

Action, Space and Emotion in Film: Reality and Speech Acts in Bresson and Scorsese

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Abstract: This paper refers to the issue of reality in film and includes some remarks on the emotions expressed by the character or the situation in the chosen filmic examples as well as on the emotions provoked in the spectator. The awareness of speech acts can pave the way to our critical work today, and renew the study of literature or art: it can offer unexpected interpretations, “mistreating” – as Barthes would have said – a text. The perspective of performativity can help me in refining my interpretation of some well-known films and filmmakers. I will concentrate on two examples: Bresson and Scorsese.

I believe that the study of emotion fully belongs to the concern with reality, since human reality is composed by our complex affective relations to the world, the other people (inter-subjective relationships), and to the self. Film, fictional film, can magnify several aspects of reality, and as some philosophers would say of fiction: fiction explores and discovers through conjectures and suppositions. The recent work of many philosophers reflects

* This article was published in the issue 2/ 2008 of *Studia UBB Dramatica*, during Patrizia Lombardo’s fundamental collaboration with our journal. It is our duty to reprint it again in the same form all the more so as it fits in extremely well with the theme of this tribute.



this. Ronald de Sousa, Keith Oatley, Noël Carroll, Martha Nussbaum, Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie and Peter Goldie¹ – all place just this emphasis on the idea that fiction, both in literature and film, displays more connections between events, actions and characters than real life does. Fiction extends the range of the possible, and develops what is indispensable for every sort of human exchange: imagination.

Cinema has inherited many characteristics of the 19th century novel, the novel being the literary form that, together with theatre, encompassed the *mélange* of genres and the continuous relationship between documentary reality and imagination (as the writer Robert Musil would have said: the possible, which is not the opposite of reality but comes with it). In spite of the difference of media, any film is necessarily unfolding in a sequential path that is not dissimilar to the novel's denouement; and compared to the novel, the film is combining its account of the time represented (a whole life, a year, a day, etc.) and of "existential" time (the internalization of *temps vécu*) with the compelling quantification of the real time of the shots and the film².

Film theory is a field in development obviously borrowing from literary theory; at the same time the awareness of the role of visual media pervades the large and multifaceted field of cultural studies. The criticism of the famous French film critic André Bazin, so concerned with the question of reality in film, is still seminal today, because of its grasp of both literary and cinematographic questions, of both historical and stylistic concerns.

¹ See Noël Carroll, *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven. CT: Yale University Press, 2003); *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *Arts and Minds* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 2004); Gregory Currie and Jon Jurideini, 'Art and delusion', *Monist*, 86:44, 2003); Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); Keith Oatley Jennifer M. Jenkins & Dacher Keltner, *Understanding Emotions* (Oxford : Blackwell, 1996, and 2006); Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990). See also Jacques Bouveresse, *La Connaissance de l'écrivain : sur la littérature, la vérité et la vie* (Marseille: Agone, 2008). Bouveresse had an important role in introducing analytic philosophy in France and is author of several essays on Musil.

² See the essential volumes by Gilles Deleuze, *L'Image-mouvement* and *L'Image-temps* (Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 1991 and 1994).

Bazin continues to be inspiring because in his theoretical insights fused with the most accurate close reading of filmic sequences. Not unlike Roland Barthes, he offers the model of the essay as the modern form of thinking, where journalism, erudition and interpretation are not separated but simultaneously contribute to the understanding of an artistic object in its specific nature, circulation, relationship with other cultural expressions, as well as in its philosophical implications.

As it is well known, Bazin is one of the founding fathers of *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* at the beginning of the 1950s, and the mentor of the young critics who, shortly after, became the film-makers of the so-called *Nouvelle Vague* (François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, etc.). Bazin's work has been fundamental in the 1940s and 1950s in his fight to give dignity to the newest medium as a form of art: in his approach to film, he considered all arts – literature, painting, theatre –, as much as the socio-cultural perspective, and the specific stylistic aspects of what he called the “language of cinema.” For example, while applauding at the political impact of Italian Neo-realism as an anti-fascist statement, Bazin investigated their use of the camera and of the sequence-shot, and its consequences in film-making. He often insisted on film as popular art; his reading of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* shed light on the aesthetic value of some techniques – such as in depth shots and long shots—and their role within the history of cinema.

But above all Bazin proved the degree of cognitive and emotional participation of the spectator. For example, in his famous analysis of the suicide attempt of Kane's second wife in *Citizen Kane*³ he displayed a very cogent reading. Susan, Kane's second wife, is not visible on the screen, but spectators see her night table with her glass, while they hear a heavy breathing and an always stronger knocking at the door. Without editing nor cutting the images that would show Susan drinking her glass filled with drugs, and then getting sick, Orson Welles can communicate what happens increasing the dramatic effect: in fact, we are simultaneously informed of her

³ See André Bazin, “Le grand diptyque. Géologie et relief”, *Orson Welles* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1972), pp. 67-68.

suicide, and of her husband's desperate attempt to rescue her by finally breaking the door and entering her room. Objects and noises are thick with the emotions of the characters and fill the spectators with the most various emotions triggered by a psychological climax and the awaiting of a dramatic event to unfold. It is Kane himself whom we see through the keyhole in an extraordinary shot where he appears small and deformed in that tiny space: he is overwhelmed by what is happening in that locked room, and at the same time desperately determined to enter the room and intervene.

The theoretical impact of Bazin's reading of specific shots is important: he defines two very different ideologies of the circulation of film connected with two different camera techniques. One type of film-making supposes the passivity of spectators, the other fosters their active role; the first one is relying on editing, the second on long shots and in depth shots. Bazin proved that Welles for example rejected the frantic editing of Eisenstein and of German expressionism, allowing for a direct and democratic in-pur of the spectators, who can interpret and evaluate the scene by themselves. Not unlike the readers of the modern texts, spectators, in the case of long shots, do not just receive the meaning constructed by the film-maker but have to construct themselves the meaning or meanings from what they see and hear.

Cinema is an audio-visual medium (even if we were to consider silent movies, we should recall that they were screened while music was played); consequently any film analysis ought to imply the interaction of the two levels of image and sound. I will be dealing with this converging of audio-visual in some of my examples. Cinema – this is Bazin's argument in his famous article "Pour un cinéma impur"⁴ ("For an Impure Cinema") – takes from literature, drama, and painting. Finally, like fiction or drama, cinema blends the major aesthetic genres of the comic and the tragic: the list of example would be infinite, for example Truffaut who was so close to Bazin whose reflections he developed both in his articles and in his films. *Les 400 coups*, *Jules et Jim*, *Tirez sur le pianiste*, and most of Truffaut's films are constructed on the fluctuation from a joyful and ironic atmosphere to a sad and tragic one; his films are

⁴ André Bazin, "Pour un cinéma impur," *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1990), pp. 81-106.

moving in the most literal sense of the word, since they move us both because of their content and because of their almost ineffable shifts and nuances from an emotional state to another. Isn't it what happens in reality?

Les 400 coups (1959) starts with amusing scenes showing young pupils in a grammar-school, and with the caricature of the school-master; many scenes make us laugh and smile but others make us aware of the unhappy conditions of life of some teenagers: school, family, institutions do not offer them what they need. At the end Antoine (Jean-Pierre Léaud) escapes from the juvenile center he had been sent after his theft of a type-writer: he wants to reach the sea, which he had never seen; he runs away from the football field, through the countryside until he gets to the beach and walks into the water at shore (this is shown via an extremely long sequence shot following Antoine's run). In this shot following the real time of the adolescent running, is not simply a faithful chronological report of the real time of that run, but is filled with emotional implications. The final freeze of the film captures the adolescent's expression – filled with suffering, almost interrogating us. The filmic image becomes still: Antoine's photograph shows here an almost adult face, and looks at the spectators communicating them the inner, irreparable wound of his being.

Films juggle with high and low styles; love stories color gangster actions; thrillers do not discard sentimental and melodramatic elements; horror movies often display a moralizing intention; the fantastic can be satirical. Like in the novel, the possibilities of mélange of genres, and especially of aesthetic values are infinite in film, and, more than in the novel, the switches from one level to the other can be as quick as the twinkling of an eye.

I would like to get back to Bazin's article, "Pour un cinéma impur"⁵: here Bazin challenged any simplistic understanding of adaptation, while emphasizing the mixed nature of cinema and the realistic aim of the filmic image insofar as it is capable of capturing both the exterior and the interior world of human beings. Not unlike all arts, film constantly borrows from

⁵ This article has been seminal for François Truffaut essay, and almost manifesto, "Une certaine tendance du cinéma français" (*Les Cahiers du cinéma* January 1954), where he attacked the naive idea of a faithful transposition of narratives from novels to film.

other media. Could we conceive – Bazin argues – the painting of Michelangelo without sculpture, or the 17th century novel by Mme de la Fayette, *La Princesse de Clèves*, without Racine’s theatre? After silent movie, the cinema of the 1940s is more and more oriented towards the adaptation of novels; this shows its impure nature, which was evident also at its beginnings in its link with popular theatre, the vaudeville, musical and circus. The important question to ask is not how faithful the scenes of a given film are to the literary text, but what important literary formal innovations can be captured by films. The case of *Citizen Kane* is crucial for Bazin, since the fragmented and polyphonic character of the whole story is deeply informed by the narrative devices of Joyce, Faulkner and John Dos Passos.

The consequences of Bazin’s investigation are important for the formal and historical analysis of the artistic object (aren’t we always torn between the formal apprehension of art and the attempt to historicize both the artistic objects and our perspective in looking at them?). On the formal level, Bazin affirmed the freedom of the language of cinema, of its techniques and stylistic solutions. On the historical level, a new light is cast on the history of cinema. First of all, no nostalgia is expressed for the golden age of the birth of the motion picture, contrary to what so many critics felt in the 1940s and 1950s, who regretted the fall of the initial “aura” of cinema because of the new era of the talkies. Secondly, in spite of what could be seen as his idealism or spiritualism, Bazin stressed the material – and materialistic – convergence of literature and cinema in the new literary production of screen-play writing. The most obvious “idealist” vision of the interplay between the novel and film would entail that literature is in the privileged position – the position of being imitated by the “inferior” art of cinema. In the early 1950’s, one needed to have a good sociological grasp of reality and the role of arts in general, in order to subvert that hierarchy between literature and cinema. Finally, Bazin rejected the history of national cinemas paving the way to the contemporary approach of production theory; he pointed in fact to that crucial breaking within film practices between the film-makers who hired screen-play writers, and those who were imagining their screen-plays and transforming them while shooting – we could say re-writing them while shooting.

In Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963) an important, almost didactic scene stages the problem of film-makers conceiving their own scripts. The characters are in a projection-room of Cinecittà: Fritz Lang (who is interpreted by Fritz Lang himself) has just shown a few rushes from his adaptation of the *Odyssey*. The producer Jeremy Prokosch (Jack Palance) is spectacularly acting out his fury claiming that what had been shown was not in the script; Fritz Lang calmly replies that images cannot be the same thing as the script; the producer then hires a professional script-writer Paul Javal (Michel Piccoli). The whole sequence stages the theoretical debate which was important for Bazin and the Nouvelle Vague: the artistic film-makers, the "*auteurs*" should write their own script and freely mould it according to the needs of the audio-visual medium. What is interesting for us is that an important theoretical debate about film-making becomes, in films like *Le Mépris*, a performance, in the literal sense of the word (as we talk about performance arts), with *mise-en scène*, actors and obviously a spatial organization. (We will see later another film showing the importance of performance.)

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At this point I would like to reflect on a notion which is important to weigh the relationship between language and reality: performativity. We know that this notion, which has been imported in literary and cultural theories from John Austin's linguistics, can take several meanings, maybe too many, especially when imported in literary theory. In Austin linguistics, performative utterances provide an evident link between words and the world; uttering words we do the things the utterance talks about; an abstract idea becomes an act through the very words expressing it. According to Austin's famous phrase, speech acts reflect "how to do things with words." This reflection on language could be easily connected to a major trend in literary studies since the late 1960s and 1970s, that of the linguistic turn, of the outcome of theory, stressing the primacy of language over reality, and reversing the old positivist and realistic vision where language had just an instrumental role. Hillis Miller recalled the weight of words in constructing whole worlds: "A true performative brings something in existence that has

no basis except in the words, as when I sign a check and turn an almost worthless piece of paper into whatever value I have inscribed on the check, assuming the various contexts of this act are in a correct order.”⁶ Performative language does not show that something is true or false but simply that an act is performed⁷.

I would say that there are mainly three uses of the notion of performative in literary and cultural studies. One of these meanings suggests the meta-language dimension of speech acts theory in Austin himself, since, as Hillis Miller wrote⁸, he is often commenting on what he is doing as if he were two persons. A second use of performativity entails, as understood by Jean-François Lyotard in his *La Condition postmoderne*, the performance level required by contemporary technologies in mastering techniques, for the sake of techniques without regard to a specific purpose.

A third use deconstructs what Austin has neglected, the whole area of performance and theatre: the meaning of the performative here suggests the social construction of marginalized identities. “Gender performativity” is, according to Judith Butler, a key notion that highlights the *making* of genders; she echoes Foucault’s idea that, for example, homosexuality came into existence by the act of naming it; at the same time she is also convinced that those meanings can be displaced thanks to the critical work unveiling their construction. Other critics focus on the theatrical implication of the term. Eve

⁶ J. Hillis Miller, *Tropes, Parables, Performatives* (New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 139. And Miller adds that things might work even if the context is not right as in the case of counterfeit money or bad checks.

⁷ We can see that, for theory, the great fascination with performative language consists precisely on the possibility of freeing utterances from the true/false alternative: nothing could have been more attractive for Derrida than this escape from the coercion of logics at the moment he was fighting against the hegemony of the *truth* and trying the *jeux* (games) of language. It can also be easily understood why Derrida, more than forty years ago, objected to Austin’s theory as grounded on the intention of the speaker. For Derrida’s deconstruction any text dismantles the intention of the author. Language or writing shows the discrepancy or the difference between the voluntary character of any project and the emergence what had been repressed. The close reading of words and rhetorical figures can prove the failure of human intention and the complete power of language (that *speaks* the human being as opposed to be spoken).

⁸ J. Hillis Miller, *Speech acts in literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

Kosofsky Sedgwick for example stressed Paul De Man's insight: performative language is exorbitant, and she comes to the conclusion that any performance is fundamentally strange, *queer*. Performance is in its very nature aberrant, perverse. Sedgwick points also at the theatrical scene suggested by speech acts: these utterances imply the speaker and the addressee but also the real or supposed presence of a witness or several witnesses; no speech act implies just two agents, it supposes the real or possible presence of several agents, the witnesses being in the position of an audience. Performativity means ceremony (stressing this aspect of it, she is less interested in examples which would include one of the classical cases of performative language: the promise, which can take place just with speaker and addressee; but we could argue that even the promise in the most understated situation suggests a sort of domestic micro ceremony).

In order to get back to film making, I would like to hold closely on the definitions by Austin, and imagine the two different scenarios of the linguistic and the artistic performances. In a Renaissance-like vision, I propose two different theatres, and their parallel effects in a chiasmic structure. One – Austin's linguistic reflection – is constituted by language and life. Austin conceives first of all that those specific words (promising, naming, ceremonial sentences etc.) *do* the things in question; the literary theorist stresses the power of words to create reality. The second scene I am imagining is cinema with its double nature of the written text and the shooting action (this last one comes with all its complicated network of image, sound, music, dialogues, and, later, the editing in montage).

A performative act, in the cinema world, takes place when the shooting puts into action (more or less precisely) the words of the script – dialogues and stage directions: the shooting, which is the first making of a film in front of the camera (before the montage session), brings about the fit between the "real" image and the script. It gives existence to the script, as, in the linguistic situation, the speaker names something and actualizes its existence by naming it. And the script has no other reason of existing besides its becoming a film.

"I am, or we are, shooting or making a film": this is exactly one of those utterances in which people do things with words. If we enter the world of cinema, we enter the world of *performance*, and that speech act – "I am

shooting a film” – gets moving, shifting again and again. And above of all, it can take the totally meta-linguistic or more precisely meta-filmic dimension: countless are the examples of films showing the shooting of films, as it happens in *Le Mépris*.

Then, we may say that many examples of films, like novels, are based on a performative utterance (a war is declared, a battle started, a marriage pronounced, a promise or a bet is made, etc.). One could even suggest that comedies are often based on the deformation or failure of a performative utterance; many film-plots are playing speech acts that are fulfilled or betrayed. “I give you my word that...:” we could amuse ourselves making a catalogue of films whose story springs out from this sentence.

The theme of performativity is somewhat obscure when moved away from its initial field of philosophy of language, and, so to speak, applied to literature or the arts. Being too metaphorical, it carries so many meanings that it can be anything (as we have hinted, in literary theory it becomes synonymous with meta-language; in cultural criticism with the effects of social constructions or with the theatrical exaggeration of an identity claiming its right to exist outside the social convention of genders). But on the other hand, the awareness of speech acts can pave the way to our critical work today, and renew the study of literature or art: it can offer unexpected interpretations, “mistreating” – as Barthes would have said – a text. The perspective of performativity can help me in refining my interpretation of some well-known films and filmmakers. I will concentrate on two examples: Bresson and Scorsese.

The case of Robert Bresson

Robert Bresson is one of the film-makers André Bazin studied in order to discuss the question of adaptation in film. As I reminded before, in some of his most theoretical essays, Bazin stressed the importance of free adaptation, turning upside down the relationship between cinema and literature. He believed that the true work of adaptation consists on transposing some stylistic effects from literature to cinema (as opposed to the most current – and still current! – idea that adaptation transfers a content from a novel or a play into

filmic images). In "Le Journal d'un curé de campagne et la stylistique de Robert Bresson," an important essay first published in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in June 1951, Bazin explained, through detailed analysis of sequences from Bernanos' novel and Bresson's film, how the film ends up being more literary than the novel. It does so by reducing the visual elements of descriptions. The final scene especially, which shows for more than a minute a thin grey cross, lets the voice over tell the tragic death of the priest with no concession for the eyes: the details of the protagonist's final moments are related by the voice, reading aloud a letter written to the superior Father by the priest who assisted at that death. In Bazin's opinion, Bresson reached here the same rarefaction and intensity of Mallarmé who refuses any trace of "reportage" and aims at the highest sphere of poetic language, dusting off all the weight of reality.

If we consider Bresson's famous films *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1954) and *Pickpocket* (1959), we can easily see the importance of gestures: renouncing to the chattering of most films, there isn't here much dialogue, the voice over is not very talkative. There are on the contrary many long sequences where the protagonist *performs* his activity using his hands, in one case in order to open his prison cell, and in the other in order to steal. It has been said that Bresson succeeded in giving to cinema the dimension of touching. We feel, in *Pickpocket*, the deftness of the hands in stealing from the bags or the jackets of the passers-by; we can guess the lightness of wrestles and fingers when the accomplices "work" on the train unfastening watches and bracelets, opening purses, sliding their fingers in the clothes of people, pretending to help people getting on the train, and throwing in the garbage their emptied wallets.

The same is true for *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé*: the spectator follows the patient movements of Jean Fontaine (prisoner of the Nazis) un-nailing the wooden door of his cell, day after day, with a metal spoon. The sense of touch and that of hearing are continuously alerted: like Fontaine we hear a noise from outside the door, we keep our breath, while he interrupts his work. The fear that a Nazi guardian would suddenly open the door and discover what Fontaine is doing takes the concrete form of a movement frozen in the middle of a tiny, meticulous action: the feeling of wait suddenly inhabits the restricted space of the cell, wall, mattress, dust and the splinters of wood accumulated by the grating of the spoon against the door's boards.

The actors chosen by Bresson – who never are stars – do not play in an expressive way: their faces and their features are always almost motionless. Bresson firmly rejected any theatrical effect in his *cinématographe*, as he liked to call cinema precisely in order to refuse any spectacular dimension of dramatic psychology. Nevertheless there is a subtle psychological dimension of different order: I would call it the concrete psychology of things, the way in which objects both resist to and are bent by an act of will. The emotion of what is at stake in both films is not *expressed* through eyes, lips, face and or words – the most obvious human ways of giving lee to affective life. The emotion is *meant* in the matter, in the sounds of things, and, if there is some human presence, that presence is in gestures, not expressively directed to the unveiling of what is felt but concretely directed to the craft work that connects human beings to things. Will, intention, intentionality and objects are condensed: when we see the details of the cell door, for example, we seize at once the intention of Fontaine, and that intention is tangible, concrete, almost without project, almost as if the idea of evasion is built little by little by wood, spoon, cloths, and cords, and noises and breathing. Bresson wrote in his *Le Cinématographe* that “objects are much more important than people” and “events”⁹.

We could say that space in these films is often investigated in its minimal dimension: as Bresson suggested: “There is just one point in space from where one thing, at a given moment, asks to be looked at.” Space is more matter than geometry, and a small corner of the ground or the wall is able to convey the whole relationship between human beings and space. Things are imbued with action and will. The same could be said about action: Bresson’s films are often in an area that is neither the rambunctious activity of what is called action-film, nor the nihilistic – and psychological – attitude of the complete suspension of action. Bresson works focus on a small scale action where things call for human will to operate on or via them – barely, without hope or despair.

⁹ Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), my translation.

Let's now interrogate Bresson with our concern with performative language: surprisingly enough we can see that both *Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé* and *Pickpocket* are structured by speech acts, as if an implacable bet or promise were holding all the events and the repetition of gestures typical of these films. Jean Fontaine moves between the death-sentence and his promise to himself, to the boards of his cell, and to the prisoners he manages to talk to during the collective rituals of washing and walking in the prison courtyard. "We condemn you to death" and "I promise I will evade" are the two speech acts determining the whole film. And *Pickpocket* is the wicked series of events stemming from an intention formulated as a solitary promise to the self in a sort of nihilistic or self-destructive challenge (Michel, the protagonist, reads Dostoevski): "I swear I will become a thief."

The case of Scorsese: urban space and performances

Baudelaire, *the* poet of modernity, knew that human beings are torn between words and things, symbols, allegories and reality. What else are his famous "Correspondances" if not the unsettling allegories that are inside and outside us?

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles ;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

The act of reading proves our will to act with words in the present, and it is in this sense a true performative: it gives real existence to books, artistic objects, films. Not unlike a novel, a film comes into life when we *read* it, therefore construct some meaning where we negotiate between the attempt to capture the ideas it embodies and the attempt to express our concerns via it. Theory and analysis go hand in hand, one is feeding the other. I believe therefore that what is true for literature can be true for cinema, and the analysis of a film – or of some aspects of it – can shed light onto some questions on performativity, and, vice versa, looking at a film with the perspective of performativity can nourish our interpretation of that film. In

fact, if we want to avoid the almost religious repetition of the catching mottos theories might be reduced to, the frame of the important notion of performative compels us to use our intellectual imagination, and to find the fit between that general – and somewhat vague – concept and the artistic work that can be correctly related to it.

Not unlike the films by Bresson I talked about in the first part of my paper, *Gangs of New York* (2003) is then, in my opinion, a good example for reflecting on performativity, and for several reasons. Cinema's mission is in some ways to challenge our perception of space and to contradict the elements of Euclid's geometry; if the metropolis means, since the 19th century and Baudelaire's expression of it, the enhancement of human experience because of its rhythm and spatial variety, cinema can offer a concentrated metropolitan experience. The close-up, just to give an example, jeopardizes any evidence that the whole is greater than the part. The movement of the camera, the use of special effects, the various types of shots, and the rhythm of editing have such an impact to our perception of space – and time – that we can say, following Paul Virilio, that cinema is responsible for a new way of perceiving that is now integrated into our eyes. Cinema, as much as the metropolitan experience since the 19th century, has forged in some ways our sight, pushing the retina to such speed that the power of abstraction is included in our grasping of images and our experience of concrete objects¹⁰.

In a beautiful shot of *Gangs of New York* Scorsese shows the body of the leader of the Irish Catholic Dead Rabbits, Priest Vallon (Liam Neeson), killed by the leader of the rival Protestant gang, the Natives, William the Butcher or the Cutter (Daniel Day Lewis). He is lying on a cart his people move away from the site where the battle took place, Paradise Square. On the ground of the square the snow is red with blood, and the faces of the Dead Rabbits are disfigured by the signs of the combat and the sadness of the defeat. Then the frame widens, more and more, until people and objects lose their individuality to give rise to a vision that comes from above showing the pattern of streets and houses of the whole neighborhood called the Five Points. The frame

¹⁰ See Paul Virilio. *Esthétique de la disparition* (Paris: Ed. Galilée, 1998), and *La vitesse de libération* (Paris: Ed. Galilée, 1995). In English: *The Paul Virilio reader*, ed. by Steve Redhead (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

widens yet again on the roofs and the urban grid, and we see the whole city of Manhattan, like in a map; and the moving space becomes time, the time of some transformation of the city, until we read: "16 years later," and we hear the voice over preaching forgiveness while the son of Vallon (Leonardo DiCaprio) stands to receive the farewell from his orphan institution in Hillgate. The same technique of widening and transforming the image, is used at the end of the film, when a final sequence accumulates the epochs of New York from the 1860's until the 20th and beginning of the 21th century, since we can see the towers of the World Trade Center.

Among the many examples of the treatment of space, it is worthwhile to recall the very beginning of *Gangs of New York*, when, in front of a black screen, we first hear the noise of the razor on the skin, and then we see, from below, the face of a man – Priest Vallon. He is shaving, purposely cuts his cheek, and hands the blade stained with his blood to his son. This perspective from below is in fact that of a child's gaze: his son is looking up at him just before the battle with the Natives. The physical space and the symbolic implications are but one: after the few words exchanged in the shaving scene, the boy follows in a sort of long martial walk his father through the dark labyrinth where the Dead Rabbits live, the so called Brewery. Then father, son and the people of the gang get out on Paradise Square. Several shots during the ferocious battle show that Vallon's son is looking at the whole event and then looks at his dying father. That gaze of the child looking up in the initial shaving scene is first out of the screen and then included in the image of Vallon's arm towards him; it will determine the life of the young protagonist, later called Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio), when, after several years at Hellgate orphan institution, he will get back anonymously to the Five Points (where William the Butcher has now been for a long time the absolute boss). The day of the battle where his father is knifed to death is imprinted forever in his mind: Amsterdam's determination to kill the murderer of his father is hosted in that initial gaze.

Cinema can operate powerfully, on a narrative level and on a meta-discursive one, playing with the converging of genres, and of senses-sight, hearing, touching. Cinema reaches a grandiose synaesthesia of several senses and of the mind, because the effect on the spectator comes from both

what is shown and what is not shown, from inside and outside the frame. Films can be like novels, plays, poems, paintings, and operas. But where a novel needs explanations by the narrator or analysis by the characters, dialogue or monologue, cinema can synthesize with just one shot, punching into the guts and the brain of the spectators who do not even have the time to adjust to what they are feeling in a scene that they are brought to something else, must continuously correct the information given by an image with the following one – quickly, more quickly than the wink of the eye. And where theater cannot but accept the full presence of the body on the scene, and a relative stillness in spite of the movements of the actors and the change of décor, cinema can cut, fragment, displace, combine, move up and down, and track on one side and on the other, from below and from above. Everything is possible for the camera.

Gangs of New York contains different forms of performative speech acts and of performance arts (in the literal sense). The first striking speech act is the beginning of the battle between the two rival gangs – exemplary as the easiest of Austin's examples: "I declare the war." The Dead Rabbits and the Natives are face to face, their respective bosses in the middle of the group, as if they were displaying themselves on a theatre which is Paradise square whose space is indeed opened up by a slow and vast wide-angle lens movement, as if the curtains were lifted for the beginning of the show allowing the vision of the whole space. After the first brief exchange, where Priest Vallon recalls the promise for a battle, the boss of the Natives, William the Cutter pronounces those words that are able to do things: "On my challenge, by the ancient laws of combat, we have met at this chosen ground to set, for good and all, who holds way over the Five Points..." The Irish Catholic leader of the other gang pronounces at his turn: "I accept the challenge", and the battle starts.

All the conditions of the speech act are fulfilled: the presence of the two parties and of testimonies, and the ceremony like character of the whole action. The combat cannot be understood without this collective ritual. I would say that this scene is so deeply rooted on a social setting and the pronouncement of some kind of law that it recalls the inaugural reflection on speech acts by the philosopher who was the for-runner of Austin and Searle:

Adolf Reinach (1883-1917), who contributed to the understanding of the link between language and action. In his *Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürgerlichen Rechtes*, he criticized Hume vision of the promise as being confined to the mere expression of an act of will on the part of the person who declares his intention to act in favor of the addressee of the promise. Reinach believed that the main problem of this type of utterance is how it can create a mutual obligation on the side of the two parties. In other terms, Reinach displaced the center of the problem from the question of personal will to the social structure required for the promise. The two-ways structure is important as the frame in which juridical activities take place: as it is clear also for Austin, on one hand there is the a-priori need for figures having the authority to declare certain things, and on the other of an audience receiving and accepting those utterances (as Austin says: speech acts require uptake). Most of Austin's performative speech acts suppose an addressee, and need that the addressee understands what the speaker is doing. Austin gives the example of some rare speech acts which are not directly addressed to someone – for example when a government speaker promulgates a law by saying: “I hereby promulgate the following law.” Nevertheless one could argue differently. It is true that the promulgator of a law doesn't need to be addressing the interlocutors, but the addressees are the essential logical counterpart. What could be the enacting of a law in a desert, even if pronounced by a state officer? Or in a destroyed country where no citizens exist any longer?

Indeed, the scene of the battle between the two gangs in Scorsese's film stages the exchange between the two parties and the presence of the community (or communities) witnessing the declaration of combat. The action of fighting is made possible by that mutually agreed promise in front of testimonies. We could notice also that this unambiguous and immediate social involvement in the name of the “ancient law” is contrasted with the other speech act that unfolds the historical events in the film: the abolition of slavery and the subsequent Civil War. Scorsese shows two cases of promulgation of law and declaration of war. He shows also that the supposed addressees are not so easy in accepting, and how difficult can be for utterances to become reality: the juridical act doesn't mean the “cultural”

acceptance of the abolition, and revolt defies state authority during the New York draft riots refusing the war. The ancient, brutal, violent local battle between the two gangs was based on a mutual agreement, while the modern, mediate presidential or governmental decisions are depicted through social disharmony. Racist feelings and acts persist in spite of the Abolition; and the legalized violence of a state taking to war the poor can cause rebellion. I will comment at the end of my essay on the presence of another type of speech act (between Vallon and his son), where command, swear and promise are illustrated.

A remark should be made about the canonicity of the film – and this kind of question in cinema means lots of money, and not simply the classroom or the academic curricula as in the case of literature: *Gangs of New York* is indeed a Hollywood style film aiming to realize one of the most Hollywood genres: historical fiction¹¹. All the ingredients for the Hollywood “canon” are there: famous actors (Leonardo DiCaprio, Daniel Day Lewis, Jim Broadbent, Brendon Gleeson etc.), huge budget, costumes, a powerful machinery for the reconstitution of places in Cinecittà studios in Rome. Scorsese dreamt to make this film on New York for about thirty years, since the 1970’s when he read the 1928 book by the British historian Herbert Asbury about the gangs of New York in the 19th century. Finally, the film is produced by a major production firm, Miramax, which collected many Oscars (and actually had to face decline because of that Scorsese movie). Nevertheless, we could argue for the ambivalence of the filmmaker towards the institution financing him: like Orson Welles with *Touch of Evil*, Scorsese tries to be faithful to his style – and in spite of the cuts imposed by the producer Harvey Weinstein. Scorsese doesn’t give up his shooting techniques, the use of long sequence shots with unexpected changes of places and situations. *Gangs of New York* continues the filming style Scorsese learned from Truffaut, Rossellini, Welles etc... Scorsese has always fused fiction and documentary, joining the lessons of the French Nouvelle Vague and American Independent Film. And he has never hidden his passion, since his childhood, for gangsters movies and westerns

¹¹ Scorsese had already tried the staging of New York upper class life at the end of the 19th century with *The Age of Innocence*, 1993, an adaptation of Edith Wharton’s novel.

(wasn't the protagonist of *Taxi Driver* both a Vietnam soldier and an "urban" cowboy?). Sociologists can understand a lot from Scorsese's depiction of New York in the 1970's; the highly fictionalized characters he conceived are capable of representing some important tension of their own time, very much like the protagonists of the 19th century European novel.

What is the challenge of the huge historical fiction that is *Gangs of New York*, of this film which encountered much criticism and disappointed the lovers of "true history"? I would say that its bet is to hold all together history and myth, the past and the present, while a mainstream historical movie would either aim at accuracy or at the spectacular Hollywood-like construction. Scorsese has at least a triple intent. He wants to represent History as the history of a Nation (Abolition, the draft for the Civil war, and the making of the United States), in the line of political history based on great events. But Scorsese wants also to account for local history: the history of the gangs in Manhattan and their presence in the life of the city, as a chapter of cultural history stressing the role of groups and small communities, their everyday life and their religious beliefs (the opposition between Catholics and Protestants is important for the gangs in Asbury's book).

Scorsese's ambition is not simply "erudite:" in depicting New York in the 19th century, he wants to explain the United States' past as the making of the law through corruption. He reads the past through the eyes of the present, through the fresh memory of September 11 in Manhattan. He accentuated the multi-cultural elements, increasing, for example, the real number of Chinese population in New York. What question can be more pertinent today than the construction of a national identity? What perspective could be more up to date than multiculturalism? Past and present nourish each other; quite uncanonically, Scorsese combines the battle scenes in the reconstructed Paradise Square around 1850s with a complex editing of contemporary music. The screening of violence so often criticized transcends the accuracy of costumes and types of arms used by the rival gangs or by the national army in the mid of the 19th century: it tells the horror of any war; it is a way of writing a pacifist message, in our tormented beginning of the 21st century, through the emphasis of an audio-visual construction of the fight. At the same time, Scorsese is conscious of the history of cinema and the infinite

representations of violence cinema has been showing since its beginnings (a close reading of some postures and movements in the first battle between the Dead Rabbits and the Natives would show many similarities with the famous battle on ice in Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevski* (1938), and, not least, the snow covered Paradise Square).

A single long shot of more than four minutes could exemplify the broadness of Scorsese's intent and his ability in holding together many elements belonging to both the sphere of fiction and of history (and of those complex historical treads I mentioned). On the side of fiction, in a scene before his revenge and betrayal of Bill the Butcher, Amsterdam already is "under his wing", works for the big boss, and actually enjoys his activity of collecting the money of the bets on boxing, while the match is starting in the middle of a noisy crowd. Fiction is colored with historical elements: in fact criminal life in lower Manhattan is organized and regulated by Bill the Butcher (William Poole, called Bill the Butcher, who died in 1855, was the leader of the Bowery Boys gang). The politician William Tweed, the boss of Tammany Hall (the society controlling all the activities and businesses of the Democratic Party), tries to get hold of the area dominated by the Butcher in order to get votes from the Irish immigrants continuously arriving from Europe. Scorsese represents the passage from the criminal gang power to the corrupted political power of William Tweed: in a sequence continuing the boxing episode where Tweed tries unsuccessfully to intervene banning public bets and games, we see on the harbor peer William the Butcher and William Tweed engaged in a discussion ending up with the Butcher's refusal to cooperate with Tammany Hall. The camera first follows Bill the Butcher walking away with Amsterdam, and suddenly, without any cuts, it flees back towards the street where we see immigrants called by state employees to sign up for the draft. The real reason for entering the army is the hope of being fed: we hear and see two immigrant soldiers getting on the boat. From the street then, without editing, the camera moves with a broad movement towards the boat and the sea. We are still hearing the conversation about food when the camera plunges quickly down, towards the shore where many wooden coffins are lined up on the ground. Up and down camera movements are swinging from the shore to the ship, following a crane which puts down a

coffin. While we still see that coffin Scorsese uses another of his film techniques: we hear already a voice that belongs to the following sequence – that of the actor playing *Uncle Tom*. Scorsese's powerful stylistic solution embraces all together fiction (the relationship between a boss and a favorite, and the tension between two bosses), local history (street life and crowds), and national history (draft and turmoil about the Abolition).

We should not forget in *Gangs of New York* the presence of what could be called “the Hollywood gloss” – i.e. the love-story and the stereotypical treatment of the main female character (Jenny, interpreted by Cameron Diaz). And then, almost like in a Balzac novel, there is the “type” of the boss: Bill is corrupted, abusive, racist, vulgar, at the same time cruel and sentimental, and faithful to a forlorn and boastful sense of honor. But Scorsese adds yet another dimension to his historical research, the mythical one: like in epics and novels, heroes are here moved by revenge. This mythical dimension bounces into another myth, confirming the tie between literature and cinema: revenge constitutes the main theme for so many gangster and western movies. The theme of revenge plunges *Gangs of New York* in the heart of the history of cinema, but also bridges with a fundamental subject in the history of theatre. Revenge: what could be more Shakespearian? “Very Shakespearian”: this is the phrase one of the characters pronounces when he understands that Amsterdam is the son of the Priest Vallon, at the crucial moment in the film when Amsterdam prevents the attempt to murder Bill the Butcher (in order to be sure that he will be the one killing him).

We can understand now the presence of so many performances in this film: people freely improvising dances in the street or in the tavern, a ball organized by the Reformers, popular sports, such as box and fights with animals (and with bets!), circus and theatre shows. And there are always crowds assisting to the theatre of life or to the various shows (representing the crowd still remains a challenge for filmmakers). The theater performance of *Uncle Tom* is interrupted by the racist reactions of the audience – among which there is the “nationalist” boss of the Natives – and by the attempt to murder Bill the Cutter. In another major circus like performance we see the knife's number of Bill with Jenny (Cameron Diaz) in the Chinese Pagoda, when Bill has already being informed about Amsterdam's plan to kill him.

All these performances are dictated by something stronger than the logic of narration; they have a meta-filmic flavor. They are allegories of the cinema as an art whose beginnings were marked by popular theatre and musical. All the performances in *Gangs of New York* allegorize cinema as the art form that is profoundly impure, to use André Bazin's term. Filmmakers contemplate their medium and reflect on its nature and history: it can be done directly by quoting scenes from other films, or just by alluding to them, or by transforming them more or less ironically, or by emphasizing some already used cinematic effects. After having refined in his various films all these modes, Scorsese shows here that cinema can englobe all the other arts thanks to the power of the camera editing, cutting, magnifying, multiplying, fragmenting, or "amplifying" the *mise en scène* of theatre, musicals, circuses, shows of any kind.

It is time now to get back to the gaze of the child in the first minutes of *Gangs of New York* and we will see that it abides another speech act. We have seen how that gaze condenses the treatment of space in both its physical and symbolic dimensions. The child's gaze in the shaving scene becomes an act of will, obeying to the words pronounced later in the battle by the dying Vallon: "Oh, my son. Don't ever look away." These words are echoing the imperative "don't" pronounced by Vallon when his son tries to wipe off the blood from the razor. They are a command and call for the mutual obligation between father and son. In fact the Priest's son will never look away from that blood. A silent promise is uttered by those childish eyes. Hidden, continuously nourished in his heart, secret or finally revealed to one or two people, one single speech act readable in the child's gaze, and obeying his father's imperative utterance, holds the whole film with all its performative speech acts and theatrical performances. That gaze confirms a long term action that is constructed throughout the film: taking revenge for his father's killing. The words are never pronounced by Amsterdam himself but they are always present, in his gestures, in the events of his life, in the expression of his face: "I swear I will revenge my father's death." And nothing will stop this promise to become an act.

The spectator feels the intensity of the promise in the quick move of the boy who, at the end of the battle, takes the knife from his dead father's chest, runs back to the Old Brewery where the Dead Rabbits live, and hides that precious token into the soil. Amsterdam will get back to his buried knife and dig it out, a few years later, after his long stay in the Hellgate House of Reform, as a young adult who has nothing to do with the teaching of the Bible he has received. Quitting Hellgate Amsterdam throws away from the bridge the sacred book, while we hear the voice over of the Reverend exhorting to the detachment from all human passions: "The Lord has forgiven you, you must also forgive." But the Christian commandment cannot weaken the words that father Vallon told sixteen years before to his son: "Don't ever look away." Nothing can break the mute swear between the living and the dead, silently witnessed by the collective blood of the battle. Neither time, nor love, nor friendship, nor pleasure, nor power, nothing can break the obligation of keeping one's word, of obeying the pact of the wild justice of revenge. The silent speech act of what belongs to "the ancient laws of combat" stands in this movie like the memory of a pre-modern type of world and of art, as savage as feelings in a Greek tragedy, or in what can be seen as the correspondent of it in cinema: the classical Western movie. "I swear I will take revenge," is a speech act where the time of the fit between the words and the thing may take a whole life. But there is no doubt about the uptake.

Almost with the insight of the cultural historian Johan Huizinga, Scorsese has depicted criminal life in lower Manhattan around 1850's with the smell of blood (as the historian described the middle Ages). Like the historian, Scorsese tried to show the discrepancy between the new age and the old one at the very moment they collide, between old and new values. The cultural divide is so well expressed by the solitude of the second battle between Bill and Amsterdam, between the Natives and the re-born Dead Rabbits (since Amsterdam reconstituted the gang after the failure of his plan of killing Bill). Alone, terrible alone, fighting with knives, in the midst of rifle powder and canon shots – the weapons used by the state army and the Navy in the repression of the New York draft riots (1863) – Bill and Amsterdam

kill and embrace each other, almost like the two lovers (Jennifer Jones and Gregory Peck) at the end of *Duel in the Sun* (1946), a film by King Vidor that greatly impressed the imagination of Scorsese when he was a child¹². Like in that famous Western, the revenge between the two protagonists takes place against rocks, earth and dust. At the same time, like in the falling down of the twin towers on September 11, white and grey clouds and debris bury human bodies.

¹² See Martin Scorsese, *Interviews*, Peter Brunette, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 34.