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**Between Symptom and Specter:
A Quest within the Visible in Giuseppe
Tornatore's *A Pure Formality***

ABSTRACT

This article performs a close reading of Giuseppe Tornatore's film *Una pura formalità* (1994). It examines the ways in which the principle of montage activates a certain reality and visibility in the process of perception, adjustment and orientation in a narrative. Highlighting the difference between the visual and the visible, the article concentrates on the points of crisis in the narrative, where the visible is deconstructed by the visual. These points of crisis in the narrative answer to key points of crisis in the subject, where the unconscious constantly assails, deconstructs and deterritorializes the conscious and its coherent and controlled narratives, through forms of haunting and a spectral presence materialized at the level of symptoms. The article looks at how the deconstruction of this montage, followed by re-montage, renders the specter visible in the stratification of time.â

KEYWORDS

Giuseppe Tornatore; Repression; Memory; Visual Narrative; Specter; Symptom; Deconstruction; Deterritorialization; Montage.

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Who is it that is addressing you? Since it is not an author, a narrator, or a *deus ex machina*, it is an I that is both part of the spectacle and part of the audience, an I that, a bit like you, undergoes its own incessant violent reinscription within the arithmetical machinery. An I that functioning as a pure passageway for operations of substitution is not some singular and irreplaceable existence, some subject or life. But only rather moves between life and death, between reality and fiction. An I that is a mere function or phantom.

Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, 1981.

Giuseppe Tornatore's movie of 1994, *Una pura formalità*, poses indirectly the question of the specter and of the way in which the interaction with it occurs and evolves at visual level. The main character of the movie, Onoff, is a recluse asocial writer who has been struggling with a writer's block for the past few years. One stormy night a police patrol crosses his way, as he is running in the pouring rain, out of breath and frantic, without any identification papers, and incapable of recalling anything regarding the past days. He is taken to the police station to be interrogated by the Inspector. Doubting his identity at first, the inspector grows even more suspicious when,



throughout the interrogatory, Onoff's statements and versions of the past events are constantly shifting. The specter of a possible murder lies at the heart of this dialectical interrogatory, where gaps of memory are constantly refilled and reconsidered, and where each attempt to re-territorialize the memory, the language, the time and space of the present flow of events is deconstructed by a spatial and temporal counterpoint which constantly deterritorializes memory and self-consciousness.

Let us return to the beginning of the movie. It's night time. It's raining heavily. The movement of the camera follows unevenly a man's frantic running and the camera borrows this frantic rhythm. The viewer will find it difficult to either locate or draw the contours of a localizable place. The movie emerges and will remain in this any-space-whatever to the end. This man's running draws up a labyrinthine geography that is constantly shifting chaotically, panic-inducing, suggesting to the viewer an escapee running away from his pursuers. The initial images are jerky, blurry to the viewer's eye, which begins to link information, to build consistency. The eye of the viewer empathizes with the frenzy and anguish of the fugitive, losing sight of essential details and, therefore, removing everything that does not make immediate sense in the economy of the narrative. Nevertheless, we do have the intuition that there is much confusion at the heart of all this, that the man is perhaps running without necessarily knowing where he is coming from and where he is heading. And this intuition oscillates. Being stopped by a police squad, he discovers, as we discover too, that he carries no identification papers, that he cannot explain his being out on a storm, late at night, in the middle of a forest, and – later – that he is apparently suffering from amnesia as far as the past few days are concerned. He is taken to the station, where everybody starts

waiting for the inspector who, for a considerable amount of time, seems to be detained elsewhere. Meanwhile the rhythm of the movie tends either to slow down, to "normalize", or to suddenly become chaotic, aggressive, uncontrolled, panic-stricken. The entire movement of the image and within the image ranges from an apparently calm (re)settlement of things to a reversal, an upheaval caused by a shock wave operating at the level of detail. The glass of milk that Onoff is offered so that he may warm up causes such an outburst that it resembles a fit of hysteria. It involves a mental duality materialized through gestures of contradictory and obscure experiences assailing the character emotionally. The seizures that grasp his body (which is contorting with incredible strength even when he is immobilized by three people) are in tune with this dual regime of contradictory feelings. On the one hand, there is a repression reflex of annihilating anxiety, of suturing fissures, in an attempt to defend and protect the integrity of the self, while on the other hand, the compulsion to death activates with a violence mostly turned against his own self. Therefore we may speak of a specter haunting both the narrative and the character, a specter against which the character fights, against which he rebels, a specter he denies, but which he ultimately must accept, assimilate and integrate.

In order to make the specter visible, in order to bring the invisible, the unfathomable, the symptom, the exception, the deviation within visibility, what is required is a deconstruction of the visible at both the narrative and the visual levels. The entire interrogatory conducted by the inspector in his effort to complete the missing pieces in the picture, to rebuild, to reconstruct the character of Onoff and his deeds is actually a deconstruction, a gradual detachment from and elimination of all reflexes of consistency



that Onoff still retains and which he stubbornly applies.

This deconstruction, activated at a narrative and visual level, through discourse (questioning, dialogue, dialectics, etc.) and images (photos, objects, the water dripping in the room, etc.) performs a gradual deterritorialization of the world in which Onoff has lived, of the only (non-spectral) reality he accepts. We may actually talk about the deconstruction of an appearance, of a reflex of certainty, of an illusion of stability in a world in which and through which we always invest things with a meaning, a significance, a symbolic reference, with regularity and legitimacy, which enables us to always resort to them in a certain way, which allows us to restore images and complete the data we receive from the surrounding world, automatically filling in the gaps with what our memory knows and activates out of reflex.

We speak of deconstruction in a Derridean sense, where deconstruction does not mean dissolution, disintegration. To deconstruct is not to destroy, to dissolve or to annihilate the legitimacy of what is deconstructed. It is to see the layered structure of the concept. Deconstruction is the genealogical analysis of the trajectory (or trajectories) through which the concept has been built, used, legitimized, etc. Deconstruction means becoming aware of and acknowledging the historical, temporal and spatial components, seeing the layered structure of the concept or image, working in anachronistic terms, accepting the anachronisms and seeing the symptoms. It means making the specter visible, internalizing it, re-contextualizing and reconfiguring things, accepting and taking their tone of uncertainty, their rhizomatic and layered appearance, their fluid condition, which is inherently unfinished, always in motion.

Derrida insists on the extra sense that the word “ghost” retains in French. Ghosts

are *des revenants*, therefore they never simply come from nothing, out of nothing, but they return. And they return bringing with them a different time, a different geography, a different history than the ones contained by the memory of the present. This return assumes the memory of a past that has never had the form of a presence. A past in which the repressed, the invisible, the unconscious have always been kept in a potential state of actuality, but without ever becoming actualized in a presence. Any repressed or invisible entity which comes to be assimilated by a present, which takes the form of a presence is integrated and refined, softened by the reflexes of reason and rationality with which the conscious memory operates. This memory space is organized almost with the means of a library, operating with entries, categories, an order and a chronology, a specific location, fixed in time and space. By contrast, a specter actualizes only temporarily, being unstable, oscillating through hauntings, through its movement of coming in(to) presence and that of resistance to solidification, to being sealed in a rigid form. A specter is a presence that provides and enables an opening, that signals, hints at another existential dimension, at another spatial and temporal dimension.

Starting from Freud’s theory of mourning, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok outline and propose a theory of ghosts which functions on the ground of the operating mechanisms and forms of mourning proposed by Freud. Freud says that in the normal process of mourning, the dead person is assimilated; this assimilation is an internalization, over the course of which mourning unfolds naturally, ending in the acceptance of the dead person. In a mourning process that goes wrong, there is no genuine introspection and internalization, but an incorporation – in the terms of the psychoanalysts Abraham and Torok – which means that the dead person is integrated, but



does not become a homogeneous part of the mourner, occupying by itself a certain place in the mourner's body. In this situation, Derrida says, it can speak on its own, it can haunt the body or turn it into a ventriloquist and therefore the mourner's own speech and body turn into a tomb that encapsulates the ghost, the mourner becoming a sort of depository space for ghosts. A ghost can be not only our own unconscious, but also the unconscious of an other, of an alterity. The unconscious of an alterity speaks thus in our place, contradicts us, plays tricks on us. Undoubtedly a terrifying experience, but – Derrida insists – absolutely necessary, because only in this context do things really start to happen. Thus deconstructed in its unity, the body is de-composed, deterritorialized and forced to reassembly, to perform a re-montage in order to incorporate the foreign body that always haunts and inhabits its host with a dose of incompleteness, unpredictability, uncontrollability. A dimension where time and space always open up, which prevents us from reterritorializing, from working with and within uniformities in order to control things.

We see what sees and concerns us first and foremost, Georges Didi-Huberman says. We notice only the things that glance back at us, that look back when looked at. Understanding the things that look back at us, understanding their gaze fixed on us is necessary in order to be able to see and understand what it is that we see in our turn. In *A Pure Formality* things signal back, the surrounding world together with its objects signals. Understanding their glance, deciphering this look is reading and understanding your own presence, condition, and existence in this world, understanding your own spectral condition in a world of spectral objects. That which glances at us affects us, causes a rupture, a fissure, a split, a scission in what we see. The reflex gesture in this situation is to lock and move beyond both

what we see and what observes us and practically returns our gaze, by reducing and simplifying, through sublimation, by supplementing through imaginative and prospective projection. We speak here in terms of a prospective projection through which we reconstruct the gaps in perception, the inaccessible or unfathomable facets by means of recourse to memory, to visual and perception habits and to our expectations. The eye seeks familiarities, avoiding any surprises, the unexpected that may interpose within our sight. The eye closes at the surprises that assail it, choosing from the outset what it will keep within the visible and what it will refuse to see, choosing the categories and tools that will guide and facilitate these options. For Freud, a dream thinks with/in visual images, in the sense that the dream applies its mechanisms and images on elements that have or acquire a behavior similar to the way that images and the visual behave. The eye sees inertially, projecting its expectations and habits, and interprets what it sees in terms of certainty, from the perspective of the items it already knows and understands and towards which it knows how to position itself.

The problem of the volume and of the void which are revealed to one's sight in the space of a work of art, not only in the visible range, but in all the dimensions of the visual (whether tactile, audible, optical, etc.) decides how we choose to relate to an image, and how we position ourselves in front of an image. We speak of the same nature and functionality of the void in the case of Barthes's *punctum*, when the viewer who looks at the photograph of a person, is instantly interpellated by the void of the death (situated either in the past or in the future) of the subject in the photo, and thus by the void of the viewer's own death. The contact with a foreign body, with an otherness (a photograph to Barthes or a grave to



Georges Didi-Huberman) causes a fissure, splits the regarding self into two the moment it imposes its sight as a cut, as a dissemination between the volume of the perceived object and the glance that it receives and returns, the glance with which the regarded object answers back and thus returns with the anguish of the void on which it stands, which comes from an abyss, not prompted by an opacity of the source, but by an essential and inherent condition and presence of the emptiness, of the nothingness lying at the heart of all things visible.

When the inevitable sense of loss is activated and acts instantly on the viewer, he suddenly finds himself in the situation where he can no longer protect himself by blocking that which causes the anxiety. The reflex is to always interpose between one's self and the void a space which is meant to act as a buffer, a screen which is designed to deviate, to divert the threat, the lurking danger, either towards a generalization (and thus, towards a reification, an objectivization) at the level of the world in general, at the level of a transcendent perspective that could ascertain and generalize (and thus abstract) the fate of humanity, or towards an artifice, pushing the terms in the space of the artifact and simulacrum. Georges Didi-Huberman speaks in terms of an emptiness that reaches instantly, at that moment, the inevitable *par excellence*: that is to understand, to know the fate of a body similar to mine, that existed and functioned once just like my own body exists and functions now, and which, at this point, is reduced to nothing, silenced, emptied of life, without words, without being able to make a gesture, to move, without the power to raise its eyes towards me, to look at me on its own. That is why the regard I receive back from such an image of the other is actually empty, anguished, as is the emptiness responding to

my own glance, just like for Nietzsche, the abyss will always gaze back at the one who looks into it, scrutinizing the viewer in its turn, answering him with the same look that it has been addressed, which comes as a shock wave to break, to probe and to question subjectivity itself. But in this gesture, it also splits and dislocates it, because it never comes with a defined geography or from a space operating with reference points or fixed and stable structures and foundations: instead, it comes to bracket all forms of stability and landmark structures which offer an order and balance for the subject. Nothingness offers itself to perception as the monolithic form of a compact and unfathomable body. The glance that it casts towards the regarding subject imposes on him an impossible image, an image which cannot be seen, which he can't bear to see. Its presence is like a spectrum which signals, but remains inaccessible and, at the same time, it imposes and ascertains itself as a certainty regarding the viewer's own future. Facing the void and the death which signal uninterruptedly, the subject falls prey to the anguish produced by this future that awaits him with the entire certitude, and also uncertainty, of what his own body will become, split between its condition of volume, thus occupying a space, and its capacity to open up, to offer itself to the void. Onoff is caught in the very interval of this split, at the moment when the instinctive rationality and memory of the volume insist, imposing their reflexes before and against all evidence, opposing the unknown, the void, nothingness, without being able thereby to avoid its distress and to eliminate or erase the signs that haunt and harass him constantly. The writer's world (the last days which he cannot remember) has a few moments of invasive visibility – as in a sort of flash which imposes a layered form at the narrative and visual level. A form which becomes more complex with each new flash,



which enhances, amplifies the web of connections it brings into visibility, but in a stratified manner, constantly changing the temporal perspective and layer. Just like, in Deleuze's terms, a minor literature written in a major language causes, produces a deterritorialization of the major language, in the same way, here, the world contained in this split, in this intermediate scission and composed of elements related to and coming from Onoff's 'real' world causes actually a deterritorialization. This space is caught within an accolade of the night, of the darkness, a night that will end only when the split will have accomplished its function of passage, thus disappearing. This intermediary world is itself a world in dissolution, dismantling. The police station is assailed by a continuous rain, which flows through cracks in the interior, through an increasing number of slots that make their way through the roof, flooding all the rooms where the containers and makeshift vessels scattered everywhere are no longer able to cope with the volume of water. All this in the context in which Onoff projects a fullness over these regions of the void, filling these areas of illegibility with reflexes and habits of his 'real' world; throughout this entire time, the space which his sight continuously tries to control and to keep coherent is disintegrating.

In this space, his identity is questioned from the very beginning. This identity needs to be rediscovered, restated and reconfirmed through a dialectical dialogue between Onoff and the Inspector and, automatically between the worlds to which each of them belongs, between two different and diverging perceptions and views of practically one and the same world. The dialogue between the two begins with a strange game of quotations, mediated through the fictional worlds of Onoff's books. Initially, he fails to identify a passage quoted by the Inspector. Subsequently, both Onoff and the

Inspector commit to this dialogue in quotes, in which, curiously, both are able to quote by heart entire portions of Onoff's books, as if they had the written pages in front of them. On the other hand, this space is also the space of the unconscious and of involuntary memory. Onoff's novels do not originate in the controlled area of consciousness, but in the spectral space of ghosts, of the voices which inhabit and haunt the subject and speak through him. This game, in which memory contains and reproduces that which normally it might not be able to, pulls again an alarm signal in the sense of a disturbance in the normal order, in the natural behavior of things and in their position and functioning in the world. However, in this context, Onoff activates, in a self-defense reflex, a projective perception that automatically fills the gaps, and makes up for the unfamiliarities which constantly signal and produce anxiety: the bottle in which Onoff sees wine (although, as we shall see later, together with Onoff, the bottle has been empty all the time), the sheets of paper that are constantly replaced in the typewriter, which will eventually prove to have been practically non-existent.

At first, after the arrival of the inspector, there is a moment of an apparent stabilization of the situation, a temporary normalization, when Onoff's identity is accepted and recorded as such. The misunderstanding seems resolved, Onoff receives dry clothes to change and is to return home. Yet, this very moment, another rupture occurs, a new question mark is raised, a new crisis looms, a new danger beckons. Onoff discovers a blood stain on his shirt. Panic follows, as he is now trying to eliminate the blood stain, to get rid of it by tearing that stained piece of cloth; however, being unable to get rid of it by discarding it, he swallows it. Again an apparent stabilization of the situation, although this time the alarm signal (coupled



with Onoff's inability to recall anything of the past days) lingers on, harassing him with a new uncertainty, a new danger lurking from the unknown – the possibility of a murder. Returning to the inspector's office, he learns that, for unclear reasons, he will not be allowed to return home. The issue of an unidentified corpse is revealed. The questioning is thus resumed (on several occasions, each time when the interrogatory reaches a dead end, a point in which the facts become confused, contradicting each other in Onoff's statements) each time with the same initial question of identification: name, surname, date of birth, etc. When it reaches the point of asking details related to the past days, Onoff's answers become confusing, contradictory, as the repressed memory of those days remains inaccessible. It only flashes in flickering details of visibility. The interrogatory is conducted in the context of this space, which is overwhelmed by a rain that slowly infiltrates it, seeping everywhere and disseminating any resistance, any barricades of the self. Joining the others in a common effort to throw out of the window the water which is now flooding the room, Onoff catches a glimpse of a corpse wrapped in a cloth, carried by two people who, accompanied by the inspector, are entering the building. Taking advantage of the apparent carelessness of the officers in the room, he jumps out of the window, trying to flee. The same staccato pace of the image at the beginning of the movie is now resumed, as the frantic image is gliding through the rain, darkness and the light beams coming from the torches of Onoff's pursuers. Eventually Onoff gets caught in a metal trap and is recovered and taken back to the station, where he falls asleep for a while. When he wakes up, he asks for pen and paper in order to quickly put down a few ideas. However, no writing instrument he finds there seems to work. In this frenzy,

panic and anger, a glitch occurs, this produces a rupture, and things start breaking apart, including the repressive screen of conscious memory. Disparate details that had previously haunted and harassed his memory are becoming consistent and start to build in. Looking around, he sees/ perceives all of a sudden the absence of the written sheets of paper and of the wine in the bottle in which he had previously seen the liquid; confronted with the presence of the body brought inside the building, he lifts the cloth covering it, and finally discovers his own face, while the image of his suicide gesture completes the entire picture.

Faced with the anguish of death, which disrupts the ego, we can opt for stereotypical language or we can re-formulate our language to accommodate this experience. In the first case, however – trying instinctually to protect ourselves – we will try to restore the broken ties by suturing the cracks and holes, thus suturing the very anguish that seizes us, which opens up in us and splits us into two. Suturing the anxiety means suppressing it, pushing the void into a space where reason controls and manages everything. Thus, the ego will remain protected, eluding the scission, the fracture produced, opened by that which regards it in that which it sees, leaving it in the belief that the rest, the emptiness contained in the volume confronting the self does not concern it, and it is not addressed to it. The visible, in terms of the surface it presents to perception (in the denial of all signs and signals which it practices), becomes flat, reductive, eliminating the impalpable and the unknown in the space of an invisible entity without a name. Against the background of this repression, of this refusal to see, to accept the look that things return, sight clings to a series of constraints of form and of things in familiar shapes, easy to handle, and to place in the surrounding space. In Onoff's case it is obvious that all his



victorious gestures of temporarily normalizing things are just apparent normalizations, artificial and short-lived compared to the anguish of the rupture. In this process of avoidance, of repression, all objects are reduced tautologically to that which is visible, being extracted from temporality, being deprived, drained of the fluid and active presence of time, of memory or of the glance in which the specters contained by the visible insinuate themselves, haunting it. Walter Benjamin would say that in this way the *aura* of the object is removed and eliminated – the *aura* meaning to him the appearance and visibility of what is distant, inaccessible, of that which is not immediately accessible to one's sight – through the indifference shown to everything that lies beyond the visible appearance, hidden to sight, although present and active. Indifference and denial are easily satisfied with the immediately obvious and the strictly visible. The visual experience becomes an exercise of faith, an investment with a victory of the organizing speech over a disseminated, deterritorialized and deterritorializing vision.

Patrick Lacoste speaks about two types of repression: repression by amnesia (which is subsumed to a form of hysteria) and repression operating with logical means, which is what Freud calls an obsessional form. Beyond its descriptive functionality as a depository of all that which is not present in the field of the conscious at a certain time, the unconscious manifests itself through a dynamic function which is systemic: it manages both the functional mechanisms of dreams through its operations of condensation, displacement and distortion, and the mechanisms of repression and suppression. In the context of these systemic features, the contents of the unconscious are given by representations of impulses and drives. Yet, these contents are modified, decomposed, distorted, de-formed and processed, like in a montage, through the

activation of a catalyst which operates these specific movements and condensations as part of the reflex action of defense mechanisms. Still, since these contents are equipped with a dynamic pulsional energy, which is fluctuating and strong, they attempt to reactivate themselves constantly, to break the barrier that keeps them away from consciousness, in order to return into consciousness as an active and permanent component thereof. However, the way in which they can return to the level of the conscious involves and assumes some compromise formations, the result of constraints and deformations caused by censorship. Onoff continually oscillates between the two forms of repression: the hysterical form materialized in the form of amnesia is doubled and counterpointed at the same time by the obsessional form which attempts to make anxiety coherent, to control anxiety by appealing to the reasons of logic, by repeating the same gestures and statements at the level of the narrative and discourse. The swift flashes of memory are constantly reconfigured. Initially they integrate in the rational discourse that tries to put things in a manageable order, but eventually this entire scaffolding collapses. Memory gaps are refilled repeatedly - but inconsistently - with other possible versions, from a range of probabilities with which the logical order operates: since this inconsistency keeps reiterating at the level of remembering facts, the gaps are not annihilated but their anxiety is enhanced due to this flagrant uncertainty. The breaking point occurs, interestingly, after the moment Onoff wakes up from sleep and tries to jot down some ideas, some images glimpsed in a dream, in order to give them a coherent form, to control and manipulate them, and thus to operate his own editing at the level of consciousness. Failing to follow this impulse, because no writing instrument that he



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tries to use seems to work, the protective shield held by his consciousness against this haunting reality falls apart. The surrounding objects regain their volume and cease to be reduced to plain surfaces, which are immediately discernible and accessible to the sight. This volume recovers its latencies, its stratification, its temporal complexity and its symptoms. The surrounding objects cease to exist tautologically, in the sense that so far their ontological reality has been assumed to be identical with what their external surface would offer unchanged to the perceiving eye, has been assumed not to hide anything, not to contain anything beyond that which was already there, already (in the) visible. Moving beyond the tautology of the visible into the space of the rhizomatic complexity of the visual, they are subjected to a temporal stratification, in which the anachronism becomes active and is no longer annihilated, in which the spectator itself becomes visible and is assimilated.

The author wishes to thank for the financial support provided from the program THE SECTORAL OPERATIONAL PROGRAM FOR HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT, Contract POSDRU 6/1.5/S/3 – „DOCTORAL STUDIES, A MAJOR FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND HUMANISTIC STUDIES”.

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