Bazin, Bresson and Scorsese: performative power and the impure art of cinema

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There must be an influx of performative power from the linguistic transactions involved in the act of reading into the realms of knowledge, politics, and history. Literature must be in some ways a cause and not merely an effect, if the study of literature is to be other than the relatively trivial study of one of the epiphenomena of society, part of the technological assimilation or assertion of mastery over all features of human life which is called the human sciences (Miller 1987: 5).

The power of causing some effects on human lives and minds that J. Hillis Miller suggests in *The Ethics of Reading* (1987) as the performative action of literature can also be ascribed to art in general and indeed to film, as the inheritor of many characteristics of the 19th century novel, which has often served as the object of contemporary literary theory focused on performativity. Unlike theatre, where the bodies and voices
of actors are present in the flesh, cinema\(^1\) is based on the one-way communication that Raymond Williams identified in *Culture and Society* (1958) and in many essays, and that since the 1950's has been seen as typical of radio, television, and, we should now add, of all the most contemporary forms of technology. Hence, the virtual dimension of the screen is somewhat similar to the written text, exactly because of the fundamental absence of the human body.

I would say that, much more than in theatrical performances, the spectators of films are submitted to a high degree of simulation, a complex mental activity that is quite different from the naïve identification with the lives and stories of the represented characters.\(^2\) As in the reading of the novel, the spectators deal with something as abstract as words, but, because of the power of images, they face something, so to speak, “larger than life”: the audio-visual nature of the medium is intimately connected with the possibility of stimulating the spectators’ senses, emotions and intelligence both in relationship with what is narrated, even if in a fragmented way, and with the medium itself. Simulation consists in the spectators’ response to all these stimuli. In the darkness, in front of the big screen, space and sound overcome the usual dimensions of everyday human exchanges.\(^3\) There is no doubt that the performative power of film can be extremely strong,

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1 Cinema is the term used by André Bazin in the 1940’s and 1950’s. I use it as a synonym of film, which has three meanings: the art form, the medium, and the photographically based film (cinema, the art form in its traditional medium).


3 David Lynch likes to say that he wants his films to wrap the audience in music and images, and therefore let them have an experience at
even in an age in which we are so used to images that they have lost the dazzling effect of their first impact.4

The critic André Bazin, the founder of *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, was concerned with the question of the impact upon the spectator: the realism that he was looking for in films has nothing to do with any "mimetic" school, quite the contrary. I would argue that his notion of realism encompasses the understanding of film as a medium that is susceptible to being read, which appeals to the spectators' minds, and therefore is capable of causing the effects Miller alludes to. Its aesthetic, ethical and political dimensions are but one: this is the lesson Bazin took from the form and content of what has been called Italian neo-realism.

In an essay on the 1941 film *Paisà* by Roberto Rossellini,5 Bazin points out that the Italian filmmaker shows several episodes of life during the Second World War in various regions and cities in Italy. Together with the political content of the film, Bazin stresses Rossellini's way of filming: the fight against Fascism in the last episode is constructed with an extraordinary cohesion between the horizontal, flat landscape of the river Po and the bodies of the partisans crouched in the water and in the fluvial vegetation. The realistic dimension is not to be sought in the accuracy of the landscape nor in the historical "truth" of the details, but in the intellectual and

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4 In several of his essays – and especially in “Kleine Geschichte der Photographie” (1931, “Little History of Photography”) – Walter Benjamin recalled the shock caused by photography in viewers in the 19th century; at the same time he could predict the habit of the users of technology, who would lose the astonishment provoked by the first appearance of new techniques.

emotional effects aroused in the spectators’ minds by Rossellini’s formal solutions. One could say, in the critical language of Miller, that Bazin was interested in the “influx of performative power” emanating from the “linguistic” transactions involved in the act of watching this film, “into the realms of knowledge, politics, and history”.

The close reading of texts helps us focus on important passages in which textual action works at the level of both form and content. Although it is a different medium from literature, cinema can be read as a text. Bazin recognized both the specificity of cinematic language and the closeness of film to the novel because of its narrative flux and the importance of stylistic invention. Therefore, in order to capture the impact of images, he closely analyzed various shots, insisting on the consequences of the takes of the camera and on the unfolding of the sequences. The more a shot is carefully constructed, the more we are drawn to interpret and re-interpret it. Actually, we can say that interpretations are the outcome of textual action.

The close reading of some shots by Robert Bresson and Martin Scorsese will allow us to reflect upon performativity understood as the type of action that works of art can develop in the mind of the receiver, who is indeed active. In their films, perception, emotions and understanding are subtly stimulated to a high degree, differently from the physical and ephemeral reaction provoked by the frantic action punctuated by gunshots in films that only appeal to gut feelings.

6 For example, Bazin described at length the last episode of Paisà, where, he argued, the horizontality of the landscape and of the human bodies absorbs in concrete external features the clandestine character of the partisans’ combat and the difficulty of hiding in that landscape.

7 Obviously, I am suggesting here a difference between good artistic films and bad commercial films. Nevertheless I am not opposing popular culture and high culture, since, as stated by Bazin and the Nouvelle Vague, cinema is popular art, but it can reflect on impor-
But the close reading will also open up all the different types of performativity that these two filmmakers have brought about. There is a profound kinship between what is at stake in *Un Condamné à mort s' est échappé* (A Man Escaped, 1955), *Pickpocket* (1959), and *Gangs of New York* (2003) and what some of the critical discussion of performativity has revealed: theory and analysis cooperate, I would say, in an irregular way.

In *Signatures of the Visible* (1989), Fredric Jameson called the contemporary critical mode of thinking that does not follow orderly historical narratives or simple reportage an "alternate account" or "a structure of laterality", in which peripheral or digressive elements are necessary in order to bring into focus central issues. This can happen in film, literature and theory (as in the styles of Roland Barthes or Walter Benjamin); all of them definitely put in jeopardy any simple idea of merely "using" or "applying" some theory to a work of art.8 In the following, this structure of laterality is what will direct my thinking about performativity, in which I will dwell on various "peripheral" reflections on formal impurity and space. Hopefully, these peripheral foci will shed light on my major concern with performative power and its different features.

8 There is a crucial structure of laterality at work here [in Blow-Up by Antonioni] (demonstrable elsewhere in contemporary literature), by which perception or experience requires a kind of partial distraction, a lateral engagement or secondary, peripheral focus, in order to come into being in the first place" (Jameson 1990: 191).
My choice of Bresson is justified by the fact that Bazin himself enthusiastically commented on the work of this filmmaker and his very sober style. The choice of Scorsese and especially of *Gangs of New York* might be surprising: in general, his films with their quick rhythm of action and musical score seem so far away from the slowness of those by Bresson, and Scorsese’s heroes are so different from the silent and almost mystical characters in Bresson’s films. Nevertheless, there is an important link, both contextually and formally. Scorsese became acquainted with the *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the filmmakers of *Nouvelle Vague* in the mid 60’s, watched the films of Truffaut, Godard and Rohmer, and studied their theories when he was a film student at New York University. Indeed, Scorsese is close to the young group of *Les Cahiers du Cinema*, to their fondness for some American filmmakers and their understanding of cinema both as popular medium and true art: Scorsese has always admitted the importance of Truffaut for his way of handling the camera, and he has declared his admiration for Bresson.9

Besides the context of cultural exchanges, an important element connects the filmmakers to the problem of performative power sketched in the “dialogue” constructed between Miller and Bazin above. This further connecting element I am alluding to is the speech-act structuring of *A Man Escaped*,

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9 Some of the scenes of his *Taxi Driver* (1975), whose scenario was originally written by Paul Schrader — a filmmaker and critic deeply influenced by Bresson — are inspired by the patient work of the protagonist of *A Man Escaped* and even more by the protagonist of *Pickpocket*: Travis, the taxi driver interpreted by Robert De Niro, who plans to kill the presidential candidate, is silently and like an artisan cutting and hammering pieces of wood and metal in his apartment in order to construct complicated systems for shooting with his guns. Moreover, the room in which he lives is very similar to the bare space — apartment or prison-cell — where the protagonists of Bresson operate. See *Scorsese by Scorsese* (1996: 66).
Pickpocket and Gangs of New York. My discussion, then, will be concerned both with the performative power of these works and with the performative sentences triggering the action - externally and internally - in these films. I will be reading Bresson through Bazin's interpretation of his style, and I will see Scorsese's Gangs of New York as acting out various types of performativity.

J.L. Austin’s theory of performative language is based precisely on words such as those used to make bets and promises, as well as to issue orders and legal formulas that are ways of doing things with words. In all the films I study here, a promise is made. These films thus foster reflection upon the meaning and the usage of key terms in the critical theory of the last few decades. The concept of performativity elaborated in Derrida’s and Miller’s deconstruction of Austin’s theory of speech acts stresses the importance of language and literature in the shaping of human reality. In the field of literary theory and cultural analysis a major consequence of their elaboration of that concept has been the renewal of the old Marxian debate on theory and practice. Thanks to the performative turn, literature and the arts are endowed with the recognition of the ability to move the reader or the spectator, as Miller suggested; art and literature are not simply an effect but also a cause. The perception of the artistic object cannot be reduced to pure, uninterested contemplation: we know how modern art has been defying classical aesthetic attitudes by challenging the opposition between utilitarian aims and disinterested enjoyment.

Actually, modern art is neither utilitarian nor contemplative - it calls for a participation whose consequences might be the “cause” that Miller talked about. I would add that the reverberations of that “cause” are not immediate in the sense that the historical avant-gardes both in art and in criticism thought they would be: they might take different temporali-
ties – a first set of reactions, and later on direct or lateral re-elaborations. If the reader or the spectator can approach art as a phenomenon reverberating with knowledge and history, this means that aesthetics (the perception of the artistic object), ethics and politics are not separated, although their actions might differ in detail and nuance. Performative power or textual action may have immediate as well as delayed effects.

Bazin, Bresson and the impurity of cinema

Robert Bresson is one of the filmmakers Bazin studied in order to discuss the problem of adaptation in film. To adapt means to translate something into something else, and an adaptation can be understood as a translation or a transaction from one genre or medium into another. The whole question is “lateral” connected with performativity: to adapt an artistic product from one medium to another – the passage from one text to another type of text – presupposes an already existing mutual adaptability of the media in question. Actually, it could even be said that a film, with all its different phases, from shooting to editing, and with the economic dimension of filmmaking, is the result of one of those sentences which could be added to the series of performative speech acts (promises, bets, contracts etc.).

Two articles by Bazin are crucial for the debate on adaptation: “Pour un cinéma impur” (“In Defence of Mixed Cinema”) and “Le Journal d'un curé de campagne et la stylistique de Robert Bresson” (“Le Journal d'un curé de campagne and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson”). Bazin challenged any

10 See (Bazin 1967: 53–75) and (125–143) respectively. These articles have been seminal for François Truffaut’s manifesto-like essay “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français” (“A Certain Tendency of
simplistic understanding of adaptation, while emphasizing the mixed nature of film whose aim is to express human reality: the filmic image is, in his opinion, capable of capturing both the exterior and the interior worlds of human beings. And the interior is what matters most. As much as the other arts, film is impure, since it constantly takes various elements from several media. Could we conceive – Bazin argues in “In Defense of Mixed Cinema” – the painting of Michelangelo without sculpture, or the 17th century French novel without the experience of Racine’s theatre?

After the silent movie, cinema in the 1940’s turns increasingly towards the adaptation of novels; this shows its impure nature, which was evident also at its beginnings in its link with popular theatre, the vaudeville, musicals and circuses. Even so, the important question to ask is not how faithful the scenes of a given film are to the literary text, but what important literary formal innovations can be captured by films. In this respect, Citizen Kane is crucial for Bazin, since the fragmented and polyphonic character of the whole story is deeply informed by the narrative devices of Joyce, Faulkner and John Dos Passos. Linear narration is broken, and the point of view shifts constantly from one character to another, from a given moment in the past to the present, and vice-versa: numerous flashbacks of the same episode in the past as perceived by various characters cut the time flow into fragments, following the syncopated rhythm of memory and the flow of stream of consciousness. Like the novels by those writers, Citizen Kane is based on the fragmentation of time.

Bazin’s investigation is important for both the formal and

French Cinema”, Les Cahiers du cinéma, 1954: 16-29), where he attacks the naive idea of a faithful transposition of narratives from novels to film.
the historical analysis of the artistic object (aren’t we always torn between the formal apprehension of art and the attempt to historicize both the artistic objects and our perspective in looking at them?) On the formal level, Bazin affirmed the freedom of the language of film, of its techniques and stylistic solutions. On the historical level, a new light was cast on the history of film, since he broke with the nostalgia for the golden age of the birth of the motion picture: unlike several contemporary critics, he expressed no regret for the fall of the initial “aura” of film before the new era of the talkies. In spite of what could be seen as his idealism or spiritualism, Bazin was also interested in questions of material means of production, since he stressed the converging of literature and film precisely in the new literary production of screen-play writing. In the early 1950’s, one needed to have a good sociological grasp of reality and the role of arts in general in order to blur the hierarchy between literature and cinema and reject the vision of the superiority of the novel over film.

As much as he was refined in his analytical reading of so many films, Bazin has been concerned with sociological questions: he was aware of the importance of the mode of production in filmmaking, and pointed to the crucial divide between those filmmakers who hired screen-play writers, and those who, more to his liking, imagined their screen-plays and transformed them – we could actually say re-wrote them – while shooting.

Bazin therefore defended free adaptation, turning upside down the relationship between film and literature. He believed that the true work of adaptation consists in transposing some stylistic effects from literature to film (as opposed to the still current idea that adaptation transfers the content of a novel or a play into filmic images). In “Le Journal d’un curé de campagne and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson” (first published
in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in June 1951), the critic explained, through detailed analysis of sequences from Bernanos' 1936 novel and Bresson's film, how the latter ends up being more literary than the novel upon which it was based. It does so by reducing the visual elements of descriptions.

The final scene especially, which for more than a minute shows a thin grey cross, lets the voice-over narrate the death of the priest with no concession to the eyes: the details of the protagonist's tragic end are told by the voice-over, reading aloud a letter written to the Father Superior by the priest who assisted at that death. The last shot is extremely sober, with no concession to the desire of seeing events represented with many details. In Bazin’s opinion, Bresson here reached the same intensity as Mallarmé, who refused any trace of “reportage”, and aimed at the highest sphere of poetic language, dusting off all the weight of description as much as its illusion of reality. For Mallarmé, the bare reality of language was a more accurate form of reality than all the attempts to represent the world through descriptions.

As with Austin's speech acts and the subsequent debate within literary theory, Bresson's film is yet another attempt to investigate the relationship between reality and language, by way of the particular language that is film. His works succeeded and still succeed in affirming the power of film and its action upon the spectators' minds, pushing them to consider that this medium, too, just like literature — in the words of Miller — “must be in some ways a cause”.

**Quiet performative: minimalist gestures and actions**

Bresson's films have a strong ethical commitment: morality has to do with values and not with norms. Michel, the protagonist of *Pickpocket*, challenges the norms of society: out-law, against the law, he wants to experience the full ex-
tent of his own values, however wrong they might be. To the commandment (both religious and societal): “do not steal,” he responds with his: “I will steal, I promise to myself that I will become a deft thief”. He reads Dostoevsky and wants to live in accordance with the philosophy of some of his characters. Indeed, the reading of novels had a crucial impact on his life. The story of Pickpocket consists in the wicked series of events stemming from an intention formulated as a solitary promise to the self in a nihilistic or self-destructive challenge: “I swear I will become a thief.”

A Man Escaped is also structured by speech acts: in both films an implacable bet or promise functions as the basis of all the events and the repetition of gestures typical of these films. In A Man Escaped, Jean Fontaine, imprisoned by the Nazis, is awaiting his execution after receiving the death penalty. He moves between that death-sentence and his promise to himself, to the boards of his prison-cell, and to the prisoners he manages to speak to during the collective rituals of washing and walking in the prison courtyard. “We condemn you to death” and “I promise I will escape” are the two phrases determining the whole film.

Those speech acts order the lives of the protagonists, but the performative power of Bresson’s films is also marked by the importance given to gestures. Gestures are the way in which we act out our will; they assure the fit between human will and reality, they are our minimal actions upon the world, and they obediently succumb to an aim. The protagonists of both Pickpocket and of A Man Escaped act with their hands, one following his decision to steal, the other his decision to escape from the Nazi prison. In the two films, as in so many Bresson movies, neither the characters nor the voice-over are very talkative. On the contrary, there are many long shots where the protagonists perform their activities solely with the use of their hands. It has been said that Bresson succeeded in
endowing film with the dimension of touching: the immediate effect of his style is the "close-to-life" participation of all the physical senses. In fact, because of the "un-psychological" acting, spectators do not identify with the human being, but capture all his gestures. The ethical and political dimensions are brought about by that participation, and not through many dialogues or extensive commentary.

In *Pickpocket* we feel the deftness of the hands in stealing from the bags or the jackets of the passers-by; we can sense the lightness of the hands and the fingers of professional thieves. In a central, long sequence starting in one of Paris's railway stations, the protagonist and his accomplices on the train "work" at unfastening watches and bracelets, opening purses, sliding their fingers into people's clothes, pretending to help them get on the train, and throwing their emptied wallets into the garbage.

The same is true for *A Man Escaped*: the spectator follows the patient movements of Jean Fontaine in his meticulous activity, day after day, of un-nailing the wooden door of his cell with a metal spoon. Several sequences show this work in his cell and its progression day by day. The sense of touch and that of hearing are continuously stimulated; like Fontaine, we hear a noise from outside the door, we hold our breath while he interrupts his work. The fear that a Nazi guard might suddenly open the door and discover what Fontaine is doing takes the concrete form of a movement frozen in the middle of a tiny, painstaking action: suddenly, the feeling of waiting inhabits the restricted space of the cell with its wall, mattress, dust and the splinters of wood accumulated by the grating of the spoon against the door boards.

The actors chosen by Bresson - they are never film stars - do not play in any expressive way: their faces and their features are almost motionless. Bresson firmly rejected any theatrical effect in his *cinématographe* (the name he gave to
film precisely in order to refuse any spectacular dimension of dramatic psychology). Nevertheless, there is a subtle psychological dimension, but of a different order: I would call it the concrete psychology of things, the way in which objects both resist and are bent by an act of will. The emotion of what is at stake in both films is not expressed through eyes, lips, face or words – the most obvious human ways of showing affective life. The emotion is meant in the matter, in the sounds of things, and, if there is some human presence, that presence is in gestures, not expressively directed to the unveiling of what is felt but concretely directed to the craft that connects human beings to things. Will, intention, intentionality and objects are condensed: when we see the details of the cell door, for example, we immediately grasp Fontaine’s intention: it is almost tangible, concrete, while the idea itself of evading is built little by little by wood, spoon, cloth and cords, noises and breathing.¹¹

Space and action in these films are often investigated in their minimal dimension: “There is just one point in space from where one thing, at a given moment, asks to be looked at” (Bresson 1993: 35). Space is more than geometry, it is matter, and a small corner of the ground or the wall is able to convey the whole relationship between human beings and space. Things are imbued with action and will. Bresson’s films are often in an area that is neither the rambunctious activity of what is called action-film, nor the nihilistic attitude of the complete suspension of action. Instead, they focus on a small-scale action where things call for human will to operate on or via them – barely, without hope or despair. It is impossible not to see how this minimalist filmic narration resembles some

¹¹ In his Notes sur le cinématographe, Bresson wrote that “objects are much more important than people” and “events” (1993, my translation).
of the most experimental adventures of prose and drama in the modern period.

Gestures and objects in Bresson’s films produce a kind of physical reality that is commanded by the inner voice of the protagonist. This voice is the quiet, silent speech act determining actions which are performed in order to achieve the fixed goal. In *Tropes, Parables, Performatives*, Miller recalls the weight of words in constructing whole worlds: “A true performative brings something into existence that has no basis except in the words, as when I sign a check and turn an almost worthless piece of paper into whatever value I have inscribed on the check, assuming the various contexts of this act are in a correct order” (Miller 1990: 139). Within his Christian vision, Bresson proposed a way of rebelling against the laws of society (Nazi power and bourgeois society) through a promise that rejects that order but proceeds according to a precise ritual: Michael’s learning and exercising of theft in *Pickpocket* and the accuracy in crafting and organizing the escape in *A Man Escaped*.

**The case of Scorsese**

Reading past and contemporary literary and artistic works means trying to find the spark which connects form with content. With our grip of the contemporary world we look for some understanding of the historical conditions in which a work has been produced; we combine the voice of something which is not “us” with that which is murmuring in our ears. The act of reading proves our will to act with words in the present, and reading is in this sense a true performative: it gives real existence to books, artistic objects, films. Like a

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12. Miller adds that things might work even if the context is not right, as in the case of counterfeit money or bad cheques.

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novel, a film comes into life when we *read* it and *re-read* it: we negotiate between the attempt to capture the ideas it embodies and the attempt to express our concerns through our reading of that precise object. Theory and analysis go hand in hand, one is feeding the other. The tension between some assumptions inherited from the 1960’s and 1970’s, and the need to view old and new works – canonical as well as non-canonical ones – in a new light, allow for endless re-readings.

As I have already suggested – like the two films by Bresson discussed above, *Gangs of New York* can be a good example for reflecting on performative power and performativity, and for several reasons. The performative power of art affecting us in our relationship with knowledge, history and politics has to do with space. Don’t we apprehend space? How can we imagine human history without the topography of places where things happened and people lived? Isn’t the term of politics itself endowed with a spatial organization: that of the city, as the etymology of the Greek word *polis* suggests?

Film is a medium founded on our perception of time and space; actually it changed our perceptive habits. A film necessarily unfolds along a sequential path that is not dissimilar to the novel’s denouement; and, at a more frantic pace than the novel, the film combines its account of the time represented (a whole life, a year, a day etc.) and of “existential” time (the internalization of the *temps vécu*) with the compelling quantification of the real time of the shots and the film. But films can also challenge our perception of space, contradicting the major elements of Euclid’s geometry. The close-up, just to give an example, jeopardizes any evidence that the whole is greater than the part. The movement of the camera, the use

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of special effects, the various types of shots, and the rhythm of editing have such an impact on our perception of space and time that we can say that cinema is responsible for a new way of perceiving that is now integrated into our eyes. Film has in some ways forged our sense of sight, pushing the retina to such speed that the power of abstraction is included in our grasping of images and our experience of concrete objects.\textsuperscript{14}

I will here argue that \textit{Gangs of New York} elaborates space and time or that combined space-time element which, according to Deleuze, is typical of film, and the more so since the challenges of the camera intervene in a film which apparently carries the most classical structure of the linear flow of events, from the childhood of the young protagonist to his adult life, from the disappearance of the gang led by his father, the Dead Rabbits, to the protagonist’s return to Lower Manhattan and to his slow and patient construction of his revenge against the man who killed his father.

As in classic historical novels, this personal story is framed by History, by the Secession War and the draft in the city of New York during the years of Tammany Hall. Obviously, \textit{Gangs of New York} aims at realizing one of the most “Hollywood” of genres: historical fiction.\textsuperscript{15} All the ingredients of the Hollywood “canon” are there: famous actors (Leonardo DiCaprio, Daniel Day-Lewis, Jim Broadbent, Brendan Gleeson etc.), a huge budget, costumes, and powerful machinery for the reconstitution of historical places in the Cinecittà Studios in Rome. Nevertheless, the film is also anti-Hollywood in terms of the use of the camera, the construction of space, and what can be called cinematic thought.


\textsuperscript{15} Scorsese had already tried the staging of New York upper class life at the end of the 19th century with \textit{The Age of Innocence} (1993), an adaptation of Edith Wharton’s novel.
In a beautiful shot in the first part of the film, Scorsese shows the body of the leader of the Irish Catholic Dead Rabbits, Priest Vallon (Liam Neeson), killed by the leader of the rival Protestant gang, the Natives, Bill the Butcher or the Cutter (Daniel Day-Lewis). He is lying on a cart that his people move away from the site where the battle took place, Paradise Square. On the ground of the square the snow is red with blood, and the faces of the Dead Rabbits are disfigured by the signs of the combat and the sadness of defeat. Then the frame widens, more and more, until people and objects lose their individuality to give rise to a vision that comes from above, showing the pattern of streets and houses of the whole neighbourhood called the Five Points. The frame widens yet again, including the roofs and the urban grid, and we see the whole City of Manhattan, as in a map; and the moving space becomes time, the time of some transformation of the city, until we read: “16 years later,” and we hear the voice-over preaching forgiveness while Vallon’s son (Leonardo DiCaprio) stands to receive the farewell from his orphan institution at Hellgate. The same technique of widening and transforming the image is used at the end of the film, when a final sequence accumulates the epochs of New York from the 1860’s until the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, in which we can see the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

Among the many examples of the treatment of space, it is worthwhile to recall the very beginning of Gangs of New York, when, in front of a black screen, we first hear the noise of a razor on skin, and then we see, from below, the face of a man – Priest Vallon. He is shaving, on purpose cuts his cheek, and hands the blade stained with his blood to his son. This perspective from below is in fact that of a child’s gaze: his son is looking up at him just before the battle with the Natives. The physical space and the symbolic implications are but one: after the few words exchanged in the shaving scene, the boy
follows his father in a sort of long martial walk through the dark labyrinth where the Dead Rabbits live, the so-called Old Brewery.

Then father, son and the people of the gang get out onto Paradise Square. Several shots during the ferocious battle show that Vallon’s son is looking at the whole event, and then looks at his dying father. That gaze of the child looking up in the initial shaving scene is first outside the screen, then included in the image of Vallon’s arm stretching out towards him; this gesture will determine the life of the young protagonist, later called Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio), when, after several years at Hellgate House of Reform, an institution for orphans, he returns anonymously to the Five Points (where Bill the Butcher has been the absolute boss for a long time). The day of the battle in which his father was knifed to death is imprinted forever in his mind: Amsterdam’s determination to kill his father’s murderer is hosted in the image of the initial gaze and its spatial installation.

Film can operate powerfully, on a narrative level and on a meta-discursive one, playing with the converging of genres, and of the senses – sight, hearing, touching. Thanks to its fundamental impurity at all levels, cinema reaches a grandiose synaesthesia of several senses and of the mind, because the effect on the spectator comes from both what is shown and what is not shown, from inside and outside the frame. Films can be like novels, plays, poems, paintings and operas. But where a novel needs explanations by the narrator or analysis by the characters, dialogue or monologue, film can synthesize with just one shot, punching into the guts and the brains of the spectators, who do not even have the time to adjust to what they are feeling in one scene before they are introduced to something else, forced continuously to correct the information given by an image with the following one – quickly, more quickly than the wink of the eye. And where theatre cannot
but accept the full presence of the body on stage, and a relative stillness in spite of the movements of the actors and the change of décor, film can cut, fragment, displace, combine, move up and down, and track on one side and on the other, from below and from above. Everything is possible for the camera and endless are and have been its effects. Scorsese wants to use all the power of the camera.

Besides the performative power of affecting our knowledge of space, *Gangs of New York* contains various forms of performative speech acts and performance arts (in the literal sense). The first striking speech act happens during the beginning of the battle between the two rival gangs – corresponding to one of Austin’s examples: “I declare war”. The Dead Rabbits and the Natives are face to face, their respective bosses in the middle of the groups, as if they were displaying themselves on a stage, in this case Paradise Square. Its space is indeed opened up by a slow and vast wide-angle lens movement, as if the curtains had been lifted for the beginning of the show allowing the vision of the whole space. After the first brief exchange, in which Priest Vallon recalls the promise of a battle, Bill the Butcher pronounces those words that are able to do things: “On my challenge, by the ancient laws of combat, we have met at this chosen ground to set, for good and all, who holds way over the Five Points...”. The Irish Catholic leader of the other gang pronounces in his turn: “I accept the challenge”, and the battle starts.

All the most basic and classic conditions of a speech act are fulfilled: the presence of the two parties and of testimonies, and the ceremonious character of the whole action. The combat cannot be understood without this collective ritual which has to take place somewhere. I would say that this scene is so deeply rooted in a social setting with the pronouncement of some kind of law that it recalls the inaugural reflection on speech acts by the philosopher who was the
forerunner of Austin and Searle: Adolf Reinach (1883-1917), who contributed to the understanding of the link between language and action. In *Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürgerlichen Rechtes* (*The Apriori Foundations of Civil Law*, 1913), he criticized Hume's vision of the promise as being confined to the mere expression of an act of will on the part of the person who declares his intention to act in favour of the addressee of the promise. Reinach believed that the main problem of this type of utterance is how it can create a mutual obligation between the two parties in the burg – in a precise physical and social space. In other terms, Reinach displaced the centre of the problem from the question of personal will to the social structure required for the promise. The two-way structure is important as the frame in which juridical activities take place.

This is also clear for Austin: on the one hand there is the a-priori need for figures to have the authority to declare certain things, and on the other there is the need for an audience to receive and accept those utterances (as Austin says: speech acts require uptake) in a ritual ceremony and in an appropriate spatial setting functioning as the place where the promise between the two parties occurs. Most of Austin’s performative speech acts presuppose an addressee, and they require that the addressee understands what the speaker is doing. Austin gives the example of some rare speech acts which are not directly addressed to anyone, for example when a government speaker institutes a law by saying: “I hereby promulgate the following law”. Nevertheless, one could argue differently. It is true that the promulgator of a law does not need to be addressing the interlocutors, but the addressees are an essential logical counterpart. What would the enacting of a law in a desert be, even if pronounced by a state officer, if no one was there? Or in a destroyed country where no citizens any longer existed?
Performing history, the past and the present

Indeed, the scene of the battle between the two gangs in Scorsese's film stages the exchange between the two parties and the presence of the community (or communities) witnessing the declaration of combat. The fight is made possible by that mutually agreed promise in front of witnesses. We could also notice that this unambiguous and immediate social involvement in the name of the "ancient law" is contrasted with the other speech act that unfolds the historical events in the film: the abolition of slavery and the subsequent Civil War. Scorsese shows two cases of promulgation of law and declaration of war. He also shows that the supposed addressees are not always ready to accept such decisions, thereby showing how difficult it can be for performative utterances to become reality. The film shows the period in which the Abolition of Slavery is declared by the Government. But the juridical act does not necessarily imply its "cultural" acceptance: Gangs of New York testifies to the brutal racist response to the Abolition. The same is true for the Draft: a revolt defied state authority during the New York Draft Riots of July 13 to July 16, 1863, when people expressed their refusal of the war.

Scorsese shows important cultural changes in the 19th century in the United States: the end of the ancient code of honour of the gangs and the beginning of the new legalized violence of the state. In spite of their brutality, the local battles between the two New York gangs were based on a mutual agreement: as it appears in the first scenes of the film, the Natives and the Dead Rabbits fight on Paradise Square after the open declaration of war pronounced by Father Vallon and Bill the Butcher. Everybody in the two groups participates in the events decided by their chiefs. But the modern, presidential or governmental decisions are depicted through social
disharmony, leading to the 1863 Riots and their repression in blood.

What is the challenge, the performative power, of the huge historical fiction of *Gangs of New York*, a film which encountered much criticism and disappointed the lovers of coherent story-telling? I would say that the function of the promise is to hold all together – history and myth, the past and the present – while a mainstream historical movie would aim at historical accuracy or at the spectacular Hollywood-like construction. Scorsese, in my view, has at least a triple intent. He wants to represent History as the history of a nation (Abolition, the draft for the Civil War, and the making of the United States), in the line of political history based on great events. But Scorsese also wants to account for local history: the history of the gangs in Manhattan and their presence in the life of the city, as a chapter of cultural history stressing the role of groups and small communities, their everyday life and their religious beliefs (the opposition between Catholic and Protestant groups is important to the gangs in the book by Herbert Asbury, *Gangs of New York*, which had been an inspiration to the director since the early 1970’s, when he first read it).

However, Scorsese’s aim is not simply the erudite depiction of New York in the 19th century. He also wants to explain the United States’ past as the making of the law through corruption, so to speak the legal corruption of Tammany Hall’s politics. He reads the past through the eyes of the

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16 As Pete Hamill put it in a review in *The Daily News*: “For all that, this movie is an honorable – if misguided – attempt to re-create a lost world. But it is, after all, a movie. It will, in the end, be judged as art, not history” (Hamill 2002). A more positive review: Todd McCarthy, “Gangs of New York”, *Variety* (2002).

present, through the fresh memory of September 11, 2001 in Manhattan – a memory which is concretized in the dust and debris accompanying the fight between Bill the Butcher and Amsterdam in the midst of the anti-draft riots. Scorsese accentuates the multi-cultural elements, increasing, for example, the real historical numbers of the Chinese population in New York. What question can be more pertinent today than the problems embedded in the construction of a national identity? What perspective could be more up to date than multiculturalism? Past and present nourish each other; quite un-canonically, Scorsese combines the battle scenes in the reconstructed Paradise Square around 1850 with a complex editing of contemporary music.

The screening of violence, which has so often been criticized, transcends the accuracy of costumes and types of arms used by the rival gangs or by the National Army in the mid 19th century: it tells us about the horror of any war; it is a way of writing a pacifist message, at our tormented beginning of the 21st century, through the emphasis of an audio-visual construction of the fight. At the same time, Scorsese is conscious of the history of cinema, and the infinite representations of violence that cinema has been showing since its beginnings. The close reading of some postures and movements in the first battle between the Dead Rabbits and the Natives would show many similarities between the famous battle on ice in Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevski* (1938), and that of the snow-covered Paradise Square.

A single long shot of more than four minutes could exemplify the broadness of Scorsese's intent and his ability to hold together many elements belonging both to the sphere of fiction and to that of history (and to those complex historical threads that I mentioned). On the side of fiction, in a scene before his revenge and betrayal of Bill the Butcher, Amsterdam is already “under his wing”, he works for the
big boss, and actually enjoys his activity of collecting the money from boxing bets, while the match is starting in the middle of a noisy crowd. Fiction is coloured with historical elements: criminal life in Lower Manhattan was in fact organized and regulated by the historical Bill the Butcher (the nickname of William Poole, the leader of the Bowery Boys gang). The politician William Tweed, the boss of Tammany Hall (the society controlling all the activities and businesses of the Democratic Party), tries to get hold of the area dominated by the Butcher in order to get votes from the Irish immigrants who are constantly arriving from Europe. Scorsese represents the passage from the criminal gang power to the corrupted political power of William Tweed. In a sequence continuing the boxing episode, in which Tweed unsuccessfully tries to intervene by banning public bets and games, we can see Bill the Butcher and William Tweed on the harbour pier engaged in a discussion ending up with the Butcher’s refusal to cooperate with Tammany Hall.

The camera first follows Bill the Butcher walking away with Amsterdam, and suddenly, without any cuts, it hurries back towards the street where we see immigrants called by state employees to sign up for the draft. The real reason for entering the Army is the hope of being fed: we hear and see two immigrant soldiers getting on the boat. Then, from the street, without editing, the camera moves with a broad movement towards the boat and the sea. We keep hearing the conversation about food when the camera quickly plunges down, towards the shore where many wooden coffins are lined up on the ground. Up-and-down camera movements swing from the shore to the ship, following a crane which puts down a coffin.

While we still see that coffin, Scorsese uses another of his particular film techniques: we already hear a voice that belongs to the following sequence, that of the actor playing
in a staging of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This powerful stylistic solution offers the continuity of the sound-track in the cut of two different shots, and succeeds in embracing fiction (the relationship between a boss and a favourite, and the tension between two bosses), local history (street life and crowds), and national history (draft and turmoil about the Abolition). Space and time are many-layered and many-faceted, and are acted out as sequences of performative events, from the call to the Draft to the scenes in the theatre. Textual action is multiplied.

In *Gangs of New York*, we should not forget the presence of what could be called "the Hollywood gloss": i.e. the love-story and the stereotypical treatment of the main female character (Jenny, the thief, interpreted by Cameron Diaz). Then, almost like in a Balzac novel, there is the "type" of the boss: Bill the Butcher is corrupt, abusive, racist and vulgar as well as being cruel and sentimental, and faithful to a forlorn and boastful sense of honour. But Scorsese adds yet another dimension to his historical research, the mythical one: as in epics and novels, his heroes are moved by revenge. This mythical dimension bounces into another myth, confirming the tie between literature and cinema: revenge constitutes the main theme for so many gangster and western movies. This theme plunges *Gangs of New York* into the heart of the history of cinema, but it is also a bridge to another medium: the theatre, where revenge is a classic theme – what could be more Shakespearian? "Very Shakespearian": this is in fact the phrase one of the characters pronounces when he understands that Amsterdam is the son of the Priest Vallon, at the crucial moment in the film when Amsterdam prevents the attempt to murder Bill the Butcher (in order to make sure that he himself will be the one to kill him).

We can now understand the presence of so many performances in this film: people freely improvising dances in the
street or in the tavern, a ball organized by the Reformers, popular sports, such as boxing and animal fights (with “performative” bets!), circus and theatre shows. And there are always crowds, in the streets, the theatres, the taverns (representing the crowd still remains a challenge for filmmakers). The theatre performance of Uncle Tom’s Cabin is interrupted by the racist reactions of the audience, among whom there is the “nationalist” boss of the Natives, and by the attempt to murder Bill the Butcher. In another major circus-like performance we see Bill’s knife number with Jenny in the Chinese Pagoda, when Bill has already been informed about Amsterdam’s plan to kill him.

As suggested above, textual action can go in the direction of the content – the spectator has to reflect on racism, the War, justice, violence, revenge etc. But textual action also activates the medium itself. All of these performances in this film by Scorsese are dictated by something stronger than the logic of narration: they are on the level of meta-language, they have a meta-films flavor. They are allegories of film as an art whose beginnings were marked by popular theatre and musical. All the performances in Gangs of New York allegorize film as a “profoundly impure” art form, to use one of Bazin’s terms again.

Filmmakers contemplate their medium and reflect on its nature and history. This can be done directly by quoting scenes from other films, or just by alluding to them, or by transforming them more or less ironically, or by emphasizing some cinematic effects that have been used already. After having refined all these modes in his various films, Scorsese shows here that film can embrace all of the other arts thanks to the power of the camera shooting, editing, cutting, magnifying, multiplying, fragmenting, or “amplifying” the mise en scène of the theatre, of musicals, circuses, and shows of any kind.
Silent and spoken performative actions

It is time now to return to the gaze of the child during the first minutes of *Gangs of New York*: that gaze embodies a speech act, words which are half-spoken, that *will* speak silently – and *do*. We have seen how that gaze condenses the physical and symbolic dimensions of space. The child’s gaze in the shaving scene will be transformed and take the shape of an act of will, obeying the words pronounced later on, during the battle, by the dying Vallon: “Oh, my son. Don’t, never look away”. These words echo the imperative “don’t” pronounced by Vallon while he is shaving, when his son tries to wipe off the blood from the razor. They are a command and a call for the mutual obligation between father and son, embodying the small community of the Dead Rabbits gang. In fact, the Priest’s son *will* never look away from that blood. A silent promise is uttered by those childish eyes and through the portion of space that they see while looking at his father in the Old Brewery where the Dead Rabbits live. Hidden, continuously nourished in his heart, secret, and finally revealed only to one or two people – one single speech act, readable in the child’s gaze, and obeying his father’s imperative utterance, relentlessly holds the whole film with all its performative speech acts and theatrical performances.

From that gaze is projected a long-term action that will be constructed throughout the film: taking revenge for the killing of his father. But another important element has to be stressed, as well: the words of promise are never pronounced by Amsterdam himself. Even so, they are always present – in his gestures, in the events of his life, in the expression on his face: “I swear I will revenge my father’s death”. And nothing will stop this promise from becoming an act. Unexpectedly, in spite of the noise, movements, actions and dialogues of this historical film, in spite of the hustle and bustle of so many
people, characters and adventures – the silent performative words embodied in Amsterdam’s mind and life recall the performatives in Bresson’s films, the secret pacts made with themselves which the protagonists of A Man Escaped and Pickpocket obey, turning their promise into their slow and patient action.

The spectator feels the intensity of Amsterdam’s promise in the quick move of the boy who, at the end of the battle, takes the knife from his dead father’s chest, runs back to the Old Brewery, and hides that precious token in the soil. Amsterdam will get back to his buried knife and dig it out years later, after his long stay at the Hellgate House of Reform, as a young adult who scorns the teachings of the Church. Quitting Hellgate, Amsterdam throws away the Bible he has received from the bridge, while we hear the voice-over of the Reverend exhorting to the detachment from all human passions: “The Lord has forgiven you, you must also forgive”. But the Christian commandment cannot weaken the words that father Vallon imparted to his son sixteen years earlier: “Don’t, never look away”. Nothing can break the mute, sworn bond between the living and the dead, silently witnessed by the collective blood of the battle. Neither time, nor love, nor friendship, nor pleasure, nor power, nothing can break the obligation of keeping one’s own word, of obeying the pact of the wild justice of revenge. In this movie, the silent speech act of what belongs to “the ancient laws of combat” stands like the memory of a pre-modern type of world and of art, as savage as feelings in a Greek tragedy, or in what can be seen as its counterpart in film: the classical Western movie.

Just like “I will steal” or “I will escape from prison” in Bresson’s movies, the words “I swear I will take revenge” constitute the performative sentence directing the course of the life of the protagonist, creating action, installing space and directing the performative power of the reading of these films
towards a reflection on law, norms and values. As much as the Rossellini film that André Bazin discussed at length, the showing and seeing of these films puts at stake our knowledge and understanding of the world, and this calls for the ethical and political aspects of aesthetic experience. But textual action also means that these films elaborate elements of the history of various arts and of the medium itself. The camera, the shot, the editing—all are the tools of the textual action of the film: the converging of genres or impurity is its method, as seen by Bazin. We might regard the terms performative power and textual action as synonyms, or, so to speak, we might put one (performative power) on the horizontal line of our relationship to the world as being informed by our relationship to literature, art and cinema, and the other (textual action) on the vertical line of meta-language and of the consciousness of the medium as expressed by some filmic techniques or stylistic solutions.

Concepts and notions are like stones thrown into water; they go deep down and move the surface with concentric circles. I have not tried the impossible task of fixing the mobile notions of textual action and/or performative power in rigid definitions, as if they were secured by the long and complex debate on performativity. But, inspired by some elements of that debate, I have tried to capture these notions laterally, so to speak “in action”. They are triggered by the epigraph from Miller, implied in Bazin’s concept of realism, conjugated, as a verb can be conjugated, by the performative speech acts, in the most Austinian sense, determining the events in the films I have chosen, and finally, in Gangs of New York, multiplied by all the performative layers created, by words, space, theatrical setting and gazes.
Works Cited


