

## Serge Daney: The Tracking Shot in Kapo

*"The Tracking Shot in Kapo" is one of the last texts written by French movie critic Serge Daney before his death in June 1992. Originally published in Trafic (No. 4, Fall 1992), it was intended to be the first chapter of a book, Daney's "cinema-biography", the story of his life as a cinephile in relation to a certain history of what he called modern cinema. What is left from this project is Persévérance (1994), a book of interviews with Serge Toubiana.*

*Beyond the temptation to overplay the importance of this article in Daney's work and the suspicious thrill one gets from its crepuscular tone, The Tracking Shot in Kapo is an astonishingly lucid and intimate account of a defining moment of film criticism which spans the second half of the 20th century from Bazin and Cahiers du cinéma to Jean-Luc Godard's Histoire(s) du cinéma work and Deleuze's Cinema, and which resonates today in the adoration of filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami and Tsai Ming-liang.*

*The text also shows Daney the art critic at his best, proposing new concepts like the "spectator's stop on the image" or "the images that watch us" and making incisive political comments on commercial music videos. This article was first published in Trafic No. 4, P.O.L. Editions, 1992 (It was also published in Persévérance: Entretien avec Serge Toubiana, P.O.L. Editions, 1994). It is re-published here with permission of the copyright holders. For information about Trafic, P.O.L. and subscription, please visit this website.*

Among the movies I have never seen there is not only October, Le jour se lève and Bambi, there is also the obscure Kapo. A movie about concentration camps shot in 1960 by the Italian Gillo Pontecorvo, Kapo wasn't a landmark in the history of cinema. Am I the only one who has never seen this movie and yet hasn't forgotten it? For I haven't seen Kapo and at the same time I have seen it. I have seen it because someone has shown it to me – with words. This movie, whose title like a password has accompanied my life of cinema, I only know through a short text: the review written by Jacques Rivette in June 1961 in Cahiers du cinéma. It was the 120th edition and the article was entitled "Of Abjection". Rivette was 33 years old and I was 17. I had probably never pronounced the word "abjection" in my life.

In his review, Rivette did not tell the story of the movie. He merely described one shot in one sentence. The sentence, engraved in my memory, said this: Look however in Kapo, the shot where Riva commits suicide by throwing herself on electric barbed wire: the man who decides at this moment to make a forward tracking shot to reframe the dead body – carefully positioning the raised hand in the corner of the final framing – this man is worthy of the most profound contempt. Thus a simple camera movement was the one movement not to make. The movement you must – obviously – be abject to make. As soon as I read those lines I knew the author was absolutely right.

Abrupt and luminous, Rivette's text enabled me to give words to this particular type of abjection. My revolt had found the words to express itself. But there was more. This revolt came with a less clear and probably less pure feeling: the relieved recognition that I had just acquired my first conviction as a future movie critic. Indeed throughout the years, "the tracking shot in Kapo" would become my portable dogma, the axiom that could not be discussed, the breaking point of any debate. I would definitely have nothing to do, nothing to share with anybody who wasn't immediately upset by the abjection of "the tracking shot in Kapo".

This kind of refusal was common at the time. Looking at the raging and exasperated style of Rivette's article, I felt that furious debates had already taken place and it seemed already evident to me that cinema mirrored every debate. The war in Algeria was ending, and because it hadn't been filmed, it had brought suspicion upon any representation of history. Everyone seemed to understand that there were such things as taboos, criminal facilities and forbidden editing – especially in cinema. Godard's famous formula about a tracking shot being "a moral issue" was in my eyes one of those truths which one could no longer question. Not me anyway.

The review had been published in Cahiers du cinéma, three years before the end of the yellow cover period. Did I feel that it couldn't have been published in any other magazine, that it belonged to Cahiers just as I would belong to them later? In any case I, who had so little of a family, had found mine. Thus it wasn't by pure snobbery that I had been buying Cahiers for the last two years and that I had shared my amazed comments with a friend – Claude D. – from the Voltaire High School. It wasn't pure fancy if at the beginning of every month I was pressing my nose to the window of the modest bookshop on Avenue de la République. Just noticing that beneath the yellow border, the black and white picture on the cover of Cahiers had changed was enough to set my heart racing. However I didn't want the storekeeper to tell me whether or not a new edition was out. I wanted to find out by myself and buy the magazine coldly, with a neutral voice, as if I was buying a blank copybook. Subscribing never even crossed my mind: I liked this anxious wait. Whether to buy, to write, or to edit Cahiers, I could stay at its doorstep since it was “my home”.

At the Voltaire High School we were a few who had surreptitiously entered into cinephilia. The event has a date: 1959. The word cinéophile was still joyful although it already had the pathological connotation and the rancid aura that will later discredit it. As for me, I despised straight away those who, too normal, were already sneering at the “cinematheque rats” that we were about to become for several years – guilty to live cinema as a passion and life by proxy. At the dawn of the '60s, cinema was still an enchanted world. On the one hand it had all the charms of a parallel counter-culture. On the other it had the advantage of being somewhat developed with a heavy history, recognised values, the typos in Sadoul's insufficient bible, jargon, persistent myths, battle of ideas and war between magazines. The wars were almost over and we were arriving a bit late, but not too late to nourish the tacit project of making all this history, which wasn't even as old as the century, our own.

To be a cinephile was simply to devour another education in parallel to high school, with the yellow Cahiers as the common thread and a few “adult” passeurs (2) who, with the discretion of conspirators, signalled to us that there was indeed a world to discover, and maybe nothing else than the world to live in. Henri Agel – literature teacher at the Voltaire High School – was one of these peculiar passeurs. To spare himself as well as us the burden of Latin lessons, he would put to a vote the following choice: either spend an hour on Titus Livius or watch movies. The pupils who chose the movies often left the decrepit cine-club wondering and feeling tricked. Out of sadism or probably because he had the film rolls, Agel projected small movies meant to make teenagers lose their innocence. They were Franju's *Le sang des bêtes* and especially Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard*. So it is through cinema that I learned that the human condition and industrial butchery were not incompatible and that the worst had just happened.

I suppose today that Agel, who wrote *Evil* with a capital E, enjoyed watching the effects of this peculiar revelation on the teenagers' faces. There must have been some voyeurism in his brutal way of transmitting through cinema this gruesome and unavoidable knowledge that we were the first generation to inherit fully. Christian but not proselytising, a rather elitist militant, Agel too was showing. He had this talent. He was showing because it was necessary. And because the cinematographic culture at the high school, for which he was campaigning, also meant a silent selection between the pupils who will never forget *Nuit et brouillard* and the others. I wasn't one of the “others”.

\* \* \*

Once, twice, three times, depending on Agel's mood and the number of sacrificed Latin lessons, I watched the famous piles of dead bodies, hair, spectacles and teeth. I listened to Jean Cayrol's commentary recited by Michel Bouquet and to Hanns Eisler's music, which sounded guilty of existing. Strange baptism of images: understanding at the same time that the camps were real and that the film was just. And understanding that cinema (alone?) was capable of approaching the limits of a denatured humanity. I felt that the distances set by Resnais between the subject filmed, the subject filming and the subject spectator were, in 1959 like in 1955, the only possible ones. Was *Nuit et brouillard* a “beautiful” film? No, but it was just. It's Kapo that wanted to be beautiful and wasn't. And it's me who would never quite see the difference between what's just and what's beautiful – hence my boredom in front of beautiful images.

Captivated by cinema, I didn't need – as well – to be seduced. No need either for baby talk. As a

child I had never seen any Disney movies. In the same way that I went directly to communal school, I was proud to have avoided the childish sessions at squalling maternal schools. Worse: for me animated movies would always be something other than cinema. Even worse: animated movies would always be a bit the enemy. No “beautiful image”, especially drawn, would match the emotion – fear and trembling – in front of recorded things. And all this which is so simple and took me years to formulate in a simple way began to come out in front of Resnais' images and Rivette's text. Born in 1944, two days before D-Day, I would discover at the same time my cinema and my history. Strange history that for a long time I thought I was sharing with others, before realising – rather late – that it was well and truly mine.

\* \* \*

What does a child know? And especially that child – Serge D. – who wanted to know everything except what was about him? What absence from the world will later make being present in front of the images of the world necessary? I know of few expressions more beautiful than the one coined by Jean-Louis Schefer when, in *L'homme ordinaire du cinéma*, he speaks about the “films that have watched our childhood”. Because it is one thing to learn to watch movies as a “professional” – only to verify that movies concern us less and less – but it is another to live with those movies that watched us grow and that have seen us, early hostages of our future biographies, already entangled in the snare of our history. *Psycho*, *La Dolce vita*, *The Indian Tomb*, *Rio Bravo*, *Pickpocket*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, *The Sacrilegious Hero* or precisely *Nuit et brouillard* are not for me movies like any other. To the brutal question “Is this watching you?” they all answer yes.

The dead bodies of *Nuit et brouillard* and two years later those in the first frames of *Hiroshima mon amour* are among those “things” that have watched me more than I have seen them. Eisenstein attempted to make such images but Hitchcock succeeded. Just as an example: how can I ever forget the first encounter with *Psycho*? We snuck into the Paramount Opera theatre without paying and the movie was very ordinarily terrorising us. But then, towards the end, there is a scene on which my perception slides, slapdash editing from which emerge only grotesque props: a cubist dressing gown, a falling wig, a brandished knife. And from the fear shared with the rest of the audience follows the calm of a resigned solitude: the brain functions as a secondary projector that would keep the image going, leaving the film and the world continuing without it. I cannot imagine a love for cinema that does not rest firmly on this stolen present: “to continue without me”.

\* \* \*

Who hasn't experienced this state? Who hasn't known those screen-memories? Unidentified images are printed on the retina; unknown events happen fatally; spoken words become the secret code of an impossible self-knowledge. These private moments are the primitive scene of the cinephile, the scene in which he wasn't present although it was exclusively about him. In the way Paulhan speaks about literature as an experience of the world “when we are not there” and Lacan speaks about “what is missing from its place”. The cinephile is the one who keeps his eyes wide open in vain but will not tell anybody that he could not see a thing. He is the one preparing for a life as a professional “watcher”, as a way to make up for being late, as slowly as possible.

My life thus had its zero point, its second birth. And it was lived as such and was immediately commemorated. The year is known: once again 1959. It is – coincidentally? – the year of the famous “you saw nothing at Hiroshima” by Marguerite Duras. My mother and I were leaving the theatre after *Hiroshima mon amour*, staggered – we were not the only ones – because we never thought that cinema was capable of such a “thing”. On the platform of the metro station I finally realised that to the fastidious question I could never answer – “what are you going to do in life?” – I had just found a response. “Later”, one way or another, it will be cinema. Thus I have never been sparing of the details of this cinema-birth to myself: *Hiroshima*, the platform of the metro station, my mother, the now closed movie theatre and its seats will often be remembered as the legendary set of the good origin, the origin one chooses for oneself.

\* \* \*

Resnais is the common thread of this primitive scene in three parts over two years. It is because *Nuit et brouillard* had been possible that Kapo was born outdated and that Rivette could write his article. However, before becoming the archetypal “modern filmmaker”, Resnais was for me another passeur. He was revolutionising the “cinematographic language” (as we used to say) because he took his subject seriously and because he had the intuition, almost the luck, to spot this subject among all the others: nothing less than the damaged and disfigured human species right after the Nazi camps and the atomic trauma. So there has always been something strange in the way that I later became the rather bored spectator of Resnais' “other” films. His attempts to revitalise the world – the world whose disease he alone had recorded in time – seemed doomed to produce nothing but uneasiness.

It is therefore not with Resnais that I will make the journey of “modern” cinema but with Rossellini. It is not with Resnais that the moral lessons will be learnt by heart and conjugated but always with Godard. Why? First, because Godard and Rossellini spoke, wrote, and thought out loud while I got irritated at the image of Saint Alain Resnais freezing in his anoraks and begging – rightly but to no avail – to be believed when he said that he was not an intellectual. Did I avenge myself for the importance of two of his movies at the opening of my life? Resnais was the filmmaker who had taken me away from childhood or rather who had for three decades made me a serious child. And he is precisely the one with whom, as an adult, I would never share anything. I remember that at the end of an interview – for the release of *La vie est un roman* – I thought useful to tell him about the shock of Hiroshima mon amour in my life. He thanked me, courteous and distant, as if I had said something nice about his new raincoat. I was upset but I was wrong: the movies that have watched our childhood cannot be shared, even with their author.

\* \* \*

Now that this history has looped back and I've had more than my share of the “nothing” that there was to see at Hiroshima, I inevitably ask myself: could it have been different? Was there, in front of the camps, another possible justness than the anti-spectacular way of *Nuit et brouillard*? A friend recently mentioned George Stevens' documentary made at the end of the war, buried, exhumed, and recently shown on French television. First movie to record the camps in colour and the colours transform it with no abjection whatsoever into art. Why? Is it the difference between colour and black and white, between America and Europe, between Stevens and Resnais? Stevens' movie is magnificent because it's the story of a journey: the daily progression of a small group of filming-soldiers and wandering-filmmakers across destroyed Europe, from ravaged Saint-Lo to Auschwitz that nobody expects and which overwhelms the crew. And then, my friend tells me, the piles of dead bodies have a strange beauty which make her think of the great paintings of this century. As always Sylvie P. was right. What I understand today is that the beauty of Stevens' movie is due less to the justness of the distance than to the innocence of the gaze. Justness is the burden of the one who comes “after”; innocence is the terrible grace granted to the first arrived, to the first one who simply makes the gestures of cinema. It wasn't until the mid '70s that I recognised in Pasolini's *Salò* or even in Syberberg's *Hitler* the other meaning of the word “innocent”: not so much the non-guilty one but the one who filming evil doesn't think evil. In 1959, young boy stiffened by his discovery, I was already caught in the sharing of the collective guilt. But in 1945, it was perhaps enough to be American and to witness, like George Stevens or Corporal Samuel Fuller at Falkenau, the opening of the real gates of the night while holding a camera. You had to be American – i.e. to believe in the fundamental innocence of the show – to make the German population walk by the open tombs, to show them what they were living next to, so well and so badly. It took ten years before Resnais began editing and 15 years before Pontecorvo made one move too many that infuriated us, Rivette and I. Necrophilia was therefore the price of this “delay” and the erotic body double of the “just” gaze – the gaze of guilty Europe, Resnais' gaze and consequently mine.

This is how my history began. The space opened by Rivette's sentence was truly mine as was already the intellectual family of *Cahiers du cinéma*. But this space, I had to realise, was less a vast field than a narrow door. On its noble side was the pleasure of the just distance and its reverse, the sublimation of necrophilia. On the not so noble side was the possibility of a pleasure of a very different nature that could not be sublimated. It is Godard who, showing me videotapes of “concentration camp porn” in a corner of his video collection in Rolle, was surprised that nothing had been said about such films and that no interdiction had been pronounced. As if the coward intentions of their makers and the trivial fantasies of their viewers “protected” them in a way from censorship and outrage. Proof that in the domain of sub-culture, the silent claim of a

compulsory interlacing between the victims and the torturers was persisting. Indeed the existence of these films had never troubled me. I had for them – as for any openly pornographic cinema – the almost polite tolerance one has for the expression of fantasy when this one, naked, only claims the sad monotony of its necessary repetition.

It is the other pornography – the “artistic” pornography of Kapo, of *The Night Porter* and other retro '70s movies – that has always revolted me. To the consensual attempts to create post-aesthetics, I would prefer the stubborn return of the non-images of *Nuit et brouillard* or even the flowing desire in *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* that I would not see. These films at least had the honesty to acknowledge an impossibility to tell a story, a stopping point in the course of history, when storytelling is stilled or runs in neutral. So we should not speak about amnesia or repression but rather about foreclosure. I would later learn the Lacanian definition of foreclosure: hallucinatory return into the real of something upon which it had not been possible to produce a “judgement of reality”. To say it differently: since moviemakers had not filmed the policies of the Vichy government at the time, their duty 50 years later was not to imaginarily redeem themselves with movies like *Au revoir les enfants* but to draw today's portrait of this good people of France who from 1940 to 1942 (and that includes the *Vel' d'Hiv* raid) did not move. Cinema being the art of present, remorse is of no interest.

This is why the spectator that I was in front of *Nuit et brouillard* and the moviemaker who tried to show the impossible with this film, were linked by a complicit symmetry. Either it is the spectator who is suddenly “missing from its place” and stops while the movie continues. Or it is the movie which, instead of “continuing”, folds back onto itself and onto a temporary definitive “image” allowing the spectator to continue believing in cinema and the citizen to live his life. Stop of the spectator, stop on the image: cinema entered adulthood. The sphere of the visible had ceased to be entirely available: there were gaps and holes, necessary hollowness and superfluous fullness, forever missing images and always defective gazes. The show and the spectator stopped playing all the balls. And having chosen cinema – allegedly “the art of moving images” – I began my cinephile life under the paradox of a first stop on the image. This stop protected me from strict necrophilia and I never saw any of the rare films or documentaries “about the camps” after Kapo. For me the matter was settled by *Nuit et brouillard* and Rivette's article. For a long time I have been like the French authorities who, still today, in front of any resurgence of anti-Semitism urgently broadcast Resnais' movie as if it was part of a secret arsenal which, whenever evil was back, could time and again apply its virtues of exorcism. And if I didn't apply the axiom of the “tracking shot in Kapo” only to the movies which were exposed to abjection by their subject, it was because I was tempted to apply it to all the movies. “There are things – wrote Rivette – that must be approached with fear and trembling. Death is such a thing and how could someone film such a mysterious thing without the feeling of being an impostor?” I agreed.

And because there are only a few movies where nobody dies, there were numerous occasions to fear and tremble. Some moviemakers were certainly not impostors. In 1959, Miyagi's death in *Ugetsu* literally nailed me, staggered, to the seat of the Studio Bernard theatre. Mizoguchi had filmed death as a vague fatality that you were able to see could and could not happen. One can remember the scene: in the Japanese countryside travellers are attacked by greedy bandits and one of them kills Miyagi with a spear. But he does it almost inadvertently, tumbling around, pushed by a bit of violence or by a stupid reflex. This event seems so accidental that the camera almost misses it. And I am convinced that any spectator of that scene has the same superstitious and crazy idea: if the camera had not been so slow, the event may have happened off-camera and – who knows – may have not happened at all.

Shall the camera be to blame? By dissociating the movement of the camera from the movements of the actors, Mizoguchi did the exact opposite of Kapo. Instead of a petrifying glance, this was a gaze that “seemed not to see”, that preferred not to have seen and thus showed the event taking place as an event, ineluctable and indirectly. An event that is absurd and nil, absurd like any accident and nil like war – a calamity that Mizoguchi never liked. An event that doesn't concern us enough for us not to carry on, shameful. For I bet that at this precise moment, every spectator knows absolutely what the absurdity of war is. It doesn't matter that the spectator is a westerner, the movie Japanese and the war medieval: it is enough to shift from pointing with the finger to showing with the gaze for this knowledge – furtive and universal, the only knowledge cinema is capable of – to be given to us.

Taking the side of the panoramic shot in *Ugetsu* against the tracking shot in *Kapo* so early, I made a choice whose consequences I would only measure ten years later, amidst the late and radical politicisation of *Cahiers* after 1968. If Pontecorvo, future director of *The Battle of Algiers*, is a courageous moviemaker with whom I share broadly the same political convictions, Mizoguchi seemed to have lived solely for his art and to have been an opportunist in regard to politics. Where is the difference then? In the “fear and trembling”. Mizoguchi is scared of war because, unlike Kurosawa, he is appalled by little men slaughtering each other for some feudal virility. It is this fear, this desire to vomit and flee, that triggers the stunned panoramic shot. It is this fear that makes this moment just and therefore able to be shared. Pontecorvo neither trembles nor does he feel fear: the concentration camps revolt him purely on an ideological level. This is why he can make his presence felt in the scene with an extra pretty tracking shot.

I realised that cinema oscillated most of the time between those two poles. Even with more substantial directors than Pontecorvo, I often stumbled onto this smuggler's way of adding an extra parasitic beauty or complicit information to scenes that did not need it. The wind that blows back, like a shroud, the white parachute over a dead soldier's body in Fuller's *Merrill's Marauders* troubled me for years. Less though than Ana Magnani's revealing skirt after she is shot dead in *Rome Open City*. Rossellini too was hitting “below the belt”, but in such a new way that it would take years to understand towards which abyss it was taking us. When is the event over? Where is the cruelty? Where does obscenity begin and where does pornography end? I knew these were questions constitutive of cinema “after the camps”. And for myself, because I was the same age, I began to call this cinema “modern”.

This modern cinema had one characteristic: it was cruel. We had another: we accepted that cruelty. Cruelty was on the “good side”. It was cruelty that said no to academic “illustration” and destroyed the hypocritical feelings of a wordy humanism. Mizoguchi's cruelty for instance showed two irreconcilable events together, producing an unbearable feeling of “non assistance to person in danger”. A modern feeling par excellence presented 15 years before the long tracking shots in *Week-end*. An archaic feeling as well since that cruelty was as old as cinema itself, like a clue revealing what was fundamentally modern in cinema, from the last shot in *City Lights* to Browning's *The Unknown* through to the ending of *Nana*. How could one forget the slow and shaky tracking shot that the young Renoir hurls towards *Nana* laying on her bed, dying of small pox? How can some people see Renoir as a singer of the happy life when he had been one of the few filmmakers capable of finishing off someone with a tracking shot? Actually, cruelty was within the logic of my journey at *Cahiers*. André Bazin, who had already theorised cruelty, had found it so narrowly linked to the essence of cinema that he almost made it “its thing”. Bazin liked *Louisiana Story* because you could see a bird eaten up by a crocodile in real time and in one shot: proof through cinema and forbidden editing. To choose *Cahiers* was to choose realism and, eventually, a certain contempt for imagination. Lacan's formula “so you want to look? Then look at this” was already substituted by this other formula “Has it been recorded? Then I must watch it”, even and especially when “it” was painful, unbearable or totally invisible.

For this realism had two sides. If modern filmmakers were saving cinema with realism, it was with an altogether different realism – as in “realistic” – that movie propaganda in the '40s had collaborated with the lies and foreshadowed death. This was why, after all, it was fair to call the former, born in Italy, “neo”-realism. It was impossible to love the “art of the century” without seeing this art to be about the madness of the century and being shaped by it. To the contrary of theatre with its collective crises and cures, cinema with its personal information and mourning had an intimate relation with the horror from which it was barely recovering. I inherited a guilty convalescent, an aged child, a narrow hypothesis. We would grow old together but not eternally.

\* \* \*

Conscientious heir, exemplary ciné-fils (3), with “the tracking shot in *Kapo*” as protecting charm, I did not let the years go by without some apprehension: what if the charm lost its power? Lecturing at a Paris university, I remember distributing Rivette's text to my students and asking for their impression. It was still a “red” period where some students were trying to grasp a bit of the political radicalism of 1968 through their professors. It seemed that out of consideration for me the most motivated of them agreed to see in “Of abjection” an interesting historical document although slightly dated. I did not get upset and if I repeated the experience with students today, I wouldn't worry whether they understood the tracking shot but I would want to make sure that

there is for them some hint of abjection. To be honest I am afraid there wouldn't be any. A sign that tracking shots are no longer a moral issue and that cinema is too weak to entertain such a question.

Thirty years after the repeated projections of *Nuit et brouillard* at the Voltaire High School, concentration camps – which served as my primitive scene – are no longer holding up in the sacred respect where Resnais, Cayrol and many others maintained them. Handed back to the historians and the curious, the question of the camps is now in line with their work, their divergences and their madness. The foreclosed desire that returns “as a hallucination into the real” is evidently the one that should never have returned. It is the desire that no gas chambers, no final solution and eventually no camps ever existed: various revisionisms. Along with the tracking shot in *Kapo* today's film students would also inherit an uncertain transmission, a taboo not clearly identified, in a word just another round in the history of tribalism of the same and the phobia of the other. The stop on the image has ceased to operate; the banality of evil can launch new, electronic images.

In recent France there are now enough symptoms for someone of my generation to look back to what was given to him as History and to take notice of the landscape he has grown in – a tragic and at the same time comfortable landscape. Two political dreams – American and communist – had been defined by Yalta. Behind us was a point of no return, morally symbolised by Auschwitz and the new concept of “crime against humanity”. Ahead of us was the unthinkable nuclear apocalypse, almost reassuringly. What just ended lasted for 40 years. I belonged to the first generation for which racism and anti-Semitism had definitely fallen into the “rubbish bin of history”. Was this first generation the only one? It was the only one anyway that shouted so easily against fascism (“fascism-will-not-pass!”) because it seemed a thing of the past, null and void. It was a mistake of course, but a mistake that did not prevent us from living very well during the “post-war economic growth”. We were naive as well to act as if, in the field of aesthetics, Resnais' elegant necrophilia would eternally keep any intrusion “at a distance”.

“No poetry after Auschwitz” said Adorno before going back over this now famous formula. “No fiction after Resnais” I could have echoed before abandoning this slightly excessive idea. “Protected” by the shockwave of the discovery of the camps, had we thought that humanity had fallen into the non-human only once with no prospect of it happening again? Had we really bet that for once the worst was over? Had we hoped so much that what wasn't called the Shoah yet was the unique historical event “thanks” to which mankind as a whole was “walking out” of history to look at it from above and recognise in an instant the worst face of its possible destiny? It seems we had.

But if “unique” and “as a whole” were too much and if mankind did not inherit the Shoah as the metaphor of what it has been and is still capable of, then the extermination of the Jews would only be a Jewish history and also – in order of decreasing importance in regard to guilt, by metonymy – a very German history, a French history, an Arab history by way of consequence, but not a very Danish history and almost not Bulgarian at all. It was to the possibility of the metaphor that responded within cinema the modern obligation to pronounce the stop on the image and the embargo on fiction. The aim was to tell another story differently where mankind was the only character and the first anti-star. The aim was to give birth to another cinema “which would know” that to give the event back to the fiction too early is to remove its uniqueness, because fiction is that freedom which disperses and which opens itself in advance to the infinity of the variation and to the seduction of the true lies.

In 1989, while visiting Phnom Penh and the Cambodian countryside for *Libération* I had a glimpse of what a genocide – an auto-genocide – “looked like” when left with no images and almost no traces. Ironically, I saw the proof that cinema was no longer intimately linked to the history of men by the fact that, contrary to the Nazi torturers who had filmed their victims, the Khmers had left behind only photographs and mass graves. And it is because another genocide was left both without images and without punishment that by a retroactive effect of contagion, the Shoah itself was now relative. Return of the blocked metaphor to the active metonymy and return of the stop on the image to the viral analogue. It went very quickly: as of 1990 the “Romanian revolution” was frivolously prosecuting obvious murderers for “illegal possession of weapons and genocide”. Does everything need to be done again? Yes everything, but this time without cinema – hence the mourning.

For we had believed in cinema, which means we had done everything not to believe it. This is the whole story of Cahiers after 1968 and their impossible rejection of Bazinism. Of course, it wasn't a question of "sleeping in the frame like in a bed" or to appal Barthes by confusing reality and representation. We were too knowledgeable not to place the spectator in the signifying concatenation or not to notice the tenacious ideology under the false neutrality of technology. We were even courageous, Pascal B. and myself, in front of an amphitheatre crowded with excited leftists, shouting that a film could no longer be "seen" but had to be "read". These were laudable efforts to be on the side of the non-naives, laudable but in my case to no avail. The time always comes when one has to pay one's debt to the fund of sincere belief and has to dare to believe in what he sees.

Of course one is not forced to believe in what one sees – it can even be dangerous – but one is not forced to hold on to cinema either. There must be some risk and some virtue, in a word some value, in the action of showing something to someone able to look at it. What would be the use of learning how to "read" the visual and to "decode" messages if there was not still the deep, minimal conviction that seeing is superior to not seeing. And the conviction that what hasn't been seen "in time" will never really be seen. Cinema is an art of the present. If nostalgia does not suit it, it is because melancholia is its instant double.

I remember the vehemence with which I said this for the first and last time. It was in Teheran, in a film studies school. In front of the guest journalists, Khemais K. and myself, were rows of boys with budding beards and rows of black sacks – probably the girls. The boys were on the left and the girls on the right in accordance with the apartheid in place in this country. The most interesting questions – coming from the girls – came written on furtive little papers. And seeing these girls so attentive and so stupidly veiled I let loose an anger with no particular object which targeted less them than all the powers that be for who the visible is primarily what is read, i.e. what is permanently suspected of betrayal and reduced by a chador or by a police of signs. Encouraged by the unusual moment and place, I let myself preach in favour of the visual in front of a veiled audience who agreed.

Late anger, last anger. For the era of suspicion is well and truly over. One can only be suspicious when a certain idea of the truth is at stake. No such thing exists today except among the integrist and the bigots, those who attack Scorsese's Christ or Godard's Marie. The images are no longer on the side of the dialectical truth of "seeing" and "showing"; they have entirely shifted to the side of promotion and advertising, the side of power. It is therefore too late not to begin to work out what is left: the golden and posthumous legend of what cinema once was, of what it was and what it could have been. "Our job will be to show how individuals, gathered in the dark as people, were burning their imaginary to warm up their real – this was silent cinema; and to show how they have let the flame extinguish itself at each social conquest, satisfied to maintain only a very small flame – and this is talking cinema and the television in the corner of the room". When the historian Godard drew this program – yesterday, in 1989 – he added "Alone, at last!"

As for me, I remember the precise moment when I knew that the axiom of the tracking shot in Kapo should be revisited and the homemade concept of "modern cinema" revised. In 1979, the French television broadcasted Holocaust, the American series by Marvin Chomsky. The loop looped back, sending me back to all the square ones. If in 1945 the Americans allowed George Stevens to make the astonishing documentary mentioned earlier, they never broadcasted it due to reasons of the cold war. Incapable of "dealing" with that history which after all is not theirs, the American entrepreneurs of entertainment had temporarily abandoned it to European artists. But on that history, like on any story, they retained a right of pre-emption, and sooner or later the Hollywood and television machine would dare to tell "our" story. It would tell it very carefully but it would sell it to us as another American story. Holocaust would therefore be the misfortunes that tear apart and destroy a Jewish family: there would be extras looking too fat, acting performances, generic humanism, action and melodramatic scenes. And we would sympathise.

Thus it would only be in the form of the American documentary-drama that this history could escape the cine-clubs and could, via television, concern this servile version of the "entire mankind" that is the global TV audience. The simulation-Holocaust was certainly no longer confronting the strangeness of a humanity capable of a crime against itself but it also remained stubbornly incapable of bringing out from that story the single individuals, each with a story, a face and a name, that once were the exterminated Jews. It would rather be drawing –

Spiegelman's Maus – that would later dare make this salutary act of re-marking out singularities. Drawing and not cinema since it is so true that American cinema hates singularity. With Holocaust, Marvin Chomsky made our old aesthetical enemy return, modest and triumphant: the good old sociological program with its well-studied cast of suffering specimen and its light show of animated police sketches. The loop had looped back and we had lost. The proof? This is the time when a fresh wave of revisionism started in France.

\* \* \*

It took me 20 years to go from my “tracking shot in Kapo” to this irreproachable Holocaust. I took my time. The “issue” of the camps, the very issue of my prehistory, would still and forever question me but no longer really through cinema. But it was with cinema that I had understood in what respect this history concerned me and in which form – a tracking shot too many – it had appeared to me. One must be loyal to what has once transfixed him. And every “form” is a face looking at us. This is why, even if I have feared them, I have never believed those at the High School cine-club who were attacking with condescension these poor “formalist” fools, guiltily preferring the personal pleasure of the “form” to the actual “content” of the films. But only the one who has been struck early enough by formal violence will end up realising – at the end of his life – how this violence is also “content”. And the moment will always come early enough for him to die cured, having traded the enigma of singular figures of his history for the banalities of a “cinema-mirror-of-society” and other serious questions with no answers. The form is desire; the content is only the background when we are gone. These were my thoughts a few days ago while watching on television images of very famous singers and very starving African children. The rich singers (“We are the world, we are the children!”) were mixing their image with the image of the skinny children. Actually they were taking their place; they were replacing and erasing them. Mixing stars and skeletons in a typical fast editing where two images try to become one, the video elegantly carried out this electronic communication between North and South. Here I am, I thought, the present face of abjection and the improved version of my tracking shot in Kapo. These are the images I would like at least one teenager to be disgusted by and ashamed of. Not merely ashamed to be fed and affluent, but ashamed to be seen as someone who has to be aesthetically seduced where it is only a matter of conscience – good or bad – of being a human and nothing more.

I realised that all my history is there. In 1961 a movement of a camera aestheticised a dead body and 30 years later a dissolve makes the wealthy and the starving ones dance together. Nothing has changed, neither me, forever incapable of seeing in all this a carnivalesque dance of death, medieval and ultra-modern, nor the predominant conceptions of consensual beauty. The form has changed a bit though. In Kapo, it was still possible to be upset at Pontecorvo for inconsiderately abolishing a distance he should have “kept”. The tracking shot was immoral for the simple reason that it was putting us – him filmmaker and me spectator – in a place where we did not belong, where I anyway could not and did not want to be, because he “deported” me from my real situation as a spectator-witness forcing me to be part of the picture. What was the meaning of Godard's formula if not that one should never put himself where one isn't nor should he speak for others?

Imagining Pontecorvo's gestures miming the tracking shot with his hands, I am even more upset with him because in 1961 a tracking shot still meant rails, personnel and physical effort. I imagine with less clarity the movements of the person responsible for the electronic dissolve of “We are the children”. I imagine him pushing buttons on a console, with the images at his fingertips, definitely cut off from what or who they represent, incapable of suspecting that someone could be upset with him for being a slave with automatic gestures. That person belongs to a world – television – where, otherness having more or less disappeared, there are no good or bad ways to manipulate images. These are no longer “images of another” but images among others in the market of brand images. And this world that no longer revolts me is precisely the world “without cinema”, meaning without this sense of belonging to humanity through a supplementary country called cinema. And then I see clearly why I have adopted cinema: so it could adopt me in return. So it could teach me to tirelessly touch with my gaze the distance from me at which the other begins.

This history of course begins and ends with the camps because they are the limit that was waiting for me at the beginning of my life and at the end of my childhood. Childhood: it will have taken

my whole life to reconquer it. This is why (message to Jean-Louis S.) I will probably see Bambi.

Translation by Laurent Kretzschmar (1)

© P.O.L./Trafic

Endnotes:

1. This translation would not have been possible without Paul Grant's detailed review and insightful comments on Daney's concepts. Thank you Paul.

2. Passeur: a person who helps to cross a river with a small boat and, by extension, a person who helps to go clandestinely through a border or a “no-trespassing” area. There is also the idea of passing something to someone. Daney explained the term in an interview when asked how he would define himself: “I like this small word: passeur. I remember a fantastic article by Jean-Louis Comolli about Eric Dolphy entitled 'the passeur'. (...) The passeurs are strange: they need borders but only to challenge them. They don't want to be alone with their treasures and at the same time, they don't really care about those to whom they pass something. And since 'feelings are always reciprocal', we don't really care about them either, we don't pass anything to them and we often empty their pockets”. *Devant la recrudescence des vols de sacs à main*, 1997.

3. Ciné-fils: wordplay with cinéphile; literally: son of cinema.

Filmography:

October (Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1927)Le jour se lève (Marcel Carné, 1939)Bambi (David Hand, 1942)Kapo (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1960)Le sang des bêtes (Georges Franju, 1949)Nuit et brouillard (Alain Resnais, 1955)Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)La Dolce Vita (Federico Fellini, 1960)The Indian Tomb (Fritz Lang, 1959)Rio Bravo (Howard Hawks, 1959)Pickpocket (Robert Bresson, 1959)