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Remembering Images: Cinema Thinking the Century

ABSTRACT

This paper tries to examine the way in which history is used in cinema to create visual territories of the past that are able to postulate a spatiality of remorse. The attempt to communicate the horrific is built up as a collection of impossible testimonies and dispersed images. The sense of “pastness” is constructed by a mediating sense of guilt surrounding the 20th century. The analyzed films concern the possibility of addressing the history of humanity by means of the national history of Germany. *Der Himmel über Berlin* of Wim Wenders and Godard’s *Allemagne Année 90 Neuf Zéro* are not only about images of the past, but also about territories of history which are spatial symptoms of a sense of omission towards the Real.

KEYWORDS

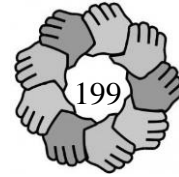
History; Memory; Image; Real; Gaze; 20th Century.

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Introduction

Forgetting is part of the exercise of staging remembrance inside which the sense of past-ness is felt by means of an intense sense of loss: not just a lost temporality, but also the lost possibility of recalling something that was once remembered. As Anne Whitehead states in her book about memory, forgetting is, indeed, part of the inclusion and exclusion operations of creating meaning. That is why, Whitehead perceives the relation of memory to past not as a *form of truth*, but as a *form of desire*¹. We could argue that it is not only a desire to retain, but most of all a desire to continue, that is to be able to go back and forth without losing oneself on the way. The construction of memory as a form of desire is most visible in Wim Wender’s film *Sky over Berlin* (1987), where the angels remember and record in as far as they long for the lives of ordinary people and the spectacles of embodiment. Memory is also a form of the desire to be incorporated, contained, meaning that remembering is determined both by a will to remember as by a longing to be remembered. The past is not only enacted through the cycles and rituals of the living body, but it requires a body of its own: the image. Ricoeur talks about the fabric of past



as being actually a fabric of images: *the return of a memory can only take place in the mode of becoming an image*². In *Sky over Berlin* and *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* (1991), the images of the past are insertions of recordings, videos, documentaries, references and when they spring inside the surface logic of the film, they create a slash that states the past as a *having been* and not as a *no longer* which keeps the room empty for the return of that image. Both films operate with the distinction made by Ricœur between *the time of the soul*³ associated with individual memory and *the time of the world* that belongs to the collective memory. How is it that we could insert *the time of the soul* inside *the time of the world*? Both films seem to give the same answer: by means of what Agamben calls the time that remains, the time that is left and which is a remnant of the two (*the time of the soul* and *the time of the world*), being lived and experienced as a rest, a residue. It is in the aftermath of a residue temporality that the films struggle to catch the gaze of the leftovers, a gaze that remembers nothing more but its own survival, a cinematic survival. It is the temporality of that *moment of danger* Benjamin talks about, the moment that sustains the construction of memory while, at the same time, bears witness to its collapse: *To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the way it really was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger*⁴.

Cinema builds inside the visual a territoriality that replaces the narrative of history and manages to make us belong to that exteriority created by the bounds of visually delimited spaces. The images of communities and the discourses of the archive are visually registered as images of territoriality, where memory is an extension of space and even the story is a way of delineating a territory inside time, history

and materiality. These territories created through the type of memory made possible by cinema are the solidification of the common and the topography of a cinematically regionalised collective subconscious. There are histories of confession and histories annexed by other histories, but the history made by cinema is the creation of territories of the visual that draw borders, negotiating the stances of the eye when confronted with the limits between Real and imaginary, visible and invisible, history and existence.

The Gaze of the Citizen

The image of Berlin, in Wenders' film, is a dispersed construction of the face of the citizen which is introduced by means of the radio station image at the beginning of the film. The radio station is a symbol of the death of the face that speaks and the birth of the voice that is caught into signals. If the voice is a shared signal at the center of the city, not the voice of the body, but the voice of voicing, the face is the territory of the regained individual and silent voice. *Sky over Berlin* starts with a series of "bird eye" images that soon melt into the collage of a Berlin that belongs to the trams, the cars running on the streets and the apartments with open windows that unlock the space towards the circulation of anonymity. Having a clandestine access to the intimate thoughts of the people we see in these public spaces, the face is no longer constructed as a visibility of the surface, a visibility that covers something that is hidden, but as a visibility engulfed by the exposure of inner thought. It is as if discourse is extracted from the bodies and given back to the faces that consent to their own expropriation in the realm of the sentence. The face of the citizen is no longer



an incarnation of thought, becoming only an image for the voice-over, an image understood as *the gaze of the void on us*⁵. This whole construction of the gaze of the citizen is determined by a certain conception Wenders has about Berlin, naming it a “place of survival”.

In Agamben’s terms each form of life can be a form of surviving and each survival can become a life, meaning that survival implies living after you have overcome life. Surviving is accepting the triumph of the speaking being over the living being and assuming the gap between the two as the non-place inside which the human is constructed. Living inside an “after” is inhabiting a “place of survival” that is at the same time a placing in the place of another. Living after ‘45, in the aftermath of crimes and horror is what *Sky over Berlin* tries to grasp by means of constructing the image as a territory in the place of another. Every image of Berlin arises as a “place of survival” where each face survives its own thoughts and each citizen survives its own place of survival.

The Gaze of the Mass

In *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero*, Godard understands the Germany of the masses, inserting different images of crowds on the streets, in squares, from archival footage. These masses of people are shown in slow-motion, the gaze of the audience being forced into this atemporal slowness that seems like a force that unites us beyond time and beyond ourselves. *When an idea is born among masses it becomes a material force* is one of the lines of our “last spy” traveling across Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall and wondering which way is the West. The mass of people seems to understand itself as materiality, carnality by

means of the weight and the pressure of the body inside the crowd, where a shared spatiality is accomplished. The cinematographic image of the mass is enclosed by a force that absorbs the trans-individual carnality and opens up a territory for the visual articulation of a horizontal corporality that develops the collective body into a historical wasteland. The images of the manifestation of the crowds are essential not only to Godard’s film, but also to the understanding of the 20th century, because as Trotsky said this was the century to witness the “irruption of the masses into the stage of history”.

In trying to think the thinking of the century, Alain Badiou dedicates a whole chapter in his book to the question of the “we”. After National Socialism and Communism have postulated a “we” that always aims at becoming a subject, a “we” that is actually the ideal of an “I”, Badiou asks a decisive question when thinking about a transition towards our century: *How are we to move from the fraternal “we” of the epic to the disparate “we” of togetherness, of the set, without ever giving up on the demand that there be a “we”?*⁶. *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* also raises the question of the historical realization of “we” by quoting two times the following passage from Hegel: “In pursuing their own interests, men make history. At the same time they are the tools and the means for something higher and greater without realizing it. But they sense it subconsciously.” This realization of something higher than the man, by means of individual participation, is a very good example of how the 20th century conceived the epic of the “we”. The “we” of togetherness (the love between the trapeze and the angel) is, thou, possible in Wenders’ film, a film made in 1987, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the “we” was still a dream of union. *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* is made in 1991, approximately two



year after the fall of the Berlin Wall and Godard makes us sense the second (after National Socialism) big deception of the “we” in German history. The expression of the “we” that Godard’s film deals with is the “we” of historical body. Badiou takes into consideration the impassiveness of the historical body and treats it as an *insensitive body* that expels and at the same time justifies violence as a mere individual element with no relevance for the big project of the “we”: *the acceptance of cruelty by the militants of a truth follows from the fact that the “we-subject” is represented as an insensitive – because eternal – body. Sensibility to violence is nothing but the individual component of an immortal “we”.*⁷

For Badiou, the century has also raised the question of what an “incarnation” signifies by means of the way it thought about the assembling of the “we”, but also by formulating that force that triggers the “we”. Thus, the “we” is understood as the incarnation of an idea, and when the century has witnessed the physical and ideological collapse of the body of “we”, it exposed, what Badiou calls *the tortured body of the Idea*⁸. Through all its horror of the camps, the mass starvation in Soviet Ukraine during Stalinism and the World Wars, the 20th century has seen its two major Ideas gathered under the shape of a tortured collective body. These two big projects of the century were the creation of the new man (as Badiou demonstrates) and, on the other hand, the victorious transformation of the agrarian societies into industrial ones at all costs. Incarnating an Idea turned out to have a major influence on the way that incarnated life has been perceived. For the incarnated Idea individual life was not of relevance as long as the life of ideals still breathed through its new construction of the dimensions of embodiment. Godard’s film understands this *tortured body of the Idea* when it

plays in slow-motion the footage with the two soldiers dragging a body in the camps.

In that moment cinema assumes the end of the Idea and its relation to the wound definitely inscribed in each representation of carnality and every image of the body. The image itself becomes a “tortured body” that witnesses its own dismemberment by the real. Godard spoke about the failure of cinema concerning its responsibility towards the real of the camps and, that is why, *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* is also a film about the defeat of cinema in the face of history.

Music – The Rhythm of Black

An interesting element that seems to distinguish between Wenders’ film and Godard’s film is the soundtrack implied in order to create the dialectics between sound and image. Wenders’ *Berlin* has its extensions in the underground music from dark nightclubs where the aesthetics of the outcry and the corporeal response of the public are part of the hypnotics of a historical self-oblivion. *Sky over Berlin* insists on the attempted resurrection of the spaces of togetherness by means of late-night Berlin’s music shows. Wenders seems to understand the theater of the gesture inside these shows, where the post-historical itself is enacted inside the corporeal distortions of guilt. By contrast, Godard’s film is embedded in classical music (Bryars, Liszt, Mozart, Bach) even when the images of horror surface with a different intensity than previous sequences. Godard dedicates some minutes of the film around the construction of “All the painters were servants of the state” naming Velasquez, Giotto and Dürer as a “precursor of Nazism” for having killed nature by representing it inside the painting. Music is used in *Germany Year 90 Nine*



Zero with the same consciousness of the indebtedness culture and the arts have

towards the formulation of passions and their development not only inside the mechanisms of the “soul,” but also inside the mechanism of societies. The inserted sequences from expressionist films (Murnau, Fritz Lang) seem to mirror a Real that was seen before its absorption into the world.

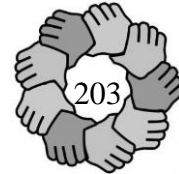
For Godard cinema is music and in one interview⁹ he declares that the black screens which divide the film into chapters and passages are used for rhythm. *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* turns the rhythm generated by the inter-titled black screens into the rhythm of memory itself, each black screen being the impossibility of a certain visual recollection which is assembled inside the process of remembering by forgetting. According to Badiou, the century was driven by the “epic feeling” which experienced the force of action as the supreme cause and at the same time regarded history as a form of destiny (when formulating the battlefields) and not as a form of will. The “epic feeling” which characterized the 20th century is present in Godard’s film by means of all the musical and visual references he uses. By means of the black screens this “epic feeling” that underlined the construction of the century is dissipated and poured inside the distance maintained between images and between sounds in order to perform the dissolution of stories and the sacrifice of the image understood as a narrative.

The Passion for the Real

The need for the “epic feeling” inside the century was also generated by the experience of the gap inside the Real. The suspicion towards the real had to be annihilated by the sense of time and history as “grand narratives”. That gap of the Real threatening the fixation of man inside its own world underlined the sensibility of the century in the aftermath of 19th century’s positivism. The experience of time as a decisive time (in the 20th century) and the “epic feeling” were not enough in the face of a foreshadowing suspicion towards the Real. That is why, when analyzing the 20th century, Badiou emphasizes the passion for the real in the ideology behind the events of the century. The passion for the real is a passion for the “here” and “now,” a passion for semblance and a longing for the disguises of the gap in the name of significances.

Žižek also talks about a traumatic encounter with the Real when acknowledging the inconsistency of the Other towards whom we would have no responsibility. By assuming guilt in the face of our neighbour we escape from the inexistence of the Other and we manage to abolish the gap opened inside the Real by means of a symbolic substitution. Guilt (the guilt towards the horror of history and passions) seems to be our own century’s way of suppressing the gap of a Real that can no longer be deepened by the “epic feeling.” We could argue that the 20th century’s passion for the real is structurally continued in our century by the guilt towards the Real, a guilt towards the “here” and “now” which can no longer be assumed as if nothing has modified them.

Godard’s film visually incorporates this guilt towards “presence” itself when the “last spy” says “The Berlin Wall is long and is short” while assembling the two halves of the picture with the commercial representation



of the woman. The Berlin Wall was not just a border, but the spatial and ideological delimitation of two different grades of the Real, imposing a split in the way of experiencing “presence”. We could say that the symbolic “extension” of the Berlin Wall is an expression of the double connotation of presence: the now of remorse and the now of living, which stages the two embodiment dimensions of the Real of survival, meaning our own post-historical Real. In *Sky over Berlin*, Germany carries the presence of the past not by means of the image (as in Godard’s film), but through the old storyteller searching for Postdamer Platz, the public space bisected by the Berlin Wall. For Wenders the narrative and the epic are not dead, because how else can we relate to history but as a mythology, where guilt and blame do not belong to civilization, because they are a *hybris*, a lack of measure towards the Real. This excess of the Real towards which we are guilty is inscribed in the spatiality of remorse and redemption of Wenders’ Berlin of ‘87. For instance, let us recall the scene where the ruined Anhalter Station (from where German Jews were deported) is shot in the background, while the former angel (Peter Falk) expresses the following thought: “not the station where the train stopped, but the station where the station stopped.”

The passion for the real of the entire century is rendered through *Sky over Berlin*’s narrative about the love story between the trapeze and the angel who wants to become human only to know the taste of coffee or to be able to feed the cat when he returns home like Philip Marlowe. The film’s refrain about childhood is not only a reference to the Freudian view about childhood as the time of the constitution of the Subject by desire, but most of all the child is evoked as the fundamental example for the passion for the real. The attraction for the “now” and the full intensity of sensation function as a

trigger for the “black and white,” spirited world of the angels. Wenders uses this story to capture the essence of that passion for the projects of the Earth, that same passion at the core of the construction of the new man of the 20th and the ideological desire of rebirth. The structure of reality is dual, inscribed inside a “nudity and disguise” logic, visible and invisible, hidden and manifested and, this is how the angel justifies his passion for the real, as a refusal of “the world beyond the world”.

The angel is borne as a human at the border between East and West Germany and he receives an old armor as an entrance gift for the world of the Real. The armor is not simply a random item he sells for money to buy his first clothes as a human. It is the expression of the “sheltered being,” that is borne out of the principle of inhabiting space. The armor is the symbol of the containment of being who experiences the Real as a series of inhabited borders of humanity, narrative and self. The way we live ourselves as borders and limits is not just a philosophical and existential question of situatedness, but also a historical inscription of the “sheltered being.” Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, analyzes the inhabited house as a principle of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. We do not know ourselves only in time, but also in space as a series of *fixations in the space of being’s stability*.¹⁰ According to Bachelard, the inhabited space plays a major role in the construction and the rooting of our *body of images*. *The real beginnings of images, if we study them phenomenologically, will give concrete evidence of the values of inhabited space, of the non-I that protects the I*.¹¹ The “sheltered being” arranges the Real as an armor in order to inhabit everything that it experiences, turning the curved space into a structure of protection. The embrace of the



protective “non-I” is powerfully sensed in the mental imagery as history itself could be perceived as a “quest” of the “being” inside borders. Places of the past are places – within borders and Wenders metaphorically knows this when he creates the Berlin of ‘87 as a container of the world. The experience of a city contained by the East and the West at the same time turns the cinematic Berlin of Wenders into a specter of containment that can pour within not only the inside of humans, but also the inside of angels. The passion for the real and the voluntary birth inside borders and inside this real of the “wriggled barefoot toes,” in *Sky over Berlin* contains a series of hopes and also trust in the phantasms of inclusion of the Berlin from before ‘89.

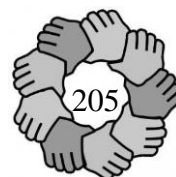
In Godard’s film the passion for the real is manifested by means of the wounded body images where the dismembering of the Real into pieces reveals a surgical curiosity and insistence upon that persistence of the Real which does not give up even when the footage is edited and the horror of the camps is played, for some seconds, in slow motion. Which is that frightening image that would fail in wrapping the Real, pouring out the naked visions of horror which have hunted the cinematographic gaze? It is the unformulated question that Godard seems to ask throughout *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero*. Those visions of horror are codified in representations, arts, portraits and space. That is why Godard’s film is full of intertwined references, quotes, memories of the resistance in Nazi Germany (Sophie and Hans Scholl), Brecht, Thomas Mann, etc. For Godard, these references do not compose only a cultural collage, but they function as embedded signs of a past and history that were there even before they happened. Cinema has the responsibility of capturing this moment in-between the sign of the event and the time of the event. It is inside this

particular moment that the passion for the real engulfs the sign, producing the visions of horror out of the sense of omission that could reveal the gap of the Real. The sense of omission not only towards the Real, but also towards history (the sense of losing that meaning that would have been accessible only a particular time) fortifies our constructions of Real inside history and history inside real. Godard’s film seems to remind us that there is also a force of the Unreal at play inside the development of history. Those haunting insertions from expressionist films are part of that built-in force of the Unreal that drives the necessity of consolidating the Real inside history and not inside experience itself.

Conclusion

Sky over Berlin is made with a perception drawn from exile, after spending some years in America. That is why Wender’s Germany is one that looks at itself from the exterior, from the angels’ perspective or from the world’s point of view in order to continually assure itself of the truth of its own survival. The reunified Germany of Godard, in *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero*, is the birthplace of the triumph of Capitalism as the only possible world version, according to Godard. Wenders’ Europe is one shared by humans and angels, where the ongoing searches for the unification of the rational and irrational, the spirit and the body, the individual and the collective are the only forces left. By means of these two films, cinema has mapped a visual of historical territories on the surface of which the gaze struggles to understand the regions of signification of a world no longer divided by means of walls and borders.

As we have seen, the two films made in two crucial moments of Germany’s history (before and after the ‘89) create that



residue temporality where the gaze is no longer a cinematic possibility of the Real, but the gaze of the leftovers looking back upon the rests left out by the attempt to join history and visuality. Within this time that remains as an unaccomplished visuality of the leftovers' past, *the time of the soul* merges with *the time of the world* because the remnants have both individual and collective dimensions. Cinema can and must formulate that look of "what is left" upon us, aggregating territories of the visual as places of survival upon which each construction of the eye is a construction of the time that remains.

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Notes

¹ Anne Whitehead, *Memory*, New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 49.

² Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 7.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 255.

⁵ Jean-Luc Godard & Youssef Ishaghpur. *Cinema: The Archeology of Film and the Memory of a Century*. New York: Berg, 2005, p. 106.

⁶ Alain Badiou, *The Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, p. 76.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Jean-Luc Godard & Youssef Ishaghpur, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958], p. 49.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.