ed emotivamente intenso, capace di scuotere l'ascoltatore/lettore suscitando un effetto di stupore e sconcerto. Tale effetto è ottenuto per mezzo del superamento dei limiti tradizionalmente imposti alla creatività dello scrittore, di uno slancio verso la grandezza morale e spirituale del 'genio naturale' opposto alla mediocre impeccabilità prodotta dalla rigida applicazione delle regole. L'aggiunta di considerazioni etiche in relazione ad una nozione di base stilistica è la caratteristica essenziale che distingue il sublime fin dalla sua prima comparsa. A riportarlo secoli dopo al centro dell'interesse critico fu la traduzione del

Περί Ὕψους apparsa nel 1674 ad opera del neoclassicista francese Boileau. Prima che gli 'eccessi' del sublime venissero assorbiti entro l'armonica razionalità del Neoclassicismo, Boileau fu pronto a riconoscerne l'essenza irregolare, definendolo nella sua prefazione un "je ne sais quoi", ciò che nel discorso è "straordinario" e "meraviglioso", colpisce e trasporta il ricevente.

In età moderna, l'estetica si consolidò come categoria filosofica a sé stante o "scienza della cognizione sensibile" con il trattato *Aesthetica* di Alexander Baumgarten. Di conseguenza, anche la nozione di sublime cominciò ad attirare l'attenzione dei filosofi in maniera scientifica, a partire dalla *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Feelings of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) di Edmund Burke. Spostando l'attenzione verso l'effetto fisiologico che ottiene sul soggetto, Burke definì il sublime come una forte emozione che getta la mente in uno stato di stupore inibendone le facoltà razionali, e ne individuò la causa nel piacere dato dalla sottrazione al dolore e al pericolo. L'empirismo di Burke sarebbe stato a breve superato dal 'sublime trascendentale' proposto da Immanuel Kant nella sua "Analitica del Sublime" (*Critica del Giudizio*, 1790). Piuttosto che negli oggetti del mondo sensibile, Kant riconobbe il sublime nella facoltà della Ragione che, al cospetto della grandezza e della forza della natura, è capace di elevare l'uomo verso la dimensione del 'sovrasensibile' trascendendo i limiti dei sensi.

La svolta segnata dalla filosofia materialistica di Karl Marx è presa in esame in quanto centrale per lo sviluppo del lavoro. La rivalutazione della percezione sensibile, considerata come punto di partenza delle considerazioni storiche, economiche e politiche del filosofo, rilegge infatti in maniera decisiva il legame fra estetica e politica. In tal senso, fondamentale è il contributo dei successivi filosofi marxisti come Lukács, Benjamin e Adorno, per i quali mutate condizioni storiche e materiali determinano di necessità un nuovo tipo di arte, con una conseguentemente nuova funzione.

La nozione di sublime, nel frattempo, aveva perso la propria centralità nel discorso dell'estetica fino all'avvento di Modernismo e Postmodernismo nel ventesimo secolo. Alla luce del dibattito tra arte realistica o 'terapeutica' ed arte moderna o d'avanguardia, il filosofo francese Jean-François Lyotard riconsidera il sublime come la nozione che meglio espone l'impossibilità di organizzare il mondo razionalmente. Sintetizzandone le caratteristiche nell'indeterminatezza, disarmonia e assenza di regole tipiche dell'arte d'avanguardia, Lyotard associa al sublime una funzione *destabilizzante* atta a rendere manifesti il disordine, le crisi e i conflitti alla base del reale.

Dopo aver delineato le origini del sublime in relazione a una visione materialistica dell'estetica, il secondo capitolo è dedicato alla definizione di sublime nel cinema, inteso come categoria estetica che ha origine nel disordine e nella disarmonia formale di un'opera. In particolare, il capitolo esplora le condizioni attraverso le quali il 'sublime cinematografico' può realizzarsi, partendo dalle caratteristiche formali di incompletezza, irregolarità e disunione dell'opera cinematografica. Attraverso il ricorso a un'estetica cosiddetta "impura", il sublime trasferisce nell'opera i tratti che hanno distinto tale nozione nel corso della sua storia, attribuendole anche la propria funzione destabilizzante. Aprendosi a una dialettica con il contesto materiale – culturale, sociale e politico – che l'ha prodotta e che ne è destinatario, le sfaldature di cui è composta l'opera mettono in discussione regole e categorie prestabilite dentro e fuori dai propri confini, distruggendo l'illusione di un ordine razionale della realtà e portandone alla luce invece fratture e contraddizioni.

Il successivo passaggio nella ricostruzione del sublime cinematografico si propone di identificare le problematiche relative all'adattamento dei drammi shakespeariani al medium del cinema. Le caratteristiche di apertura e ambiguità dei testi shakespeariani hanno infatti favorito la loro continua reinterpretazione e ricreazione attraverso la storia, facendo così emergere tematiche e questioni legate alle varie epoche. Non essendo tenuti insieme da nessuna visione univoca o totalizzante, ogni performance dei testi shakespeariani è già di per sé un adattamento, che può al tempo stesso invitare a una lettura più radicale e quindi portare a una vera e propria appropriazione del dramma. Con la trasposizione sul mezzo cinematografico, il testo shakespeariano viene necessariamente adattato anche a diversi contesti storici, culturali, linguistici o socio-politici, il che spesso incoraggia letture da punti i vista nuovi o non convenzionali. Ciò determina un confronto più o meno esplicito sia con le problematiche concrete di un determinato momento storico, sia con le reazioni personali e intellettuali da parte del singolo artista (in questo caso del regista).

Tale legame fra l'adattamento filmico e specifiche tematiche storiche e intellettuali può emergere in modo particolare grazie alle caratteristiche del medium del cinema. Rappresentando o riproducendo la realtà con un coinvolgimento più diretto della sfera della percezione sensibile, il cinema ha nello spettatore un impatto viscerale, che provoca un responso in primo luogo nei sensi e nelle emozioni. Possiamo così comprendere il sublime cinematografico come dato da un insieme di tecniche o espedienti che creano discontinuità nella forma filmica, che sfida le aspettative del pubblico ed è quindi in grado di innescare con questo un confronto attivo, una partecipazione. La funzione destabilizzante del sublime viene così ricreata nell'opera filmica grazie alla particolare interazione instaurata dal mezzo

cinematografico con la realtà materiale: tramite la sovversione dell'ordine e dell'armonia nella forma filmica, lo spettatore viene riavvicinato o 'elevato' alla coscienza del caos e delle contraddizioni del reale.

Gli adattamenti presi in considerazione, esasperando la frammentarietà e l'indeterminatezza dei testi shakespeariani di partenza, ne reinterpretano i conflitti e le ambiguità alla luce di un nuovo contesto storico e di diverse esigenze intellettuali. Il capitolo terzo analizza *Chimes at Midnight*, adattamento di Orson Welles del 1965 che rielabora la figura di Falstaff sulla base di diversi drammi di Shakespeare: in primo luogo, *Henry IV*, Parte I e II, a cui si aggiungono brevi passi da *Richard II*, *Henry V*, e *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. I testi di partenza sono manipolati in maniera radicale, con tagli drastici, riposizionamenti delle scene in ordine diverso rispetto all'originale, con la formazione di nuove sequenze che confondono i confini fra un dramma e l'altro, e con l'aggiunta di materiale selezionato da una delle fonti utilizzate da Shakespeare stesso, ossia le *Cronache* di Holinshed. All'estremo rimaneggiamento dei testi si aggiunge una serie di discordanze nella forma filmica, create tanto da consapevoli scelte estetiche quanto da imprecisioni tecniche più o meno casuali. Tali idiosincrasie stilistiche sono riconducibili in particolar modo all'incerta relazione fra immagine e suono a scapito di quest'ultimo: oltre ad essere a tratti impreciso e difficile da capire, l'audio nel film è sincronizzato in maniera inadeguata con le immagini in diverse sequenze, e in genere sembra risultare estraneo e distaccato rispetto agli eventi e ai personaggi riprodotti. Al tempo stesso, il montaggio veloce e a forti contrasti di Welles contribuisce a distrarre dal parlato o ad attribuirvi minore importanza a favore del visivo, con conseguente impatto più diretto e immediato della 'realtà dell'immagine' sullo spettatore.

Il capitolo analizza l'instabilità e il disordine stilistico di *Chimes at Midnight* come mezzo per mettere innanzitutto in discussione letture retoriche dei testi shakespeariani e di temi essenziali quali la storia, il potere, la guerra. Nel rintracciare l'interazione del film con il contesto in cui è stato creato e in seguito recepito, l'analisi mette in luce come tali testi, reinterpretati da Welles nel 1965, esprimano un fondamentale senso di perdita sia dal punto di vista intellettuale o personale che storico. Le varie 'falle' che determinano lo stile del film realizzano così il potenziale destabilizzante del sublime in *Chimes at Midnight*: costituiscono una continua sfida verso il giudizio dello spettatore, il quale, di fronte a una forma artistica privata di logica e coerenza, è portato a mettere in discussione interpretazioni retoriche e univoche sia della storia che della realtà contemporanea.

Il capitolo quarto è dedicato a *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole?* di Pier Paolo Pasolini, rivisitazione o appropriazione dell'*Othello* che fa parte del film a episodi *Capriccio all'Italiana* (1968). Il corto di Pasolini ruota attorno alla rappresentazione del dramma shakespeariano in un teatro di marionette, recitato da burattini semi-umani, i quali alternano la finzione teatrale a momenti in cui, fuori dal palcoscenico, cercano di raggiungere consapevolezza di sé e del mondo. A fare da cornice allo spettacolo delle marionette vi è una serie di citazioni pittoriche, teatrali e cinematografiche, cosicché il dramma di Shakespeare risulta 'incorporato' in una rete di intertesti verbali e visivi che sovrappongono fra loro diversi stili e media. Basandosi di per sé su una moltitudine di prospettive che rivelano l'artificialità dell'opera d'arte, l'adattamento o l''incorporazione' dell'*Othello* in tale complesso discorso intertestuale porta alla luce, esasperandole, le regole e le categorie della rappresentazione mimetica.

Nel rintracciare la strategia per cui il testo shakespeariano viene appropriato o 'assimilato' nella struttura intertestuale del film, l'analisi proposta sottolinea la resistenza che il mezzo cinematografico permette di porre a tale processo. Secondo Pasolini, il cinema è strutturato sulla nostra stessa percezione del mondo, e in quanto tale *riproduce* la realtà anziché semplicemente rappresentarla, trascinando lo spettatore sullo stesso livello o 'dentro' la realtà stessa. L'opera cinematografica quindi fa parlare il contenuto attraverso una forma che è data dalla sua stessa, immediata materialità, e che sorpassa e dissolve i confini tradizionali della rappresentazione. In *Che Cosa Sono le Nuvole*, infatti, lo spettacolo di *Othello* rappresentato dalle marionette viene definitivamente interrotto dall'insurrezione del pubblico, con cui la realtà (che il film riproduce tramite la realtà stessa) irrompe bruscamente nella finzione teatrale, mettendola in crisi. L'immagine finale dei burattini che, morti per il mondo del palcoscenico, ammirano per la prima volta, estasiati, le nuvole sintetizza l'azione del sublime nel film, che porta alla sconvolgente scoperta del reale. Considerando i processi storici e sociali contemporanei a cui lo sguardo di Pasolini stesso è diretto, il cinema diventa infatti per il poeta la risposta più efficace alla necessità di esprimere una nuova realtà, proprio per questa capacità di mantenere intatta la destrutturante, ambigua essenza del reale.

Il capitolo quinto prende in considerazione una singolare appropriazione shakespeariana ad opera di Gus Van Sant, *My Own Private Idaho* (1991). Il film si pone da subito come una ricollocazione culturalmente e socialmente specifica del testo di partenza: trasferisce e ingloba le due parti dell'*Henry IV* nel contesto della vita di strada negli Stati Uniti dei primi anni '90, utilizzando come tramite lo stile cinematografico di *Chimes at*

Midnight di Welles, spesso ricalcato scena per scena. *My Own Private Idaho* rivisita in maniera creativa e radicale i personaggi del Principe Hal e di Poins, riproponendoli come due prostituti gay adolescenti, Scott e Mike, che appartengono a una famiglia di ragazzi di strada con a capo il vecchio tossicodipendente Bob Pigeon, personaggio ispirato direttamente al Falstaff di Welles. Il nucleo shakespeariano del film è incentrato essenzialmente sulle relazioni fra Scott e i suoi due padri: quello per sangue, il sindaco di Portland, e quello per scelta, Bob Pigeon, che ripropongono i rapporti fra il Principe Hal, Henry IV e Falstaff. Nell'analizzare la rivisitazione dell'Henriad di Van Sant, il capitolo considera come tale narrazione s'intrecci non solo con quella parallela del personaggio di Mike, ma anche con una fitta rete di citazioni che rielaborano diversi linguaggi, stili e generi cinematografici. La struttura ibrida del film e la sua forma aperta, indefinita e in continua trasformazione, accompagnate da temi quali il viaggio e la ricerca dell'identità, sono analizzate come parte della strategia della 'ripetizione con differenza'.

Tale strategia è ciò attorno a cui si costruisce il sublime in *My Own Private Idaho*, in quanto permette di fare proprio il testo shakespeariano, frammentarlo e renderlo materialmente parte di una nuova epoca e di un nuovo ambiente. Shakespeare è difatti inserito nella dimensione degli 'outsiders', dei dimenticati del sistema economico, ai margini di ciò che è socialmente e sessualmente accettabile, ed è integrato alle sue specifiche problematiche culturali, sociali e ideologiche. Tale mondo è rappresentato tramite una forma cinematografica che nega e sovverte la rappresentazione tradizionale: una forma in movimento, fatta di transizioni ininterrotte fra diverse categorie che di fatto annulla ogni distinzione fra queste ultime. In questo senso l'appropriazione di Shakespeare assume la funzione destrutturante del sublime, per cui lo spettatore, costretto a muoversi egli stesso fra le immagini, si arresta in uno stato di liminalità, in un processo per cui la definizione di sé e dell'altro è costantemente sovvertita.