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## From the “Big” Movie of the World to the Personal One and Back. *127 Hours* as a Case Study

**Abstract:** This paper is analyzing the definition of the term *postcinema* trying to reveal its content, extent and usefulness. In the second part the research is based on a case study dedicated to *127 Hours*, directed by Danny Boyle. Cataloging the images taken by Aron with his personal camera, their content, place and role in the story, this article is trying to find and define what sort of “space” is established when Aron is filming and taking pictures with his video camera. Another question is what is the role of this “space” in the overall narrative, and what kind of discourse does it serve?

**Keywords:** cinematic, postcinematic, personal camera, intimate space, confession.

### 1. Postcinema. The concept and its utility

“Cinema died several times”, says at the end of his *History* Jean Paul Leutrat, He is citing some of these “deaths” following Raymond Borde who mentions the waves of “destructions” that took place in cinema around 1920 and 1930. After the First World War movies became longer, and those belonging to the so called “old cinema” were doomed. Many movies were lost around the thirties when cinema passed from “silent” to the “talked” movies. Others were lost when acetate film was replaced by nitrate (qtd. in Leutrat 97).

The apparition and the development of television, of video tapes (that disappeared in the meantime), of DVDs (that will have most probably the same ending), of personal computers and personal video cameras, of the

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Internet and of the new mobile phones can be mentioned as similar "threats" to the life of cinema.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to the extraordinary development and accessibility of audio-visual technologies, both cinema and television as the only public audio-visual voices in the world. Both of them need to face the challenges of the new audio-visual manifestations. These last ones tend to conquer the interest, time and attention of nowadays people, artists or not.

Denson and Leyda synthesize among the features of these media manifestations the following:

that they are essentially digital, interactive, networked, ludic, miniaturized, mobile, social, processual, algorithmic, aggregative, environmental, or convergent, among other things. Recently, some theorists have begun to say, simply, that they are *post-cinematic*. (Denson and Leyda 1)

These authors continue by stating that this term does not cover a uniform reality, but rather the phenomenon of a "transition" that is not "identical", "for everyone, everywhere" (Denson and Leyda 2). How can we understand this transition? I would suggest we rather talk about "signs of a change", signs of complex pressures, defined as artistic, spiritual, commercial and technological pressures.

If Denson and Leyda are enumerating the characteristics of what they try to define as *post-cinematic* spirit and atmosphere, Simone Arcagni is presenting *postcinema* as a list of phenomena and technologies:

Postcinema è la galassia di forme, modi, pratiche e tecnologie dell'audiovisivo contemporaneo. Una galassia fatta di web cinema, web serie, web doc, web tv, live media performance, app game, augmented reality cinema, crossmedia storytelling. (Arcagni no page)

My question is if all these elements/techniques gathered under the term of *postcinema* represent another "threat" to the classical understanding cinema or, on the contrary, they are a way of reformulating it and, by this way, allowing it to survive, to remain credible and interesting in a time when technology seems to become more "democratic", in the sense that it is more accessible, sometimes rather overwhelming for a lot of people, movie makers or not?

Another interesting question that deserves to be brought to attention is that of the real and substantial benefits these video technologies can bring into the lives of "ordinary" people. I believe that, having access to so many devices, gadgets and applications, the contemporary man is risking to live in the middle of too many visual tools that often "move" very little ideas and significant messages.

Returning to the concept of *postcinema*, first of all, the name itself shows lack of imagination. Second, a fact that is called as a "*post something*" can be either very fuzzy, not very clearly, not definitively detached from that *something*, or it may even didn't

exist at all. Third, if it is to accept the *post something* way of naming concepts, the most accurate name for these phenomena I consider is to be *post-television*. Even a one of most prominent *postcinema* theoreticians has to admit that

if we are to be entirely strict about it, cinema was only dominant for the first half of the twentieth century; in the second half, it gave way to television. (Shaviro 2016, no page)

In this article I will continue to use the term *postcinema* in order to be understood by readers, also taking into consideration the fact that the main goal of the paper is not to impose a new concept. Fourth, as it is presented by the quoted authors, this proposed concept seems to be too large and polymorphic, up to be unclear. Does it refer to the multiple possibilities of the audio-visual technologies that are very much available to creators and almost to everybody else? Does it refer to the kind of spirituality that triggered and is triggered and cultivated by these technologies? Or at the same time to both of them?

In order to discuss this idea, Steven Shaviro has introduced the term of *postcinematic affect*, where *affect* would mean a sort of mega and beyond individual, "primary", "non-conscious" emotion (Shaviro 2010, 3). Is it possible that such a mega-emotion exists at the origin of our particular emotions? Is this a sort of *saeculum*, a spirit of time, different in every era? And should we call it *postcinematic* in contemporary visual arts?

Is the *postcinema* concept designed to name artistic acts done on purpose and others accidentally, experiments, family movies, diverse shootings, funny recordings, plays, applications without any utility, and more, placing them under the same umbrella? If the answer is positive, we are dealing with an extreme diversity, an enormous disorder of "cinematographic" genres and personal intentions. If this is *postcinema*, to what extent this concept can be useful, taking into consideration that it seems to have no principle of coherence?

The concept becomes clearer when Steven Shaviro is presenting it as a competition between the "small" and the "big screen": Its unifying principle seems to be, in this understanding, the intention to avoid or to overcome the "cultural dominance" of the cinema:

My sense of the "post-cinematic" comes first of all from media theory. Cinema is generally regarded as the dominant medium, or aesthetic form, of the twentieth century. It evidently no longer has this position in the twenty-first. So I begin by asking, what is the role or position of cinema when it is no longer what Fredric Jameson calls a "cultural dominant," when it has been "surpassed" by digital and computer-based media? (I leave "surpassed" in quotation marks in order to guard against giving this term a teleological meaning, as if the displacement of one medium by another were always a question of logical progression, or of advancement towards an overall goal. While André Bazin's teleological "myth of total cinema" is certainly worth considering in this regard, there are many other factors in play as well; the situation is a complexly overdetermined one). (Shaviro 2016, no page)

I would not agree that the relation between *cinema* and *postcinema* (if we are to accept this last concept) should be presented in terms of a conflict. In my understanding *postcinema* includes a wide range of sometimes intended, sometimes accidental, usually personal, sometimes innovative, sometimes cliché-istic contemporary styles. To me *postcinema* simply means "if we have the possibilities to do things, let's do them".

## 2. Cinematic and postcinematic in 127 Hours

Maybe understanding this spirit of emancipation from the "big screen" that exists in the world today or maybe just reproducing gestures so common today as it is that of taking pictures or filming ourselves or others in almost every new place we arrive, the movies made for cinema understood to include among their means of expression and in their narrative structure elements that can be classified as *postcinematic*.

By analyzing *127 Hours*, the movie directed by Danny Boyle in 2010, in this part of the paper I will make an inventory of the particular moments filmed and photographed by the personal camera of Aron Ralston, using this classification in order to understand their role in the whole structure and their signification.

The movie contains some registers, some types of images. The shots taken by the "classic" camera I will call *cinematic*, and those recorded by the personal camera, *postcinematic*.

### 1. Images filmed "objectively" with the "classic" camera

These represent both the "big" narrative of the movie and a mode to counterpoint in an objective way the other ways Aron is telling his story, namely a mode to always bring us to the cruel reality.

The "objective" camera is used in many instances, from aerial view and extremely large shots (especially in the beginning), then moving to close ups, medium close ups and extreme close ups (when Aron is blocked in the crevasse).

### 2. The imaginary moments / the hallucinations

The movie imitates at some point the tone of the TV/radio speakers. His conscience judges him with irony in the style of live TV shows. His family and friends appear to him around a couch as for a group photography. He is imagining himself as going to his girlfriend's house through the rain, in front of cold beers at Kristi's and Megan's party or drinking the juice left in the car.

The images of Kristi's and Megan's party have very vivid colors, and they are filmed with the hand held camera suggesting Aron's point of view. He is searching; he is there, in his own mind, and, really, sadly, not there at all. It conveys a painful feeling of loneliness, of humor and a sort of desperation.

The external, "classic", *cinematic* camera is using special effects in very important moment. After he is making his confession, he turns to dust. In this way the moment achieves at least two possible meanings: one related to the extreme pain, and another telling about the destruction, the self-implosion of the "old" Aron.

### 3. *The flashbacks, the real memories*

These are moments from his childhood or closer to the present, as it is that when he doesn't answer to his mama on the phone, being home. There are also here scenes at the border between memory and imagination, as it is that with the party or that when he is in the house with his girlfriend.

For the scene in which his mother is calling the classic camera is used perhaps in order to underline the idea that it was a fact, a real fact that he didn't answer her. He is indifferent and in a hurry for something else. The scene is shot from the angle of the telephone. It creates a low angle following the very busy and self-sufficient Aron.

### 4. *The interior filming (the subjective perspective)*

This is the way in which the interior of the bottle is filmed when the water is over, when he drinks his own urine, then the interior of the arm, with the blade of the knife reaching the bone and moving on it, and, after that, the bones before they break, releasing him. We must separately mention this kind of shots, because, especially the last two, represent moments of maximum tension within the movie.

### 5. *The images shot / taken with Aron's personal camera*

A commented inventory of these provides a detailed understanding:

- a. He is filming himself with his camera on the road to the canyon. These shots express his exuberance. The classic camera is used alternatively with Aron's personal one. On his camera Aron is recording that here are "just me, music and the night". The angle of the camera is oblique. It is a low angle, dynamic, like the music and Aron's state of mind.
- b. He is also exuberantly filming himself from his bike, going very fast in an attempt to beat previous records. He is falling down, he gets up, he is always followed by the sound of techno music. Up to now. His camera is fixed on his bike; the shot is still low angled.
- c. He takes a picture with Megan and Kristi when they leave him. They have also filmed themselves before when they took a bath in the lake under the cliffs. These are moments of somehow exterior exuberance. The picture Aron takes with the girls is a symbol of his well-mannered but superficial behaviour.
- d. He is taking the last exterior picture pointing to the sky, when he is entering the crevasse.

A stone is falling, and it is blocking his arm! The exterior, super dynamic, techno music stops, next the silence is coming. And the inner road through his soul begins. At the beginning he tries to escape, in a simple, exterior, practical way. He tries to release his arm using his muscles, physical force. He curses, it is a sort of a nervous prey ("Move this fucking rock!" he says). He is setting his chronometer, cries after Kristi and Megan. He is making an inventory of all the things he has with him. He is trying to dig in the stone with the knife from the *multitools*, but this way the rock slips and blocks his arm even tighter.

His new situation is filmed with the classic camera in various manners: from different angles, with moving and steady camera, so the viewer can understand very clearly what Aron is experiencing.

Only after 24 hours he opens his video camera, and starts filming. This is a sign that he started to become focused to his interior life.

- e. This time he is giving his personal data, and is making a will. This shooting has a practical purpose (he is accepting the fact that he once will be found dead there), but it is also a personal introspection. Camera is making few moves; Aron is filmed (obviously) from a very close distance. This way of filming plunge the viewer into the intimate space of the hero.
- f. The camera is a witness to his attempts to free himself and a companion in his solitude. When he sees the previous filmed moments after the fall, he gains determination and courage to continue, to hope and to act. "Aron, do not lose it!", he is telling to himself.
- g. The camera is a mirror, in the most proper understanding. When he sees himself on it he says he got scared about what he saw.
- h. On Tuesday (The rock blocked him on previous Friday.) the voice of his conscience is telling him in a setting of a live TV show that he made a mistake (a practical one): he didn't tell anyone where he lives. He did this mistake because of his selfishness, a lack of opening towards others. In the following we have a sort of confession and a declaration of love for his parents. ("I love you, guys! I'll always be with you!", he tells to the camera.)
- i. After this confession (and after he is thinking at his girlfriend Rana) he gets the courage, determination and the motivation to stab his arm.
- j. Camera is functioning as a mode of preserving Aron's words, and it is also a memory of the beauty of the people and of the world that used to be around him. This beauty encourages him and also makes him suffer more. "Ralston, rock on!", one of the girls says on a his camera. She gives him a kiss. Now it remains just an image of a kiss.
- k. The camera is for Aron an "objective" witness that delivers him from a hallucination, it is helping him not to get mad, since it confirms him that the Scooby Doo he saw the crevasse is an illusion. This is a brief and somehow scary moment, rendered in short, rapid shots.
- l. The camera is a witness of the time that is flowing very slowly, and of his great revelation. Everything acquires a clear meaning when he understands, when he gets the courage to affirm the great truth for the utterance of which he was pinned there: "I have been thinking! Everything... just comes together! It's me! I choose this! I choose all of these!"

He understands that *every breath, every action* led him to *this crack of the earth surface* and to the encounter with *the rock*, the rock that *was waiting for him his entire life*. This rock has been waiting there especially to help him understanding the

truth that his selfish way of life led him to this situation, stuck by the rock and unknown by anybody. That way of life, that style, had this direct consequence. But this consequence can be a chance, an opportunity to change his life.

The construction of this moment is very complex, as many registers are used. The multiscreen reappears. On one section and, sometimes, on two sections of the screen we see Aron making his confession in front of his camera, while on others is once his girlfriend, other time he is trying to free himself, then the story of the rock fallen from the sky to encounter him, images of his falling into the crevasse, the raven, portraits of him as a child and as a teenager.

The multiscreen effect brings together shots taken by his video camera with other taken with the "classic" one, present moments along with memories and hallucinations (e.g. the image of Blue John looking at him from above). One of the most important characters that appear now on a section of the screen is his girlfriend Rana. In the past she told him: "You'll gonna be so lonely, Aron!", and now he is understanding the truth of those words.

The multiscreen is functioning as a complex puzzle of Aron's life. The end of these moments comes when all the pieces are put together as his face.

In fact the multiscreen reappears for a brief moment showing Aron looking up at a sort of perhaps imaginary heard (of some horses) that crosses the crevasse. The middle section of the multiscreen and the crevasse are visually put in relation. Both of them can be understood as symbols of the fractured, disharmonic "old" life of Aron. And also through this crevasse the truth is poured into the soul and mind of our hero.

At this point the battery of his video camera is completely discharged, but this has no importance anymore. Aron has already made his big confession: "It's me!" With this, (what I call) *the interior movie*, represented by personal camera shootings, is over. Aron will manage to break his arm and be released.

m. He still manages to take a last picture of the place where he was stuck.

Now we are reentering into the "big" movie of the world, filmed with the "classic" camera. Aron meets some people, cries "Help!", and is saved. A helicopter takes him. His cap fell down, and it remains in the canyon along with a part of his arm. Aron is reentering the world. Changed. The movie reiterates, symmetrical with the beginning, the multiscreen split in two or three sections. This effect, used for the first time by Abel Gance in *Napoleon*, in his case as overlapped images (*Napoleon* 2:20:21), was taken over and used a lot in television. At the end, we see Aron swimming under the water. When he gets to the surface, at the end of the pool, *his people* are waiting for him, on the couch and around it, as they would prepare themselves for a family picture. They look the same way he has imagined them during the hard moments spent in Blue John Canyon. The ex-selfish guy is now reentering the communion of love. Of others. Love he now is able to appreciate and receive. The sign to remember him this lesson is the amputated

arm. Here we are leaving Aron the character, and we see in shootings and photos Aron Ralston, the real guy. We are leaving fiction and entering reality.

Of course, the fact that the movie is based on a true story can have a strong emotional impact on the public. Without knowing that these events really happened, the whole story would lose a lot of its power. If this would have been a simple fiction story it would, most probably, never become a film. It would seem a too exaggerated, improbable story (especially the amputation of the arm with a dull knife from a cheap *multitool kit* and the fact that he still remains alive after this). Looking from the opposite direction, somebody might raise the question if the real story does not represent, from a certain point, a force too constraining for a movie, one that can direct it toward a message excessively simple, too common. Just for the reason that "it happened so".

### 3. Conclusions

Speaking about the freedom he is assuming as a script writer, Quentin Tarantino says that in the moments when he writes only the sheet of paper matters (qtd. in Strauss and Huet 19). This is a kind of freedom he is taking from the (somehow) restricted technical possibilities of movie. This freedom is a normal one. The other freedom, that is more important, is related to the inspiration, the truth, coherence and beauty of the message.

But in the lives of real people there are sometimes significant events which have a better coherence than of the most fiction screenplays. People who had these experiences can gather them and enlighten their meaning from their whole life perspective. This is what was often described as "reality beating fiction". A good movie based on real facts reaches, and remains into the mysterious core of that reality. As it is the case of Aron Ralston's story, told by Danny Boyle and played by James Franco.

In this story the personal camera shootings introduce the spectator in the intimate space of a guy who was stopped from his run, from his planned trip. This man is "forced" to understand his life, to realize how enormously wrong his attitude was, related to everything. His camera is allowing him, among the things mentioned above, to record the dialogue with himself and others. It opens an intimate, unpredictable, fragile, deep space. Only inside this space truth can be called by its name, it doesn't matter how painful it is: "It's me! I choose this! I choose all of these!" This means: "it was my fault, and now I understood it".

In *127 Hours* the *cinematic* and *postcinematic* styles of expression excellently work together enriching one another's capabilities to render this moment of grace and deep transfiguration that Aron's soul reaches. His new life begins with a deep confession: "It's me!"

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