THINKING CINEMA

NON-CINEMA

GLOBAL DIGITAL FILMMAKING AND THE MULTITUDE

WILLIAM BROWN

BLOOMSBURY

Non-Cinema

Thinking Cinema

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Non-Cinema: Global Digital Film-making and the Multitude

William Brown

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For Ariadne

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If, as I claimed above, I do not know where I begin and end, perhaps the shortcomings of this book will help me to learn, since they are all mine, perhaps are all me, and for which I must therefore apologize in advance. Now read the book.

Introduction: What is Non-Cinema?

For Jonathan Beller, cinema is co-extensive with capital.[1] In an era when the measure of reality is visibility (if you are not visible, then you are as good as non-existent), and in an era when gaining and maintaining attention not only helps to constitute reality but also profitability (the more people pay attention to you or your products, the more money you make), then we can see how capital has in large part come to take on the characteristics of cinema (and vice versa). Contrasted against this visibility, I shall in this book explore two linked forms of invisibility. First, there are those who are not seen or who are invisible, and who as a result are cast as unreal, barbarian, useless and/or as not valid. And then there are, in contrast to the products of capital (which are as visible as possible), the invisible workings of capital itself, the very invisibility of which helps capital to function as such. For, when the workings of capital are made visible – from workers in sweatshops to humans carrying out data entry – we have to face up to the reality (already known, but just not seen) of exploitation, as well as to the reality (again, patently known but not seen) of the sheer boring nature of much work. Capital functions more smoothly when these things are kept hidden.

These two types of invisibility are linked because, simply put, it is invisible people who carry out the invisible labour of sweatshops: both the work and the workers are occulted, kept in the shadows. And as they become unreal by virtue of not being visible, so do the machinations of capital become 'unreal' by virtue of being invisible – even if the products of capital come to be our only reality because they are all that we can see. As a result of this invisibility, even though we know about sweatshops and even though we know that work is boring, we can be in denial of such things; without visual evidence, the exploitative workings of capital are not objectively real or true, and thus are unproven. What is by contrast visible, real, true and evident is a lifestyle of commodities and of consumption, a world of rapid movement as opposed to stasis, repetition and boredom, a world of warm lighting and light skin tones, a world of clear sound rather than the cacophony of the factory or even the street. And even though cinema has exited the theatre as a post-cinematic age has dawned, involving home viewing, smart television, online videos and more, it nonetheless is the techniques developed in the cinema (framing, lighting, cutting, make-up and so on) that proliferate on the near-ubiquitous screens of modernity and which, via smartphones, sit in the palm of nigh everybody's hands in the contemporary world.

Non-cinema, then, involves an attempt to challenge the limits of cinema and, by extension, the limits of what is constituted as real in our world of cinema-capital. Non-cinema is for this reason a point where aesthetics meets politics or, put differently, it is a point where we examine the ideology of cinema as a form: what does cinema typically exclude or occult, how are these exclusions linked to the formal/technological constraints of cinema, and what do these exclusions mean? In identifying what cinema excludes and/or occults (including the workers and the workings both of capital and of cinema itself), then we can begin to understand how non-cinema is or might be perceived as portraying the weak, the poor and/or what Enrique Dussel might term the barbarian, as well as being weak, poor and/or barbarian itself.[2] And yet, just as that which is invisible – together with invisibility itself – is crucial to capital, I shall argue that barbarian (non-)cinema is in fact an important part of the cinematic ecology as a whole. I therefore attempt in *Non-Cinema: Global Digital Film-making and the Multitude* to demonstrate that barbarian cinema, typically characterized as poor, is in fact rich. But that if that 'poor' cinema, or what Hito Steyerl might characterize as the 'wretched of the screen', is considered outside of cinema, then it can and perhaps must appropriate its status as non-cinema in order to demonstrate that non-cinema also exists and is important.[3] Indeed, if cinema as defined by capital is about both homogeneity and hegemony (the repetition that is the pursuit of box office returns that in turn reinforce power), then non-cinema is about heterogeneity, the unusual, the minor, the multitudinous.

Non-cinema has perhaps always existed. However, in the digital age increasing numbers of people have in their grasp the tools to produce films – and they are doing so. The films may have pixelated images, poor lighting, poor sound, poor acting, obviously false sets, or they may be shot on location with amateur actors. They may also represent people, things and thoughts that do not normally find their way into mainstream cinema. Indeed, if cinema *qua* cinema-capital involves the occultation of labour as part of the project of presenting itself as objectively real, then non-cinema makes clear the labour that goes into its making, thereby demonstrating what we shall, after Niels Bohr and Karen Barad, term its entangled status.[4] That is, where cinema claims to offer objective access to (and thus separation from) the world, non-cinema conveys entanglement: humans coexist with a universe defined not by objectivity or even by subjectivity; they are with the world and help to constitute it just as the world helps to constitute them.

As a result of humans' entangled (as opposed to detached) nature, we can begin to understand that the actions of humans have consequences not just on a world that is separate from them, but on a world that is with them. That is, entanglement suggests that humans change themselves as they change the world, and so if non-cinema conveys entanglement, it is also ethical. It is ethical not in the sense that it is morally perfect, always getting everything right, even if it endeavours – or tries, or *essays* – to treat the world as we might treat ourselves (with care and respect). Rather, it is ethical because it acknowledges its imperfections, and because it acknowledges that it is an attempt, or an *essay*, rather than a success. Non-cinema, as a digital-era continuation of what Julio García Espinosa termed imperfect cinema, conveys entanglement, then, but it also demonstrates and respects the otherness and the difference of the world, and otherness and difference more generally.[5] For, while entanglement suggests withness, non-cinema does not separate itself from or exclude that which does not conform to its worldview. Rather, it includes but does not via homogenization destroy difference. Entangled and ethical, non-cinema involves becoming wise about others, or becoming otherwise.

It may be ironic that it is in the digital age that an intensification of non-cinema takes place, since computers have cemented the grip of capital such that we live in what Gilles Deleuze calls a control society. That is, we live in a world where humans who do not conform to capital are increasingly rare. This suggests a diminution of otherness as there is a shift through computerization away from simply disciplining human behaviour to outright controlling it – not least by perpetually forcing humans to maintain their attention on screens.[6] It may also be paradoxical that machines that run uniquely using quantification (1s and 0s) can help us to achieve not access to a world measured or quantified objectively (the separation of human from world that is cinema-capital), but to a world experienced qualitatively (with experience significantly connoting a shift away from only the visual and towards a more multi-sensory entanglement with films and the world more generally). While paradoxical, however, it does seem that contemporary digital tools can help us not just to make visible hidden aspects of the world, but to help us to experience, or at least to understand the existence of those things which are not and perhaps cannot be visible. In this sense, where cinema-capital separates and excludes, non-cinema encourages us to experience the 'whole', a whole that goes beyond simply the visible, and which thus is a whole that we cannot see, but the effects of which we can feel – much like a black hole, or a black (w)hole.

We know as humans that there are things that we cannot see and yet which, like black holes, are real. Rather than limiting itself to only that which is visible or in light (i.e. rather than limiting ourselves to cinema), non-cinema is a tool for helping to reveal that which we cannot see, and this includes darkness itself. As the late Amos Vogel puts it:

> What we know of the world comes to us primarily through vision. Our eyes, however, are sensitive only to that segment of the spectrum located between red and violet; the remaining 95 per cent of all existing light (cosmic, infra-red, ultra-violet, gamma, and X rays) we cannot see. This means that we only perceive 5 per cent of the 'real' world; and that even if we supplement our primitive vision with our equally primitive senses of hearing, smell and touch, we are neither able to know everything nor even realise the extent of our ignorance.
>
> It is thus no longer possible for an artist creating within this historical period to portray reality along mimetic lines (art as the imitation of reality) or to view it as a coherent, fully intelligible construct, capable of apprehension through his sense organs and in its documentary aspects, a valid representation of the universe.[7]

Non-cinema thus includes the otherwise excluded and the invisible, be they invisible because overlooked or invisible because the machines that we have made (cameras) do not so readily register them, be that in terms of space (and especially colour) or in terms of time (because we can only record for so long and/or because of the speed at which they move). To include the previously excluded means that non-cinema involves what Dussel might term an ethical liberation of the poor: bringing about a just world in which all humans (and perhaps also non-humans) are treated equally.[8]

However, being ethical does not mean to replace one morality with another, or suddenly to validate only non-cinema at the expense of cinema. As antimatter exists alongside matter, we must recognize the reality and the contribution of both cinema and non-cinema, and see that there is as much that is cinematic in non-cinema as there are non-cinematic aspects in cinema – with digital technology functioning here, then, as the prism through which non-cinema becomes visible. In other words, non-cinema has always been with cinema, but the digital functions as a tool to show us how this is so. Indeed, non-cinema reveals the entangled, becoming reality that allows cinema to exist. To reiterate, then: it is not that non-cinema should replace cinema, but it is for cinema to recognize that non-cinema is important and, after Dussel, to commiserate with it, or to share in its poverty.[9] That is, cinema is level with non-cinema, its equal, rather than above it in a self-fashioned hierarchy.

In this way, *Non-Cinema: Global Digital Film-making and the Multitude* is not a replacement of my last book, *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age*.[10] In that book I tried to demonstrate that there can be philosophical profundity in even 'vapid' Hollywood blockbusters. With this book, however, I endeavour to show, or I encourage people to see, that there is philosophical profundity in even the 'poorest' films. Surely my efforts in this endeavour are imperfect, and I shall fail. Nonetheless, we can continue to change through learning and through next time – with shades of Samuel Beckett – failing better.[11] As Enrique Dussel might put it, it is inevitable that there will always be exclusions and that we cannot see the '(w)hole', but if we learn anything from this inevitable failure, it is that we must always be vigilant to learn where we have erred and become ever-more inclusive, in a bid to see whole, to immanentize the possibility of change, or to produce what I shall call hope.[12] It is fine to love Hollywood. But one should try to find room to love all cinema, as one might try to find room (or energy and will) to love all humans, all life, all matter, all existence. As François Laruelle's non-philosophy is a project to move beyond 'philosophy of' – with 'of' here signalling an act of separation, or what Laruelle might term a decision – then non-cinema involves an attempt to move beyond an exclusive love 'of', and towards an inclusive love, via the creation not of 'images of' but, after Jean-Luc Godard, just images.[13]

What I am proposing is not a spectacular revolution, then, since spectacular revolutions tend simply to replace one morality or hierarchy with another – with spectacular revolution's complicity with the society of the spectacle being evident in its very spectacularness. As Laruelle suggests in relation to Marxism, or what he proposes as non-Marxism: there is no final confrontation between the forces of capital and its other, but, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto*, the fall of the bourgeoisie (the capitalist class par excellence) 'and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable'.[14] As much is made clear by the fact that it is the supposedly most advanced tool of capitalism, digital technology, that is helping to bring this about. Non-cinema, thus, is not 'against' cinema; it is cinema. It is cinema's future, it is the creation of the conditions in which cinema can have a future. And if the liberation of the poor is impossible, then let us at the very least continue to work towards it, to try, to essay, and to encourage ourselves and others to do the same.

If cinema is coterminous with capital, then non-cinema is not anti-capitalism per se, but perhaps the maturation of capitalism, a progression into adulthood that we shall see is evident in Godard's recent, or 'late' films. But adulthood involves seeing reality unadulterated, including the impure (that which is pure cannot reproduce), the dirty, the improper, the scatological and the eschatological. As John Ó Maoilearca proposes, after Laruelle, that all thoughts are equal, so might I propose that all films are equal, just as all humans are equal and just as humans are equal to non-humans and perhaps to matter and the non-matter that is antimatter.[15] In this way, while non-cinema sounds like a negative ('non-'), it is, I wish to suggest, a positive, a way of seeing positive in the negative.

If all films are equal, what constitutes a film? Heretically, heuristically, I shall propose that every video on YouTube and Vimeo, every Vine video, every WhatsApp video, every Snapchat video, every moving image art installation, every moving image advert, every Skype conversation – these are all films, even if they are non-cinema. And yet, this begs the question: why use the term non-cinema if a term like new media might simply help us to get around the issue, leaving cinema behind? The reason for persisting with the term cinema is because we still live in a world in which kinocentrism prevails. Be it on television, a computer screen or a cinema screen, our very lives are validated by our ability to turn them into images, still and moving, and which conform to the iconography (the lighting standards, the mise en scène, the costumes, the make-up, the body shape, the locations, the framing and the colours) of cinema and the other media that use the techniques developed in cinema to sell particular products and more generally a lifestyle that involves the consumption of products. That is, our lives are validated by cinema-as-capitalism. What non-cinema thus draws out that a term like new media does not is the fact that a line of flight away from cinema-capital and into new media is fine for personal escape (were it not for the fact that new media are also overrun by advertising), but it does not necessarily involve the ethical liberation of the poor. Non-cinema makes clear the processes of exclusion that take place in a cinematic society, making it untenable for that society to continue in the way that it has done until now. New media one can simply ignore; by contrast non-cinema is in some senses to bring the necessarily social, or entangled, emotion of shame into play: I can only feel shame when I am seen by others, with shame thereby affirming both imperfection and otherness.[16] It is to show that when people speak of cinema, they generally mean an exclusive 'cinema of' – a process of separation that contradicts the logic of entanglement and the multitude, and which also is realized in the exclusive process of fabricating the imagined communities of nations.

But does a certain old-fashioned auteurism linger in this non-cinema, as the references to Godard might suggest? Quite possibly. At least, there are definite limitations in the examples that I use in this book. Most are feature-length films that have played on cinema screens. I have barely discussed short films, gallery films or various other types of film that could have been explored in relation to non-cinema. What is more, there are many more examples both from the nations that I have discussed and from numerous more that I have not discussed. But as one cannot see – but perhaps can sense – the enormity of reality itself, perhaps I offer here only the tip of the iceberg, not so as to keep hidden the rest of its mammoth structure, but precisely to demonstrate that there is so much more to come. All films are equal. In a world of thinking, learning and becoming, we can learn from anything and everything – if we are prepared to do so. Rather than seeking reasons not to learn, let us open ourselves up to total learning.

Philippe Grandrieux says of his film *La Vie nouvelle/The New Life* (France, 2002) that 'the sun remains hidden, we never show it. But it's there as something we chase, which dazzles and blinds us, which gives us an appetite to live'.[17] If we chase the sun, it is because we live in darkness. If the sun blinds us, then this only reveals that without the sun we are blind anyway. Or rather, if we chase the sun, then we also need darkness, we also need not to see but to feel. This is made clear by the human mechanism of blinking: if we did not blink, our eyes would go dry from the heat of the sun and we would indeed go blind. Darkness is necessary. Perhaps it is for this reason that in Chris Marker's film, *La Jetée* (France, 1962), the only moving image that we see is of a woman not looking, but blinking. In a world that is obsessed with the visual and with an attention economy predicated on movement that grabs our attention, it is exemplary that Marker would make a film (about time travel, no less) in which there is no movement, except to show someone not looking. *La Jetée* is, thus, a pre-digital example of non-cinema through its emphasis on the moment of blindness that is essential for seeing, and through its use of still images that point to how we must get beyond movement and the demands of the attention economy in order to see that other invisible phenomenon that is often excluded from vision under capital, namely time itself.

Non-Cinema: Global Digital Film-making and the Multitude is comprised of ten chapters, each analysing various examples of contemporary digital film-making from around the world, and each incorporating various philosophical ideas – not so much to establish a philosophy of non-cinema as to suggest non-cinema as philosophy. The first chapter, 'Digital Dreams in Afghanistan', looks at micro-budget action films made by Afghans and the Afghan diaspora. Drawing upon Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of the multitude, I suggest that in their aspiration towards cinema, or being/ becoming cinematic, they demonstrate that Afghanistan is a nation that lies beyond cinema, in the realm of non-cinema.[18] By extension Afghanistan may be a nation with a people, but these digital film-making practices elude both the nation and the concept of a unified national people, existing instead in the realm of, and giving expression to, the multitude.

I then continue in 'The Iranian Digital Underground, Multitudinous Cinema and the Diegetic Spectator' to suggest that if state-backed, official cinema creates a sense of national identity in Iran, then it is the underground and unofficial work of film-makers like Bahman Ghobadi that gives expression not to the nation but to the multitude – with multitude here being linked to the philosophy of withness that is characteristic of Jean-Luc Nancy, especially his concept of being singular plural.[19] I then extend the withness of multitudinous film-making beyond the people that we see onscreen and into the relationship between film and spectator. Analysing the role that the traditional theatrical form of *ta'ziyeh* plays in the work of the late Abbas Kiarostami, I suggest that the spectator of non-cinema does not detachedly observe films (as happens in cinema), but actively participates in them. That is, where the diegesis of the film begins and ends becomes unclear, suggesting that the spectator, too, might be diegetic.

The third chapter, 'Digital Entanglement and the Blurring of Fiction and Documentary in China', follows on from this second chapter by elaborating via the work of feminist physicist Karen Barad how the blurring of fiction and documentary suggests not separation but something related to withness, namely entanglement.[20] That is, we are not detached from the world (one of capitalism's founding myths), but active participants with it. I establish this theory through the documentaries of Wu Wenguang and Ai Weiwei, both of whom blur fiction and documentary by entangling themselves with their subjects, in the process challenging the norms of cinema-making. I also look briefly at work by Andrew Y-S. Cheng and Lou Ye to demonstrate how this entanglement extends beyond documentaries and into digital fiction film-making.

'Digital Darkness in the Philippines' also draws upon physics, in particular David A. Grandy's work on light, in order to elaborate the role that darkness plays in non-cinema, especially via a consideration of the work of punk digital film-maker Khavn de la Cruz.[21] Khavn prefaces each of his films with the words 'this is not a film by Khavn de la Cruz', while also producing subversive movies that do not so much bring to light as demonstrate the keeping in darkness of vast swathes of the Philippines. In other words, there is a synthesis that takes place in Khavn's work of the digital as a non-cinematic format and the treatment of 'squatterpunks' who lie beyond the normal remit of cinema, in darkness that can often literally consume the frame in Khavn's films.

Having considered the role of darkness in the work of Khavn de la Cruz, 'Digital acinema from afrance' considers the role that dark skin plays in non-cinema, looking at how the black lives depicted in the work of Alain Gomis suggest a link between cinema as a form and cinema as an exclusion of blackness. Black lives are not officially French, but somehow non-French, or a-french/afrench, an idea also found in the early digital films of Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, and which can be applied to women's lives in the work of Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi. The idea of a-france also recalls Jean-François Lyotard's 1978 notion of acinema, a concept that has been applied to digital auteur Philippe Grandrieux.[22] The chapter ends, then, by analysing Grandrieux's 'sombre' cinema to discuss the links between acinema and non-cinema, but especially the way in which the latter might explore not just darkness and dark skin, but the dark potential for violence that lies within us all.

In 'A Certain Compatibility: The British Digital Wave', I argue that Michael Winterbottom's treatment of the British weather, together with his ongoing investigation of Steve Coogan as a star who can never quite progress from television to cinema, suggests not a confirmation of François Truffaut's suggestion that cinema and Britain are incompatible, but that non-cinema and Britain are entirely compatible, especially in the digital age.[23] Furthermore, I characterize Winterbottom's work as a digital-era continuation of what García Espinosa calls 'imperfect cinema' as a result of its essayistic tendencies. Finally, I explore how the essay-film itself plays an integral part in non-cinema, as this form has not coincidentally exploded since the advent of lightweight digital cameras. I do this through a consideration of work first by Mark Cousins and Mania Akbari and then by Andrea Luka Zimmerman, arguing how the former use landscapes and the latter animals in order to suggest a non-cinema that pushes beyond the anthropocentrism of cinema and into the non-human realm. That is, as humans multitudinously are with each other, they are also with other species and with the world more generally.

The focus of 'Non-cinema in the Heart of Cinema' is Giuseppe Andrews, a film-maker who for years made digital movies on his trailer park in Ventura, California, with tiny budgets and a cast of barbarian characters overlooked by conventional cinema. In the shadow of cinema's heartland, Los Angeles, Andrews's non-cinema is defined by a scatological but comic interest in both bodily effluence and the effluence of society more generally ('trailer park trash'). Drawing on philosophies of comedy, carnival and scatology, then, I demonstrate how those excluded from cinema and from society more generally are not geographically separated from cinema and capital's home, but in fact are right on its doorstep.

'Globalisation, Erasure, Poverty: Digital Non-Cinema in Uruguay' takes us to the south of the Americas, where we explore the way in which a nation like Uruguay is perhaps not even able to produce cinema as a result of its small size, with Uruguay either disappearing from films made there, or Uruguay being eliminated from cinema as its films are remade in the global north. Here I also draw more fully on Dussel to propose that non-cinema makes clear cinema's exclusions, and that non-cinema thus engages in the ethical pursuit of the liberation of the poor. The chapter culminates in a consideration of *La vida útil/A Useful Life* (Uruguay/Spain, 2010), Federico Veiroj's paean to the Montevideo cinematheque, which is all but disappearing in the age of the blockbuster. If the blockbuster has taken over cinema, then perhaps it is in non-cinema, or in a cinephilia that includes not just certain types of cinema, but cinema and non-cinema, that hope for cinema's future survives.

It is with the all-pervading mainstream aesthetic in mind that 'Cinema out of Control: These are Not Films' explores the adoption by certain film-makers of ever-smaller, ever-more uncinematic technologies, such as the smartphone camera. Concentrating in particular on *In Film Nist/This is Not a Film* (Jafar Panahi and Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, Iran, 2011) and *Film Socialisme* (Jean-Luc Godard, Switzerland/France, 2010), the chapter suggests that the smartphone film may (for the time being) take us beyond cinema and into non-cinema, and that this process involves a socialist, or democratic, principle: all films – be they rich or poor – are equal.

Finally, Chapter 10 says 'Farewell to Cinema; Hello to Africa'. Looking at Godard's *Adieu au langage/Farewell to Language* (Switzerland/France, 2014), I continue the previous chapter's shift away from a national to a technological context, proposing that this 3D film might not only bid good bye to language, but perhaps also to cinema as its images extend beyond the separating mechanism of the frame and out into the audience. Through its digitally shot consideration of nature, animals and hair, Godard's film is also an example of floccinaucinihilipilification, or a celebration of that which might typically be overlooked as useless (in contrast to capitalism's need for everything to be useful). Furthermore, in this film (as well as in *Film Socialisme*), Godard repeatedly makes reference to Africa as we see how the cinematic global north has achieved its position of power through the exclusion of the uncinematic global south. It is perhaps logical, then, that I turn my attention finally to Nollywood, the enormous video industry based in Nigeria, and which churns out more films than Hollywood and Bollywood combined. Digital and 'poor' in various respects, Nollywood signals not just the exclusion of a continent by cinema-capital, but the irrepressible return of that continent in the form of non-cinema. Perhaps the most significant hub of non-cinema, Nollywood also constitutes a viable alternative to the hegemony and the homogeneity of cinema-capital, with Africa emerging not as stuck in the past, but as cinema's, and perhaps the world's, very future.

With the obligatory synopsis out of the way, then, I should like to end this introduction by returning briefly to Chris Marker. In *Sans soleil/Sunless* (France, 1983), his monumental treatise on, among other things, Africa, animals, the digital and darkness, Marker commences the film by musing on how black leader, an image perhaps of the black whole, in which the insistent visuality of cinema-capital is suspended, might be a moment of happiness. Happiness lies not in light, then, but in darkness.

In his travels, the cameraman Sandor Krasna meets Japanese animator Hayao Yamaneko, who digitally modulates film images such that they change colour – the kind of visible labour or manipulation that demonstrates the entanglement of the image maker and their subjects: these are not images that give the impression of detached observation; these are images that are specifically created and thus are not objective, but redolent of entanglement. During a sequence featuring such manipulated images – of humans and a menagerie of other animals with which we also are entangled – the narrator (Alexandra Stewart) reads at the film's end one of Krasna's letters explaining how these are images 'already affected by the moss of time'. Time, here, is change – and the manipulation that Yamaneko does is thus to expose the images to time, or to expose time itself (helping us to understand another phenomenon that lies beyond the realm of the visible), with the so-called digital Zone in which these images find themselves being perhaps time itself. Thus the images are 'freed from the lie' or the Bazinian myth that cinema 'mummifies' time and produces images that cannot change.[24] Cinema is not fixed in its being, but rather is becoming. *Contra* Bazin, then, the question, is not what is cinema, but what cinema at any given moment in time is not – and why. For this shapes and also is shaped by what we consider to be human and what we consider to be real.[25]

Krasna travels to a post office to await a letter and on the way takes 'the measure of the unbearable vanity of the West that has never ceased to privilege being over non-being'. In asking us to think about non-being, Marker asks us by definition to think about the future – that which is not, but that which may yet come to be, or become. Indeed, Krasna likens Yamaneko's 'electronic graffiti' to profiles drawn on prison cell walls: 'A piece of chalk to follow the contour of what is not, or is no longer, or is not yet, the handwriting each one of us will use to compose his own list of things that quicken the heart.' A list of things that quicken the heart: an attempt/essay to put love into language. 'To offer, to erase', the voice continues. 'In that moment poetry will be made by everyone, and there will be emus in the Zone.'

What Marker describes is a world in which everyone will be taking part in the poiesis, the ongoing process of creation that is reality – perhaps consciously so by making cine-poems with their digital devices. To create, then, is consciously to take part in reality. It is to become conscious of one's entangled status with the world. Perhaps it is a paradox that digital technology, the ultimate product of capitalism, brings us closer to the realization of capitalism's own undoing (what for Marx and Engels was its very destiny). In finally allowing us to think outside of capital, to include non-being with being, to make non-cinema instead of cinema, the age of everyone writing digital cine-poetry gives to humans a future. Maybe we are on the verge of ecological collapse – a collapse that may also take humans beyond capital in the sense that we all perish. Nonetheless, in looking at *Sans soleil* – one of the earliest digital films about a world without a sun, that is, in darkness – we look not just at our past, but also at our future – a future without capital, a future without cinema. In this way, non-cinema gives us a future – not a future already mapped out, under control, and without risk. For, such a future is not a future at all. It is not a specific (vision of the) future that non-cinema offers us, but the prospect of a future that is not controlled, maybe even a future out of control. In this way, non-cinema gives us hope. Non-cinema is, perhaps, the new hope.

Let seven billion cine-poems bloom.

Notes

1 Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006).

2 Enrique Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation in the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, trans. Eduardo Mendieta, Camilo Pérez Bustillo, Yolanda Angulo and Nelson Maldonado-Torres (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 1–52.

3 Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2012). See also Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 117–21.

4 See Karen Barad, *Meeting the University Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

5 Julio García Espinosa, 'For an Imperfect Cinema', trans. Julianne Burton, *Jump Cut*, 20 (1979), 24–6.

6 Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59 (Winter 1992), 3–7.

7 Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art* (London: C.T., 2005), 12–19.

8 Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

9 Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, 63.

10 William Brown, *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* (London: Berghahn, 2013).

11 Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 89.

12 See Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, trans. George Ciccariello-Maher (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), esp. 123.

13 François Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Nicola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

14 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2004), 18. See also François Laruelle, *Introduction to Non-Marxism*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith (Minneapolis: Univocal Press, 2013).

15 See John Ó Maoilearca, *All Thoughts Are Equal: Laruelle and Non-Human Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

16 See Tarja Laine, *Shame and Desire: Emotion, Intersubjectivity, Cinema* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2007).

17 Nicole Brenez, 'The Body's Night: An Interview with Philippe Grandrieux', trans. Adrian Martin, *Rouge*, 1 (2002), http://www.rouge.com.au/1/grandrieux.html.

18 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London and New York: Penguin, 2004).

19 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. R. Richardson and A. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

20 Barad, *Meeting the University Halfway*.

21 David A. Grandy, *The Speed of Light: Constancy + Cosmos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

22 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Acinema', *Wide Angle*, 2 (1978), 52–9.

23 François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 124.

24 André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume One*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 14–15.

25 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*

1

Digital Dreams in Afghanistan

'This film … is not for you', gruffed the storeowner of the Al Madinah greengrocers on Uxbridge Road in London when I bought *Anjam/End* (Basir Mujahid, Afghanistan, 2008) on DVD in 2012. Even though 'not for me', I soon after returned to the store to buy a second film, *Ehsaas/Emotion* (Farid Faiz, Australia/Germany/UK/Afghanistan, 2006). As low-budget action films from Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora, *Anjam* and *Ehsaas* were a revelation to me, greatly different to the cinema about and/or from Afghanistan that I had seen prior to these films, and with which I shall engage presently.

'A country without an image': Afghanistan as non-nation

Prior to *Anjam* and *Ehsaas* my knowledge of cinema from Afghanistan was limited to three basic categories: films, predominantly American, set there (e.g. *The Kite Runner*, Marc Forster, USA/China, 2007); documentaries, predominantly western, about aspects of Afghan life (e.g. *Out of the Ashes*, Tim Albone/Lucy Martens/Leslie Knott, UK, 2010, about the emergence of the Afghan national cricket team); and a few films made there. This latter group was confined to films made or produced by the prolific Makhmalbaf family, including *Kandahar* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Iran/France, 2001), *Panj é asr/At Five in the Afternoon* (Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran/France, 2003), *Lezate divanegi/Joy of Madness* (Hana Makhmalbaf, Afghanistan/Iran, 2003), *Sag-haye velgard/Stray Dogs* (Marzieh Meshkini, Iran/France/Afghanistan, 2004), *Buda as sharm foru rikht/Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* (Hana Makhmalbaf, Iran/France, 2007), *Asbe du-pa/Two-Legged Horse* (Samira Makhmalbaf, Iran, 2008) and *Osama* (Siddiq Barmak, Afghanistan/Ireland/Japan, 2003).

Mark Graham has described the latter as 'burqa films', arguing that western viewers see in films like *Kandahar* and *Osama* that which reaffirms their understanding of Afghanistan as backward and barren. Of *Kandahar* in particular, he says that 'instead of portraying Afghans in humanizing, domestic settings, the film situates itself in the bleak and public spaces of refugee camps, squalid villages, and barren deserts. To do otherwise would flout viewer expectations.'[1] This is problematic, since 'for many Westerners, the Afghanistan of these movies *is* Afghanistan.'[2] More than simply being received as 'authentic', though, Graham also suggests that the films are designed for westerners, and thus are complicit in this reception. This can be seen by the way in which *Kandahar* is told predominantly through the eyes of characters from the West, especially Nafas (Nelofer Pazira), a Canadian journalist who has travelled to Afghanistan in order to prevent her sister from committing suicide. And it can also be seen in *Osama* by the way in which it opens with footage shot by a foreign journalist of the Taliban breaking up a demonstration being held by women – before showing us an oppressive, patriarchal Kabul that is a 'dead zone of barren and unremitting rubble', instead of 'a once beautiful city of flowers, trees, gardens, thriving businesses, modern high-rises, and exuberant crowds'.[3] This use of the outsider offering a way into Afghan culture demonstrates how the films construct what Kamran Rastegar, in relation to *Osama*, would term a 'global audience', and as a result both films to certain degrees 'fall within Orientalist discourse'.[4] That is, with the work of Edward W. Saïd in mind, the films do not properly represent Afghanistan, but instead offer to western audiences what they expect to see, namely veiled women who need rescuing.[5] For Graham this is made clear by the fact that Makhmalbaf uses the Arabic term *burqa* to talk about the veil, as opposed to the Dari term *chadari*: Makhmalbaf cannot but convey his own (Iranian) views on Afghanistan, rather than understanding the country from 'within'.[6]

It is not my aim here to seek out whether films like *Kandahar* and *Osama* objectively are 'reliable' or 'true' – even if a case can be made both for their unreliability, which, broadly speaking, is Graham's argument, and for their reliability (various of the actresses involved in *Osama* have described, for example, how the events in the film are 'true' to their own life experiences).[7] Rather, I wish to suggest that if these films at least in part perpetuate the western image of Afghanistan, and if these films constitute Afghan cinema, then these films also reveal an important link between cinema, the nation and the West, namely that the concept of the nation is a western invention in which the reality of what is otherwise (after Benedict Anderson) an 'imagined community' is constituted through images/cinema.[8] If one does not have an image or a cinema, or if one is invisible, then one is not really a nation and one does not really exist.

Makhmalbaf seems implicitly to be aware of this when he says that 'Afghans … are indeed invisible, just like their country is on the world stage. Afghanistan, he writes, is "a country without an image"'.[9] In trying to provide an image/a cinema of and for that country, Makhmalbaf in some respects negates Afghanistan's non-cinematic/invisible status, while also negating its status as a non-nation (a nation without an image is not a nation if having an image is precisely what constitutes a nation). Krista Geneviève Lynes says that when the opening handheld sequences shot by the foreign journalist in *Osama* are brought to an abrupt close by a member of the Taliban, this marks 'a foreclosure of a bottom-up perspective of the reality of life under the Taliban'.[10] Similarly, *Kandahar* opens with an eclipse, suggesting that the film consciously is about light, visibility and/or the absence of both. That is, both moments suggest that one cannot film Afghanistan because Afghanistan defies/denies cinema; it is non-cinematic. In effect, Afghanistan is veiled from view; to lift that veil would be to negate Afghanistan, since the veil itself is what constitutes Afghanistan's (non-cinematic) reality.

If Afghanistan is not cinematic – and yet if *Osama* and *Kandahar* are films about Afghanistan – then we get a sense here of how *Osama* and *Kandahar* do not capture the nation but construct the nation by giving to it an image. It is not just that these films are made for western viewers or that they are films 'for me', unlike *Anjam* and *Ehsaas*. Rather, they show how the nation is a western construct and how the nation is an image, with image-making and cinema thus also reinforcing as well as being a key part of western ideology. *Anjam* and *Ehsaas*, meanwhile, are 'not for me'. They were supposed to remain invisible. In this way, neither *Anjam* nor *Ehsaas* is cinema in the way that *Kandahar* and *Osama* are. They are not films made to render Afghanistan comprehensible to westerners by virtue of providing a cinematic image of/as the nation. Rather, they constitute a non-cinema that, I wish to argue, does something profound on a political level, and which is tied to the films' digital and 'impoverished' aesthetics – in contrast to the visual beauty of Makhmalbaf and Barmak's films.

'Barmak estimates that the entire history of Afghan cinema in the twentieth century amounts to about forty films.'[11] This suggests both that Barmak sees Afghanistan as not having particularly strong historical ties to cinema (forty is a low number), and that Barmak has a relatively exclusive definition of cinema. For, there are numerous films like *Anjam* and *Ehsaas*, suggesting that Afghanistan in fact has produced many films – even if these circulate not in theatrical venues, but online and on DVD. In other words, Afghanistan might not have strong links with cinema (only forty films, including *Osama*), but Afghanistan does have strong links with non-cinema (numerous films like *Anjam* and *Ehsaas*).

Anjam and *Ehsaas*

Anjam tells the story of two brothers, Rostam (Basir Mujahid) and Jawad (Aryan Khan), whose war-injured father was killed in a seeming hit-and-run car accident when they were young. Brought up by their mother, Rostam now works for his uncle, Sikander, a criminal involved in the drugs and firearms trades. Rostam is a kick-ass dude who wears a leather jacket and packs several guns when he's not impressing his cousin, Lina, whom he rescues at one point from a kidnapping attempt. Meanwhile Jawad is a martial arts specialist who's maybe the best cop in Kabul, and who wants to go steady with Frishta, a girl whom he meets in a shopping mall.

Although both Rostam and Jawad still live at home with their mother (and try to keep their respective love lives secret from each other), Jawad knows nothing of Rostam's criminal life until late on in the film, when Rostam is betrayed by his uncle for refusing to help a Pakistani criminal to send a suicide bomber into Kabul (the subtitles read: 'those Pakis [*sic*], I can't kill my people'). Framed by his uncle, Rostam is outed in the newspaper as a criminal, prompting Jawad and Rostam to fight in a hospital over the body of their mother, who has died at the shock of discovering Rostam's criminality. Rostam sends a thug to attack Jawad, but Jawad defeats him in the mud of a Kabuli plain (the scene foreshadows a muddy courtyard battle in *The Raid 2: Berandal*, Gareth Evans, Indonesia/USA, 2014). However, Jawad comes to forgive Rostam when the latter explains that he had no choice but to become a criminal, because it was the only way that he could pay to support their fatherless family. Together, then, the brothers track down Sikander (via a fight in a snooker hall), who confesses in an out-of-the-way estate to having killed their father (Jawad: 'If al [*sic*] uncles are like you, then no one can trust him'). A climactic battle ensues, with Rostam eventually blowing Sikander up with a bazooka as he flees in a car. The police arrive – but instead of evading arrest, Rostam chooses to stay. 'You did what you wanted', the brothers say to each other, and the film ends.

Ehsaas, meanwhile, opens with a man waking up in a jungle, before telling the story of Nazir (Fahim Faiz), a strong guy who works a dead-end job in a scrapyard in Melbourne, Australia. He lives at home with his put-upon mother (Suraya Bahrami) and his alcoholic father (Farid Faiz), in his spare time going to the gym, kickboxing, and generally hanging out with his buddies, Navid (Navid Faiz) and Akmal (Akmal Akbar). Nazir has a nemesis at the gym: John (D. Antonio Vaqueroz), who turns up at regular intervals and initiates group fights with Nazir and friends. These take place at the gym, at a beach-side café where Navid's love interest Gheeti (Sutara Ariyan) works, and in a pool hall.

When Nazir's mother is fired from her job at a car service, Nazir loses his cool and gets into a fight with the police. Realizing that he needs to get money for his family, he falls in with Tania (Daniella Malinowski), who introduces him to Cobra (Beghan Sahil – who also did the graphic design for the film), a yellow-eyed drug dealer who gets Nazir to do his dirty work (with Nazir taking over from John for a while as Cobra's number one heavy). However, when Nazir's mother refuses the money that Nazir makes by working for Cobra, Nazir has a crisis of conscience, and refuses to do any more criminal work. Cobra therefore tries to kill Nazir, since no one is allowed to leave after they have started working for him. Fighting breaks out, with Nazir killing various henchmen before eventually being shot and, in a scene that repeats the film's opening, being left for dead in a jungle. Somewhat anticlimactically, Nazir then wakes up and wanders home.

While these synopses hopefully indicate the kind of low-budget action films that *Anjam* and *Ehsaas* are, some further description and a sense of the films' form will help to clarify the point. Both movies are replete with well-worn clichés from the sorts of cheap-ish action films that made stars of Jean-Claude Van Damme and Steven Seagal in the 1980s. Fights break out for no obvious reason (John just dislikes Nazir, for example), and the fights in both films are replete with meat-packing punch effects that are often ill-timed (they do not coincide with blows landing) and plain unrealistic. Sand is thrown into the face of an adversary such that they cannot see momentarily (Sikander to Rostam in *Anjam*), while doing the splits is clearly a sign of martial arts proficiency, as per many a Van Damme movie (Jawad in *Anjam*). Characters often wear shades (Rostam), bandannas (Nazir), and other slightly camp costumes, while it is de rigueur for the characters to stand around the most expensive cars to which the budget could stretch. While the films do have plots, both of which focus on family matters filtered through a nationalist paradigm (as I shall explain shortly), really both films seem to be excuses for fights and whatever special effects the film-makers could, on their limited budgets, achieve (squibs, explosions, clearly plastic blades cleaving enemies in twain, and so on). The acting might charitably be described as flat (especially in *Ehsaas*), with