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**Beyond Slow: The Problem of Realism in  
Contemporary Minimalist Cinema**

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## **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:  .....

Date: **11 December 2014** .....

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## ABSTRACT

Commonly referred to as “slow cinema,” a cinematic approach in which minimalist strategies are applied to narrative cinema is being practiced by filmmakers worldwide to an extent seen previously only in experimental and avant-garde films. This minimalist mode of cinema is characterised by heavily de-dramatised narrative and formal approaches that foreground emptiness, silence, stillness and duration. Concurrently, there is a growing tendency within film criticism to view minimalist films as realist or even hyper-realist, which can be attributed to the films’ predominantly realist narratives and images, and the filmmakers’ use of strategies that have precedents in existing realist cinematic models. Indeed, their broad preference for often extremely long takes and sequence shots over editing evoke and expand on André Bazin’s realist model; their films’ narrative, formal and technical simplicity mirrors that of early cinema; and their use of nonprofessional actors, actual locations, as well as their focus on the quotidian and contemporary social realities draw heavily on the legacy of Italian neorealism and the documentary tradition. A closer analysis, however, reveals a more complex, and even paradoxical approach to cinematic realism. Contemporary minimalist filmmakers employ a minimalist realism – one that upholds broadly Bazin’s emphasis on the continuum of physical and temporal reality, as well as the broader realist aim of narrating the social real, while allowing the coexistence of clashing, oppositional representational qualities that are inherent in all minimalist artforms. This thesis examines the ways in which a series of contemporary filmmakers use minimalism to enhance, detract from and interrogate the realism of their films, in order to critique current cinematic practices and investigate new approaches to the centuries-old dilemma of how reality can be represented on screen. This thesis is a creative doctoral project, comprising of an exegesis and a feature-length documentary/fiction film, *This Used To Be Here* (DVD enclosed). Across these two works, I hope to draw direct links between minimalism as a concept and as an artistic practice, and demonstrate the challenges and virtues of representing reality through minimalism.

## SYNOPSIS

*This Used To Be Here* (93 mins)

Following a chance encounter, a young filmmaker is offered an unusual job by the father of his childhood's best friend: as a Christmas present, put his daughter Zoe into one of his films. Years later, the filmmaker revisits the family to follow up on the film and a production begins. Years pass again, and the film remains unfinished and effectively abandoned. Yet through this standstill, a different film continues to be made. *This Used To Be Here* combines documentary and fiction, fact and fantasy, to depict a transnational tale about family, dreams and filmmaking.

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## **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

In the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory in Lyon* (1895), usually cited as the first film ever made, a large group of workers stream out of a factory at the end of their working day. Almost all of them are women, although there are a small number of men, a couple of dogs and a horse. Some people disappear to the right of the screen, others to the left. The reel, and the film, ends when the factory is nearly emptied. The Lumières' camera captures this simple moment of everyday life in a simple way. There is no editing in the film because editing is yet to be invented. The camera does not move. Rather, there is a single, static wide shot, too wide to make out any faces clearly. But it is wide enough to frame two doorways, one small and one large, in their entirety, and show us a glimpse of every person that walks out, how they walk, how they are dressed, and which direction their next destination is. There are no characters, and the action – a door opens, people leave – is simple by any definition. Indeed, on the surface, it appears to be little more than a filmic record of people moving from one place to another.

A little over a century later, on the other side of the world, Argentinean filmmaker Lisandro Alonso filmed another simple depiction of everyday life with his first film *La libertad* (2001). In this film, a young male woodcutter is observed living out what is presumably his daily routine. The narrative can be summarised in a few sentences. The woodcutter eats a meal by a fire, at night. The next day, he walks through the forest choosing and chopping wood, pausing to defecate, eat lunch and nap. After he wakes, a local man picks him up and lends him his vehicle to go and sell wood to a farmer. He then stops by a store to buy provisions, uses a payphone to make a brief call to his family and then returns to his tent in the forest as the sun sets. En route he catches an armadillo, which he kills, prepares and cooks. The film ends with the woodcutter eating by the fire at night, reprising the opening image.

This simplest of narratives is filmed in an equally simple style. The camera barely moves, only panning or tilting occasionally to follow the movements of the woodcutter. Close-ups are rare, with most of the film being composed of wide shots. Shots are held for an unusually long time; there are 63 over 73 minutes, with an average shot length close to that of the Lumières' single-shot early films. The soundtrack too, is sparse. What we hear is always what we see; besides the opening credits there is no non-diegetic sound or music. The woodcutter remains mostly silent and is not given many opportunities to speak. When he does, the words are few, inconsequential to the plot and reveal little about the character. Without knowing



Spanish, it is possible to watch and appreciate the film without subtitles. The meaning of the title, which translates as “freedom,” remains ambiguous, as does the narrative and the woodcutter himself. As we do for the workers in the Lumières’ film, we know no more about the woodcutter at the end than at the start of the film other than how he looks, talks and walks, and how he performs his routine of work, food and sleep.

To be able to draw even general comparisons between these two films, made over a century apart, is remarkable. The Lumières were pioneers. Until their film, along with nine others that comprised their *cinématographe* exhibition in Paris 1895, “cinema did not exist” (Vaughan 63). Their film was created and screened before a distinction between narrative and documentary film form had been conceived, and before cinema was “dominated by the narrative impulse that later asserted its sway over the medium” (Gunning 64). Alonso, however, had before him as reference, over a century of cinema, an artform that has grown at an astonishing rate. In between these two films, filmmakers developed the grammar of film narrative, documentary, genre, performance, close-ups, crosscutting, montage, flashbacks, visual metaphors, lighting, sets, costumes, tracking shots, sound, music, voiceovers, special effects and computer-generated imagery. One of the many remarkable characteristics of *La libertad* is that Alonso barely dips into this vast repertoire. He comes full circle, using the barest necessities of filmmaking; to be as simple as possible, like the Lumières. *The New York Times* described *La libertad* as “the simplest definition ever of pure cinema” (Mitchell 2001). By virtue of historical context, Alonso’s film about a woodcutter is not as simple as the Lumières’ film about factory workers. But well over a decade after the film’s release, it remains about as simple as a film can get.

The simplicity of Alonso’s film is not the result of historical circumstance, but rather a calculated approach that is utterly at odds with dominant contemporary filmmaking practice. He is, in fact, one of a large, diverse group of contemporary filmmakers who purposefully and boldly apply strategies of simplification to an extent previously unseen in narrative cinema. This well-documented cinematic trend is characterised by heavily de-dramatised narrative and formal approaches that foreground emptiness, silence, stillness and duration. Besides Alonso, a list of prominent filmmakers who follow this trend includes: Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey), Pedro Costa (Portugal), Lav Diaz (Phillipines), Philippe Garrel (France), José Luis Guerín (Spain), Jim Jarmusch (US), Jia Zhangke (China), Hong Sang-soo (South Korea), Hou Hsiao-hsien (Taiwan), Fred Kelemen (Germany), Abbas Kiarostami

(Iran), Samira Makhmalbaf (Iran), Jafar Panahi (Iran), Corneliu Porumboiu (Romania), Carlos Reygadas (Mexico), Ben Rivers (UK), Albert Serra (Spain), Aleksandr Sokurov (Russia), Béla Tarr (Hungary), José Luis Torres Leiva (Chile), Tsai Ming-liang (Taiwan/Malaysia), Gus Van Sant (US) and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand). Even though most of these filmmakers climbed to prominence or produced their key films in the twenty-first century and have not made, and are unlikely to ever make, any significant commercial impact, they have already left a remarkable footprint on world cinema. Despite the vastly different cultural, social and political environments in which they live and work, these filmmakers are often discussed collectively, perhaps because their unusual approach to film practice is seen as located outside the more unified context of their respective national cinema movements. Their films win awards regularly at major film festivals, have influenced a new generation of filmmakers (and most likely, each other), and have subsequently become the focus of much critical discussion, attracting both praise and scorn.

Although Michel Ciment had already identified a “cinema of slowness” in his keynote address to the 2003 San Francisco International Film Festival, it is, however, the term “slow cinema,” coined by Jonathan Romney in 2010 to describe the “varied strain of austere minimalist cinema that has thrived internationally over the past ten years” (43), which has gained the most traction. Romney characterises these films as “slow, poetic, contemplative – cinema that downplays event in favour of mood, evocativeness and an intensified sense of temporality” (43). In turn, for Matthew Flanagan the key formal features of these films, which are “immediately identifiable, if not quite fully inclusive,” are “(often extremely) long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday” (2008).<sup>1</sup> In addition, Adrian Martin lists as a central part of a “contemplative” film’s formal repertoire: “static frames in long shot, lateral tracking movements, extended silences, natural rather than musical sound” (2012, 519). Furthermore, in regards to the films’ narratives, which according to him often feature “prolonged passages of everyday activities such as walking or cooking” (519), Martin writes:

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations where page numbers are not provided in this thesis are either from sources originally published online without page numbers, or online transcriptions where the original source is no longer available or was not located. In this thesis I actively use frequent, extended footnotes as an aspect of my approach to presenting a long, complex argument and as a conventional textual component in the genre of the academic dissertation.

Many of these films have a heavy air of the unsaid, the unlived, all that is secret or repressed. Little is articulated in spoken words, while the burden of expressivity is shifted to externals: the bodily language of gesture and posture, and especially the surroundings of landscape or architecture. Narrative, or at least explicit narrative action in a conventional sense, is usually one of the least important or foregrounded aspects of a contemplative movie. (519-520)

As Martin's evaluation highlights, the narrative and formal aspects of these films are deeply intertwined. De-dramatised approaches are applied to both, equally; narrative simplicity is mirrored by formal simplicity, and vice versa.

Of the 30 titles selected as the key films of the decade in *Sight & Sound's* critics' poll in 2010, at least nine unmistakably possess the qualities described above – a fact that did not go unnoticed by the magazine.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the poll is prefaced with editor Nick James's noting slow cinema's "peculiar aesthetic dominance" (2010a, 35). It is also followed by a column in which Romney attributes this dominance to critics' disillusionment with contemporary commercial cinema, and hypothesises an aesthetic and philosophical response by filmmakers to a "bruisingly pragmatic decade in which, post-9/11, the oppressive everyday awareness of life as overwhelmingly political, economic and ecological would seem to preclude (in the West, at least) any spiritual dimension in art" (44). Moreover, critics have even begun warning that what they call a "slow cinema aesthetic" may have already been overused. For example, James, in a later editorial for *Sight & Sound*, suggests that "the contemplative tendency" is "in danger of becoming mannerist [and] developing its own clichés" (2010b, 5). Meanwhile, Darren Hughes argues that much of today's art cinema is infected with nostalgia for modernism, "threaten[ing] to inspire a new 'Tradition of Quality' characterized by expressionless faces, glacial pacing, and calculated stabs at transcendence" (2008, 161).

Despite the variation of the labels given to this type of cinema, the explanations for the trend's origin, and the criteria to decide which key films and

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<sup>2</sup> The nine films are, in alphabetical order: *Battle in Heaven* (Reygadas 2005), *Colossal Youth* (Costa 2006), *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Puiu 2005), *Platform* (Jia 2000), *Russian Ark* (Sokurov 2002), *Ten* (Kiarostami 2002), *Tropical Malady* (Weerasethakul 2004), *Uzak* (Ceylan 2002), and *Werckmeister Harmonies* (Tarr 2000). A further four films – *Hidden* (Haneke 2005), *The Son* (Dardenne & Dardenne 2002), *Waiting for Happiness* (Sissako 2002) and *Workingman's Death* (Glawogger 2005) – share many of the same qualities but do not rely on the "slow cinema aesthetic" as strongly.

filmmakers fall under discussion, as well as some disagreements as to its virtues and limitations, descriptions of the broad qualities of contemporary films that follow the so-called “slow cinema” aesthetic remain consistent.<sup>3</sup> Although its discourse initially revolved around the pages of film magazines and in online publications, three lengthy studies have been published in recent years: Flanagan’s 2012 PhD thesis “‘Slow Cinema’: Temporality and Style in Contemporary Art and Experimental Film,” Song Hwee Lim’s *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness* (2014), and Ira Jaffe’s *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action* (2014), with Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge’s *Slow Cinema* (2015) collection forthcoming. That these films represent a major aesthetic and philosophical tendency within contemporary world cinema is undisputed.

Despite the similarities, this mode of cinema is not homogenous and is far more diverse than the tag “slow cinema” and its numerous variations suggest. Although this label encapsulates many of the films’ key narrative and formal qualities, it also over-emphasises these qualities and camouflages other key, possibly more significant ones, where notions of slowness are either less applicable or relevant. It is for this reason that I have chosen to adopt the term “minimalism” and refer to this relatively recent cinematic trend as “contemporary minimalist cinema.” “Minimalism,” however, is not an unproblematic term as it can convey at least three different meanings: first, it can be used to refer to a movement in the visual arts; second, it can denote artistic traditions that draw on the legacy of this movement (for example, literary minimalism and minimalist music); and, third, it may be used to invoke a general stylistic tendency in the arts.<sup>4</sup> Minimalism in any application entails an approach to art that aims to be rigorously, and often excessively, simple.

Yet, a precise use of the term “minimalism” denotes far more than an art of simplicity, conveying instead a wider aesthetic and philosophical range, alluding to a more complex discourse than does “slow cinema.” I elaborate on this complex, far-reaching and misunderstood term in great detail in Chapter One, where I trace and analyse minimalism’s trajectory across the visual arts, literature and the avant-garde cinema. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, many of the features of

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the labels used to describe this kind of cinema include: “slow cinema” (Romney, Flanagan), “contemplative cinema” (Martin), a “cinema of slowness” (Ciment, Song Hwee Lim), “Slow Film” (John Ellis), or simply “slow movies” (Ira Jaffe).

<sup>4</sup> It is equally common for the visual arts movement to be called Minimalism (conventionally capitalised) or Minimal Art; I will use the latter throughout this thesis to avoid confusion.

contemporary minimalist films are expressions, in a narrative cinematic form, of the inherent qualities of, and principles behind, minimalism already explored in these artforms. In general, contemporary minimalist cinema has far more in common with broad minimalist art traditions than critics have given it credit for. This is so despite the fact that Romney used the term “minimalism” in his definition of slow cinema and that it appears frequently in discussions about this cinematic trend. In order to investigate the inherent qualities of minimalism, this approach is framed in this thesis through art history and the often overlapping and sometimes contradicting theories and writings about minimalist art (Berger, Foster, Fried, Greenberg, Meyer, Strickland), literature (Greaney, Hallett, Herzinger, Saltzman) and avant-garde cinema (Battock, Carroll, Gidal, Sitney, Rees).

According to my definition in this thesis, contemporary minimalist filmmakers are those who apply and extend the aesthetic and philosophical principles of artistic minimalism into narrative cinema. Although most of the films that I analyse in the chapters that follow have been produced in the twenty-first century, I will expand the parameters of “contemporary” to include a number of key minimalist films made prior, which serve as important precursors to this current cinematic trend. Even though “minimalism” has been used previously to discuss films and filmmakers who are neither contemporary nor working in a narrative medium, references to “minimalist film” or “minimalist cinema” in this thesis will henceforth correspond solely to the work of contemporary minimalist filmmakers as defined here, unless otherwise indicated. In order to capture the rich diversity of strategies that manifest from minimalist approaches, and because of the fact that no two minimalist filmmakers are truly alike, I will look at a wide range of films and filmmakers in each chapter. However, there will be a prominent focus on the works of Alonso, Ceylan, Costa, Kiarostami, Reygadas, Tsai and Weerasethakul. These are seven filmmakers from different corners of the world who apply minimalism as an approach to creative practice in highly innovative ways, and whose work collectively represents the aesthetic diversity, and remarkable cohesiveness, of contemporary minimalist cinema.

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While minimalist filmmakers’ aesthetic and philosophical concerns address many issues that have arisen throughout the wider arts, they can be traced back more

specifically to the tradition of cinematic realism, a discourse that spans across different decades, national cinemas and movements. De Luca suggests that these filmmakers may be grouped together despite their differences, due to their “resolute adherence to devices traditionally associated with cinematic realism, such as location shooting, non-professional actors, deep-focus cinematography and the long take” (2012, 183). According to Cyril Neyrat, a film such as Costa’s *In Vanda’s Room* (2000) “places cinema back in the greatest tradition of realism: a diagonal that cuts through the art of the twentieth century, connecting Griffith and Straub, Walker Evans and Robert Frank, Warhol and Costa” (15). For Flanagan, slow cinema in general represents a “tendency toward realist or hyperrealist representation” (2012, 2); for de Luca, it is a “new realist peak in world cinema” (2012, 187). This tendency to align contemporary minimalist cinema with cinematic realism can be attributed to the films’ predominantly realist narratives and images, and the filmmakers’ use and expansion of strategies associated with existing realist cinematic models. Although the manner in which minimalist filmmakers approach the problem of realism is unique, most of the notable narrative and formal aspects of their work can be readily seen as part of a rich, complex and well-documented cinematic lineage.

The discourse of cinematic realism has often revolved around two opposing schools of thought, between the so-called realist and formative theorists and, analogously, between the Lumière (reality, observation) and Méliès (fantasy, expression) modes of filmmaking. Both schools asserted their ideals for cinema by calling for the use or avoidance of certain film techniques. Formative theorists such as Rudolf Arnheim and Béla Balázs sought to differentiate cinema from other artforms such as photography and painting, by moving away from literal mimesis and countering the representational qualities of photography. Arnheim believed that artistic progress in cinema meant countering its photographic realism and exploiting the “subjective formative virtues of the camera” (156), such as montage and shifting camera angles. Realists such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, on the other hand, championed the ability of the camera to record physical reality accurately and stressed its innate, realist capabilities. Bazin’s model of realism is founded on his theory of the ontology of the photographic image, namely that photography and cinema, due to the “automatic” nature of the camera as a mechanical recording device, are able to capture a concrete reality and “satisfied once and for all, in their

very essence, the obsession with realism” (2009, 6).<sup>5</sup> Kracauer argues along similar lines that cinema is “uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality, and hence, gravitates toward it” (28). Among the many elements of filmmaking, photography has “a legitimate claim to top priority [...] for it undeniably is and remains the decisive factor in establishing film content” (27). In order to retain and build on what they regarded as cinema’s inherent realism, realists such as Bazin and Kracauer thus favoured transparent techniques such as the long take and depth of field to record reality, rather than the fragmentation and abstraction of time and space entailed by editing and montage.

These two schools of thought reflect the development of cinematic approaches stemming from two of cinema’s earliest pioneers: the artificial, illusionist films of Georges Méliès and the realistic, actuality films of the Lumières. Kracauer uses these two parallel approaches to distinguish between a “realistic” and “formative” tendency in cinema; V.F. Perkins, similarly, notes how cinema “offers two forms of magic, since its conquest of the visible world extends in two opposite directions” (53). Despite suggesting in his early essay “The Life and Death of Superimposition” that

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<sup>5</sup> Wherever possible I rely on Timothy Barnard’s recent translation of key essays by Bazin, published in the 2009 volume *What is Cinema?* by Canadian publisher Caboose, rather than the longstanding translations by Hugh Gray, originally published across two volumes by University of California Press in 1967 and 1971. The Caboose edition has already won the admiration of Bazin scholars and translators, including Dudley Andrew and Jonathan Rosenbaum, for its superior translations, corrections and extensive annotations. More crucially, Barnard’s translation addresses key shortcomings in previous English translations, many of which are directly relevant to this thesis and which, Barnard suggests, have led to Bazin’s arguments being misinterpreted for decades. For example, Barnard outlines in great detail the often confused and often confusing concept of *découpage*: put very simply, a process of “organising the profilmic and visualising a film’s narrative and mise en scène [...] before (or during) the shoot” (2009, 264) which is thus a form of film “writing” that is completely separate from editing. Barnard demonstrates how the word is almost completely absent in previous translations despite it being a cornerstone in Bazin’s thinking; indeed, it was “the essence of his preferred mode of film art” (271). (Barnard expands on this concept in a lengthy translator’s note and in his recent book *Découpage* [2014], the only book on the topic in any language, according to the press release.) Barnard also notes, and corrects, previous translators’ conflation of the various techniques and paradigms of film editing under the single banner of “montage” – in French the word is used to connote all forms of editing, but in English it is not – which has led to misreadings and important nuances being lost in such key essays as “Editing Prohibited” (previously translated as “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage”) and “The Evolution of Film Language” (previously “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema”), where “every occurrence of *montage* [was translated] as ‘montage’ when often what is quite clearly meant is ‘editing’ in the most prosaic sense possible” (2009, 287). The use of “montage” as an all-encompassing term to describe all kinds of editing nonetheless remains common in English-language film studies. For example, Sam Rohdie defines it as “simply [...] the joining together of different elements of film in a variety of ways, between shots, within them, between sequences, within these” (1); many of the critics and theorists quoted throughout this thesis use the word in a similar fashion. To avoid confusion, I will not use montage as a synonym for editing but rather in the manner Bazin referred to it, that is as “a technique, or rather a paradigm, associated with silent film of the 1920s (and not just the Soviet school) [and which] abstractly joined bits and pieces of reality in a non-linear manner” (Barnard 2009, 272).

this binary opposition “is essentially forced” (in Cardullo 2000, 41), Bazin would later contribute to it, claiming boldly that filmmakers between 1920 and 1940 could be divided into those “who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality” (2009, 88). The early Lumière films provided an archetype upon which Bazin built his conception of realism, while the same films were alluded to as an antithetical model for Arnheim’s own anti-realism, he who warned that cinema’s push for realism will see it “be thrown back to before its first beginnings – for it was with a fixed camera and an uncut strip that film started” (157).

Minimalist films would appear to sit firmly within the realist faction of this discourse; moreover, minimalist filmmakers’ style seems to rely overwhelmingly on a type of realism that can be understood through Bazin’s realist model. Without doubt, the most prevalent formal feature of minimalist films is the long take. When used instead of editing and alongside other techniques, such as depth of field, the long take depicts a continuum of reality, based as it is on a “respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, naturally, for its duration” (2009, 99). Bazin’s conception of realism seems to provide an ideal framework through which to analyse the realism of minimalist films, because in addition to the use of the abovementioned techniques – key stylistic articulations of Bazinian realism’s ontological foundations – minimalist films quite overtly share numerous qualities, techniques and approaches associated with the various filmmakers, cinematic eras and traditions through which Bazin shaped his own concepts. From Bazin’s perspective, his ideals of realism could first be identified in early cinema, including silent cinema, documentary, and going as far back as the pioneers; were then advanced in the next half-century by a handful of directors working in opposition to the dominant model, which relied increasingly on complex, fragmentary and standardised editing techniques; and led eventually to Italian neorealism, which for Bazin represented the peak of realism. As Robert Stam succinctly puts it, this is a chronology that “postulated a kind of triumphal progress of realism [...] which began with Lumière, continued with Flaherty and Murnau, was revived by Welles, and reached quasi-fulfillment with the Italian neo-realists” (2000, 225). As expressed in my opening remarks above, minimalist films’ narrative, formal, and technical simplicity evoke that of early cinema. They also draw heavily on the aesthetic and ethical legacy of Italian neorealism and the documentary tradition, in their often consistent use of nonprofessional actors, nonfictional narrative elements, location shooting, episodic structures and narrative ambiguity, as well as in



their humanistic outlook, historical specificity, commitment to depicting social realities, and focus on the quotidian.

Thus it comes as no surprise that it is now common for critics to frame minimalist cinema as a revival and rigorous adoption of Bazinian realism. For Flanagan, who has discussed this issue in great detail, Alonso's *La libertad* is "remarkably close to the Bazinian ideal of long take filmmaking, demonstratating [*sic*] a deep-seated belief that cinema allows us to examine the world clearly without interiorising it" (2008). James Quandt goes further, suggesting that for many, this seminal film represents "the apotheosis of Bazinian realism" (2008). Robert Koehler casts a wider net, asking: "Could even devout Bazinians have predicted as recently as the late 1990s that Bazin would re-emerge as the most important theoretical mind for a new generation of filmmakers around the world?" (2011) At the heart of this connection between Bazin and contemporary minimalist cinema lies the issue of duration. Flanagan argues that "[s]low cinema [...] returns to what we might call the Bazinian root of durational style, displaying a clear acceptance that film adequately registers an *impression* of the world *as it exists in time*, and a subjective striving for a realism of duration" (2012, 98; emphases in the original). De Luca contends that the "distinctiveness of this new realist aesthetics [...] is steeped in the hyperbolic application of the long take, which promotes a contemplative viewing experience anchored in materiality and duration" (2012, 184). The term "slow cinema" clearly encapsulates duration as this cinema's central aesthetic concern. This is also reflected through a renewed critical engagement with such theories as Bazin's durational realism, Gilles Deleuze's conception of time in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989), and adopting David Bordwell's practice of measuring average shot lengths (ASLs; see Bordwell 2005, 26) to analyse duration in minimalist films.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, to say that minimalist filmmakers would "return" to Bazin's durational realism is an understatement. In fact, they do far more than that: they extend it, for example, applying long takes far more consistently, with shot lengths greatly exceeding any of the examples Bazin cited. They also combine this extended duration with expanded neorealist approaches, namely: narratives that are often almost plotless

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<sup>6</sup> Bordwell has timed the average shot lengths of Hollywood films to highlight their increasing pace of editing since the 1960s, a practice he has since applied to non-Hollywood filmmakers to analyse their style. This arithmetical approach of analysis was in turn adopted from Barry Salt, who first raised its virtues in "Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures," published in 1974. For examples of the use of ASLs to analyse duration in minimalist films, see Flanagan 2008 and 2012, Udden 2009, and Lim 2014.

and which frequently begin or end in *media res*; characters who have highly ambiguous motives and barely express their emotions; nonprofessional actors who do not simply play roles but frequently appear as themselves and integrate aspects of their real lives into the film; and the reduction or elimination of superfluous narrative and stylistic elements, such as expressive camera movements, flashbacks and music. Still, there is clearly a tendency to regard minimalist filmmakers as torchbearers of the realist tradition and, in consequence, as the clearest living proof of Bazin's intellectual legacy. A closer analysis of minimalist films, however, reveals a far more complex, and even paradoxical, approach to realism that weakens their apparent ties to Bazin's conception of it. In problematising this connection, my purpose is not to discount or criticise Bazin directly. Rather, it is to question the alignment of minimalist cinema with his conception of realism; the implication that minimalist films are thus realist in their aims; and draw attention to how these films both engage with, and reveal the limitations of, many of Bazin's arguments.

As is well known, over the years theorists have attacked, with varying degrees of success and severity, the contradictions, limitations, the supposed naiveté and alleged essentialist nature of Bazin's arguments, while others have criticised the ambivalence of his poetic prose style.<sup>7</sup> It is equally important to recognise that in recent years there has been a spate of radically revised readings of Bazin, many of which interpret him as a modernist, or rely on the flexibility of his ambivalent prose to extract from his writings modernist impulses that are not immediately apparent.<sup>8</sup> In his comprehensive and insightful rethinking of Bazinian realism, Daniel Morgan also identifies a "standard reading" of Bazin that over-equates his realism with certain technical attributes, and films, filmmakers and movements that demonstrate them (445). It is outside the scope of this thesis to examine these revisionist readings of Bazin in detail, although they will certainly be taken into account, particularly in Chapter Three where I discuss the overtly modernist aspects of minimalist films. Regardless, this "standard reading" of Bazin, as outlined by Morgan, may still prove to be the most appropriate framework for this discussion, for a number of reasons. Firstly, contemporary critics' comparison of minimalist cinema with Bazinian realism represents precisely a standard reading of Bazin, because formal considerations take

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<sup>7</sup> For examples of the former, see Williams 1973, Metz 1974, MacCabe 1976, Wollen 1976, Carroll 1988 and Currie 1995; for the latter, see Margulies 1996 and Gallagher 1998.

<sup>8</sup> See Morgan 2006, Ricciardi 2006, Lowenstein 2007, Grist 2009 and Horton 2014.

primacy in their alignment. Secondly, this comparison, as it stands, must be questioned; numerous problems arise from it because it relies too heavily on surface (mainly stylistic) similarities, and cannot account for the numerous anomalies that cannot be addressed through a Bazinian framework. Thirdly, despite the ambiguity in much of Bazin's writings, it still holds true that he prescribed to various cinematic techniques a particular quality or function which he related back to realism, and that Ivone Margulies goes so far as to call it a moral value (1996, 39). The manner in which he articulated these qualities was often unequivocal. Minimalist filmmakers highlight the limitations of Bazin's arguments by extracting from the use of these techniques qualities different to, and at times the very opposite of, that which Bazin proposed.

The notion that minimalist filmmakers adopt existing realist models in their work – particularly Bazin's theory of the long take as durational model – is visibly correct. However, I propose that these filmmakers apply key strategies from existing realist models, but utilise them within a different framework and for different ends. In minimalist films, not despite but because of the use of the approaches advocated in Bazin's model, the literal often becomes abstract; for example, a realistic image may be rendered unrealistic or ambiguous as the ontological status of the image is disturbed. Through their exaggerated application, and because of the minimalist framework in which they appear, approaches traditionally considered to be realist can adopt a non-realist function (such as abstraction) in addition to its realist one (for example, to convey continuously and therefore realistically, the passage of time). In other words, the same approach or technique is able to both construct *and* call into question the film's realism. Furthermore, while it stands true that so-called realist formal approaches are consistently evident in minimalist films, it stands equally true that so-called non-realist or formative approaches – montage, expressive angles, close-ups, certain kinds of camera movements, and so on – are far from being eradicated from minimalist films. Rather, they play a central role in the aesthetic of many minimalist filmmakers. And, while they are more scarcely used by others, when they are used, their functions and effects are often vastly different to Bazin's propositions.

For example, Bazin suggests that close-ups and editing are essentially synonymous; the former is a decidedly non-realist technique that disallows ambiguity, whether it belongs as part of a montage sequence or used to provide emphasis within

a continuity style of editing that “confers a sole meaning upon the dramatic event” (2009, 101). Yet when close-ups appear in minimalist films they usually appear in conjunction with the long take, and frequently outside the context of an editing style or pattern. Rather than clarifying or emphasising what is already seen and known, here the close-up obscures or questions the givenness and transparency of the seen. When minimalist filmmakers use continuity editing, rather than merely placing emphasis or dictating meaning and dramatic flow, as Bazin would have it, they create ambiguity by emphasising the reductive qualities of a shot, or a series of shots. That is, they emphasise what is *not* shown or able to be shown: what may be too distant in a wide shot, too obscured to see within the confinement of a close-up, what is beyond the edges of frame or effaced when cutting from one shot to the next. As described earlier, minimalist films rely heavily on narratives and characters that leave a great deal unsaid, implied or repressed. This *modus operandi* extends to film style. In many minimalist films, the use of unseen, offscreen space is a vital aspect of the film’s formal structure and how the narrative is conveyed; it is used to both construct and ambiguate filmic reality. Thus, in a direct challenge to Bazin’s and Kracauer’s visually oriented realist models, in the realism of minimalist films what is obscured or omitted takes on equal or greater importance to what is shown or included. By subverting or inverting the functions and effects of both realist and non-realist approaches within a minimalist framework, minimalist filmmakers transcend the realism/non-realism binary, and put to rest dualistic notions of realism and non-realism as being intrinsically linked to the use or avoidance of specific techniques. In their films, they demonstrate the potential for an aesthetic pluralism by illustrating how realist and non-realist formal structures, and the different shots and techniques they imply, are not necessarily contradictory.

Furthermore, minimalist filmmakers are often not interested in depicting clear, believable, or realistic stories, nor are they ultimately interested in maintaining the transparency of style encouraged by realism more broadly. Even though their films, like those of neorealist cinema, may address everyday social realities and depict them within a predominantly realist formal framework, the treatment of the social realities they portray can become oblique to the point of abstraction, with the narratives gaining, through minimalism, surreal, comical, absurd or dreamlike qualities. Minimalist filmmakers often use realist formal strategies to depict overtly non-real elements introduced into the narrative – such as dreams, nightmares, hallucinations,

ghosts, myths, absurd coincidences, divine interventions, mysterious illnesses and even UFOs – and refuse to make stylistic deviations to accommodate them. Conversely, they do the opposite at times, allowing overtly non-realist formal elements – for example, montage, highly subjective or abstract sounds and imagery, and abrupt shifts in tone or technique – to intrude and punctuate an otherwise realist film narrative. In almost all of their films, their realism is offset by reflexive and distancing strategies, which make their presence felt strongly at some point. These paradoxes amount to a cinema that accommodates fluctuating and seemingly incongruous kinds of realism within the same film, and often in the same scene or shot. These intrusive elements would sit uncomfortably within most conceptions of realism, in and outside of the cinema – Bazin’s model included.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, minimalist filmmakers may be better understood as contemporary heirs of the tradition of modernist filmmaking than inheritors of realist cinema. Indeed, modernist filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov, Robert Bresson, Ernie Gehr, Jean-Luc Godard and Michelangelo Antonioni, among many others, are part of a hugely diverse tradition that, like contemporary minimalist cinema, explores the complexities and contradictions of the depiction of reality, often through a combination of realist and anti-realist approaches.

Finally, several minimalist filmmakers extend a paradoxical approach to cinematic realism by blurring the distinction between documentary and fiction film and, by extension, the relationship between fiction and nonfiction, and between reality and its representation. In some of these filmmakers’ work, fictional and documentary elements are often inseparable, deeply embedded in the narrative, style and production methods used. A unique quality of many of their films is the difficulty, particularly on first viewing, to distinguish whether significant portions of the film (and in some cases the entire film) are fiction or documentary. Despite, or rather because of, the high degree of realism achieved through the exaggerated application of realist approaches, combined with the use of documentary methods, a film’s status

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<sup>9</sup> Bazin clearly preferred realistic content, as evident in the films and filmmakers he advocated. However, he was receptive of unrealistic content so long as it appears within the “plastics” of the image (basically, *mise en scène*) and not fabricated through editing – in other words, as a realist depiction of unrealistic content. Predating his enthusiastic response to Albert Lamorisse’s fantasy *The Red Balloon* (1956) in “Editing Prohibited,” in “The Life and Death of Superimposition” Bazin argues that what “appeals to the audience about the fantastic in the cinema is its realism [...] the contradiction between the irrefutable objectivity of the photographic image and the unbelievable nature of the events that it depicts” (in Cardullo 2000, 42). And to illustrate his proposition, he refers to several examples of the filming of ghosts in cinema.

as fiction or nonfiction may become ambiguous, as might an actor's role as performer or observed documentary subject – thus paradoxically enhancing and detracting from the film's overall realism. A common subjective effect experienced during the viewing of these films is the perception that we are simultaneously watching a documentary involving real people and places, and a carefully constructed, self-aware art film. The viewer is constantly made to interpret the reality represented, always questioning whether the film may be fiction, documentary, neither, or both. As such, these films prompt viewers to consider received notions of fiction and documentary, the expectations of realism that each carries, and why we think and respond to them in the ways we do.

Thus, simply defining minimalist cinema as realist necessarily entails downplaying or ignoring the significant and numerous anomalies, deviations and contradictory elements that interact with and undermine the films' realism. Having outlined the manner in which minimalist cinema adheres to and departs from realist models, I propose that minimalist filmmakers adopt realist approaches and lay the narrative and formal foundations of an overtly realist film, only to collapse these foundations and confound expectations of realism that these approaches carry with them. Their aesthetic hinges on what I will call a minimalist realism. This is a reductive, highly simplified mode of realism broadly committed to the faithful representation of physical and temporal reality (as outlined by Bazin and Kracauer),<sup>10</sup> as well as the narration of the social real (as per realism more broadly), but which simultaneously calls into question its own production of realism by allowing both realistic and abstract elements to coexist – sometimes subtly, at other times, forcibly. These elements may coexist on the level of narrative or style, in the manner of a modernist film, or, more uniquely, through an exaggerated use of one which leads to the other – that is, an abstraction arrived at *via realism*. A minimalist realism is articulated differently across films and filmmakers, and is bound more strongly by the filmmakers' shared modernist-reflexive aims rather than by strikingly unified approaches to style. Furthermore, and as I will discuss at length in Chapter One, the presence of oppositional representational qualities – realism and non-realism, realistic and abstract detail – as well as reflexivity, is an integral aspect of all forms of minimalism.

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<sup>10</sup> See Bazin 2005a, 2005b and 2009; Kracauer 1997.

Even though *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory in Lyon* is often described as a filmic document, or even a documentary – despite the term not having been invented at the time – the Lumières did not merely point their camera at the workers as they happened to leave; rather “it is possible to discover that the workers were assembled behind the gates and surged out at the camera operator’s command” (Farocki 239). All of the early Lumière films in fact “express an inherent ambiguity between the inclination to record and tendency to imagine reality” (Traverso & Mhando 109). Furthermore, what is not commonly known about the film is that there are three versions of it: two re-enactments of the original film, each of workers leaving the same factory, and each slightly different to the previous one. The workers wear different clothes, walk differently and at a different pace, and interact with their co-workers differently. In one version there is a horse, in another, two horses, and in another, none. As Pedro Costa noted in his speech to a group of film students in Tokyo, it is immediately after the first film when “things deteriorate, go awry, become complicated” and “fiction was born” (2004). Minimalist filmmakers explore, intensely and rigorously, this issue that came to the fore from the day the Lumières filmed their workers. They return to this ambiguous state of affairs by adopting a complex mode of representation that nevertheless is utterly simple on the surface; a model committed to the faithful depiction of physical and social reality. Yet their films can be simultaneously perceived as realist and not, demonstrating a paradoxical approach to cinematic realism that is evident in all aspects of the work. Minimalist filmmakers go far beyond the “slow” aesthetic with which they have become aligned. They use minimalism simultaneously to enhance, detract from and interrogate the realism of their films, to critique current cinematic practices and investigate new approaches to the centuries-old dilemma of how reality can be represented on screen.

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In the first chapter I trace the history of minimalism in the visual arts, literature and avant-garde cinema – three disciplines with established, well-documented minimalist traditions – before turning to contemporary minimalist cinema. I argue that minimalist filmmakers have inherited key characteristics from these earlier minimalist traditions, and operate at the intersection of avant-garde and narrative filmmaking practice. In this chapter I also examine in detail the term “minimalism” itself, in order to provide a

more concrete definition as it applies to narrative cinema and thus outline the parameters of my own research. Finally, I investigate the paradoxical qualities of representation inherent in all minimalist artforms; the ways in which minimalist films articulates these qualities will form the focus of much of this thesis.

The remaining chapters of this thesis involve the analysis of minimalist films. In the second chapter I delve specifically into minimalist filmmakers' approach to a minimalist realism. I argue firstly that they uphold cinematic realism's legacy in its commitment to addressing social realities through narrative and form, and in particular Bazin's model of realism as manifested in the use of techniques and approaches with which it is associated. I then investigate how minimalist filmmakers subvert these notions of cinematic realism, and expose their limitations, by creating ambiguous and abstract effects through an exaggerated application of realism, and by subverting and inverting the proposed functions and effects of so-called realist and formative techniques.

In the third chapter I expand the discussion of minimalist realism to incorporate the ways in which minimalist filmmakers allow for the coexistence of the real and the non-real in their films, a practice that upholds both the legacy of modernist cinema and that of minimalism. They do this firstly by merging abstract and realist elements in their films, on the level of both form and content, and through a diverse range of reflexive strategies that disturb the established realism of the film. I then turn to contemporary minimalist cinema's most radical articulation of a minimalist realism, in its disintegrating of the boundary between documentary and fiction, and challenging how viewers view and interpret the reality represented in the films, as well as the film's own relations to reality. In this chapter I also analyse the methods used in the production of these films, which goes some way in explaining many of the resulting minimalist aesthetics and the approaches to realism discussed earlier in the thesis. By examining how minimalist filmmakers engage with both documentary and fiction, and apply the filmmaking methods of both, it is possible to demonstrate how their cinema is politically and ethically engaged with the problem of how reality is represented on screen – a problem that is particularly pertinent in this day and age, and which has far greater stakes in the documentary film's nonfictional representation of the real.

Given both the realist and modernist concerns of minimalist filmmakers, my method of film analysis in Chapter Two and onwards will be framed, first, by theories



of cinematic realism articulated by key proponents of the relevant realist models (Bazin, Kracauer, Arnheim, Zavattini) and those who have adopted their ideas into broader discussions of realism (Margulies, Flanagan, Chaudhuri & Finn, Pasolini). Second, I will address the work of theorists who investigate the modernist and reflexive aspects of realism (Brecht, MacCabe, Perry, Stam). Finally, when conducting film analysis I will engage with the ideas of prominent documentary theorists (Cowie, Nichols, Renov, Ellis, Walhberg, Barnouw), which overlap with discussions of realism in fictional film. By examining this cross-section of theorists, it is possible to highlight the key, intersecting aesthetic and philosophical aspects of cinematic realism, and negotiate its numerous contradictions and inconsistencies. In consequence, it is possible to demonstrate how contemporary minimalist filmmakers draw from, depart with, and contribute to the debate surrounding cinematic realism.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Foundations of Contemporary Minimalist Cinema**

## Introduction

Contemporary minimalist filmmakers come from different corners of the globe and are not part of any movement; they explore different subjects and employ different narrative and formal strategies. No two filmmakers are truly alike, yet they are often compared because they share a similar approach to narrative and form. There is no doubting the prevalence of the minimalist aesthetic in art cinema today, but there are strong precedents for this aesthetic, evident in films from different periods, movements and national cinemas. Narrative filmmakers Andrei Tarkovsky, Chantal Akerman, Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, Miklós Jancsó, Kenji Mizoguchi, Sohrab Shahid-Saless, Michelangelo Antonioni, Theo Angelopoulos, Carl Theodore Dreyer, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet are just some of those whose films display minimalist qualities; indeed, many of them are “routinely cited as precursors of this tendency” (Lim 9). Meanwhile, avant-garde film artists, such as Andy Warhol and Michael Snow, and movements, such as structural film, are sometimes “invoked as kindred spirits” (9). These filmmakers have all used minimalist strategies and shared an interest in simplicity to varying degrees and for different purposes.<sup>11</sup>

Bresson may be regarded as a particularly important precursor for minimalism in narrative cinema, having demonstrated a rigorous and consistent minimalist approach in both his films and in *Notes on the Cinematographer* (1977), a book of enigmatic maxims on filmmaking that “advocate strict restraint and minimalism” (Jaffe 17). Some of Bresson’s trademark narrative and stylistic features include: precise, still, austere visual compositions; limited camera movements; minimal, uncomplicated plots; elliptical narratives; non-expressive performances delivered by nonprofessional actors; an emphasis on physical gestures to reveal or suggest character; a sparse soundtrack and a restrained use of music; and a general tendency not to include more details than absolutely necessary. These features can be regarded as benchmark minimalist strategies and have since been adopted by narrative filmmakers around the world. In contemporary cinema, Abbas Kiarostami’s use of offscreen sound and visual and narrative omission, Lisandro Alonso’s use of muted,

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<sup>11</sup> Although this is not necessarily a clear indication of their influence, it is worth noting that in their “top ten films” list provided for a 2012 *Sight & Sound* poll, Carlos Reygadas, Béla Tarr, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Tsai Ming-liang, Lisandro Alonso, Hong Sang-soo and Corneliu Porumboiu included, amongst them: eight films by Bresson, six by Ozu, four by Dreyer, three by Tarkovsky, one each by Akerman and Warhol, and seven of each other’s films (Bell 2012, 62-66).

introspective performances by nonprofessional actors, and Tsai Ming-liang's stark, static compositions are all evidence of Bresson's legacy.

Bresson's writings on filmmaking also reveal close parallels between the strategies used by both he and minimalist filmmakers. His maxims in *Notes on the Cinematographer* range from broad expressions of minimalist intent – for example, “Master precision. Be a precision instrument myself” (1) and “Not to use two violins when one is enough” (8) – to the addressing of specific techniques and approaches. On sound, Bresson wrote: “A sound must never come to the help of an image, nor an image to the help of a sound” (28); on music: “No music as accompaniment, support or reinforcement. *No music at all*” (10; emphasis in the original); and on cinematography: “To be constantly changing lenses in photographing is like constantly changing one's glasses” (30). Although Bresson's influence on minimalist filmmakers may be obvious, he did not explore duration in the same way as they do. His films are more fragmented than theirs, as he cuts far more frequently and his shots are not held nearly as long. His approach relies more on the creative possibilities of editing than duration, as reflected in his statement that “[a]n image must be transformed by contact with other images, as is a color by contact with other colors [...] No art without transformation” (5). Even though the style and narratives of the films of such current directors as Michael Haneke, Bruno Dumont, and Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne bear close resemblance to Bresson's films, they are only mentioned occasionally in discussions of contemporary minimalist cinema. Their absence suggests that duration plays a more crucial role in defining and grouping filmmakers than other minimalist factors do. Nonetheless, Bresson's key strategies have clearly manifested in a variety of different ways in minimalist films, even though, as Ira Jaffe suggests, his writings “may comprise a more reliable guide than his films to slow-movie values” (17).

What then, besides an emphasis on duration, are the formal and narrative preoccupations of the current crop of filmmakers who employ minimalism to tell their tales on screen? I will shift the emphasis toward their unique approach to cinematic realism, for which duration plays an important, but not defining, role. This shift is in order to investigate crucial aspects of contemporary minimalist cinema that so far has attracted little discussion; aspects that can be better understood by examining the relationship between cinematic realism and minimalism. In so doing, it is important

first to address the problematic, elusive term “minimalism” and its implications, which is the main concern of this chapter.

Thus, in this chapter I propose that minimalist films have inherited key characteristics and strategies from earlier minimalist creative traditions, while operating at the intersections of the narrative and avant-garde traditions in cinema. I first investigate the antecedents of the *minimalist* aspects of contemporary minimalist cinema within well-established minimalist traditions in visual art, literature and avant-garde cinema. I start here because contemporary minimalist cinema has much more in common with these traditions than is recognised, and its relationship with realism can be understood as the manifestation of artistic concerns articulated in them. Next, I define contemporary minimalist cinema by drawing on the key features identified in these minimalist antecedents, and examining the ways in which they are transposed within this cinematic tendency. Aligning minimalist narrative films with, for instance, the sculptural works of Minimal Art may seem a strenuous task given the significant differences between the artforms. However, by charting minimalist approaches across various artforms, I will identify a flexible yet remarkably cohesive approach to artistic creation, with shared philosophies, strategies and techniques. In this way, when we arrive at contemporary minimalist cinema, minimalist foundations already developed in art, literature and avant-garde cinema are still visible.

### **Minimal Art: foundations and key characteristics of minimalism**

Though never exactly defined, the term “minimalism” originally referred to the work of (mainly) New York artists “who shared a philosophical commitment to the abstract, anti-compositional, material object in the 1960’s” (Colpitt 1). As an artistic movement – the validity of which was contested by critics and artists alike – Minimal Art challenged the notion of art as self-expression, a notion made popular by the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1940s and 1950s. Minimal Art sought to eradicate emotion and illusionism from art, and create a reflexive, non-referential art that did not “allude to anything beyond its literal presence, or its existence in the physical world” (Meyer 15). Minimal artists, such as Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt, believed that “a work of art should be completely conceived by the mind before its execution. Art was a force by which the

mind could impose its *rational* order on things, but the one thing that art definitely *was not* [...] was self-expression” (Gablik 245; emphases in the original).

This belief manifested in a series of controversial (predominantly rectangular and cubic) sculptural works that were “non-compositional, pre-planned, repetitive, and made of uninflected pre-fabricated industrial materials” (Vickery 111). These works often looked like the result of simple, precise workmanship rather than artistry. For example, Andre’s *Equivalent VIII* (1966) comprised 120 bricks arranged on the floor in six rows of 10, stacked two-high; and Judd’s ongoing *Untitled* series (first created in 1965) involved a column of rectangular shapes attached to the wall in precise configuration, with a gap between each equal to the height of the shapes. Colour, when used in such works, tended to be flat, uniform and inexpressive. For exhibition, the works were assembled then placed, stacked or arranged precisely within the gallery, free of frames, plinths and rope barriers. Once installed, the lack of distance between the work and the public foregrounded “the gallery as an actual place, rendering the viewer conscious of moving through this space” (Meyer 15).

Minimal Art was and remains a highly influential, yet controversial artistic movement. Since its prime in the mid-1960s, it has received a tremendous amount of criticism for a variety of reasons. Two modernist critics, Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg, led the charge with influential essays published in 1967. Both critics framed their arguments against Minimal Art by maintaining strict distinctions between forms of art, such as painting and sculpture, and between what art is and is not (“non-art”). These distinctions were already problematised before minimalism became a household name, for example, in Dadaist Art, but it was the utter simplicity and apparent “artlessness” of Minimal Art, as well as the effortless with which it seemed to have been created (privileging idea over technique and execution) that threatened these critics’ conception of art. In “Recentness of Sculpture,” Greenberg distills the “essential logic” of Minimal Art as one that attempts simply to see how far art can be pushed before it ceases to be so. He describes the movement as a “Novelty Art” with no lasting power beyond its initial shock value, then goes on to declare:

The ostensible aim of the Minimalists is to ‘project’ objects and ensembles of objects that are just nudgeable into art. [...] Minimal works are readable as art, as almost anything is today – including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper [...] Minimal Art remains too much a feat of ideation, and not enough anything else. (184)

This attack on Minimal Art as a reductive one, and the defense of modernist artistic distinctions, were expanded further in Fried's more scrupulous (and aggressive) "Art and Objecthood." Fried prefers to describe Minimal Art as "literalism," concerned as it is with the literal rendering of a work so that it does not allude to anything beyond itself. For this reason, Minimal artworks are mere objects, and "objecthood" is Fried's condition of non-art – precisely what modernist art seeks to "defeat or suspend" (2). By revealing the literal viewing space and emphasising the viewer's place within it, Fried also argues that Minimal Art sets up a "theatrical" relationship with the viewer, with the work vying for attention like an actor. The "literalist espousal of objecthood," he argues, "amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre; and theatre is now the negation of art" (3). In addition to maintaining distinctions between what does and does not constitute art, Fried stresses the importance of upholding quality and value as central concepts in judging art. According to Hal Foster, who writes in defense of Minimal Art, the real fear expressed in Fried's propositions is that the minimalist paradigm risks not only disrupting the autonomy of art but may corrupt belief in art, "that it may sap its conviction value" (Foster 53).

As a result, Minimal Art has been one of the most ridiculed and parodied styles of art, while often been responsible for igniting broader debates about what art is and is not. The polarising stance and prose style of its critics no doubt contributed significantly to igniting such debates.<sup>12</sup> However, these debates about minimalism and the attendant questions about the nature of art were beneficial in generating some healthy and necessary discussions. What Greenberg and Fried see as the unequivocal weaknesses of Minimal Art can be easily interpreted as its virtues. It can be argued, for instance, that it is precisely the disintegration of ossified artistic boundaries – between various forms of art, or between art and non-art – that makes Minimal Art a radical and interesting movement. It may also be argued that Minimal Art's literalness

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<sup>12</sup> Unlike Greenberg's somewhat conciliatory approach, Fried's arguments may be interpreted as aggressive in that, by seeking to distinguish between "the *authentic* art of our time and *other work*" (9; emphases mine), he was by extension denouncing the artists themselves and their motivations as inauthentic; his urgent prose also slips frequently into hyperbole (for example, using war as an analogy to define the relationship between modernism and theatre). David Batchelor notes how published objections by Minimal artists "focused less on the arguments which Fried developed and more on the tone of voice in which they were conducted" (67).

and the manner in which it is exhibited empowers the viewer by offering a high degree of interpretative and perceptual freedom in how (and why, and from where) she takes in the work.

Significantly, toward the end of “Art and Objecthood,” Fried describes the temporal nature of experiencing Minimal Art. In Fried’s words:

The literalist preoccupation with time – more precisely, with the *duration of the experience* – is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical: as though theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time*; or as though the sense which, at bottom, theatre addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, *simultaneously approaching and receding*, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective... This preoccupation marks a profound difference between literalist work and modernist painting and sculpture. (9; emphases in the original)

For Fried, the experience of viewing modernist art is one of “continuous and entire presentness” (9) and transcends duration. “If only one were infinitely more acute,” he continues, “a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it” (9). This aspect of Fried’s essay provided bait for those attacking not only his critique of Minimal Art, but also his appraisal of modernist art; indeed, it was “lambasted by numerous writers for its unapologetic idealism” (Meyer 33). More importantly, the durational aspects of Minimal Art that Fried so vehemently criticised may also be considered one of its most significant innovations – one that would later manifest in other artforms. In seeking to maintain clear distinctions in art, both Greenberg and Fried underplayed Minimal Art’s innovations, and failed to foresee the wide-ranging impact that it would later have in the visual arts, and outside of it. As Foster argues, one of Minimal Art’s greatest contributions was that it “opened up a new field of art, one that advanced work of the present continues to explore” (36).

Another criticism against Minimal Art is that it would be uninterested or even incapable of addressing real social and political issues. This idea proposes that Minimal Art is essentially art about art, not the real world – an accusation that has been directed to numerous forms of abstract art and more recently, to postmodern art in general. As Maurice Berger notes, the features of Minimal Art, with its “inherent



formalism and hermeticism, its use of elemental geometric forms and gestures, and its rejection of narrative content would appear to mitigate against social or political meaning” (2-3). He also notes that Minimal artists themselves frequently denied any connection between their practice and ideology, and that many of those who seemed to be apolitical would later abandon the minimalist sensibility of their earlier work to create activist works that directly and explicitly engaged with social issues.<sup>13</sup> When artists shifted their approach throughout their career in this manner, this supposed limitation of minimalism seemed to be amplified.

Given that Minimal Art purportedly rejects narrative content and metaphor, it is necessary to look beyond the surface form of the artwork to be able to gauge any political implications. Berger invokes Fried’s discussions of “objecthood” and “theatre” to suggest that most discourses on Minimal Art have failed to consider “the ideological reasons for redirecting the sculptural experience away from complex sculptural objects and toward the subjecthood of the viewer” (14). Berger contends that the ideological aspects of Minimal Art can be best understood through the recent theoretical concept of performativity, “the infiltration of performance into the social and cultural sphere, an infiltration that is never less than meaningful, never less than ideological” (15). He goes on to add that:

minimalist performativity, embodied by a temporal, experiential, and spectator-driven style directly influenced by the anti-establishment, pro-individual, and liberatory ideologies of its age, has meshed with the interests of those artists who have wished to explore or contest the social relationships of identity, power, and selfhood. This performative aesthetic has come to influence the formal, stylistic, and philosophical sensibilities of much political art of the past thirty years in multiple and complex ways.  
(15)

As Berger suggests, Minimal Art’s political dimension rises to the fore when one considers the way in which it radically redefines the relationship between the work and the viewer in the physical space of the gallery. Minimal Art’s reflexive qualities, that is, its ability to render the viewer conscious of her relationship with the work and

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<sup>13</sup> Berger cites as examples of the latter Yvonne Rainer’s socially conscious avant-garde films in the 1970s, and the doomsday-laden narratives of Morris’s *Cenotaph* (1980) installation series.

the space in which it exists, the freedom and autonomy that this relationship makes possible, and the new ways of looking that this entails, can all be regarded as political.

The controversy surrounding Minimal Art has been exacerbated by the fact that artists themselves have failed to agree on what constitutes “minimalism,” understood as a methodology or aesthetics. As both critics and proponents of Minimal Art have pointed out, there are various inconsistencies and contradictions across two key texts by Minimal artists, namely, Judd’s “Specific Objects” and Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture.” In their essays, both artists seem to disagree implicitly on Minimal Art’s relationship with sculpture. Judd regards his art as a complete departure from sculpture, whereas Morris sees his art as both an extension of and a critical reflection of sculpture. This confusion was compounded by the fact that critics and artists alike disagreed on how the term “minimalism” should be used. Edward Strickland suggests that the question of “whom to include under the Minimalist rubric was from the beginning no more problematic than whether to use the rubric at all” (17). Moreover, he expands the scope of minimalism to “denote a movement, primarily in postwar America, towards an art – visual, musical, literary, or otherwise – that makes its statement with limited, if not the fewest possible, resources, an art that eschews abundance of compositional detail, opulence of texture, and complexity of structure” (7). This expansion makes it even more difficult to define the term properly, yet even in this wider context minimalism is still “only slightly more precise when applied to works of visual art” (Baker 1998, 9). To complicate matters further, many of the artists at the centre of the movement rejected the label altogether. When Flavin was invited to participate in a group exhibition of Minimal Art, he responded that he did “not enjoy the designation of my proposal as that of some dubious, facetious, epithetical, proto-historic ‘movement’” (in Batchelor 6). Judd, who in 2004 had a major retrospective of his work at Tate Modern and is perhaps the best known of the Minimal artists, despised the term, “feeling it suggested exclusion or a reduction of potential” (Serota 2004). Nonetheless, one will struggle to find a published description of this artist that does not specify him as a minimalist, or at the very least, link him directly to the movement.

Over the years the influence of Minimal Art spread across the arts and the expression “minimalism” began to be used liberally; today, the term in lower case is more often used to describe an identifiable approach to art, whose origins may be the Minimal Art movement. The publication of Gregory Battock’s *Minimal Art: A*

*Critical Anthology* in 1968 brought the debate surrounding minimalism into wider circulation, as it included a variety of arts (painting, sculpture, dance) and opened the door for further expansion and interpretation of Minimal Art and its legacy. Since then critics have continued to widen the application of “minimalism” to descriptions of art and the term’s specificity has been reduced greatly. Minimalism may now be used “in reference to any stylistic austerity in the arts” (Baker 1998, 9), or simply to “include all art that in some way radically simplifies” (Perez 2006, 285). Thus, minimalist influences have been identified in countless artforms including film, architecture, fashion, dance, music, theatre, performance, literature, design and even cooking. In an article for *The Guardian* prior to Judd’s Tate Modern exhibition, Adrian Searle notes Judd’s influence on contemporary styles:

He has a lot to answer for, in the wastelands of loft living, the sweeps of polished concrete and reclaimed oak flooring on which squat the stainless steel pouf and the Shaker-style occasional coffee table. None of this is Judd’s fault, of course, but his art and the way he installed it and wanted it to be seen now appears to signal a lifestyle option. (2004)

Minimalism, as it is known today, has morphed significantly from its original forms and objectives. Half a century since its inception, it is a ubiquitous concept that no longer belongs solely to the realm of the arts. “Minimalism may have never existed,” Batchelor suggests, “but its influence is everywhere” (75).

### **Narrative, surface and the everyday in literary minimalism**

Many of the qualities of Minimal Art, as well as the discourse that surrounds it, echo in literary minimalism, a tradition that has remained strong over the past four decades. The connection between Minimal Art and literary minimalism appears initially to be only of name and a shared general desire for simplicity. Minimalist writers and critics did not recognise any influence of Minimal Art, writers tended to detest the “minimalist” label, and the narrative form of literary minimalism seems irreconcilably different to the defiantly non-narrative, abstract forms of Minimal Art. However, as I discuss later in this chapter, the two traditions in fact share more in common than a desire for simplicity. This becomes all the more apparent when contemporary

minimalist films – in their equal reliance on narrative and visual form – receive the influence of both traditions.

Discussions of literary minimalism have focused mainly on the short story form and its writers, including Raymond Carver (to whom the label was first applied in the late 1970s), Frederick Barthelme, Tobias Wolff, Ann Beattie, Amy Hempel and David Leavitt. This focus is something that Cynthia Hallett attests to by highlighting the fact that the short story is a “naturally compact narrative vehicle” (490) and that “both minimalism and the short story are governed by an aesthetic of exclusion” (487). Hallett argues that:

[i]n addition to brevity, those features of the short story link it [*sic*] with literary minimalism in general include: a contrived use of figurative language; a maximal exclusion of the extraneous – especially emotive words; and a detectable artificiality that results from an exaggerated realism. (490)

Unlike the visual arts, in studies of literature there is critical consensus as to how the word “minimalism” is defined and used, and about the writers who would fall under discussion. In his introduction to an edition of *The Mississippi Review* dedicated entirely to discussions of literary minimalism, then editor Kim Herzinger lists the key, “salient” characteristics as: “equanimity of surface, ‘ordinary’ subjects, recalcitrant narrators and deadpan narratives, slightness of story, and characters who don’t think out loud” (11). For John Barth, it is a “terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction” (1). Phil Greaney lists a more precise, expanded set of characteristics that delves deeper into the techniques used by writers:

[A] reduced vocabulary; a shorter sentence; a reticence towards the expression of a character’s thoughts or feelings; unresolved, even slight narratives which reveal more than they resolve; the use of unadorned language and the rejection of hyperbole; a detached, even ‘absent’ narrator; a more abundant use of dialogue; fewer adjectives and, when used, not extravagant; showing, not telling as a primary means of communicating information; an interest in the accurate depiction of the everyday; and a focus upon the present tense. (2005)

These narrative and stylistic qualities of literary minimalism owe a great deal to Ernest Hemingway, who is recognised widely as the forefather of the tradition. Hemingway devised and adhered to a “theory of omission,” which consciously seeks to omit information in order to “strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood” (75).<sup>14</sup> This theory is often expressed analogously as the “iceberg” principle, in which only one-eighth of the narrative should lie above the surface; the remaining narrative, though conceived, is omitted from the text and lies unexpressed underneath the surface as subtext. This process of omission is particularly evident in the characters of minimalist fiction, who tend to express very little, seem to feel isolated or live in isolation, or appear to struggle with the aftermath of unsaid traumas, and seem haunted by death, guilt, regrets, and loneliness. Far from eradicating emotion, as Minimal Art would have it, minimalist writers push emotion under the surface. It may be felt or implied but rarely stated. Hallett argues that “[r]epressed or compressed emotion is a key function of [literary] minimalism – emotion resounding below a deceptively mute surface” (491). This key concern – what to include and what to omit – was established by Hemingway and expanded further by Carver and minimalist writers. For Michael Trussler, the central issue that discussions of literary minimalism generally invoke is “the enigmatic relationship between what is present in a text and what is implied through absence” (24).

Literary critics generally agree on what literary minimalism entails but there remains strong disagreement on its artistic merits. Indeed, the controversy surrounding literary minimalism is not unlike its equivalent in the visual arts. Arguments against literary minimalism “range in tone from the mildly cautionary to the borderline hysterical” (Hallett 487) and are “often made more on moral than stylistic grounds” (Trussler 21). Jerome Klinkowitz argues that literary minimalism “suspends all aesthetic innovation in favour of parsing out the most mundane concerns of superficial life (for fear of intruding with a humanly judgmental use of imagination)” (364). Author Madison Smartt Bell, a passionate critic of literary minimalism, published an article in *Harper’s* in 1986 titled “Less is Less: The Dwindling American Short Story,” thus inverting the popular minimalist maxim “less is more.” In the article, Bell rapidly and systematically dismisses a series of

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<sup>14</sup> As Hallett notes, this theory is also practiced by writers as diverse as Edgar Allan Poe, Anton Chekhov, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, all of whom employ “conscious codes of omission [...] designed to make audiences feel more than they understand” (489).

minimalist writers: Beattie's "emaciated prose style" (66) and "rather anorexic stories, stripped of all but vestigial traces of emotion and often plot" (65); Hempel's "increasingly familiar sparseness of style which suggests, in the end, that there is not too much to be said but too little" (66); Leavitt's "low-key" and "noncommittal presentation" (67); Carver's "elaborately mannered" style (67). Although most of these observations are simply articulations of the author's taste and opinion, Bell also identifies in minimalist stories "a studiedly deterministic, at times nihilistic, vision of the world" (65). This is a far more contestable reading, for minimalist fiction often starts and/or ends well before or after characters are given the opportunity to take action, or before any significant event is able to take place. The stories tend to "begin in the middle and end in the middle" (Hallett 494) and thus the sealed fates implied in a "deterministic" vision of the world can be neither confirmed nor denied. Similarly, minimalist writers focus frequently on down-and-out, though extremely ordinary, characters. Even though the apparent outcome of their story may not be positive, just as often, it is not negative. The detailed depiction of their everyday, existential (or psychological, physical or financial) struggles may be regarded as a compassionate, sympathetic or humanistic gesture, rather than a nihilistic one.

Because literary minimalism enjoyed commercial success and was a mainstream tradition – unlike avant-garde Minimal Art – it received criticism that was unique to its status. In this sense, Bell ends his article by extending his criticism to literary publishers, and accuses minimalist writers of organising themselves to "conform to the marketplace not necessarily as it is but as it is perceived to be by the commercial publishing business" (68). He argues that the consistent style across a minimalist writer's short story collection is, simultaneously, evidence of the publishers' Hollywood-like preference for surface unity (it is easier to package and promote) and a reflection of "the increasing homogeneity of our society" (69). This kind of criticism culminated when Bell and four other authors (Mary Gaitskill, Tom Jenks, Stephen Koch and Meg Wolitzer) participated in a round-table discussion with the provocative title: "Throwing Dirt on the Grave of Minimalism."<sup>15</sup> This was by far the most concentrated public attack on literary minimalism, but much of the discussion that took place was unsophisticated and bitter in tone. Gaitskill rejected literary

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<sup>15</sup> It took place during the 1988 Summer Writers' Festival at Columbia University in the United States. It was organised by the university's *Columbia* magazine, in which excerpts were published in 1989. Koch was the moderator.

minimalism as “an intellectual fashion” and suggested that “probably there will be some new literary vogue to take its place in some years” (Koch et al. 48). Koch described it as “an anorectic voice [...] a new cool that feigns numbness, boredom. Accompanying that I-don’t-care drawl is the prestige of plotlessness” (51).<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the most alarmist message was expressed by Bell, who warned of Carver’s influence and the direct impact it may have on a writer’s career:

I don’t think there’s anything in it for writers now to set out to write like Raymond Carver. In the short run, it’s a means of possibly getting yourself published in a cute magazine, but there’s no point if you’re talking about long-term survival into the future, which is a much more sensible way to look at it. In fact, it’s going to be damaging to people who fall under that sway. (46-47)

Rather than delving deeply into the issues surrounding minimalism, much of which was their own making, and despite the collective expertise that they offered, these writers/critics were content to dismiss minimalism quickly and cynically as a worthless fad. As with the critics of Minimal Art, they clearly regarded literary minimalism as a threat to existing artistic boundaries, and sought to protect the modes of writing they admired, taught and practiced.

As in the visual arts, this charge against minimalism was exacerbated by the fact that literary minimalism’s key exponents often rejected the label. Carver, considered one of the most important writers of the twentieth century, has become “the quintessential referent for [literary] minimalism” (Hallett 488). His own reflections on the art and craft of writing, which, like his fiction, are written simply and precisely, seem to reinforce this notion. In his essay “On Writing,” Carver discusses his commitment “to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring – with immense, even startling, power” (1983, 15). However, Carver’s resistance to being called a minimalist is famous, and it echoes Judd’s rejection of the label in the visual arts. In Carver’s words: “somebody called me a ‘minimalist’ writer. The reviewer meant it as a compliment. But I didn’t like it. There’s something about ‘minimalist’ that smacks of smallness of vision and

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<sup>16</sup> There is some irony in Koch’s dismissal of plotlessness, for he is the author of a book about one of cinema’s most prominent advocates of it, *Stargazer: Andy Warhol’s World and His Films* (1973).

execution that I don't like" (in Simpson & Buzbee 210). Richard Ford, another writer to whom the label has been applied, rejects it as "a critical term foreign to the work [...] It's at best a convenience for a reviewer too lazy to deal with the good work on its own terms" (in Herzinger 8-9).

Hallett suggests that this defensive stance against the use of the expression "minimalism" taken by the key exponents of this literary approach reflects an interpretation of the term that "seems to lie in a negative connotation that is a cultural rather than literary construct: certain people in certain cultures have determined that to have less or to be short is to be inferior" (488). This is so despite the fact that minimalist slogans such as "less is more" and "show, don't tell" have withstood the history of criticism against literary minimalism and has been taught as valuable advice for writers. As Greaney notes: "It is another lamentable result of the neglect minimalism has faced from critics – and writers themselves, who neither assembled as a group with a manifesto, nor welcomed the term when applied to their work – that the term has not yet obtained widespread cultural currency" (2005).

### **Duration, structure, materiality and reflexivity in structural film**

It was Andy Warhol who first merged minimalism with film. His two most influential and notorious films are *Sleep* (1963), comprised of six static, extremely long shots showing a man sleeping for over five hours, and *Empire* (1964), a single static shot of the Empire State Building that runs for over eight hours. The significance of these films was recognised almost instantly by his peers in the avant-garde but they proved to be both very controversial and difficult to handle by the public. The latter is illustrated in Mike Getz's account to Jonas Mekas after a screening of *Sleep* in Los Angeles:

Amazing turnout. 500 people. *Sleep* started at 6.45. First shot, which lasts about 45 minutes, is close-up of man's abdomen. You can see him breathing. People started to walk out at 7, some complaining. People getting more and more restless. Shot finally changes to close-up of man's head. Someone runs up to screen and shouts in sleeping man's ear, 'WAKE UP!!' Audience getting bitter, strained. Movie is silent, runs at silent speed. A few more people ask for money back. [...] Thoughts of recent football riot in South America. People angry as hell, a mob on the verge of violence. Red-faced guy stomps toward me: 'Well, what are you going to do?' (in Mekas 50)



*Sleep* appeared at the height of Minimal Art and linked Warhol directly to the movement. Warhol's early films were regarded then, as it is now, as "an expression of the then emerging aesthetic of *minimalism*" (Verevis 2002; emphasis in the original), having transposed with a vengeance the durational qualities of Minimal Art into the inherently durational artform of cinema. Like the work of his counterparts in Minimal Art, his films elicited strong, often extreme, responses, and would soon have an enormous impact on the medium.

Noël Carroll identifies two major stylistic categories of minimalist film: the first has a discernible geometrical shape and is therefore similar to "gallery minimalism" – for example, Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) – while the second "involves the creation of a highly simplified, readily identified system or procedure whose underlying principle of organization can be grasped almost immediately" (2006, 177). Carroll goes on to suggest that "Warhol's *Empire* may be seen as falling into the simplified-procedure category of minimal filmmaking since there is scarcely a more austere cinematic *modus operandi* conceivable than merely turning the camera on and pointing it" (178). Having already expanded minimalism (as a movement) to encompass other artforms, including cinema, Strickland argues that, "in retrospect the Minimalist cinema may on the whole get about half a star, its negligible achievement founded on what seems a perversely reductive negation of its medium" (12). Given the radical nature of Warhol's early films, and the films that soon followed in his footsteps, such criticisms are both predictable and understandable. In Warhol's early films, evidence of technique is practically non-existent, and the anti-narrative stance of the avant-garde cinema was taken to its extreme. Their length alone made them difficult and far removed from both the mainstream narrative and avant-garde films of their time; Warhol himself conceded that audiences might not wish to sit through the whole duration of his work (Koch 1978, 166).

Yet these criticisms fail to take into account Warhol's crucial innovations: the opening up of cinema as an exploration of time, and of a cinema that takes the medium itself as its subject. P. Adams Sitney identifies Warhol as "the first filmmaker to try to make films which would outlast a viewer's initial state of perception" (1974, 351), while Koch argues that *Sleep* is radical in "its absolutely trenchant redefinition of what filmic time is and can be. [...] The film entirely modifies the very

nature of film viewing” (1978, 165). Battock suggests that in *Empire* and his other early films, Warhol “re-examines communicative procedures in art. In so doing, he has focused upon the very *presence* of the art object itself” (1967, 237; emphasis in the original). The subject of *Empire*, he continues, is “an investigation of the presence and character of film – a legitimate if not a requisite concern for the artist” (237). In a series of simply conceived and executed films – perhaps the simplest ever made – Warhol devised a purely phenomenological approach to filming reality and established duration and reflexivity as legitimate concerns of the avant-garde cinema, and, more crucially, as key characteristics of cinematic minimalism.

Similar concerns are reflected and expanded in an approach to cinema that came to be known as structural film, for which the key figures include Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, Hollis Frampton, Joyce Wieland and George Landow, with Warhol being the “major precursor” (Sitney 1974, 349). As a group of New York-based filmmakers who became active in the 1960s and who have close philosophical, aesthetic, historical and geographical associations with Minimal Art, structural film is the closest equivalent of a minimalist movement in cinema. Sitney coined the term in his influential major study of avant-garde cinema, *Visionary Film* (1974), and his definition of structural film resonates strongly in Carroll’s definition of minimalist film, as described above. Sitney defines structural film as one of “structure in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape which is the primal impression of the film” (348). He identifies four key traits of structural film (while acknowledging that there are few films that feature all of them): a fixed camera position, the flicker effect, loop printing, and rephotography of the screen.<sup>17</sup> What content these films may have, he goes on, “is minimal and subsidiary to the outline” (348).

For example, Frampton’s hour-long *Zorns Lemma* (1970) is comprised of three distinct sections, each with a unique formal structure and its own patterns, connected only by oblique thematic associations and a linear duration. In the first section, a woman (Joyce Wieland) narrates over a black screen *Bay State Primer*, a colonial-era grammar text used in the United States to teach the alphabet. In the second and lengthiest section, a series of silent one-second images cycles through the 24 letters of the Roman alphabet, which also evokes notions of time (hours in a day)

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<sup>17</sup> As A.L. Rees notes, some structural films, such as Snow’s *La Région Centrale* (1974), contain none of these traits (81).

and film (frames-per-second). The letters appear in the initial cycle printed on tin foil and photographed in close-up, then as moving images of environmental words filmed around lower Manhattan – on shop signs, billboards, posters, magazine covers, and so on – that represent each letter. After every few cycles a letter drops out and is replaced by an image without a sign, the meaning of which is unrelated to the letter it is replacing (a fire replaces *x* and a shot of a man painting replaces *k*, for example). The last section is a long take of a man, a woman and a dog walking across the snow, away from the camera, and eventually out of sight. A choral reading takes place on the soundtrack; each word of the narration is divided by precisely one second, accompanied by the sound of a metronome, and spoken by six women in turn.

Snow's seminal *Wavelength* (1967) is structured around a single slow, irregular zoom from a fixed point, which begins as a wide shot of a loft and ends on a close-up of a photograph of waves, hung on a wall in the far end of the space. Across its 45-minute progression, the zoom is punctuated at various points by sudden shifts in film stock, light (day turns abruptly to night then back to day) and colour (achieved by placing filters over the lens). It is also interrupted by "some minimal sub-drama" (Rees 73), which consists of scattered hints of narrative. Snow refers to the latter as "4 human events": removalists move in a wardrobe, two women talk and then play *Strawberry Fields Forever* on a radio, a man collapses and dies, and a woman makes a phone call where she briefly discusses the dead man. The soundtrack of the film is at first diegetic and synchronised (consisting of the sounds of the first two "events" and the traffic outside the window), with the exception of the radio playing *Strawberry Fields Forever*, which is both diegetic and obviously artificial (as it replaces all other sounds). A sine wave is then introduced at the eight-minute mark of the film and continues rising in pitch until the end (it is heard simultaneously with diegetic sounds only during the "events").

In his more polemical and political analyses of many of the same films and filmmakers, Peter Gidal expands on Sitney's discussions and emphasises the "materialist" aspects of structural film, which he initially called "Structural/Materialist film"; later he would drop "Structural" altogether from the description.<sup>18</sup> Gidal stresses the crucial importance of the non-illusionist and reflexive

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<sup>18</sup> In *Materialist Film* (1989), Gidal argues that Sitney's definitions of structural film were based on "a crucial misunderstanding of the notion of structure" and that it was problematic in that the film's

aspects of the structural film, defining structural/materialist film as one committed to be non-illusionist, whereby the “process of the film’s making deals with devices that result in demystification or attempted demystification of the film process” (1976, 1). “The dialectic of the film,” he declares, “is established in that space of tension between materialist flatness, grain, light, movement, and the supposed reality that is represented. Consequently a continual attempt to destroy the illusion is necessary” (1). In this respect, a structural/materialist film is one in which the film becomes a record of its own making (rather than a representation, reproduction or documentation); necessitates a mental activation of the viewer in decoding the film’s structure (the film is “structuring,” not merely “structural”); and, by extension, promotes a reflexive film practice in “which one watches oneself watching [and] the process of the production of *film-making*, and the filmic practice of film-viewing *as production*, become interlinked” (10; emphases in the original). This stress on the viewer strongly parallels that of Minimal Art, in its “foregrounding of the viewer as an equal player in the aesthetic experience” (Berger 16).

Despite the differences in tone and approach, both Sitney and Gidal agree on many key characteristics of the structural film while championing many of the same films and filmmakers. In both definitions, the “form [of the film] became content” (Rees 72). Far from ignoring the reflexive aspects of structural film, Sitney echoes Gidal’s discussions in arguing that Warhol’s films trigger an “ontological awareness” (1974, 352) in the viewer. A filmmaker such as Snow, meanwhile, “always incorporated an apperceptive acknowledgment of the cinematic materials and circumstances in his film. [His] transcendentalism is always grounded in a dialogue between illusion and its unveiling” (359). For both Sitney and Gidal, structural films were responding, at least in part, “to a new wave of minimalism and self-referentiality in the arts during the 1960s” (Rees 72), and more so to existing practices in their field. Like Minimal Art, which was a response to Abstract Expressionism, structural film answered to the increasingly complex cinematic forms of the avant-garde cinema, and in particular, the intuitionism, spontaneity, self-expression and abstractions in the work of such filmmakers as Stan Brakhage (whose work has been described as the filmic equivalent of Abstract Expressionism). Nonetheless, structural filmmakers, not unlike the Minimal artists before and minimalist writers after them, often rejected the

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“overall shape [...] take precedence both over the functions within any internal segments and equally over all filmic processes” (7).

terms that critics used to describe their work. In an interview with Gidal, Frampton remarked jokingly that the term structuralism “should have been left in France to confound all Gaul for another generation” (Frampton & Gidal 77).

At this point, it is important to address an apparent ambivalence in structural film’s anti-illusionist approach to duration. If indeed Warhol’s method was that he “simply turned the camera on and walked away” (Sitney 1974, 349), he would have only done so for roughly three minutes at a time for his earliest films, because it was three minutes that the 100-foot rolls of film in his Bolex camera would have taken to reach the end. When Warhol acquired a 16mm Auricon camera in 1964, which allowed him to shoot continuous 33-minute reels (Verevis 2002), he may have been able to “walk away” for longer periods but not for the entire eight hours that *Empire* would eventually run for. In spite of Warhol’s characteristic use of “no editing” (Rees 69), as he rarely changed the angle or distance of the shot (or did not change it at all, in the case of *Empire*), all film work necessarily entails connecting reels together if one wishes to include a shot in which the duration outlasts the camera’s recording capabilities. Structural films may not use editing in a traditional manner but separate reels/shots are connected, by necessity – in a straightforward chronological manner in *Empire*, and by looping from and to itself repeatedly before moving to a new shot, in the case of *Sleep*. Similarly, Snow’s *Wavelength* is not in fact a single uninterrupted shot as many descriptions of the film may suggest, including Snow’s own. “The film is a continuous zoom which takes 45 minutes to go from its widest field to its smallest and final field” (1), Snow states in his notes on the film published for the fourth International Experimental Film Competition in 1967. If the film is a continuous zoom, it is so only in the sense that there is a linear progression from wide shot to close-up, because the film is comprised of a series of connected individual 100-foot takes. As Elizabeth Legge suggests, unlike Warhol’s “still” films, Snow’s “is a constructed – not a ‘documentary realist’ – recording, and the time of *Wavelength* represents real time as well as taking place within it, as day turns to night twice during its 45 minutes” (15; emphasis in the original). Tellingly, *Wavelength*, like most fictional films, was shot out of sequence (over a weeklong period), and there were alternate rolls from which Snow chose the best takes.<sup>19</sup> And Snow has also revealed

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<sup>19</sup> Like most fictional films, the shooting schedule was decided according to convenience. For example, Snow filmed the scene of the man dying first, simply to suit the schedule of the male actor, played by friend and filmmaker Hollis Frampton (Legge 20-21).

that the shot is not in fact filmed from a single static vantage point, but multiple: the zoom lens reached its perspective's limit from the starting position and was unable to reach the photograph where the film ends; Snow therefore had to move the camera forward in the final stages of the zoom (Legge 20).

The anti-illusionism of these films seems to be predicated, paradoxically, on an illusionism of duration – a series of shots connected together to suggest a continuous one. However, the filmmakers constantly and transparently address this ambivalence by matter-of-factly making visible the cut, and by foregrounding both the materiality of the medium and various filmic processes throughout the film.<sup>20</sup> The effect, and the means by which this is achieved, is different from film to film. In *Sleep*, it is possible to notice where one take ends and the next begins, as each loop entails a small but noticeable shift in the position of the sleeping subject, as well as in the material grain of the image – the latter is particularly noticeable throughout Warhol's films due to the fact that he filmed at sound speed (24 frames per second) and projected at silent speed (16 frames per second). Similarly and despite Snow's description of *Wavelength* as a "continuous zoom," the continuity of the shot is interrupted constantly by the aforementioned visual and aural shifts; the camera also backtracks briefly, and at one point, an image previously seen is superimposed (the woman taking a phone call is seen twice). Likewise, in the beautiful and enigmatic final shot of *Zorns Lemma*, Frampton addresses the ambivalence by foregrounding both the materiality of the film and the visual content of the shot. At the end of each film reel, the male and female figures walking across the snow briefly stop and let their arms drop to their sides – as if they had been deactivated by a switch – before a quick dissolve sees them resuming their walk from an approximate position. The subtle visual transitions are also marked by the inclusion of the overexposure that signals the physical end of a film reel or the beginning of a new one. In an interview with Gidal, Frampton comments upon the final shot:

It is for all intents and purposes a continuous take. In part, it's not; it's a shot of five 100 feet rolls, and suggestions of fogged ends are left in, and it's dissolved, so... if

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<sup>20</sup> This key anti-illusionist approach differentiates the long takes employed in structural films with those in many narrative films that have adopted them as part of their formal strategy. In a similar fashion to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), Kriv Stenders's *Boxing Day* (2007) connects 12 separate shots to create the illusion that the narrative unfolds in real time, as an uninterrupted take. Each transition is positioned carefully, to camouflage it – for example, by making a subtle cut as a character rushes from indoors to outdoors.

you're at all into the materiality of film, it suggests several times that it's about to end, then it dissolves into a new image, then finally goes out to white. (Frampton & Gidal 67)

In a sense, the transitions in this shot become as predictable as the precise, mechanical cuts in the second section of the film; they simply occur much less frequently. The markers of filmic processes and materiality are also far more noticeable in this shot by virtue of its stillness and duration, as well as its predominantly white, minimal and unchanging *mise en scène*. It is through such approaches that structural films foreground the very processes of film and photography, render the form as content, and address the illusory aspects of filmmaking by stressing the materiality of the medium.<sup>21</sup>

The single most important and immediate precursor to contemporary minimalist cinema is the Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman, in particular her early films. If Warhol was the first to apply minimalism to cinema, Akerman was the first to apply it to cinema with a narrative, as slight as that narrative may be. Made during and shortly after a two-year stint in New York, Akerman's early minimalist films display the direct influence of the structural film movement, which she was exposed to at the Anthology Film Archives. They also constitute a progression in which narrative elements become more prominent with each successive film, thus demonstrating the equal influence that narrative and avant-garde filmmaking practice had on her. Even though she is sometimes named alongside structural filmmakers, Akerman's film work is an extension of the structural film movement rather than a part of it; her introduction of narrative elements, and eventually narrative outright, constitute a significant break from the non-narrative stance taken by structural filmmakers. Through her equal consideration of minimalist form and content, Akerman's films are a crucial, direct link between structural film, as well as earlier minimalist traditions, and contemporary minimalist cinema.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The physical medium of film plays a vital role in this process. Indeed, it is fascinating to hypothesise how Warhol and structural filmmakers would have approached duration had they been made today. Digital technology has eliminated the technical limitations of how long a shot may be held, and practically removed materiality as an element of filmmaking.

<sup>22</sup> This is not to suggest that Akerman was the only significant narrative filmmaker who was influenced by minimalism in the 1960s and 70s. (See for example Jacques Rivette's experimentations with duration in the little-seen *Out 1: Noli Me Tangere* [1971], which runs just shy of 13 hours, and the reworked *Out 1: Spectre* [1974], which runs for over four hours.) However, Akerman's early films are an obvious precursory model for contemporary minimalist cinema in that the influence of minimalism

Recalling the play between stillness and movement in many structural films, Akerman's short *La chambre* (1972) is a single-take film in which the camera pans 360-degrees around a small apartment; Akerman is shown during each revolution resting on a bed and repeating minute gestures (turning her neck, rocking from side to side, eating an apple) toward the camera. *Hotel Monterey* (1972) and *News From Home* (1976) are minimalist documentaries about displacement: the former is a formal exploration of the mainly empty corridors of a low-rent hotel in New York, while the latter is a series of long static takes in various parts of the city, over which Akerman reads out sporadically letters from her mother in Belgium. Both films carry over some of the reflexive strategies of structural films: flickers and fogged ends of film reels are often prominent, and both facilitate a structuring process on the part of the viewer. Most noticeably, they are reflexive in a manner both different to structural films and befitting their theme and autobiographical nature. There are numerous instances in both films where the camera stares at people staring back at it, foregrounding explicitly the filmmaking and viewing process, Akerman's presence behind the camera, and the viewer's in front of the screen.

Whereas *Hotel Monterey* only hints at the potential for narrative through its formal suspense and occasional glimpses of the hotel's inhabitants – for example, a pregnant woman seen through a doorway – *News From Home* gains clear narrative momentum through the repetitions and chronology of the letters read aloud on the soundtrack. Through these the viewer is encouraged to piece together unseen events in Akerman's life and her relationship with her mother, and the images of the city – never directly related to the letters – gain poetic and thematic resonance. Akerman's first fictional feature, *Je, tu, il, elle* (1975), foregrounds its narrative structure, which is also hinted at by its title; the film is comprised of three distinct sections that detail stages of the protagonist's (played by Akerman) love life. In the first section, she remains in a sparse apartment, where she neurotically writes and rewrites a letter, shifts her furniture around, and eats nothing but spoonfuls of sugar. In the second, she embarks on a road trip with a male truck driver, to whom she eventually gives a handjob. In the third, she visits and has sex with an ex-girlfriend. The film features long takes, minimalist visual compositions (often emphasising lines and geometric

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and structural film in particular can be felt directly, and that her films reflect more than any other from the period the diverse formal concerns of structural filmmakers, which, as outlined above, go far beyond duration.



shapes) and extensive repetitions, both formally and narratively. Although *Je, tu, il, elle* and Akerman's next film – the widely acknowledged masterpiece *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975; hereafter *Jeanne Dielman*) – are very much a product of their time in their sexual politics and aesthetics, they would both sit comfortably as examples of contemporary minimalist cinema had they been made today.

*Jeanne Dielman* is a fictional, experimental film that uses extremely long takes to observe, in real time, the tedious daily routines of a housewife (Delphine Seyrig) over three days and across a 225-minute running time. After completing her household chores, each afternoon she prostitutes herself to a male client, the third of whom she murders with a pair of scissors after achieving orgasm. Ivone Margulies points out the influence of narrative art cinema in Akerman's work: the colour palettes, compositions, narrative linearity and ellipses would associate the filmmaker with the “disjunctions of European art cinema,” whereas the performances in her film are indebted specifically to “Bresson's flat models and Dreyer's nonpsychological austerity” (2009). R. Patrick Kinsman notes that one of *Jeanne Dielman*'s “most immediately noticeable characteristics [...] is its reliance on cinematic minimalism, manifested as long takes and medium shots” (218). Akerman herself has openly acknowledged the influence of minimalism via structural film and such artists as Snow, Mekas and Warhol. In discovering their films, Akerman realised “the relationship between film and your body, [and] time as the most important thing in film, time and energy” (in *Kinder 2*).<sup>23</sup>

Margulies notes how the film sits at the intersection of narrative and avant-garde cinema and argues that it “constitutes a radical experiment with being undramatic, and paradoxically with the absolute necessity of drama” (2009). She also identifies the influence of Akerman's film decades later, in the works of minimalist filmmakers who may all be said to straddle both narrative and avant-garde traditions in cinema. According to Margulies:

Despite their apparent simplicity, Akerman's assured framing and narrative, built out of blocks of real time intercut by radical ellipses, are not easily replicated. Rather, the

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<sup>23</sup> The influence of structural film is so apparent that at the time of *Jeanne Dielman*'s release, “many in the avant-garde felt vindicated that [the film] was so plainly indebted to pure experiments with duration and series” (Margulies 2009).

film's impact is indirectly evident in the emergence of a new phenomenological sensibility and approach to observation and the weight of time in the work of contemporary filmmakers as diverse as Abbas Kiarostami, Gus van Sant, Pedro Costa, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Todd Haynes, Jia Zhangke, and Tsai Ming-liang. (2009)

It is this combination of narrative – with its potential to engage directly with human struggles and social realities – and the avant-garde's phenomenological and reflexive approaches, which began to yield new and interesting results in the field of cinematic realism. Notions of realism were rarely applied to early minimalist film by virtue of the fact that it contained no narrative, no characters and no social realities that it directly addressed.

*Jeanne Dielman* was received widely as a feminist film, both in its form and content and through the combination of the two. Kinsman suggests that critics found its content “highly political, arguing that it shows the alienation implicit in housework, or that it validated housewives as part of the labor force, or that Jeanne's routine drove her mad and caused her ‘eruption’ at the film's end” (218). Margulies notes how the film's “rigorous alignment of sexual and gender politics with a formal economy — showing cooking and hiding sex — was hailed by feminist critics as an impressive alternative to well-intentioned but conventional political documentaries and features” (2009). Indicating both her political outlook and an affinity for realist formal approaches, Akerman has stated that she wanted to “avoid cutting the woman in a hundred pieces [and] to look carefully and to be respectful” (in Margulies 1996, 68). In *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman found a way to combine minimalism and realism within a narrative framework. The form matched the content, while it remained an integral part of the content itself (as per the objectives of structural film). Here, minimalism could represent social reality (as per the objectives of cinematic realism and realism more broadly), reflect on the medium, and have social and political meaning. This is a legacy that has lived on in the works of contemporary minimalist filmmakers, who represent the most unified expression of cinematic minimalism since structural film, and, as Margulies has suggested, are the closest descendants of Akerman.

## **Defining contemporary minimalist cinema**

Before examining in detail contemporary minimalist cinema's own minimalist manifestations, it is important to address the crucial problem of how to define this body of work. The difference between how the notion of minimalism has been applied in discussions of avant-garde cinema and narrative cinema is analogous to how it has been used in the arts more broadly. For example, the capitalised term "Minimalism" has direct aesthetic and historical links with the structural films of the avant-garde, whereas the lower-case term "minimalism" can be applied to describe the work of such narrative filmmakers as Bresson. The latter term is adaptable, open to interpretation, transcends historical periods and therefore more difficult to describe and measure. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the number of narrative and formal techniques available to filmmakers is huge and they encompass a wide range of artforms.

There has never been an organised discussion of minimalism in narrative cinema because it never had an established tradition as it did in literature, or a discernible movement as in the visual arts. As such, there currently exists almost no critical consensus as to what actually constitutes minimalism in narrative cinema. This is apparent from the different labels critics have used to describe minimalist films (as listed in the General Introduction), all of which have been more or less synonymously used to describe minimalism. This multiple nomenclature is mirrored in both the visual arts and literature, where many tags were used before "minimalism" became the presiding term. Prior to 1967, Minimal Art had been described as "ABC Art," "Rejective art," "Cool art" and "Primary Structures" (Meyer 18). Similarly, literary minimalism had been described as "Pop Realism," "New Realism," "TV Fiction," "Neo-Domestic Neo-Realism" and even "Post-Post-Modernism" (Herzinger 11). As Greaney notes, the liberal use of the word "minimalism" across various artforms – a consequence of the fact that it never had a specific definition – has meant that it has become a "cross-cultural term which stretches to encompass sometimes very different enterprises and this can obfuscate the definition of the term" (2005). This confusion cannot be more apparent in cinema, where the expression continues to be applied inconsistently and often haphazardly.

Much in the way terms such as "experimental" and "postmodern" are often used too quickly to label films, when applied to narrative cinema, minimalism is

generally used in its broadest sense to summarise a film's simple design. It often appears in some unlikely contexts, far removed from the term's origins, and applied according to different criteria. For example, presumably because of its contained setting (a canyon), Scott Macaulay describes Danny Boyle's *127 Hours* (2010) as "decidedly more minimalist [than his earlier work]" (2011), thus placing minimalism on a quantitative scale. The same justification seems to apply to Rodrigo Cortés's thriller *Buried* (2010), which, due to its confined narrative premise and single setting (a man trapped underground in a coffin), has been described as "an exercise in cinematic minimalism" (Murray 2010) and as part of a trend in single-location "minimalist thrillers" (Rose 2010) dating back to Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944). This is so despite the fact that both Boyle's and Cortés's films may be described from the view of style as "maximalist," as they use rapid cuts, restless camera movements, a dense and heightened soundtrack – and in the case of *127 Hours*, extensive flashback sequences – to express the plight of their protagonists.

The term "minimalism" is no more specific when used in the context of art cinema. Lodge Kerrigan's films, such as *Clean, Shaven* (1993), *Claire Dolan* (1998) and *Keane* (2004), have been consistently labeled as "minimalist" by critics (French 2006, Wood 2006) because of their sustained focus on the minute sensory experiences of their protagonists. This criteria mirrors Arthur M. Saltzman's approach to (re)defining literary minimalism; in response to criticism against the minimalist tradition in contemporary American fiction, he suggests a range of strategies to expand the possibilities of what minimalism may constitute, one of these being to contribute to "a definition of minimalism that emphasizes concentration rather than attenuation" (431). Like most discussions of minimalist narrative cinema, Yvette Bíró's essay "The Fullness of Minimalism," which addresses minimalist narrative filmmaking with particular reference to Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003) and *Three Times* (2005), does not take into account the broader discourse of minimalism in the arts. While Bíró eloquently describes minimalist film aesthetics in the context of narrative cinema, the concept of minimalism offered here is a Bressonian one, denoting simplicity, quietude and concentration. When she discusses the films' formal aspects, such as their long takes and use of repetition, the qualities that are described remain abstract and detached from the craft of filmmaking: "Lingering on their real time vitality they gain an unexpected light. Duration lends to them a radiation, another illumination. Consequently, the series becomes more than the mere sum of the

components, it is another, broader whole” (2006). Although the prose in B ro’s essay captures beautifully the elusive qualities of minimalism, in order to explain the prevalence of minimalism in contemporary art cinema, differentiate its use from other artforms and traditions, and pinpoint the similarities and differences between films and filmmakers, more precision with the term and consideration of the filmmakers’ craft are needed.<sup>24</sup>

Even during the height of Minimal Art, when the term was used with more specificity, artists and artworks were labeled as minimalist even though they were not strictly so, and purely formalist readings of minimalism remained dominant.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the definition of contemporary minimalist cinema entertained in this thesis takes into account minimalism’s flexibility. In this sense, I am adapting the term to describe a body of contemporary narrative films, as others have done in the context of various artforms, but I strive to retain precision by relying on the key, defining characteristics and strategies of minimalism as expressed in earlier minimalist traditions. This approach testifies to the fact that minimalist filmmakers have much more in common with those traditions, besides the obvious and well-documented tendency for simplicity, than critics and the filmmakers themselves have given credit for. It also aids in restoring some specificity to the term in the context of cinema and, as discussed in the General Introduction, alludes to a greater range of strategies than that encapsulated in the label “slow cinema.”

As Strickland argues, if the term “minimalism” is to have any real meaning as opposed to being merely a generic description, the artwork’s historical context as well as the artist’s “philosophical commitment” to minimalism is important; hence to “call the builders of Stonehenge Minimalists is to evaporate the term” (4).<sup>26</sup> By the same token, it would be misleading to call the simple film grammar and techniques of the

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<sup>24</sup> The same cannot be said for B ro’s valuable book on temporality in film, *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design* (2008), which examines in detail the narrative and formal strategies used by a range of filmmakers. This discussion, however, does not take place under the rubric of “minimalism.”

<sup>25</sup> As James Meyer notes, artists Agnes Martin and Anne Truitt were included in key Minimal Art exhibitions during the 1960s: both artists’ work share many surface aesthetic qualities with Minimal Art, yet there was a crucial difference in that “neither had adopted the literalist agenda key to Minimalism and both retained some form of illusion” (24).

<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Meyer notes that while on the surface Minimal Art shares many aesthetic qualities with the Soviet Constructivist art of the early twentieth-century, they cannot be easily compared due to the vastly different social, cultural and political environment in which the art was created. Despite their similarities, within the context of 1960s New York in which many Minimal artists worked, the Constructivists’ “radical innovations no longer carried the revolutionary political meaning they once possessed” (20).

Lumières, “minimalist.” Without downplaying the beauty, innovations and continuing influence of their pioneering aesthetic, it is possible nonetheless to argue that it was largely the result of historical circumstances – that is, their methods of representation were simple by default because other approaches had not yet been devised, including that of narrative cinema. Conversely, a filmmaker such as Alonso – whose style has many similarities with the Lumières’ early films, as posited in the General Introduction – demonstrates a clear and conscious artistic decision to be minimalist by drastically reducing or eliminating the narrative and stylistic tropes associated with the current, dominant methods of representation (in addition to introducing an array of other minimalist strategies, to be discussed later in this thesis). Although the differences between these filmmakers go far beyond that which can or cannot be explained by artistic intent and historical context, a crucial difference is that Alonso’s work demonstrates a conscious process of simplification rather than merely being simple. As I am showing in this chapter, minimalism in any context is a response to complex aesthetic forms of its time. Therefore, where this thesis focuses on contemporary examples of cinematic minimalism, it also considers the cinematic climate in which these films exist.

Contemporary minimalist cinema sits at the junction of the abovementioned minimalist traditions in art, literature and avant-garde cinema, and therefore I draw from the narrative and formal characteristics of these traditions to define what a minimalist film is. For example, Kiarostami’s *Five* (2003) – a feature film comprising of five extremely long takes filmed by the Caspian Sea – and *Shirin* (2008) – a series of close-ups of women in a cinema, watching a film offscreen – do not contain enough narrative elements to draw useful comparisons with other films in Kiarostami’s oeuvre or films by other directors. These two films share many similarities with structural film and Minimal Art (non-narrative, repetitive, structural, reflexive, durational), but not enough with narrative cinema and literary minimalism (neither characters nor narrative). The same may be said of certain films by experimental filmmaker James Benning, who is often mentioned in discussions of slow cinema – films such as *North on Evers* (1982), *Nightfall* (2011) and *Stemple Pass* (2012) demonstrate a negligible interest in filmed narrative. All of these examples can comfortably be labeled as “minimalist,” yet the absence of narrative leaves them too far outside the parameters of my discussion. Conversely, a film such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s *Three Monkeys* (2008) shares many formal similarities with

his own and other minimalist films, yet relies too extensively on narrative and dramatic suspense to be classified as a minimalist work.

### **The legacy of minimalism in contemporary cinema**

Minimal Art, literary minimalism and structural film are fundamentally different artforms. However, while minimalism manifests in diverse ways across them, its key principles and characteristics remain the same. For a start, all three forms are bound by an aesthetic of simplicity: Minimal Art's precise, geometric forms manifest in structural films' long takes, formal simplicity and calculated structural outlines; meanwhile, in literary minimalism they translate as a sparse, strict and understated prose style. Minimal Art and structural films reject narrative; the latter, however, may sometimes allude to narrative as part of its formal structure (as in the case of *Wavelength*). Literary minimalism is unambiguously a narrative form and cannot reject it outright, but it downplays narrative significantly more than other modes of writing through its use of uneventful plots, focus on the everyday, and inexpressive characters. Both Minimal Art and structural films seek to eradicate emotion; literary minimalism does not eradicate it altogether but mutes it heavily, suppressing it as subtext underneath the surface of the work. The formal repetitions of Minimal Art are echoed in the loop printing and the visual, aural and structural repetitions of structural films. In minimalist literature repetition manifests both in the style, for example, as short sentences used one after another, and within the narrative, for example, through the depiction of the cycles of everyday life's routines. Minimal Art and structural films are both non-illusionist and reflexive: both initiate a state of conscious perception in the viewer; the latter also reveals and emphasises the materiality of the medium and its filmic processes, and often urges the viewer to decode its formal structure and patterns during viewing. Literary minimalism is far from being overtly reflexive like the other two, yet its exaggeratedly simple prose style instills in the writing a noticeable artificiality, while its fragmentary and elliptical stories often demand a high degree of participation from the reader in order to create meaning. These minimalist characteristics and strategies manifest in new ways, and encounter new problems, in narrative cinema.

Given that cinema first became associated with minimalism via Warhol and structural film, it is no surprise that the issue of duration still dominates discussions of

minimalist films. For example, Béla Tarr's use of the long take and the length of his works push "duration to an extent most often confined to the experimental tradition" (Balsom 27). Indeed, the duration of shots in *Werckmeister Harmonies* – an average of almost four minutes per shot – and the seven-hour-plus running time of *Sátántangó* (1994) evoke the likes of Warhol and bear little resemblance to most narrative films, past or present. The durational aspects of minimalist films are often framed as a politicised formal response to the rapid pace of contemporary visual culture and its cinematic manifestations. Matthew Flanagan argues that in addition to being "in defiant opposition to the quickening of pace in mainstream American cinema," minimalist cinema "compels us to retreat from a culture of speed, modify our expectations of filmic narration and physically attune to a more deliberate rhythm" (2008). Similarly, Jonathan Romney suggests that we "understandably thirst for abstraction at a time when immediacy and simultaneity [...] are tyrannical demands, forcing our aesthetic sensibility to seek ways of slowing itself down." He goes on to state that a reductive form of cinema can help viewers "engage more reflexively with the world in a way that can be critical and indeed political" (43). By the same token, Bíró highlights the attention that minimalist films give to the "neglected values of slowness, an urge against the over-praised fast pace, the infatuation with feverish quickness, as it has become idolized in life as well as film" (2006).

Minimalist filmmakers have also expressed, outside their films, how their minimalist strategies are informed by current historical context. Tarr has explained the reason for his use of the long take: "the people of this generation know information-cut, information-cut, information-cut. They can follow the logic of [...] the story, but they don't follow the logic of life" (Ballard 2004). Similarly, Gus Van Sant has criticised American cinema as being like soundbites (Macaulay 2002). These sentiments are strikingly similar to those expressed in interviews by structural filmmakers. Gehr, for example, explains that *Still* (1969-1971) was driven in part by a desire to "counter [...] the grain of the quick take" that was being applied in audiovisual representations of the Vietnam War, which, "among other things, [contributed to] an oversimplification of reality" (Catapano & Gehr 2013). For Scott MacDonald, Gehr's work is informed by the "idea of using cinema as a retraining of perception, often of slowing us down so that we can truly see and hear" (in Catapano & Gehr 2013). Contemporary minimalist filmmakers, therefore, continue to explore



the ramifications of the long take as a key minimalist strategy first explored in depth by structural filmmakers.

Yet, as already indicated, the radically long takes and extended durations are only some of the ways in which minimalist strategies have been adapted into narrative film. Contemporary minimalist cinema also shares Minimal Art's broad objectives in its "commitment to clarity, conceptual rigour, literalness and simplicity" (Gablik 245). These objectives are often already apparent in the titles of minimalist films, many of which also suggest close aesthetic ties with structural film. For example, Kiarostami's *Ten, Five and 10 on Ten* (2004) reveal literally their formal structures and conceptual outlines, as each title refers to the number of scenes or shots in the film. Similarly, Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror* (1998), Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte* (2010) and Tarr's *Sátántangó* allude to the films' narrative structures (divided into two distinct halves, four sections representing seasonal change and the cycle of life, and split like the steps of a tango, respectively). In addition, Costa's *In Vanda's Room*, Tsai's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), and Jia's *The World* (2004) and *24 City* (2008) refer to the locations where the films are set.<sup>27</sup> As already outlined, these broad minimalist objectives have manifested in minimalist films through extremely simple approaches to narrative and form, and by adhering to a framework in which the range of techniques and approaches – the cinematic syntax – is deliberately reduced.

In minimalist films, minimalist frameworks are used to depict simple narrative premises, minimal plots and unsensational situations, which often feature repetition and mundane events that gain dramatic, thematic and poetic resonance over the film's running time. For example, in Tsai's *The River* (1997), a young unemployed drifter reluctantly agrees to help on a friend's film set by floating in a river, pretending to be a corpse. He subsequently contracts a mysterious neck pain, and the remainder of the narrative details his and his family's poignant and increasingly desperate efforts to remedy it. Over time and through narrative repetition, it becomes apparent how fractured the family is, and a seemingly banal medical problem gradually takes on tragic and otherworldly proportions. As discussed, repetition is a key formal characteristic of Minimal Art and structural film, and manifests in the repetition of

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<sup>27</sup> The "world" in the title of Jia's film refers to the Beijing World Park where the film is set. This is an actual theme park that contains downscaled replicas of world landmarks including the Pyramids, the Red Square, the Eiffel Tower and the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

images and sounds, or the repeating structural patterns in many minimalist films.<sup>28</sup> However, rather than constituting a debt to Minimal Art and structural film, the use of repetition within a minimalist narrative parallels instead the minimalist tradition in literature, which often takes as its subject a character's existence within the repetitive everyday.

Furthermore, minimalist films often combine narrative repetition with the formal repetition of recurring visual and aural motifs – a combination available only to narrative filmmaking. For example, Ceylan's *Uzak* focuses on the uneasy relationship between its two central characters: Yusuf (Mehmet Emin Toprak), a young man from the countryside who has come to Istanbul in search of work, and his older and wealthier relative Mahmut (Muzaffer Özdemir), a photographer who has reluctantly offered him a room in his apartment until he finds a job. The narrative revolves around the repetitive everyday cycles of each man: Yusuf wanders around the docks during the day looking for work and returns home at night after failing to find any; Mahmut remains at home unless he needs to work, and spends his days unproductively, dedicating a large swathe of his time to watching TV. The repetition in the plot and the stasis of and growing tension between the characters are articulated further through visual and aural reiteration. For example, Ceylan repeatedly uses the sounds of a wind chime on the apartment balcony: it is first heard as a mysterious and ambiguous offscreen sound, gradually becomes integrated into the everyday soundscape of the neighbourhood, turns into a plot device when it becomes a source of direct irritation for Mahmut (in a subtle but key scene, Yusuf absentmindedly pokes it when smoking on the balcony, prompting Mahmut to shut the balcony door with Yusuf still outside), before finally making its way into Yusuf's dreams in abstract form, toward the end of the film. Similarly, the frequent sounds of foghorns in the distance evoke the repetitive comings and goings of the ships on which Yusuf is trying to find work. Although numerous ships are shown leaving the port throughout the film, the presiding image is one of stagnation: a memorable shot of Yusuf walking past a huge ship overturned in the harbour, underlying the futility of his search. Ceylan reinforces this stagnant atmosphere visually by using similar or exact shots on multiple occasions (he achieves it, most notably, with a wide shot of the TV room in

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<sup>28</sup> Repetition is also a key characteristic of minimalist (or minimal) music, another major minimalist tradition which emerged alongside Minimal Art in the United States; key composers include Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Riley and La Monte Young.

the apartment that is shared uncomfortably and often comically with the two men), adding subtle narrative and character developments every time the shot reappears.

But contemporary minimalist cinema's narrative roots may also be found in the European modernist cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. According to Flanagan, the principal source of this influence is the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, Alain Resnais and Roberto Rossellini, "where emotional restraint began to suppress dramatic incident and the themes of alienation, isolation and boredom usurped the weight of familiar conflict" (2008). The narratives of minimalist films, however, are far simpler, sparser and more contained than almost everything that has come before it. In narrative terms, Alonso's *La libertad* is no more than the observation of a day in the life of a woodcutter, completely void of any sort of dramatic development or conflict. The same may be said of many of Tsai's and Weerasethakul's films, which are virtually plotless, as well as the recent works of Costa and Kiarostami, who have stripped away plot and narrative to a bare minimum and often revolve around a reduced number of locations.

In spite of their characteristic plotlessness, minimalist films tend to end in a surge of, often sexualised, narrative violence, not unlike Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, as discussed earlier in the chapter. Adrian Martin (2012) notes that often, minimalist films end,

after so much banality, mundanity, and deliberate nothing-much-happening – with a sudden burst of seemingly inexplicable violence: murder (or multiple murders at once), suicide, even brutal castration [...] suddenly appear[ing] to splice in a genre or exploitation code. (520)

And he goes on to compare this narrative strategy of withholding spectacle before a violent release, with orgasm:

I wonder, is there some kind of formal delight in ending two or more hours of contemplative, minimalist cinema in an explosion of violent death? It is easy to think of this effect as a kind of orgasm – a big or little death – a climax that has been prepared for very slowly, very exquisitely; much more slowly and exquisitely than in traditional narrative cinema. (520-521)

Martin's description would suit perfectly *Jeanne Dielman* on both literal and metaphorical levels: the film ends, after almost four hours, with the title character achieving orgasm and then committing a murder. Although the violence depicted in the minimalist films discussed in this thesis do not reach the excessive heights that Martin describes, there are many examples of it nonetheless: the killing of an armadillo and a goat, respectively, in Alonso's *La libertad* and *Los muertos* (2004); a group of men rampaging a hospital and assaulting the patients in Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies*; the accidental sexual encounter of a man with his father, who then strikes him, in Tsai's *The River*; the smashing of a window in the startling and enigmatic final shot of Kiarostami's *Like Someone in Love* (2012); and many others.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of the above examples, the narrative climax in the majority of minimalist films, if they have one at all, is generally far more subdued, although they still register as major events within the context of the film. Tsai's characters, for example, often break down in a cathartic outpouring of emotion near the end, after having remained relatively mute and expressionless throughout most of the film (*Vive l'amour* [1994], *The Wayward Cloud* [2005], *Stray Dogs* [2013]). Minimalist filmmakers' affinity to quietude and the quotidian is thus counterbalanced by the heightened dramatic impact they are able to exploit in a minimalist form of narrative filmmaking. While the climactic use of sex, death and violence in no way applies to each and every minimalist film, it is a trend that reflects the crucial importance that narrative has in these films, and demonstrates their strong similarities to literary minimalism. As in minimalist fiction, when something eventually happens in a minimalist film it can happen with great intensity, imbued with a certain gravitas unattainable in other forms of storytelling.<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum describes this trait as one of the "drawbacks of minimalism," in that a "few elements can take on hyperbolic importance" (2005). However, as I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the disproportionately high – indeed, occasionally hyperbolic – importance that these few elements can take on is precisely what minimalist filmmakers take

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<sup>29</sup> Martin's examples include Sanjeeva Pushpakumara's *Flying Fish* (2011) and Sergei Loznitsa's *My Joy* (2010).

<sup>30</sup> Take, for example, the ending of Carver's short story "Tell The Women We're Going." After the story has depicted the banal interactions between two old friends who sneak away from their wives and try and pick up two young girls they drive past, the story takes an abrupt, shocking turn in its final sentences: "He never knew what Jerry wanted. But it started and ended with a rock. Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon and then on the one that was supposed to be Bill's" (1981, 66).

advantage of. It is the narrative equivalent of Warhol's films' "slight variations in the image," which "become all the more important because of their scarcity" (Battock 1967, 237-38). A similar sentiment is captured eloquently by Straub in Costa's documentary *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* (2001): "a sigh can become a novel."<sup>31</sup>

It is significant to note at this point that the heavily de-dramatised narratives of minimalist films seem to owe little to the work of structural filmmakers, who were for the most part not interested in narrative. Darren Hughes suggests that for Snow, "[a]rtistic form vanishes amid the simple pleasures of narrative" (2008, 160). The main problem with narrative in film, Snow argues, "is that when you become emotionally involved, it becomes difficult to see the picture as picture. Of course, the laughing and crying and suspense can be a positive element, but it's oddly nonvisual and gradually destroys your capacity to see" (in MacDonald 67). Yet critics have written persuasively about the narrative undercurrents of key structural films: their strategic use of the *potential* for narrative. In *Wavelength*, the obvious elements are the "human events" – scattered across the film and linked causally only by some vague snippets of dialogue – all of which "the lens literally passes over in a casually anti-narrative gesture" (Rees 73). However, it is the combination of these narrative fragments – unexplained, unexplored and hastily relegated to the offscreen – combined with the formal framework in which they appear, that makes *Wavelength* a non-narrative film that paradoxically relies on the viewer's awareness of the possibility of a narrative occurring. At times in the film, narrative fragments and film form seem to interact directly. Arguably the most "dramatic" moment in the film is an offscreen sound of glass smashing, during which the image quickly shifts through various hues – "suggesting that the film or the room also have physiological responses to the 'suspense' [of the ambiguous offscreen sound]" (Legge 13) – followed by an abrupt shift to night as we continue to hear the noise of a break-in and footsteps coming up the stairs. More generally, the film builds dramatic tension through non-narrative means: its "slow directional movement creates an expectation that we are being directed toward something, toward a definitive event" (13). Similarly, Annette Michelson argues that by means of the camera's trajectory through empty space

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<sup>31</sup> Saltzman also evokes this quality of minimalism in his description of Nicholson Baker's novel *The Mezzanine* (1988): "In this scaled-down drama, how best to put on socks is the stuff of high comedy; the sight of a "wounded" paper bag brings supreme pathos; the peregrinations of a phonograph needle offer picaresque delights" (426).

toward an object in *Wavelength*, Snow invented “a reduction which, operating as the generator of spatiotemporality of narrative, produces the formal correlative of the suspense film” (118). In the documentary portrait *Michael Snow Up Close* (1995), Snow discusses the non-narrative nature of his films by evoking narrative films nonetheless, stating that he “became more interested in film vocabulary – panning, tracking, dollying – and trying to make those things [...] the *protagonists* in the film” (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup> Likewise, even in a film as plainly and defiantly non-narrative as *Empire*, Battock draws parallels with narrative films and identifies some unlikely traces of drama:

During the first fifteen minutes the image of the building is obscured almost entirely by fog. This provides a dramatic beginning, and one that acknowledges traditional methods of film art. It recalls the first appearance of Garbo in *Anna Karenina* [Brown 1935], when the face of the actress is almost totally obscured by steam from a train. Dramatic evolution is confined to the first reel, leaving the rest of the film free to concentrate on a more important limitation of the medium. (1967, 236)

In the context of contemporary minimalist films, these reassessments of what constitutes narrative, suspense and drama, are useful to understand a cinema that contains far more narrative elements than most experimental or avant-garde films, but far fewer elements than conventional narrative films; yet it is a kind of cinema that relies equally on its formal and narrative elements to create drama. Minimalist filmmakers, like the avant-garde, may see narrative as a delimiting factor also but they do not do away with it altogether. Instead they situate their approach within the most popular cinematic form – that of narrative cinema – and take full advantage of, as well as respond critically to, everything the form has to offer.

Minimalist films, therefore, paradoxically both embrace and reject the avant-garde’s resistance to narrative. Rather than indulging in the narrative pleasures and emotional manipulations of most narrative films, they critically strip the narrative back, often to a bare minimum. They also often allow narratively unimportant visual and aural elements to take on a heightened dramatic importance through their formal

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<sup>32</sup> His three best known structural films demonstrate clearly this interest, with each focusing on an aspect of film vocabulary: the zoom (*Wavelength*), panning and tilting (*Back and Forth* [1969], also known as <--->), and 360-degree camera movement (*La Région Centrale*). The latter was achieved by attaching a camera to the robotic arm of a machine Snow co-designed with engineer Pierre Abeloos, which performed preprogrammed movements.

treatment. Nonetheless, these filmmakers recognise the potential of narrative to engage the viewer, sustain dramatic interest, depict social realities and express ideas that are not representable in a non-narrative form; for example, charting a character's emotional journey or exploring the causality between characters, events and societal factors (these aspects will be discussed at length in the next chapter). Without considering narrative, it becomes irrelevant to emphasise the durational aspects of minimalist films, or their eventual similarities to their durational cinematic precedents. Whereas structural filmmakers filmed a single object or concept, often for hours, contemporary minimalist filmmakers film characters, places and narratives, seeking to engage viewers emotionally. Warhol's approach to filmmaking, for example, was purely phenomenological, as he sought to foreground the literalness of the subject being filmed, emphasising the medium itself and the act of viewing it. Minimalist filmmakers adopt these phenomenological and reflexive approaches, but take into account both form and narrative; and also seek to depict social realities, whether directly or obliquely, whether literally or poetically.

Finally, it is pertinent that I draw attention to the rather elusive relationship between minimalism and realism, particularly in view of understanding minimalist filmmakers' approach to cinematic realism. As discussed in this thesis' General Introduction, André Bazin's realist theory provides the most obvious framework through which to analyse the realism of minimalist films. In general, Bazinian realism, and the various films, filmmakers and cinematic traditions it encompasses, strives for realism through some form of narrative or formal simplification. The phenomenological approaches of the long take and depth of field, as outlined by Bazin, are designed as austere substitutes for complex, fragmented and illusory editing methods. The neorealist focus on the quotidian entails both a de-dramatisation of narrative and the minimisation of the superficial aspects of narrative conventions. The use of nonprofessional actors often renders an actor's face a blank canvas, and is used to craft ambiguous and non-expressive performances that suppress emotion and intent. Likewise, the use of location shooting and natural lighting, and a conscious evocation of the early cinema, can be read as a push toward realism by stripping away artifice and reducing the technical and aesthetic complexity of most fictional filmmaking. These approaches will be explored in depth, and also questioned, in the next chapter; suffice it to say that through their shared preference for reduction and

simplicity, the general parallels between Bazinian realism and film minimalism are obvious enough.

However, as discussed throughout this chapter, an aesthetics of simplicity alone does not denote minimalism; it is merely one of its characteristics. As highlighted earlier, the presence of paradox is a common occurrence in descriptions of minimalist works. For example, Minimal Art has been described, and indeed attacked, for its literalness, while the artists have shared a “philosophical commitment to the *abstract* [...] material object” (Colpitt 1; emphasis added). “Literal” and “abstract” are two qualities that seem to contradict each other; yet through the artists’ commitment to creating a precise, rational and non-referential art, Minimal Art becomes so excessively literal that it paradoxically gains a strong abstract quality nonetheless. The extreme simplicity and repetitions of its form, combined with the manner in which it is exhibited, allows the work to transcend its apparent literalness, rendering it strange and abstract. Similarly, Hallett describes how minimalist literature has a “detectable artificiality” that results, ironically, from the “exaggerated realism” of its sparse, precise prose and concentrated focus on the everyday. Thus, Carver may write realistic (or hyperrealistic) fiction, yet the style of his prose may still register as being “elaborately mannered” (Bell 1986, 67) in its starkness, simplicity and suppression of both emotion and information. As such, minimalist literature contrasts with traditional forms of narrative realism that seek to camouflage the very devices that are used to construct realism. Also, as I have discussed it above, artifice is not merely detectable but foregrounded in structural films, which often juggle two apparently contradicting commitments: a literal, realistic representation of time and space through phenomenological approaches, on the one hand; and the foregrounding of the materiality of the medium and the illusionistic procedures behind the film’s making, on the other. According to Ted Perry, Gehr’s *Still* “documents a realistic and credible world (a street corner)” but renders it abstract through its use of superimposition and duration, while Warhol’s *Sleep* “takes a realistic subject – a man sleeping – and renders it quite abstract” (3) through its use of repetition and duration.<sup>33</sup> Snow refers to *Wavelength* as “a balancing of ‘illusion’ and ‘fact’” (1), and Legge, echoing

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<sup>33</sup> Perry argues that Gehr’s film makes us “aware of a contradiction: a world familiar to the eye and yet not perceptible by the eye,” and that the sleeping man’s body in *Sleep*, “while still a human shape, becomes an abstract object, an assemblage of forms, light and shadow, movement and immobility” (3).



Snow's assertions, identifies in the film a "fluctuating tension between abstraction [...] and the representational" (8).

As can be seen, minimalism in its various manifestations sustains a tension between oppositional qualities of representation. It is an extremely simplified approach to art that, through its own simplicity and/or other added markers of mediation, imbues the work with a quality that may register as simultaneously literal and abstract (Minimal Art), realistic and artificial (literary minimalism), or representational and materialist/anti-illusionist (structural film). Minimalism, therefore, is not merely simple; it requires the coexistence of these oppositional representational qualities. When minimalist approaches are transposed into narrative cinema, it entails a fluctuation between realistic, and abstract or non-realistic representation – between realism and non-realism. Furthermore, the potential for these opposing qualities to intersect, and interact, is greatly enhanced in narrative films because of the vast number of narrative and formal variables that can be manipulated. As such, the term "minimalist realism" entails a paradox. Minimalist approaches in narrative cinema gravitate naturally toward a simplified realist aesthetic; however, a simplified realist aesthetic does not constitute minimalism. A significant legacy of minimalism in contemporary minimalist cinema is that of a new approach to representing reality; minimalism is used here to construct and enhance realism, and simultaneously negate, subvert and question it. The ways in which minimalist filmmakers achieve this will be the focus of the remainder of this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, contemporary minimalist cinema is situated between the avant-garde cinema (in its commitment to formal exploration) and the traditional narrative cinema (in its reliance on narrative, characters, emotional engagement). Secondly, it has inherited key characteristics from previous minimalist traditions, including Minimal Art (simplicity of form and structure, repetition, reflexivity), structural film (duration, patterns and structures, reflexivity) and literary minimalism (reduced syntax, use of simple language, narrative simplicity, focus on the everyday, the withholding of dramatic incident, inexpressive characters). While the phenomenological approach identifiable in minimalist films reflects the influence received eventually from structural films and Minimal Art, its commitment to

depicting everyday social realities stems from narrative cinema, and mirrors that of literary minimalism. In the next chapter I examine how this minimalist inheritance shapes the realism of minimalist films. When minimalism is applied to narrative cinema, the problematics of the representation of reality comes to the fore, and the paradoxical qualities of minimalism are pronounced.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Minimalism and Cinematic Realism**

## **Introduction**

As discussed in the General Introduction, minimalist filmmakers appear to sit firmly in the Lumière camp of cinematic realism, with many critics identifying them as contemporary cinema's clearest inheritors of the realist tradition; in particular, the realism posited by André Bazin. Indeed, minimalist films operate clearly and visibly in a predominantly realist mode, in their approach to both form and narrative. Their largely realistic narratives, formal simplicity, documentary-like approaches, and use of nonprofessional actors, as well as their often rigorous respect for the temporal and spatial integrity of the shot, are key characteristics that suggest close ties to both Bazin's theory of film realism and earlier realist models that helped to shape Bazin's views. As discussed in the previous chapter, minimalism aligns closely with these realist approaches in narrative cinema, in particular through their shared inclination for simplification and reduction. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely minimalism's simple and reductive qualities, as well as those that are less quantifiable, which complicate the relationship between minimalism and Bazinian realism. This complication, in turn, stresses the need to question the characterisation of minimalist films and filmmakers as realist.

In this chapter and the next I will discuss the various ways in which minimalist filmmakers use a critical minimalist realism, and how in this way they both engage with and contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse on cinematic realism. In this chapter I identify and illustrate two broad critical approaches to minimalist realism. In the first, minimalist filmmakers question the realism of their films through their exaggerated use of realist approaches. In the second, they re-appropriate realist, and sometimes non-realist, techniques, frequently subverting or inverting their functions and effects, while relying on unseen, missing, or nonvisual elements to both construct and render filmic reality ambiguous. Both approaches demonstrate how minimalist filmmakers transcend the realism/non-realism binary, and the means by which these filmmakers adhere to, and depart from, longstanding notions of cinematic realism.

I begin by examining in detail how minimalist filmmakers uphold Bazin's realist legacy through their approaches to narrative and style, the kinds of stories they choose to tell, and the techniques they use to tell them. It appears initially that these films adhere stringently to Bazinian ideals of cinematic realism and invite a default realist reading. However, in the next section I argue that in the context of minimalism,

these critical, minimalist approaches are able to transcend the realism/non-realism binary that Bazinian realism entails. Instead, minimalist filmmakers use these approaches paradoxically, to simultaneously enhance and detract from the realism of their films. Finally, I examine how minimalist filmmakers engage with so-called realist and non-realist techniques, both as outlined by Bazin and within the wider discourse of cinematic realism. The manner in which filmmakers use these techniques frequently depends on their intended use and purpose, while additional strategies, such as the innovative use of sound and offscreen space, further complicate the links between Bazinian realism and cinematic minimalism.

### **Parallels between minimalism and realist models**

At its core, Bazinian realism yearns for the formal simplicity of the early cinema – including silent and primitive cinema – which Bazin believed captured reality most effectively, before editing was introduced at the expense of realism. Though Bazin never used the term, his notions of realism are founded on an aesthetics of simplicity, or more precisely, simplification – a return to simplicity. Bazin referred constantly to the films of the Lumières, Robert Flaherty, Charles Chaplin, F.W. Murnau, and Erich von Stroheim, where his ideals of realism he saw as firstly evident. Furthermore, he called explicitly for cinema to return to its cinematic origins, not in resistance to, but rather with the aid of the medium’s inevitable technological advancements. In Bazin’s words:

Cinema’s true early masters, alive only in the imaginations of a few dozen people in the nineteenth century, imitate nature completely. In this way, every new improvement to cinema merely brings it paradoxically closer to its origins. Cinema has yet to be invented! (2009, 17)

This sentiment is expressed in Bazin’s discussion of the invention of CinemaScope in his essay “Will CinemaScope Save the Film Industry?” Here Bazin argues that the technology will “only hasten the adoption of that modern of tendencies beloved in fine filmmaking: the stripping away of everything extrinsic to the quintessential meaning of the image, of all the expressionism of time and space” (in Cardullo 2000, 59). Naturally, he links this simplification with realism, asserting that CinemaScope’s wider screen dimensions and possibilities for depth of field will allow films to “get

even nearer to it[s] profound vocation, which is to show before it expresses, or, more accurately, to express through the evidence of the real” (59). Bazin’s embrace of technology stands in stark contrast to the stance of formative theorists such as Rudolf Arnheim. Arnheim lamented technological developments (sound, colour, widescreen) since the silent era, which he regarded as cinema’s most fertile period that was never permitted to reach its full potential (Bazin, meanwhile, regarded silent film as having peaked artistically by 1928 [2009, 87]). Arnheim saw these developments as regressive, pushing the medium toward the “fulfillment of the age-old striving for the complete illusion [of reality]” (158). These, he feared, would redirect the cinema toward theatre and eventually eliminate the need for formative techniques.

Following Bazin, it is plausible to argue that minimalist filmmakers also strive to return to the simplicity of old through minimalism. The very process of simplification in art, including stripping away, reducing, making things clearer and less dense, is a conscious effort to make something less complex, and therefore simpler, than the manner in which it exists. In this respect, both Bazinian realism and cinematic minimalism entail reverting to an earlier form of simplicity that did not yet have to respond to complexity; for Bazin, it was editing (in its numerous forms) that introduced this complexity to cinema, and to which both he and minimalist filmmakers respond aesthetically.<sup>34</sup> It should already be clear that minimalist filmmakers’ fondness for a form of early, even primitive, cinema is reflected in their radically simplified styles and narratives. Their simplicity, however, is a carefully considered aesthetic and ethical choice with the benefit of over a hundred years of hindsight; it is in no way a circumstance of historical or technological conditions. Thus, while their cinema can, in many ways, be said to capture reality in a similar way that the Lumières did at the turn of the twentieth century, their aims are vastly different; a key difference may be the fact that there is an actual aim to their simplicity. In the context of the twenty-first century, in which the effects and complexities of editing and illusion have far exceeded Bazin’s descriptions, a conscious return to cinematic roots can be seen as a radical, and political form of simplification that highlights the manipulative nature of dominant film language and

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<sup>34</sup> Incidentally, many minimalist filmmakers have expressed their debt to both Bazin and the silent masters. Jia Zhangke studied Bazin, whose work became a key influence on his filmmaking, while Lav Diaz calls Bazin one of his “great heroes” (Ruiter 2012). Pedro Costa’s admiration for Chaplin and D.W. Griffith is evident in numerous interviews and most notably in a 2004 lecture at Tokyo Film School, titled “A Closed Door That Leaves Us Guessing.”

offers the viewer a high degree of interpretative freedom. It is this context that concedes the term “minimalism” its specificity, thus allowing it to transcend the vague notions – discussed in the previous chapter – that have crippled and convoluted debates about minimalism in film, and art more generally.

Minimalist filmmakers’ reversion to early cinema as a framework of reference is not just an abstract ideal or concept; rather, it is readily identifiable in their use of style and narrative. The frequently stationary camera setups, lateral compositions, preference for wide shots and long takes – a reduced syntax that is a characteristic of minimalism in general – evoke the basic style and limited technical and stylistic means of the earliest cinema. There are also parallels between the narrative content of early cinema and minimalist films. Though simple in a completely different way, the use of simple fictional narratives in general invokes the bare narratives of early films, while many minimalist films, in whole or part, are difficult to characterise conclusively as either fiction or documentary, like the early Lumière films (this ambiguity between documentary and fiction will be a focus of discussion in Chapter Three). Certain films by Lisandro Alonso, such as *La libertad* and *Los muertos*, involve the detailed, extended depictions of labour, something that evokes Flaherty’s early documentaries as well as the Lumière films, which “capture[d] the surface sights of the everyday world of turn-of-the-century production, labor, and social reproduction” (Polan 136). In linking early cinema with cinematic realism via the use of technique, Bazin wrote:

Earlier slapstick films (Buster Keaton in particular) and Charlie Chaplin have much to teach us in this respect. Slapstick triumphed before D.W. Griffith and editing because most of the gags used a spatial humour – a humour based on the relations between people, objects and the outside world. Chaplin, in *The Circus* [1928], is very much in the lion’s cage, and both Chaplin and the lion are confined within the frame of the screen. (2009, 84)

Minimalist filmmakers do not make slapstick comedies but the dramatic and thematic content of their films, as in Keaton and Chaplin’s comedies, are frequently derived from simple narratives and the heightened use of screen space to express them. Although editing is never excised altogether – both in minimalist films and in the films Bazin championed, a fact he acknowledged – filmmakers such as Alonso, Béla

Tarr and Tsai Ming-liang seem to adhere to the Bazinian realist concept extremely closely, in terms of style. Almost all of their scenes are filmed as single sequence shots, and in only a few exceptions does editing play a role other than as an occasional stylistic deviation or simply to connect scenes together. Not coincidentally, just like in *The Circus* and numerous other early films, there are also many instances in minimalist films where characters and animals “are confined within the frame of the screen.” Animals often play a brief but important role in the narratives of minimalist films and, as Bazin suggested, this contributes greatly to the realism of the film when presented in a certain way (an idea I discuss further in Chapter Three).

While sound plays a crucial role in minimalist films, their general lack of dialogue can also be said to invoke silent cinema, which necessarily relied on images to drive their narrative. In addition, there is almost a unanimous refusal to use computer-generated imagery, fantastic or expressionist settings, and montage techniques to create illusory effects or construct metaphors (with a few notable exceptions, which I discuss later in this chapter). Even the occasional, explicit use of visual illusion through special effects tends to be approached simply and in the spirit of early filmmaking (though not necessarily in the spirit of the early films that Bazin championed, belonging as they do in the “non-illusionist” Lumière camp). For example, in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010; hereafter *Uncle Boonmee*) Apichatpong Weerasethakul uses a variety of special effects, all of which rely on basic cinematic devices and optical tricks that could very well have been used by early filmmakers. The ghosts that appear in the film are merely semi-transparent images superimposed on top of other images; the ominous monkey ghosts are just actors in costumes; the effect of the princess’s face morphing from old to young when she looks at her reflection was achieved through the use of mirrors. The latter method was used despite the fact that it could have been achieved far more easily and cheaply using digital technology (Houin 2010). The talking catfish – the only supernatural element in Weerasethakul’s film that we do not see clearly in its entirety – is constructed using an offscreen voice, with a couple of brief shots of the fish that are divorced from the sound: a simple technique available to filmmakers since the advent of sound.

For Bazin cinematic realism reached its peak with Italian neorealism, which demonstrated the most ideal intersection between realist subject matter and style. Moreover, neorealism introduced an ambiguous representation of reality that would



become a crux in Bazin's thinking; as a result, the movement has since "become inseparably linked with his larger conception of realism" (Horton 27).<sup>35</sup> The connection between minimalist cinema and neorealism is immediately apparent through their shared approaches to style and narrative. James Quandt lists as the "essential features" of the various tenets of neorealism:

location shooting and refusal of the studio; the use, when possible, of available or natural light (rather than Hollywood's three-point lighting); nonprofessional actors representing ordinary, often lower-class characters like themselves; unobtrusive camera work and editing; and a rejection of traditional narrative in favor of a documentary-like recording of preexisting reality, captured whole (i.e., long takes preferred over montage). (2010, 13)

Millicent Marcus adds to this list "a predominance of medium and long shots, [...] an uncontrived, open-ended plot, [...] dialogue in the vernacular, active viewer involvement, and implied social criticism" (22). Yet, expressed thus, these features amount only to a "customary checklist of the neorealist inheritance" (Horton 24) that reduces the movement to either its social content or its common narrative and stylistic characteristics. The same would apply to any style, genre or movement when it is reduced to a list of technical attributes. As it has been widely noted, even key neorealist films do not always display these features, or "rules governing neorealist practice" (22), as Marcus puts it.

Regardless, it is difficult to ignore the remarkable correlation between neorealist approaches and those of minimalist filmmakers. Elliptical, fragmentary narratives are a keystone for minimalist films, as it is for significant neorealist films such as Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946). Minimalist filmmakers use natural lighting and location shooting frequently, and almost all have used, and continue to use, nonprofessional actors to enhance realism, create ambiguity and lend their films a documentary-like quality (the unorthodox ways in which minimalist filmmakers have adopted this practice forms a significant portion of the next chapter). The camera

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<sup>35</sup> In his reappraisal of Bazin, Leighton Grist suggests that Bazin's emphasis on ambiguity conflicts with existing notions of realism, for example, Terry Lovell's insistence that "the first principle of realism" entails the existence of "an objective and independent social world, which can be known" (Lovell 23). In relation to Bazin's discussions of the uncertainty of reality manifest in Roberto Rossellini's films, Grist adds that Bazin's "captivation by the equivocal, by the indeterminate [...]" tends to imply an engagement with and advocacy of not so much realism as modernism" (Grist 23).

work and editing in minimalist films may be considered unobtrusive insofar as the former is generally kept still, and seems to lack expressive or didactic intent; the latter is tied in with a clear preference for long takes, which, as previously discussed, is this cinema's most distinctive formal trait. These and other approaches align closely with the model of neorealism posited by Cesare Zavattini, a key filmmaker and theorist of the movement who expressed his desire for films that capture everyday reality accurately, through both content and form. Neorealism must, for Zavattini, explore and analyse poverty, "one of the most vital realities of our time" (55); reduce or eliminate story, which is "simply a technique of superimposing dead formulas over living social facts" (51); and recruit nonprofessional actors and "give human life its historical importance at every minute" (54). These approaches must strive to "sustain the moral impulse that characterised [neorealism's] beginnings, in an analytical documentary way" (53).

An analysis of the subject matter and narrative content of minimalist films also reveals strong parallels with neorealism, such as the consistent focus on contemporary social and political issues relating to the filmmaker's national context. For example, the forgotten, impoverished underclass (Pedro Costa's *Ossos* [1997], *In Vanda's Room* and *Colossal Youth*); the plight of the poor (Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* [1998], Jafar Panahi's *Crimson Gold* [2003], Tsai's *Stray Dogs*); political oppression (Panahi's *This is Not a Film* [2011] and *Closed Curtain* [2013]); the oppression of women (Panahi's *The Circle* [2000], Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten*); class issues (Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uzak* and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* [2011]); the victims of globalisation (Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* [2006] and *24 City*); and the marginalisation of immigrants (Tsai's *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* [2006]). Similarly, the neorealist locations "inspired by the indeterminate environments created by the postwar situation" (Chaudhuri & Finn 45) are echoed in the slums of Lisbon's Fontainhas in Costa's recent films; the vanishing rural landscapes and way of life in Jia's and Alonso's films (made explicit in the former and implicit in the latter); the makeshift squats and abandoned architecture of Taipei in *Stray Dogs* and of Kuala Lumpur in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*; and the tension between modernity and tradition in chaotic, contemporary Tehran in most of Panahi's films and some of Kiarostami's. All of these environments are created or maintained by their immediate social, cultural and political contexts as well as their place within a globalised, ever-shifting world. In terms of their approach to both narrative and style, minimalist films

therefore demonstrate the flexibility of neorealism, and represent a continuum of filmmakers fascinated by a “postwar aesthetic that successfully brought engaging narrative [and stylistic] technique to bear up on social issues” (Ruberto & Wilson 3).

Bazin claimed that Zavattini “dreams of nothing more than filming 90 minutes of a man’s life during which nothing happens” (2009, 103).<sup>36</sup> This was an ideal that was not realised in Zavattini’s work, nor was it truly evident in the films Bazin championed, but which nonetheless articulated neorealism’s aesthetic impulses, humanism and ethical stance. As Ivone Margulies states in *Nothing Happens* (1996), her study of the cinema of Chantal Akerman: “Along with extended duration the quotidian is undoubtedly the signifier par excellence of the realistic impulse. The possibility of covering the events evoked by the notion of the quotidian is [...] the main lure for the realist desire” (23). Whereas Bazin isolated examples from neorealist films that foregrounded the quotidian through their break from narrative – for example, the famous scene of the maid working in the kitchen in *Umberto D* (De Sica 1952), which is a clear digression from both the film’s protagonist and its plot – in minimalist films there is a far more profound emphasis on the quotidian, so much so that it often constitutes the very basis of their de-dramatised narratives. For example, there is the matter-of-fact depiction of physical labour and routine in Alonso’s films; the perpetual boredom, repetitions and aimlessness of the characters in all of Tsai’s films; and the everyday banter, drug use and communal interactions in Costa’s recent work.<sup>37</sup> These elements do not constitute a break or deviation from their films’ narrative; rather, they form the narrative itself, for its plot has been either drastically reduced or is completely absent. As such, many minimalist films come remarkably close to fulfilling the neorealist ideal of a film in which nothing happens.

In minimalist films, this consistent narrative focus on the quotidian is intrinsically tied together with form. Writing about literary minimalism, Cynthia Hallett argues that there is always a direct correlation between minimalist form and

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<sup>36</sup> Although this is a frequently quoted statement attributed to Zavattini, its original source could not be located. Bazin makes this claim twice, in the essays “The Evolution of Film Language” and “Umberto D.” Bert Cardullo paraphrases a slightly different version, which he calls the “most concession-less expression” of neorealism: “to *insert* into a film ninety minutes of a man’s life in which nothing happened” (2007, 38; emphasis added).

<sup>37</sup> In this respect, many characters from minimalist films share common qualities with characters from the broader art cinema. As David Bordwell argues, characters in art films tend to “lack defined desires and goals. [...] Choices are vague or nonexistent. Hence a certain drifting episodic quality to the art film’s narrative. Characters may wander out and never reappear; events may lead to nothing. The Hollywood protagonist speeds directly toward the target; lacking a goal, the art-film character slides passively from one situation to another” (2008, 153).

content; more significantly, this correlation is deeply intertwined with the work's realist aspects. Rather than attributing the subdued style and characters of minimalist fiction as mere stylistic flourishes (as many opponents of literary minimalism have argued), Hallett suggests instead that:

[t]he blunt, uncomplicated prose mirrors empty lives, and the lack of narrator commentary demands extensive reader participation. For the most part, the characters of minimalist fiction are ordinary people, neither heroes nor larger than life, just people who appear to inhabit the 'real world,' where doing and or saying nothing is often easier than the alternative. (490)

This crucial observation must be applied to minimalist films, where it is easy to mistake key minimalist qualities as being the result of formal strategies that are divorced from narrative elements. Rather than blindly applying minimalist formal strategies to any subject matter, minimalist filmmakers consider carefully the relationship between form, content and realism. For example, their films consistently feature characters that experience everyday existential struggles, such as boredom, loneliness, romantic longing and isolation. These everyday struggles often appear to be the direct or indirect result of social and cultural factors, such as poverty (*In Vanda's Room*, *Stray Dogs*), unemployment (*Uzak*), economic and geographic displacement (*Still Life*, *Colossal Youth*), family breakdown (*The River*, *24 City*), repressed sexuality (*Vive l'amour*), class (*Uzak*, *Close-Up* [Kiarostami 1990]) and language barriers (*What Time Is It There?* [Tsai 2001], *Blissfully Yours* [Weerasethakul 2002]). These factors contribute to establish a narrative that focuses necessarily on the quotidian – for it is the everyday that the characters must exist in and engage with constantly, and it also often forms an oppressive cycle from which they are unable to break free – thus making it ideal for minimalist approaches to be applied. In these films, characters often lack the inclination, or the economic, cultural or linguistic means to do other than walk around, stare, kill time, remain silent, and simply get through their day. In traditional narrative terms, they do nothing. In this context, similar to that of *Jeanne Dielman*, the extended long take does not simply represent, for instance, a character's boredom but simultaneously becomes either a metaphor for boredom in general or a metonymy for the viewer's boredom. Similarly, such diverse minimalist approaches as the use of formal and narrative repetition,

stillness (of the camera), inexpressive performances, and the absence of music simplify and reduce both narrative and film form, while at the same time they mirror, and realistically depict, the emptiness and stasis of the characters' everyday lives.

Another example of these films' application of simplified formal approaches, and their focus on the characters' everyday, is the key minimalist use of silence. This is characterised most obviously by: a stripped back sound design, in which certain sounds are often isolated or pronounced; a preference for negligible diegetic sound over non-diegetic music and sound effects; and characters who say very little. In the narratives of minimalist films, characters are frequently placed in situations where the need to speak either does not exist, or has been greatly reduced. When asked in an interview why his characters do not speak, Tsai answered pragmatically: "When I'm alone I don't speak," adding that, "When I want to film a real scenario or real emotions, or real appearances, I put the characters in a lonely situation, to observe their reaction in that time and space" (Rayns 2005). Therefore the silence prevalent in minimalist films is not a simple matter of an artificial stylistic approach that privileges silence by default, or of contriving characters who do not speak. An emphatic narrative focus on the quotidian, rather than formal considerations, is the basis for silence in minimalist films; the latter acts in service of the former.

There are, of course, exceptions. Recalling the radically reduced, stylised sound design of Robert Bresson's films, the sound of a mob marching toward a hospital in *Werckmeister Harmonies* is reduced to their artificially synchronised footsteps, with all other traces of speech and sound removed; not a single man opens his mouth during the four-minute shot. Bresson's controlled use of sound and silence can also be related to Tsai's *The Wayward Cloud*, a film that is uncharacteristic of this director's work in that here he exaggerates silent performance to a far greater extent, pushing it toward abstraction. The film contains several sequences in which two ex-lovers remain silent for extended periods, for no apparent reason and without reprieve; the silences eventually register as highly artificial and stylised, as if it were a sound film in which characters were not permitted to speak. The exaggerated use of human silence in Tsai's film begins to resemble the stylised, unrealistic silence of Kim Ki-duk's *3-Iron* (2004), which contains a protagonist (possibly a ghost) who remains resolutely mute for the entire film. A preferable model for silence in minimalist films, however, is illustrated in José Luis Guerín's *In the City of Sylvia* (2007), in which Marisol Nievas's complex sound design preserves extended silences

without disrupting the film's realism. Most of the narrative revolves around a man (Xavier Lafitte) who sits in cafes in Strasbourg, quietly watching people, hoping to re-encounter a woman he once met. Despite a dense soundtrack in which human voices are often prominent – by virtue of the narrative being set in the middle of the city, and the protagonist's constant proximity to other people – the film contains barely any dialogue and retains a heavy quality of silence. With the exception of a few dialogue scenes the conversations overheard by the protagonist, as he sits and watches and listens, are mixed carefully so that they remain somewhat indistinct, blending together human voices as one element of the soundtrack and balancing it precariously between realism and abstraction without tipping over into the latter. The protagonist's own silence is justified narratively by his being alone for most of the film, while the broader quality of silence in the film becomes pronounced through the contrast of his silence to the otherwise dense sound design.

By and large, minimalist films therefore have a strong narrative justification for their characters' silence. Within the realist narratives, the silences also register as plausible. This is obvious enough when minimalist films isolate their characters – here they simply have nobody to talk to – but holds true even when there are multiple characters in a scene and the need for dialogue is increased, if the silence is not to register as forced or artificial. The increasingly awkward silences between the two central characters in Ceylan's *Uzak* become more prominent as the narrative progresses, and as their personality and class differences become pronounced. The extended silences between Roong (Kanokporn Tongaram) and Min (Min Oo) in a lengthy car sequence of Weerasethakul's *Blissfully Yours* seem odd at first, until it becomes apparent that the two are sexually attracted to one another and that Min is a Burmese illegal immigrant whose grasp of the Thai language is limited. Min does not speak at all in the lengthy opening sequence in which he is taken to see a doctor by Orn (Jenjira Jansuda), an older woman acting as his guardian, who also attempts unsuccessfully to coax the doctor into breaking protocol and writing a prescription for him. Although he may register initially as mute, Min's silence throughout this sequence can be explained retrospectively in simple narrative terms: if he opens his mouth, he will reveal that he is not Thai and will not get a prescription. Minimalist films therefore preserve the formal quality of silence through a realist narrative. They evoke the silent cinema through both the use of silent characters and extended passages of wordless storytelling. They achieve this not through stylisation or

pastiche, but through a realist narrative framework that adopts and extends the legacy of neorealism's de-dramatised narratives, focus on the quotidian, and examination of social factors pertaining to the characters' everyday.

I have so far established the ways in which contemporary minimalist cinema adheres to and greatly extends Bazinian notions of cinematic realism as outlined by his chronology of realism. This cinema's use of specific techniques, realist content (in particular, its social focus and affinity with Italian neorealism), and a conscious evocation of the early cinema justify comparisons between the realism of minimalist films and the realism of the films Bazin championed. I will now consider again these and other features of contemporary minimalist cinema, but this time in order to problematise these comparisons and to illustrate how the nuanced study of minimalist films' approach to realism can expose the limitations of, and even contradict, Bazin's notions of realism. To equate unquestioningly the modes of realism used by minimalist filmmakers to those theorised by Bazin risks painting a misleading picture of their cinema, for this necessarily entails downplaying or ignoring their abstract and anti-realist elements. These elements are often used in conjunction with, and in opposition to, realist styles and narratives, and are arguably as important as the realist elements.

### **Realist departures: open images and ambiguity**

I begin my reassessment of the relationship between contemporary minimalist cinema and Bazinian realism by reviewing the former's connection with Italian neorealism, the movement that, according to Bazin, epitomised cinematic realism. As I demonstrated in the previous section, most of the realist characteristics of neorealism – including its aesthetic and ethical aspects – are clearly evident in many minimalist films. However, a straightforward comparison risks overstating contemporary minimalist cinema's realist aspects, as well as reducing neorealism – itself a contested term and a “famously slippery designator, describing a variety of film practices and styles” (Schoonover 69) – to a simple array of realist stylistic and narrative strategies.

It is pertinent to highlight that Bazin himself is quick to note that neorealism did not invent, nor even particularly contribute to the realist style: “Isn't neo-realism a form of humanism before it is a style and a kind of *mise en scène*? And isn't this style essentially defined by its unobtrusiveness towards reality?” he asked rhetorically

(2009, 94).<sup>38</sup> But he regarded the movement as “distinct from earlier forms of cinematic realism in the way it lacks any expressionism and, in particular, because of its complete absence of montage effects” and by endowing its films “with a sense of the ambiguity of reality” (2009, 102-103). However, Bazin’s claim about neorealism’s aesthetic purity is hyperbolic and highly problematic. Putting aside the question of whether it is even possible for films to lack any expressionism, while it stands true that neorealist filmmakers reduced drastically expressionistic uses of film style, they hardly eliminated them.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Bazin’s claim of the “complete absence of montage effects” in neorealist films is visibly incorrect.<sup>40</sup> Most neorealist films revert to a continuity style of editing at some point, while others occasionally use a more overtly expressionistic and manipulative form of editing. For example, *Rome, Open City* relies extensively on an illusionistic use of parallel editing. In a scene from the same director’s *Germany, Year Zero* (1948), two children enter a decrepit building and play a record of Hitler’s speech to a pair of American GIs, hoping to sell it to them. As the speech starts, Rossellini cuts away from the action to a shot of a father and his son walking through a different part of the building, followed by a wide shot displaying the dilapidated building from outside – a clear example of juxtaposition to create an ironic effect, à la montage.

Of greater interest here is Bazin’s (apparently modernist) emphasis on the ambiguity of reality, for which he assigned to neorealism “the role of unveiling the true vocation of cinema as a medium, namely to disclose the fragmentary and discontinuous nature of reality” (Ricciardi 485). This ambiguity was reflected most

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<sup>38</sup> In “Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation” Bazin would declare “the humanism of today’s Italian cinema as its principal merit” (2009, 222).

<sup>39</sup> The extent to which Italian neorealist films rely on conventional dramatic approaches is often downplayed. For example, in discussing *Paisan*, Adrian Martin notes how anyone approaching the film “without foreknowledge of its status as a neorealist masterpiece could be forgiven for giving up early on: stock footage of the American campaign in Italy, Hollywood-style music, bad actors barking military commands” (2004, 217). Quandt identifies in the same director’s *Rome, Open City* (1945) a conventionally suspenseful plot, highly contrived performances delivered by well-known actors, schematic editing and often classical camerawork (2010, 14).

<sup>40</sup> “Montage effects” is taken here to mean the creation of “meaning which is not objectively contained in the images and which derives solely from placing these images in relation to one another” (Bazin 2009, 89). This, argues Bazin, is the “very definition of editing and montage” (89) and the common feature binding together such different editing procedures as the “parallel editing” developed by Griffith, which creates the illusion of simultaneity by crosscutting between events in separate locations; “accelerated editing” as developed by Abel Gance, in which decreasing shot lengths creates the illusion of speed; and the more radical “montage of attractions” developed by Sergei Eisenstein, which derives new meanings through the assembly of disparate shots, including shots not part of the same episode. The editing in these examples “does not show events; it alludes to them” (89). What remains important for Bazin is the preservation of the spatiotemporal integrity of the shot and the “true continuity of reality on the screen” (103) that this implies.



strongly in neorealism's elliptical, fragmentary narratives; its use of duration; and its emphasis on the quotidian, which weakened the connections between narrative fragments. According to Gilles Deleuze, neorealism was for Bazin "a matter of a new form of reality, said to be dispersive, elliptical, errant or wavering, working in blocs, with deliberately weak connections and floating events. That real was no longer represented but aimed at" (1). Bazin would also articulate a desire for ambiguity elsewhere, outside the context of neorealism – most notably in describing the functions of the long take and depth of field, both of which he argued allowed for an ambiguity not achievable through editing.<sup>41</sup> I will turn to these techniques in detail later in this chapter, but now I will examine the ways in which minimalist filmmakers construct ambiguity of a sort not identified by Bazin. Minimalist filmmakers in fact share with the neorealists other, less tangible features that are not evident by looking at their shared techniques. Crucially, these features will be here seen to interfere with the ontological foundations of Bazinian realism, as well as the continuum of reality that Bazin identified as integral to realism and its stylistic articulation.

In their essay on the poetic realism of Iranian films, Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn recognise that the influence of neorealism (and the French New Wave) on Iranian cinema has long been a matter of debate, and argue that the use of reality as a "yardstick to measure neorealism" risks "over-emphasiz[ing] neorealism's so-called 'realist' aspects" (39). They propose instead a poetic conception of neorealism and describe the use of the "open image," which they define as "a certain type of ambiguous, epiphanic image [that] often belong[s] to the order of the everyday" (38) – shared by both neorealist and contemporary Iranian filmmakers, such as Kiarostami and Samira Makhmalbaf. Under this criteria, Italian filmmakers such as Luchino Visconti, Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni – many of whose works are often placed under the neorealism banner with some difficulty, thus attracting labels such as "post-neorealist" – do not "represent a break with neorealism" but rather "bring forward poetic qualities which were inherent in neorealism from the beginning" (39).

In their conception of the open image, Chaudhuri and Finn rely on Pier Paolo Pasolini's notion of the free indirect subjective shot as elaborated in his essay "The

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<sup>41</sup> It was through this shared emphasis on ambiguity that Bazin was able to compare a filmmaker such as Orson Welles with the neorealists, "[d]espite their stylistic differences" (2009, 102).

Cinema of Poetry.” Pasolini examines whether cinema, like literature, is capable of using (visual) language to create a divergent “language of poetry” in addition to its existing and codified “language of narrative prose” – a difficult undertaking, given that cinematic images are simultaneously extremely subjective and extremely objective and that in theory, cinema’s “more or less poetic or prosaic character is merely a matter of nuances” (548). In addressing this question, Pasolini searches for the cinematic equivalent of literature’s free indirect discourse, in which “the author penetrates entirely into the spirit of his character, of whom he thus adopts not only the psychology but also the language” (549). He finds instances of this in films such as Antonioni’s *Red Desert* (1964); for example, in the way the colours and shapes of the film adjust to reflect the psychological states of its neurotic heroine, thus substituting wholly Antonioni’s vision with the character’s worldview. As a result, the shot becomes neither objective (indirect discourse) nor subjective (direct discourse), but presents instead “*a vision that has liberated itself from the two*” (Chaudhuri & Finn 39-40; emphasis in the original). For Pasolini, the free indirect subjective image is rooted in both the diegesis – for example, there is a clear narrative pretext for this sort of image in *Red Desert* – and the obsessive vision of the filmmaker. As Chaudhuri and Finn note, this kind of image:

cannot be straightforwardly deciphered as a revelation of either a character’s psychological state or that of the filmmaker. Instead, the unresolved tension between the two viewpoints – character and filmmaker – creates an ambiguity, a space in which the image appears to emerge from somewhere other. (40)

Another common characteristic of the open image is the stasis shot, a concept Chaudhuri and Finn borrow from Paul Schrader’s writings on the “transcendental style” of Bresson, Carl Theodor Dreyer and Yasujiro Ozu.<sup>42</sup> These shots have a quality of stillness, as expressed through the stillness of the frame, long shots and duration (or they can be literally still, when applied to Iranian cinema’s and the French New Wave’s use of freeze frames) and, in the words of Chaudhuri and Finn, are used for “the fracturing of the everyday by something ‘other’” (41). In Pasolini’s similar terms, Chaudhuri and Finn go on, it is a sort of “poetic image [that] infuses a

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<sup>42</sup> Other key characteristics of the transcendental style include “a meticulous representation of the dull, banal commonplaces of everyday living” (Schrader 39) and “[d]isparity: an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action” (42).

prosaic narrative with its ambiguity” (52). Schrader argues that a transcendental effect in film can only be achieved by “progressing from abundant to sparse artistic means” by “progressively reject[ing] certain abundant movie devices: character delineation and interaction, linear narrative structure” (167). Thus, “stasis films” – experimental films that “examine a frozen view of life through a duration of time” (166), such as Michael Snow’s *Wavelength*, Bruce Baillie’s *Still Life* (1966), Stan Brakhage’s *Song 27, My Mountain* (1968) and Andy Warhol’s *Sleep* – are unable to achieve this effect because they “reject even this level of abundant means”; it requires instead a “movement from everyday to stasis [to] be already completed” (167). As Chaudhuri and Finn put it, the “effect is only produced by stasis as a break within ‘realist narrative’: for an image to be ‘arrested’ it must previously flow” (42). The existence of a realist narrative, therefore, is a vital precondition for the ambiguous open image. As explained in the previous chapter, the absence of narrative is the reason why certain films by minimalist filmmakers were not considered in this thesis. Indeed, in non-narrative minimalist films, such as Kiarostami’s *Five* and *Shirin*, and many films by James Benning, there can be no ambiguity of the kind Schrader describes. In these films there is no opportunity for an “unresolved tension” between the viewpoints of filmmaker and characters, for the simple reason that the films are devoid of narrative and, therefore, characters; and, in this sense, there is nothing with which open images may contrast. On the contrary, the minimalist cinematic realism discussed in this thesis is a realism that relies on the existence of narrative.

All the abovementioned theorists agree implicitly that within the context of a realist narrative, certain images – even though they may be presented within a realist formal framework – have a capacity to become enigmatic, abstract, poetic, or non-real: they are able to “transcend” realism, to borrow Schrader’s expression. There are many examples of these open images in contemporary minimalist cinema. Chaudhuri and Finn cite the example of Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), where the protagonist Behzad (Behzad Dorani) flips a tortoise onto its back, watches it struggle for a while and walks away, after which the tortoise manages to correct itself. Although a reductive explanation of the character’s motivations might be possible, Chaudhuri and Finn argue that “Behzad is not hero, villain or victim [in this scene or in the film]: identification with him and his act remains disconnected, open, as does the image of the tortoise – obsessively framed in excess of the narrative requirement” (52). One could also list as further valid examples of the open image: the bone

floating down the river at the end of the same Kiarostami film; a similar scene in *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, in which an apple rolls down a hill and eventually comes to a halt in a stream; the extended shot of the child's toy at the end of *Los muertos*; a mysterious insert shot of a ceiling light in *Uzak*; a suitcase drifting slowly across a pool in *What Time is it There?*; and the numerous, ambiguous close-ups of human faces throughout *In Vanda's Room*. All of these images rupture their film's realist narrative, do not serve any immediate need of the narrative or the characters, and are liberated from any specific meaning or interpretation.

As Chaudhuri and Finn note, open images are also frequently “a feature of film endings, closing scenes which try not to close down a narrative but rather open it out to the viewer's consideration, to ‘live on’ after the film itself has finished” (52). Here they cite the ending of Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997): after the protagonist Badii (Homayoun Ershadi) takes an overdose and lies in a ditch at night to await death, the screen cuts to black. The image then re-emerges as a grainy video coda featuring characters that appeared earlier in the film, as well as Kiarostami himself, sharing a cigarette with Ershadi on the film set. Chaudhuri and Finn argue that this vérité-style coda “does not assert, in Brechtian fashion, that the foregoing film is just a representation” (52). Rather, they point out that:

the intrusion of this uncanny real marks a shift to the poetic. The switch from night and death to day and life, far from resolving the narrative, creates an ambiguity, an openness, as if we are now watching images of life after death – whether or not our central character actually died or not. (53)

However, there are instances in minimalist films where this openness is achieved more economically through the direct application of a minimalist approach, and without deviating from the broader formal structure of the film. For example, the final extended shots in *Los muertos* and Carlos Reygadas's *Silent Light* (2007) are blatantly literal, realist depictions of something physically and durationally concrete: a child's toy on the ground in *Los muertos*, the sun disappearing into the horizon and leaving behind a starry night sky, in *Silent Light*. The latter example forms the tail end of a sequence of images that constitute a distinct break from the film's narrative. The transition can be pinpointed six minutes from the end of the film, when the image cuts from inside a room, where a daughter speaks to her mother, to a shot of the

windowsill from outside the house, where the daughter's voice can still be heard faintly. A brief, wider shot of the house situates it amongst other buildings and surrounds of the village, and the late afternoon sun can also be glimpsed filtering light through tree branches. From this point, all traces of narrative and character – indeed, all traces of a human presence – are abandoned. Reygadas charts the receding daylight across the next three shots, in separate locations: a lateral tracking shot across a field, a static shot of a lake next to a small hill, and a slow forward tracking shot in a different field. Day turns to night only in the final shot, which is a repetition in reverse of the opening shot of the film (night turning to day, filmed at the same field); the narrative is embedded in between these two bookending images. In addition to foregrounding the film's ambiguous structure, this simple sequence gravitates toward open, ambiguous images by moving the camera both explicitly and literally away from the narrative.

The ending of *Los muertos* is even simpler, but its transition to an open image (and an open ending) is more difficult to pinpoint for it entails a gradual shift within a single shot. The first 90 seconds of this four-minute shot continue to depict a realist narrative, as the film has been doing for most of its running time. A few minutes earlier, Vargas (Antonio Vargas) has just met his young grandson for the first time, after having spent most of the film travelling through the jungle to find his daughter (the boy's mother). Vargas follows the boy back to his hut, and learns that his mother is not home. In the final shot, the camera pans to follow the boy as he walks a few metres from the hut to pick up his baby sister, then back toward and inside the hut. Vargas remains crouched outside, next to the entrance, examining a plastic figurine of a man. After 40 seconds, he places it on the ground, retrieves his machete and disappears into the hut, placing the machete down on a table near the entrance on the way in. Alonso does not follow the action but instead holds the shot, tilting down slowly to show the canopy flapping in the breeze, and eventually framing the toy on the ground. He holds the shot for over a minute longer as chickens sporadically roam into the frame, the shadows of the trees sway on the sand, and the sounds of the jungle are heard offscreen, before cutting to black. Despite their different approaches, both of the final shots in these two films are similar in that they abandon their films' narrative, and create a sense of mystery in which the meaning of the images is left entirely up to the viewer to interpret; a mystery designed so that there cannot be only one interpretation. By virtue of their position within a realist narrative, and in

particular their position at the end of the narrative, they become something else entirely: enigmatic, ambiguous, open images that transcend literalness, liberated from the narrative, the characters and the realism of the films.

In minimalist films these open images are abstracted further by the sheer length and heightened duration of the shots, which far surpass any films discussed by Pasolini and Schrader. It is worth recounting here the lesson Akerman learned from structural film and particularly Snow, that extended duration “changes the equation between the concrete and the abstract, between drama and descriptive detail” (Margulies 2009).<sup>43</sup> This effect, in which openness and abstraction are reached *via* realism, is echoed in Alonso’s statement that “[i]f you show an ashtray for three seconds, it’s just an ashtray; but if you show it for thirty seconds, it’s more than an ashtray” (Jenkins 4). While Schrader is right in stating that minimalist cinema in the vein of Snow may not be able to achieve the ambiguity he describes, when long takes are used in the service of narrative, and alongside other minimalist strategies (such as formal and narrative repetition, an enunciation of structure, and an intensified emphasis on the quotidian), they are actually capable of heightening it. These examples demonstrate that minimalist cinema shares with neorealism more than just a strong interest in realism. Minimalist filmmakers adopt and further enhance the abstract, poetic qualities of the neorealist open image. Here we can see the paradoxical qualities of minimalism come to the fore – in this instance, the coexistence of the literal and the abstract, realism and non-realism – and identify the effects of a minimalist realism, in which realist approaches are applied so rigorously that the film’s realism is called into question. While emerging from a realist narrative context, minimalist films’ indeterminate open images challenge the basic ontological foundation of Bazinian realism: that the photographic image should be able to capture an objective, concrete reality in its very essence.

Additionally, this foundation is challenged further through minimalist filmmakers’ expanded use of narrative ellipses. In the opening of Tsai’s *What Time is it There?* (hereafter *What Time*), a static wide shot that lasts over three minutes, a middle-aged man (Miao Tien) sits down at a table in the foreground with a plate of freshly prepared dumplings. He does not eat but lights a cigarette and stares into

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<sup>43</sup> Margulies argues that Akerman’s early films show a clear debt to structural film and particularly Snow, in that they “make the image waver between its ‘concrete/materialist’ status and its ‘naturalist/representational’ one. Extended duration becomes the cinematic transformer for a to-and-fro passage between abstraction and figuration” (1996, 3).

space. He eventually gets up, walks down the hall and calls out for someone whom we later learn is his son – “Hsiao Kang!” – and returns to his seat after receiving no reply. He continues to smoke for a while, gets up again, walks into the background of the shot, and exits on to the balcony where he inspects a plant and then continues to finish his cigarette. The next shot of the film is of his son (Lee Kang-sheng) travelling in a taxi, holding an urn containing his father’s ashes; the father’s death is elided and the cause of his death, unexplained. This significant narrative ellipsis, which eliminates the single most important event that determines the succeeding narrative, does more than forcing the viewer into deducing the causal links between the two fragmentary scenes. As Song Hwee Lim asks:

[D]oes the opening shot necessarily precede the next shot in temporal terms? Could it not be seen as Hsiao-kang’s memory of his father while he travels in the taxi? In light of what unfolds later in the narrative [the mother spends much of the film trying to reincarnate the father through religious ritual, and he reappears mysteriously in Paris, in the film’s final moments], could the opening shot not also be read as the father’s ghost returning to his home, going about his daily routine as if he has never left it? (92)

The ellipsis therefore renders the filmic reality of the opening shot considerably ambiguous and it does so on multiple fronts: Is the character alive or dead, present or absent? Does the shot represent something real or imagined? Is it objective or subjective and in what way? Is this shot a depiction of Hsiao Kang’s memory, or could it be a visualisation of his guilt or regret for his own absence in his father’s life? And what is the shot’s temporal status in relation to the rest of the film? Is it past, present, or detached from the temporal reality of the film completely? In thinking about these questions, it is pertinent to remember that according to Bazin “the imaginary world shown on the screen must have the spatial density of reality” (2009, 80), and that he posited that editing should be used “only within precise limits, on pain of threatening the very ontology of the cinematographic fable” (81). In the case of the abovementioned shot in Tsai’s film, what may or may not be imaginary – it cannot be confirmed either way – has the spatial density of something real, and editing does not factor into the equation within the scene in any way; the ontology of the cinematographic tale is disturbed nonetheless.

The final sequence from *Silent Light*, as described earlier, also uses ellipses to infuse with ambiguity the spatial and temporal relationship between the images that comprise it. While the sequence maintains a clear form of temporal continuity, in that the sun continues to sink visibly throughout it, there are some curious shifts between the last three shots. These shifts are perceived in the sequence's camera movement (as described earlier) and duration (two shots lasting approximately 20 seconds each, followed by one lasting almost five minutes), but more crucially, in its *mise en scène* (it is extremely windy in the first shot, but almost completely still in last two) and sound (there is a drastic change in sound volume and quality across the first two shots, and the sound of distant cows is introduced in the final shot). As a result, the sequence seems to be both temporally continuous and elliptical. Despite the images' similar visual and thematic content, and a clear progression marked by the consistent temporal barometer of the sinking sun, the discontinuities between the shots are emphasised to the extent that it becomes difficult to ascertain both their spatial relations (is this all still taking place close to the village, are the locations miles apart, or is each shot somewhere else altogether?) and temporal relations (are these images even from the same day?). In Costa's films, particularly *In Vanda's Room* and *Colossal Youth*, there are so few causal links between scenes that it would be possible to shuffle many of them around without affecting the narrative. The ellipses in minimalist films, therefore, constitute a fragmentary and discontinuous approach to depicting reality, as per neorealism, but they depart from the latter through their robust emphasis on the quotidian, heightened duration and their radically de-dramatised narratives. Because the narrative links between scenes are so weak, and sometimes nonexistent, ellipses become exaggerated, and the temporal and spatial relations between two shots may become unclear. Whereby neorealist films are always linear, minimalist films always only appear to be; for the latter, a continuum of reality can be often neither confirmed nor denied.

Minimalist films thus render their realist images and narratives ambiguous and abstract, not by deviating from, but rather through a consistent use of approaches aligned with realist filmmaking. However, as outlined, minimalist filmmakers do not merely apply realist approaches directly or indirectly associated with Bazin, but greatly extend them. Their exaggerated and intensified use of realist approaches includes: the sustained use of extremely long takes rather a selective use of it; narratives that revolve entirely around the quotidian rather than merely emphasising



it; and ellipses that are so great that the temporal relations between shots or scenes can no longer be ascertained. The outcome of this exaggerated use of realism becomes a critical distancing or interrogation of it as it is pushed toward abstraction, and is one of the key aspects that differentiate Bazinian realism from the critical realism of minimalist cinema. In the next section, I continue my reassessment of the relationship between minimalist cinema and Bazinian realism by considering in greater depth the former's use of specific realist techniques that have been largely associated with the latter.

### **Inverting and subverting realist and non-realist techniques**

Even though Bazin never stated it, it is important firstly to recognise that the three principal realist techniques he championed – depth of field, the long take and consequently, the avoidance of editing – are deeply intertwined. In other words, the desired effect of realism cannot necessarily be achieved through their isolated use but usually require their combination. In this respect, John David Rhodes writes:

The long take, in Andre Bazin's famous terms, performs a variety of labors, among them this one: a forcing of spectators to assume a more active role in interpreting the representation of reality before them. No longer are spectators guided by the close up, the edit, the montage sequence; instead they are '*forced* to discern.' (18; emphasis in the original)

This would assume that the long take, in and of itself and so long as it is not a close-up or part of an edited sequence, is capable of achieving the effect Bazin called for. However, the effect described by Rhodes in fact resembles more closely Bazin's descriptions of depth of field, rather than the long take. In his analysis of the former technique, Bazin argues that:

Depth of field creates a relationship between the viewer and the image which is closer to the viewer's relationship to reality. It is thus accurate to say that its structure is more realistic, whatever the content of the image itself [...] As a result, the viewer has a more active intellectual approach, and even makes a real contribution, to the *mise en scène*. [...] Here a minimum of individual choice is required. The meaning of the image depends in part on the viewer's attention and will [...] [Depth of field] re-introduces

ambiguity into the structure of the image, if not as a necessity [...] at least as a possibility. (2009, 101)

Duration, of course, remains a vital component of Bazin's conception of realism but he demonstrates its virtues – articulated stylistically as the long take – with reference to films that used (varying degrees of) depth of field. From the silent era he highlights Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), *Sunrise* (1927) and *Tabu* (1931), and particularly the films of Stroheim; works by filmmakers for whom montage plays “practically no role [...] apart from the purely negative role of cutting down where necessary an overly abundant reality” (2009, 91). According to Bazin, after the emergence of the sound film, cinema entered a period in which an “analytic” or “dramatic” style of editing – commonly referred to as analytical or continuity editing, whereby a scene would be broken up into several shots/angles which shifted “according to [its] material or dramatic logic” (88) – became a ubiquitous and standardised mode of cinematic storytelling, found nearly everywhere and “practically always carried out according to the same principles” (98). The long take aesthetic re-emerged via the deep-focus photography of Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (1937) and *La bête humaine* (1938), as well as Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942).<sup>44</sup> Bazin praised Renoir's preference for shooting in depth, which respected the spatiotemporality of dramatic space, while Welles's systematic employment of depth of field “started a revolution” and “restored to reality its visible continuity” (2005b, 28). In these films, through the use of both the long take and depth of field, and never one without the other, Bazin identified his mode of realism articulated.<sup>45</sup>

In almost all of these descriptions, the use of the long take is not stated but rather implied to be a formal accompaniment to depth of field. This slight ambivalence is understandable. This is so because unlike depth of field – which can be achieved technically via photographic adjustments, and for which the effects tend

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<sup>44</sup> All of the earlier film examples cited by Bazin use depth of field insofar as they rely extensively on wide shots, preferring to shoot in the depth of the image without fragmenting the action, while the smaller focal lengths of the wider lenses allowed for a greater range of acceptable focus when visual elements were both close to and far from the camera. Welles and cinematographer Gregg Toland introduced in *Citizen Kane* a far more exaggerated depth of field (by experimenting with aperture, lights, lenses, film stock and altering the set) that allowed visual elements both close to the camera and in the far distance to remain in extremely sharp focus.

<sup>45</sup> Bazin would even promote the virtues of the long take by examining a sequence from Harry Watt's *Where No Vultures Fly* (1951), a film that he otherwise suggested had little artistic merit.

to be more uniform – the long take is a far more flexible strategy and does not by itself denote an inclination toward minimalism or realism. On the contrary, some of the more celebrated long takes in recent films come from narrative filmmakers who work in modes far removed from minimalism, and which produce a much different reality effect to the one Bazin proposed. For example, the famous long take in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990) uses a Steadicam to track gangster Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) and his new girlfriend Karen (Lorraine Bracco) as they travel into a nightclub via a VIP entrance, taking a shortcut through corridors and the kitchen where they are greeted by various staff members, and eventually through to the main room where they are promptly offered the best seat in the house. The length of the shot, combined with its mobility, the dense soundtrack (including non-diegetic music) and mise en scène work together to impress the viewer, prompting her to identify with Karen, to whom this new, glamorous world is hugely impressive. The shot is an example of the long take (lasting over three minutes) and thus the avoidance of editing, but not of depth of field. Consequently, the shot size – sometimes wide, but predominantly a medium shot – and constantly shifting frame, combined with the other expressive stylistic and narrative elements, direct the viewer's attention in much the same way as an edited equivalent of this scene would, imbuing the shot with a specific meaning that requires only a negligible requirement for the viewer to interpret the representation of reality. Similarly, in Alfonso Cuarón's apocalyptic science-fiction film *Children of Men* (2006), the mobile long take is used to create dramatic tension and serve the film's generic needs, "to showcase the calm before the storm followed by the unexpected violence that erupts as it occurs in real time" (Nixon 2007). Incidentally, long takes are used increasingly to depict bravura action set pieces as seen in such films as Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003), Johnnie To's *Breaking News* (2004) and Prachya Pinkaew's *The Protector* (2005).

In these films the long take is not the normal method of representation but part of a much wider repertoire of stylistic techniques used to create specific effects at certain points in the film, something that is always justified by character motivation and narrative development. However, there are similarities even in such films as Brian De Palma's *Snake Eyes* (1998) and Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013), which use long takes fairly consistently throughout their running time, and Alexandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark*, where the long take is the sole method of representation (the film is comprised of one single shot, lasting 95 minutes). These films feature dense, meticulous

soundscapes and mise en scène; fluid, complex camerawork; and, in the case of the latter film, an onscreen narrator who guides both the film's narrative and the camera's attention. Here, as in the films mentioned earlier, the long take heightens neither realism nor ambiguity but serves the needs of its narrative, which in *Snake Eyes* entails a murder mystery; in *Gravity*, a thriller set in space;<sup>46</sup> and in *Russian Ark*, a fantastic journey through Russian history via the Hermitage, with a cast of 2000. Additionally, there is an inherent theatrical and performative aspect to all of the above examples, in that the shot is a meticulously prepared, pre-arranged performance, both in terms of cinematography and mise en scène. In viewing these films, it becomes clear that there has been a great degree of time, resources and effort invested in its planning, coordination and rehearsal.<sup>47</sup> These examples demonstrate that the long take has become a technique adopted by contemporary filmmakers for showcasing large-scale, dramatic spectacle. Conversely, the realist effect of the long take, as implied by Bazin, thus relies heavily on the simultaneous use of depth of field and the increased ambiguity, and perceptual freedom, this allows. When depth of field is absent in the application of a long take, and the shots become narrower and more focused, and when other stylistic elements, such as sound and mise en scène help dictate the

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<sup>46</sup> The use of the long take in *Gravity*, however, has been lauded for its realism, particularly for realistically evoking the sensation of floating through space. Nonetheless, this realism is very different to the kind posited by Bazin, which requires a degree of perceptual freedom and interpretation by the viewer.

<sup>47</sup> As such, the viewer may also become acutely aware of the high degree of (creative, logistical and financial) risk involved in the shot's undertaking – there are a huge number of variables that could have caused the shot to fail – which also generates extra-diegetic suspense. Many viewers would also be aware before watching the film that *Russian Ark* was achieved on the fourth take; the first three were abandoned due to technical errors and the filmmakers knew that their fourth attempt would also be their last, due to time constraints in their access to the Hermitage. (This anecdote is included in the film's press materials, mentioned frequently in reviews and in the making-of documentary included on the film's DVD release). Although the long takes in minimalist films tend to be far simpler in both their design and execution, there are a few similar examples, such as Shahram Mokri's *Fish & Cat* (2013), a 134-minute film that is paradoxically shot in a single take and has an intertwining, non-linear narrative structure; some of the tracking shots in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), which traverse across a variety of indoor and outdoor spaces; and the often complex Steadicam shots in Tarr's films, for example, the lengthy opening shot of *The Man from London* (2008) – an extraordinary technical feat that maps out the film's key locations and their geographical relations, as well as introducing narrative elements that are meticulously timed to the camera's trajectory. All of these examples fall under one of the three broad categories of the sequence shot outlined by Jacques Aumont, which is exemplified by the tracking shots in Miklos Jancsó's films of the late 1960s: "a very animated shot [...] in which the overriding goal is to explore a space [and the viewer is] made to see the elements of the action one after the other" (31). The other two categories are: a static shot in depth, in the vein of Renoir; and a long shot, as in the films of Warhol and Alonso, which is "held simply for a very long time and in which the passage of time becomes the most important factor" (31).

interpretation of the image, ambiguity decreases and the realist outcomes of using the long take become less evident.<sup>48</sup>

A key Bazinian proposition that must be challenged is that the long take and depth of field are necessarily in opposition to editing and montage. Just as Bazin noted decades ago, it still holds true that most narrative films' use of editing within a scene is "justified by the geography of the action or by shifts in the dramatic interest" (2009, 88). For Bazin the close-up was "the keystone of film editing" (in Cardullo 2000, 58) – synonymous with editing, antonymous with the long take, and responsible for the introduction of soft focus, the antithesis of deep focus. Yet the close-up is in fact used frequently by minimalist filmmakers outside the context of editing, and in conjunction with the long take, not instead of it. It is not used merely as a component within an editing system that "mak[es] it possible to follow the action better," nor is it used simply to "plac[e] emphasis in the appropriate spots" (2009, 97) in such a system. In minimalist films, there are in fact countless examples of different combinations of so-called realist techniques (long take, depth of field) and non-realist techniques (montage, continuity editing), which produce vastly different effects to what Bazin proposed. As established earlier, all minimalist filmmakers use long takes, but the ways in which they use them are vastly different. Some rely overwhelmingly on a fixed frame (Tsai, Costa, Kiarostami); others often use a highly mobile camera and have fluctuating perspectives and focal lengths (Panahi, Reygadas, Tarr); while others use stillness and movement in equal measure, even if the movements may involve only the occasional slight pan or simple tracking shot (Alonso, Ceylan, Weerasethakul, Jia). Similarly, some minimalist filmmakers predominantly use wide shots and depth of field (Tsai, Alonso), others use close-ups extensively and therefore restrict the use of depth of field to a large extent (Costa, Kiarostami), and most rely on both at some point in their films. Minimalist filmmakers, while eschewing continuity

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<sup>48</sup> This also highlights the limitations of adopting Bordwell's practice of measuring ASLs to analyse duration in minimalist films. While measuring the ASL can provide useful information (for example, being able to identify an upward trend in using longer takes across Tsai's filmography), it cannot recognise the nuances or the context in which a long take may be applied; may produce a distorted figure when filmmakers occasionally resort to quicker cutting (in this respect, a median shot length may be more appropriate); and also creates the impression of a homogenous approach to duration by disparate filmmakers working within often very different contexts. As demonstrated above, the length of a shot alone does not suggest any closer ties to Bazinian realism, nor does it guarantee a sense of "slowness" (the context in which the figures are normally discussed). As Lim suggests, "long takes alone do not a slow cinema make" (79). He lists numerous factors within the shot that contribute to a sense of stillness or slowness, including its visual content, direction of actors, setting, camera movement, camera angle and distance, and pacing (79-80).

editing for the most part, do not do away with it altogether. Some filmmakers use it very rarely (Alonso, Tsai), whereas some use it often (Weerasethakul, Kiarostami), though not at the expense of the long take.

In general, shot types in minimalist films rarely correspond with their standard function in classical narrative cinema, or with the function Bazin assigned to them. A close-up is capable of rendering reality ambiguous as much as a wide shot, and both types of shots – and everything in between – remain equally capable of preserving mystery. This is because minimalist films exaggerate what is apparent in any film that uses editing within a scene: a shot change, a shift in vantage point, always entails a compromise, a loss in exchange for a gain. By showing us more of something or showing us something more clearly, we inevitably see less of something else or see something else less clearly. In this context, a wide shot obscures as much as it reveals, and a close-up removes as much as it emphasises. A wide shot offers the viewer a greater range of visual information but entails a loss of detail; a close-up offers greater detail through its close proximity to the subject but also entails a loss of information, the field of vision having been greatly restricted by the narrow edges of the frame. Classical narrative films generally edit between different shot sizes within a scene to overcome these compromises. They exploit the perceptive benefits of each shot to their fullest extent and in so doing, they establish a clear spatial and temporal continuity that also allows them to manipulate the dramatic flow through emphasis and de-emphasis.

When minimalist filmmakers use editing, they often assign to it a very different function, which produces effects far removed from what Bazin described. Despite Bazin's unequivocal assertion that editing, "by its very nature, is fundamentally opposed to ambiguity" (2009, 101), minimalist filmmakers often rely on editing to create ambiguity, by emphasising the reductive, nonvisual qualities of different shots rather than what they are able to show. That is, they emphasise what a shot, or a change in shot, has reduced, obscured or eliminated. In an early scene of *Uncle Boonmee*, the title character (Thanapat Saisaymar) and his sister-in-law Jen (Jenjira Pongpas) take a rest in a hut on their farm. The scene uses a number of continuity cuts, showing us the hut and its surrounds from different vantage points (always as a wide shot), eventually ending with a pair of medium shots/medium close-ups in a straightforward shot-reverse-shot pattern: a shot of Boonmee who has fallen asleep, then a shot of Jen, who watches Boonmee for a few seconds, smiles, then turns

away from both him and the camera. The pattern of editing in this scene, starting with wider shots that offer various vantage points of the same geographical space and ending with closer shots, observes a conventional system of scene coverage. However, the scene's final, closer shots, instead of emphasising or dramatising, obscures what we expect to see and, as a result, increases ambiguity. The first shot is not only of a character sleeping, but also of a character sleeping with his back turned to the camera. Despite the intimacy of the shot and the close proximity of the character to the camera, there is not much we are able to read besides the simple fact that he has fallen asleep – a fact that is conveyable in any number of shot sizes and angles. Additionally, the shot does not actually show Boonmee sleeping but only suggests it by showing us his back. It takes a few moments to register that he has fallen asleep, for the process of his falling asleep is omitted. The following shot, of Jen watching Boonmee sleep, similarly relies on obscurity to create ambiguity. Though the shot initially seems to offer a clear shot of Jen reacting to Boonmee having fallen asleep, we see only a brief, ambiguous smile that quickly disappears (the ambiguity is also increased by the muted, non-expressive nature of the performances both here and throughout the film), before she too turns her face away from the camera, thus eliminating what we need to see in order to understand the shot and its meaning.

In minimalist films, close-ups are often completely removed from any system of editing. As Mark Cousins writes in his evaluation of close-ups in *Sight & Sound*, “close-ups grab like bullies grab. They use their luminous, grand advantage unfairly, almost” (47). His analogy aligns with Bazin's view of the close-up: that it is forceful and eliminates personal choice. But, on the other hand, Cousins also recognises their duplicitous nature, as they both show and hide: “they seem to show the mechanism of thought, but don't. They seem to show pain, but don't. They seem to show sex, but don't” (50). It is this latter quality that minimalist filmmakers frequently exploit. For example, in Costa's films scenes are frequently covered in a single, long-take close-up of characters, respecting spatial and temporal unity but refusing to show us the larger geographical space – sequence shots without the wideness, in other words. Cutting straight to a close-up in a new scene obscures the context of the scene, forcing the viewer to figure out what they are looking at, where the characters are, and what is beyond the edges of the frame. The minimal, elliptical narratives in which scenes often begin in *media res* also contribute to this ambiguity: we must also figure out

what, if anything, has happened between this shot/scene and the previous one.<sup>49</sup> Almost all of the close-ups in *In Vanda's Room*, argues Thom Andersen,

stand by themselves as separate scenes. They appear as privileged moments, outside any chain of action, almost like commentaries providing a reading of the whole film. These images can be a critique, even a repudiation, of the cinema of action. (27)

In this context, the close-up does not belong within a system of editing with the emphasis, accentuation, and dramatisation this implies; it is used instead within the realist framework of the long take, and to create ambiguity by emphasising what the shot is not showing us. This effect is further enhanced by Costa's use of ambiguous performances by nonprofessional actors (a topic I cover at length in Chapter Three): we are often shown these faces clearly, yet it is difficult to read and understand them.

A similar effect occurs in minimalist filmmakers' use of wide shots. For example, *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* is a documentary in which Costa observes Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet as they edit their film *Sicilia!* (1999), and which is filmed predominantly using wide shots. Throughout Costa's film, Straub and Huillet are constantly obscured by either the angle (avoiding frontal shots of their faces) or wideness of the shot (preventing a clear, close enough view of their faces). They are also obscured through the *mise en scène*. Costa frequently chooses to show the film being edited rather than the filmmakers editing it (we hear them on the soundtrack instead), and always allocates a large portion of the screen to darkness – something justified, to an extent, by the fact that the film is set in the darkened spaces of a studio editing room and screening room. The film ends without ever offering a clear view of Straub or Huillet throughout its 104-minute running time.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, there is a scene in *Uncle Boonmee* where two members of the dead – Huay,

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<sup>49</sup> These qualities can already be seen in the opening shot of Costa's beautiful first film *O Sangue* (1989), which begins with a close-up of a young man standing in a field, who is then slapped by a hand from offscreen. Though we soon learn that it is his father who hit him, we never learn why. Jonathan Rosenbaum states that *O Sangue* "announced the essence of [Costa's] cinema by declaring every shot an event, regardless of whether or not we can understand it in relation to some master narrative" (2010).

<sup>50</sup> Although there is an obvious visual justification here, this emphasis on darkness is prevalent in all of Costa's films, which frequently use *chiaroscuro* lighting to allow the non-lit, black spaces of the frame to dominate the image. Additionally, the visual obscuration in *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* subverts standard documentary practices, where a filmmaker would typically either adjust the exposure or gain of the camera to show the subjects more clearly, at the expense of degrading the quality of the image (through added visual grain, or overexposure of parts of the image), or simply add more light, at the expense of disrupting the actuality of the environment being filmed.



Boonmee's sister (returning as a ghost), and Boonsong, his son (returning in the form of a monkey spirit) – visit their family. After Boonsong recounts his death and previously unexplained disappearance through a flashback sequence, the scene returns to a wide shot of the table where Boonmee and the others have been listening on. The following conversation takes place in the same shot:

**Jen (to Boonmee):** From my outsider's point of view, you should be rejoicing that these two have returned.

**Boonmee:** I am.

**Jen:** So why such a face?

**Boonmee:** How should my face look?

It is only at this point that the viewer is prompted to focus on a specific element of the wide shot: Boonmee's face. Until then, the viewer's attention is likely to have been split equally by Boonsong, who is seated in relative darkness with his back turned to the camera, in the left of the frame (the narrative focal point of the shot), and the rest of the people seated around the table (the visual focal point) who are lit more clearly and have their faces visible, and for whom the wide shot presents a sort of collective reaction shot to Boonsong's story. However, even after being prompted to direct our attention to a specific portion of the frame via the dialogue, we cannot see or understand what kind of facial expression Jen is referring to. The shot is too wide to be able to scrutinise Boonmee's face properly, and one suspects that even a closer shot would not have allowed for better scrutiny. The viewer is not intimate enough with Boonmee to register the significance of any subtle shifts in facial expression (the viewer does not share the history between these characters, which begins long before the film does), and the non-expressiveness of the performances in the film means that the viewer would likely have difficulty reading the emotions regardless, in that they remain muted and internal throughout. After Boonmee brings out photographs for the family to look at, Boonsong tells them that the light is too bright for him to be able to see. The lights are switched off, plunging the scene into darkness. The scene then returns to a continuity style of editing (which the film uses throughout), cutting between different characters, shot sizes and vantage points (though the individual shots remain as long takes). However, until a torch is brought out, the scene remains in almost complete blackness. In the dark, wide shots and close-ups alike neither

show nor emphasise, and cutting from one to the other only makes obvious that we cannot see.

A similar example, albeit one that does not rely at all on editing, can be found in the minute-long shot that introduces Mahmut in *Uzak*. After the credit sequence, Ceylan cuts to a soft-focus close-up of Mahmut in a dark bedroom, who occupies the entire left half of frame. However, it is not a close-up that reveals his face but merely shows the outline of his head and shoulders, as he is largely silhouetted (only the colours and textures of his flannel shirt are clearly visible) and looking away from the camera toward a woman sitting on a bed, undressing, in the depth of the shot. The woman is lit faintly by moonlight but she too is barely visible for she is completely out of focus; it is possible only to make out her red shirt, pale skin and her broad movements, and not her face or any other physical features. Eventually Mahmut removes his shoes offscreen, stands up and moves deeper into the frame to sit next to the woman, changing the shot from a close-up to a wide shot. However, Ceylan does not push focus to follow the character. The initial focal point (Mahmut, in his original position) no longer exists and the lens does not adjust to locate a new one, leaving behind a highly abstract, out-of-focus image in which barely anything is visible. These examples foreground the crucial importance of *mise en scène*, which includes but is not limited to the use of lighting, and the manner in which subjects are arranged within the shot. Weerasethakul's and Ceylan's use of minimalism emphasises the reductive qualities of the image and exposes the often tenuous link between Bazinian realism and the long take, depth of field, and (the non-use of) editing, and the different shot sizes they imply. In these instances, minimalism is achieved via a drastic reduction of visual content through the reduction of light (and in the case of *Uzak*, refusing to focus), long takes (both within and without a system of editing), and the repetition of these barely visible images (via editing in *Uncle Boonmee* and as a long take in *Uzak*).

Minimalist filmmakers' unorthodox use of different shot types has another useful, albeit paradoxical function that further complicates their connection with Bazinian realism. Regardless of the type of shot being used, these filmmakers constantly foreground offscreen space through sound – the unseen reality existing outside the parameters of the image. Usually, onscreen and offscreen spaces are inversely proportional: wider shots increase onscreen space but reduce offscreen space, and close-ups do the opposite. By shifting between different shots of the same

space, most films progressively minimise the offscreen space of a scene, revealing in subsequent shots what was not shown earlier. Shots removed from the action, such as inserts, can increase the offscreen space substantially and allow a high degree of manipulation of the soundtrack, given that the sound usually has no obligations to what is being presented on the screen (in the same way that voiceover narrations can essentially be placed over anything). For example, in a generic shot out the window during a conversation between two characters – the visual content of which may have nothing to do with what is being discussed – there is no visual reality that the sound needs to connect directly with. It is this offscreen space, a space available in every shot but more so in closer shots, which minimalist filmmakers skillfully exploit and which comprises a vital component of their minimalist realism. Contrary to Bazin’s assertion that the sound image is “much less malleable than visual images” (2009, 98), minimalist filmmakers use various strategies that suggest that sound can be infinitely more malleable than the image. They use a wide range of shot sizes to emphasise offscreen space and sound, and in so doing, they alter significantly the reality presented by the film.

In discussing Michael Haneke’s *Code Unknown* (2000), Rhodes states that “we are as pained by what we do not see as by what we do. If such a plenitude of human suffering and action can be found in two blocks, then what is going on behind the camera’s back?” (20). This statement can be easily applied to some of Costa’s films, where the combined use of sound and offscreen space often plays a far greater role than the images themselves. For example, *In Vanda’s Room* is a film where the constant use of offscreen sound emphasises a rich, larger world outside of the shot, continually situating the characters as being only a part of a vast cultural and social system of which we only see small fragments. The film relies heavily on close-ups and barely on editing (within scenes), thereby creating a vast domain of offscreen space that can be manipulated. In the soundtrack, Costa constantly foregrounds the sounds of the slum community of Fontainhas (music, voices, television, and cooking) and its impending destruction (demolition, machines, and workers’ shouts). While Costa affords us glimpses of the latter mainly as contemplative shots connecting scenes, for the most part this aspect of reality is presented using sounds recorded and added separately, disconnected from their visual source. We rarely see the destruction of the slum, but hear it frequently. This concentrated use of offscreen sound is unique in that it uses the soundtrack, and not images, to create geographical space and

encourage the viewer to construct (this aspect of) the reality of the film. Likewise, the strategy of visual obscuration used by Costa in *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* allows him to “creatively combine images with sounds taken separately, as moviemakers have always done” (Gallagher 2007). Because Straub and Huillet, the film’s central characters, either remain offscreen or are visually obscured through the *mise en scène* for large portions of the film, Costa is able to manipulate their conversations as he sees fit, editing it as if it were a voiceover – an approach he has described as “anti-Straubian” (in that Straub and Huillet rigorously use diegetic sound in their films, to the extent that wind noises and other incidental sounds are often included). Thus, it is the carefully manipulated dialogue that drives Costa’s film; the images are of secondary importance.

In a very different example, namely, the opening sequence of *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Kiarostami uses a series of extreme wide-shots (which Rosenbaum calls the “cosmic long shot,” a Kiarostami signature shot he identifies in many of the Iranian director’s films) to show a four-wheel drive containing a film crew of three, as it winds through the countryside. If the sound were to adopt a realist perspective and record from the position of the camera, we would perhaps hear little more than the distant hum of the car motor, as well as the natural sounds of the landscape itself. However, Kiarostami presents the sounds from inside the vehicle for the duration of the sequence, allowing us to listen intimately to the conversation of its occupants even though the realistic source of the sound is hundreds of metres away, obscured by both distance and the fact that they are inside the closed vehicle. The disjunction between image and sound creates a paradox: the shot is simultaneously distant and intimate, realist and noticeably constructed. A shot this wide, in which we can see so much, also means that we can make out very little. Simultaneously, the separation of sound and image transforms an onscreen image (a car driving through the countryside) into an offscreen space (people inside the car, whom we cannot see). Thus, the disjunctive character of the relationship between image and sound in Kiarostami’s paradoxical shot, as pointed out earlier, highlights the way in which *mise en scène* and editing can be used to subvert the Bazinian notion of realism while maintaining a critical minimalist realism in the shot.

This, however, is not an isolated example in Kiarostami’s film restricted to the use of extreme wide shots. When the crew stops the car and asks a child for directions, the sequence eventually cuts to the inside of the vehicle. However, it is a

shot from inside the car, looking out at the child; the crew is still not visible and their presence remains restricted to an offscreen one. In fact, with the exception of Behzad, the protagonist, we never see the other crewmembers for the entirety of the film, although we hear them frequently. Similarly, we never glimpse the old woman whose impending death, and subsequent local mourning rituals, are the reasons for the crew's visit. A character with whom Behzad chats at various points in the film is a labourer digging a hole on a hilltop – a character we also hear but do not see. Elsewhere, dialogue scenes are frequently filmed so that only one character is shown, with the image of the offscreen speaker left to be imagined by the viewer, thereby respecting the viewer's "ability to see beyond our immediate field of vision – to project our own pictures into the blank spaces of the image" (Sutcliffe 105). Even in *Ten*, which is set in the confined space of a car and relies only on a basic shot-reverse-shot editing pattern for its entire running time (cutting between two medium close-ups – a shot of the driver, and a shot of various people who occupy the passenger's seat), Kiarostami manages to create and use a substantial amount of offscreen space. Despite its extremely basic style, relying on what is ostensibly the most conventional and ubiquitous editing pattern in cinema, individual shots are often held so that we hear large portions of the dialogue of the offscreen driver or passenger without seeing them as they speak. Similarly, shots are often held on the speaker for a long time, refusing to show us the offscreen listener and prompting us to imagine the responses for ourselves. In one single-take sequence, Kiarostami refuses entirely to show us the passenger (a female prostitute), leaving it entirely to the viewer to imagine what she looks like. This strategy of using sound and offscreen space is entirely consistent with Kiarostami's broader use of narrative and visual omission, a strongly reductive form of minimalist cinema that urges the creative participation of the viewer to levels rarely seen in narrative cinema.

The degree of manipulation of a film's soundtrack that offscreen space allows is also evident in Kiarostami's cunning use of editing to craft performances. Kiarostami has revealed in interviews that actors in his films are often not present when dialogue scenes are filmed. In a scene depicting a conversation between Behzad and a child in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Kiarostami filmed the boy – whom the director suspected did not like him – and talked to him from offscreen, and then filmed Behzad separately, piecing the shots and dialogue together later so that they appear seamless. Entire stretches of *Taste of Cherry* – which, like *Ten*, revolves

around conversations between a driver and various passengers in his car – were filmed without the actors having even met. Rather, Kiarostami stood in for one actor, with the camera pointed at the other, and repeated this with the second actor. He also provoked facial and verbal responses from his nonprofessional actors by using the profilmic offscreen space. For example, a look of surprise was prompted by asking the unsuspecting actor to look inside the glove compartment, where Kiarostami had planted a gun (Rosenbaum 1998). The actor’s look remains in the film, the gun does not.

This kind of illusionism and visual trickery extends to the basic construction of *mise en scène*, used by minimalist and non-minimalist filmmakers alike. Rosenbaum declares that *Shirin*, “like so much of Kiarostami’s work, is an illusionist tour de force” (2009) and recounts how Tarr, a “master illusionist in more ways than one,” revealed to him that all of the copious amount of rain in *Sátántangó* “comes from a rain machine; real rain, he noted, isn’t adequately photogenic” (1994). Similarly, the manipulation of audio in Costa’s films also extends to onscreen sound, that is, sound in which the source is clearly visible in the shot. In the revealing Criterion DVD commentary of *In Vanda’s Room*, Costa recounts to Jean-Pierre Gorin how all of the demolition sounds of the film are in fact construction sounds recorded in Egypt; similarly, many of the sound effects we hear, and the source of which we clearly see (for example, Vanda’s incessant coughing fits), were re-recorded afterwards and synchronised seamlessly. Despite their surface simplicity and anti-illusionist approach, minimalist films in fact rely heavily on illusionism, trickery and manipulation to craft their minimalist realism. In this respect, they do not merely uphold Bazin’s assertion that “realism can be achieved in one way: through artifice” (2005b, 26). They also demonstrate how their realism can rely on artifice to such an extent that the film, or at least significant portions of it, would be inconceivable (as in the case of *Taste of Cherry* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*), while non-realist techniques, which Bazin claimed were inherently artificial (montage, close-ups), often also play a prominent role.

The balancing of realist and non-realist formal approaches is articulated across a broader canvas in Tsai’s *What Time*. Like most of Tsai’s work, the film is a multi-character study of loneliness, the root cause of which, in true minimalist fashion, is only felt and not expressed. After a father’s death, the film observes the mourning of his wife (Lu Yi-ching) and their son in Taipei. The former turns immediately to

religion in an attempt to summon back her husband's dead spirit, and her behaviour becomes increasingly erratic and hysterical; the latter proceeds with his job as a mobile watch vendor but otherwise spends his time holed up in his room, where he develops the unusual habit of urinating in various plastic containers. 10 minutes into the film, a young woman (Chen Shiang-chyi) is introduced. She is trying to buy a dual-time watch because she is moving to Paris; the son reluctantly sells his own after she is unimpressed with the range on sale. After this brief encounter, the son becomes gradually obsessed with Paris, changing every clock he encounters to Parisian time and often staying up late to watch a bootlegged copy of *400 Blows* (Truffaut 1959). About half an hour into the film, Tsai expands the narrative to include the woman who has moved to Paris, whom we quickly learn is experiencing her own distinct form of loneliness through her geographic and cultural isolation. For the remainder of the film, Tsai shifts the focus between these three characters, spread across two cities. Tsai's films often feature characters who are separated at the beginning but become united narratively either through familial connections or a particular location. Examples include: two characters living on separate floors of a building, who slowly gravitate toward each other, in *The Hole* (1998); an empty apartment around which revolves the intersecting narrative of three characters, in *Vive l'amour*; and three disparate characters whom we eventually learn to be members of the same family, in *The River*. *What Time* differs from these films in that, after a brief initial encounter, two of the protagonists are separated across a vast distance never again to be reunited, physically or otherwise. Hence, the burden of establishing a connection between them is consigned to means outside the narrative.

*What Time* is one of Tsai's most formally rigorous films, whereby practically every scene is filmed as a single sequence shot. In fact, this is one of Tsai's "slowest" films both in terms of stillness – as it contains no camera movement whatsoever – and shot length – with an average of 65 seconds per shot (see Flanagan 2012). With this overwhelmingly clear adherence to the Bazinian realist approach in each shot and scene, it is easy to fail to notice that, paradoxically, the film's meaning is wholly constructed in a decidedly non-realist fashion, with a heavy reliance on parallel editing and montage effects. At times, the editing of the film is overtly manipulative, presenting scenes and sequences as parallel action to suggest that characters are being observed simultaneously (this is also suggested by the film's title). The most obvious examples occur toward the end of the film, which culminates in three consecutive

unfulfilling sexual acts by each character. First, the mother puts on makeup and a dress, and proceeds to masturbate in front of a photograph of her dead husband; second, the son has sex with a prostitute in a car, who then steals his case of watches as he sleeps; and, third, the young woman in Paris makes sexual advances on a Hong Kong woman she met in a café, and is rejected. In the next sequence all three characters end up falling asleep: the son returns home and lies next to his mother, who is asleep in front of the photograph; the woman in Paris cries and then falls asleep on a bench in front of the pool at the *Jardin des Tuileries*, after which a group of kids steal her suitcases. Each of these scenes is approached in an overtly realist manner (long takes, deep-focus photography, sequence shots), but the sequences – the connection and arrangement of these scenes – are constructed in a non-realist way, creating the illusion of simultaneity and manipulating the narrative through (what becomes, by its arrangement) a series of highly contrived coincidences. In other words, *What Time* embeds a realist form within a broader, non-realist formal structure; the film therefore represents time and space in both a realist (each of the shots and scenes) and abstract fashion (how these shots and scenes are arranged, through editing).

More generally, however, the effects of this non-realist approach in *What Time* are far subtler and more ambiguous. *What Time* can be said to rely on two different kinds of editing systems. The first has already been described and is parallel editing. The second is Eisensteinian montage, where an idea “arises from the collision of independent shots – shots even opposite to one another” (Eisenstein 49) so that a new meaning may be created that would otherwise not exist (often illustrated as  $A+B=C$ ; for example, “girls + flowering apple trees = hope” [Bazin 2009, 90]). This effect is central to *What Time*, which draws new meaning from connecting shots that are unrelated, spatially or narratively. It is easy, for instance, to imagine *What Time* re-edited as three separate portraits of lonely characters, one followed by another, without altering the narrative in any significant way. However, the poetry and lasting impression of Tsai’s film are derived from crosscutting between disparate scenes, filmed mostly as self-contained and unedited blocks of time, to allow new meanings to emerge. Broadly speaking, cutting between these characters’ lives creates an impression that, despite the physical distance between them their experience of loneliness is simultaneous and interconnected. This constructed sense of “togetherness” is reinforced through several narrative rhymes: for example, the son



watches *400 Blows* and the actor of that film (Jean-Pierre Léaud) appears later in front of the woman in Paris; the son and the young woman are shown urinating, on opposite sides of the world; the son's obsessive quest to adjust all clocks to Parisian time; and, finally, the father surfaces as a ghost in Paris in the final scene of the film, bookending the narrative. As Rosenbaum suggests, it is through the ordering and juxtaposition of shots and scenes that *What Time* becomes:

an examination of separateness and togetherness, unity and disparity in two separate countries in two separate parts of the world. This is a movie deeply interested in what it means to be lonely, but also what it means to *perceive connection and similarity in the midst of that isolation*. (2002; emphasis added)

The sense of separateness and isolation is already inherent in all aspects of *What Time*, from its narrative to its visual and aural design; the ineffable sense of “togetherness” emerges only through the film's editing patterns.

However, Tsai's use of editing creates a very different type of meaning to what montage theorists posited. Despite Eisenstein's assertion that montage entails viewers forming their own meaning of a film sequence by mentally assembling separate elements, the meanings of Eisenstein's own film sequences are often specific and rigid, and require a negligible effort in their interpretation. The juxtaposition of a bull being slaughtered with soldiers killing workers in *Strike* (1925) equates unambiguously the action of the soldiers to the slaughterer, and the plight of the workers to the animal; a sequence in *October* (1928) that intercuts shots of Kerensky with a golden mechanical peacock “hits the viewer over the head with Marxist ideology” (Shaw 11).<sup>51</sup> This lack of ambiguity was one of the main reasons why Bazin vehemently rejected montage, for it “disambiguates images and bluntly states their message” (Shaw 11). Furthermore, Bazin notes that Lev Kuleshov's famous experiment – in which he juxtaposed the same shot of actor Ivan Mozhukhin's expressionless face with consecutive shots of a dead child, a bowl of soup and a woman on a divan to “create” emotional expressions on the actor's face – “uses absurdity to demonstrate this by giving a different meaning each time to a face whose ambiguity makes possible the three successive and exclusive interpretations attributed

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<sup>51</sup> A few years later, Chaplin – a friend and admirer of Eisenstein – would adopt a similarly obvious cinematic metaphor using animals, creating a graphic match between a flock of sheep and workers entering a factory in the opening of *Modern Times* (1936).

to it” (2009, 101). As a result, Bazin concludes, “Mozhukhin smiling + dead child = pity” (90) and nothing else.

The key difference between Tsai and Eisenstein in this context is that in his formulation of montage Eisenstein assumes a scene to be comprised of several disparate shots; in Tsai’s film, on the other hand, shot and scene are one and the same for the most part. Thus, within the minimalist context of *What Time*, montage is extended across scenes and longer timeframes, rather than across shots within single scenes. As a result, this minimalist use of montage contributes to the development of meanings that are highly ambiguous, equivocal, open, and with no single correct interpretation. Rosenbaum describes the rhymes and associations that emerge in *What Time* as those that “we can feel emotionally before we start to process it intellectually” (2002). Indeed, it may be more accurate to describe the montage effect in the film as the creation of an abstract *affect* through the juxtaposition of separate shots, rather than a meaning. *What Time*, therefore, balances two distinct modes of representation: shots and scenes are constructed in a realist manner, in the Bazinian sense of the word; these scenes are then organised within a broader, non-realist formal structure. Despite some conventionally manipulative uses of the latter at some points in the film, overall this structure serves not to dictate a specific meaning but to create precisely the kind of ambiguity that Bazin argued was not possible through montage. Bazin enthused, “for each new topic, a new form!” (2009, 94). With *What Time*, Tsai upholds Bazin’s legacy and moves beyond it.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have demonstrated how contemporary minimalist cinema transcends Bazinian realism by re-appropriating and subverting cinematic techniques either favoured or dismissed by Bazin. Minimalist filmmakers open up the possibilities of an aesthetic pluralism by illustrating how realist and non-realist formal structures, and the different shot types they imply, are not necessarily contradictory. On the contrary, they can coexist within a film, or even within a scene or a shot, without diminishing ambiguity or compromising the effects of Bazinian realism. Realist effects can, in turn, still be produced through the use of non-realist approaches (and vice versa) and may also rely on other strategies, such as the use of offscreen space and sound, which did not factor into Bazin’s realist model. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to the

modernist and reflexive aspects of minimalist cinema that introduce non-realist elements more forcefully, and which pronounce the abstract qualities of minimalism more emphatically. These aspects disrupt the realism established by the film to a far greater degree, and establish the interrogation of cinematic realism as one of the central concerns of contemporary minimalist cinema.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **The Real and the Non-Real in Contemporary Minimalist Cinema**

## Introduction

In the final extended shot of Lisandro Alonso's *La libertad*, Misael the woodcutter is seated by a fire, feasting on an armadillo that he caught earlier. The sound of distant thunder can be heard, and occasional lightning flashes illuminate the night sky behind him. The shot is identical to the opening of the film, or so it first seems. About thirty seconds into the shot, Misael looks up and directly at the camera, then just past it; he holds up the meat, as if displaying it for an audience whom we cannot see, and according to instructions that we cannot hear. The shot runs for a further three minutes. Misael continues cutting and eating the meat, scratches his naked back and arms occasionally, sometimes glances up at the camera and past it; at one stage he appears also to smile.

In a film that had sustained until this point a rigorous illusion of reality, Misael's acknowledgement of the camera and the filmmaker beside it creates a rupture. The reality effect had been maintained by the effacement of both camera and filmmaker, the presence of a nonprofessional actor apparently behaving as himself, and the use of realist narrative and formal approaches, where for the most part "frame, depth of field and duration are almost entirely subordinate to the rhythms of Misael's woodwork" (Andermann 87). By virtue of its position at the end of the narrative and within the minimalist framework of the film, this rupture not only disrupts the film's realism and reveals the fact of its construction but renders as ambiguous the film's relation to the reality it had seemed to represent.

Alonso's films, argues Matthew Flanagan, "epitomise the notion of pure cinema delineated by André Bazin in his review of *Bicycle Thieves* [De Sica 1948]" (2008), that is, "no more actors, no more story, no more sets" (Bazin 2005b, 60). With this subtle but momentous break in the film's final sequence, *La libertad* throws into question two of these elements: Is Misael a "real" person enacting or re-enacting a routine for the camera as a documentary subject? Or is he assuming the role of an actor who is performing in a predetermined, fictional context? Is the film a narrativised depiction of Misael's everyday life, or is it entirely a fictional construct, or perhaps a story disguised as the former? Who and what have we been watching? Rather than reinforcing the Bazinian notion of a pure realist cinema, this final moment in *La libertad* epitomises how minimalist films both uphold and break from Bazin's legacy; how their minimalism both enhances realism and undermines, disrupts and

interrogates it. It is thus also an illustration of minimalist cinema's realist and modernist impulses, as well as its affinity to both the documentary and fictional forms.

In Chapter Two I outlined two broad approaches to a minimalist realism: an exaggerated application of realism that disrupts the ontological status of the image and extracts abstract qualities from what is presented as an authentic image, and the subversion and inversion of the proposed functions and effects of both realist and formalist techniques. Both approaches uphold broadly Bazin's emphasis on representing the continuum and ambiguity of reality, but paradoxically also undermine its realism. In this chapter I extend this discussion to a further two key aspects of minimalist cinema. The first is this cinema's modernist and reflexive elements, which disrupt the film's realism to a far greater degree than the examples so far discussed in this thesis. In the modernist cinematic tradition, minimalist films adopt an ambiguous approach to representing reality and are also highly reflexive, foregrounding both the filmmaking and film viewing processes and inviting a critical perception on part of the viewer. The second aspect is the filmmakers' conscious blurring, sometimes disintegrating, of the boundaries between fiction and documentary; and by extension, the relationship between fact and fiction, and between reality and its representation. In Chapter Two I discussed how minimalist films apply realist strategies so extensively that the film's realism is made uncertain, called into question and sometimes even negated. This effect parallels the minimalist filmmakers' application of documentary strategies that I discuss in this chapter. In minimalist films, sometimes the impression of watching a documentary reality can become so great that it disturbs the default fictional framework in which the film is viewed, while the coexistence of fictional and reflexive elements complicates further the way in which the film is read. This not only infuses ambiguity into the realism of the film but often goes much further, making ambiguous the reality of the film as an object. These aspects reinforce the minimalist filmmakers' agenda of creating films that simultaneously enhance and detract from the realism of their work, and that interrogate their own methods of realist representation.

In addition, this chapter expands the discussion of the coexistence of oppositional representational qualities, identifiable in all forms of minimalism – in this instance, as a dialectic between the realist and the abstract, between documentary and fiction, and between the real and the non-real. I begin the chapter by outlining

how minimalist filmmakers uphold a modernist agenda through their inclusion of realist and abstract elements in their narrative, and how their minimalist aesthetic often refuses to make distinctions between the two. Secondly, I analyse the wide range of reflexive strategies used by minimalist filmmakers that question the representation of reality in their films. Finally, I examine how these concerns are carried across to minimalist filmmakers' exploration of fictional and documentary boundaries. On this topic, I address the debate regarding representation in documentary cinema, outlining the factors by which a film may be considered fiction or nonfiction, and explore the notion that minimalist films can be perceived simultaneously as fiction and documentary. Employing *La libertad* as a formative model, I explore how minimalist filmmakers' use of animals in their films relates to concerns about the relationship between realism and documentary. Moreover, I examine the use of documentary methodologies – namely, the common practical and logistical considerations made in documentary production – to establish critical links between the creative process and the work produced. In this context, I discuss the filmmakers' performance strategies and their use of nonprofessional actors, and illustrate how such factors as casting, choice of location and equipment – much of which is not evident by looking at the films alone – play a crucial role within their minimalist aesthetic and their broader strategy of problematising fictional and documentary boundaries through realism.

### **The convergence of abstraction and realism in minimalist cinema**

Minimalist filmmakers' combined use of realist and non-realist approaches, and their paradoxical approach to representing reality, situates them firmly within the modernist tradition of filmmaking. In *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema* (2006), Ted Perry argues that along the spectrum of films, from purely graphic and abstract to realistic filmmaking (including the documentary and the narrative entertainment film), modernist films exist in the middle of the continuum at “a point where abstraction and realism meet” (2). Many modernist films create an ambiguous universe where the real and imagined, and the realist and abstract, coexist. Touching on one of the key agendas of Minimal Art, a modernist film typically makes a “constant effort to make images stand on their own, not simply to represent something else” (7). One of the

crucial intentions behind this thinking, Perry goes on, “is to call into question the nature of reality as embodied in most films” (7).

As the photographic medium is inherently representational, modernist filmmakers have had to devise various formal and narrative strategies to counter that representational quality. As discussed in Chapter One, structural filmmakers often use a vast array of stylistic devices to render the image abstract and disrupt its representational quality. For example, Michael Snow’s use of varying colour, photographic processes and film stocks, and superimpositions, serves to interrupt the continuity of the zoom in *Wavelength*; indeed, these devices foreground the fact that it is not at all a continuous zoom. Narrative filmmakers, however, generally do not have the option of relying on such stylistic exuberance because they need also to consider how form reflects and interacts with content. For minimalist filmmakers it is even less of an option; for a minimalist film to delve into such an abundant syntax would mean for it to cease to be minimalist. Minimalist filmmakers instead uphold modernism’s ambivalent and contradicting approach to representing reality through the incorporation and juxtaposition of non-realist elements within an otherwise realist form and narrative, making space for the coexistence of the realistic and the abstract that Perry describes.

This coexistence may be constant and subdued, and achieved without deviating from a unified minimalist aesthetic, or it may be brief and forceful, punctuating and disrupting the film’s aesthetic. Jonathan Rosenbaum notes how Béla Tarr often “interfaces allegory with realistic detail” (1994) in his films. For example, *Werckmeister Harmonies* applies a realist style centered around extremely long takes to depict a fabulistic narrative, which involves the ominous arrival of a circus (led by an unseen “Prince”) in a small town, and which brings with it the carcass of a stuffed whale as its only attraction. All the while, the film remains committed to depicting quotidian details: large swathes of time are dedicated to every activities, banal banter between characters, and a huge amount of walking – all of which bear great consequence on the tone of the film but little on its narrative. Similarly, Tarr’s *The Turin Horse* (2011) observes in painstaking detail a horse driver (János Derszi) and the repetitive daily routine of his grown daughter (Erika Bók): getting dressed, collecting water from a well, feeding their horse, staring out windows, and eating meals, which always consist of nothing but boiled potatoes and pálinka. These realistic details coexist with the film’s overtly fictional, doom-laden overtones: the



perpetual windstorm that rages outside their hut; the horse contracting a mysterious illness and refusing to obey its owner; Mihály Vig's intermittent, somber score; and the desolate and apocalyptic *mise en scène*, emphasised most strongly by Fred Kelemen's black-and-white photography.<sup>52</sup> Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole* and *The Wayward Cloud* disturb their already precarious realism by bursting occasionally into musical numbers – the musical being a genre that perhaps makes clearer than any other a distinct split between fantasy and reality. The largely static, deep-focus long takes used to film these scenes do not lend the closeness to reality suggested by Bazin, but rather an air of deliberate theatricality. Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Tropical Malady* begins as a realist love tale before a caption at the halfway point of the film alters radically the course of its narrative, switching it to a fairytale-like hunt for a mythical tiger, and abandoning the protagonists from its first half. A more overt example of the combined use of realist and non-realist elements can be found in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, where a computer-generated UFO flies through the sky across two wide shots and in two completely different locations, prompting the narrative to shift focus from one character (for whom the UFO marks an ending) to the next (a beginning). Jia makes little attempt at making the UFO look photographically realistic, like the rest of the film; it is not a meeting but a collision of realism and abstraction.

In minimalist films the dead frequently visit the living. In Carlos Reygadas's *Silent Light* there is a startling scene in which a woman lying dead in a coffin at her own funeral wakes and speaks calmly to her children. As discussed in the previous chapter, in Tsai's *What Time*, the protagonist's dead father – whom we see but may already be dead in the opening shot, in Taipei – reappears as a ghost in Paris at the end of the film. And there are the ghosts, spirits and other supernatural elements in *Uncle Boonmee*, also discussed in the previous chapter. Besides this film's strong narrative focus on the supernatural and otherworldly, there are other non-realist narrative elements that are embedded within an otherwise realist context. The film takes time to depict carefully the minute, everyday details relating to Boonmee's ailing condition; for example, showing his nurse preparing his colostomy bag in an

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<sup>52</sup> Because standards of realism change over time, the use of black-and-white can be read today as an explicit marker of fiction. Richard Allen argues that contemporary moviegoers often have a low tolerance of black-and-white or silent films because their "awareness of the datedness of a film is one way that [their] attention may be drawn to the photographic basis of the medium [...] break[ing] the hold of projective illusion" (42).

extended shot. Elsewhere in the film, however, his health shows little sign of physical deterioration, and there is no attempt to depict his demise and death in a realistic manner. Even the decision to use suits for the monkey spirits in the film seems to be informed by a desire to create something that balances between realistic and artificial. Weerasethakul explains that:

People are fascinated by the image of the monkey ghosts... When we made the film I wanted to make it look in between 'real' and 'a man in a costume'... I want to evoke the feeling of uneasiness in the audience, whether we should laugh at this, or whether we should ask 'is it real?' (Houin 2010)

As it can be seen, fantasy and reality, as well as the literal and the abstract, share the same physical space in many minimalist films. Sometimes, as in the examples of Jia, Reygadas and Tsai, these contrasting elements constitute a sudden, stark deviation from realism. At other times, as in the examples of Weerasethakul and Tarr, they coexist harmoniously throughout the film.<sup>53</sup> They rely only partially on the telling of clear, believable stories preferred by Bazin, and implied in the discourse of cinematic realism more broadly.

With the exception of the overtly non-realist stylistic elements that occasionally punctuate contemporary minimalist films, and which are largely detached from the diegesis (for example, the autonomous camera movements in Alonso and Weerasethakul's films, which I discuss in the next section), these films typically do not use style to differentiate between the kinds of reality being represented. Whereas a film – be it realist or modernist – may normally emphasise non-realist elements (such as ghosts, spirits, UFOs, dreams, flashbacks, illusions, hallucinations and fears) through a range of expressive techniques (such as close-ups, camera movements, manipulation of film speed, music, colour, filters and lighting), minimalist films are unique in that they generally refuse to make stylistic deviations to accommodate them. In *Uncle Boonmee*, the bewilderment of the characters when

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<sup>53</sup> Many of these films resemble in part or whole the literature of "magical realism" in its "seamless blending of realism, mysticism, magic, fact, history, politics and morality in the creation of cultural product" (Knudsen 109). This blending, suggests Erik Knudsen, perhaps reflects also the filmmakers' belonging to "cultures in which the spiritual, the mental and the physical occupy equal status in epistemology" (109). Elizabeth Cowie notes how a moral and political need to discern the real from the illusory "is central to modern Western culture and is part of a privileging of the serious over illusion, the imagined, and fantasy, which are usually assumed to be the domain of fiction (21).

they are confronted with the supernatural – a bewilderment that does not last long, and quickly turns to acceptance – exists solely in the diegesis of the narrative. Their bewilderment and, in turn, the viewer’s bewilderment, is never matched, emphasised or encouraged by style. Because the style does not deviate, the viewer must quickly accept as given, just like the characters, the fact that the real and the unreal may matter-of-factly share the same screen space; one that remains otherwise committed to depicting images and sounds in a realist manner.<sup>54</sup>

The same principle applies for all of the non-realist narrative elements mentioned above in relation to other minimalist films: the UFO in *Still Life*, the tiger in *Tropical Malady*, the whale in *Werckmeister Harmonies* and the ghost in *What Time*. These films allow the real and non-real to inhabit the frame equally, considerably making ambiguous the realism of the film; the viewer is thus required to adjust drastically any expectations of realism established prior to these intrusions. In this respect it can be argued that minimalist films use a non-continuity style to depict a different sort of continuity. This is a continuity not of characters, action and narrative, but fluctuating levels of reality and realism: between the physical and the metaphysical, the concrete and the abstract, the everyday and the fantastic, the living and the dead, reality and dream, objective and subjective, photographic and computer-generated imagery. A simple wide shot may contain in the same frame an animated tiger and a photographed human being; a long take may depict from an ambiguous point of view a character who may be alive or dead; a cut may offer no other transitional marker between reality and dream, or between past, present and future. Through this continuity, minimalist filmmakers expand their minimalist realism to uphold modernist cinema’s adherence to the coexistence of the abstract and the realist in the most literal sense, achieved through a simple, unified minimalist aesthetic. As I

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<sup>54</sup> It must be noted that the unproblematic acceptance of the supernatural in this film can be explained partially by cultural and religious factors, and a wider acceptance of spirits and the otherworldly in Asian cultures more generally. Weerasethakul, who is a Buddhist, explains that the film is “a mixture of belief that I grew up with in the Thailand environment... we always think that there are invisible beings around us. So in this film I tried to put [in] the feeling that the characters and audience are surrounded by invisible beings or some kind of forces” (Houin 2010). This manifests in the film’s ghosts, spirits and talking animals, and extends to the idea of reincarnation prevalent in the film’s narrative, themes and form (the latter through the use of actors from his previous films, and the channelling of past films). It can also be seen in the film’s profound respect for animals and nature. Boonmee laments that he will get bad Karma because he has killed “a lot of bugs” on his farm; in another scene Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee) carefully pick up an insect that Jen has accidentally stepped on.

discuss it below, this practice is extended further in the filmmakers' use of reflexive strategies.

### **Reflexive modernism**

Crucial to the theorisation of the modernist film is Bertold Brecht's discussion of realism, which he considered to be a "major political, philosophical and practical issue" (1964, 45) and "one of the crucial questions of our age" (MacCabe 1976, 7). Brecht argued for a realism that should be "laying bare society's causal network" (1964, 109) and encouraged critical distance and reflexivity in the arts. This was an argument that greatly influenced film theory in the 1970s and pitted modernism and realism as seemingly antithetical notions, despite the fact that Brecht considered himself a staunch realist. Colin MacCabe uses Brechtian concepts to argue that most cinema, like the classical realist novel, "simply allows reality to appear and denies its own status as articulation" (1981, 218). MacCabe contends that if we truly want to engage with the real as being complex and contradictory – one of the goals of cinematic realism – a film must offer the viewer a position from which to produce meaning for the film, as well as offer a "different set of relations to both the fictional material and 'reality'" (1981, 233).<sup>55</sup> In his famous rebuttal of George Lukács's formalist conception of realism, Brecht argues that the production of realism "is not a mere question of form," as Lukács would have it. For Brecht this is so because "[r]eality changes [and] in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change" (1974, 82).

Filmmakers and film theorists have grappled with Brecht's arguments for decades, and his concerns are clearly reflected in many modernist films, past and present. Perry argues that a key characteristic of the modernist film is how:

[t]he space between screen and viewer is animated by the viewer's consciousness of watching the film. The modernist film is motivated by a desire, inherent in the work, to initiate a conscious process of perception, celebrating the difficulty and duration of that experience. As we watch these works, we are often aware of ourselves watching them.  
(7-8)

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<sup>55</sup> As Jonathan Friday states: "The search for verisimilitude of appearance depends on an artist employing skills and techniques to fool the eye of the spectator into taking the picture for what it represents. This deception stands uncomfortably with that other aim of realism, which is to reveal the deeper truth behind mere appearance" (341).

The effect Perry describes is plainly obvious in all Minimal Art and many structural films, as discussed in Chapter One, as well as in minimalist films of extreme duration. Undeniably, in watching Tarr's *Sátántangó*, Lav Diaz's *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007), or *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004), which last seven, nine, and 11 hours, respectively, it is reasonable to expect that without even considering the films' formal aspects and narrative content, the difficult viewing experience will be made obvious merely by the demands of the viewer's body. Given that these films are narrative works designed to be viewed in a cinema in a single sitting – required breaks notwithstanding – their length and their length alone ensures a demanding, unusual viewing experience in which the process of perception will be eventually, if not always, made obvious.<sup>56</sup>

This effect can be also felt through durational approaches applied within the film itself. In analysing the infamous final shot of Tsai's *Vive l'amour* – a static, six-minute medium close-up showing May Lin (Yang Kuei-Mei) sobbing – Song Hwee Lim illustrates Ivone Margulies's concept of "corporeal cinema": a film's constant reminder to the viewer, as seen in both experimental and modernist films, "of physical, material presences – of cinema, of the actor/performer, of the spectator" (1996, 47). A corporeal effect is thus also a reflexive one, and can be created in a huge number of ways; as many ways as there are to "insisting on and amplifying the referential aspect of representation" (Margulies 1996, 47). Lim argues that the corporeal effect is created in *Vive l'amour*, as it is in Akerman's films, through a hyperrealism attained through extended duration and "the excess of detail resulting from a fixed stare" (Margulies 1996, 46), and also in this case, by foregrounding the relentless sounds of sobbing. Although the corporeal effect in the film is not in fact constant (in the manner of structural film) but rather sporadic, Lim highlights the manner in which it invigorates the viewer's consciousness in this shot. As he explains it, the final shot:

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<sup>56</sup> Non-narrative films of extreme duration generally do not require a complete viewing for their comprehension or appreciation. Experimental films are often screened continuously as a loop in gallery settings and thus have different start and end points for each viewer. Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2011) – a 24-hour montage consisting of shots from existing films, often revealing glimpses of the time through shots of clocks and watches – is designed to be viewed in fragments: audiences queue, enter the cinema when a seat is free, leave when they choose, and can return at a later time to see another portion. Warhol's *Empire* may very well be appreciated on a conceptual level by seeing a still and reading a description of the film.

elicits a corporeal response from us as we wriggle in our seats in a state of discomfort, wondering what the people around us are feeling, both emotionally and physically. We are trapped on both accounts: trapped in the diegetic world of inconsolable sobbing and trapped in an auditorium listening to these uncomfortable sounds alongside strangers [...] Time passes... very slowly. (134)

In this respect, the shot is an example of a political form of reflexivity, described by Bill Nichols as one that “operates primarily on the viewer’s consciousness, ‘raising’ it in the vernacular of progressive politics [...] in order to achieve a rigorous awareness of *commonality*” (69; emphasis added). However, minimalist films typically have much more modest running times than the examples cited above, while others do not apply long takes nearly as extensively as Tsai does.<sup>57</sup> As a result, they rely on far more than duration (of a shot, or of the film) to achieve reflexive effects.

Minimalist filmmakers respond to the aesthetic and philosophical challenges posed by Brecht and, more generally, modernism, by employing a wide range of reflexive and distancing strategies that foreground explicitly both the film viewing and the filmmaking process. As already noted, Alonso’s *La libertad* and *Los muertos* are ostensibly realist films, containing largely believable, realistic narratives that are filmed in what one may call a pure realist style (as I discuss later in this chapter, this style is “pure” to the extent that it may be plausible to refer to these films, or at least significant portions of them, as documentaries). In these films the use of extremely long takes and heavily de-dramatised narratives, which mostly observe the physical labours of lone men in the wilderness (played by nonprofessional actors appearing as themselves), seems to realise the Bazinian notion of a “perfect aesthetic illusion of reality” (2005b, 60). However, Alonso is not content to pass these films off merely as realistic. It can be argued that the sheer lack of drama in the films’ narratives produces disproportionately strong audience expectations of drama, as well as a form of reflexivity – a spectatorial awareness of the film viewing and the filmmaking process – on its own. As Jacques Aumont notes, the current proliferation of long takes in world cinema “also has the paradoxical effect of highlighting the editing by creating the sensation of an extended time that is no longer subjected to dramatic necessity”

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<sup>57</sup> Alonso’s first four feature films, for instance, are very short by any standard, ranging from 63 to 84 minutes.

(47). In both of Alonso's films, however, there are far more overt examples of reflexivity.

The final shot of *La libertad*, described at the start of this chapter, and its direct acknowledgement of the camera and thus the audience – a breaking of the so-called “fourth wall” – is today a common technique employed in film and other audiovisual media, and wide ranging in its effects and intentions. Rarely, however, has this technique been used so overtly and in such stark juxtaposition to a film style that strives for and achieves such an overwhelming sense of realism. The direct address is not a new strategy in cinema, but its isolated use within a minimalist, realist narrative and formal framework, certainly is. In its position at the tail end of both a lengthy shot and the film – to be precise, at 73 minutes into the film's overall running time – the effect of this direct address sequence registers as hyperbolic and disturbs the realism established by the film to an immense degree. Here, the consequences of minimalism's deliberately reduced syntax can be felt. The effect is markedly different to that of films in which the direct address is part of the normal method of representation, for example, most of Peter Watkins's films;<sup>58</sup> some of Jean-Luc Godard's cinema; and a film such as Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, in which Henry's sudden address to the camera registers as a formal surprise, but remains just one of a vast number of self-conscious techniques employed throughout the film.<sup>59</sup> While the overtly reflexive moment at the end of *La libertad* is not mentioned in any synopsis of the film, it registers as highly significant, indeed carrying the same weight as the armadillo killing sequence, that is, as a high point in the film's narrative. By virtue of its position within a minimalist narrative, Alonso's direct address sequence gains a hyperbolic quality and thus tremendous dramatic and thematic resonance, as well as a heavily reflexive quality.

This kind of abrupt, reflexive punctuation is also expressed through radical deviations in style, and, additionally, the punctuation is made stronger through the

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<sup>58</sup> All of Watkins's docudramas from *Culloden* (1964) onwards use a similar reflexive framing strategy, which depicts events from the perspective of a fictional TV documentary crew who interact with the subjects even though their own presence defies logic. For example, a crew is present at the 1746 Battle of Culloden in *Culloden*, the 1871 Paris Commune in *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (2000), and in 19<sup>th</sup> century Sweden in *Edvard Munch* (1976). Within this context, the characters – almost always played by nonprofessionals – glance constantly at the camera throughout the film, while they also address it directly during interview sequences and monologues delivered to camera.

<sup>59</sup> The range of such techniques in *Goodfellas* includes its ironic use of music, its hyperbolic style that exceeds narrative requirements, and its use of homage and of a knowing voiceover narration that addresses the viewer directly.

filmmakers' use of a minimalist syntax. Earlier in *La libertad*, there is a scene in which Misael takes a siesta after a busy morning of chopping wood. As he lies to rest in his tent, the camera uncharacteristically and without motivation begins to back away from its subject, floating through the jungle for a minute or so across several cuts as the sounds of nature are emphasised in the soundtrack. It is, as Jens Andermann describes it, as if the camera becomes "another animal in the community of the forest: a gaze-being on the hunt for images" (88). Eventually the camera settles in the outskirts of the jungle and observes a car as it comes into view, from which point Misael is reintroduced and the narrative resumes. In a film built on a simple, observational shooting style that is always committed to showing what Misael is doing, this self-conscious, autonomous camera movement sticks out like a sore thumb, completely abandoning the mood and stylistics established earlier in the film. As viewers we are made to notice it, question it, and ask ourselves why it belongs there. There is an equivalent moment in *Los muertos*, namely, in the film's opening: a dreamlike murder sequence that is arguably the most dramatic moment in the film and undoubtedly the most expressive, even though we do not actually see the murder. Here, a highly mobile camera again appears to float through the jungle, showing us glimpses of two dead children before settling on a bloodied machete clutched by a young man. Again, this highly expressive series of shots is utterly inconsistent with the decidedly subdued style, tone and narrative of the film that follows. It introduces a gaze, Andermann suggests, "with no relation to the diegesis, a gaze somehow as external to human affairs as the natural forms it beholds" (89). Another similar example can be found in *Uncle Boonmee* when the characters enter a cave where Boonmee will spend his last night alive. The camera, suddenly handheld, becomes autonomous, tilting and panning to offer glimpses of the textures of the cave walls without making clear whose viewpoint it is adopting, if any. In a very different example, albeit one that produces a similar foregrounding effect, Nuri Bilge Ceylan breaks abruptly from *Uzak*'s established stylistic register during a key moment. Having already annoyed Mahmut by overstaying his welcome and been recently scolded by him for smoking inside the apartment, Yusuf misjudges the situation badly by activating a toy bought for his nephew. After Mahmut is seen responding suspiciously to a vague offscreen sound, Ceylan cuts to a shot of a mechanical toy soldier, whirring and clicking on the floor in the doorway. Yusuf's feet enter the frame, and an odd, rapid tilt upwards – there appears to be several frames missing in



the shot, adding to its unusual comic effect – frames him standing over the toy and laughing goofily. The scene then settles into a shot-reverse-shot pattern, cutting back and forth between Yusuf and the brooding Mahmut in close-up, occasionally picking up speed as the argument escalates. Here the film diverts abruptly and temporarily from its established long take approach – a diversion repeated nowhere else – while the aforementioned tilt announces the stylistic departure.

A conscious process of perception is also initiated in minimalist films through the filming of empty space. In *Los muertos* there are several scenes in which the camera lingers on the scenery long after a character has exited the frame. An example of this is a scene in which Vargas is hitching a ride in the back of a utility vehicle after having being released from prison. He is eventually dropped off on the roadside but the camera remains in the back of the vehicle for 45 seconds as it drives away, filming the empty road before tilting up to the sky. The final shot of the film, cited in the previous chapter in regards to its transition to an open image, is a similar example.<sup>60</sup> Likewise, the opening of *Uzak*: a long uninterrupted take observes Yusuf walking away from his village and toward the camera, which is positioned atop a small hill and frames Yusuf, the village, and its snow covered surrounds in an extreme wide shot. Yusuf emerges eventually on top of the hill a few feet from the camera, panting. He looks back at the village briefly and exits frame to the left. Ceylan elects not to follow him immediately but continues to frame the landscape for a few seconds, before panning left slowly and eventually framing the road (Yusuf is not to be seen). A few seconds after the camera has settled, a pair of headlights appear in the far distance – the film’s first moment of dramatic expectation – and Yusuf steps back into frame from the left and flags the car down. The car approaches and begins to stop but Ceylan refuses to show the encounter, cutting instead to the title sequence as the sounds continue offscreen. The above examples demonstrate an extension of the use of offscreen strategies discussed in Chapter Two: they foreground, through absence, the notion that our “access to photographed reality remains partial insofar as the camera necessarily views this and not that, frames, and hence cuts out from the wider

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<sup>60</sup> In his analysis of Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*, Ben Singer describes these moments as “post-action lag,” in which “the camera lingers on inanimate objects [...] before the cut occurs. Any semblance of Hollywood’s invisibility of editing disappears in this standardised, repetitive, self-conscious system of prefacing cuts” (59). Flanagan suggests that this strategy, which can be seen in many minimalist films, is derived primarily from late modernist cinema (most evident in films by Straub and Huillet) and presents “a clear signal that all visible activity is still being carefully coordinated by the ‘invisible’ filmmaker” (2012, 180).

ongoing contingency of the world just this scene, this event, this action, and this person” (Cowie 21). In these examples, which eventually afford as much time to filming people as it does to their absence, the viewer is made blatantly aware of the presence of the camera through its process of recording “nothing”; the presence of the filmmaker through the foregrounding of his ability to control precisely what is shown or obscured; and our status as viewers as well as our act of watching, as we contemplate the ambiguous emptiness of the image.<sup>61</sup>

As can be seen in these minimalist films, stark deviations from naturalistic filmmaking, or the seemingly rigid stylistic norms established by the film, often make explicit the presence of the camera, the filmmaker, and the viewer. In terms of depicting reality, they follow the modernist tradition as they foreground contradiction and mediation (Stam 2000, 226) and “offer two present contradictory articulations of the world and thus reveal its own presence” (MacCabe 1985, 49). As discussed in the first chapter, within these films’ minimal narratives, a certain action, event or piece of dialogue can register as major, climactic moments because of their sheer difference to what has come before or will come after. Similarly, by withholding the use of certain techniques until key moments, stylistic deviations can also register as highly significant. A key trait of contemporary minimalist cinema, then, is its deliberate use of a minimal range of narrative and stylistic approaches with which to construct its realism. When the film deviates from the stylistic norm that it has established, sometimes across several hours, the effects of reflexivity – the viewer’s sudden, heightened awareness of the camera and the filmmaker’s presence, the film as a construct and their own status as viewer – are far greater and longer lasting than in other films even though their expression may be much more muted.

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<sup>61</sup> Similar examples of foregrounding can be found in *Silent Light*, which Reygadas often punctuates with odd shots that reveal the presence of the camera, and foreground the process of photography. The majority of the film is impeccably framed and photographed, but on several occasions shots are composed so that a heavy lens flare falls across the frame, distracting from and obscuring other parts of the image; a lens flare that could have been avoided by minor adjustments in camera position or by repositioning the actors. In one scene, the protagonist confides to his workmate about his extramarital affair, and proceeds to circle the man in his truck in a giddy expression of having fallen in love, while the camera pans and follows him. Eventually, we notice that the workmate is visible a few metres away from the camera, revealing that the shot is not in fact a point-of-view shot as it first seems, and that the protagonist has been staring directly at the camera all along. A foregrounding effect is made more constant in the same director’s *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012), which applies distorting, ripple-effect filters to all of the exterior scenes, and in the recent films of Hong Sang-soo (since *Tale of Cinema* [2005]), where the static long-take scenes are interrupted by a sudden pan or zoom in/out, foregrounding the camera and the filmmaker both abruptly and regularly throughout the film.

These strategies are a manifestation, within a narrative form, of one of minimalism's crucial aims. In his analysis of Minimal Art and the avant-garde minimalist cinema of the 1960s, Noël Carroll argues that minimalism "provokes reflexive reflection on itself and/or its associated experiences by employing highly reductive or limited means," adding that minimalist film is "reflexive in the sense that its subject matter is the nature of the pertinent art form itself and/or the experiences the works in question engender" (2006, 176). Contemporary minimalist films are also narrative films, so they are able to extend their reflexive approaches beyond "employing highly reductive or limited means"; but it is through these means that they are able to exaggerate reflexive effects when they occur. The use of reflexive strategies in minimalist films also serves a function that is similar to that of Minimal Art and in particular structural film: it calls attention to and reveals its own formal and narrative structures and logic, inviting a "structuring" process on the part of the viewer. The computer-generated UFO in Jia's *Still Life* divides the film into two distinct narrative halves, as does the key moment in Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror*, in which the young girl stares into the camera and declares that she "doesn't want to act anymore," shifting the film from realist fiction into a documentary mode. Roughly the first half of Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006) charts the lead-up to a TV talk show commemorating the sixteenth anniversary of the 1989 Romanian Revolution, then switches to the show itself, filmed in real time from the perspective of an amateurish studio camera operator. The film quickly becomes a reflexive, comedic farce – commercial-break banter, out-of-focus shots, poor framing, and dodgy pans and zooms are all included – and establishes a radical tonal and formal contrast to the film's narrative-driven opening half.

This kind of reflexivity, however, is often detached from the film's diegesis – in particular, its narrative and characters – and relies instead on devices that exist outside of the world of the film. Minimalist filmmakers have conceived ways of emphasising the artifice of the film, as well as emphasising its structural shape, which do not interfere directly with the narrative. Instead of image and sound, they often use devices such as captions, graphics and title sequences to interrupt, divide and bookend the narrative. The opening credit sequence in Weerasethakul's *Blissfully Yours* begins 45 minutes into the film, almost at the halfway point. This also divides the film into two, signaling both a start and an end in the narrative's transition from the urban (first half) to the rural (second half). The stark division between the two different kinds of

narratives and realities depicted in the same director's *Tropical Malady* is also marked by a device that owes little to the diegesis of the film: a caption with a proverb. Similarly, Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* uses a film countdown leader to divide the film into ten segments; by the second or third appearance of the leader we are able to grasp the structural logic of the film. After this, we may watch the rest of the film in the same way we would a structural or even a portmanteau film, with an awareness of how many sections are yet to come – this, of course, is also made clear by the title – and some expectations as to their narrative and stylistic content.<sup>62</sup> A similar use of offscreen, non-diegetic devices can be seen in Alonso's films. All his films use postpunk music by the group Flormaleva in either the opening or end credit sequences – a startling choice because his films do not otherwise contain any non-diegetic music, and because the choice of music seems completely incongruous with the mood, themes and realism of the films themselves. Alonso thus starts, ends or bookends the realist narrative with explicit, extra-diegetic markers of mediation – explicit only in their contrast to the film, not as a default quality – prompting the viewer to contemplate the meaning of the disjunctive elements, while emphasising the work as an artificial construct. The very process of craft is foregrounded through the strongly disjunctive elements – both have been placed side by side, and deliberately, by the filmmaker.<sup>63</sup>

Minimalist filmmakers exercise a reflexivity that is not merely used for its own sake but is deeply embedded in the subject matter, political outlook and, when

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<sup>62</sup> This is the narrative equivalent of the formal expectations raised in a film such as Frampton's *Zorns Lemma*, particularly in its second and main section. Just as the viewer would likely expect the film to end, or at least move on, once all of the 24 letters have been replaced by moving images, there is a parallel expectation that the content of many of the moving images themselves will reach an end. These particular images display a clear progression after each cycle, as well as a foreseeable endpoint – for example, a container fills up with beans; a man paints a wall; and a pair of hands is seen peeling a fruit. Even the far simpler *Lemon* (Frampton 1969) – a seven-minute close-up of a lemon as an artificial light is moved slowly across it – establishes a clear formal expectation that it will end once the light passes over and plunges the object back into darkness, where the film began. Here, Frampton confounds this expectation by including a coda: he continues to move the light against the back of the studio wall (which has been effaced up until this point), silhouetting the lemon and abstracting it into a two-dimensional image, and simultaneously foregrounding the film's visual construction and illusion of three-dimensionality.

<sup>63</sup> Alonso also explains that: "I like to use music to give my films a time period. Without music, these films could take place 15 years in the past or in the future. [...] [T]he primitive in the images and story are contrasted with the modern sound" (Klinger 2005). Although it is arguable that Flormaleva's music can be used to suggest a time period with such precision – especially given that he used it in *Fantasma* (2006), a film in which the historical setting requires no emphasis – Alonso's reasoning stands firm in both *La libertad* and *Los muertos*, where the textual markers of a contemporary setting are few and far between.

documentary elements become involved, ethics of their films.<sup>64</sup> This is immediately evident in the narratives of many films, which foreground as part of its subject the film viewing and filmmaking processes, including the underlying illusory aspects of all filmmaking. For example, Weerasethakul frequently foregrounds the ideas of illusion and seeing as visual and narrative motifs in *Uncle Boonmee*. When Boonmee talks about not being able to see clearly in the cave, this is accompanied by an insert shot of a gap in the cave ceiling as the moon passes over, thus presenting an abstract depiction of an eye and the act of seeing. In an earlier scene when the princess stares into a pond and watches her reflection transform into her former, youthful self, she states dejectedly that she knows that the “reflection is an illusion.” In another scene, Boonmee recounts a dream, which is expressed in voiceover accompanied by photographs – evoking Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962) and foregrounding the disjunction between objective reality (photograph, perception) and subjective reality (dream, memory). For Weerasethakul, these details constitute an important part of a broader reflexive strategy of combining realist and non-realist elements:

In many of my movies I always have a shot or a scene that has the audience aware that they’re looking at the illusion. For example, to put the still photos in, or to have the character look at you. It breaks the narrative, it breaks the time and it makes you realise, ‘wait, this is really in a theatre and we’re looking at illusion.’ (Houin 2010)

In keeping with this foregrounding of film as illusion and filmmaking as illusionistic, the narratives of minimalist films often unfold wholly or partially on film sets (*The River*; *The Wayward Cloud*; *Taste of Cherry*; *Through the Olive Trees* [Kiarostami 1994]; *The Mirror*; *Climates* [Ceylan 2006]) and in cinemas (*Fantasma*; *What Time*; *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*). They also often feature characters who are, or represent, filmmakers (*The Wind Will Carry Us*; *Life, and Nothing More...* [Kiarostami 1992]; several films by Hong, such as *Tale of Cinema*, *Like You Know it All* [2009] and *In Another Country* [2012]); feature the actual filmmakers (*Mysterious Object at Noon* [Weerasethakul 2000]; *Visage* [Tsai 2009]; several films by Panahi and Kiarostami); or feature characters, or obvious variations of characters, from the filmmaker’s earlier

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<sup>64</sup> As Robert Stam acknowledges, reflexivity “comes with no pre-attached political valence; it can be grounded in art-for-art’s sake aestheticism or in dialectical materialism” (1985, xii). Particularly, postmodernism has revealed “the infinite cooptability of reflexivity when it is used as nothing more than an ironic device” (2000, 227).

work (*Fantasma*; *Uncle Boonmee*; numerous films by Pedro Costa and Hong; practically all of Tsai's films).

The diverse range of strategies described above respond to the modernist challenge by encouraging the viewer to question the contradictory representations of reality in the film and respond to it in a critical, reflexive manner. Through such reflexive strategies as the combined use of realist and abstract narrative elements, abrupt stylistic intrusions and narrative deviations, the creation of spectatorial awareness through duration and de-dramatisation, and the foregrounding of filmmaking devices as well as the act of filmmaking and viewing, minimalist filmmakers go far beyond their surface realism. Their minimalist, realist approach entails that the former is used to create as well as question the latter. Theirs is a cinema committed to revisiting and interrogating available models for the representation of reality – most importantly, its own. These concerns are expanded further, and they take on far greater stakes, in minimalist filmmakers' exploration of fictional and documentary boundaries.

### **The problem of documentary**

As Michael Renov notes in his introduction to *Theorizing Documentary* (1993), “[t]he recourse to history demonstrates that the documentary has availed itself of nearly every constructive device known to fiction (of course, the reverse is equally true) and has employed virtually every register of cinematic syntax in the process” (6). It is, therefore, somewhat of a cliché today to point out that fictional films incorporate documentary techniques, or vice versa, just as it is to suggest that any given technique belongs inherently to either form. Technological and formal innovations in one form eventually make their way into the other. Nonetheless, today there is a noticeable abundance of fictional films and TV shows that explicitly evoke the documentary through different means, and for various ends. The ever-popular mockumentary format mimics conventions from the expository and “fly on the wall” observational modes of documentary, usually to create a comedic or satirical effect (*The Office* [Gervais & Merchant 2001-2003], *Kenny* [Jacobson 2006]). Techniques such as handheld cinematography and the use of natural light, previously associated with documentary movements such as Direct Cinema and cinema vérité, are ubiquitous in today's fiction films. They have become elements of a common stylistic approach for

many films that strive to create the impression of “witnessing” a fictional event (*Festen* [Vinterberg 1998]) or a recreated historical moment (*Tony Manero* [Larraín 2008]). Or they are applied selectively to achieve visceral thrills in films that are otherwise not concerned with being wholly realistic (*The Hurt Locker* [Bigelow 2008]). A clear trend in horror films of recent years, which began with the global success of *The Blair Witch Project* (Sánchez & Myrick 1999), is for the film to present itself as found footage, using seemingly amateurish, faux-documentary video footage to enhance its reality effect (*REC* [Balagueró & Plaza 2007], *Cloverfield* [Reeves 2008]). Techniques once associated with documentary filmmaking are now well and truly embedded in the fictional filmmaking canon, and now bear resemblance to fictional films as much as documentaries.

As Renov notes above, the same trend applies in the reverse. A documentary such as *The Cove* (Psihoyos 2009), which seeks to expose the inhumane slaughter of dolphins in a Japanese town, manipulates a huge assortment of fictional techniques – multiple coverage of scenes, emotive music, special effects, non-diegetic sounds and a highly compressed, fragmented narrative structure – to craft a dramatic, suspenseful narrative that has drawn comparisons to fictional heist films such as *Ocean’s Eleven* (Soderbergh 2001). Similarly, and despite its widespread positive reviews, fictional approaches are applied to such extent in the documentary *American Teen* (Burnstein 2008) that some critics have concluded that too much of the footage is “simply too good, too dramatically shaped, to be true” and that the film was “marred by the persistent suspicion that the director wasn’t being entirely straight with us” (Bradshaw 2009).<sup>65</sup> The increasing trend of applying overtly fictional forms and techniques to shape documentary, also extends to nonfictional films made outside a cinema context. WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange shot to fame in 2007 when they released 39 minutes of leaked, unedited footage taken from a US fighter helicopter in Baghdad, which captured the pilots killing 18 civilians and journalists on the ground after mistaking them for insurgents. Tellingly, far more widely viewed and discussed was WikiLeaks’s subsequently released, 17-minute edited version of the same incident titled *Collateral Murder* (2010). This version was more didactic, overtly political in

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<sup>65</sup> The film looks at a cross-section of American teenagers in their final year of high school. Some of the more contentious scenes include the filming of a bullying incident, in which a group of friends litter a classmate’s front yard with toilet paper, and several instances of the camera capturing both ends of a phone conversation, or the close-ups of both mobile phone screens as a text message is sent and received (including one in which one of the subject breaks up with his girlfriend).

tone and approach, and manipulated the events through heavy compression of the footage, the use of captions to highlight onscreen details, editing in quotes from army officials in an ironic manner to highlight their incompetence, the emotive use of photographs of the deceased, and a George Orwell quote at the start of the film. Predictably, the recut version was simultaneously more embraced and criticised by the media and public.<sup>66</sup>

This synthesis of so-called fictional and documentary approaches is not at all surprising, and not at all new. In fact, the two have always been integrated. Despite their longstanding status as the earliest documentary models – with Méliès’s films being the fictional counterpart – Antonio Traverso and Martin Mhando argue that the Lumières’ “allegedly unmediated images of the real were in fact densely designed visual texts (in terms of framing, composition, structure, and timing), which responded to long-lasting traditions of visualisation in painting and, more recently, photography” (109). And thus cinema “does not only arise as documentary but its very desire for actuality is from the onset complicated by the needs of narrative and fiction” (109). Furthermore, as Renov notes, all discursive forms are, “if not fictional, at least *fictive*” (7; emphasis in the original), and “fictional and nonfictional forms are enmeshed in one another – particularly regarding semiotics, narrativity, and questions of performance” (2). Adrian Martin distinguishes between claims of “truth” that are often evoked in discussions of documentary practice: truth as factual reportage, as objective attitude, as an essence (for example, a mood or feel of an event) or as a universal quality (with a capital “T”). He then disputes the alignment of these truth claims with documentary, and proceeds to dismiss them outright:

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<sup>66</sup> While it reached a wider audience and won many over to WikiLeaks’s cause, critics pointed out that the film (the first version was never called a “film”) was misleading in that its editing failed to reveal that the incident occurred as a conflict was taking place in the neighbourhood, or emphasise that one man on the ground appeared to be holding a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. Others noted its propagandist approach and its use of a “tendentious rubric” (Keller 2011). This approach has a clear precedent in film history, most notably in the agitprop montage film tradition that skillfully appropriated or reappropriated images to express political beliefs, or to “give us the tools with which to understand, discuss and transform a historical situation” (Brenez 45). Key exponents of the tradition include Cuban filmmaker Santiago Álvarez (*Ciclón* [1963], *Now* [1965], *Hanoi, martes 13* [1967]), who “transformed the scarcity of resources at ICAIC [Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry] into the departure point of a search for new aesthetic possibilities based on collage” (López 480); the Grupo Cine Liberación, formed by Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (*The Hour of the Furnaces* [1968]); and later, filmmakers such as Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin (*Letter to Jane* [1972]), Chris Marker (*A Grin Without a Cat* [1977]) and Patricio Guzmán (*The Battle of Chile* [1977]).



Not only do none of the above catalogued brands of truth actually exist (factual reportage is always compromised in some way by selection or circumstance; objectivity is a bogus ideology; essences are pure wishful thinking); I do not think it even *matters* whether they exist or not. The space of the real and the true is being kept too sacred, too pure, too separate in such discussions; it is underwritten at all times by fiction (what is the belief in a real essence, if not the leaning on a handy and appropriate fiction or account of the significance of an event?), but this fact is defensively and hysterically denied. (2013; emphasis in the original)

Martin's argument reflects Jacques Lacan's statement that "every truth has the structure of a fiction," after having made a distinction between truth and reality: in short, truth is constructed and proposed subjectively, whereas reality requires no substantiation for it simply is.<sup>67</sup> After making the same distinction, Jacques Derrida in similar terms argues that "it immediately follows that the truth 'declares itself in a structure of fiction'" (467). Thus it is widely accepted that the documentary's truth claim relies on fiction for it to be even articulated, as reflected in John Grierson's longstanding definition of documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality" (1966).

As illustrated in the examples above, documentaries are often attacked on aesthetic grounds (for example, when fictional approaches become too overbearing and manipulative, casting doubt on their claims of truth) or ethical grounds (for example, if a filmmaker appears to be exploiting or deceiving a subject, or employing an aesthetic that represents a subject or event inappropriately), with the two usually being closely linked. Thus a key problem of representing reality in documentary is not so much a question of *whether* fictional approaches are applied in the context of nonfiction but of where, when, how and why they are applied. Yet, regardless of how much a documentary may rely on fictional approaches or vice versa, a film's status as *being* either fiction or documentary is rarely disturbed by this synthesis. It is unlikely that a viewer would mistake any of the fictional examples cited above as documentaries, regardless of how realistic it may seem; likewise, and despite their often overbearing use of fictional approaches, the documentaries are unlikely ever to be construed outright as fiction. A film's "documentary-ness" may be devalued, and we may even lose trust in it and its maker; yet it is perceived as a documentary

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<sup>67</sup> Or as Cowie puts it, "[m]aterial reality – the trees outside – are not true, they simply are" (26).

nonetheless. The balance of synthesis in any given film thus alters the degree of documentary realism and its reality effect (its impression of reality), but not so far as to affect the reality of the film itself, as a filmed object.

As Renov puts it, the difference between documentary and fiction “is the extent to which the referent of the documentary sign may be considered as a piece of the world plucked from its everyday context rather than fabricated for the screen” (7). Cowie suggests another, possibly more crucial, factor that often lies outside the text itself. Because there is “no style that distinguishes the factual from the fictional” (25), and narrative (and its procedures, such as structure, and the construction of characters and types) remains an integral aspect of both forms, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction lies “in the authorization that is provided for the text by the writer or filmmakers and by the publisher, exhibitor, or broadcaster” (25). She goes on:

If, like fiction, the documentary is defined as not intending to deceive, then it requires an assertion in this regard by its producers that the events and actions shown – the film’s world, in fact – are actual and real, in such a way that enables the reader or viewer to know ‘for certain’ whether what they are watching is offered as fiction or nonfiction. (25)

This assertion can be made via an extratextual statement within the film (for example, captions, voiceover, credits and titles) or outside of it (at the point of exhibition, broadcasting, marketing and promotional materials); the latter is particularly important if the former is absent (as it is in the films of Frederick Wiseman, for example).<sup>68</sup> The recognition of visual and narrative styles (and content) associated with nonfiction plays a major role in it being interpreted as such, but it does not guarantee certainty. It is only in the absence of an extratextual statement, argues Cowie, that the viewer falls back on this recognition entirely to assess a film’s status as fiction or nonfiction. Therefore, a viewer’s understanding of whether a film is

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<sup>68</sup> It can be argued that that the former examples are stylistic devices in themselves, which now belong equally in fiction. For example, a caption may state, as it often does in documentary, the year in which a historical film is set; or it may announce an ellipsis (“Three years later”).

fiction or documentary relies as much on viewing context and prior knowledge, as it does on the film's content and form.<sup>69</sup>

Minimalist filmmakers complicate the already tenuous division between documentary and fiction, and challenge the “knowability” of the world suggested in either form, by often refusing to make clear a distinction between them, both in and outside of the filmic text. Far from being a deceptive measure, it is simply the case that the minimalist form and content of the films create a realism that evokes both forms equally, and that the filmmakers often approach – indeed, conceive – their films with both forms in mind, sometimes even in parallel. These films always retain a strong sense of documentary realism because the filmmakers do not merely incorporate the signposts of the documentary genre, but often approach their film as if it were one. Although their films invite a default fictional reading – it is in fact rare for a documentary not to acknowledge itself as such, at the very least in its promotional materials – certain films by minimalist filmmakers are difficult to categorise conclusively as either documentary or fiction, whether in whole or part.

As I have already noted, many fictional films strive for a high degree of realism (which can begin to resemble a documentary realism) by evoking a sense of documentation of a reality, through the use of countless approaches associated with the documentary genre. Documentaries, to varying degrees, rely strongly on fictional approaches to convey meaning and construct characters, and to structure more economical, entertaining, informative and emotional narratives (often to enforce their ideas and agendas more forcefully). In minimalist films, however, fictional and documentary elements are often inseparable, deeply embedded in the narrative, style and shooting methods that are used. In addition to rendering the reality represented in the film as problematic and ambiguous, this lack of distinction may confound the very status of the film itself, as being essentially a piece of fiction or nonfiction, or as a fiction or documentary.

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<sup>69</sup> It is precisely by withholding this extratextual statement and relying on conventional uses of documentary style and narrative, that filmmakers have in the past been able to deceive the viewer into thinking an outright fiction to be a documentary, and thus a nonfictional depiction of the real. In exposing the viewer's complacency in trusting unquestioningly the documentary form, Shohei Imamura's *A Man Vanishes* (1967) refrains from revealing its fictional status until its final moments, while Mitchell Block's *No Lies* (1972) does not do it until the closing credits. The deception extends to well outside of the film in Casey Affleck's *I'm Still Here* (2008) and Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project*, both of which relied on a fake publicity campaign to reinforce their status as documentary. The latter film's attempt to pass itself off as a found footage documentary included a massive online marketing campaign, the production of a fake documentary, and sworn secrecy by those involved in the production.

Minimalist filmmakers' stance on whether their films are fiction or documentary is varied. Despite the fact that his films exhibit more explicit ties to documentary forms than those of his peers, Alonso asserts that his films are fiction and not documentary (Guillen 2011). Kiarostami, meanwhile, suggests that after much deliberation, he no longer bothers to make a distinction between the two forms. In an interview with Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa and Jonathan Rosenbaum, Kiarostami outlines his reasons:

**Kiarostami:** I personally can't define the difference between a documentary and a narrative film. [...] I finally decided that if you just attach the camera to the top of a bull's horns and let him loose in a field for a whole day, at the end of the day you might have a documentary. But there's still a catch here, because we've selected the location and the type of lens that we want.

**Rosenbaum:** And the kind of bull.

**Kiarostami:** And whether it's a cloudy day or a sunny day. In my mind, there isn't as much of a distinction between documentary and fiction as there is between a good movie and bad one. (116-17)

Kiarostami's concerns reflect the longstanding theoretical and practical dilemma of how accurately any given reality can be captured; the impossibility of objective representation; and the conceptually inevitable idea that a documentary "depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audio-visual signifier (via choices of language, lens, proximity, and sound environment)" (Renov 7). While standards of documentary may vary from viewer to viewer – the hypothetical camera strapped on a bull's horns constitutes a far simpler, purer ideal of documentary than most viewers would likely have – the question of what is documentary and what is fiction clearly remains a central concern implicit in Kiarostami's remarks. In particular, the degree of manipulation and intervention on the part of the filmmaker before documentary tips over into fiction, or vice versa, is a question often at the heart of minimalist films (as it is in the discourse of documentary theory), and evident in their approach to both form and content. They do not provide an answer to this question. Rather, they take as their film's subject and formal basis the aesthetic and ethical problem of the representation of the real, and prompt viewers to consider why

we think about and respond to each of these forms in the ways we do. This is accomplished in a variety of ways.

### **Documentary as art film, art film as documentary**

Jim Weil suggests that *La libertad* is “a ‘documentary’ film doubling as an ‘art’ film” (44). But it may be equally accurate to describe the film in the opposite way, as an art film doubling as a documentary. Due to both its style and its detailed documentation of a way of life, *La libertad* can be aligned to a distanced, self-effacing form of observational documentary filmmaking that refrains from using narration, music, cutaways, captions, graphics and other manipulations and explanatory devices. Instead, it presents the footage “with all its ambiguities [to be] offered as a basis for discussion [...] without official guidance” (Barnouw 251). Indeed, Nichols’s formative descriptions of the observational mode of documentary in *Representing Reality* (1991) read like a checklist of the qualities of Alonso’s film. For Nichols, the observational mode “stresses the nonintervention of the filmmaker [and prefers to] cede ‘control’ over the events that occur in front of the camera more than any other mode” (38); they “tend to take paradigmatic form around the exhaustive depiction of the everyday” (39) and “the representation of typicality” (40); and frequently include “moments representative of lived time itself rather than [...] ‘story time’” (40) as well as “[r]ecurring images or situations [that] tend to strengthen a ‘reality effect,’ anchoring the film to the historical facticity of time and place” (41). In relation to Alonso’s film, this aspect of observational documentary is particularly pertinent:

Observational cinema affords the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others, to gain some sense of the distinct rhythms of everyday life, to see the colors, shapes, and spatial relationships among people and their possessions. (42)

This description suits well Alonso’s film, as it does the work of observational filmmakers such as Wiseman, which “involv[es] the viewer in teasing out meaning rather than documenting absolute truths” and discovering “the structural logic of the

film's parts and exploring their implications" (Grant 241).<sup>70</sup> This description of Wiseman's films is in turn echoed in Alonso's description of his own approach: "To observe respectfully and to allow the spectator to grasp the appropriate elements and make up his or her own world" (West & West 35).

It would be easy to read *La libertad* as a straightforward documentary observation of a real person, if not for the presence of stylistic elements that complicate the way in which we may read and respond to it. As David Jenkins notes, despite the fact that *La libertad* appears to be a documentary, "there's a camera tilt there, a swooshing pan there, to remind us that essentially, we're watching a piece of fiction" (4). He rightfully asserts that a film's style has as much to do as narrative in whether we interpret the film as a piece of documentary or fiction. In other words, the precision and control evident in *La libertad* – its framing, mise en scène, pacing, controlled soundtrack and so on – seem somehow to be at odds with the film's subject and narrative, which, for all intents and purposes, plays out as an observational documentary, a form in which this level of precision and control may be desirable but unattainable. Furthermore, there are far more explicit markers of mediation as discussed earlier in this chapter, namely, the expressive sequence in the forest, and the direct address to camera in the film's final shot. Both of these moments constitute a departure from the observational mode and put into doubt the film's status as documentary; significantly so in the latter example, which also makes ambiguous Misael's role in the film: is he a performer in fiction or an observed documentary subject?

And yet, these markers do not necessarily render Alonso's film a piece of fiction. Formal precision in and of itself does not entail fiction, as recent documentaries such as *Megacities* (Glawogger 1998), *Sleep Furiously* (Koppel 2009) and *Sweetgrass* (Castaing-Taylor & Barbash 2009) have demonstrated, just as formal imprecision or arbitrariness in a fictional film does not entail documentary. Furthermore, Cowie argues that a documentary "never ceases to be a documenting of reality, all its 'deformations' notwithstanding, insofar as it sets out a contract with its audience by its self-declaration as a documentary. Its particular fabrications do not thereby make it nonfiction" (45). *La libertad* refuses to set out such a contract with its audience. Fiction is strongly suggested in the opening credit sequence: the red sans-

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<sup>70</sup> Wiseman is one of the few documentary filmmakers often listed alongside fictional filmmakers in discussions of contemporary minimalist cinema (see Koehler 2009 and Jaffe 2014).

serif font placed vividly over a black background; the list of crewmembers, including numerous assistants; the cast members listed in order of importance, with Misael afforded his own individual frame as the film's "star"; and most importantly, Flormaleva's lively electronic score, which fades away as the sequence ends, seeming to promise a drama in its wake. Yet all that these elements can do is merely suggest fiction and, in fact, they may not even do that: the number of crew listed is noticeably small by fictional filmmaking standards (although noticeably large for a documentary of this nature) and it is not uncommon practice for documentary subjects to be listed in credit sequences, as in a fictional film. In addition, and as described earlier in the chapter, Alonso has stated that he uses Flormaleva's music as a framing device to emphasise the film's contemporary setting, which it clearly does. Moreover, the overt suggestion of fiction in the credit sequence seems in hindsight extravagant; it appears to emphasise or even announce, through its sheer difference, a switch to documentary when the film starts proper. Indeed, it is the title sequence that seems incongruous with the film, not the other way around.

Given that the credit sequence does not conclusively reveal the film as fiction or documentary, the viewer needs now to turn to the film's content and form to gauge its impression of documentary reality. As should already be clear, it is because of the extraordinarily high degree of realism that Alonso achieves in the film that the question of whether it is documentary or fiction is even being raised. In the first half hour of the film, the film seems unequivocally to be a documentary and a rather pure expression of the observational mode. Alonso's minimalist approach entails obviously low levels of narrative and formal manipulation. Narrative exists only in the sense that each scene simply follows another, in chronological fashion, but there is no plot to speak of. The camera's focus is entirely on realistic quotidian details, centered on the routine of Misael's labour. The spatiotemporal integrity of the shot is maintained rigorously; each scene is filmed in long takes from a single angle, and editing is used only for minor temporal ellipses. However, the most crucial factor in the film's impression of documentary reality is the central presence of an unknown, nonprofessional actor, whom we also know, via the opening credits, to be appearing as himself. This creates a direct, identifiable link between the film and reality, embeds a clear nonfictional human element into the film, and thus frames Misael's role in the film as a documentary subject, rather than as an actor in fiction. This is reinforced further by the intense focus on Misael's labour, which he performs skillfully,

efficiently and professionally, suggesting that it is his real livelihood outside of the film. By extension, it is also suggested that the location of the film is the same one in which Misael really lives and works. If *La libertad* is not a documentary, there is little so far to suggest that it is not; indeed, the film creates a far greater impression of documentary reality than most documentaries.

The first hint that the film is not what it appears to be is the expressive jungle sequence, described earlier, which also brings about two key changes: a subtle shift in style in the second half of the film, and the introduction into the narrative of other human beings. Any alert viewer with a basic understanding of the filmmaking process will notice that from this point in the narrative, the camera is more ubiquitous, and that Alonso begins occasionally to fragment time and space, using multiple shots in continuity to depict a scene when he had previously used only one (for the most part, however, the observational, long take style of coverage is maintained). After Misael is driven away on the back of the farmer's utility vehicle, the next shot finds the camera on the vehicle as it is in transit, filming Misael and the farmer's dog sitting on the back; the following shot cuts to inside the vehicle, filming the farmer and his son. Similarly, after Misael has borrowed the vehicle, the camera is inside filming him driving, in one shot; in the next shot it is outside, showing the car approaching and anticipating its arrival. Where the first section of the film could be simply the ordering of shots culled from hours of documentary footage, several of the scenes in the second half are clearly constructed and prearranged, signaling the intervention of the filmmaker. This difference in approach to filming time and space, argues Aumont, is precisely "the difference between a fiction film, whose time is managed, and a documentary film, whose time is experienced" (11). However, if Nanette Burnstein is able to include the impossible feat of showing both ends of a phone conversation in *American Teen* without the film being labeled a fiction as a result, surely Alonso is entitled to include the relatively minor abstraction of physical and temporal reality, of showing a car arrive from two different angles.

It is not the shift in the editing itself that complicates the impression of documentary reality that the film has established, but that it throws into doubt the role of Misael and other people depicted in the film. Documentary always entails a degree of performance by both subject (who will modify their behaviour for the camera) and filmmaker (who will project a certain persona in order to coax a certain behaviour



from the subject, even though this may not be evident in the film).<sup>71</sup> But here the editing reveals the subjects performing in accordance with the needs of the filmmaker. In order for a switch in angle in a continuous sequence, the filmmaker must pause the action, reposition the camera and establish a new shot. The subjects or actors must, of course, be a part of the process; they are in on the act. As such, the most muted deviation from documentary style in *La libertad* is also the clearest indication of fiction. The implications of editing here are radically different to a fictional film where such coverage is part and parcel, and where the viewer is never under the impression that they are watching real people, doing real things in their own way. Although not an uncommon practice in documentary either, this seemingly minor deviation in style reveals that for the first time in the film, the people depicted are not simply being observed; they are working around the style and logistics of the film rather than the other way around.

Nevertheless, what remains clear, unless Alonso has deceived the viewer completely, is that Misael is a real person and that, to an extent we will never know for sure, there remains a strong correlation between his life as represented on the screen and his real life outside of it. In light of this conclusion, two broad possible readings of the film emerge: firstly, that in the first half the film is documentary, and in the second it introduces staged, fictional elements (which seem to be nonetheless fictionalised enactments or re-enactments of Misael's real everyday life). Or, secondly, the whole film is a protracted re-enactment of a day in the life of Misael.<sup>72</sup> It is now well known that *La libertad* was "faithfully re-created from weeks of Alonso's close observation of the man's actual life" (Quandt 2008). Indeed, a script was written, and some aspects of Misael's real-life persona were changed (Andermann 87). However, many films classified historically as documentary – though not unproblematically – involve extensive re-enactments. Kevin Macdonald's *Touching the Void* (2003) depicts the dramatic account of the survival of mountain

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<sup>71</sup> As Stella Bruzzi suggests, documentaries "are a negotiation between filmmaker and reality and, at heart, a performance" (186).

<sup>72</sup> There is already an instant in the opening half (Misael's defecation in the woods, which is obscured by framing) that disturbs its reading as documentary because of the ethical problems it raises (of privacy and the subject's dignity, for example). Yet, again this may be read as an insertion of fiction rather than evidence that the film is one. As James Quandt describes it, "[f]ar from Rüdiger Vogler's aestheticized defecation in Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road* (1976), Misael's act seems nothing more than a shit in the woods" (2008). The scene of Vogler's defecation, despite its belonging in a fictional film, was nonetheless real and posed an ethical problem of whether it should be included. Wenders has admitted that the scene "has followed me for the rest of my life. The actor, poor Rüdiger, it marked his life" (Berning 2012).

climbers Joe Simpson and Simon Yates in the Peruvian Andes (shown and heard through studio interviews), through extensive re-enactments on location, using professional actors. Watkins's *The War Game* (1965) is a speculative film that contains not a single frame of documentary footage – it is not a re-enactment but a pre-enactment – yet it won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 1967.<sup>73</sup> It is common knowledge that in making *Nanook of the North*, a seminal documentary to which *La libertad* is often compared, Robert Flaherty fabricated facts and restaged or manipulated events for the camera, “alter[ing] the reality he was filming to a surprising degree” (Eagan 84).<sup>74</sup> John Ellis argues that such alterations would amount to a film that would “scarcely qualify as a documentary today. It is a drama based on fact, a drama-documentary or a recreation” (12). Yet the film remains considered as documentary, and its alterations of reality are not revealed within the film itself but rather known only through extratextual statements made by Flaherty, and through historical research. *La libertad* is arguably a far purer form of documentary than *Nanook of the North* because the actions of its subject are far more unspectacular, de-dramatised and truer to the subject's actual life, although it is not entirely clear as to what extent Alonso may have dictated the kinds of activities he wanted to film, and how. *La libertad* does not comment explicitly on its subject, nor does it actually claim to be a documentation of a way of life in the way *Nanook* does, that is, with its use of explanatory and factual title cards.<sup>75</sup> It is by the very precedents set in the discourse of the documentary's theory, history and practice that *La libertad* can be classified as a documentary.

In this respect, Alonso's inclusion of reflexive markers of directorial presence also addresses the ethical problem of representing real people, especially that which comes to the fore in observational representation. As Nichols suggests, since the

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<sup>73</sup> The entire film shows, in the manner of a newsreel, the physical and social consequences if England were to experience a nuclear attack. While all of the scenes are staged, the events and dialogue depicted are based on extensive factual research.

<sup>74</sup> The film depicts the life of an Inuit hunter from the Itivimuit tribe. Nanook (whose real name was Allakariallak) was not actually married to the women in the film, nor were the children actually his. He was cast and was required to follow a story and perform a role, which included re-enacting the methods of survival of his forbearers (for example, using a harpoon to hunt despite that in real life, he used a rifle). Flaherty also modified the surroundings to suit the logistics of the filmmaking, such as removing the roof of an igloo to allow for more light for the camera (Eagan 84).

<sup>75</sup> Despite the many instances of its use of the observational approach, it is for this reason that Nichols considers *Nanook of the North* to be an example of the expository mode of documentary. He suggests also that the film utilises a poetic exposition that “give[s] emphasis to the rhythmic and expressive elegance of [its] own form in order to celebrate the beauty of the quotidian and those values that unobtrusively sustain day-to-day endeavor” (36).

observational mode “hinges on the ability of the filmmaker to be unobtrusive, the issue of intrusion surfaces over and over within the institutional discourse. Has the filmmaker intruded upon people’s lives in ways that will irrevocably alter them, perhaps for the worse, in order to make a film?” (39) In this context, the direct address by Misael in the final shot does not merely disrupt the film’s observational, documentary realism. The shot grants Misael autonomy from the film and its representation of him, and represents a refusal to be looked at without looking back. As such, the shot also becomes a question posed directly to the viewer by Alonso’s film: how well do we think we understand this film’s – or any film’s – relation to the real? It is a moment that encapsulates perfectly the coexistence of fictional and documentary approaches, and the virtues and limitations of each. Through the tension created by evoking these two forms (as established at the outset), Alonso’s film challenges the viewer into deciding whether the film itself, or at least significant portions of it, is fiction or documentary, and constantly forces the viewer to scrutinise the authenticity of its images, sounds, narrative and the people depicted. In *La libertad* the extratextual statements, and the content and form of the film itself, ultimately prove little. They merely foreground the film’s equal status as both fiction and documentary, whereby the qualities of one both emphasise and negate the qualities of the other.

Alonso’s observational style is an appropriate framework with which to explore the intersection of documentary and fiction, for “observational documentaries set up a frame of reference closely akin to that of fiction film” (Nichols 42), primarily via their use of social actors to drive the narrative.<sup>76</sup> More so, the observational documentary echoes neorealism’s focus on quotidian reality – this is not surprising given that observational filmmakers used Italian neorealism as a model themselves (Nichols 42) – and resembles closely the Bazinian realist aesthetic of duration and spatial depth, the formal model for most discussions of minimalist cinema. These discussions focus overwhelmingly on fictional films and filmmakers (documentary and avant-garde films and filmmakers are often mentioned alongside them but are rarely examined), but some theorists have identified a similar trend in documentary practice. Robert Koehler (2011) traces the Bazinian approach of observation in such

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<sup>76</sup> Nichols uses the term “social actor” to “stress the degree to which individuals represent themselves to others [and] remind us that [they] retain the capacity to act within the historical arena where they perform” (42).

nonfictional films as *Sweetgrass*, and identifies the “game-changing” *La libertad* as a starting point for a rich period of observational films focusing on work. These films, such as *Bellavista* (Schreiner 2006) and *The Anchorage* (Winter & Edström 2009), “drift away from ‘documentary,’ toward perhaps what might be labelled a ‘nonfiction feature,’ but even then, the label fails to stick, because the fiction appears to be nonfictional [...] and vice versa” (2009). Furthermore, although not acknowledging the concurrent discourse of slow cinema, Ellis identifies a slow, durational aesthetic trend of “Slow Film” in contemporary documentary cinema, which demonstrates today’s radical cinematic gesture of “a calculated refusal of montage” (93). Ellis argues that this aesthetic has unique virtues in documentary practice, because it addresses problems posed by editing that are unique to documentary:

Slow Film deals with one of the lurking suspicions that many have regarding contemporary documentary: the suspicion of selection. In its refusal of fast montage, it is able to stress the uniqueness and the specificity of each filmed moment [...] Slow Film begins to provide an answer to one of the most common criticisms of contemporary documentaries: the accusation that they have ‘left out’ vital details, or have distorted the viewer’s conception of events and people by too much elision. (97)

Because minimalist films are rarely documentaries *per se*, and their narratives are so slight and have little to hide, they are largely immune from the accusation Ellis identifies above. However, their use of a durational aesthetic reveals further their affinity with documentary.

Nichols states that our understanding of documentary is often influenced by the fact that in documentary footage “some quality of the moment persists outside the grip of textual organization” (231). In similar terms, Cowie highlights “some aspect that exceeds the intention of the filmmakers [which is] neither true nor false; rather, it is a real that bears upon us as a brute insistence” (29). Likewise, Martin suggests that such a quality can in fact exist in both fiction and documentary, both of which are equally capable of capturing “the unrepeatable, irreducible uniqueness, the here-and-nowness, of people, events, times, places.” Yet, he adds, it is important “to acknowledge that documentaries are powerfully real – full of surprises, excesses and revelations no fiction film is *likely* to deliver” (2013; emphasis added). In their effort to operate at the intersection of documentary and fiction, it is precisely this latter

quality that minimalist filmmakers often capture and include in their films. Sometimes it is clearly sought out and sometimes it just happens to be recorded. In both instances, its ability to be captured by the camera is made possible by both a precise, minimalist framework and through a documentary approach.

In an extended shot from Costa's *In Vanda's Room* that lasts several minutes, Vanda sits on her bed and smokes, and then vomits after having a vicious coughing fit (one of many shown throughout the film). The fact that she vomits – an event that is outside the control of, and could not have been predicted by, Costa or Vanda herself – pushes the scene into incontestably documentary territory. A coughing fit can be acted, but vomiting cannot. It can, however, be faked easily, for example, through editing. But in this case, the minimalist style used to depict it – it occurs on the tail end of a lengthy shot, the frame is held, and Vanda is not permitted to exit it – refuses any other interpretation of the event other than that we are watching a real person, really vomiting. The act of vomiting is in itself insufficient to even suggest documentary; the documentary reality is shaped by the minimalist style used to depict the act, and the fact that the film has already established itself as a documentary to a vast degree (this will be discussed in the next section). Such instances do not merely “punctuate narrative space with documentary space” (Sobchak 293) as many fictional films do in their attempt to heighten realism. They transcend the narrative space altogether, and the veracity of the image becomes concrete.

Minimalist filmmakers achieve a similar quality through their tendency to film animals, and moments of actual violence toward animals. In *Los muertos* there is a four-minute sequence in which Vargas captures, kills and guts a goat. The sequence is striking because it shows the act as it actually happens, that is, it is not tricked through the use of editing or special effects. Due to the manner in which it is filmed – simple wide shots, using two long takes to capture the entire process – there remains no ambiguity as to whether the animal has been killed or not. Here the realism of the film is taken to its logical conclusion, namely, the filming of death. Toward the end of the sequence the viewer is left with no doubt as to the scene's authenticity as we witness the goat being captured, then struggling to get free, then gargling for breath as its throat is slit, then watching its life ebb away as it bleeds to death. In the same way, and as already noted, in *La libertad* Misael catches and kills an armadillo, which he then prepares, cooks and eats. The last 15 minutes of the film is dedicated to detailing these activities. We first see Misael capture a small animal by its tail in a long shot,

and a couple of minutes later when he returns to his tent we see clearly that it is an armadillo.<sup>77</sup> He places the animal upside down in a bucket of water to drown it while he prepares a fire. When he returns to the bucket and lifts the lid off – all of this takes place in the same shot – the armadillo is barely alive. Misael kills it by hitting its head with a spanner and then cutting its throat. He then scales and prepares it before cooking it over the fire; it is eventually eaten in the final shot of the film. Significantly, these sequences in both films are afforded as much time and emphasis, and captured with the same simplicity as all of the other physical tasks performed by the characters in the films, such as rowing a boat, chopping a tree, walking, and gathering food; in other words, they are depicted as quotidian details of equal importance.<sup>78</sup>

It is no coincidence that other filmmakers who may be said to use a minimalist aesthetic use animals extensively in their films, although not all of the films below are concerned with blurring the distinction between documentary and fiction. Byambasuren Davaa's films (*The Weeping Camel* [2003], *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* [2005]) feature an extensive array of animals which are often given so much freedom in both the frame and narrative that it is difficult to determine how much is observed and how much is choreographed. Sergey Dvortsevov's *Tulpan* (2008) features an astonishing scene of a sheep being born; in Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte*, a goat is born and becomes the protagonist for a section of the film. There are some quietly memorable moments in Tsai's films when an animal is permitted to roam freely within the frame (a moth in *I Don't Want To Sleep Alone*) or into it, (a pigeon in *What Time*) providing a chance motivation for the duration of the

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<sup>77</sup> The first shot of the sequence may well be staged to some degree, but there is much to suggest that it may have been a spontaneous moment that was filmed and then incorporated into the narrative. There is a clear lack of formal precision in the shot that is evident everywhere else in the film: the capture of the animal occurs almost immediately at the start of the shot (the only time in the film where a cut has an abrupt effect), the framing is awkward (Misael's head is initially cut off by the top of the frame), and the camera struggles to keep up as it tilts up to film the action.

<sup>78</sup> Although many viewers may be tempted to see it otherwise, the killings of animals in these films are defiantly non-exploitative and anti-spectacle because of the way in which they are filmed, and because of the context in which they happen. Having established these people, to a large degree, as documentary subjects rather than fictional characters (Vargas will be discussed in the next section), Alonso frames the killings as simply an aspect of their real, everyday lives. The narratives also reinforce this: the armadillo is cooked and eaten before our eyes, and we can also assume that the goat has been killed in order to be eaten (Vargas takes it to his daughter's house as a gift), just as Vargas had earlier removed a beehive to retrieve honeycomb. Misael and Vargas kill the animals simply because they need to eat, and Alonso films it because it is a real and integral aspect of their lives and needs to be shown. But because it is also no more or no less integral than rowing a boat, cutting a tree, or taking a shit, Alonso presents it with the same matter-of-factness as everything else; thus he "approaches the basic functions of survival with basic functions of cinema" (Klinger 2005).

shot. The centerpiece of *Le Quattro Volte* is a brilliantly orchestrated scene, covered in a single 10-minute take, in which the climax entails a dog causing a van to crash through a farm fence, liberating a paddock full of goats. Frammartino suggests that the animals' "unawareness of the camera naturally led me to accomplish something I had always aspired to in my filmmaking: transcending the boundary between documentary and fiction" (2010).<sup>79</sup>

It is almost as common, however, to see or hear animals being harmed or killed in minimalist films. One of the most memorable images in *Uzak* is of a mouse trapped on an adhesive strip, which is later killed offscreen. Reygadas's *Japón* (2002) involves an unsimulated scene of a bird being shot by hunters, then having its head torn off in the opening few minutes; there is also an offscreen killing of a pig in the same film.<sup>80</sup> There is a scene of a dog being beaten savagely offscreen in the same director's *Post Tenebras Lux*, and the most controversial scene in Tarr's *Sátántangó* is the convincing torture of a cat by a young child, although both of these scenes have been expertly tricked.<sup>81</sup> Randolph Jordan suggests that the "animal on film is an embodiment of the contradictions that force the human mind to search for coherence and meaning in film" (2003). Because of a viewer's awareness of ethical boundaries, inherent knowledge about the behaviour of animals and their far reduced ability to consent for the camera, "there is a far greater sense of 'actuality' on screen when we witness the performance of animals, even when they are situated within the context of fiction films"; in the filming of an animal's death, "the emblem of the real takes on an even greater sense of actuality" (2003). Minimalist filmmakers thus recognise that the use of animals strongly influences the film's realism and its documentary sense.

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<sup>79</sup> Animals are not inherently unaware of the camera but can be made to seem so, as demonstrated in the now-famous opening sequence of Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash's *Sweetgrass*, an observational documentary about modern-day American shepherders. After an extreme wide shot of hundreds of sheep standing in the snow, a close-up isolates a sheep, observed chewing grass and looking into the distance. After 40 seconds, the sheep turns and notices the camera, stops chewing, and stares blankly into the lens in a comical standoff with the filmmaker.

<sup>80</sup> Although he does not address specifically the ethics of filming the killing of animals, Reygadas defends the depictions of sex and violence in his films by arguing: "What you find in my films you see [in] any ordinary day: a gas station, a hunter killing an animal, people making love. I'm not trying to impress anyone with those images; they make sense in the context of my films" (Castillo 2010).

<sup>81</sup> Notable precedents of unsimulated animal killings in narrative films include the killing of a rabbit in Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game* (1939), oxen in Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Boki* (1973), a chicken in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1975) and a horse in *Andrei Rublev* (1971), a sea turtle in Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), ducks in Wayne Wang and Spencer Nakasako's *Life is Cheap, Toilet Paper is Expensive* (1989), a pig in Michael Haneke's *Benny's Video* (1992) and a horse in *Time of the Wolf* (2003). The ethical dimension of the filming of animals being killed is different in each film.

It is highly significant that discussions of Bazin's theoretical formulations of the long take – and subsequently, his film theory being closely linked to the philosophy of time – often focuses on his example involving an animal, indeed an animal's death: that of the seal hunt in *Nanook of the North*. Bazin writes:

For Flaherty, what is important about Nanook hunting a seal is his relationship with the animal, the real extent of his wait. Editing can suggest time; Flaherty simply *shows us* the wait. The length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true subject. In the film, this episode is thus composed in only one shot.<sup>82</sup> Can anyone deny that it is much more moving as a result than a montage of attractions would have been? (2009, 91; emphasis in the original)

In *Documentary Time* (2008), Malin Walhberg argues that the aesthetic of spatial depth and temporal continuity long associated with Bazin's "presumed realism" has often "been confused with the acclaimed transparency of camera inscription" (32). What the above passage in fact demonstrates, Walhberg argues, is recognition of duration as a creative strategy, and a stress on the physical impact of lived duration. From this perspective, the "realism in *Nanook of the North* [...] would be less about whether the representation of the Inuit family is a convincing documentation of a social realm, than Flaherty's creative ability to measure the interval of an event and to frame the unfolding of drama" (33).

It is curious that Bazin chose to analyse the seal hunt using these strong terms, for it has been long known that the entire sequence was faked, with the seal having already been killed prior to the filming. Thus, if Bazin was aware of this fact he would

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<sup>82</sup> Bazin's description of this scene is incorrect. Flaherty uses editing to compress the duration of the seal hunt at every stage, including its preparation, as he does in the scene in which Nanook hunts the walrus. After Nanook spears the seal through the ice, six shots (of similar duration and size) show his struggle with the animal at various stages. Flaherty then cuts to a wide shot in which Nanook is on the ground, pulling the rope in the foreground, while his family rushes over to help, from the extreme background. The vast remainder of the struggle plays out across this shot, but Flaherty intercuts it once with a medium shot of Nanook, before cutting back out to the previous shot to show that the family has moved closer. In the next shot, Nanook chips away at the ice as his family continues to pull on the rope; they drop off one by one as the seal weakens. In the final shot of the sequence, they extract the dead seal from the hole. Curiously, Bazin contradicts his own description in his essay "Editing Prohibited," where he acknowledges that the episode is constructed using not one shot but multiple (2009, 82).



appear to be flippant with the use of the word “real,” for there is no real hunt and hence no “real extent” of Nanook’s wait.<sup>83</sup> As Jared F. Green asks:

Once it has been acknowledged that the entire seal-hunting sequence was a carefully staged dramatic set piece involving an already-harpooned seal (a fact of which Bazin was undoubtedly aware but which passes without comment), must we then judge Flaherty’s documentary as having failed the test of realism, that is, having failed to honor the documentary’s implicit promise of authenticity? (64)

However, it is not simply the case that, in demonstrating the virtues of the long take, Bazin chose an example that happened to be a documentary. Rather, Bazin can discuss the film in these terms only because it is a documentary. The fact that Bazin does not comment about the veracity of the hunt suggests that he either did not know, or did not care about it. Both scenarios reveal how notions of documentary are conceived by both extratextual knowledge and methods of representation. Without the revelations about Flaherty’s methods, viewers may never have been aware of the staging of the seal hunt or the numerous other contrivances in the film. And, although it would seem unlikely for Bazin to be unaware that the hunt was faked, he discusses the scene in a manner that strongly suggests he believes it to be a documentary nonetheless. Bazin refers to the same scene (in the context of its spatial unity) and argues that it is unthinkable for it “not to show us, in the same composition, the hunter, the hole in the ice and the seal. It matters not in the slightest that the rest of the scene was edited as the director saw fit. It is necessary only that the event’s spatial unity be respected at the moment when its rupture would *transform reality into its mere imaginary depiction*” (2009, 82; emphasis added). This argument reveals implicitly that Bazin regards the film as a documentary (“reality”), and had the scene been constructed only in fragments and without the unifying wide shot, this would entail a slippage, a shift, into the domain of fiction (by definition, an “imaginary depiction”) because the viewer would no longer believe in its documentary value.

If we take Bazin’s comments at face value – that he indeed believed the seal hunt to be real – and we entertain a hypothetical scenario in which the seal hunt did actually occur, what Bazin would then be failing to stress in the analysis of the scene

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<sup>83</sup> In Hugh Gray’s translation, the “real extent of the wait” translates as, “the actual length of the waiting period” (2005a, 27).

is the presence of the seal. If it were an actual hunt, the actual length of it – “the very substance of the image,” as Bazin calls it – would not be decided by Flaherty, who may have been able to estimate its length but not measure it, nor by the hunters, but by how long the seal is capable of fighting for its life. Flaherty would continue filming as long as there is film in the camera, and Nanook and his family would continue pulling the rope as long as needed (the struggle is tipped vastly in their favour). However, it would only be when the seal yields that the scene could come to an end. Therefore it would not remain a matter of indifference that, outside Flaherty’s decision to show the hunt using long takes (although, contrary to Bazin’s earlier description of the scene, he does not show its whole duration, nor does he eliminate editing altogether within the scene), the overriding factor in determining the length of the shots and the sequence – what justifies Flaherty’s durational approach in the first place – would be an unpredictable, nonfictional narrative element grounded in reality, something neither Nanook nor Flaherty could have controlled. The unequivocal knowledge that the seal hunt was faked would appear to render moot these hypothetical considerations, if not for the fact that Bazin’s analysis could apply almost equally to the other famous hunting sequence in *Nanook of the North*: that of the walrus hunt. This is also a staged event, but not faked; it is an actual hunt involving an actual waiting period, actual danger for the hunters and actual death for the animal. The veracity of the hunt is suggested much more strongly, for Nanook is placed here in the same shot as an animal that is still alive. Both sequences involve animals and are filmed with a similar aesthetic (which also includes the use of editing); one is staged and fake, the other, staged and real. In each instance, the key factor complicating the shot’s relation to the real is the extratextual knowledge of Flaherty’s methods.

Bazin’s arguments illustrate how significantly animals may shape the realism of a film and how, when filmed in a certain manner, they can maintain a direct documentary link with reality. Thus, Bazin demonstrates that the use of so-called realist or formalist approaches has far greater stakes in nonfiction, when the film engages directly with the real, especially the real lives of real people. In this context, it is not a simple matter of choosing one style over another but of applying an aesthetic that ensures that what is filmed remains real and is not morphed into fiction, or perceived to be so. The use of animals by minimalist filmmakers is not a narrative or thematic quirk, but embodies broader concerns regarding the representation of

reality in their films. It is an example of realism expressed not only through style, performance, or a narration of social realities, but through the act of resting all these elements on an animal; one that does not perform for the camera and whose veracity as a real, nonfictional presence is uncontested. The strategy of using animals in their films is evidence of the essential relationship between minimalist form and content, and of how the former is determined by the latter. It also provides minimalist filmmakers with a direct link between the film and reality, and between the people depicted in the film and their real lives (for example, the killing of the armadillo represents a real aspect of Misael's everyday work and survival, just as Vanda's vomiting is a symptom of her real drug addiction). Additionally, this approach represents the problematic intersection between fictional and documentary practice (the walrus hunt in *Nanook* is contrived, but nonetheless real), and displays a willingness on the part of the filmmaker to cede or reduce their control of events presented in front of the camera, allowing chance, accidents, and indeed, excessively real images to factor heavily into the equation and influence the narrative. These elements strongly reveal the documentary ethos of minimalist filmmakers, as well as their desire to engage with both fictional and documentary practice. Having established the central concerns of minimalist filmmakers' engagement with documentary by using *La libertad* as a model, I now turn to how they articulate these concerns through documentary methodologies.

### **Documentary methodologies in minimalist film**

The single most crucial factor in a minimalist film's blurring of fictional and documentary boundaries is the question of performance raised by the presence of real people. Minimalist filmmakers use and extend the longstanding cinematic tradition of casting nonprofessional actors, which is typically used to achieve natural performances, and to populate the films with the kinds of unglamorous, realistic faces absent in most fictional films. As an established practice in film tradition, the casting of nonprofessional actors is long associated with specific film auteurs, for example, Robert Bresson, Peter Watkins and Ken Loach, as well as such film movements as Italian neorealism, Third Cinema and the Iranian New Wave. Today the uniform or near-uniform casting of nonprofessional actors – who are often from the same social milieu as the characters – is a common practice adopted by realist filmmakers,

particularly European auteurs with documentary backgrounds (*Rosetta* [Dardenne & Dardenne 1999], *The Class* [Cantet 2008], *Johnny Mad Dog* [Sauvaire 2008], *Gomorra* [Garrone 2008]).

Practically all of the minimalist filmmakers identified in this thesis have cast nonprofessional actors at some point in their career. Some of them have gone much further, shaping their narratives, aesthetic, and filmmaking approach entirely around them. In general, the use of nonprofessional actors in minimalist films is far more complex and ambiguous than the manner in which filmmakers have used them previously, which usually entails inserting them into a preconceived fiction (that may nonetheless be based strongly on actual people, places and events, as in the film examples cited above). Rather than relying on the presence or performance of nonprofessional actors for an aesthetic or realistic effect, minimalist filmmakers foreground the notion of performance itself in their films. Sometimes the real people depicted in these films are not “nonprofessional actors” and are in fact not acting at all, in that they are not pretending to be somebody they are not (they may still be performing for the camera, however). Rather, they are closer to being documentary subjects – with the filmmaker being upfront about the fact – and fiction is embedded in and around their narratives (examples include Weerasethakul’s *Mysterious Object at Noon* and Jia’s *24 City*).

In this section I will focus on a more ambiguous use of nonprofessional actors, whereby they do not simply play fictional characters, as is usually the case, but seem to be playing themselves. They are frequently credited under their own names and clearly incorporate aspects of their everyday lives into the film, though in a semi-fictional environment modified and controlled by the filmmaker. It can become difficult for the viewer to tell which aspects of the character are real or fictitious, and how much is documentary observation or fictional performance; by extension, the film’s status as fiction or documentary is also made ambiguous. The use of real people to create or emphasise an impression of reality is a realist strategy with strong precedents in film history, and minimalist filmmakers follow this tradition. However, by creating an impression of reality so strong that the film’s relations to reality can become unclear – thereby questioning its own realism – this aspect of minimalist cinema can also be read as a continuation of the reflexive aims of modernist cinema, as explored earlier in this chapter.

Despite being similar to *La libertad* in many respects, deciphering the nature of performance is more problematic in Alonso's second film *Los muertos* because it is laced with an overtly dramatic subtext. The subtext is established most strongly by the expressive opening sequence described earlier in the chapter, after which we are introduced to Argentino Vargas, once again played by himself, waking up in a low-security prison somewhere in the Argentinean countryside. He chats to other inmates, drinks *mate*, smokes cigarettes and quietly kills time on what we eventually learn to be his last day in prison. After being released the next day, he stops at a store to buy some provisions and a blouse for his daughter, has sex with a prostitute and then borrows a rowboat from a local, who alludes to the fact that Vargas was imprisoned for killing his two brothers. The remainder of the film focuses on Vargas's languid journey by boat through the jungle as he tries to reach his daughter. On the way, he stops to collect honeycomb from a beehive, visits a family to deliver a letter from a former inmate, finds a goat marooned on an island, which he kills and takes with him on the remainder of his journey, and eventually arrives at his destination where he is greeted by his grandson. The film ends with the shot of the child's toy on the ground after Vargas enters the tent, as described in the previous chapter.

It is likely that most viewers would safely assume that Vargas did not actually murder his brothers in real life, nor would they assume that he is actually a prisoner at the start of the film (nor, perhaps, that the prison shown is even an actual prison). This is due to the default assumption that a film is fictional unless presented or marketed as otherwise, and the fact that in this film, unlike *La libertad*, the camera strays into areas that we recognise immediately as being outside the conventional ethical and logistical realms of documentary: the filming of murder, sex work, and both ends of a prison sentence, and the inclusion of beautiful and precise tracking shots on a river in the middle of the jungle. Additionally, because of the loaded dramatic subtext of the film – emphasised through both the narrative (centered around a journey and involving murder) and style (such as the expressive camerawork in the opening shot) – and the associations that such subtext has with fictional storytelling, *Los muertos* initially reads entirely as fiction and, therefore, as a significant departure from *La libertad*. However, when the observational, documentary-like scenes are introduced later – the kinds of scenes that *La libertad* is almost entirely comprised of – the question of performance is raised, as it becomes uncertain as to which aspects of the character are fictional and which are not.

When we watch Vargas navigating a boat through difficult terrain, skillfully coaxing bees out of a hive to retrieve honeycomb, and witnessing his capability for violence and survival in his calm, systematic slaughter of a goat, we recognise that these are skills – like woodcutting is for Misael – that have not simply been learned by an actor for the purpose of a film. They register instead as an accurate representation of Vargas’s life and daily work routine. *Los muertos*, therefore, begins in overtly fictional terrain before introducing strong documentary elements. Consequently, aspects of the subject/character emerge, which, as in *La libertad*, suggest a far more direct link to reality than would be seen in a simple scripted performance.<sup>84</sup> In watching *Los muertos*, it becomes gradually uncertain as to how much of the real Vargas we are watching on screen and how much of it is Alonso’s creation; how much is documentary observation and how much is performance. Through his interactions with nature, it too adopts an “ambiguous status as object of documentary observation and as fiction setting” (Andermann 88). Although we know that the opening shot is not actually of Vargas having just killed his brothers, we cannot know for certain – not without at least an extratextual confirmation by Alonso – whether Vargas has murdered in real life, and if he has been to prison. This would remain an unlikely reading, but at the least, the observational, documentary elements of the film, which suggest a direct correlation between aspects of the Vargas represented onscreen and the real Vargas, force the viewer to be open to the possibility. It is this lack of certainty that makes ambiguous the realism of the film, creates a tension between documentary and fiction, and in turn, also creates suspense – the stakes of knowing who Vargas really is, is clearly higher than in *La libertad*. This ambiguity is increased if the viewer has previously seen *La libertad*, and is already familiar with Alonso’s approach of incorporating real people, their environments and their lives into the narrative.

The kind of performances that Alonso elicits from his nonprofessional cast also contributes to this ambiguity, and it is linked closely to the film’s narrative and style, and the methods used in its making. As is well documented, Alonso, along with many of his peers, shares a minimalist approach to performance similar to that of Bresson, who directed his nonprofessional actors or “models” to give muted, non-

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<sup>84</sup> As Andermann notes, the movement from fiction to documentary in *Los muertos* is the reverse of *La libertad*, which moves “from documentary observation to narrative and performance [...] Now, it is the natural setting itself, which charges the documentary image with a fictional surplus or excess, as the origin of an ominous, enigmatic and latent violence, that overshadows the entire film” (89).

expressive, ambiguous performances. In respect to their casting and performance, Bresson wrote:

No actors.

(No directing of actors.)

No parts.

(No learning of parts.)

No staging.

But the use of working models, taken from life.

BEING (models) instead of SEEMING (actors). (1)<sup>85</sup>

Bresson did not aim for realism, choosing nonprofessional actors “not for their ability but for their appearance, often for an intense facial asceticism” and often using dozens of takes, “train[ing] them to remove all traces of theatricality and to speak with a fast monotonic delivery” (Pavelin 2002). Alonso, however, adopts a similar performance style for different ends, namely, in order to capture the actors as naturally as possible in their environment. By placing his characters in solitude, within narratives that restrict performance almost entirely to the non-spoken, and filming them from distances that prevent the viewer from carefully scrutinising their faces, Alonso creates the narrative and formal conditions in which performance is relegated mostly to physical actions centered around the quotidian. Eating, walking, sleeping, killing, working: these are the means by which performance registers in Alonso’s films; the actors are barely given an opportunity to “act” in any traditional sense. Incidentally, these are exactly the kinds of activities that do not require a trained actor to convey realistically. The craft of acting does not factor in at all, for nobody knows better how Vargas walks, rows a boat, or kills a goat, than Vargas himself. Despite the substantial differences between *La libertad* and *Los muertos*, the performance in each film creates a similar effect: it calls attention to itself as a link between the actor and reality, and by extension, calls into question the relationship between the film and reality.

This kind of performance is only made possible by Alonso’s documentary-like conception of the film, and his methods. Alonso typically begins a film by finding a

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<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Alonso has stated: “I always tell my actors, don’t look into the camera and don’t express anything. Don’t try to be an actor. When they try to be an actor, the scene is fucked” (Sweeney 2009).

location, often spending several months travelling and scouting before an idea is even conceived; only then does he search for somebody who lives or works nearby to appear in the film (Sweeney 2009). Additionally, as many documentary filmmakers do, he spends a lot of time socialising and even living with the nonprofessional actors, to shape the narrative around their everyday lives, as well as to build trust and understanding. This is a highly unusual approach that suggests not only how deeply embedded the film is in nonfiction, and the significance of scenery and locations in his films, but also the importance he places in maintaining a nonfictional filming environment in which his actors feel at home – or in the case of *La libertad* and some parts of *Liverpool* (2008), they literally are. Alonso also maintains that he never uses a film crew of more than a dozen people (Hughes 2009), a tiny crew size by most standards of film production.<sup>86</sup> In such ways, Alonso approaches narrative film production as many would approach documentary film production, going to great lengths to retain the naturalism of the subjects and locations he is filming. As a result, the performances register as extremely natural, and the film appears to show real people behaving as they normally would and, just as importantly, where they would.<sup>87</sup> It is primarily through the performance that the realism of the film is greatly increased, so much so that when overtly fictional elements are later introduced it becomes difficult to gauge which aspects of the character's life are real and which are not.

A similar approach can be seen in Costa's films, in particular what has come to be known as the "Fontainhas Trilogy." The first film, *Ossos*, centers on a young couple living in Fontainhas – a now-demolished slum neighbourhood in Lisbon, once

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<sup>86</sup> Juan Manuel Seoane's documentary *Making of 'Los Muertos'* (2004) reveals a highly stripped-back production: equipment is kept to a bare minimum; lighting tends to be used only for indoor scenes and, when used, remains extremely simple; the tiny crew work at a relaxed, leisurely pace that barely resembles a typical film set.

<sup>87</sup> Although not a minimalist film, Panahi's *Offside* (2006) displays a similar attitude toward location and the effect it has on a film's relation to reality. Major portions of *Offside* were filmed at the actual World Cup qualifying match between Iran and Bahrain in 2004, and a caption clearly states so at the start of the film. In addition to providing the dramatic backdrop, here both the setting and event become an integral part of the narrative. Each goal that was scored during the match is incorporated into the narrative, and the final result (2-1 in Iran's favour) triggers the film's triumphant ending. The documentary realism of the film is particularly enhanced by the fact that the viewer is aware that the film may not exist, or at least exist in its current form, had the outcome of the match been different. Although Panahi has stated that only about 50 per cent of the script was written prior to shooting so that the second half of the film could respond to the outcome of the match (Wisniewski 2007), the viewer watches *Offside* fully aware of the huge creative risk involved in Panahi's undertaking, and the tension between fiction and documentary is apparent from the opening frames. The caption at the start of the film, therefore, reveals that the film is fiction while at the same time revealing just how deeply the narrative is embedded in non-fiction, and immediately shapes the way in which we read the film.



home to many of the city's immigrants and underclass – who are burdened with an unwanted child. As Cyril Neyrat states, *Ossos* displays the “last fires of a dying European aesthetic [that features] an elliptical plot, highly composed wide shots held for a long time, the generally unmoving and silent presence of characters who preserve their mysterious density until the end” (12). While the film achieves a high degree of realism, its evocation of documentary is minimal compared to that of Costa's next film, *In Vanda's Room*. The ties to documentary in *Ossos* exist only as far as its use of the real location of Fontainhas, and the casting of nonprofessional actors from the neighbourhood, including Vanda Duarte (playing Clotilde). The performances in the film are powerful, and muted and internalised in the Bressonian vein, but are not naturalistic in a way that would suggest that the actors' actual personalities are being projected in any literal way. As Neyrat suggests, what *Ossos* does is capture a more abstract essence: “The people of Fontainhas – Vanda, Zita, and the others – play characters, embody parts. But Costa is already filming their pure presence in space, their strength, their resistance, capturing what is beneath the actors, the truth of the individuals” (13). Their performances and faces evoke beautifully the actors' true personalities under the surface, and the lives they may actually live, but they appear in a clearly fictional context, emphasised by a dramatic, clearly-scripted narrative and a film style deeply rooted in European art cinema.

In the following film, *In Vanda's Room*, there is a significant change in Costa's approach to performance – brought about by a drastic aesthetic and ethical shift – whereby the film begins to resemble a documentary rather than merely evoking it.<sup>88</sup> Several of the same actors from *Ossos* reappear, this time as themselves. They speak and act more freely, naturally and excessively in a far more dialogue-heavy film, and within a narrative deeply dedicated to observing quotidian details and conversations that have no consequence to the plot, which too is now barely existent. The metaphorical title of the first film, meaning “Bones” in English, has been abandoned for a title that reflects literally the film's narrative content, which is set mainly in Vanda's cramped bedroom as her and her sister (Lena Duarte, also appearing as herself) take drugs and discuss their lives. The film is now grounded much more firmly in reality. It is set again in the real location of Fontainhas but this time as it is being demolished, house by house, and its inhabitants relocated to a new

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<sup>88</sup> So much so that it won both the FIPRESCI and The Mayor's Prize at the 2001 Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival.

area of the city – images and scenes of which are incorporated into the film. It is therefore a film that both documents and needed to be made at a specific historical juncture; a certain place *and* time. Vanda's drug addiction, which was restricted to subtext in *Ossos*, is now in the open. Throughout *In Vanda's Room*, Vanda and her sister constantly and openly smoke heroin, re-emphasising it as a tragic but nonetheless real, integral aspect of their everyday lives, in the same way that cutting wood is for Misael in *La libertad*.

The documentary nature of *In Vanda's Room* is reinforced further by the mere existence of the films that came before and after it. *Colossal Youth*, which features a sober and overweight Vanda several years after she has quit heroin and relocated from Fontainhas to a council housing estate, reinforces the reality status of the earlier film in the same way that Michael Apter's *Up* documentary series revisits its subjects at later stages in their lives.<sup>89</sup> The mannered performances in *Ossos* are markedly different to the naturalistic performances in *In Vanda's Room*, emphasising the fictional nature of the former and the documentary nature of the latter. Simply put, in *In Vanda's Room* the nonprofessional actors appear no longer to be actors; they perform for the camera but only as themselves. Before making *In Vanda's Room*, Vanda allegedly told Costa: "Come, you'll see what our lives are really like. You used to ask us to be quiet; now we're going to talk, you're going to listen. That's all we do, talk and take drugs" (in Neyrat 13). In the film, Costa adopts an approach to filming and performance that clearly respects these wishes.

These changes, as well as a critical engagement with ethical issues of documentary representation – filming real, poor people and real places, and addressing the inherent power imbalance in all filmmaker/subject relationships – are reflected in Costa's change of filming methods, leading to one of the most drastic aesthetic shifts in recent auteurist cinema. Despite the critical and commercial success of *Ossos*, Costa was deeply unsatisfied, not of the film but the methods with which it was made. *Ossos* was made as part of a large international production, riding on the success of Costa's *Casa de lava* (1994). It was during production, however, that Costa realised the ethical and moral dilemmas in shooting real people in real places – people

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<sup>89</sup> Apter began by documenting the lives of 17 British school children, all aged seven, in *Seven Up!* (1964). He has since revisited, and made a film about them in seven-year intervals. The most recent film is *56 Up* (2012).

who are also desperately poor – as a part of a production of this scale. As Neyrat describes eloquently:

This was a traditional production, shot in 35 mm, with tracks, floodlights, and assistants. Costa was a professional, a part of the Portuguese film industry. The shoot proceeded with everyone doing his job, following the routine of European art film. And the uneasiness grew, the feeling that a lie was being told, that an imbalance both moral and totally concrete was taking root on both sides of the camera. Costa later said: ‘The trucks weren’t getting through – the neighborhood refused this kind of cinema, it didn’t want it.’ Too much squalor and despair in front of the camera, too much money, equipment, and wasted energy behind it. And too much light shining in the night of a neighborhood of manual laborers and cleaning women who got up at 5:00a.m. (11-12)

Having understood “that the cinema of tracking shots, assistants, producers, and lights was not his” (Neyrat 12), Costa radically refined his filming method for *In Vanda’s Room*, a method he has kept since. Costa purchased a small Panasonic digital video camera and visited Fontainhas alone, every day, for a year.<sup>90</sup> This camera simultaneously allowed Costa to remain unobtrusive and retain the naturalism of his subjects and their performances, eliminated the need for crew and equipment, and gave him the economic freedom to approach the film as a documentary production, as well as experiment with form, narrative and duration (Vanda’s vomiting, described earlier, would likely never have been captured had the film not been made so). Despite retaining a high level of control by often filming up to 20 takes of one scene, Costa did not ask the nonprofessional actors to work around a film script as he had previously done. Instead he observed them living their lives, and allowed their stories, dreams, actions and personalities to determine the film’s form and content, not the other way around. He did not alter the *mise en scène* of the real locations; instead of lights and equipment, he crafted some crude, makeshift reflectors from household items to take advantage of existing light when needed.

The resulting form of *In Vanda’s Room* – a series of beautifully composed and disconnected scenes, filmed using extremely long takes, in which the camera moves not once – is a direct result of these practical choices. The film’s images are as stunning and precise as those in any fiction film – indeed, they are the kind of images

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<sup>90</sup> In the latter stages of production Costa would bring with him a dedicated sound recordist.

that would be impossible to attain in any typical documentary – but the content of the film now belongs unequivocally to the people in it, and their world – the kind of content that fiction generally does not allow. In this film, writes Miguel Marías,

all theoretical or academic distinctions between fact and fiction, documentary and narrative, soon loose [*sic*] any meaning, become senseless: what matters is the truth, even if that is merely the faithful rendering of people’s illusions, dreams, fears, nightmares, tale-spinning impulses or the oral tradition they embody in the transmission of legends or family myths. (2009)

Thus the film’s highly elliptical, non-narrative structure is less an indication of modernist approaches as it is evidence of Costa’s refusal of a script, and the film’s documentary fidelity in capturing fragments of unscripted realities of the characters’ lives.<sup>91</sup> Costa’s newfound methods also address – and because of his previous experience as a fictional filmmaker using real people, correct – the inherent imbalance of power between filmmaker and subject.<sup>92</sup> This film, and those that would follow, now demonstrate “practical solidarity with the characters and loyalty to their real environment and living conditions (which are a logical but unusual result of growing mutual knowledge and shared experience over long stretches of time, even years)” (Marías 2009). With *In Vanda’s Room* Costa gives a clear voice to the marginalised, as both dignified subjects of a documentary and co-makers of their own fiction.

There is perhaps no better film than Kiarostami’s *Ten* that demonstrates how a combination of strategies relating to form, narrative, performance, casting and location blurs the distinction between documentary and fiction, presenting at once a realistic and ambiguous world. As many critics have noted, *Ten*, like his follow-up feature *Five*, is a hybrid film that “encompasses fiction, documentary and

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<sup>91</sup> This is also reflected in the film’s running time: the slender and typical running time of 94 minutes in *Ossos* has ballooned out to 170 minutes in *In Vanda’s Room*.

<sup>92</sup> The ethical issues involved in filming real people is addressed frequently – and often metatextually, by revisiting earlier works – in contemporary Iranian cinema, which is well known for its tradition of “freely mixing aspects of documentary and fiction filmmaking and refusing to draw clear distinctions between the two” (Rapfogel 2001). For example, in Kiarostami’s renowned “Koker trilogy” (*Where is the Friend’s Home?* [1987], *Life, and Nothing More...*, *Through the Olive Trees*), each film is linked to the previous one by centering its narrative around a film production of or related to the preceding film, thereby addressing ethical issues of truth, representation and power raised by the earlier (actual) production. The cycle of films could potentially continue forever, suggesting the very impossibility of an ideal, truthful representation. In these films, Gilberto Perez argues, Kiarostami combines realism and modernism, “vividly depicting a reality but not allowing us to forget that we’re watching a film, which a film-maker has put together in this way [...] a representation of life and a reflection on how life is represented on the screen” (2005, 18).

experimental video all at once” (Darras 95). Kiarostami adopted a radical approach whereby he rehearsed extensively with his nonprofessional cast, before sending them away in a car to semi-improvise their way through a roughly sketched outline (he remained hidden in the backseat but did not intervene in the proceedings). Two digital video cameras were attached to the dashboard of the car, one pointed at the driver and the other at the passenger, thereby “reducing mise-en-scene to its barest essentials” (Martin 2004). The film was edited together from the footage of the resulting conversations. Kiarostami cast a divorced, single woman (Mania Akbari) in the central role and then crafted a story in which her life experiences are discussed throughout the film. All the other characters in *Ten*, who at one stage or another occupy the passenger’s seat of the car in which the film is entirely set, are played by nonprofessional actors (including the woman’s actual son and sister), who also integrate aspects of their real lives into the conversations.

*Ten* may be seen as a radical experiment in testing the boundaries between fiction and documentary, a cinematic manifestation of Kiarostami’s “camera on the bull’s horn” idea, mentioned earlier. The film demonstrates a paradoxical approach in which Kiarostami’s role in determining what happens before the camera is greatly diminished, while he remains hugely influential in shaping the film. Kiarostami has compared his approach to filming *Ten* to that of a football coach, preparing the groundwork before sending off his players to determine the outcome of the match, an approach that Matthieu Darras rightly describes as being “simultaneously extremely ambitious and very humble” (95).<sup>93</sup> Despite its fictional underpinnings and as in the films of Alonso and Costa, the performances are so natural, and the semi-improvised dialogue between the driver and her passengers so convincing – the extraordinary opening banter between mother and son sets the tone immediately – it becomes unclear as to how much is documentary and how much is fiction conceived by the filmmaker.

Whereas Alonso uses the unconventional approach of shaping his narrative and casting his actors around locations, Kiarostami uses the contrived, fictional location of

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<sup>93</sup> An unlikely precursory film that used a similar method is the aforementioned horror film *The Blair Witch Project*, about a group of student filmmakers who go missing after travelling into the forest to make a documentary about a local legend known as the Blair Witch. In the making of the (actual) film, directors Myrick and Sánchez sent nonprofessional actors, playing themselves, into a forest with camcorders to improvise their way through a roughly-sketched narrative. The filmmakers manipulated the narrative and performances through instructions left for the actors each day, and by surprising them with situations with which they had no prior knowledge.

the car – which he has repeatedly said to be his favourite film location – to carry the minimalist narrative. In the press notes for the film’s premiere at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, Kiarostami wrote the following statement:

The film was created without being made as such. Even so, it isn’t a documentary. Neither a documentary nor a purely fabricated film. Midway between the two perhaps. [...] In *10*, we have a shot in the car with the little boy facing the camera. The scene takes place in front of the camera. And yet there are also people who pass by, lower their window, and peer into the car. That’s documentary. That’s background. They look at the camera. But what happens in front of the camera isn’t documentary because it’s guided and controlled in a way. (In Saeed-Vafa & Rosenbaum 124-125)

Kiarostami suggests that there is a conceptual distinction to be made in the film between the real world that is the world outside the car, and the fictional world inside it. Indeed, this is emphasised at various points in the film where passersby look into the car and at the camera.<sup>94</sup> Yet despite this distinction, what unfolds inside the world of the car remains vital to the ambiguous representation of reality in the film. In his film *10 on Ten*, Kiarostami explains his choice of setting:

Two very comfortable seats, and an intimate dialogue between two people, sitting next to each other, rather than opposite each other. This reassures both and creates the right mood for dialogue [...] In this position characters can look at each other, or not [...] The significance of this form of dialogue as I have said, is the sense of security created in both parties during their exchanges.

The choice of the car as location, therefore, is not merely for conceptual or narrative reasons, nor because Kiarostami finds it aesthetically pleasing. Firstly, he regards the everyday setting of the car as one that is able to coax natural performances, as its unique seating arrangement puts both actors and non-actors at ease; thus it is a realist

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<sup>94</sup> A similar physical division between a real location and a contrived, fictional one can be seen in Alonso’s *Fantasma*, which is set in a cinema in Buenos Aires. In one scene, Vargas, appearing as himself to attend a fictional screening of *Los muertos*, is wandering around the foyer killing time. On the other side of the glass doors can be seen the real world of the city, with its traffic and pedestrians (who often walk by, unaware of the filming taking place); on this side is Vargas, the film crew and the film: a contained and controlled fictional setting.

strategy.<sup>95</sup> Secondly, the use of this location gave Kiarostami an opportunity to experiment with video, which paradoxically contributes to the film's realism (by allowing for natural performances) and undermines it by drawing attention to itself as medium (or literally as a recording device, when people look at it in the film); it is thus both a marker of fiction and documentary.

In regards to the realist justification for using video, Kiarostami suggests how his choice for the medium was informed by practical reasons, rather than aesthetic considerations (with the image usually weighing most heavily, alongside budgetary considerations, in a filmmaker's decision to use film or video). Kiarostami explains:

The most important advantage is that it doesn't need complicated and difficult lighting, so you need fewer crew members around the people you're shooting – especially the nonprofessional actors, for whom the presence of cameras is always a nuisance. The small size of this camera can quickly be forgotten by them, and more sensitive scenes involving feelings between the directors and actors can be created as a consequence. So we can arrive that way at acting that is more real and simpler. (In Saeed-Vafa & Rosenbaum 121)

His reasoning for choosing video here is therefore similar to his choice of the car as location; both are designed for the comfort and security of the nonprofessional actors, and coaxing natural performances from them.<sup>96</sup> Given the cramped confines of the car, *Ten* is a film that simply would have been inconceivable with the bulkier 35 and 16mm film cameras that Kiarostami had previously used, or even with larger video cameras that were available at the time. Furthermore, with larger cameras comes a larger crew, something Kiarostami sought to eliminate altogether for this experiment, and something he would have needed to reduce drastically in any case, given the cramped location of the car. By using video in this manner, Kiarostami enacts literally minimalism's reduction of syntax, putting in practical measures to guarantee that he has access to only the basic cinematic means. However, as I have discussed throughout this section in relation to other films, it is the high degree of realism achieved by the film via the performances, which in this case was made possible by

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<sup>95</sup> In *10 on Ten*, Kiarostami continues on to provide real life anecdotes about people having their most meaningful conversations in cars.

<sup>96</sup> As Kiarostami states in *10 on Ten*, the combination of the car, digital video, and the absence of crew meant that "everything is in place to create an intimate and private atmosphere in which we can obtain extraordinary, spontaneous, simple and natural performances from actors and non-actors."

the use of video, that eventually renders its filmic reality as ambiguous. In watching *Ten*, we cannot know what is performance, what is observation; what aspects of the characters are real or imagined; what is fiction or documentary – an ambiguity achieved, paradoxically, through realism.

Furthermore, the aesthetic of digital video, which would appear not to be a concern in Kiarostami's remarks, is also significant in the film's blurring of fictional and documentary boundaries. Although crisp, high-definition video images were available at the time of production, Kiarostami opted instead to use smaller video cameras, which provide far rougher, more amateurish looking images than what we are accustomed to seeing in feature films, shot on video or otherwise. The art of cinematography is virtually absent from *Ten*, and the aesthetic quality of the image is unquestionably un-cinematic, particularly so for a filmmaker who is renowned for photographing beautiful images. Even the aspect ratio of the film is in the outdated Academy ratio rather than widescreen, presumably because the smallest, consumer-level cameras that Kiarostami used were not yet capable of shooting in the widescreen format. It is tempting to view the plainness of the images in the film as an artistic compromise necessary to execute the film and achieve the standard of performance Kiarostami required. But because the image is so decidedly un-cinematic, it ties in strongly with Kiarostami's intentions of eliminating direction altogether. The cinematography and mise en scène, usually the most noticeable aspects of a director's style, are completely downplayed here in favour of content, reducing the director's room to stamp his formal signature on the film to other aspects of filmmaking, such as editing, sound and the performances. Furthermore, the video draws attention to itself frequently, both as a medium with limited capabilities and as a recording device: there are numerous instances of lens flare, overexposure and underexposure that would normally be avoided, as well as the aforementioned glimpses at the camera by passersby (and occasionally, even the actors). As Alberto Elena points out, the low-quality video image, combined with the minimalist, mechanical editing pattern and the static mise en scène, also produces an aesthetic that is similar to surveillance footage (100).

Conceptually and in its execution, *Ten* demonstrates perfectly the intersection of minimalism and realism, and fiction and documentary, and their contradictions. It is realist in that it depicts the lived realities of actual people, and their social world; it does so through the (near-literal) self-effacement of the filmmaker and the embrace of



new technology. The filmmaker seems absent, yet his presence can be strongly felt nonetheless. It is minimalist in its radically de-dramatised narrative, its formal simplicity, repetitions, and numerous reflexive and anti-illusionist markers. It embeds a contrived, fictional space within the actual world, and allows a controlled environment to interact with a fortuitous one (the city, its traffic and its people). It shows and hides, it creates a high degree of realism and simultaneously negates it; it both represents reality vividly and questions its own representation of it.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have expanded on my conception of a minimalist realism to incorporate minimalist filmmakers' merging of the real and the non-real in cinema. They achieve this in the first instance through combining realism and abstraction, and by employing a broad range of reflexive strategies that foregrounds and questions the film's own representations of reality – a practice that upholds both a modernist cinematic agenda, as well that of minimalism more broadly, in its coexistence of oppositional representational qualities. The minimalist framework in which these reflexive strategies are applied can accentuate their abrupt and disruptive effects, stressing the difference between various elements, while at other times, it may refuse to accentuate at all, allowing incongruous elements to coexist directly but subtly. The approaches to minimalist realism discussed in this thesis culminate in minimalist filmmakers' disintegration of the boundaries between fiction and documentary, and reality and its representation, in innovative new ways. Far from being a modernist gesture *per se*, or providing mere variants on existing hybrid forms, this aspect of contemporary minimalist cinema is deeply rooted in the subjects of their films; an equal interest in engaging with the real and the non-real; and a realist desire to depict the world as it is and a modernist/minimalist counter-desire to question this depiction, and do so in a simple manner. It is an extension of an approach to cinema that both engages with, and interrogates, its own methods of realist representation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Slowness has always been and will likely always remain a vital element of minimalist films, but it does not define them. It is also true that Bazinian realism has re-emerged emphatically in the aesthetic of minimalist films, but Bazin alone cannot account for what they are or stand for. Contemporary minimalist cinema, in fact, touches on many tenets of film tradition and practice, immediately bringing to mind the stark simplicity of the earliest films; the visually oriented narratives of silent film; neorealism's ethical, humanistic impulses and its engagement with the everyday; the contradictory representations of the real of modernist cinema; and the lived realities of actual people in actual places, living in the world today, as per the documentary tradition. This is a cinema that often appears to depict reality with the utmost fidelity, yet one that adopts, in this depiction, artifices, deceptions, illusions and lies – and it is boldly upfront about the fact. It is a cinema of narrative and formal simplicity, but one that at the same time rejects easy classification; an art of simplicity with complex aims, full of abnormalities, eccentricities and paradoxes.

While such a high degree of consistency in the application of simplicity may only be a recent trend in narrative cinema, it has strong precedents elsewhere in the arts, for example, in the visual arts, literature and the avant-garde cinema, three traditions that this thesis has engaged with at length. Although “minimalism” has long been a contested term in the wider arts, it is one that in the 1960s and 1970s in particular was able to describe a reductive, reflexive approach to artmaking and allude to qualities, approaches and aims more substantial than when it is used today. In the context of cinema it has increasingly been used in a particularly flippant way, to the point of losing all specific meaning and merely becoming a synonym for “simple” or “reductive.” This is so despite the fact that it appears over and over again in the discussion of films invariably described as “slow,” “contemplative,” and “transcendental.” Through a renewed engagement with minimalism, as explored in relation to the abovementioned traditions, this thesis has highlighted aspects of contemporary minimalist cinema that may be camouflaged by a habitual critical emphasis on slowness, while demonstrating that all rigorous, simplified approaches to art share some qualities and objectives. The thesis, in turn, has shown how these qualities and objectives manifest in unique ways in the medium of narrative cinema.

Minimalist filmmakers uphold the legacy of cinematic realism, but they also problematise this legacy. Their minimalist realism is one that engages with social realities and existing realist cinematic models – particularly that outlined by Bazin –

but use realism simultaneously to affirm and interrogate their own methods of representation of reality. Through an emphasised or self-aware application of realist approaches, minimalist filmmakers often confound the expectations of realism that their films establish, of a knowable, coherent and transparent filmic reality. In this sense, in their films the very techniques championed by Bazin can be used to produce very different effects to what he proposed, abstracting and rendering ambiguous the image rather than presenting something that can be seen, known and understood. Meanwhile, their cinema also relies on approaches traditionally considered as anti-realist within cinematic discourse, using montage techniques and shifting angles to both construct and render ambiguous filmic reality. Furthermore, minimalist filmmakers often include in their films disruptive and reflexive elements that strongly tend to contradict and disturb their realist attributes, highlighting the fact that realism can only go so far in describing their approaches. Finally, the paradoxical qualities of their films culminate in what is perhaps their most radical trait, namely, the blurring and sometimes disintegration of the line between fiction and documentary, and, as a result, the critical interrogation of the discursive distinction between reality and its representation. Consequently, theirs is a cinema that can be simultaneously perceived as realist and not; a cinema with each foot planted firmly in both the so-called Lumière and Méliès cinematic traditions; a cinema concerned as much with the faithful depiction of reality as with its intervention.

Recent works by some of the minimalist filmmakers discussed in this thesis demonstrate a continuation and departure from the approach they have been honing for years. With *Jauja* (2014), Alonso continues with his themes of lone men in the wilderness, but this time he has made a period piece set in 1882, featuring a Hollywood star (Viggo Mortensen). Kiarostami returns, as he has done many times before, to his favourite setting of the car in *Like Someone in Love*, only now the car is driving through the streets of modern day Tokyo. Costa continues to document the plight of the ex-Fontainhas residents, and Ventura returns as a protagonist, in *Horse Money* (2014), a film in which expressionistic, subjective and fictional elements are far more pronounced than in his preceding two films. These filmmakers continue to give us what we have come to expect, while persisting in confounding and surprising us all the same. What has not changed is that minimalist filmmakers continue to prove that a lot can be said with very little and as simply as possible, and that this simplicity must adjust to the realities that the film depicts. They engage with the tradition of

realism with which cinema will always be linked; they use realism, interrogate it, and move beyond it. They demonstrate an approach to artistic creation in which the way to engage with the world and its people, in all its complexities, requires that an artist both show and hide, include and omit, reveal and invent, depict reality as it seems to be and also as it may be otherwise.

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## Filmography

*10 on Ten* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2004, Iran/France)  
*12:08 East of Bucharest* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2006, Romania)  
*127 Hours* (Danny Boyle, 2010, US/UK)  
*24 City* (Jia Zhangke, 2008, China/Hong Kong/Japan)  
*3-Iron* (Kim ki-duk, 2004, South Korea/Japan)  
*400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959, France)  
*56 Up* (Michael Apted, 2012, UK)  
*American Teen* (Nanette Burnstein, 2008, US)  
*Anchorage, The* (Anders Edström, 2009, US/Sweden)  
*Andrei Rublev* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1966, Soviet Union)  
*Anna Karenina* (Clarence Brown, 1935, US)  
*Apple, The* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998, Iran/France)  
*Back and Forth* (Michael Snow, 1969, Canada)  
*Battle in Heaven* (Carlos Reygadas, 2005, Mexico/Belgium/France/Germany/Netherlands)  
*Battle of Chile, The* (Patricio Guzmán, 1977, Venezuela/France/Cuba)  
*Bellavista* (Peter Schreiner, 2006, Austria)  
*Benny's Video* (Michael Haneke, 1992, Austria/Switzerland)  
*Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948, Italy)  
*Blair Witch Project, The* (Eduardo Sánchez & Daniel Myrick, 1999, US)  
*Blissfully Yours* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2002, Thailand/France)  
*Boxing Day* (Kriv Stenders, 2007, Australia)  
*Breaking News* (Johnnie To, 2004, Hong Kong)  
*Buried* (Rodrigo Cortés, 2010, Spain/US/France)  
*Café Lumière* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2003, Japan/Taiwan)  
*Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980, Italy)  
*Casa de Lava* (Pedro Costa, 1994, Portugal/France/Germany)  
*Cave of the Yellow Dog* (Byambasuren Davaa, 2005, Germany)  
*Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006, US/UK)  
*Ciclón* (Santiago Álvarez, 1963, Cuba)  
*Circle, The* (Jafar Panahi, 2000, Iran/Italy/Switzerland)  
*Circus, The* (Charles Chaplin, 1928, US)  
*Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941, US)  
*Claire Dolan* (Lodge Kerrigan, 1998, US/France)  
*Class, The* (Laurent Cantet, 2008, France)  
*Clean, Shaven* (Lodge Kerrigan, 1993, US)

*Climates* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2006, Turkey/France)  
*Clock, The* (Christian Marclay, 2010, UK)  
*Closed Curtain* (Jafar Panahi, 2013, Iran)  
*Close-Up* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990, Iran)  
*Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008, US)  
*Code Unknown* (Michael Haneke, 2000, France/Germany/Romania)  
*Collateral Murder* (WikiLeaks, 2010)  
*Colossal Youth* (Pedro Costa, 2006, France/Portugal/Switzerland)  
*Cove, The* (Louie Psihoyos, 2009, US)  
*Crimson Gold* (Jafar Panahi, 2003, Iran)  
*Culloden* (Peter Watkins, 1964, UK)  
*Death in the Land of Encantos* (Lav Diaz, 2007, Phillipines/Netherlands)  
*Death of Mr. Lazarescu, The* (Cristi Puiu, 2005, Romania)  
*Edvard Munch* (Peter Watkins, 1974, Sweden/Norway)  
*Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003, US)  
*Empire* (Andy Warhol, 1964, US)  
*Evolution of a Filipino Family* (Lav Diaz, 2004, Phillipines)  
*Fantasma* (Lisandro Alonso, 2006, Argentina/France/Netherlands)  
*Festen* (Thomas Vinterberg, 1998, Denmark/Sweden)  
*Fish & Cat* (Shahram Mokri, 2013, Iran)  
*Five* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2003, Iran/Japan/France)  
*Flying Fish* (Sanjeewa Pushpakumara, 2011, Sri Lanka)  
*Germany, Year Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948, Italy/France/Germany)  
*Gomorrah* (Matteo Garrone, 2008, Italy)  
*Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2003, Taiwan)  
*Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990, US)  
*Grand Illusion* (Jean Renoir, 1937, France)  
*Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013, US)  
*Grin Without a Cat, A* (Chris Marker, 1977, France)  
*Hanoi, marte 13* (Santiago Álvarez, 1967, Cuba)  
*Hidden* (Michael Haneke, 2005, France/Austria/Germany/Italy)  
*Hole, The* (Tsai Ming-liang, 1998, Taiwan/France)  
*Horse Money* (Pedro Costa, 2014, Portugal)  
*Hotel Monterey* (Chantal Akerman, 1972, Belgium/US)  
*Hour of the Furnaces, The* (Fernando Solanas & Octavio Getino, 1968, Argentina)  
*Hurt Locker, The* (Kathryn, Bigelow, 2008, US)  
*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2006, Malaysia/China/Taiwan/France/Austria)

*I'm Still Here* (Casey Affleck, 2010, US)  
*In Another Country* (Hong Sang-soo, 2012, South Korea)  
*In The City of Sylvia* (José Luis Guerín, 2007, Spain/France)  
*In Vanda's Room* (Pedro Costa, 2000, Portugal/Germany/Switzerland/Italy)  
*Japón* (Carlos Reygadas, 2002, Mexico/Germany/Netherlands/Spain)  
*Jauja* (Lisandro Alonso, 2014,  
     Argentina/Denmark/France/Mexico/US/Germany/Brazil/Netherlands)  
*Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975,  
     Belgium/France)  
*Je, tu, il, elle* (Chantal Akerman, 1975, France/Belgium)  
*Johnny Mad Dog* (Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire, 2008, France/Belgium/Liberia)  
*Keane* (Lodge Kerrigan, 2004, US)  
*Kenny* (Clayton Jacobson, 2006, Australia)  
*Kings of the Road* (Wim Wenders, 1976, West Germany)  
*La bête humaine* (Jean Renoir, 1938, France)  
*La chambre* (Chantal Akerman, 1972, Belgium/US)  
*La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (Peter Watkins, 2000, France)  
*La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962, France)  
*La libertad* (Lisandro Alonso, 2001, Argentina)  
*La Région Centrale* (Michael Snow, 1971, Canada)  
*Lemon* (Hollis Frampton, 1969, US)  
*Letter to Jane* (Jean-Luc Godard & Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972, France)  
*Le Quattro Volte* (Michelangelo Frammartino, 2010, Italy/Germany/Switzerland)  
*Life, and Nothing More...* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1992, Iran)  
*Lifeboat* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1944, US)  
*Life is Cheap, Toilet Paper is Expensive* (Wayne Wang & Spencer Nakasako, 1989, US)  
*Like Someone in Love* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2012, France/Japan)  
*Like You Know It All* (Hong Sang-soo, 2009, South Korea)  
*Line Describing a Cone* (Anthony McCall, 1973, US)  
*Liverpool* (Lisandro Alonso, 2008, Argentina/France/Netherlands/Germany/Spain)  
*Los muertos* (Lisandro Alonso, 2004, Argentina/France/Netherlands/Switzerland)  
*Magnificent Ambersons, The* (Orson Welles, 1942, US)  
*Making of 'Los Muertos'* (Juan Manuel Seoane, 2004, Argentina)  
*Man From London, The* (Béla Tarr, 2007, France/Germany/Italy)  
*Man Vanishes, A* (Shohei Imamura, 1967, Japan)  
*Megacities* (Michael Glawogger, 1998, Austria/Switzerland)  
*Michael Snow Up Close* (Jim Shedden & Alexa-Frances Shaw, 1995, Canada)

*Mirror* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1975, Soviet Union)  
*Mirror, The* (Jafar Panahi, 1998, Iran)  
*Modern Times* (Charles Chaplin, 1936, US)  
*My Joy* (Sergei Loznitsa, 2010, Germany/Ukraine/Netherlands)  
*Mysterious Object at Noon* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2000, Thailand/Netherlands)  
*Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922, US/France)  
*News From Home* (Chantal Akerman, 1976, US/France)  
*Nightfall* (James Benning, 2011, US)  
*No Lies* (Mitchell Block, 1973, US)  
*North on Evers* (James Benning, 1992, US)  
*Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922, Germany)  
*Now* (Santiago Álvarez, 1965, Cuba)  
*Ocean's Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001, US)  
*October* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1928, Soviet Union)  
*Office, The* (TV series) (Ricky Gervais & Stephen Merchant, 2001-2003, UK)  
*Offside* (Jafar Panahi, 2006, Iran)  
*Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003, South Korea)  
*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2011, Turkey/Bosnia and Herzegovina)  
*O Sangue* (Pedro Costa, 1989, Portugal)  
*Ossos* (Pedro Costa, 1997, Portugal/France/Denmark)  
*Out 1: Noli Me Tangere* (Jacques Rivette, 1971, France)  
*Out 1: Spectre* (Jacques Rivette, 1974, France)  
*Paisan* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946, Italy)  
*Platform* (Jia Zhangke, 2000, Hong Kong/China/Japan/France)  
*Post Tenebras Lux* (Carlos Reygadas, 2012, Mexico/France/Netherlands/Germany)  
*Protector, The* (Prachya Pinkaew, 2005, Thailand/US/Hong Kong)  
*REC* (Jaume Balagueró & Paco Plaza, 2007, Spain)  
*Red Balloon, The* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956, France)  
*Red Desert* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1964, Italy/France)  
*River, The* (Tsai Ming-liang, 1997, Taiwan)  
*Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945, Italy)  
*Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948, US)  
*Rosetta* (Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne, 1999, France/Belgium)  
*Rules of the Game, The* (Jean Renoir, 1939, France)  
*Russian Ark* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2002, Russia/Germany/Japan/Canada/Finland/Denmark)  
*Sátántangó* (Béla Tarr, 1994, Hungary/Germany/Switzerland)  
*Seven Up!* (Michael Apted, 1964, UK)

*Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2008, Iran)  
*Sicilia!* (Danièle Huillet & Jean-Marie Straub, 1999, Italy/France/Switzerland)  
*Silent Light* (Carlos Reygadas, 2007, Mexico/France/Netherlands/Germany)  
*Sleep* (Andy Warhol, 1963, US)  
*Sleep Furiously* (Gideon Koppel, 2008, UK)  
*Snake Eyes* (Brian De Palma, 1998, US/Canada)  
*Son, The* (Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne, 2002, Belgium/France)  
*Song 27, My Mountain* (Stan Brakhage, 1968, US)  
*Stemple Pass* (James Benning, 2012, US)  
*Still* (Ernie Gehr, 1969-1971, US)  
*Still Life* (Bruce Baillie, 1966, US)  
*Still Life* (Jia Zhangke, 2006, China/Hong Kong)  
*Stray Dogs* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2013, France/Taiwan)  
*Strike* (Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1925, Soviet Union)  
*Sunrise* (F.W. Murnau, 1927, US)  
*Sweetgrass* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor & Ilisa Barbash, 2009, France/UK/US)  
*Tabu* (F.W. Murnau, 1931, US)  
*Tale of Cinema* (Hong Sang-soo, 2005, France/South Korea)  
*Taste of Cherry* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1997, Iran/France)  
*Ten* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2002, France/Iran)  
*This Is Not a Film* (Jafar Panahi, 2011, Iran)  
*Three Monkeys* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2008, Turkey/France/Italy)  
*Three Times* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2005, France/Taiwan)  
*Through the Olive Trees* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1994, France/Iran)  
*Time of the Wolf* (Michael Haneke, 2003, France/Austria/Germany)  
*Tony Manero* (Pablo Larraín, 2008, Chile/Brazil)  
*Touching the Void* (Kevin Macdonald, 2003, UK/US)  
*Touki Bouki* (Djibril Diop Mambéty, 1973, Senegal)  
*Tropical Malady* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004, Thailand/France/Germany/Italy)  
*Tulpan* (Sergey Dvortsevov, 2008, Kazakhstan/Russia/Germany/Poland/Switzerland/Italy)  
*Turin Horse, The* (Béla Tarr, 2011, Hungary/France/Germany/Switzerland/US)  
*Umberto D* (Vittori De Sica, 1952, Italy)  
*Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2010,  
 Thailand/UK/France/Germany/Spain/Netherlands)  
*Uzak* (Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2002, Turkey)  
*Visage* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2009, France/Taiwan/Belgium/Netherlands)  
*Vive l'amour* (Tsai Ming-liang, 1994, Taiwan)

*Waiting For Happiness* (Abderrahmane Sissako, 2002, France/Mauritania)  
*War Game, The* (Peter Watkins, 1965, UK)  
*Wavelength* (Michael Snow 1967, Canada/USA)  
*Wayward Cloud, The* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2005, France/Taiwan)  
*Weeping Camel, The* (Byambasuren Davaa, 2003, Germany/Mongolia)  
*Werckmeister Harmonies* (Béla Tarr, 2000, Hungary/Italy/Germany/France)  
*What Time Is It There?* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2001, Taiwan/France)  
*Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* (Pedro Costa, 2001, France/Portugal)  
*Where is the Friend's Home?* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987, Iran)  
*Where No Vultures Fly* (Harry Watt, 1951, UK)  
*Wind Will Carry Us, The* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1999, Iran/France)  
*Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory in Lyon* (Auguste & Louis Lumière, 1895, France)  
*Workingman's Death* (Michael Glawogger, 2005, Austria/Germany)  
*World, The* (Jia Zhangke, 2004, China/Japan/France)  
*Zorns Lemma* (Hollis Frampton, 1970, US)

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