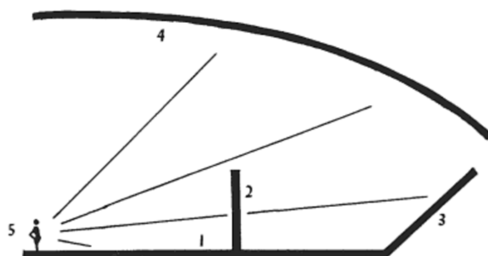
FROM THE EDITORS



ANGLES

Diagram 1: **The four prime planes of the landscape. (1) is the flat-lying plane, the ground. (2) is the upright plane of the trees. (3) is the slanting plane of the mountains. (4) is the apparent arch of the sky, the source of light. (5) is the observation point.**

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THEME AND VARIATION

Shirley Clarke and the Rhythms of Authorship

by MATTHEW RIVERA

As a major filmmaker in the American avant-garde of the 1950s and '60s there is surprisingly scant writing on the work of Shirley Clarke. There are no books dedicated solely to her work. Her films receive the occasional retrospective screening, but even the *The Cool World*—the second of her only two narrative feature films—has yet to undergo a restoration and you will only find it by tracking down a French bootleg VHS. Milestone Films is undergoing a major project to restore all of Shirley Clarke's work, but her contemporaries like Frederick Wiseman and Jonas Mekas still largely overshadow her. The reasons for this oversight are numerous, but an important contributor is Clarke's own defiance of categorization, her challenge to the very act of analyzing her films. Like Billie Holiday, who summed it all up with "Don't Explain," Clarke's ideas and style didn't change gradually over long periods of similar works, but rapidly, within each work itself. Just as Holiday's elusive voice follows a sweet and syrupy lull with a coarse groan and a shrill cry, Clarke's camera seems to abide by nothing but its own motivations, the will and purpose of the artist whose hands it is in. At times Clarke falls into the realm of structural filmmaking, at others she is invested in crafting a performance à la Cassavetes, and yet at others she is a candid documentarian echoing the

school of Robert Drew or the Maysles brothers. These aren't just different types of films she made, these are all the threads woven together into each film by Shirley Clarke. How, then, can we find Shirley Clarke amidst this panoply of styles and approaches? The search for Shirley does seem a precarious path, but it is a road lamentably under-traveled.

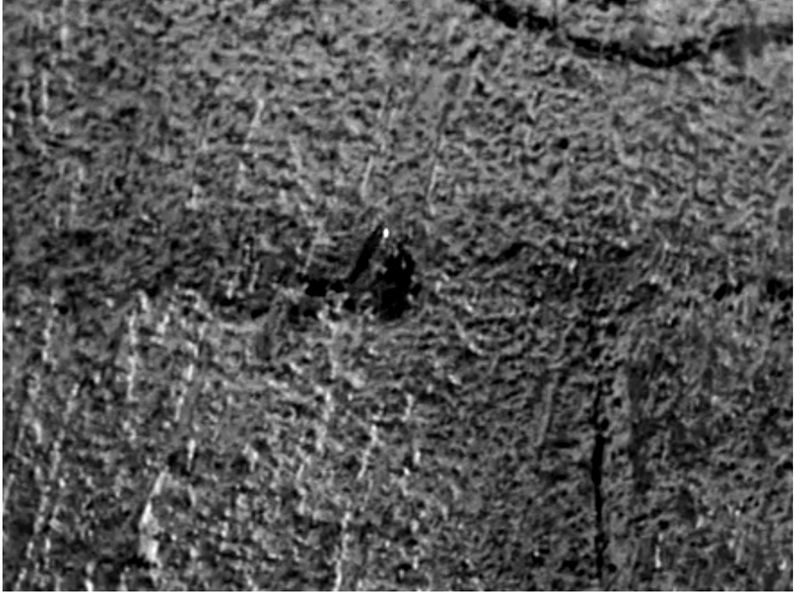
It is a telling detail that her first feature *The Connection*, begins with a written statement to the audience credited to a pseudo-author of the film, "J. J. Burden." Clarke's identity is a burden to herself as she tries to avoid the suffocating perils that recognition and canonization can impose on an artist. Her voice shifts, disappears and reappears through the guise of other characters and onscreen authors in a way that makes her own presence nearly impossible to pin down. Yet through all of the illusory aspects of her voice—her widely-varied influences, styles, and tones—there is a remarkable sense of unity in her work. Her films are meticulously framed and structured rather than hodgepodged collections of dissonant scenes or aesthetics. Yet she still manages to achieve freedom from derivation and pattern. Her movies represent improvisation in the truest sense of the word. No matter how many disciplines the work of Shirley Clarke intersects, it always feels like part of the same artistic sensibility. Her documentaries cross into the realms of narrative fiction. Her narrative features and experimental shorts court documentarian impulses. Her background in dance (she began her career studying the schools Martha Graham and Hanya Holm) is continually informative. To balance all of these qualities, Clarke takes cues from her intense relationship with Jazz. She conducts and navigates her thicket of influences and inspirations like the best rhythm sections unite a dissonant collection of distinct horns and voices.

Clarke makes no efforts to hide her love of Jazz's most intellectualized modes, from the brazen mad flights of BeBop to the digressive, liberated spirit of Ornette Coleman. *The Connection* thoughtfully integrates a score by hard bop pianist Freddie Redd who appears in the movie with a quartet featuring Jackie McLean on alto saxophone. *The Cool World* features a Jazz score by Mal Waldron with the phenomenal presence of Dizzy Gillespie. In *Portrait of Jason*, consisting of interview footage with Jason Holliday, a charismatic black, gay, self-described hustler, Holliday mentions meeting Miles Davis at a San Francisco cabaret with blasé confidence. Her final film, released in 1985, is a documentary about Ornette Coleman called *Ornette: Made in America*. Yet Clarke's mere inclusion of Jazz in her films does not begin to reach the deepest extent of her fascination and experimentation with the music. Beyond their manifest content, her films express a more nuanced understanding of Jazz in their form and essence. Even Clarke's films that don't directly feature Jazz, like her 1950s shorts and her 1963 documentary about Robert Frost, are constructed with a freewheeling spirit, a rhythm that swings, and a structural consciousness that reflects Jazz on the cutting edge. In this sense her musical inspirations echo what the Jazz scholar Gunther

Schuller called "thematic improvisation" in a 1959 article on Sonny Rollins—improvisations that are based on "thematic and structural unity" rather than formal technicalities like chord patterns. Clarke's films resemble such aspirations in their most abstract gestures of individual expression that maintain the tone of the film but flee the limits of the narrative framework. These moments are Clarke's "solos."

The idea of the cinematic solo is not a new one. In principle, the movie director has always had her/his solos. One avenue for determining a director's abilities, unlike those of a Jazz musician, is not merely in the quality of solos, but by the quantity of such moments in a medium where so many people are involved. Like the history of Jazz, the history of film has increasingly privileged the solo. Such instances of sheer liberation are manifest in cinematic form with any piece of film that is not essential to the task of merely advancing the diegesis. John Ford, to offer a canonized example, took his solos in painterly wide shots where the landscape and the spiritual forces of the world swallow the characters within it. The length and breadth of these shots builds to a radical gesture of divergence from what is essential to the narrative. Ford and his contemporaries might be the equivalent of the soloist in the Swing Era big band with its largest caveat being the limited space for individual expression. Shirley Clarke then might most resemble the music of a figure whose spirit appears in *The Connection* and *The Cool World*: Charlie Parker. Her solos still work within a narrative framework, but there is more space for bursts of individuality than in the orchestral arrangement equivalent of a plot-centric film. At such moments she is unbound from any restrictions other than those of the camera itself.

The Connection contains many solos, but one stands out as a particularly triumphant example of thematic improvisation in a narrative-driven film. After most of the Godot-esque plot of a group of heroin addicts waiting for their dealer to arrive has played out, one of them, Sam, stands up to tell a story for the on-screen movie director, Jim Dunn. The room is silent in a state of general post-trauma. Sam picks up a hula hoop and rolls it back and forth across the floor as he begins to recall his tale. The flimsy hula hoop's empty sound as it bounces and rolls across the floor has endowed the scene with a feeling of piercing honesty, replacing the Jazz that began the film. The camera follows the hula hoop back and forth until Sam pretends to toss it but holds back, causing the camera operator to trip over himself as he starts to pan across its expected trajectory. Sam points and laughs, suggesting our entrance into the digressive realm of the solo. He lays down on a bed in the corner and we are close to him as he pieces together an incoherent memory. From behind Sam a tiny insect appears on the wall. The camera, realizing its presence, racks in and out of focus until it has sharply framed the bug, zooming in as close as possible to capture its rapid, random turns and movements. The solo lasts for 41 seconds, grasping our attention the entire time. We are more concerned about the inexplicable path of this bug than the convoluted story Sam is telling. For a moment we feel we are freed from the painful, tedious structure of



top and bottom: *THE CONNECTION* (1961)

the narrative with its repeated character introductions ("Leech is a queer without being queer," "Saulie, now there's a hard man to figure," "Ernie, he don't want much . . .") and long scenes of waiting that suggest something like the cyclical agonies of addiction. Clarke here erupts from the rigid structure she herself has set up.

The film is so exhausting up to this moment in part due to the way the people on screen feel caricatured to the point of withdrawing themselves from the audience's vantage. Dunn, the director of the film, comes closest to being our mediator and yet he is also furthest from the audience's point of identification. His pompous, self-important, flustered nature overshadows and obscures any instance of sincerity. Each drug addict seems detached from himself, let alone the audience. In moments where they speak directly to the camera they are too aware of their performance to make the audience trust they are genuinely

confiding in us. The eyes of J. J. Burden are those through which we see the film (he is the camera operator), yet he is unseen and his few words barely distinguish him. The very juxtaposition of Jazz and junk is perhaps the most caricatured aspect of the film, signaling a cliché depiction of life on the fringe. But Clarke uses this unfortunate convention to make the moments where the film breaks away from such stereotypes all the more exuberant. If there is anyone or anything we can "identify with," it is the bursts of improvisatory Jazz performance and this tiny bug on the wall. Being drawn into the act of its crawling around for so long increases our separation from Sam, whose inconclusive tale has transformed into a monotonous mumbling, but it also brings us closer to his state of mind: distracted, impulsive, endlessly crawling wherever the surface of the wall talks us. The moment quickly cut offs with the crash of a cymbal and the temperamental Dunn throwing in the towel. As if by a violent lift of the needle, the solo has prematurely ended.

There are moments in many of Clarke's films where she seems to materialize as an authorial figure. Dunn and Burden in *The Connection* are just one example, albeit the most heavy-handed one. A similar moment occurs in *Robert Frost: A Lover's Quarrel with the World* where Frost references Clarke's camera crew and the documentary they are making about him to an audience at one of his lectures. In *The Cool World* an obtuse white social worker leads a group of black students on a bus trip to see the landmarks of Manhattan, badgering them about petty rules while neglecting to even learn their names. We feel Clarke's most self-conscious reflection on the unavoidable invasiveness of her role as an artist in each of these instances. These characters depict the worst thing one could become with the privilege of holding a camera. But as close as these characters and scenes get us to the person behind the camera, we should be deeply skeptical of any instance where an artist explicitly calls attention to their presence. These moments are not solos. Take one of the most disturbing parts of Clarke's most complex and most-seen work, *Portrait of Jason*. Throughout the film Clarke and her partner Carl Lee are heard off camera changing film magazines and asking Jason questions. By the film's end their presence has become disturbingly antagonistic. Jason's one-man show has become a conversation between him and the people off screen: "You ever do something really bad?" Clarke asks. Lee adds on, "What'd you tell those lies for? Why'd you do that to me? Rotten queen." Jason whips right back but eventually tears stream down his face and he puts his hand in his mouth: "I was just a vicious cunt." Clarke twists the knife, "Are you lonely? You should be lonely—You're not suffering—How'd you get on welfare anyway?" Through his piercing gasps he hisses, "You shut up!"

By the film's end we are paralyzed: what the hell have we witnessed? The questions are centered on the very work itself, the convergence of reality and artifice, of restrained objectivity and invasive entanglement. But what about solos? Clarke's literal voice in *Portrait of Jason* is no

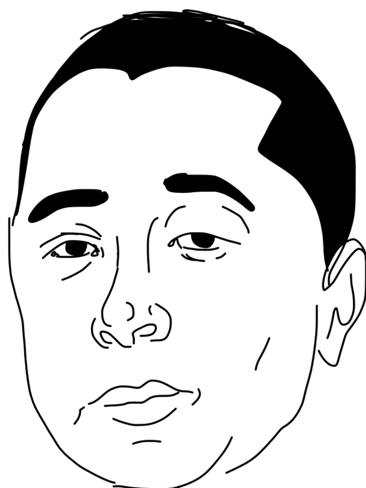
more symptomatic of a solo than the director character in *The Connection*. Her presence is part of the narrative fabric of the film, the structure that thematic improvisation diverges from. She emerges by taking one apparatus of her camera—the focus ring—to its furthest limits to simultaneously edit the film in camera, frame Jason's musings, and amplify her presence. The lens itself, more specifically than the collective idea of a "camera," becomes one of the most visible characters in the film. We can hear Clarke's voice as the image racks out of focus in the middle of one of Jason's gripping stories, transforming our vision of his face to a mess of soft shapes, dense masses of grayscale that blend into one another, blots an indeterminable distance from the surface of the screen. We might be able to discern Jason's mouth moving within this abstraction, oddly producing no sound. When the next story begins we feel we have traversed the fog between spectator and object, the thick stuff of blind confusion. We feel Clarke's disheartening at the overwhelmingness of her subject, her apprehension of the vastness of an individual; we feel Jason's desire to avoid entrapment, his slipping into a chimeric form. Most poignantly, we feel we have learned something about the total experience of artist, subject and instrument. As the best solos do, these expressive instances have rendered the limits and restrictions of the work the subject of the work itself.

Shirley Clarke was by no means the most formally experimental filmmaker of her day, a time when the New York avant-garde was ebbing towards the furthest reaches of abstraction and isolation. Jazz was in the thick of this receding into the obscure and Clarke's choice to make films that use narrative convention and structural unity seems an active motion of resistance against the music's direction towards the esoteric. Clarke's films have vague tones of nostalgia for structure, for the balance between collective unity and individual freedom that Jazz of previous years had courted. Pushing balance to its limits was both Jazz's greatest artistic contribution and its Achilles heel. The rocking, alternating pulse of a rhythm section, the guitar striving out and bass resisting back, is the very balance that constitutes swing, but this balance requires a foundation of rigid formality, of collective similitude—all aspects that the music's biggest antagonists, like the theorist Theodor Adorno, have brought to the fore. Clarke's films and her entire artistic project incorporate her total understanding of Jazz from its political and cultural significance to its musical essence. Her solos are instances of resistance against convention and ubiquitous uniformity, yet they require certain formalities in order to exist as outbursts of freedom at all. Watching one of Clarke's films is a difficult, sometimes downright frustrating experience that seems to result in a mess of contradicting perspectives, projects and formal attributes. All these voices make up a chaotic din, but meet in a few special instances at a crossroads where Clarke appears for perhaps no more than a few seconds. Although briefly, she appears with clarity and tenacity, reminding us that everyone in this thing has a voice, herself included.

SENSES OF CATASTROPHE

Jia Zhangke's Thick Description Realism

by KATIE ZHENG



FROM THE VERY OPENING SCENE, it's clear that Jia Zhangke's *Platform* is a film suffused in sound. As an indistinct mob of people stand in what appears to be some kind of performance venue, their diegetic conversation intermingles with a sprightly soundtrack of instrumental string music that seems wholly ungrounded in the on-screen environment. Because *Platform* is a film about performance and popular culture in the rapidly changing sociocultural landscape of China in the '80s, Jia's decision to place such a heavy emphasis on media and its interventions in people's lives is wholly understandable. However, Jia's multilayered soundscape in *Platform* is not only a narrative tactic constrained to a single film, but a part of a larger, multi-work stylistic project of what film scholar Wang Hui in a talk given on Jia's 2006 film, *Still Life* calls "thick description realism," a term he defines as "a careful, multiple-perspective description of a historical event, process or detail, character or scene." Jia Zhangke communicates this "thick description realism" with special attention paid to stylistic tactics that emphasize the often impressionistic or, in the words of Wang Hui, "sketch-like," and affective relationship between the smaller interpersonal drama and larger national changes that happen in his characters' lives.

While Wang's initial definition of "thick description realism" is a good starting point for signaling the importance of "multiple perspectives" in the way Jia Zhangke constructs his realism, these multiple perspectives are perspectival not in the intellectual sense (that is, different "takes" on or "understandings" of historical events), but in the affective and experiential sense (that is, the way that different individuals and groups of people feel and react to the events that take place in history). This distinction means that while characters in Jia Zhangke's films rarely articulate points of view or arguments pertaining to the nature of historical happenings, they are always experiencing, reacting to, and emoting about the things that happen around them. In this sense, the descriptor "thick" works almost in a painterly way—the word connotes the kind of texture and richness that comes from layering various kinds of narrative and cinematographic techniques or tactics on top of each other to communicate "description realism." We might then compare Jia's films to Impressionist paintings—they take advantage of highly stylized and artificial techniques in order to communicate a kind of realism that is impressionistic and evocative, rather than didactic or intellectualized.

In *Platform* this kind of "layered" technique works through Jia's layering both related and unrelated soundscapes on top of the narrative action happening within the context of the film via music, visual media such as news reports, and magnified sounds that occur just out of frame. This "layering" often seems extraneous or contrary to the actual narrative action at hand, disorienting the viewer and making us uncertain whether to focus on the "major" news happening in the soundscape. The film follows a theater troupe of young adults traveling through China during the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, but our attention is divided between the on-screen drama that includes a break-up and an abortion, and the surrounding panoply of sounds like the announcement of a new regime policy or the pardoning of a prisoner. The divide between soundscape and visual narrative in *Platform* not only makes history personal by tying official happenings to everyday life, but it also makes the personal historical by using official happenings to reflect and amplify everyday emotion.

One beautiful example of this effect occurs in the watershed "break-up" scene early on between two of the theater company members, Yin Ruijian and Cui Mingliang. Ruijian tells Mingliang she has never considered herself his girlfriend and suggests that they cannot work as a couple because of their different values and family situations. As the previous shot cuts into the scene, we hear an English instruction tape intone, "Lesson Five." This abrupt linguistic displacement seems to echo the disquiet of the previous scene where Mingliang and Zhong Ping discuss Ruijian, warning us that the scene to follow will likely involve the couple's relationship. The present exchange between Ruijian and Mingliang continues with the audience becoming increasingly aware of two

left and right: *PLATFORM* (2000)

other seemingly diegetic sounds of a military drill session, complete with bugles and marching sounds, and a peculiar droning noise that continues throughout the entire scene. That droning sound is only explained later with the intervention of yet a third diegetic sound following the conversation between Mingliang and Ruijian—an automated loudspeaker announces the departure of a bus.

These three diegetic sounds frame and dramatize the interpersonal exchange on screen while combining to create an impression of the changing economic and cultural landscape around the characters. The military drill session that runs throughout the scene and only quietens when Mingliang leaves works both as a reminder of the omnipresence of the Chinese nationalist state and as an articulation of Mingliang's own resentment of Ruijian's military police father (whom he earlier compared to the KGB, itself a representation of socialist state power). The decontextualized sounds of the road that only become clear after Mingliang exits the scene, act both as a reminder of the rapidly industrializing and changing situation of the town and as a clever aural pun—the bus readies for departure exactly as Ruijian emotionally "pulls away." Through Jia's thick description soundscape, we gather by what we hear what it feels like to live through a destabilizing moment in history via the common and interpersonal drama of a breakup.

The scene in which Zhong Ping, another company member, gets an abortion after having an illicit sexual encounter uses diegetic sound in a way both more intimate and more emotionally fraught than the former scene. The narrative ac-

tion and soundscape continuously pun on the porousness between public and private spaces. When Zhong Ping finally acquiesces to the abortion procedure, an official announcement filters in through an unseen loudspeaker celebrating the "thirty-fifth year anniversary of the People's Republic," complete with descriptions of the festivities. An individual "birth" is terminated inside the private confines of the operation room just as the nation itself publicly celebrates its collective re-birth. This conceptual twinning props up a fundamental tenet of Jia's "thick description realism," which calls into question not only the universality of private narratives, but the stability and meaning of the concept itself. Transgressions of the divide between private and public include the impossibility of having a fully "private" life in a society characterized by public spaces; the instability of the border between the "public" socialist theater troupe and the "privat(ized)" popular performance troupe they become; and the clash between "private" or individual citizen dramas and the larger, "public" narrative of the state. Through these layered meanings of public and private, Jia thickens the problems of description and reality themselves.

Still Life, made six years after *Platform*, maintains Jia's fascination with sound, but also begins to deviate even further from standard "realist" formulas by including CGI interventions and other oddities in his visual language. The film tells the story of two people searching for their respective spouses—Sanming, a coal minor who comes to work on a demolition crew, and Shen Hong, a nurse. Though Jia's tactics may have

matured or changed, his preoccupation with "thick description realism" remains in *Still Life*. The landscape itself participates in the emotive process of the film, rather than merely serving as a communicative method for already extant emotions as in *Platform*. In one scene, Sanming stands on a cliff and surveys the Kuimen Gorge, something that he saw on a ten yuan note in the previous scene. As he looks over the gorge, he first sees Mao's face before he turns the note over to survey the other side. Setting aside the clear ideological and political valences of Sanming's momentary confusion of landscape and leader, Jia reminds the viewer that the vista represented on both the note and on the screen is specific, with specific emotional valences and values that act on the people witnessing them.

In the previous shot Sanming has his initial conversation with other demolition workers about the landscapes on the back of money. Although this scene does introduce the Kuimen Gorge, the last few seconds of the shot before the transition actually focus on a different landscape: the Hukou Falls of the Yellow River in Shanxi. This is Sanming's home vista, and to use it as the last image before cutting to the next scene again functions as dual-layered "thick description realism." On the one hand, the ties between monetary value and landscape are clear—the value of the yuan note also lends a kind of emotional and affective value of the landscape it depicts. On the other hand, the actual vistas represented also function to remind the audience of how landscapes can change; the difference in water level between a waterfall and a gorge is, somewhat ironically, the exact difference between a Three Gorges that is dammed and one that is not.

After Sanming's brief moment of reflection on the cliff, the scene transitions into a disorienting pan across a very different kind of Fengjie landscape—the sound of a foghorn strings together the two shots of demolition and construction. After the foghorn fades away, a rhythmic and musical soundscape composed of loud thudding noises and a periodic horn dominates the scene. At first, it's unclear what this sound is—given Jia's somewhat frequent usage of electronic music in this film it's initially feasible that the sound is a part of the soundtrack. But as the shot continues, the sound shifts from non-diegetic to diegetic; we see Sanming changing and preparing himself for the demolition with his fellow workers, explaining the thudding as hammer against stone. This sonic layering again calls attention to the way human attachments and connections can reshape landscapes, but the influence also goes in the opposite direction. While Sanming and the other demolition laborers are indeed acting out the motions of demolition without actually doing much damage to the buildings themselves. Demolition becomes a rote and mindless action—rather than destroying entire buildings, a worker can only hope to reduce a single brick into smaller and smaller smithereens. This representation of destruction harkens back to the depiction of the Kuimen Gorge on the ten yuan note. The act of demolition is, in itself, a

futile and hopeless act because the landscape can't be changed. In turn, the demolition workers who participate in this fruitless labor become the strangely robotic bodies that we see on the screen.

Jia Zhangke again reinforces the importance of locality and specific landscapes in a scene where Shen Hong has just disembarked from a boat in Fengjie to start her search for her truant husband. As she walks towards the road, a girl who was also on the same boat stops her and asks if she is "from out of town." With this initial dialogue the stakes are set—the conversation that follows is an exchange between an insider and an outsider. But the normal power dynamic between included and excluded are inverted; in this case, the "insider" (the younger girl) is the one who wants to leave, asking Shen Hong if her region "needs any maids." Shen Hong deflects the girl's request by simply redirecting the conversation back to landscape when she turns around and says, "the sky is so dark." At this moment, both characters face away from the camera, denying the viewer access into any notion of interiority through their faces. The stormy dark sky takes on an intense emotive power as the characters both project their worries and insecurities onto it. As Shen Hong leaves the girl without answering her question, the camera slowly pans around the girl, who stands, trapped in her own landscape, completely powerless amidst the forbidding cliffs of Fengjie. With such richly layered gestures we feel the constraints and limitations of space and place.

Both *Still Life* and *Platform*, through their visual and aural landscapes emphasize the emotional and affective ties between humans and their surroundings. These ties offer in turn an impressionistic and "sketchy" understanding of the ways that people live through both major state-sanctioned and macrocosmic changes in their lives. Jia Zhangke's interventions into "reality" in *Still Life* are built off of his initial experiments with diegetic sound in *Platform*, yet his stylistic and directorial interventions in both films are a means of communicating the ways history and change are experienced in the realm of everyday life. "Thick description realism," as we have seen it in these two films, might be the most effective way of representing the modern Chinese condition. Jia said in an interview at the 2009 Hong Kong film festival, "from the perspective of film [and] the perspective of the individual, we can provide countless details that make change something that can be felt." The ultimate crystallization of "thick description realism" is a series of layers of audience observations and affective experiences which accrue and pile up until the true dimensions of catastrophe, change, and displacement can effectively be felt, rather than understood. In creating a cinema of feeling rather than thinking through stylistic intervention, Jia's art acknowledges that perhaps some phenomena cannot be understood and instead may only find explanation in impulses, emotions, and the body itself.

left and right: *STILL LIFE* (2006)

THE ART OF VIOLENCE

Suffering with Alejandro González Iñárritu

by DAVID QUINTAS

Alejandro González Iñárritu burst onto the international-film scene in 2000, winning the Critics Week Grand Prize at Cannes for his debut feature *Amores Perros*. The film starts with a graphic automobile collision, and the maintains this explosive level of brutality throughout. Over the course of two and a half hours, we are bombarded with intensely graphic sequences of violence, including horrific scenes of dog-fighting and animal abuse, all with a more than sufficient amount of blood and gore.

This bloody debut set a precedent for his subsequent features. 2001's *21 Grams* focuses on three lives affected by a horrific car accident. A couple of the similarly hyperlinked plots in 2006's *Babel* are spurred into by a similarly unplanned act of violence; two Moroccan boys playing with a rifle accidentally shoot an American tourist played by Cate Blanchett. Though relatively lacking in gore, Iñárritu's 2010 film, *Biutiful*, may be his most morose, centering on Uxbal (Javier Bardem), a man whose prostate cancer is the least of his problems, and featuring a scene in which a basement full of Chinese migrant workers are asphyxiated in their sleep. While these films differ in location, language, and the number of

plot-lines, the worlds they depict are marked by similar amounts of misery and anguish.

All this bodily carnage and agony has given Iñárritu a reputation for reveling in pain, of being a maestro of misery. While this proclivity for anguish is hardly unique or even the most intense in the annals of cinema (*Amores Perros* is a barrel full of laughs next to most of Bresson's filmography, for instance), it does beg the question: why does Iñárritu feature violence and the pain it causes so frequently? Is there something about undergoing suffering that ennobles his characters or makes us, his viewers, better people? Or is it meant not to ennoble anyone but rather illuminate the pain people around the world experience on a day-to-day basis?

An answer to these questions might be found in Iñárritu's most atypical film: 2014's *Birdman or (the Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*. *Birdman* seems to represent a tonal shift from Iñárritu's earlier films and the desolate lives they depict. The film tells the story of Riggan Thomson (Michael Keaton), a washed-up actor once famous for playing the titular superhero who is trying to revive his career by staging a theatrical adaptation of Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. One major difference between *Birdman* and most of Iñárritu's previous films (Biutiful excepted) is that *Birdman* doesn't cut between multiple storylines but is instead arranged to look as if the film was shot in nearly one take. With rare exceptions, we almost never cut away from what Riggan and the cast of characters surrounding him in the theater are going through. Furthermore, while those films are dark and frequently depressing, *Birdman*, though dark at times, is unambiguously comedic; one tentpole scene features Riggan running through Times Square in his underwear after accidentally locking himself out of his show's theater.

These structural and stylistic differences make an 11th hour act of violence in *Birdman* all the more startling, although it would be at home in one of Iñárritu's earlier films. On the opening night of his play, Riggan—whose on-stage character is supposed to commit suicide as the curtain falls—replaces his fake gun with a real one and pulls the trigger. *Birdman* leaves Riggan's motivations for this act somewhat unclear. Throughout the film he has wrestled with whether he is doing his Carver adaptation in the noble pursuit of artistic truth or with the questionable ambition of reigniting his fading spotlight. His attempted suicide tells us the answer is a little of both: it genuinely expresses his internal anguish, but it also gets people's attention once and for all.

One of the many antagonizing forces in Riggan's life over the course of the movie is Mike Shiner (Edward Norton), an obnoxious star of the stage who is a last minute replacement for the show. Mike consistently mocks Riggan for lacking authenticity in his performances. He taunts Riggan for using a conspicuously fake gun, telling him to get something that will actually "scare him." Riggan's use of a real firearm on stage is partially a retort to Mike, acting out a *reductio ad absurdum*

BIRDMAN (2014)

of his Method madness. If suffering and "realness" automatically produces better art, then killing one's self onstage is the easiest route to a masterpiece. A more damning critique of this school of thought is that Mike is just as concerned with fame and approval as everyone else, proudly boasting that a clip of his performance has garnered "80,000 views" on Youtube. Iñárritu seems to say that suffering for one's art can be just as much an attention-seeking gesture as donning a superhero's cape and mask.

This idea makes the way Iñárritu embraces the notion of noble suffering in his latest film, *The Revenant*, all the more surprising. *The Revenant* tells the true-life tale of Hugh Glass, a fur trapper in 19th century Canada. Glass is mauled by a bear and left behind by the rest of his pack with a small party to guard him until he passes. One member of the party grows tired of waiting for Glass to give up the ghost and attempts to smother him, killing Glass's son when he tries to save his father. The man buries Glass, leaving him to die. The rest of the film depicts Glass's struggle for survival and revenge. By hook and by crook, he works to avenge his son's murder. He eventually succeeds, but along the way, he encounters a whole host of wintry horrors. Being torn apart, thrashed, and crushed by an enormous grizzly bear is the least of Glass's troubles. As the film progresses, he performs surgery on himself, falls off a cliff, devours a bison liver, and sleeps inside of a horse carcass.

As gristly as these acts are, they are framed in an incongruously gracious light. Cinematographer Em-

manuel Lubezki drapes every shot in dazzling arrangements of natural illumination from the Sun and bonfires. This creates a strange aesthetic, rendering even Glass's most grotesque actions as noble and righteous trials, bathed in Heavenly light. Glass himself furthers this surprising sense of beatitude, constantly being revived or reborn. Whether pulling himself out of a prematurely-dug grave or climbing out of a horse carcass's stomach (his shelter from the night before), Glass's tribulations continually are framed as a rebirth.

This divide between the anguish Glass goes through and the bliss infused into the aestheticizing of his pain would be much more palatable if one got the sense that such pain truly did change Glass. When he reaches his son's killer, they duke it out in precisely the bloody manner one might expect, but they are here accompanied by the primal beauty of the natural landscape around them: as the two men stab each other, their blood colors the stunningly white snow with bold strokes of scarlet. The only moment of restraint comes when Glass holds back from killing his tormentor—not from harming him, but from dealing the final blow. One gets the sense that all the agony he went through might have taught him this minimal level of mercy.

DiCaprio performed most of these feats himself, without simulation, really eating raw bison liver and spending time in a horse's innards. These tests of endurance were placed front and center in awards coverage and campaigns, with both DiCaprio and Iñárritu discussing the "living hell" they and the rest of the crew bravely endured to capture Glass's agony with shocking authenticity.

But admirable as DiCaprio and Iñárritu's commitment to verisimilitude is, it is hard not to watch *The Revenant* with its conspicuous and dubious investment in the notion of suffering on-screen and off, without thinking of the skepticism of such suffering that his earlier work raises. The type of art-as-self-flagellation that went into the making of *The Revenant* oddly mirrors the Mike Shiner School of Method Acting that Iñárritu skewered in *Birdman*.

Iñárritu's work moving forward seems likely to remain just as blood-stained as it has been thus far; but he need not continue down the wintry path he set in *The Revenant*. If one is to imply that suffering makes both artist and subject better, he ought to produce more than just handsome scenes of violence and pain to back up that claim. Iñárritu has proven himself capable of saying much more about the role of violence in art with the example set by *Birdman*. With that film, he was self-aware enough to call into question the motivations an artist might have for featuring pain so prominently. Not every film needs or should have this level of meta-commentary, but when a director is as prone to spill blood as Iñárritu, it pays to spend some time considering whether one is having his cake (or bison liver, as the case may be) and eating it too.

LOIS: LOST AND FOUND

REIMAGINING THE SILENT ERA WITH LOIS WEBER'S *SHOES*

by HUNTER KOCH

The first time I saw Lois Weber's 1916 film *Shoes* was at Anthology Film Archives in the fall of 2016 after its restoration and release—probably the only way I, and most people sitting in the audience that night, could have seen it. As far as I know there has never been a DVD release and its availability was limited to academic conferences, small film festivals, and the occasional rep-house like Anthology before its complete restoration in 2011. Hence, when I saw this incredible film, I couldn't help but question its scarcity, its lost place in the history of film, and why I had never heard of it. Oddly enough, *Shoes* made me return to the canonical silent-film par excellence, D.W. Griffith's 1915 epic *Birth of a Nation*. Continuously mired in controversy from its very beginning (we have no definitive print due to its constant re-editing and censorship throughout the years), many arguably careless critics simultaneously laude *Birth of a Nation* as the film that established the "grammar of film," whatever this grammar may be.

I don't want to engage in the controversy of the film at the level of its content. Instead, I want to look at Lois Weber's *Shoes* on a formal level, the level on which critics and historians often praise *Birth of a Nation*. The two films were released within a year of each other, and discussing the rhetoric surrounding *Birth*'s formal innovation while also closely analyzing some components of *Shoes* allows us to complicate the comfortable teleology that we find in conventional and popular accounts of the Silent Era. In other words, accounts that see film as a progression toward particular current formal styles elide alternative narratives and films and ignore the industrial, capitalist, and normative assumptions that create those styles and allow a film like *Birth of a Nation* rather than one like *Shoes* to survive for over a century.

Popular critics take more liberties when discussing film history before 1930 than other eras (though elisions occur in any period). As it pertains to *Birth of a Nation*, some are quick to assert the primitiveness of film form in the early decades, allowing *Birth* to assume a preeminent role in lifting film from the primordial soup of trick films and early documentaries. The amount of missing information and films from those early years allows certain narratives to stand out, quelling the potential challenges of those films lost in a basement, such as *Shoes*.

In 2003, the influential critic Roger Ebert published his own perspective on *Birth of a Nation*. His review is interesting due to its alignment with what one would expect to find in a discussion about this infamous film almost 90 years later: a grappling with the overwhelmingly racist content, while pushing the formal innovation through a cursory reading of silent film to deem it a "Great Movie." The article reads:

Silent films began with crude constructions designed to simply look at a story as it happened before the camera. Griffith, in his short films and features, invented or incorporated anything that seemed to work to expand that vision. He did not create the language of cinema so much as codify and demonstrate it, so that after him it became conventional for directors

to tell a scene by cutting between wide (or "establishing") shots and various medium shots, closeups, and inserts of details. The first closeup must have come as an alarming surprise for its audiences; Griffith made them and other kinds of shots indispensable for telling a story.

Derogatorily establishing the "crudeness" of early films, Ebert argues for a cinematic language that centers around the presentation of narrative elements. The location of the camera with respect to the action (close, medium, wide shots, etc.) is, for Ebert, dictated by the logic of the story. He charts a specific continuum from Griffith through standard Hollywood continuity editing—that is, the innovation of a multitude of camera locations begins our own narrativized history of filmmaking that follows a Hollywood-prescribed course. He expounds upon this more forcefully with: "Griffith assembled and perfected the early discoveries of film language, and his cinematic techniques that have influenced the visual strategies of virtually every film made since; they have become so familiar we are not even aware of them." While Griffith certainly made indelible contributions to filmmaking, Ebert's laudatory language again reveals an insistence on seeing the silent-era as a monolithic phantasmagoria, a mixing of all sorts of techniques that awaited "discovery" by a pioneer who would funnel them into "all films" after. This telling of history unnecessarily simplifies the complexity of techniques and modes of practice that existed before, during, and after *Birth of a Nation*.

Ebert's evaluation of *Birth of a Nation* also points to Griffith's famous use of cross-cutting: "A naïve audience might have been baffled by a film that showed first one group of characters, then another, then the first again." He continues, "but audiences in 1915 were witnessing the invention of intercutting in a chase scene. Nothing like it had ever been seen before: parallel action building to a suspense climax." Griffith arguably *is* the pioneer of cross-cutting and using multiple story-lines in one film, but this technique first appeared before 1915, and it is hardly fair to call early audiences "naïve." This rhetoric seems to say that Griffith discovered a pioneering and supremely important characteristic of all future film in suspenseful cross-cutting that climaxes in a dramatic denouement, a never-before-seen feature that shocked audiences and influenced all works that came after. Ebert continues, "The human stories of the leading characters have the sentiment and human detail we would expect of a leading silent filmmaker," and "Griffith demonstrated to every filmmaker and moviegoer who followed him what a movie was, and what a movie could be." Through his formal innovations and use of human detail and sentiment, Griffith created not merely a great film, but something like a Platonic ideal of all film, what a movie was and is, a certain mode of filmmaking that Ebert attempts to concretize as the most important and noteworthy.

Shoes, a movie produced around the same time as *Birth* and released in 1916, complicates the singular narrative of *Birth*'s innovations. The film follows a poor, young shop

BIRTH OF A NATION (1915)

clerk, Eva, who lives with her family: her caring but occupied mother, her jobless, alcoholic father, and her younger sisters. The title concerns Eva's need for a new pair of shoes; her's are continuously falling apart. She dreams of a better life, out of poverty, where she lives comfortably with her family. But the film is not a fairytale—Eva ends up sleeping with a rich jazz singer for money, gaining nothing more than a new pair of shoes and a greater sense of sorrow.

The film is more understated than *Birth of a Nation*, making use of similar formal elements with greater subtlety. One stand-out scene contains three tableaus cut with startling effectiveness: first we see the sleazy jazz singer flirting with Eva while at her job. She brushes him off, and we cut to Eva's mother at home, vigorously doing laundry. The shot lasts for ten seconds, then we cut to Eva's father in the park, resting on a bench and reading rather than looking for work. Within thirty-five seconds, we have seen Eva's job and her struggle with her sordid suitor, her family's poverty, and her father's effective absence. Like Griffith's cross-cutting, the sequence shows multiple characters in different spaces at the same time. But unlike *Birth of a Nation*, the cross-cutting in *Shoes* does not build toward a climax, but rather unites the characters to create a sort of affective environment. The sequence utilizes cross-cutting not for the sake of narrative but for constructing and reinforcing the parallels existing between characters that are essentially dependent on each other. This use of cross-cutting creates a more subtle and even more emotional sentiment than *Birth*'s suspenseful editing.

Ebert's focus on cross-cutting

left and right: *SHOES* (1916)

indexes a fascination with how action is represented in space, as evident in his continued praise of *Birth of a Nation*'s use of various camera distances and positionings, particularly the close-up. However, in its own way, *Shoes* seems to surpass *Birth of a Nation* in its shot composition and camera placement. In the most iconic image of the film, Eva looks longingly into a cracked mirror at her reflection. She seems to look past herself, not able to look herself in the eyes as she is about to meet her suitor at a club. In this atypical and highly emotive shot, we see her face only in the mirror and the nape of her neck otherwise. Soon after, at the actual club, the composition of a single shot allows for narrative continuation while also producing necessary affect. We see Eva slouching at her table at the jazz club, the suitor in the background talking. The crowd around her hustles and bustles, eventually moving away. The suitor approaches her from behind. The shot lasts over twenty-seconds. This single shot is productive on multiple levels, though not in the Griffith fashion of serving the grander narrative. The shot does delineate the single story proper, but the moving people convey Eva's sense of isolation in the midst of people of a different social strata. The movement of the suitor from this class of people toward Eva in a single shot links him to both worlds, indicating perhaps traces of exploitation and manipulation—he is a part of the world that makes a poor woman feel isolated, abject, and manipulated. This complexity works within a single shot, not through a multiplicity of narratives but rather by showcasing the ability of one shot

to establish narrative, character, and affective elements simultaneously.

The final scene again demonstrates the power of a single shot. The film ends with a simple medium composition showing Eva's family eating at the table, things essentially the same as they had always been. Our focus goes toward Eva, off to the side, again isolated within the action, this time with her own family. The scene's irresolution provides an uncomfortable ending to the film. The set-up reflects a shot at the beginning of the film where Eva seemed just as hopeless, but the previous fifty minutes have created a different sense of isolation and sadness in Eva's character than could possibly be conveyed in a single shot. The un-remarkableness of this moment becomes remarkable, highlighting a sense of futility, but also a feeling of irresolution within any image, since our perception continually shifts, creating a sense of time that extends beyond a strict narrative construction.

Shoes is not radical in the same way an avant-garde film or even *Birth of a Nation* is; it is a quiet story about a woman facing extreme poverty and her inability to escape it, a film meant for a commercial audience, with Lois Weber being a fairly popular and known director (at one time the highest-paid in Hollywood). But in the way the formal qualities of the film utilize camera position paired with a strong sense of composition, *Shoes* does indeed work within parts of the "grammar" that Griffith is identified as "discovering." But it also pushes this grammar into more interesting

realms. The cross-cutting and multiplicity of shot distances in Griffith's work benefits the narrative first and foremost, but with *Shoes*, affect and the production of environment is central. Hence, we have a different mode of filmmaking, one that is not easily delineated when we think about a single, teleological narrative of film history. Being concerned with tracking just one use of formal elements is being complicit in ignoring the complexities and variation possible with such techniques. Affect and unconventional employment of composition and editing for ends other than narrative are seen as a mere off-shoot of Griffith's innovations, a building-upon of techniques that he importantly discovered and elaborated upon. This obsession with time-stamping certain innovations and focusing on them overwhelmingly prevents us from identifying equally inventive techniques outside this seminal history, such as those seen in the brilliant *Shoes*.

The problems inherent in the general assumptions about *Birth of a Nation* derive from the muddled records of cinema's earliest years. *Shoes* was first seen by contemporary critics, at the earliest, in 2011. This, sadly, is the case for most silent films; the Library of Congress estimates about 70% of all silent feature films are non-extant, while only 14% exist in their original 35mm format. Our historical record is nowhere near complete, but this void offers fertile ground for making *ex post facto* inscriptions about what happened during the era. That is, if we don't have many films, how could we challenge the idea that *Birth of a Nation* is the most innovative? The compulsion to rank films based on perceived importance or innovation tends to solidify simplistic claims and prevent us from self-analyzing our consumptive patterns.

We say *Birth of a Nation* is the most influential and innovative film of the silent era. Yes it is thoroughly racist, but it is the one that established everything we know about films. But this outlook ignores the loss of other films, and also places film history outside wider History. Thus, the muddiness of the silent era allows a critic to obfuscate the industrial/capitalist/racist origins of certain filmmaking and distributive practices. We lament the horrible bigotry within *Birth of a Nation*, but ignore the films of the black experience such as those of Oscar Micheaux or the hundreds of early women filmmakers like Lois Weber. Our tendency to value singular importance makes us complicit in ossifying a historical narrative, rather than letting it progress as new information and films appear. I am not berating Griffith, a director for whom I have great respect. But I am presenting a "lost" film like *Shoes* to show how our contemporary assumptions about silent films and their role in the history of cinema are always subject to change. The beginning of film is mysterious, messy, chaotic, sometimes violent, and often confusing. We should relish in this ambiguity, rather than seizing it to advance our own assumptions. There is something liberating about keeping this era open to discovery and reevaluation.

top: *BIRTH OF A NATION* (1915)
bottom: *SHOES* (1916)

CRIES OF THE CITY

The Energized Isolation of Wong Kar-Wai's *Fallen Angels*

by CRYSTAL LUA

"Fallen Angels strives to haul cinema out of the cinema, to connect it to different sites…a land of images where cinema's mystique, as an art of registering, would cease to have any meaning, where images would seem to be self-engendered, deploying themselves without any reference to the real."

—Jean-Marc Lalanne

There is a comical scene in Wong Kar-Wai's *Fallen Angels* where a mute madman locks a family in an ice-cream van and drives them around for an entire night, forcing them to eat ever-increasing amounts of soft serve. It's an absurd moment, but as the night wears on we see the family bonding, laughing and chatting in the garishly bright ice-cream van as it zips around beneath the dark shuttered store-fronts of Hong Kong. It's the kind of scene only Wong Kar-Wai could have dreamt up. The ironic, poignant interaction evokes a touch of playful incredulity, revealing emerging traces of the film's themes of isolation, urban alienation, and love that are a through-line across his work.

Fallen Angels' unexpectedly belligerent style is slightly unwieldy, nothing like the calm, brooding tone of Wong's later work for which he is widely celebrated: exquisite, aching portraits of urban alienation and

a futile yearning for romance. His earlier films are drastically different: pulp gangster flicks that were only moderately well-received. But it is in *Fallen Angels*, comparatively neglected in critical circles, where we first see the transition between these two styles. While his previous few action flicks were experimental and high-octane, here his textural mastery reaches its zenith, with both technical and thematic layering paving the way for his developing focus on urban alienation.

Yet urban alienation is hardly a fresh subject. Since the 1970s, the genre has become well-trodden ground. By 1980, film scholar Robert Kolker had coined the term 'cinema of loneliness' to describe an entire category of more mainstream films that flourished around chronicling the lone wolf on the streets, perfected by directors like Scorsese and Coppola. But Wong's entry distinguishes himself here with a hungry, sleepless camera roving around Hong Kong by night (the film is devoid of any day-time shots and scenes are lit only by harsh fluorescent lightbulbs and night vision green filters). The film fashions itself out of the action gangster films of 1990s Hong Kong, combined with the distinctive loneliness of the urban wanderer (à la *Tokyo Drifter*). But its frenetic ramble verges on desperation. Amidst hyper-stylized visuals, characters find comfort in bars and late-night eateries; in one scene, Chi-ming, a reticent blank slate of an assassin, sits alone in a near-empty McDonalds, picking at fries amidst harsh lighting and an inoffensive tiled gray floor.

The film avoids lingering on any one protagonist, but centers around two pairs of characters. There is Chi-ming, and his agent/assistant who is haplessly in love with him. The other duo comprises Zhiwu, the aforementioned madman who harrasses unwitting 'customers' into paying for his unwanted services, and Charlie, whom Zhiwu falls for, an equally unhinged girl trying to take revenge on her ex-lover. Yet far from bringing these character arcs together, Wong deliberately keeps them apart, spinning adjacent tales of four lonely people—one who spends her time alone in bars, another lingering in deserted McDonalds; one is a jilted lover, another a petty criminal who is painted as harmless and endearingly misunderstood.

The urban spaces of *Fallen Angels* become characters in themselves. There is a shot after Chi-ming's assistant closes the shutters in his home: the camera tracks forward a little to peek through the closed blinds before pulling back as a train rumbles by, tempering our voyeuristic tendencies with a reminder of the city's ceaseless presence. The image is divided: the restless traffic takes up more than half the frame, while the remaining screen space allows us partial glimpses of the characters' internal lives as they enter and leave the apartment intermittently. On more than one occasion, even after the people leave the frame, the camera lingers, unmoving, watching cars and trains pass by. Wong repeats this composition again and again, using it in establishing and narrative shots alike until the city and its rhythms

FALLEN ANGELS (1995)

become as individually fleshed out as whatever lies beyond the shutters.

Such moments are the only occasions where the camera remains still. From the opening, shot sequences are wildly kinetic, offering only brief glimpses of deserted escalators and bleak train stations in a series of jump cuts that track characters as they traverse any given space. This is Wong's most hectic film; often, the camera roves through the city too quickly for it to find purchase on any image, leaving the audience similarly scrambling to piece the 'plot' together. The abstracted, often choppy scenes are overlaid by the hypnotic rhythms of "Because I'm Cool," a dated Cantopop number that borders on kitsch. Coupled with the sheer artificiality of the visuals, it foregrounds the characters' superficial relationships within this urban space.

Wong has spoken about his choice to use a 6.8mm lens (when he'd never gone wider than 16mm before). The ultra wide-angle lens distorts the viewer's perception of space, making actors seem to be standing further away than they truly are, capturing an 'outside-looking-in' perspective that captures the sense of isolation, but this unconventional lens also takes voyeurism to new heights. The viewers' presence is not self-effacing, but artificial, a mechanistic co-presence that constitutes the only form of companionship afforded to the characters. Wong forces us to notice our palpable presence, through the characters' oblique relationship with the camera. Movement deliberately doesn't happen along the line of action. A hand swings dangerously close to the camera, the cigarette between its fingers almost brushing up against the lens as it rests against a man's thigh. At other times, the mute madman grips the camera, staring straight into it as his thoughts are narrated in voice over.

Wong's later films may perfect his trademark understated subtlety, but in *Fallen Angels*, the seedy energy of his earlier efforts in the gangster genre like *As Tears Go By* has begun to transition into an overwhelming obsession with the city that the criminal figures of those films occupy. Early on in the movie, after the assassin finishes an assignment, he sits alone on a bus, cruising through the night. A long take through the bus window lingers on the LED sign-studded streets of Hong Kong shop fronts; the man's face in the rear view mirror is only an afterthought.

Yet the film doesn't entirely sacrifice Wong's penchant for intensely stylized action that characterized his early work; here he has developed a more mature understanding of form, ironically employing those same frenetic gestures in service of lesser-dramatized plot moments. After a hitman shoots Chi-ming, the shot (representing his vision) becomes dark and blurry; the camera spins dizzyingly, desperately, capturing nothing more than fluorescent ceiling lights and employing a pixilated technique. Yet the accompanying voiceover is contrastingly subdued. "I feel the need for change," he declares, almost placidly. The ambiguous scene, set near the end, anticipates the elegantly yearning masterpieces of his later career (like *Happy Together* and *In the Mood for Love*) as the male protagonist renounces his assassin profession to find spiritual fulfillment.

Indeed, much of this film feels like Wong memorializing Hong Kong in a love letter to its streets. (Towards the end of the film, Zhiwu compares himself to a shop commandeered by his love interest. "Every shop must have its own feeling," he muses.) Ironically, the extravagant visuals he lavishes upon each shot of the city is juxtaposed against the intense intimacy, and futility, of individual relationships. In the wider trajectory of Wong Kar-Wai's work, this dichotomy further serves narratives that are primarily centered around love (or the lack thereof) in and of the city.

Fallen Angels takes the theme of loneliness to its extreme, but explores it primarily through formal techniques. The only sex scene in the film is startlingly solitary. Instead of any romantic or sexual interaction, we are conscious of absence. The sequence is overtly voyeuristic: the camera, perched near the ceiling, looks down at Chi-ming's agent masturbating on a lone mattress in a sparsely decorated flat. The image is devoid of sexuality; instead, we find ourselves paradoxically intruding upon her isolation and unrequited love. Filmed from an odd angle that renders her twisted body disturbingly unnatural, it's painfully awkward to watch. Instead of a desired partner, there is only a desperately lonely woman—and the camera.

Christopher Doyle, Wong Kar-Wai's long-time cinematographer and collaborator, offers a great bit of insight on Wong's work: "The structure of a Wong Kar-Wai film is like a fat man's feet. They more or less get him from place to place but he can't see them till the end of the day." Far from devolving into

top and bottom: *FALLEN ANGELS* (1995)

a meaningless trudge, Wong's penchant for shooting without a fixed script and his overlapping of multiple storylines allows him to be a voyeur of space itself. Using film with the aspirations of a choreographer, his attentiveness to sensory details faithfully documents the rhythm of the city. Each filtered shot of *Fallen Angels* seems like a step forward in the dark. The eerie, obsessive depictions of deserted city spaces connote a sense of emptiness and the inability to move beyond the mere surface. Within the first few minutes, the film takes on an almost dance-like quality—repeating significant movements and places—that prefigures the mournful choreography of his later films. Roads become abstract, rain-slick blurs reflecting psychedelic neon lights.

This notable form-conscious stylization is perhaps best epitomized in Wong's unique approach to shootouts where not just the characters but the scenes themselves are temporarily suspended in a space of pure movement. Besides pyrotechnical effects and garish blood splatters on the camera lens, Wong uses a signature stretch-printing process, producing an effect that is best described as "pixelated."

Granted, if *Fallen Angels* were to have a fault, it would be an excessive self-consciousness of its surface. As with most of his other films, the minimal plot structure puts the attention on mise-en-scène and visual motifs to the point where character interactions can feel curiously unfulfilling. The impenetrability of form reshapes our idea of the romantic encounter, for example, where Wong stages such scenes in voiceovers, videotaped recordings, one-way interactions, but always with hardly any actual conversation between characters.

The chaos of the surface seems to reflect the characters' struggle to express themselves. *Fallen Angels*, in moments that come close to abstraction, grasps for new ways to represent the unsettling 'modern' through visual rhythms, intensely stylized color, and vividly canted angles. Often these blatantly unnatural gestures obscure the action to the point of chaos. The jerky handheld photography, the rapid zoom-ins, the seemingly random shifts to black-and-white all create a disjointed, jagged viewing experience, destabilizing our relationship with the screen much like the characters' relationships with their city.

Wong spins an urban poetry out of each exaggerated effect, and it's here that he first adapts his expressive (if a little excessive) visual tools to elucidate themes of urban isolation. In the final scene, filmed in blurry stop-motion, the assassin's agent and the mute ride home together, both musing (through separate voiceovers) about the ways their paths repeatedly intersect, but never fully merge. Wong teases these stories out through the marriage of visual form and content: wandering from space to space, the characters' inability to find genuine love and connection is echoed in the disparate assembly of vignettes. Far from being a clumsier, premature version of his later masterpieces, *Fallen Angels* is an abstract meditation on the urban world itself, each disconnected vignette and seemingly random technical element speaking to the chaos and the desperate allure of the city.

NOTHING IS ORIGINAL

"MANIFESTO" AND THE DELEUZIAN RHIZOME

by SOPHIE KOVEL

The central, foremost screen of Julian Rosefeldt's 13-screen installation, "Manifesto," first released in 2015, is a fuse burning. It is an incendiary point of entry to the equally incendiary manifestos that make up the work's structure. Each of its films adopts a historical art movement as its focus: from Futurism to Pop Art to Constructivism to the medium of film as an epilogue. But like any movement, or any account, there is no single story, no single author. Accordingly, Rosefeldt acknowledges multiplicity by integrating many pens into a given script. His weaving of voices across time and space is rhizomatic, a concept developed by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their book, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

The rhizome or rhizomatic thinking, for Deleuze, is weed-like; it goes in-between and among things rather than logically and hierarchically ascending upwards, like a tree.

As a model for culture, the rhizome resists the organizational structure of the root-tree system which charts causality along chronological lines and looks for the original source of "things" and looks towards the pinnacle or conclusion of those "things." A rhizome, on the other hand, is characterized by "ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles."

At first sight, it is clear that "Manifesto" sprawls in this weedy sense. Installed in New York's Park Avenue Armory, 9 of the 13 screens line the long walls while the other four occupy the center of the room, projected back-to-back. Benches are provided, but not mandatory. The films play on a loop, with a crescendic, automated moment of syncopation, an opportune time to switch from one screen to the next. Unlike a movie theater, and like the rhizome, single screens are not enclosed in rooms. Instead, the space of the armory, a 55,000 square foot drill hall, is vacuous and open, allowing for and encouraging a kind of circulation that fits Deleuze's "in-between and among" model. Duly noted, the hand-out map offers a numbered counter-clockwise tour of the films, but its multiple screens invite meandering from the chronology, and pauses and silences of one given film are filled with the sound of another.

Cate Blanchett, the shape-shifting protagonist and narrator across 12 of the 13 films, acts as a through-line. Though Blanchett is a unifying face and cult of personality, her characters are multiplicitous: she plays a stockmarket broker, a funeral speaker, a puppeteer, among others. For this reason, in her *New York Times* review of the installation, Roberta Smith calls Blanchett's performance "chameleon[ic]." In *Choreographer*, Blanchett plays a Martha Graham-esque choreographer, instructing an entourage of white-clad nymphoid dancers.

Choreographer entertains contradiction: it is a visual feast of extravagant bizarrities, frolicking, and excess. Set on a glossy stage with a midnight blue backdrop dotted with garish, pronounced stars, the danc-

“MANIFESTO” (2016)

ers huddle, drop to the floor, and spin with correspondingly brazen pizzazz. Yvonne Rainer’s “No Manifesto“ and George Maciunas’ “Fluxus Manifesto,” voiced by Blanchett, advocate for the very opposite: stringent restraint. Blanchett’s exasperated exclamation at the height of the tremor from the darkened sidelines of the stage, “Illusionistic art!” (also taken from Maciunas) defines and critiques precisely the sort of highly composed spectacle that is transpiring onstage.

Subtitling this work “FLUXUS / MERZ / PERFORMANCE,” Rosefeldt brings manifesto writers across mediums, time, and space into dialogue with one another (from dance to visual art to music; from Berlin to New York to Los Angeles). “No to moving or being moved. Flat hands, flat hands,” the choreographer instructs, quoting Yvonne Rainer’s “No Manifesto” (1965). “Life is the artwork and artwork is life. Fluxus is a way of doing things and a way of life and death. Fluxus is bigger than you,” she continues, borrowing from George Maciunas’ “Fluxus Manifesto” (1963). Though Rainer and Maciunas’ manifestos were not explicitly intended to be spoken aloud, they are instructional, and Blanchett speaks them as a single voice. She then asks the question Mierle Laderman Ukeles asks in her pivotal “Maintenance Art Manifesto“ (1969), “[a]fter the revolution, who is going to pick up the trash Monday morning?” Ukeles defines “two basic systems”: development”—pure individual creation” or “the new,” and mainte-

Manifesto:

2. To affect, or bring to a certain state, by subjecting to, or treating with, a flux. "*Fluxed* into another world." *South.*
3. *Med.* To cause a discharge from, as in purging.

flux (flŭks), *n.* [OF., fr. L. *fluxus*, fr. *fluere*, *fluxum*, to flow. See FLUENT; cf. FLUSH, *n.* (of cards).] **1.** *Med.* **a** A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part: esp., an excessive and morbid discharge: as, the bloody *flux*, or dysentery. **b** The matter thus discharged.

Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectual", professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, — PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPANISM"!

2. Act of flowing: a continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream; a continuing succession of changes.
3. A stream; copious flow; flood; outflow.
4. The setting in of the tide toward the shore. Cf. REFLUX.
5. State of being liquid through heat; fusion. *Rare.*

FLUXUS MANIFESTO (1963)

nance—"merely keep[ing] the dust off the pure individual creation." While contemporaries like Donald Judd and Richard Serra designated the making of their works to unseen and unnamed workers , Ukules sought to disrupt the muteness and anonymity of the capitalistic machine, and in doing so, imbue maintenance with significance. In addition to mass-labor, Ukeles also associates maintenance with women's work, siphoned to the domestic realm: "I learned that Jackson [Pollock], Marcel [Duchamp] and Mark [Rothko] didn't change diapers." The dance comes to a close as Blanchett instructs, "Paste smooth and surface over one another. Make lines fight and caress one another." These words are from Kurt Schwitters' "The Merz Stage" (1919). Here, Schwitters calls for *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or the total work of art, a concept from German Romanticism that envisions the disintegration of artistic boundaries.

Choreographer is one locus among many in Rosefeldt's installation of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or of Deleuzian rhizomatic trajectories. Rainer, Maciunas, Ukeles, and Schwitters all share the desire to break from traditional, and especially isolated, forms and structures. Yvonne Rainer, a dancer and

filmmaker, wrote "No Manifesto" to extricate dance from the historical clichés of narrative, "spectacle," "virtuosity," and "eccentricity," preferring the neutrality of the movements of the human form. Maciunas' "Fluxus Manifesto" also includes the objective to "FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action." The movement more generally is said to have generated "intermedia," a network (read: rhizome) of interdisciplinary artists who strove to blur the distinction between art and life. This blurring brings to mind Ukeles' redefinition of women's work, as well as her aim to unify her halved identity as "two separate people," the "maintenance worker" and the "free artist," into one body.

Internally and structurally, "Manifesto" achieves this kind of disruptive work through assembly. In bringing authors together, some who were, and others who were not in dialogue, Rosefeldt constructs a rhizomatic film that can be entered from many different points, all of which connect to each other. It does not have a beginning, an end, or an exact center. As Deleuze writes in *A Thousand Plateaus,* "the rhizome is reducible neither to the one nor the multiple...it is comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion." The same can be said of "Manifesto," which cannot be reduced to any given screen nor to a totality, but is best understood as a network that reaches in many directions and connects at many points, both conceptually and spatially.

Deleuze pinpoints a decisive break in cinematic form after World War II in his book, *Cinema II*. In it, he defines the new post-war function of cinema as to show *l'intolerable*, which opposes the determined spaces of pre-war, Hollywood cinema. The spaces of pre-war cinema engender, according to *Cinema I*, the movement-image where time depends on movement and montage denotes a "series of presents." Deleuze locates WWII as a disruption from the ahistorical present, as well as from the highly crafted confines of the Hollywood stage. *Cinema II* emphasizes the rise of the time-image, "a shot that fuses the pastness of the recorded event with the presentness of its viewing." Rosefeldt's "Manifesto" has this sort of self-awareness; it is firmly rooted in the past of the recorded event. "Manifesto" does employ many of the interventionist techniques of pre-war cinema, including practiced camera movements and scripted narrative. Ultimately, though, its basis rests on the undeniable assumption of the time-image; though she was recorded in the past, across both space and time, we are presented with a multiplied Blanchett in the same space-time.

Neo-Realism began this tradition of the time-image by portraying *espace quelconque* ("any-space-whatsoever"), spaces that are empty, disconnected. The French anthropologist Pascal Augé originally used the term to describe anonymous spaces people pass through, a point of transit between points of so-called "importance." Deleuze turns to the films inspired by the early Neo-Realist ef-

forts to exemplify the concept: the train stations in Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), the airport in Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), the empty urban spaces of Antonioni. Rosefeldt's films contain this sort of debris—broken landscapes, deserted but inhabited, if not by people then by the camera's gaze. *Homeless man (SITUATIONISM)* opens with long tracking shots of Teufelsberg, a crumbling abandoned NSA listening post in former West-Berlin; *Broker (FUTURISM)* likens rows and rows of computers to a modern-day technological and spiritual wasteland. In both of these scenes, spaces are not only empty and disconnected, but seemingly endlessly so.

The final film of "Manifesto" entitled *EPILOGUE/FILM* provides the thesis, "Nothing is Original," which Rosefeldt astutely borrows from Jim Jarmusch:

Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is non-existent. And don't bother concealing your thievery—celebrate it if you feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: "It's not where you take things from—it's where you take them to."

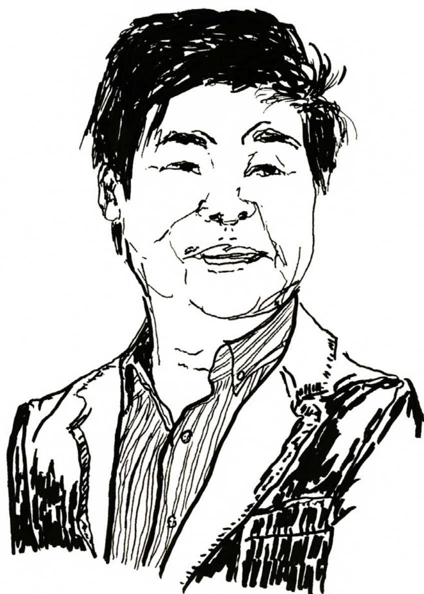
Blanchett plays a teacher, didactically encouraging her kindergarten students, and consequently, the viewer, that the sources of "Manifesto" echo Rosefeldt's recognition of his thievery from the manifesto-writers before him. For if "originality is non-existent" as Jarmusch says, neither is auteurism. Rosefeldt takes this idea to heart and seems to say that we should too.

Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg on behalf of DOGME 95 (1995) similarly advocate for a cinematic form that is detached from a single maker as well as from interventionist techniques. Blanchett delivers their renunciation moments afterward:

The director must not be credited. I swear as a director to refrain from personal taste! I am no longer an artist. I swear to refrain from creating a "work," as I regard the instant as more important than the whole. My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

Von Trier and Vinterberg's denial of authorship and "work" is Rosefeldt's self-erasure for the sake of truth-telling. Just as the rhizome subverts hierarchical structures; auteurism disintegrates into many voices, many sources and multiple screens. "Manifesto" constructs a model like the rhizome in which "culture spreads like the surface of a body of water" that does not build chronologically or progressively, but instead, as Deleuze writes, "is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo."

WEAVING PAST AND PRESENT



Isao Takahata's Lingering Memories

by SAM FENTRESS

Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata met in the 1960s as grunts for Toei Doga, an animation studio where they drew frames for comic-based TV programs. The two were involved in the unions, but would talk animation when they weren't planning labor activities. The latter half of the decade brought Takahata the opportunity to direct his first feature, *The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun*, which failed financially but laid the groundwork for projects to come; a number of the artists on *Horus*—art director Yasuo Otsuka, color designer Michiyo Yusuda—helped form the Japanese animation powerhouse, Studio Ghibli, that Takahata and Miyazaki (who was a scene designer on *Horus*) would found decades later. Between *Horus* and his features for Ghibli, Takahata spearheaded a number of successful television shows and a handful of shorter features. In 1978, he and Miyazaki co-directed a successful TV saga called *Future Boy Conan*, which led to Miyazaki's first feature, the zany *The Castle of Cagliostro*. It was Miyazaki's success with *Cagliostro*, and the following success of 1984's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, that gave him the financial means to found Ghibli.

What is the nature of the relationship between these two "auteurs of anime"? Over the years, they've at

times considered themselves rivals. Because they still share an office and staff, Miyazaki and Takahata inevitably rub elbows, but they remain fairly divorced when one or the other is working. Following the unexpected success of the first Ghibli features, *Nausicaä* and Miyazaki's fantastical follow-up *Castle in the Sky*, both directors began work on features that would become the 1988 double-bill of *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Grave of the Fireflies*. During this intense two years, Miyazaki and Takahata reportedly pilfered each other's best animators, creating an in-house race to the production finish line that Miyazaki won. Since then, Takahata and Miyazaki, who will occasionally produce the others' films, spare each other artistic advice; they share a complicated friendship that runs deeper than professional work. "If we start arguing," Miyazaki once said, "we won't stop."

This cross-pollination is responsible for the similarity in style between works of the two directors. The Ghibli catalogue lends itself to discussion across films because certain images, themes, and mysteries glide fluidly across its vast body of work. Viewed as one piece, the films can form a kind of filmic tapestry, each one sparking a greater appreciation and understanding of the catalogue as a whole. For example, in nearly every Ghibli film there's some sage-like man or woman, usually beset by blankets of wrinkles, who gives the protagonist some needed perspective (*Castle in the Sky*'s Un-

DOUBLE-BILL POSTER FOR
MY NEIGHBOR TOTORO AND *GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES* (1988)

left and right: *ONLY YESTERDAY* (1991)

cle Pomme, for example, or *Spirited Away*'s Zeniba or *Nausicaä*'s Obaba). The respect for the aged and ageless, just one recurring motif in these films, defies the oft trite or comical depiction of elders in Hollywood films and powers many of Ghilbi's most affecting narratives.

A number of other Ghibli films communicate an environmentalist ethic. Landscape is part of the Ghibli entourage, playing a supporting role in nearly every film. Many of their films ask the audience—in lingering frames of uncorrupted habitats or loaded nature allegories—to consider a deteriorating relationship between humans and the natural world. Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*, an adventure narrative sandwiched within an epic war between humans and forest spirits, is the unforgettable Ghibli hallmark of this ethic, but two of Takahata's mid-career films also share this attention to the environment.

Overall, awareness of Isao Takahata's films in the U.S. pales in comparison to that of Miyazaki's, and the films that bookend his career at Ghibli seem to garner more attention than his work in between. Those films, namely 1988's *Grave of the Fireflies* and 2013's *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*, deserve the recognition they've received, but the three animated features he directed in between form the meat of his career. *Fireflies* and *Kaguya* are beautiful films dealing classically with poignant subjects. But in offering less conventional narratives and more nuanced character explorations, *Only Yesterday* (1991) and *Pom Poko* (1994) intimate animation as the tool of an auteur.

O*nly Yesterday*, Takahata's follow-up to *Grave of the Fireflies*, is about memory and the way the

past allows us to adjust our perspective on the present. The film follows 27-year-old Taeko, a young urbanite with a well-paying job in Tokyo, as she takes a 10-day vacation to farm safflowers in the countryside. As Taeko prepares for and embarks on her trip, she is visited by images and anecdotes from her life as a 10-year-old girl. But what separates *Only Yesterday* from other visit-from-the-past narratives (e.g. *A Christmas Carol*) is a certain commonplace quality of the visits themselves. Most of the film's recollections aren't particularly important ones—instead, they circuit visual or emotional analogs to Taeko's present experiences. When she walks past a banana stand on the street, for instance, she recalls the first time her family shared a pineapple; the yellow of both fruits provides the connective tissue for a match cut entrance into memory.

Still, the memories' arrangement is not arbitrary. Takahata poetically positions the recollections, and as the drama of the film intensifies, the memories blossom with greater fervor in the present. The experiences of home life, of daily school events, do not seem at first particularly traumatic or psychologically formative, but Takahata communicates elegantly how distant, ordinary memories can reprise casually and unexpectedly in the course of a meal or a walk through the park.

Takahata muses on memory with a certain formal attention unique to his films, a rigor one doesn't necessarily expect in the films of Miyazaki. He leaves backgrounds partially blank and the match cuts between past and present are often disorienting. Through such gestures, the audience becomes aware of a certain self-consciousness that doesn't surface in other Ghibli features—

Takahata is making a film, the kind of visually dynamic work that uses the full range of the formal palette. In particular, his associative style of editing and experimental drawing techniques reflect not only an animation tradition but an approach akin to live-action films by the likes of Tarkovsky (in floating depictions of nature), Kubrick (in brash, pointed editing), and De Sica (in the quiet observance of quotidian moments).

One particularly poetic scene at the tail end of a grade school baseball game depicts an awkward encounter between the young Taeko and her mutual crush. Takahata draws the scene sparsely with clear geometry. The background seems unfinished, leaving a great deal of white space to emphasize the incompleteness of the recollection. We have access only to the scenery immediately around the characters skimmed by the rays of a deep-orange setting sun.

At first the emphasis is on distance, with a number of exchanging shots that place Taeko's crush in the deep center of the frame. Even he, clad in the white garb of the baseball team, seems to blend into the barely-colored frame. When Taeko passes him, head down, his awkward blurt about her preference between rainy, cloudy and sunny days, invites another flash-cut. At this point there's no way to tell whose imagination we have entered. It might be young Taeko's remembrance, but it might also be adult Taeko's, her memory moving into what her young self would have remembered. The point is that it doesn't matter; the experience of images in memory is immersive, non-linear. When Taeko responds that she likes cloudy days, we get another flash-cut, but this time it seems to belong to her crush. He smiles and a split-second shot a baseball hitting a catcher's mitt offers a satisfying punch. The image describes the empathetic power of the romantic moment—that one could move, momentarily, into the emotional and psychological experience of another person.

This spark lifts both the lovers, and as they part ways, we feel the animator's pen is stretched to its limits. Taeko runs at first into the depth of the frame, towards a vanishing point, but suddenly she is running up the frame, moving not backwards or forwards but simply up, stepping through the air into the sky and owning her total liberation from the limitations of gravity or depth of space.

The climax of the film is appropriately the peak of Takahata's ventures into the physicality of memory. Taeko encounters, with all the trappings of realism save temporal impossibility, a grade school enemy on the bridge while reflecting outside during a storm. At this point in the film, Taeko is already faced with an overwhelming decision, and it's no chance that she encounters this pressing memory while she ponders an enormously consequential life decision. Suddenly the bridge she walks on is populated, in the rain, by all her grade school companions—the pressures of past experience gliding into the pressures of the present.

Only Yesterday is most firmly about this tension between a mun-

top and bottom: *ONLY YESTERDAY* (1991)

dane physical world and a fantastic emotional one, and Takahata is concerned at every moment with reminding us that it is animation that allows for this drift through time. While Taeko and Toshio drive through the rain at the film's quiet climax, we get a momentary glimpse of Taeko's projection opposite of what we've been seeing—a dream of the future. In one shot, we watch the sunbathed profiles of Toshio and Taeko on a haycart (her imagination) meld into the coolly-lit profiles of the pair driving in the rain (her reality). This kind of shot is, of course, impossible to capture naturally with a camera. In *Only Yesterday*, the image reads as entirely organic.

As Miyazaki and Takahata often emphasize in interviews, animating a film takes a great number of people working long hours for several years. Both directors have a penchant for overworking; they insist such a tendency is necessary to reach a certain quality of animation. Interestingly, then, *Pom Poko*, made after *Only Yesterday*, plays with the idea of how a community can encourage, and still lack entirely, a work ethic. Whereas a dedication to hard work characterizes the matured Taeko in *Only Yesterday*, the main characters of *Pom Poko*, a forest society of human-like *tanuki* (legendary Japanese dog-raccoons) are more . . . human.

The film, unusually long for an animated feature at nearly two hours, depicts the oft-unsuccessful resistance of the *tanuki* to the commercial encroachment on their serene forest existence. The length can be explained by the fact that *Pom Poko* follows the structure of a war epic, tracing in seasons the lives of individual animals within a larger community of fighters. It's purposefully difficult to pinpoint the exact mood of *Pom Poko*, as it changes around every corner. Even the way Takahata draws the raccoons is constantly flip-flopping, so while in one moment a *tanuki* might take on a completely naturalistic look, in the next—depending on context or mood—the same *tanuki* might appear entirely cartoonish. The film never makes it quite clear how the humans perceive these creatures, instead it is much more concerned with how the *tanuki*, so anthropomorphized already, cross animal boundaries into the human world.

Given its weighty themes, *Pom Poko* often trails into the all-out absurd and its humor remains mostly unrivaled by other Ghibli films. The *tanuki* are fast-food loving, TV-addicted creatures who can weaponize their own testicles. Importantly, they can also shape-shift, an advantage to their main military efforts—the most potent shape-shifters are tasked with frightening the human contractors and construction workers away from bulldozing the *tanuki* habitats. When some of the frightening involves actually killing several humans, the film seems to become temporarily concerned with ethical questions as some of the raccoons have misgivings about murder. As he does with many of the film's major questions, Takahata diffuses, but does not dismiss, this ethical spark; the *tanuki* agree that they ought to keep the humans around, but only

POM POKO (1994)

for the purpose of sustaining the availability of McDonald's.

Throughout the film, Takahata continues to alter and adjust the boundaries between human and animal—certainly the *tanuki* are as sentient (and in a certain sense, more "woke") than the humans, even though their habits are just as degenerate. The *tanuki* emphasize the most extreme possibilities of human temptation and opportunity; they are both completely dedicated to saving their homes while being completely vulnerable to their own impulses. They simply cannot resist the tempting taste of a Big Mac.

But the *tanuki*'s beautiful metamorphosis cancels their degeneracy to some degree. The film describes shape-shifting as an ancient art that requires guidance from old masters to fully learn. One of *Pom Poko*'s most fantastic scenes involves these old masters, who are a trio of scraggly *tanuki* recruited from their respective communities to help fight the encroaching construction. As the *tanuki* invade a newly-built town, the raccoon geezers shape-shift magnificently in an attempt to scare the residents away. Takahata leaves this to a few long takes where the masters perform, center-frame, a spectacle of transformation, dissolving effortlessly, even gracefully, between skull-headed spirits and musical samurai sprites. Tragically, the beauty of their performance invokes the opposite of the desired effect, and the next half of the film is built upon an allegory implied in this scene. The shape-shifting of the *tanuki*, like animation, is not repulsive, but in fact inherently profitable—not terrifying enough to scare the humans away, but fantastical enough to make them find a way to sell it.

And so, a group of covetous corporate executives becomes obsessed with recruiting the *tanuki* to work in their human world for some kind of shape-shifting theme park. It's no accident that Disney's name is dropped at several points in the movie, particularly when one executive notes that the *tanuki* shape-shifting is "better than Disneyland." But this scene also resonates as a clear metaphor for the Ghibli dream factory. The analog between the corporate fiends overtaken by the potential of shapeshifting, and the viewer of *Pom Poko* overtaken by the protean power of Takahata's pen is not accidental. The director wants the viewer to remember, with a smile, that the grueling commercialization of the *tanuki* tradition is not altogether different from the commercial exchange implicit in the viewers of Ghibli animation

But remembering that Ghibli is a stage removed from the pay-per-frame world of animated movies and TV, *Pom Poko* becomes a movie about moderation, about middle ground. The ending of the film is surprisingly satisfying in its ambiguity—in what it implies for the environmental cause, and for those we affect by constant consumption of natural resources. Perhaps this satisfaction derives from the fact that it ends, like so few films, in real compromise: a pact that is painful for both sides but not entirely destructive to either. The subtle, moving plea for environmentalism is as much a plea for animation done well.

Takahata's specific contribution to Ghibli is more consciously dedicated to the preservation of animation itself; his films, more often than Miyazaki's, present metaphors or awareness of the formal techniques that make the stories possible. Takahata's work speaks deeply to the animated tradition, but also to the tradition of cinema at large. Several of his films, including *Only Yesterday*, begin with the same wood threaded background of Yasujirō Ozu's iconic title cards. This calculated blend of progressive characters and environmental nostalgia is woven deeply through Takahata's work; like those in many Japanese films, his characters straddle the lives of their past and present.

At 81 years old, Takahata thinks it unlikely that he will live to finish another film, but he has said he will continue to try. The space he leaves between major works (14 years between *Yamadas* and *Princess Kaguya*) indicates a certain patience, even within the fast-paced world of film production. If nothing else, Takahata's films should be remembered for their distinct slowness and willingness to linger. In *Only Yesterday*, the young Taeko receives an offer to perform in a local play after only a bit-part in her grade school play. The secret to her success is not the delivery of her single line, but a poignant pause—she stays on stage for a pregnant moment, looking out onto the crowd. There is beauty, Takahata knows, in the silent gaze.

ONLY YESTERDAY (1991)