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Through the “Eye of the Machine”: Poetics of the Inhuman in Andrey Zvyagintsev’s films

Abstract. This paper tries to examine the way in which the “work of narrative” and the question of guilt are played out in the construction of postmodern narratives of the Fall. The visual language of a post-Christian guilt articulated inside the structure of biblical narratives will be analyzed in three of Andrey Zvyagintsev’s films: *The Return* (2003), *Elena* (2011) and *Leviathan* (2014). The mythological aspect of the Real, in these films, will be discussed in relation to the different signifying power it gives to the visual. In Zvyagintsev’s films, the distinction between history and duration opens up the space in which the new myth of a cultural fall is formulated by the story of men becoming the story of civilian life.

Keywords: gaze, visual discourse, narrative, inhuman.

Introduction

The visual language of cinema gives a different dimension to what we will call “narratives of the Fall”. The logic of montage allows for a double investment of the image, creating each frame as a distance between what was shown and what is there left to be shown. This particular structure of film inherits the double dimension of the narrative of the Fall, understood as the dialectics between what cannot be undone and what is there left to be undone. Because of this structural similarity between the cinematographic image and the “narratives of the Fall”, we will try to see in what way does the visual discourse create significance by extracting a present condition out of a previous one as if each image of an inhabited world calls back upon the images of

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a “wasteland”. This “wasteland” of the Real is a space that cinema has exorcised with great power, projecting life as a myth and the instance as narrative. What is there left of this “wasteland” consists in an encrypted intuition of an *inhuman* eye watching upon the edges and limits of a visibly and cinematographically rendered *human*.

The look of the uninhabited world upon the Real

The image of life puts the imaginary at a distance

(Nancy 27)

Cary Wolf talks about film and photography as the two means that have managed to overcome subjectivity in a way painting could never have done it, because it has always depended on the artistic drive of the drawing human hand. By contrast, when it comes to film or photography, a certain automatism is implied by the fact that the human agent is no longer the creator of a certain image, but its producer. Film and photography rely on the acceptance of our absence from the world, an absence that can be conceived also as a specter. The first consequence of the acceptance of our own absence from the world is the fact that we make some “space” for the presence of the world itself:

In photography and film, on the other hand, the existence of the world is miraculously affirmed via automatism, but the price we pay for the world’s recovery is that it no longer exists for us. It is radically *ahuman*, other. We can’t know or touch the world precisely because it manifests itself unbidden, without our help. Film is thus what the world looks like when we’re not there (Wolf 177).

Jacques Rancière talks about the “eye of the machine”, which is present in cinema, having its own language which transforms matter into “luminous energy”. The “language of light”, from the early understandings of cinema, mastered the “eye of the machine” in order to create a new pulse and rhythm of the Real by the movements of the camera itself (e.g. Dziga Vertov). This idea is based upon a certain vision of purity about cinema, where the visual can and must be seen through the workings of “the machine”, but it must not be mixed with the devices of fiction. We could argue that the later “impurity” of cinema, brings to the surface a certain need of acknowledging not only the dialogue between the camera and the world, but the assemblage between the “eye of the machine” and the human eye. It is inside this second relation that narrative emerges as a dissolution of that *inhuman* at the core of the human. Rancière observes the way in which the aim of the art, and particularly cinema, has changed after the Second World War. To make the *inhuman* sensible, to render it visible, graspable and touchable inside artistic perceptions was the new mission and duty of art. This perception of the *inhuman* inherent in the cinematographic experience is a similar idea to that of Cary Wolf and his theory about film as being the image of an uninhabited world.

According to Bachelard, it is space and not time which creates duration, because it is space which invites us to come out of ourselves and to engage in that oblivion of

continuity inherent in duration as a way of expanding beyond a temporally defined subjective closure. Thus, with this new understanding of spatiality in mind, we could argue that it is that uninhabited world, as the background perception of film, which exorcises the inhuman and calls us to step out of the human boundary which fixes us inside that "being of within". The silent spatiality of an uninhabited world, weaved inside each frame, calls us out of ourselves and out of chronological time to re-inhabit and fill in the void left in us by the presence of the empty eye of the machine. Thus, the spacial insinuation of an uninhabited world inserts duration in the visual discourse of cinema and disrupts the continuity of chronological time. The emptiness of a frame develops a life of its own, tracing back the haunted space of cinema, the place where gazing begins without an object of perception. This is an important dimension of cinema, which has to take into account the power of the empty parts of the image to recall the inhuman aspects of that gaze which tries to appropriate external reality. Those empty sides inside a frame or the blind spots created by the frame have a language of their own, the language of an uninhabited world trying to erase itself from the cinematographic codification of the Real, where everything has to be shown or, at least, represented inside the power structures of showing and arranging what is already said. The look of the uninhabited world upon the Real claims the mythological aspect of a lost world which cannot be rebuilt by means of imagination, but by means of drawing the contours of that loss inside a world that we visually own. That is why we consider there is a subtle connection between narratives of the Fall, which preserve the idea of a lost world and the phenomenological understanding of cinema's poetics of the invisible, which try to grasp the idea of a lost world.

In his understanding of the cinematographic gaze as being a *condition* instead of a *representation*, Jean-Luc Nancy talks about that look "through which a world can give back to itself its own real" (44). For instance, freeing motion from the clusters of conventional perception by means of the "language of light", the camera movement or the framing casts away the Real of everyday montage and sets it back ashore by means of its symbolic reinvestments and by capturing and realizing that presence which gives the world back to itself. Here we have again a conception about the inhuman or the uninhabited world which haunts cinema in order to give back a voice to the "outside" in the process of becoming an "inside". There is an underlying idea in all these theories about cinema, which is most present in the text of Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*: the idea of the ontological inversion according to which it is life that sets a continuation for cinema and not the image that functions as a work of persistence and continuation for life. We could argue that the uninhabited world of the cinema projects back an inhabited and populated world of the everyday life as if it were in the shadow of the inhuman where the spectacle of the Real begins. The limits of the "eye of the machine" set the contours of an invisible lost world which is not contained or caught inside a frame and that is why it generates the representation of life outside of itself, as a continuation of the lost world search-game which cinema

makes possible. That is why, we could argue that not only is cinema the laboratory of life, dictating what we see and how we see, but also a laboratory of the inhuman, culturally establishing life as a need to replenish the deserted uninhabited world intuitively projected by the phenomenon of cinema.

Zvyaghintsev's brief definition of cinema is structured around the idea that "the film is a mythological look at human life" and it is precisely this conception about film that will lead us further on to the poetics of the inhuman. The affect constructed by his films has to do with a sense of the inhuman coming from an internalised mythical eye that rests upon the unfolding of things as they develop from minor gestures into an epic of life. The "mythological look" filters the immediacy of experience and sets it into a narrative that tries to encompass both gods and humans, eternity and death, religious echoes and private memories, etc. In the following lines, we will argue that the films of the contemporary Russian film director, Andrey Zvyaghintsev, are aware of the duty of cinema to make the inhuman sensible. These films give a new, mythical understanding to the inhuman and, thus, they work the "eye of the machine" into "the eye of the daemon" in order to accomplish the director's understanding of cinema as being a mythical look upon reality. The uninhabited world becomes a world looked at from above, the traces of human life being undistinguishable unless they inhabit the narrative world of the gods. The mythological gaze upon the world is, at the same time, a gaze of the inhuman upon the Real. It captures the epic of life as it accounts for its own lack of higher significance outside the spectrum of narratives of origin or narratives of the Fall. The story of everyday life, the banal encounter between father and son in *The Return* (2003), the encounter between the self and the murderer in *Elena* (2011) or the clash between man and the system in *Leviathan* (2014) are rendered in a mythical dimension, the story of mankind being written inside the private or hidden stories of civilian life.

Following Mircea Eliade's understanding of myth as the structure that we need in order to assimilate our fragmentary experience of evil into narratives of origin, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes this definition of myth as a force of incorporation. According to Ricoeur, myth is the first stage of discourse, inside which we operate a transition from experience to language. We could go further and say that myth narrates this passage from experience to language in order to retain, inside discourse itself, the scheme of the Fall, the mutation, the logic of a hierarchical reordering of the world. Thus, we can argue that the trace of the Fall is inscribed in discourse as *the distance* between the impersonal and the personal, between perception and language, between the status of men and the status of gods. The distance created by narratives of the Fall makes room for the construction of the accidental as the force of destiny, the point where the two levels of significance collide. Zvyagintsev stages the traces of this scheme of the Fall inside the cinematographic language and uses the force of the myth and the force of the epic to show common life through the lens of that "eye of the daemon". The inhuman inside the human is made sensible as the narrative of the particularity

of life evolves into the story of mankind or the story of an idea. The weight of each gesture and each frame becomes a foundational one. The uninhabited world's labour, from behind the cinematographic pursuit of an inhabited world, is felt inside the mythical contours of a world born out of the "desert of the Real", out of the "eye of the machine". The uninhabited world is a presence that haunts each frame, a floating boat carrying the dead body of the father being not just a boat, but also the absence of that boat inside a world where its mythical dimension does not exist. These layers of presence and absence, myth and banality, habitation and emptiness make up the blurry and dialectical impression of Zvyagintsev's films.

In search of narrative

In his article, *Sorrows and the Making of Life*, Ricoeur asks himself what are the resources of the story that make sorrows bearable. Following this path, Ricoeur states the theory according to which the capacity to endure itself is generated by the narrative. Narrative places sorrow inside a linear, causal structure that mimics the endurance scenario of the process of creating meaning itself. The endeavour, the postponement, the waiting are all operations of the narrative in its elaboration of meaning. This process of the narrative itself generates the capacity to bear the sorrows and acknowledge their end and their beginning. "Life itself is in search of narrative" (323) and it constructs itself according to this search for the form. Ricoeur defines the term "work of narrative" as the narrative form of "working through". The term is borrowed from Freud, who used it to describe the anchor in interpretation and elaboration of a traumatic event from the unconscious as a therapeutic strategy which would bring it to the surface, in the plane of the conscious, in order to overcome it. "Working through" is a process of bringing into the open things that are not accepted by the rational mind and can be differently articulated by means of transference. If we apply this expression into the field of narrative theory, "working through" would mean the process of the rational appropriation of an event that we were not able to conceive of before. We can say that the transference of the affect into narrative renders visibility to a small piece of the invisibility of the uninhabited world. Because of its "working through" structuring, the "work of narrative" retains that inherent separation between layers, world orders, the conscious and the unconscious, the visible and the invisible, the before and the after, which is at play in narratives of the Fall as well. "Working through" means to take something from a previous "fallen state" and make it accessible inside the present state via a narrative. In this light we will define narratives of the Fall as having the same form of a "working through", inside which different layers and world configurations are postulated in order to create meaning in-between them. Narratives of the Fall are narratives about loss, about uprooting situations evolving up to that point where another understanding is needed for the "working through" of meaning. Narratives of the Fall are narratives of collision, where the order of the Real is brought down to a "zero degree", a point

from where reconstruction is possible only by means of a “working through” of meaning and by means of translating a layer into the other or death into a new order. The ending of *Elena* (2011) is very illustrative for the idea of translating and inheriting the death of the previous condition inside the new one. The last frame of this film is the image of the lower-class new-born child placed in the middle of the large bed of the rich husband Elena has recently murdered.

Zvyagintsev’s films are constructed around such narratives of the Fall, where the uprooting forces of guilt and loss break through the common understanding of good and evil, necessity and intention, class struggle and murder. *The Return* (2003) is a film about the silent rejection of the father, God, the past and history as figures of power. The citing of Andrea Mantegna’s work, *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, in the frame of the returned father, who is sleeping in his bed as if he was always there, dominates the whole assemble. It is not only as a religious clue for the entire film that Zvyagintsev cites this work, but because of the reference it makes to the relation between the birth of new modes of seeing and the development of perspective in arts. The development of perspective in Renaissance’s painting marks a turning point in the history of visual thinking, because it is the beginning of the representation of things as if they were seen by the eye of an observer, through a frame. All the frames of the film have geometrical angles, Zvyagintsev being concerned about the depth of the image and the way in which the image has to be a construction of the human eye as if to defend itself from the inhuman “mythological look” of the camera’s workings. This tradition, which started in the arts, searching for the image of the divine to ironically find the presence of the subjective gaze, follows the idea according to which the unfolding of the Real is the *mise en scene* operated by the gaze of the Other. So it is the incorporation of the presence of the Other that operates the break inside the visual subjective closure and brings the possibility of a “mythological look” which assembles the visible according to an extra-worldly perspective. We have seen that this “other” can be the observer of a painting, “the eye of the machine” or, as Deleuze formulates it in *Pure Immanence*, the eye of materiality itself. For instance, the first take from *Elena* (2011), where the house is seen from a nearby tree awaiting the sunrise is constructed as if the presence of a human eye is not implied, because it is not a matter of us watching, but a matter of the materiality of the inside of the frame looking at us. Zvyagintsev plays with this Deleuzian idea about montage, as being a construction made according to the human eye, which ceases to be the viewpoint of an eye in order to become the vision of an inhuman eye, an eye that looks back at us from among things.

The father from *The Return* (2003) is that haunting point of the supreme and silent observer which generates the actions of all the other characters. In post-soviet Russia, the rejection of this external observer is not only an aesthetic decision, but also a political one. The whole film retains the perception of the boys in their journey of encounter with the Other. Even the black and white photos’ series at the end of the film

were supposed to be diary entries, a blending of text into the visual, but Zvyagintsev decided to turn the diary into the black and white family photos played at the end of the film. The myth of the return is also the story about inherited ways of looking, which turn back into the field of vision in order to create that sense of spectrality of a gaze that looks at us through its own memory. The memory of a Fall or the memory of a sense of guilt towards the other is the subtext of *The Return's* visual epic. The inhuman haunts the human, not only by means of the stranger's intervention in the boys' lives, but also by means of the still photographic medium haunting the moving picture's medium, which is best illustrated at the end of *The Return* (2003), where we see the series of photos the boys have taken during the journey with their father, and it is like watching a film with a whole different sound. The old photo, which the boys has used as a proof in the process of recognising the newly arrived man as their returned father, is a different photo at the end of the film. The father has disappeared from the photo and there is no trace of him ever having existed. The image is not capable of retaining the trace of death, the memory of the Fall or the inscription of the father's murder at the end of the film. The "mythological look" has to melt back into the private consciousness as if the succession of moments has to replace the narrative. The return of the moment from inside the narrative, reclaiming its own rupture, is beautifully constructed at the end of the film. It is the triumph of the uninhabited world's look upon the Real, where figures can disappear from photos, stories can be erased and collective memory can only come back to the same question that deals with the idea of a lost world: 'where do we come from?'

Elena (2011) is a film about inequality and it best defines Zvyagintsev's political turn and his new understanding of film as a response to society. The movements of the camera through the indoors of the two social areas, the upper class apartment where Elena resides with her husband and the tiny apartment of her son, inside a communist block of flats, are deeply evocative of a geography of inequality where the sense of space engraves two different visual possibilities. The film opens with the frame of the outside perspective of Elena's husband flat, the camera patiently awaiting the sunrise in order to enter the house and to display images of the silent, seemingly uninhabited place. The everyday ritual, the drawing of the curtains at the window, the big door of her husband's room which closes and opens frequently marks the routes of Elena as she makes way for the structured body of images of a house that will become her property, in the end. It is the spectacle of inhabited space, as Bachelard understands it, as the inner study of "how we take root, day after day, in a «corner of the world»." (45) As Bachelard argues, the house is "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (47) and Zvyagintsev seems to rely on this idea in constructing a film about the way we know ourselves in bits of inhabited space and not in time. Later in the film, when Elena goes to visit her son in a crowded neighbourhood at the periphery of Moscow, we have a frame that spatially answers the opening of the film. We see a

man looking outside his balcony, in the big block of flats and, in the reflection of his window, we see only the block of flats from across the street. The first line of the film is the perfect opening for the myth about murdering in the name of justice and wealth redistribution: "Get up...". Elena will murder her husband in order to assure the life opportunities of her grandchildren. The film follows her into the making of this decision and the aftermath remorse of crime. This narrative of the Fall is built by Zvyagintsev and the screenwriter, Oleg Negin, as the mythical account of one of the most powerful sentences in the history of knowledge and Christianity, which is also one of the film's lines: "And the last shall be first and the first last." (Matthew 20.16). The sense of space in Elena plays a major role in the epic of class struggle, inequality being the visual construction of inhabited space as inner space. The gaze of the uninhabited world upon the Real, one of the structural mechanisms in narratives of the Fall, is constructed at the beginning of Elena by means of that gaze of the seemingly uninhabited, large and tidy apartment, which is the hierarchical centre of the film's world. This luxurious apartment at the beginning of the film, which is not yet defined as the property of someone, will encompass the whole class inequality epic of the film. This apartment that can contain the "dreams of mankind" is haunted by the sense of an uninhabited space awaiting to be claimed by someone from the outside. That is why, the film is not only the story of Elena becoming a murderer for her grandchildren to have a better life, but also the visual struggle of territory becoming a place of living. This is the reason why the film insists on the indoors rituals and movements as if they were trying to recall their own annihilation inside a world of deserted territories. The "mythological look" seems to retrace the deserted territory at the core of each idea of property, rendering visible the impossibility to fully contain or inhabit the world. *Elena* (2011) is a powerful film about the struggle to reorder an already structurally owned and inhabited world. In this case, cinema becomes an interesting montage that reconstitutes the echoes of the images of space inside the images of property.

Leviathan (2014) is one of Zvyagintsev's most criticised films in Russia and one of his best acclaimed films in Europe. The script is based on the real story of Marvin Heemeyer, a welder from Colorado, who ran a bulldozer into the town hall and other buildings, after losing access to his shop situated on a piece of land that a cement plant wanted to buy from him. Although the film deals with the story of a man facing bureaucracy and corruption in Russia, it has been regarded as a far-fetched insight into Russian society, by the Russian audience. The film takes a powerful stand in relation to the state and the Russian Orthodox Church at a time when the aggression in Ukraine was much discussed all over the world. In one of his interviews, Zvyagintsev talks about St. Augustine's point of view according to which the only thing that distinguishes between the state and a gang of thieves is the presence of the law and the fundamental justice principle that everyone is equal in front of the law. Then, Zvyagintsev compares the social contract with a contract with the Devil, in

order to emphasize the Faustian bargain dimension of the social protection promise:

That thought convinced me that in his treatise *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes was fundamentally mistaken to idealize the state. An ideal model can be created on paper, however the minute a human being, with all their vices and faults, comes on stage, any ideal will easily turn into its opposite. It is no longer a social contract but a contract with the Devil. A contract under which a person gives up their freedoms in exchange for bogus social protection (Kichin, "Andrey Zvyagintsev").

The narrative of the Fall, in this film, is constructed around the political idea of the social contract defined as a contract with the Devil, from which there is no escape or turning back until one loses everything. The church as an institution is involved in the preservation of this social contract "with the Devil", in a country where the power to oppress is ironically justified by the idea that "all power comes from God". The scene with the bulldozer demolishing Kolya's house from the expropriated land in order for an Orthodox Church to be built there is a scene that comprises the entire force of the mechanism Kolya was fighting with. The "work of narrative" in *Leviathan* (2014) is another attempt to make visible an inhuman eye, the eye of the "sea monster", the governmental collective body's eye, watching from behind things or from behind the order of things. *Leviathan* (2014) is another one of Zvyagintsev's ethical attempts to render the inhuman visible and to expose it by means of a narrative of the Fall which sets the scenario of loss necessary for the construction of the Real's zero level, the bare surface point from where everything can be reinvested.

Conclusion

The conscious presence of the inhuman eye, closed inside the "eye of the machine", sheds a light on the intuitive power of that mythological look upon reality. The capacity to see the eye that does not see and to expose it inside the perceptive and narrative structure of the Real is one of the most important aims of cinema. The gaze watching through its own counterfeit existences in search for the wholeness of the symbolic Real must always be contradicted, derailed by the look of the mythical inhuman eye gazing back at the solid constructions of reality that we build with each innocent glance. The look of the uninhabited world gazing back upon reality is the fundamental deconstructivist exercise that is able to see between and beyond the already settled blocks of Real, among which the possibility of change is invisible, confiscated. The look of the inhuman eye erases the established circuits of significance and glances at the possibilities of renewal from among the cold surroundings of an uninhabited world created as a "white noise" through the lenses of cinematography. This "white noise", the chaos from behind each constructed image, is the border of a "lost world" that any type of cinema craves for. The image is not the reconstruction of a certain "lost world", but its perpetual erasing, inside a game where the only possible memory of cinema is the memory of its own inhuman.

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