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**THE REPRESENTATION OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMAS**  
**IN ESSAY FILMS: A QUESTION OF ETHICS AND AESTHETICS**

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THE REPRESENTATION OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMAS IN ESSAY  
FILMS: A QUESTION OF ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

TOPLUMSAL TRAVMALARIN DENEME FİLMLERİNDE TEMSİL  
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## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research is to analyze the various representations of collective traumas in essay films in the context of the film form and ethics. It focuses on three essay films: *ABC Africa* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2001), *Cameraperson* (Kirsten Johnson, 2015) and *The Pearl Button* (Patricio Guzman, 2015). My starting point is that ethics and aesthetics are inextricably related. On this basis, the thesis demonstrates the audio-visual ethical propositions enabled by the film form and the films' aesthetic choices. This research aims to answer the following questions: How does the intellectual root of the essay film which carry the legacy of critical thought and its formal style which diverge from conventional cinema effect the ways in which they represent collective traumas? How does the formalistic divergences in the essay films' aesthetic choices form ethical indexes? The thesis takes issue with the directors' subjectivity in terms of accepting responsibility of their aesthetic choices. In doing so, it aims to contribute to existing discussions in the literature on the reconsideration of film studies on the auteur and the genre based discussions in the context of the question of ethics. In this framework, the various points of analyses include the positioning of the director in the image ecology of films as a subject, the relationship between the director and the film subjects, and the anti-methodical, fragmented and the non-linear narrative style.

The positioning of the director as subject in the film blurs the conventional distinction between the director and film subjects and subverts the authoritative, objective and all-knowing authorial positions. In addition, the essay film problematizes the cinematic representations of collective traumas by exemplifying self-reflexive filmmaking practice. The anti-methodical, fragmented and non-linear narratives of essay films point at the incomprehensibility of collective traumas. These qualities are significant in all three films in different ways. As such, these three films put forward audio-visual ethical propositions which enrich the relationship between films and ethics.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, collective trauma, essay film, ethics, film form

## ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, *ABC Africa* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2001), *Cameraperson* (Kirsten Johnson, 2015) ve *The Pearl Button* (Patricio Guzman, 2015) deneme filmlerine odaklanarak, bu filmlerdeki toplumsal travmaların temsil edilişlerini film biçimi ve etik bağlamlarında incelemektir. Etik ve estetiğin ayrılmaz bir şekilde ilişkili olduğundan yola çıkarak bu filmlerdeki estetik tercihlerin işaret ettiği görsel-işitsel etik önermeler sergilenmeye çalışılmaktadır. Temel olarak bu çalışma şu sorulara yanıt aramaktadır: deneme filmlerin ilham aldıkları eleştirel geleneğin mirasından yararlanarak klasik sinemanın biçimsel üslubundan sapmaları, toplumsal travmaların bu filmlerde temsil edilişi hakkında neler söyleyebilir? Bununla bağlantılı olarak,estetik tercihlerdeki bu tür biçimsel sapmalar nasıl etik göstergeler oluşturmaktadır sorusu da tartışılmıştır. Deneme filmlerinde yönetmenlerin özneliğinin belirginliği estetik tercihlerin sorumluluğunun üstlenilmesi bağlamında ele alınıp autuer ve türe dayalı film çalışmalarının etik çerçevesinde değerlendirmesi tartışmalarına katkıda bulunmak amaçlanmıştır. Bu çerçevede, yönetmenlerin filmlerin görüntü ekolojisinde bir özne olarak konumlanması, yönetmen ve filmdeki özneler arasındaki ilişki ve anti-metodik, parçalı, doğrusal olmayan anlatı biçimi önemli analiz noktalarını oluşturmaktadır.

Söz konusu deneme filmlerde toplumsal travmaların temsil edilişleri incelendiğinde görülmektedir ki, yönetmenlerin bir özne olarak film içinde konumlanması, klasik yönetmen-film özneleri ayrımını bulanıklaştırarak otoriter, objektif ve her şeyi bilen direktif pozisyonları deforme etmektedir. Bununla birlikte, filmler özdüşünsel bir film edimini örnekleyerek toplumsal travmaların sinematik temsilini sorunsallaştırırlar. Anti-metodik, parçalı, doğrusal olmayan anlatı biçimleri ilede travmaların bütünüyle kavranabilecek olaylar olmadığına dikkat çekmektedirler. Bu öğelerin farklı şekillerde belirgin kılındığı bu üç film, toplumsal travmaların filmlerde temsil edilişi bağlamında, sinema ve

etik arasındaki ilişkiyi zenginleştiren, çeşitli görsel-işitsel etik önermelerde bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** deneme film, estetik, etik, film biçimi, toplumsal travma

## INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this study is to explore the ways in which collective traumas are represented in essay films in the nexus of ethics and the film form. The individual traumas are translated into collective traumas through cultural works, such as speeches, rituals, monuments, and films. The culturally constructed nature of collective traumas opens up a critical space to explore the question of agency. As it is social actors who produce representations of suffering, hence it is with collective traumas. The production of the symbolic representations of traumas, which engender new ways of remembering bears upon the question of ethics which is interconnected with the question of agency.

It is this context that I focus on essay films about collective traumas. I am particularly interested in the form of essay films, with a view to analyze their ethical stand as cultural products that embody the pain of others. The formal aspects of each film, cinematography, editing, framing, *mis en scène*, sound, narrative structure and point of views (the director, the camera and characters) reflect on a moment of crisis between the tragedy and its translation to the screen. Against this background, I engage with how essay films respond to this crisis by unsettling the conventional formal aspects of filmmaking. The subversion of these conventional formal aspects draws on the legacy of the critical tradition, which they originate from. In this sense, essay films problematize the question of ethics at the interface of aesthetics, critical thought and cinema.

In this thesis, I examine three essay films: *ABC Africa* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2001), *Cameraperson* (Kirsten Johnson, 2016) and *The Pearl Button* (Patricio Guzman, 2015). The commonality between these three films is that they avoid the demonstration of graphic violence. I consider this commonality as a vital ethical stand inscribed in the fabric of these films. Furthermore, they take place in different geographies and are filmed by both female and male directors. I believe

that these two reasons behind my choice of these films will provide a multiplicity of views, even in the limited scope of this work.

The first chapter begins with explaining a specific conceptualization of collective trauma as cultural work in the light of the social trauma theory. This conceptualization takes the following questions as its starting point: What is a collective trauma? How does it differ from individual trauma? I mainly draw on the arguments of the sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander who theorizes collective trauma as cultural trauma, arguing that “to transform individual suffering into a collective trauma is cultural work” (2012, p.4). Significant in this regard, I discuss the question of agency that this conceptualization bears upon. What follows is the problematization of the ethics arising from the question of agency of social actors who produce these works.

After drawing the contours of the theoretical framework, this discussion will be re-considered in the example of essay films which are cultural objects, producing symbolic significations of collective traumas. I am particularly interested in the form of essay films, or to say it with Hayden’s White’s words “the content of the form” (1990), so as to analyze their ethical stand as tangible objects that embody the pain of others. In this regard, it is important to note the argument of Thomas Elsaesser, who suggests in his article, “The Essay Film: From Film Festivals Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form?” that the essay film was developed as a critical attempt, representing a break with the conventional films portraying the trauma of World War II. Considering traumatic moments, the thematic preoccupation of essay films resonates with their historical formation. The formation of essay films indicates a moment of crisis which is to produce a narrative among the ruins left behind by devastating traumas.

Against this background, I focus on the ways in which essay films disrupt conventional narrative acts and narrational choices. In this context, the position of the filmmaker in the image ecology of films, the anti-methodical and non-linear narratives that posit the singularity of the essay films are crucial points of

analyses. From this point of view, I discuss the critical potentials of these features in the context of the representation of collective traumas.

In the last part of the first chapter, I scrutinize the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, the essay film form in particular. My aim is to explore the audio-visual ethical propositions that are inscribed in the form of the essay films. In this regard, I draw on the arguments of Asbjørn Grønstad who discusses how films “embody a distinctively visual ethics through its diverse aesthetic affordances” (2016, p. 3). He proposes three strands of research that are “emblematic of contemporary ethical turn in cinema: one thematic, one conceptual, and one artistic” (ibid. p.55). The thematic turn takes issue with the Holocaust as a crucial site of memory. The major debate in this field is whether the Holocaust can be represented or not. The second ethical turn is the conceptual one. These studies mainly discuss the concepts of the philosophy of ethics with films. The last one is the artistic strand, which, in dialogue with the philosophical turn, places auteur or genre-based studies within an ethical framework.

The discussions in the artistic strand (due to their preoccupation with film aesthetics and philosophy of ethics), that concern images of suffering in particular, inform my approach in this thesis. Hence, the methodology in this thesis depends on the analysis of narrative and narration in the selected films. I engage with an array of essays, theoretical works about filmic images, and trauma and memory studies. And for a philosophical discussion of ethics, I draw on Spinoza’s ethics to make sense of the relationship between the filmmaker and filmic subjects, and the film form, focusing on the use of digital cameras, framing, editing, and sound. There are two contexts in which Spinoza’s ethics provides a perspective to discuss ethics in relation to the essay film form.

Firstly, Spinoza’s ethical judgment of the self that “starts from the relation of a person with herself” (Talay Turner, 2018) serves to understand and critically evaluate the role of the filmmaker in essay films. The director and the filmic subject positions are sometimes interchangeable. That is, the director can also turn

into one of the subjects with visible enunciator positions. In this regard, I discuss the films' take on subverting the conventional distance between the filmmaker and the film subjects, treating the filmmaker as the part of same image ecology. The ethical knowledge that this aesthetic aspect offers in relation to the representation of collective traumas will be traced in the selected films in this thesis.

Secondly, Spinoza's embodied, situated ethics indicates an affective ground where the bodies constantly affect and are affected by other bodies. In this regard, this affective communication between bodies marks an ongoing differentiation and the process of becoming in bodies. This perspective can be operationalized in a particular analysis of the ability of essayistic form to interact, be affected and transformed as a result of its relationality with the film subjects. I conceive of the essayistic film form as a body which resembles the changing, differentiating bodies mentioned in Spinoza's ethics. These theoretical discussions will form the ground for the following chapters.

In the second chapter, these discussions are contextualized in *ABC Africa* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2001). I first argue that Kiarostami's use of hand-held, digital video camera promotes the critical convergence between the role of the self in essay films and the use of digital cameras. This convergence requires a consideration of ethics in relation to the film maker's embodied body/thought. I then explore how this attempt subverts the conventional borders between the filmmaker and film subjects. Furthermore, I make a case for the dialectical disjunction of scenes in the film that intertwine joyful moments and the traumatic events. For example, the arrangement of life and death in the film is discussed in relation to Kiarostami's previous films. And, finally, the previous discussions are associated with Kiarostami's positioning himself at the periphery of trauma throughout *ABC Africa*. I argue that this approach proposes an ethical knowledge that is inscribed in his just distance with subject of the film, being an emblematic of a just ethics.

The third chapter revisits these discussions again in the analysis of *Cameraperson* (Kirsten Johnson, 2016). Firstly, I analyze Kirsten Johnson “personal camera that can breathe.” In this regard, the way in which Johnson intensifies the materiality of her body and the body of the camera that both operate on a very tender and an affectual ground is discussed. Similar to Kiarostami’s in *ABC Africa*, Johnson’s embodied body/thought in the film marks an embodied ethics. At this point, the question of what kinds of bodies an embodied ethics considers, is an important question. For this reason, the materiality of the body in the film is examined around the notion of “mud bodies”, a notion based on Ursula K. Le Guin’s articulation of the different materials of the self in her essay “Being Taken For Granite.” This conceptualization is associated with framing and episodic editing of the film. I argue that Johnson proposes an ethics of vulnerability that is rooted in receptiveness of her body and her breathing camera.

The fourth chapter considers all these discussions on the basis of *The Pearl Button* (Patricio Guzman, 2015). Firstly, the affective ground on which the film operates is discussed. To illustrate with an example, the effect of violence on the landscape of Chile, focusing on the problem of “disappeared” people, is highlighted. This aspect is associated with the aesthetic and thematic preoccupations in the films of Guzman, which have been interpreted under the current notion of “planetary turn” (Grønstad 2016; Gyunn 2016; Radisoglou 2019). Thus, the construction of the film by different subjectivities is examined. In this context, firstly, the film’s “listening capacity” will be analyzed through the polyphonic dialogue that is established between different subjects who have witnessed traumas. Secondly, Guzman’s positioning in different subjectivities and identities due to his relationship with different time segments is explored with respect to the affinity of time and ethics within the framework of responsibility. I suggest that Guzman proposes a multi-centric ethics that sees and listens to animate and inanimate subjects with minute attention. Thus, he establishes a community of wounded subjectivities.

Essay films discussed in this thesis are cultural objects that engender different ways of remembering and produce symbolic significations of collective traumas. They unsettle the conventional formal aspects of filmmaking. With the subjective position of the filmmaker and a flexible film form, they provide a ground for embodied and situated ethical discussions bear upon differentiation of film forms as a result of their relationality with each particular trauma. In this regard, I believe that the ethical knowledge that these films propose has the potential to enrich the relationship between cinematic imagination and ethics, in particular when “regarding the pain of others” (Sontag, 2004).

## CHAPTER ONE

I aim to analyze, in this part, the representation of collective traumas in essay film at the nexus of ethics and the film form. It is commonly known that collective traumas and their symbolic representations are culturally constructed. The symbolic representations are sometimes inscribed onto material surfaces which remind us of collective traumas. In fact, over time, both the traumas and the surfaces engender new ways of remembering and produce new symbolic significations of trauma. Remembering and producing ways of remembering are both ethical issues. Therefore, this chapter scrutinizes the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, the essay film form in particular. It explores the audio-visual ethical propositions that are inscribed in the form of the essay film. In this context, the position of the filmmaker in the image ecology of films, the anti-methodical and non-linear narratives that posit the singularity of the essay films are crucial points of analyses in this chapter.

### **1.1. The Tangible Object: Collective Trauma as Cultural Work**

Hannah Arendt's anecdote about the vitality of memory is inscribed on a bridge in Berlin. It says, "Without memory and the representation of memory in the tangible object (which in turn stimulates memory), the currency of living exchange, the spoken word and the thought, would disappear" (Cited by Brown and Rafter, 2013: 1). Engraving this anecdote on a bridge in a city where the memory of a globally recognized collective trauma (World War II) is ingrained, is quite significant. With this anecdote inscribed on a bridge, a tangible object, Arendt's ideas have been concretized.

A different memorial object, Berlin Memorial to The Murdered Jews of Europe (in memory of Holocaust), made from a similar material is located near this bridge. This memorial is yet in a different form, a grid structure composed of grey, concrete pillars. Thus, as Arendt emphasizes, the embodiment of memory in a tangible object is important for people to remember and in this case, the remembrance of a collective trauma, continues to be produced in different forms and contexts, including Arendt's statement itself.

The sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander states that collective trauma is produced within both exact continuities and various deviations in these continuities. He points out a significant difference between individual and collective trauma, stating that "individual victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are overcome" (Alexander, 2012: 3). Yet, "for collectivities, it is different. Rather than denial, repression, and 'working through,' it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there" (ibid.p.3). Therefore, the transformation of individual suffering to be part of a collective trauma involves cultural work which "depends upon speeches, rituals, marches, meetings, plays, movies, and storytelling of all kinds" (ibid. p. 3-4).<sup>1</sup>

According to Alexander, considering trauma as a culturally and collectively created work opens up a critical space to explore the question of agency. As it is social actors who produce symbolic representations of social suffering. Needless to say, the effect of agency in this process is significantly related to the power of different institutions that are involved in the symbolic meaning making process. However, in the current domain of meaning which is created by the flow of visuals and sounds, what Alexander calls the "aesthetics arena as an institution" (ibid, p. 20) has an extraordinary resonance to create narratives about social

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<sup>1</sup> The second part of the book can be studied to see the stages of change "Holocaust" undergoes in the process of creation of it as an iconographic collective trauma.

suffering so as to “channel powerful human emotions” (ibid, p.6). Herewith, the “aesthetics arena as an institution” raises questions regarding ethics, especially questions concerning the agency of creators. These questions include what the narrative is and how it is constructed, who the subjects are, and what kind of effect the specific representation foresees.

The simplest definition of ethics is the responsibility of giving account to the world that we unfold in and with. Ethics concerns our choices and conducts. “Human beings are ethical animals,” says Simon Blackburn, this does not “mean that we naturally behave particularly well, nor that we are endlessly telling each other what to do. But we grade and evaluate, and compare and admire, and claim and justify.” (Blackburn 2003: 14) Perhaps our ethical capacity expands to its limits when we encounter the suffering of others. In contemporary society, these encounters often take place in the field of visual regimes. Taking this as her point of departure, Susan Sontag expresses her concerns about the difficulty of building a memory of collective trauma in the midst of the constant flow of visuals of atrocities. Particularly in war photography, such visuals cast a shadow over our ethical capacity. Yet we cannot abandon images, Sontag says. She (2003: 108) notes, “let the atrocious images haunt us” because this is the way in which we remember the atrocities and “remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself” (ibid.p.109).

To a spectator who sees the atrocity of visuals, her argument may come across as an impasse. But, it also marks the ethical position of those who have created these images and stories. If we re-visit Arendt’s anecdote mentioned above at this particular juncture, we can understand the crucial role of the tangible objects which reproduce the symbolic significations of collective trauma. If I were to rephrase Susan Sontag’s words, I would say that, not only remembering, but also producing the way of remembering is an ethical issue. Different ways in which we remember can potentially paralyze our ethical judgments as well as remind us of our ethical capacity to choose and comment. The essay films are tangible object that produce different ways of remembering of collective trauma. I am particularly

interested in the form of essay films, or to say it with Hayden White's words "the content of the form" (White, 1990), so as to analyze their ethical stand as tangible objects that embody the pain of others.

## **1.2. Film Form and Trauma: Example of Essay Films**

As mentioned above, films as tangible, cultural objects engender different ways of remembering and produce symbolic significations of collective traumas. In representing collective traumas, the formal aspects of each film, cinematography, editing, framing, mise-en-scene, sound, narrative structure and point of views (the director, the camera and characters) refer to a moment of crisis between the tragedy and its translation to the screen. Essay films respond to this crisis by unsettling the conventional formal aspects of film making, drawing on the legacy of the critical tradition from which they originate. To put it differently, essay films problematize ethics at the interface of aesthetics, critical thought and cinema. To start with, they unsettle the conventional boundaries between the filmmaker and film subjects. They position the filmmaker as one of the film subjects. Significant in this regard, the process of filming becomes visible. Therefore, they both reflect on the traumatic events and the cinematic apparatus. Crucially, with their fragmentary, non-linear, anti-methodical method, essay films subvert the classical realist films' offer of the comprehension of traumatic events. And by proposing an editing of fragments towards a unique disjunction, essay films carry a singularity. This singularity presupposes a unique form of representation of each collective trauma.

In his book *Afterimage: Film, Trauma and Holocaust*, Joshua Hirsch discusses the film forms which represent the Holocaust. He draws on the arguments of Alexander and a number of other theorists' who theorize collective trauma as cultural trauma. Hirsch points at the foundational role of cinema in the creation of the memory of the Holocaust. Given the decrease in the circulation of the numbered photographs taken during the liberation of camps by Allied forces on the media and in the public sphere, this role becomes particularly important.

Hirsch classifies such films under three categories: realist, modernist and postmodernist. These categories refer to the differences in their formal approaches to represent collective trauma.

In this historically chronological categorization, the first films were the classical realist films, considered as conventional historical films. Regarding the question of trauma, these films provide “the spectator with a sense of mastery over time..., a linear chronology,” and assume “the omniscient point of view of one who is outside history epistemologically, emotionally or morally.” (Hirsch, 2003, p.21) For Hirsch, *Night and Fog* (dir. Alain Resnais, script. Jean Cayrol & Chris Marker, 1955) marks a vital turn (a posttraumatic turn). It is a short film about Auschwitz which is quite different from classical realist films. Hirsch states that “*Night and Fog* constitutes a key link between the genre of Holocaust films, the development of post-World War II modernist film, and the appearance of posttraumatic cinema” which marked “a kind of failure of narration... a self-consciousness voice, toward a consideration of its failure to master the past” (ibid., p.23).

What Joshua Hirsch describes as a modernist break in trauma films is interpreted by Thomas Elsaesser as the beginning of the formation of essay films as a body of work. Elsaesser argues that “mentioning Francophone countries is also a reminder that the essay film was first developed as a deliberate break with the propagandistic nonfiction films after World War II, by auteurs who belonged to the French nouvelle vague<sup>2</sup>, such as Alain Resnais’s *Statues Also Die* (co-directed with Chris Marker; 1953) and *Night and Fog* (1955).” (Elsaesser, 2015, ed. 2017, p.243) Thus, Elsaesser speaks about a critical attempt (“a deliberate break”) made by the filmmakers who were at the crossroads of a changing zeitgeist. What others see as a break, a spontaneous aberration, as a deliberate filmmaking practice that situates criticism at the various levels of a film, is seen

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<sup>2</sup> Although Elsaesser cites Alain Resnais and Chris Marker as belonging to French nouvelle vague, these directors were belong to a specific group in the French new wave, Left Bank.

by essay film makers as the deployment of “a personal and politically engaged mode of expression”. (essayfilmfestival)

Such a view invites us to revisit the meaning of the ‘essay’.<sup>3</sup> It is fruitful to follow a line of discussion on the first determination of the word/genre in literature. In discussing the features of essay films, theorists frequently cite a small number of thinkers/authors, including, Michel de Montaigne, Georg Lukács, Max Bense, and Theodor W. Adorno. In doing so, they seek to lay the “foundations” with the help of early literary texts where the term originally sprang from.

*Essays* (Montaigne, 1580, tr. 2003) of Michel de Montaigne introduced the term to the literary genre. The importance of his text for discussions of essay films lies in his emphasis on the importance of the “self” in essay writing. He writes in “To the Reader” chapter, “I myself am the object of my book” (2003: 140). Montaigne describes his aim as: “to be authority on myself... and studying myself more than any other subject” (2003: 822). In this voluminous book, he writes about his ideas on quite different subjects, ranging from the nature of friendship to wars in the European land. In Timothy Corrigan’s words, Montaigne’s essays show “constant changes and adjustments of a mind” regarding the perception of the world that surrounded him.

After Montaigne, numerous essay writers have contributed to the formation of the genre, including Bacon, Dr. Johnson, Orwell and Virginia Woolf. The first cycle of critics emerged to investigate features of essay writing. Two iconic German language essays, Georg Lukács’s “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” (Lukács, 1910, ed. 2017), and Theodor W. Adorno’s “The Essay as Form” (Adorno, 1958,

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<sup>3</sup> The origin of the word comes from the word “essai” in French which means “attempt to accomplish or perform (a deed, task, etc.): make an attempt (at); undertake or try to do” Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: On Historical Principles Sixth Edition Vol 1. A–M (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007: 864)

ed. 2017) are important in terms of the discussions about the formalistic elements in essays.

George Lukács argues that “essay as an art form” oscillates between science and art, as “science offers us facts and the relations between facts, but art offers us soul and destinies” (ibid., p.23). He locates the essay form somewhere in between science and art, suggesting that the essay form blurs the boundaries of both. According to Lukács, the most important transformation took place in the field of art, the poetry. “Poetry in itself knows nothing beyond things; for it each thing is serious and unique and incomparable. That is also why poetry knows no questions” (ibid. p.25). Therefore, poetry walks through the destiny, focusing on solution (“tragedy”), and skips questions. On the contrary, the essayist arrives to the scene where the things have already been established and changes the dynamic. S/he occupies a critical position: “... in the works of the essayist form becomes destiny, destiny-creating principle” (ibid. p.28). This principle is strongly related with the life of the essayist which is subsumed in constant questioning. It is no coincidence that Lukács referred to the life of Socrates as “the typical life of essay form.” A life that is passionate about questions and judgements with a word of caution: “the essay is a judgement, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict but the process of judging” (ibid, p.40).

Theodor W. Adorno, in dialogue with Lukács, argues that the fundamental form of the essay is having an “unmethodical method”. At the ontological level, this constitutes a different relation with the objects. He adds that “it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character” (Adorno, 1958, ed. 2017, p. 67). This unique approach characterized by discontinuity, resists the Cartesian/Orthodox thought which emphasizes the total comprehension of the subject from every possible angle so as to create a smooth arch of discussion which has a certain beginning and an end. According to Adorno, in the essay “thought does not advance in a single direction but aspects of the argument

interweave as in a carpet” (ibid. p.70). Therefore, essayistic writing opposes the current, “hence the essay’s innermost formal law is heresy” (ibid. p.81). It also violates rule-bound thinking and writing models through which “something in the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy’s secret and objective aim to keep invisible” (ibid. p.81).

Max Bense dwells on the relationship of the essay and critical thinking. His emphasis is on the content. He argues that essay rests somewhere “between poetry and prose, between creation and persuasion, between an aesthetic and ethical stage” (Bense, 1948, ed. 2017, p. 52). In his view, this in-betweenness in the content of essay prevails. It is precisely that which calls for an ethical stance of critical thinking in the time of crisis. Referring to thinkers, including Leibniz, Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Ortega y Gasset, Bense claims that prominent essayists are also prominent philosophers and critics whose works occur in critical times. “The essay serves the crisis and its conquest by provoking mind to experiment” (ibid. p.59).

While early literary critics and writers dwelled on the definition of essay, film critics raise interest in this topic only after the 1940’s. A scrutiny into Hans Richter’s, Alexandre Astruc’s and André Bazin’s ideas is important to discuss the historical positions and contemporary scholarship about essay film. Moreover, the historical context in which this literature emerged and developed corresponds to a “deliberate break from propagandistic film after the World War II ” in Elsaesser’s words. These works invite a discussion on the need for new filmmaking styles that can reflect the atmosphere of the time, just before and after the Second World War. From then onwards borders have been violated, agreements have been broken, concepts and methods have fallen apart. The need for a new language has come about.

With the awareness of being at the crossroads of a new age, Hans Richter (Richter, 1940, ed. 2017) criticized the documentary film for not being capable of keeping up with the “zeitgeist” of the time. While Europe was in the hands of the

fascist rulers, and the Second World War was just around the corner, the task of the documentary film was “to lend form to intellectual substance.” Richter thought that there was a need for a new documentary form. And the essay form was just appropriate for this task, because “even in literature the word ‘essay’ is used for the treatment of difficult subjects and themes to render them into a generally comprehensible form” (ibid. 91). Thus, the essay film with its capacity to transform generic conventions, and its capacity “to lend form to intellect” could express the complexity of the “zeitgeist”.

Equally important to Richter’s early arguments about the essay form in filmmaking are two short texts by the writer, theoretician and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc. They were both written in 1948: “The Birth of a New Avant-garde: The Camera Stylo,” (Astruc, 1948, 2019) and “The Future of Cinema” (Astruc, *The Future of Cinema*, 1948, ed. 2017). Resembling that of Richter’s discussion, Astruc acknowledges the need of a new tendency in cinema in accordance with the zeitgeist of the new age and to keep up with the time in “The Camera-Stylo.” According to him, films should get rid of the “tired face” of conventional cinema to develop a new style; camera-stylo (camera-pen) (emphasis in the original). This filmmaking mode would solve the problem of the expression of thought in cinema to such an extent that “a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16 mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film” (ibid.). This “prophetic” style would transgress the border of conventional narrative cinema as well as the “old hat” of avant-garde cinema. According to Astruc, the appearance of writer-director, would inevitably lead to the birth of a new avant-garde.

In his second text “The Future of Cinema” (ibid.), Astruc emphasizes once again the need of a new form to visualize thought on screen. This time he came up with the ‘essay film’, denoting a prophetic style. “Cinema has a future only if the camera eventually replaces the pen: that is why I say that its language is not of fiction or news reports, but of the essay” (ibid., p.96).

Up to now, I introduced the prominent texts written by film critics who dealt with the definition and the function of essay film. The first person to define the essay film and relate this definition to an existing film was André Bazin. Bazin, in his review of Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (Bazin, 1958, ed. 2017) highlights the non-resemblance of this film with other films “with a documentary basis” (ibid., p.103). He calls this film an “essay documented by the film”, “an essay at once historical and political, written by poets as well” (ibid., p. 103). Bazin also listed some formalistic elements in the film that are emblematic of essay films according to him: “primary material as intelligence,” “horizontal montage,” and the “importance of the verbal track”.

After the first round of texts on the essay film which appeared in the period between the 1940's and the 1960's, the community of scholars have remained silent on this topic, almost until the beginning of the 21st century. From then on, numerous articles, book chapters and lectures have been written on the topic.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to cover the whole literature in this thesis. Thus, I confine my discussion to mainly three sources which bring together fragmented discussions on the role of the self, the form and the content in essay films. These three sources draw on the foundational discussions as well as the contemporary positions.

Timothy Corrigan, in his book *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Corrigan, 2011), explores the meaning of the “essayistic”. He looks into essay films, focusing on the essayistic mode as a performative expression of the self as a

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<sup>4</sup> In his essay “The Essay Film: From Film Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form? ”, Thomas Elsaesser argues that the rise of the essay films and the scholarly interest reflect the symptoms of the new century. They are “symptomatic of our global socioeconomic system and our transnational arts and entertainment business” (2017, p. 255), “In relation to politics, the essay film is a placeholder, especially for the kind of politics it inherited from the activist and agitational documentary of the 1960s and 1970s,” (p.256) “In addition, the essay film is symptomatic of certain changes in technology— notably the lowering of the bar for entrance into filmmaking thanks to cheap high-quality digital cameras and easy-to-use editing software.” (p.256)

result of multiple encounters between the self and other subjects in the public domain. “The essayistic acts out a performative presentation of self as a kind of self-negation in which narrative or experimental structures are subsumed within the process of thinking through a public experience” (ibid. p.6). For Corrigan, one of the most important aspects of the encounter between the self and the public domain is its transformative power on subjectivity. “[A] subjection of an instrumental or expressive self to a public domain as a form of experience that continually tests and undoes the limits and capacities of that self through that experience” (ibid., p.17). Here, Corrigan attributes equal significance to the content of the essay and the role of the self. Hereby the social, political and historical issues should be considered from a personal perspective.

Laura Rascaroli, in her book *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (Rascaroli, 2009), highlights two important features of essay films. Firstly, the director or narrator should hold a subjective position that speaks from a “single authorial position”. The arguments in essay films should address an “embodied spectator” who actively participates “in the construction of the meaning.” In her latest book, she answers the question of how these two fundamental features work together in essay films. To put it differently, her question is: “how does the essay film think?”

She argues that “the dialectical disjunction is at the basis of the essay form in film in-between spaces that must be accounted for, inasmuch as they are central to the essay film’s functioning” (Rascaroli, 2017, p. 8). In her view, the “dialectical disjunction” of elements in the film, including the visuals, the soundtrack or the filmic actions, opens some “gaps/intervals” in the text which maintains a discontinuous structure in the film. She draws attention to the resemblance between her concept of “gap/interval” and Gilles Deleuze’s concept of interstice.

“Given one image, another image has to be chosen which will induce an interstice between the two. This is not an operation of association, but of differentiation, as mathematicians say, or of

disappearance, as physicists say: given one potential, another one has to be chosen, not any whatever, but in such a way that a difference of potential is established between the two, which will be productive of a third or of something new.” (Deleuze, 1989: 179-80, cited by Laura Rascaroli)

According to Rascaroli, the essay film “thinks interstitially”, with gaps and intervals through which novel meanings occur in the films. Furthermore, these intervals open passages through which “authorial position” and viewers can be in an active dialogue.

Nora M. Alter, in her *The Essay Film After Fact and Fiction* defines essay film as a genre, emphasizing its capacity to blur boundaries, between formalistic conventions, institutions and geographical borders. She defines the vital code of the essay film as “erasing all boundaries in the process of production” (Alter, 2018, p.11). This has to do with transgressing fact oriented documentary style of filmmaking, “unlike the relatively clear line of argumentation developed in documentary productions, the essay film order calls into question the very possibility of a single narrative logic or perspective” (ibid. p.7). In this context the essay film crosses the conventional structure of fiction films, too. Alter addresses the dramatic rise in the number of essay films with the production of digital cameras and platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo. The presentation of essay films extends beyond the institutional venues (film theatres), and spreads to galleries, museums and online platforms. As a result of this, the essay film has become a “transnational genre” which provides the filmmakers a broader connectedness with the social and political world and also a way to escape the networks of film circles in their national cultures (ibid. p.6).

Even a limited overview of this literature demonstrates the impossibility of providing a clear-cut definition of an essay film. This difficulty resonates with the spirit of essayistic thinking and filmmaking, given that it is a resistance “to be melted down and condensed into a form” (Lukács: 29) as well as a definition.

However, we can still discern some key features of this mode of filmmaking. It engages with socio-political issues with a critical and personal point of view. It deploys the disjunction of fragments, and the authorial position of the filmmaker is more or less preserved. What do these features tell us about the relationship of the essayistic form to the representation of collective trauma?

Considering traumatic moments, the thematic preoccupation of essay films resonates with the historical formation of essay films. As mentioned above, the formation of essay films indicates a moment of crisis. The crisis is to produce a narrative among the ruins left behind by devastating traumas. In this context, Hirsch argues that “trauma deforms and throws into crisis a witness’s mental representation of an event, it can be said to impose inherent limits of representation... limits of intelligibility and narratability ” (Hirsch, 2003, p.20). If we take the essay filmmaker as a witness (either the first witness or the second-generation witness of events, or just an intellectual witness to history), s/he tries to produce a work from this crisis, with the legacy of the critical tradition it came from.

Probably the most distinctive feature of the essay films is the subjective position of the filmmaker. Unlike classical realist films (whether documentary or fiction), s/he does not constitute a bodily absent, yet mentally omniscient, all-seeing, all-knowing position. The presence of the enunciator/filmmaker is apparent in the film at different levels. “The inscription of the authorial figure can be very direct, for instance, by making the filmmaker’s body visible and his/her voice audible” (Rascaroli, 2008:38). Thus, we can detect the agency of the filmmaker as one of the subjects in the film, registering filmic events as well as the process of filming. As noted by Jean Pierre-Gorin, the act of the authorial position in an essay film “is a rumination in Nietzsche’s sense of the word, the meandering of an intelligence that tries to multiply the entries and the exits into the material it has elected” (Pierre-Gorin, 2007).

However, we should note that the material is multilayered in an essay film. Essay films in which collective trauma is the thematic material, the filmmaker, as an embodied intelligence, meanders and works through traumatic events that are affectively charged with the suffering of others. As one of the subjects in the film, the filmmaker's reflection, who presents her "self-negation, the process of thinking through a public experience" (Corrigan, *ibid.*), is also a material in itself. A material that works as a semi-permeable membrane that the selected image and sound reaching the audience in a particular edited form is transmitted through. These are the affects and thoughts of the filmmaker, which are formed concomitantly in here body and mind during this process. As mentioned above, essay films reflect upon the cinematic apparatus self-reflexively. They are not only films about collective traumas, but they are also about making a film about collective traumas.

In essay films where both intellectual and affective aspects of collective traumas and their representation by the cinematic apparatus are problematized, well known methods are dismantled. Instead, what Adorno calls an "unmethodical method" is employed. Unlike classical realist films, they offer a fragmented temporality, not a linear one. Instead of narrating a past temporality with cause and effect relationships, essay films create cracks in the representation of the past<sup>5</sup> in a fragmented style. In doing so, they point out the gap/cracks between the reality of traumas and their translation into a representation. So, they do not provide the viewers with a sense of mastery over the past and a comprehension of these atrocious events. Instead, they suggest the possibility of a dialogue between essay films and viewers due to these cracks/gaps between fragments. Therefore, essay films offer a "dialectical disjunction" in which different thought patterns and

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<sup>5</sup> This aspect of the essay films is similar to what Joshua Hirsch describes as modernist postmodernist Holocaust films that point at the crisis of representation in different ways

questions occur about traumatic events as well as their realization via cinematic images.<sup>6</sup>

Each pain, each trauma creates its own intellectual and affective layers. Essay films respond this situation by singularity of their forms. Due to their capacity to unsettle conventional genres, a subjective authorial position, and their proposition of a unique disjunction of fragments in every single work, the essay film carries a singularity in its essence. In this context, in essayistic approach of filmmaking, the particularity of each collective trauma is emphasized. For example, the trauma of AIDS epidemics in *ABC Africa*, the index of violent events in the last quarter century in *Cameraperson*, and the trauma inflicted by state of Chile in *The Pearl Button* are addressed in unique ways. In *ABC Africa*, Kiarostami highlights the ongoing effect of the trauma of the AIDS epidemics in Uganda. In *Cameraperson*, Johnson portrays different collective traumas, focusing on some specific moments rather than giving full stories behind each collective trauma. In *The Pearl Button*, Guzman deals with different traumas in the history of Chile with a clear emphasis of state crimes. With respect to these situations, *ABC Africa* focuses on the present situation in Uganda where the affect of the trauma and the resilience of peoples in the face of adversity go hand in hand. In this regard, Kiarostami designates a partial yet constitutive representation, referring the complexity of the ongoing trauma of the epidemics and both the sufficiency and the limits of cinematic representation. *Cameraperson* applies an episodic structure that effaces the causes of traumas in point and focuses on creating trans-geographical, transnational dialogues between different traumatic moments. Guzman portrays different communities in Chile to explore the interrelation of different violent events in the past in *The Pearl Button*. In doing so, the film focuses on the causes of traumas more than other films, emphasizing the agency of the Chilean state. In that sense, we can say that the essayistic approach, in particular these films imply a resistance against the idea of a monolith understanding of collective traumas.

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<sup>6</sup>In that sense, essay films exemplify metacinema.

They highlight the particularity of each traumatic events <sup>7</sup>(emphasizing the filmmaker's situatedness in certain places and times) with their singular aesthetic choices.

Jean Pierre-Gorin explains this aspect of essay films, borrowing the term, "termite art", from the legendary critic Manny Farber. "The most inclusive description of (their) art is that, termite-like it feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement" (Farber, 1962-3, cited by Gorin). In doing so, essay films refer to a construction/demolition process. In the sense that the boundaries of the formal aspects of film are permeable even when establishing itself, carving a place for the next representations to come, which will eat them and produce new eatable work. In this context, as I have mentioned in the first part, the essay films are tangible objects, which, while transforming into something new in the processes of construction and demolition, also produce new meanings of trauma as well as new translations of trauma into visual imagery.

### 1.3. Film Form and Ethics

Capturing images is clearly an ethos, a disposition, and a conduct in regard to the world.

(Jean Luc-Nancy, *The Evidence of Film*, 16)

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<sup>7</sup> The further elaboration on different sources of collective traumas (e.g. colonialism, post-colonialism, genocides, epidemics or pandemics) and the relation of essayistic is outside of the scope of this study. Yet, a further research on particular traumatic sources and how they depicted in essay films can be carried to add depth to the studies of collective trauma. Essay films' way of representing collective traumas can challenge categorization of different traumas under same categories.

The aesthetic simply appeals to sensory and cognitive perception. Ethics is about our judgements and conduct in regard to the world that we unfold in. The aesthetics and the ethics are deeply interconnected. In this context, I scrutinize the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, the film form in particular and explore the audio-visual ethical propositions that are inscribed in the form of the essay films analyzed in this thesis. The thesis takes as its starting point the distinctive authorial position of the essay filmmakers (as holders of authorial responsibility) to discuss the ethics of aesthetic choices. On this basis, I draw on a specific use of Spinoza's ethics in the context of the relationship of filmmaker and filmic subjects, cinematic tools (e.g. working methods digital video cameras), and the form of the films, focusing on framing, editing, and sound.

André Bazin wrote about the affect of the image of ordinary moments as they appear on a cinema screen:

“The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities. It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love.” (Bazin 1967: 15 cited by Asbjørn Grønstad)

Regarding the nexus of aesthetics, ethics, and films, Asbjørn Grønstad argues that this passage from Bazin “contains the seed of an entire theory of ethics, pivoting around the central premise that the filmic capture of a phenomenon in the real world makes us aware of it in such an acute fashion that deep affections arise” (2016, p. 47). He draws our attention to how the emergence of affections with regard to an artistic work unfolds the relationship between aesthetics and ethics.

A scrutiny into the origins of words help us better understand the basis of this relationship. The aesthetic originates from a Greek word *aisthetikos* which means “of or for perception by the senses, perceptive of things, from *aisthanesthai* “to perceive (by the senses or by the mind), to feel” (online etymology dictionary). Thus, as mentioned above, if we were to provide a basic understanding of ethics, it would cover our judgments, our conducts, our attention, our love and affections towards the world that we unfold in and with. On this ground, ethics is strongly related to how we perceive and feel the world surrounding us and ourselves, which constitute the components of a vast network of interrelatedness.

Emphasizing this deep interconnectedness between ethics and aesthetic experience, and considering aesthetics as an umbrella concept that “subsumes all other areas of experiences” (ibid. p. 26), Asbjørn Grønstad argues that “aesthetic form, in particular cinematic images, is potentially capable of generating ethical knowledge of kind not easily accessible, if at all, outside of domain of art.” (ibid. p. 26) Marking the variety of the ethical stands that artistic works can offer, he adds that “aesthetic emboldens a free play of ethics, a kind of experimental ethics that has little room to unfold within the stricter parameters of those other domains. Artistic practices establish what is, in effect, a laboratory for research into ethics” (ibid. p.26).

In the same work, Grønstad, also argues that the relationship of cinema with ethics has been about the processing of some themes that concern ethical knowledge (rage, shame, compassion, etc.) in stories for many years. The identifiable ethical turn in film studies has taken place in the late 90’s which has marked a transition from film content to film form. This turn has made it possible to discuss ethics concerning cinematic images. The motivation underlying this turn indicates a critical paradigm shift in film theory that gives priority to “spectatorship, affect and ethics which values singularity over universality, affectivity over rationality, and ethics of the particular over ethics of moral imperatives” (Choi & Frey, 2014, p.9 cited by Asbjørn Grønstad).

Against this background, Grønstad proposes three avenues of research that are “emblematic of the contemporary ethical turn in cinema: one thematic, one conceptual, and one artistic” (ibid. p.55). The thematic turn takes issue with the Holocaust as a crucial site of memory. The major debate in this field is whether the Holocaust can be represented or not. Although this is partially a worn-out discussion, he notes that “their crucial insights will continue to influence future research” (ibid. p. 57) about the relationship between ethics and films. Thus, Grønstad highlights the inseparability of visual ethics and images of atrocities in this kind of research.

The second ethical turn is the conceptual one. These studies mainly discuss the concepts of philosophy of ethics with films. The filmic elements such as points of view, narrative structures and characters are re-visited, using the frameworks of the philosophers who have taken issue with particular visual realms. In this sense, the discussions and concepts of the philosophy of ethics have been effective in laying the foundations for a visual ethics.

The last avenue is the artistic strand, which, in dialogue with the philosophical turn, marks "the appearance of an auteur- or genre-based studies that place their object within an ethical framework" (ibid.p.62). One particular film about the Holocaust, more precisely a tracking shot in this film, Gillo Pontecorvo's *Kapo* (1960) has formed the ground of the discussions in this area. This scene depicts the murder of a woman in a concentration camp. After she is killed in front of an electric fence, a tracking shot approaches her body, while an edgy music accompanies the shot. The film, in particular this fragment of the film, was harshly criticized by the critics at that time. Jean Luc Godard, for example, said in regard to *Kapo*, “tracking shots are a matter of morality” (Godard, 1959, cited by Grønstad). Libby Saxton says that Godard's statement is “the best-known critical statement about film and ethics” (Saxton, 2010, p.22).

Godard’s statement, even as a faint silhouette, has formed the background of the discussion about the relationship between ethics and film form at this point. It

indicates that the nexus between responsibility and aesthetic choices is an important issue in terms of ethics. In this context, Grønstad says that “the selection of formal components is made to carry the burden of authorial accountability” (ibid. p.67). Griselda Pollock also comments on the discussion around the tracking shot in *Kapo*: “the choice of shot, the aesthetic decision is at the same time an ethico-political reflex and index” (2011, p. 263 cited by Asbjørn Grønstad). In short, as seen in this example, simple yet catchy, aesthetic choices are also ethical choices, especially when “regarding the pain of others” (Sontag, 2004).

The discussions in the artistic strand (due to their preoccupation with film aesthetics and philosophy of ethics), that concern images of suffering in particular, informs my approach in this thesis. I analyze essay films on collective traumas for several reasons. The authorial/subjective position of the filmmaker differentiates this form from other filmmaking practices. In fact, the authorial responsibility behind every formal choice in films can be discussed in regard to ethics. However, essay films make the signature of the “I” behind these formal choices in significantly a direct manner, making the responsibility issue more visible.

The aesthetic choices of essay films point out the distinctive audio-visual ethics inscribed in the fabric of essayistic form. The positioning of the filmmaker as one of the subjects in the film marks a self-reflective act that examines both the filmmaker’s position vis a vis the filmic events/subjects and vis a vis the position of the cinematic apparatus against collective trauma. Furthermore, as mentioned above, with their fragmentary, multidirectional paths, essay films dismantle the spectators’ mastery over time and comprehension of the traumatic events. The essayistic form allows for an affective communication between the filmmaker and the subjects. Thus, the narrative in these films are formed from affections, uncertainties and questions arising from this communication rather than facts or evidences.

Against this background, I examine three essay films in this study: *A.B.C Africa* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2001), *Cameraperson* (Kirsten Johnson, 2016) and *The Pearl Button* (Patricio Guzman, 2015). I analyze how they operate on these points; how they unfold, challenge or transform them in their narratives. I engage with an array of essays and theoretical works about filmic images. And for a philosophical discussion of ethics, I draw on Spinoza's ethics to make sense of the relationship of filmmaker and filmic subjects, and the film form focusing on use of digital cameras, framing, editing, and sound. In what follows, I specify how Spinoza's ethics is used in this study. He distinguishes morality and ethics. The subjective authorial position of filmmakers in essay films can be thought in the light of this distinction.

Talay Turner comments on this difference in her discussion of why Spinoza's book has the title of "Ethica":

"The book is called Ethica, not morality. The main difference between ethics and morality is that ethics which comes from a Greek word 'ethos' starts from the relation of a person with herself. On the contrary morality which is a Latin term, it starts with relation with others primarily." (Talay Turner, 2018)

This inquiry of the relation of a person with herself starts with the understanding of her part in the whole. Thus, Spinoza foregrounds an embodied and a situated kind of ethics that advocates a thinking "fully integrated within nature." Significant in this regard, human beings' freedom and power lie in their capacity to understand nature and our relation to it. The knowledge for such an understanding is formed both in the body and the mind, which are different attributes of the same substance. The definition of such knowledge for Spinoza is "a mode of being than of having, not something we possess but something we are or become" (Yovel, 1991, p. 159).

The embodied, situated process of the formation of knowledge indicates an affective ground where bodies constantly affect each other and are affected by

other bodies. Spinoza describes this interaction between bodies with geometric modeling in the second book of *Ethics*, in proposition 13 and in axioms and lemmas under this proposition. I particularly draw on his definition of the body and his ideas about movement in and between bodies for analysis of the films in this thesis. According to Spinoza, “all bodies are either in motion or rest,” (E, II, pro. 13, axiom 1), and he adds, “all bodies agree in certain aspects” (E, II, prop. 13, Lemma 2). Furthermore, a body as an individual thing “composed of simplest bodies... for since, each single part can therefore move with varying degrees of speed and consequently communicate its own motion to other parts with varying degrees of speed” (E, II, pro. 13, proof 4., sch.). The determining capacity of these movements in regard to interrelation is the surface structure of these simplest particles in a body. “Hence bodies whose parts maintain close contact along large areas of their surface I term hard; those whose parts maintain contact along small surface areas I term soft; while those parts are in a state of motion among themselves I term liquid” (E, II, prop. 13, corr., axiom 3).

Spinoza thinks about the order of things through forms. Bodies have forms. Even the simplest parts in a body have form. These forms do not indicate stability as there is fluidity in and between bodies. Indeed, there are continuous encounters which indicate an ongoing differentiations and processes of becoming for bodies/forms. For this reason, “Spinoza’s ethics, cannot be understood in terms of a fixed moral code: a list of ‘thou shalt not’” (Gatens, 2003, p.6). As there are no fixed forms, identities and interrelations that can entail the applicability of fixed moral codes. Instead, his ethics is based on understanding the changes in forms, the causes and results due to variable encounters. This requires “becoming the active cause of one’s encounters, a path that leads to an increase in our freedom through an increase in our understanding of ourselves, others, and broader nature” (Gatens, 2003, p. 7).

In short, I use Spinoza’s ethics in a specific sense, that is an understanding of encounters that causes changes in and between different forms/bodies. It is Spinoza’s ethical judgment of the self that “starts from the relation of a person

with herself” which maps onto the role of the filmmaker in essay films. The directors are also one of the subjects in the films with visible enunciator positions. They portray the subject through their affect on them. They employ a mode of expression which reflects personal engagement. Therefore, the ethical knowledge that arises from these films is deeply engaged with the filmmakers’ relation with themselves.

This aspect of the essay film blurs the classical distinction of behind the camera and in front of the camera. There occurs an affective communication between the filmmakers and the film subjects. This encounter changes, deforms the authoritative, omniscient, all-knowing directorial positions. This authorial position is replaced with directorial bodies open to influences. This change manifest itself in *A.B.C Africa* when Kiarostami becomes part of the same image ecology with the filmic event/subjects, not just with his onscreen body, but also, he shares the space behind the camera with a group of children. He performs in a public domain where he “continually tests and undoes the limits of the self” (Corrigan, 2011, p.17), in particular his position as the filmmaker, through affective communication with other bodies. In *Cameraperson*, Kirsten Johnson further emphasizes the importance of dissolving the position of the autonomous and autogenous director, frequently confronting us with her most vulnerable, most uncertain, least perfect moments such as crying due to filming war victims, or falling to the ground while filming people, or being caught to the police recording scenes. Guzman’s stand in this regard is more complex. It is about undoing his authorial director position in his long filmmaking career based on making classical documentary films as a victim of the Pinochet regime. In *The Pearl Button*, unlike omniscient positions in his earlier films, he puts himself forward as an embodied figure and his identity position changes due to his relation with the past of Chile’s history. His encounter with the Patagonian indigenous people raises the question of the crimes that his ancestors have committed and puts his victim position into question.

As mentioned above, the other topic of discussion in this thesis is the cinematic tools, especially how films utilized digital video cameras, and the form of the films, focusing on framing, editing and sound. What we call film form refers to the constellation and arrangement of some individual particulars, including yet not all, shots, scenes, characters within these moments, the cameras recording them, frames posited by these cameras, temporality that occurs within and the editing from these moments. The essay films, with their anti-methodical, non-linear, fragmentary approach is open to changes in film form. This enhances the ability of the film forms to interact, be affected and transformed as a result of their relationality with the film subjects. Unlike conventional genre films that follow certain, fixed aesthetic formulas, these films interact with their subjects in a unique way and forms are shaped as a result of these specific encounters. In *A.B.C Africa*, this is a rumination of Kiarostami at the periphery of the trauma with his hand-held camera, capturing segments of complicated affective fluxes in Uganda. In *Cameraperson*, it is the indexing of twenty-five years of memory of Johnsons as a cinematographer, using what I call surplus images, images that could not make their way to the previous films. The film consists of forty-four distinctive episodes that are interwoven by black screens in between. In *The Pearl Button*, it is an oscillation between the past and the present. The film portrays the oceans and the skies to show that the Chilean land have experienced variable atrocities.

In this context, in the nexus of ethics, film form and representation of collective traumas, I aim to outline various constellations of audio-visual ethical arguments inscribed in the forms of these films. In this context, I focus on the bodies/forms, the parts inside these bodies/forms, and how they interact, and how these interactions provide us with an ethical knowledge to embody the pain of others into tangible objects.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ABC AFRICA

Abbas Kiarostami was a renowned Iranian scenarist, filmmaker, photographer, and poet, who reached out to different audiences in different parts of the world, using various media. His sources of inspiration were sometimes children and their school notebooks; other times, a tree or many trees on the vast landscapes, a tin rolling on the street, or a mulberry which saves the life of a man who attempts to commit suicide. As the title of the second film in his Koker trilogy sums up, Kiarostami made films about *Life and Nothing More...* (1992). The trilogy is about both life and death:

“Ever since the devastating earthquake in the Koker region in the northern part of Iran, death has been something that I think about from time to time. But now it is more of an issue to me as an individual, but that is not necessarily why you see it in my films. In my films I show death to celebrate life so it’s not a pessimistic.” approach to death (Kiarostami, Abbas Kiarostami: *The Art of Living*, 2003)

In his films, life and death are played against each other, hence interrelated in multiple and complex ways. For instance, the protagonist in *Taste of Cherry* (1997), looks for a person to help him to die, yet finds a man who “delivers an elegy to life who will help the other die. It is extraordinary “and if you did not know Kiarostami’s work, you might expect that this older man will dissuade the other from committing suicide. However, that is not the case” (Bergala, *Abbas Kiarostami: The Art of Living*, 2003).

It is highly likely that Kiarostami’s preoccupation with death and life, as well as his stories on children led the United Nations International Fund for Agricultural Development to invite him to make a film “about a project, UWESO (Uganda

Women's Effort to Save Orphans), the fund supports in Uganda, and bring attention to the plight of that country's orphans, whose numbers are estimated to be at least 1.6 million" (Scott, 2002).

Although he did not officially accept the UN's invitation, he agreed to visit Uganda. Instead of a heavy 35mm camera equipment and a full film crew, Kiarostami set out with a small digital camera and a couple of friends. In the beginning, his intention was not to make a film: "It was sort of location scouting, but we had cameras with us, and we started shooting- not for the purpose of making the actual film. Then, when we finished shooting, we looked at the footage we had and decided that maybe we could make the movie out of this footage" (Kiarostami, 2002).

The result is *A.B.C Africa* (2001), a milestone in Kiarostami's oeuvre, in the sense of working outside of Iran and filming with a digital camera for the first time. It is a film made from the notes of a not fully actualized film. It is, indeed, an attempt<sup>8</sup> to make a film, that is, an essay film about the plight of orphans in Uganda as well as about life itself.

## **2.1. Digital Camera: Camera-Style**

As mentioned earlier, in "The Birth of a New Avant-garde: The Camera Style," Alexandre Astruc pointed out the need for a new filmmaking style by using camera-style (camera-pen) (Astruc, [1948], 2017). He proposed the term to provide a fresh approach for the expression of feelings and thought in cinema. In another text published in the same year, he coined the notion of the "prophetic"

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<sup>8</sup> The meaning of the essay is: "make an attempt" Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: On Historical Principles Sixth Edition Vol 1. A-M (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007: 864)

mode of filmmaking. This is the essay film. “Cinema has a future only if the camera eventually replaces the pen: that is why I say that its language is not of fiction or news reports, but of the essay” (Astruc, 1948, 2017, p.96). In one of his interviews, Kiarostami explains the relationship of camera and pen, somehow echoing Astruc’s arguments. He says: “For me, the camera is exactly the same as a pen, it can be used by the common person or it can be used by Baudelaire to create a great poem” (Kiarostami, *Abbas Kiarostami: The Art of Living*, 2003).

Both Astruc and Kiarostami highlight the form and the content of a cinema which serve to visualize thoughts and feelings and have a resemblance to the literary genre (essay/poetry). However, the technological shift to make a camera resembling a pen has been possible thanks to the invention of digital cameras. They are small, light to carry, and affordable to buy. Just like a pen, using them requires only an elementary level of knowledge. With this shift, there occurred a critical convergence between the role of the self in essay films and the use of digital cameras. “The essay film is symptomatic,” writes Thomas Elsaesser, “symptomatic for the changes in technology that allow anyone with the desire to bear witness or manifest critique in the public realm to easily to pick up a digital camera as turn to the typewriter or pick up a pen” (Elsaesser, 2017, p. 247).

This critical convergence manifests itself most evidently in terms of the role of the self in essay films. As discussed in the first chapter, the role of the enunciator is one of the vital aspects of the essayistic filmmaking mode. Scholars, including Corrigan (2011) and Rascaroli (2009, 2017), highlight the role of “I” as the most crucial element in the film. Whereas other scholars/theorists, including Alter (2018) and Gorin, argue that the role of “I” is essential as long as she/he focuses on the socio-political issues from the perspective of the personal. Although there are different views concerning the presence of “I” in an essay film, the existence of the self is unwaveringly apparent. Nevertheless, due to the transformation of film cameras to digital video cameras, the materiality of the film has disappeared, in which context, the materiality of the artist/filmmaker becomes a problematic too.

“Film and its French equivalent pellicule- from pellis, the skin- at first have the same meaning, stemming from the same origin,” writes Jean Luc Nancy, “it is a small skin, a thin skin” (Nancy, 2001, p.46). When we talk about the disappearance of materiality, it connotes the disappearance of the film/pellicule/skin, along with the disappearance of the filmmaker’s bodily presence. In this context, Rodowick argues that digital arts are “the most radical instance yet of an old Cartesian dream: [that] the best representations are the most immaterial ones because they seem to free the mind from the body and the world of substance” (Rodowick, 39, quoted in King). However, another kind of a digital art- materialist, an embodied one - is possible, too. As demonstrated by the Homay King in her analysis of *The Gleaners and I* (Agnes Varda, 2000):

“The digital could thus in many ways be said to realize the dream of a disembodied, timeless, and transcendent form of representation. *The Gleaners and I*, however, is a film that denies the digital divorce from the tangible and time-bound. It uses digitality in ways antithetical to the Cartesian dream of immateriality, in ways opposed to the fantasy of freedom from the body and the suspicion of the senses. Varda’s film counters transcendence with immanence.” (King, 2007)

The scenes of Varda’s hands, showing signs of old age, trying to catch trucks in the road, or scenes of her whitening hair in *The Gleaners and I* (2000) emphasize the filmmaker’s body (onscreen and behind the camera). In a similar way, Kiarostami’s “embodied thought”<sup>9</sup> expresses itself in *A.B.C Africa* (2001) in different moments. The film starts with a dark screen accompanied by the voice of a fax machine. Then, we see a paper come out of the fax machine and hear a

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<sup>9</sup> I borrow Anne Rutherford’s comments on *The Gleaners and I* (2000) quoted in Homay King’s “Matter, Time and Digital: Varda’s *The Gleaners and I*”, referring Varda’s (the director) presence in the film as an “embodied thought” and an “embodied affect.”

woman voice-off read the text, an invitation to Kiarostami from United Nations International Fund for Agricultural Development to make a film about the condition of orphans in Uganda with a view to show the “devastating dimension of tragedy” (*A.B.C. Africa*, Abbas Kiarostami, 2001). Then, we see a sequence which shows the view from a window of a landing plane. In the following sequence, we see Kiarostami and two of his friends walk towards a car with their suitcases. We understand that he accepted the invitation. In the next scene, we are in the car, the cameraman sitting at the back seat films the front where Kiarostami is seated next to the driver. He holds his hand-held camera, films the driver and asks him to “play some Kampala music.” Then, the film cuts to the footage from Kiarostami’s hand-held camera, showing the driver’s face from the profile. He answers Kiarostami’s question while trying to tune a local radio. The film once again cuts to the image of Kiarostami. He focuses his camera towards the driver’s hand as he tunes the radio. In the next shot, we see the driver’s hand in a close-up. Thus, cutting between Kiarostami’s images as he films the driver and the footages from his hand-held camera, several times back and forth unites Kiarostami’s onscreen body of Kiarostami with his point of view. Although, the point of view shot implies the presence of the owner of the gaze, the previous shot showing the Kiarostami’s body does more than implying, it shows the body of the owner of the gaze. Therefore, the presence of an embodied enunciator strengthens by an embodied gaze. In the following sequence, Kiarostami visits one of the UWESO (Uganda Women’s Effort to Save Orphans) group, strolls around, moves up and down concomitant to the people’s movements whom he films. He particularly focuses on different hands which note things on paper, touch the soil, or hold a baby. We realize that it is Kiarostami’s camera which films these people. His gaze overlaps with other gazes, and it is his hand which films others’ hands.

Kiarostami’s “embodied thought”’s once again expressed in a coming sequence where he and his friends walk around a market place. A group of children see him with the camera and go after him. They dance and chant to attract his attention. When Kiarostami turns his camera towards them, they point their fingers with

surprised looks on their faces, as if they were trying to understand what a camera is. Seeing the curious and cheerful urge of the children, Kiarostami bends towards the ground. A group of children gets behind the camera, sit next to the Kiarostami. He shows them the camera screen. Some children start to dance in front of the camera. We can see their excitement as they watch their friends, dancing just one step ahead of them, on a small screen in Kiarostami's hands. Then the camera cuts to the hand-held camera footage, showing dancing children in a close-up. Like the previous scene inside the car, the presence of the body holding the camera, and the camera's look coalesce. This time, thanks to the presence of the accompanying children, Kiarostami's and children's gazes meet with the gaze of dancing children. So, do ours.

When I revisited these two sequences, I had in mind Jean Luc Nancy's explanation of the etymological source of the word, film, "a small, thin skin" (ibid.). It implies a liveliness of animals'/humans' skin. The sensitivity of film to the light, which is the very materiality of cinema, emphasizes the similarity once again. When it comes to digital videos where receptiveness and the storage of the subject, is "matter-free," do we lose the liveness of the skin? Or do we face a more lively, receptive, and a permeable digital skin? King argues that apart from digital images which can act against "Cartesian dematerialization" "...the digital arts, broadly conceived, already implicitly contain a critique of that Cartesian dream." Relating this to the art of painting, she adds that "The gesture of the filmmaker is modestly analogized to grand gesture of the painter... This camera movement ceases to be a marker of liveness or urgency" (ibid.). Embracing King's emphasis on the significance of the embodied filmmaker in digital cinema, I take a step further to elaborate on the relation of the filmmaker and the filmic subject. I focus on the two sequences mentioned above in *A.B.C Africa* to question the liveness of digital video.

In particular, in the sequence of the marketplace, Kiarostami's gesture of bending towards the ground, being closer to children, addresses the question of Kiarostami's relation to himself and the subject of the film. Let us remember the

scene: Kiarostami walks around in the marketplace with his camera. A group of children who happily dance attracts his attention. He bends towards the ground. A group of children comes next to Kiarostami, while he shows the LCD display. Some children start to dance in front of the camera. A boy moves from Kiarostami's side to the front of the lens. It is this moment that captures the receptivity and the permeability of digital camera. The film subject quickly moves between behind the camera and in front of the camera. With the help of the LCD display, the subjects and their images become part of the same ecology. Seeing how the gaze of the other/ the director sees you whilst not losing your physical relationship with the owner of the gaze is quite miraculous. It indicates a permeability between the director's eye and the camera lens. Therefore, the filmmaker also gets a chance to become part of the same image ecology with the filmic event/subjects, not just with his onscreen body, but with his ability to share the off-screen with potential film subjects, in this case, a group of children.

In what follows, I wish to consider the permeability off-screen and onscreen space where Kiarostami and the children share alternately, in terms of the ethics of filming others' pain.

## **2.2. The Director is Dissolving, Bodies are Prevailing**

“[T]he standard modern Western philosophical ethics even now, in the early twenty-first century, is theologically driven,” says Heidi Ravven, “that deracinate mind from body, nature from spirit, will from desire, the individual from its history, and self from others” (Ravven 2009, p.125). However, the domination of modern Western philosophical ethics based on Cartesian principles have been challenged by numerous philosophers, including Benedict Spinoza, a conversos who lived in Amsterdam in 17th century and was “formally ostracized from the Jewish community, when he was only twenty-four years old, with the pronouncement of a particularly harsh cherem for his ‘monstrous deeds’ and

‘abominable heresies’” (Gatens 2009, p.3). The complicity of his “heretic” philosophy came to terms with his magnum opus *Ethics* that was posthumously published.

“Spinoza was able to envision ethics in thoroughgoing, different key- one that has recently been described as ‘outside the structures of dualism, transcendence, and representation’-because he was heir to an alternative and rival philosophical-theological tradition, namely, the Judeo-Islamic...The critique and the alternative to ethics that a turn... with the search for an embodied and situated kind of thinking, a non reductive materialist perspective that can overcome dualism.” (Ravven, 2009, p.136)

We can find the novelty of Spinoza’s embodied ethics against Judeo-Christian morality in the second book of *Ethics*, where he discusses “the Nature and Origin of the Mind”. Spinoza wrote, “The mind does not know itself except insofar as it perceives ideas of affections of the body” (E, II, Prop 23). Furthermore, he adds: “The human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing except through the ideas of affections of its own body” (E, II, Prop 26). So, the body, as well as the mind, is a sensitive and a receptive field that knowledge<sup>10</sup> of any kind is formed in. On this relation, Talay-Turner comments:

“The mind tries to maintain its integrity as a temporal and spatial being, but is also open to new relationships with other bodies that will leave marks on both the body and mind. In this sense, their struggle to express and create themselves in a whole where they are parts of the body blurs as much as it protects the boundaries between bodies.”(Talay-Turner 2017, p. 4)

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<sup>10</sup> See the second book of *Ethics* for elaborated discussion on different kinds of knowledge in Spinoza’s philosophy: inadequate, adequate and intuitive knowledge.

Therefore, in this interrelation of the body and the mind, self and the others, a new ethics prevails against Christian/Cartesian<sup>11</sup> doctrine that gives the “human as absolute mastery over the self and the world” (Ravven, 2009, p.129). While this mastery over the self and the others dissolves, we see an affective interconnectedness between different bodies. This interconnectedness does not override the presence of the self; at the same time, however, it emphasizes that our cohabitation with others occurs on the ground of an interdependent affective field. In this context, I suggest that, the self, the embodied thought in essay films bears a close relationship to the self in Spinoza’s philosophy of ethics. It manifests “whether social or physical, a body physics that both protects the boundaries of the body and blurs these boundaries” (Talay-Turner 2017, p.3).

The previous discussion on the use of the digital camera in *A.B.C. Africa* can be helpful to elaborate on this topic. First of all, let us consider the filmmaker’s onscreen appearance in the context of this discussion. Unlike classical documentary conventions that position the filmmaker as a “fly on the wall” to observe the filmic events objectively, Kiarostami is in the film just like the filmic subjects, in fact as one of them. We can see him while he records some scenes throughout the film; we can see the film maker’s hands and body. His presence continually reminds us of the filmmaking process. As Mathew Abbot notes, “his is a recording of a recording: a recording of the very fact that the world and the human beings in it appear” (Abbot, 2013).

Nevertheless, these appearances do not occur independently; they are not obvious appearances. They are appearances of the subjects that take shape in the frame of Kiarostami’s camera, as a result of the affective relationship of these bodies with Kiarostami’s body and mind. We observe this “embodied thought”/ “embodied affect” expressed in the reflexive movement of the Kiarostami’s body and his hand-held camera in the marketplace scene. The market is quite crowded. The

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<sup>11</sup> In the already cited article, Ravven argues that the modern Western/Cartesian philosophy of ethics is strongly tied up with Judeo-Christian theological understanding of free will.

children surround Kiarostami, looking at the strange device in his hand. They jump, dance, shout around him to attract his attention. Affected by this cheerful crowd, Kiarostami stops and bends towards the ground, adjusts his position to meet the children's gaze. Thus, children can observe the camera by moving from behind to in front of the lens or vice-versa. As I discussed earlier, the editing of the scene portrays the permeability between the director's eye and camera lens. Furthermore, Kiarostami's gesture to adjust his body to meet their gaze and what happens after reveals the permeable relationship of different bodies, in particular, that of the director's and film subjects'. Kiarostami does not have total control over the environment/ the filmic event. Children direct his attention to themselves. Furthermore, by deciding to dance in front of the camera, they join the production process of the film. They decide to dance, and he films and edits. It is a collaborative directorial effort in which the last word has been Kiarostami's in the editing table where he decides to add the scene; yet, however, the scene reveals the process of the last word; a lively editing table in which cutting and framing is visible, as well as the director.

As Alisa Lebow notes, "articulating an address in the first person emphatically does not imply an autonomous an autogenous 'speaking self,' as if the Cartesian subject had never undergone review" (2012, p.3) in essay films. A.B.C. Africa is such an example in which the "autonomous," "autogenous" director/self dissolves in the film, leaving its place to a body that has been affected continuously by different bodies while recording a film. He performs in a public domain where he "continually tests and undoes the limits of the self" (Corrigan, 2011, p.17), in particular his position as the filmmaker, through affective communication with other bodies.

Significant in this regard, is the question of how the specific use of cinematic tools accompanies this affective communication. In this case, it is the use of a hand-held digital video camera in the film. Considering it as a body, a technological body, we can infer that its' capacity is utilized in the film. It is significant in terms of emphasizing its digital, permeable, and lively skin. This

establishes an affective relationship between the filmmaker and his hand-held camera as if it were an extension of his hand. From this relation, a joint mobility develops, “a good encounter” in Spinoza’s words between the particles of Kiarostami’s hand and the particles of the hand-held camera. Furthermore, with its thin membrane-like structure, it realizes the transitivity between the filmmaker and filmic events/subjects.

Bearing in mind that these practices have taken place in an environment, full of bodies, who live under conditions affected by the trauma of civil war and the AIDS epidemics, we can safely assume that Kiarostami recorded the affect of this traumatic atmosphere on his body and mind. The film portrays an example of an “embodied” ethics of the director due to his act of being present with his body in the filmic image and the affective ecology of the film and working through these affections. Yet, he does not override his position as the perceiver of the traumatic bodies and places. This points to an important twist in terms of both protecting and blurring the boundaries of bodies at the same time. The use of the digital video camera in this case both help to build an embodied ethics that blurs the boundaries between the technological body and the filmmaker and the filmmaker and the filmic subjects and reminds its presence in a self-reflexive act. The body of the camera, the filmmaker, and the filming process are visible, emphasizing both the frame and framing. It is a film that thinks not only about the different aspects of a collective trauma but also reflects on its own position vis a vis the subjects in the film, and what it does with its material. The film thinks and reflects on itself. In this ethical mediation of making a film about a collective trauma, and an idea is born. Even in places where bodies are in dense affective communication, of the emotion of pain in particular, the boundaries should still be visible, even though they may be slightly worn and slightly displaced.

### **2.3. Zigzag Roads**

We often encounter the metaphor of roads, paths and directions that occupy a precise place in the writings of critics who argue for essayistic writing or filmmaking. Perhaps the most memorable one is Adorno's claim that: "in the essay, concepts do not build a continuum of operation, the thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thought depends on the density of this texture" (ibid. p.70). Adorno's idea of essayistic carpet implies how the arguments in an essay are built with multidirectional thought lines that avoid linearity. This discussion on the linear or the nonlinear, the fragmentary form can easily be pictured by discussions of editing in films. The conventional cinema prefers linear storylines that have a definite beginning and an end. The arc of events between this beginning and end are related to each other with cause and effect relationships. However, in essay films, this convention is eschewed by the filmmakers to increase "the density of the texture." *A.B.C. Africa*, with its discontinuous editing and juxtaposition of fragmentary parts, portrays a vivid example.

Those who are familiar with Kiarostami's oeuvre would easily remember the zigzag roads in his films. From *Where is My Friend Home* (1987), *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), *Taste of Cherry* (1997) to *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), characters of Kiarostami walk always on the zigzag roads to go somewhere. That somewhere is not always clear or accessible. Nevertheless, they keep walking on the roads. The beginning of *A.B.C Africa* is quite similar to these examples. A letter invites Kiarostami to Uganda to make a film about orphans. Then we see a shot from the plane window while it lands. Then Kiarostami and his friends walk on the streets of Uganda for location scouting. The beginning of the film strongly recalls Kiarostami's second film in Koker trilogy; *Life and Nothing More* (1992) in which a director goes after the boy who acted in his previous film (*Where is My Friend Home?*) after an earthquake has struck the northern region of Iran. Portraying the persona of Kiarostami, the man strolls around the devastated area to find the boy. What he observes are newborn babies or people who try to watch

the World Cup in the middle of devastated villages. Jean-Luc Nancy notes in this regard that “the film registers the earthquake: precisely not in its terrifying imaginary-which could be only one of the things: either a reconstitution of a catastrophe-film or a camera really present and toppling over in the general ruin and tearing of all images as well as of life” (Nancy, 2001, p.70).

We observe this coalescence of the catastrophe and the routine affairs of life in a compelling way, in the juxtaposition of scenes in *A.B.C Africa*, too. One example is from the editing of a sequence towards the middle of the film. At the beginning of this sequence, Kiarostami and his friends visit an AIDS clinic in Masaka at the center of the epidemics. With the use of mobile hand-held framing, variable shots come together to form what Mathew Abbot calls a scene that is “surreal and disturbing” (ibid.). Kiarostami enters the AIDS clinic; Catholic posters that promote abstinence are on the wall, while the sound of a crying child accompanies the scene. Then, we see a room where the sick children are either in bed, or on the mats on the floor, or on their mother’s laps. Then the camera stops at a skinny, sick boy in a bed, and we learn that the crying sound comes from him.

Although we feel like staying a bit longer to see the source of the sound when the image and the sound overlap, the film abruptly cuts to another room to show a nurse joking and laughing. The camera then enters another room where we see a nurse wrap a dead child’s body in a white sheet. Then she tries to cut a cardboard box to carry the body. When she finishes cutting off the box, she carries the body outside where a man waits with his bicycle. The man and the nurse place the body on the back of the bicycle. The man takes away the body, presumably for burial. The camera stops in front of the gate, yet does not get close to the bicycle. We watch the man and the body on the back from afar, while they get lost in the crowd. Then, the film cuts to a scene where a crowded group of children in yellow sing in the shade of a large tree. In the beginning, the rhythm of the song is slow, then it increases pace. The children start to dance and sing all together. Kiarostami joins them and dances with them. The atmosphere is soft and warm, like the yellow shirts of the children indicate.

This is what Abbot calls “surreal and disturbing” in the way that Kiarostami’s gaze captures a complex section of life in the clinic. However, for those who are familiar with how Kiarostami treats the relationship of life and death, the sequence can be disturbing but not surreal. Maybe it’s too real to be real which portrays the power of his particular perspective to the order of things. As Bergala states “Kiarostami is a true auteur with a genuine subject which is the question of arrangements. An arrangement occurs when two elements succeed in fitting together to become a stronger force” (Bergala, *Abbas Kiarostami: The Art of Living*, 2003).

In this case, Kiarostami edits two scenes: the AIDS clinic, and the children’s dance. In the clinic scene, we see the “dense texture” of essay films enabled by the essayistic act of possibilities that arise from the multidirectional movement that makes the rumination on the subject possible. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, in this act, the essence of Kiarostami’s cinema, as well as the cinema itself, is hidden; “after all, that is what cinema means: continuous movement, not representation animated with mobility, but mobility as essence of presence and presence as a coming, coming and passage” (ibid., p.66). Thus, Kiarostami is not a preconditioned subject with intentions as he walks in the AIDS clinic. He is only attentive to the bodies in the clinic: the baby greedily eats despite her sickness, the skinny boy who cannot raise his head from the pillow, mothers who worryingly hold their babies, nurses who laugh, children who cry, a child’s dead body being carried on the back of a bicycle. The nurse’s moments of joy and the traumatic presence of death are in flux, coexisting in the same space. I think, Kiarostami maintains this flux by editing the clinic scene with the dance of children. After the man leaves with the child’s dead body on the back of the bicycle, the film cuts to the group of children who sing and dance. The song sounds like a farewell song dedicated to the dead child. Kiarostami also participates in the children’s dancing and singing. It is a reminder of how life keeps going, not in spite of, but with the deaths and pain.

This is how life and the trauma of deaths enter into intricate yet complicated relations in *A.B.C Africa*. This relation marks an ethical stand in the film, as well as in Kiarostami's cinema. To put it in other words, the fact that life always points to death not as the antithesis of it, but as its innermost part. Kiarostami shows the complexity of traumatic areas that are constituted by flux of different affections and thought. In view of this, he refuses the way tragedies are represented by "tearing of images" until there are no other things than painful scenes. He shows people who are damaged by severe traumas, and places ridden with conflicts, yet life somehow keeps going. This may be why refusing the methods of conventional films about traumas may seem 'disturbing'; because, we are used to seeing coherent storylines with images, "toppling over in the general ruin and tearing of all images as well as of life" (ibid.). This is what Susan Sontag also calls an ethically paralyzing situation, facing "atrocities images" which enter our homes on a daily basis. The atrocity of the events is diminished, with images that are torn apart until they become digestible.

On the contrary, Kiarostami does not tear the images. He stands there in the middle of the complexity of the intertwinement of resistance of people and the trauma of death. It is disturbing for not allowing a cathartic spectacle for the viewers, and as an archive of atrocity images for the filmmaker. In this way, the traumas cannot be cast aside or put in a time bracket. The traumas covered by the film are like a brace that has opened but does not close; and life in Uganda continues in this open parenthesis. Abbas Kiarostami, on the other hand, tells only a segment of this ongoing situation. The quantitative and qualitative equivalent of this section is stated in the name of the film: a, b, c of Africa.

#### **2.4. At the Periphery of the Trauma**

My words

to myself

never seem quite finished.

(Abbas Kiarostami, *Walking with the Wind*, 236)

One of the most memorable scenes in *Close-Up* (1991) shows a rolling tin can in the shape of a cylinder. It rolls and rolls as the camera follows it like the apple in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), however, this time, it rolls in a shallow riverbed. They move and roll, with resonance to their nature. Nancy defines these moments in Kiarostami's cinema as identifier of a "kinematic truth," that "posits the truth of motion just as motion points to the truth of a thing whose shape prompts it to roll" (Nancy, 2001, p.28). He points at the bidirectional significance of the movements of things in point, referring both the imperativeness of movements as such due to shape of the things and values that these movements put on screen. This leads me to think about Kiarostami's movements in *A.B.C Africa*, the motion of strolling on the streets of Uganda. What does his motion say about the particular nature of filming the trauma in Uganda and what kind of ethics this motion engenders.

In one of these moments, Kiarostami meets a couple from Austria visiting Uganda to adopt a child. He accompanies them in a marketplace while they show the environment to their small baby. The couple takes some photographs to show her in the future to make her understand "where she came from and the culture of Uganda." Kiarostami asks a question to understand whether it is possible to comprehend the place and the culture in that way. They reply "it will show some part of it." After this scene, the film cuts to a montage sequence which shows different people on the streets of Kampala. There is a marketplace where people sell food, children run, and people dance. We see the close-up image of the adopted girl's eyes as if she were recording these moments to remember later.

The position of the adopted girl in that montage sequence resembles that of Kiarostami's. They both take segments from the events unfolding in this place, some photographs for her, and video recordings for him. When Kiarostami, the couple and their adopted girl board the same plane to leave Uganda, the girl wears a white shirt on which three letters inscribed: a, b and c. These three letters mark the quantitative and qualitative equivalent of the segments, setting the film's limits in terms of expressing the traumas in Uganda as far as the three letters, a, b and c goes. Furthermore, these letters also refer the fundamental blocks of the alphabet that the written language is built on. In that sense, the name of the film refers to both the limits of the representation and constitutes possible fundamental ground for the future representations. The fundamental ground (a,b,c of the situation) is where the trauma of death and plight of millions of orphans and the resilience of women and joy of children are located in the same place.

In this context, the metaphor of these three letters expresses Kiarostami's field of manoeuvre in response to the trauma in Uganda. His motion rotatively ruminates at the periphery of the trauma. In fact, the pain keeps the other at the periphery vis-à-vis the state of affairs. "Regarding the pain of others", he keeps at a just distance. He does not act as if it were possible to comprehend the totality of others' pain. Nor he turns a blind eye to it. I suggest that this approach proposes an ethical knowledge that is inscribed in this just distance. It is a just ethics, close enough to enter the same image ecology, share the front and the back of the camera with the subjects in the film, yet far enough to reflect upon his position, the different aspects of the situation and the limits of representing others' suffering. For that reason, Kiarostami does not despair in the face of traumatic events. Nor does he try to overcome them. Nor does he try to efface the continuation of daily affairs and joyful resilience of people in Uganda. Kiarostami is well aware that there are other letters in the alphabet, marking the far end of the open brackets of traumas. He designates a fundamental, yet a partial block that

can be utilized in other representations to express remained letters in the alphabet.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> At this point, it is timely to revisit aforementioned articulation of Jean Pierre Gorin with respect to the works of essay filmmakers as making a “termite art” that is “with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement.” In light of these, we can say that Kiarostami offers permeable, partial boundaries with respect to representation of trauma of epidemics in Uganda that will be eaten and turned to new visual imaginaries in other films on the same subject.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **CAMERAPERSON**

Kirsten Johnson has worked as a cinematographer in various films for the last twenty years. She has worked in conflict ridden regions, including in Darfur, Sudan during the genocide; Sarajevo in the aftermath of the civil war; Kano, Nigeria, struck by poverty and violence; Tahrir Square, where more than 900 people have been killed since 2011; Hotel Africa, one of the execution sites of the Liberian Civil War; Nyamata Church in Rwanda, where more than 10.000 Tutsis were massacred; Guantanamo Bay's Camp; Bibi Mahru Hill Swimming Pool in Kabul, later used for Taliban public executions. In addition to her job as a cinematographer, filming more than 200 interviews with Holocaust survivors for the Shoah Foundation has made her a witness to many peoples' pains.

While she was filming a documentary in Afghanistan, the film was called off after one of the subjects asked to be removed from the film. The film has come to an halt and she could not complete the film. After this, Johnson started to question the ethics of representing others, and in particular, those who are in precarious situations. She expresses her concern in one of the interviews, as follows:

“That project in Afghanistan really made me think about my blind spot in a way I never have before. I think of myself as this incredibly conscious person who thinks about ethics and representation but in fact I find that I'm not on the top of it all in this moment in Afghanistan. That was such a shock to my system that it really made me want to go back and revisit other situations and think about other situations. That's why I reached out to these different directors to look for evidence of what had happened, what was in the footage.” (Johnson, 2017)

The directors, including Laura Poitras, Michael Moore, Ted Braun, and many others, offered Johnson to share their archive with her. At about the same time, Johnson found out about her mother's diagnosis of Alzheimer. As Johnson was trying to come to terms with her memories, her mother's, Catherine's, memories were fading away. Then, she decided to make *Cameraperson* to remember memories that have faded away in time.

Johnson started to work on the images that did not make their way into the films before. I call them surplus images. These images include the sneeze of the cameraperson, discussions about the framing behind the scene, Johnson's and the director's conversations with a young woman in an abortion clinic on their experiences with unintended pregnancies, and the ethical dilemma of filming a boy playing with an ax in Foca, Bosnia. The ethical dilemma at this point lies at the heart of the decision of whether to intervene or continue rolling the camera. Work on these surplus images is a meditation on what has been left out of the frames; and, indeed, a meditation on frames themselves, the very core of the cinematic apparatus itself. It is a meditation that invites the viewer to think about the experience of filming atrocities, and their rearrangement. The film opens with Johnson's letter from Johnson to viewers signed by her handwriting:

“For the past 25 years I've worked as a documentary cinematographer. I originally shot the following for other films, but here I ask you to see it as my memoir. These are the images that have marked me and leave me wondering still.”

With Love, K.J

### **3.1. A Personal Camera that Can Breathe**

One of the key elements that defines essay films is the presence of the enunciator. “The inscription of the authorial figure can be very direct, for instance,

by making the filmmaker's body visible and his/her voice audible" (Rascaroli, 2008:38). In *A.B.C Africa*, Kiarostami's presence manifests itself with the hand-held camera. Likewise, Johnson intensifies the materiality of both her body and the body of the camera by continuously reminding the viewer of their presence, which operates on a very tender and an affective ground.

After the black screen with Johnson's letter on it, we see a shepherd and his sheep are pass. A woman's whispering voice accompanies the shot. When the gaze of the shepherd meets with the camera, the woman holding the camera greets the man: "Dobra!", and he greets back. Then the camera is raised from the ground and moves along with the shepherd. The camera shakes due to walking of the women and she says: "I want to walk with you for a bit." Then she starts to run. The shaky camera records the women's feet and the ground. After a while, she stands on the side road, places the camera on the ground and films the sheep's feet. The out of breath sound falls onto the sound of the running sheep. In the following scene, we see almost an empty highway in Nodaway County, Missouri. The sky is stormy. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning strikes. We hear a sound of gasps followed by sneezes (twice) as the name of the film appears on the screen: *Cameraperson*. Thus, the person's presence behind the camera is accompanied with her moving body and the sound of breathing and sneezes. The camera is held by a woman, Kirsten Johnson, who marks her presence in every frame with these small bodily gestures. It is the personal camera of Johnson who runs, breathes and sneezes.

Johnson's presence as cameraperson for previous films (director for this film) also points at the problematic of authorship in films. Johnson claims an authorship for images that she has filmed during her career. This position indicates an authorship that is different from the classical auteur theory's reservations of the directors as single-authors of films. In fact, Johnson's use of these footages in the film reveals the cinematographer's contribution to films.<sup>13</sup> This kind of relationality untangles

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<sup>13</sup> For a similar discussion see Philip Cowan's article, "Authorship and the Director of Photography: A Case Study of Gregg Toland and *Citizen Kane*." He criticizes attribution of the authorship to Orson Welles (the director) only, while

the rigid single-author position of director and replace it with a nets of relationality of different peoples during production of films. Johnson takes this relationality one step further (like Kiarostami in *ABC Africa*) by dismantling classical directorial position with her relation with film subjects in *Cameraperson*. Consequently, the film questions the personal voice of the director with respect to her relationships with other directors and film subjects.<sup>14</sup>

Alongside the enunciator's position and material presence, the opening of the film draws attention to the presence of the framing process. In one sequence, Johnson records Derrida and a group of his friends as they walk around Manhattan, New York. The man next to Derrida, says: "My theory is that Americans exist to the degree they are being filmed, or believe themselves to be filmed," and Derrida replies, laughing: "You see how Americanized I am now." As they pass across the street, Derrida helps Johnson, reminding her of the step: "Careful". He continues: "She sees everything around her, and she is totally blind," pointing at the step. "That is the image of the philosopher who falls in the well while looking at the stars." Derrida tells the story of philosopher Thales, making a reference to Johnson. Only two seconds later, Derrida shouts at Johnson to warn her of a car approaching her from behind. The scene is followed by a montage sequence in which Johnson walks behind or next to different people in different places and times. The montage sequence ends with a moment where Johnson walks backwards, filming a cartoonist from *The New Yorker*. He shouts out her too: "Watch Out!" and we hear the sound of a bump. The film fades to black, recalling

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the film's cinematographers Gregg Toland has an important contribution to visual imaginary of the film.

<sup>14</sup> It is outside of the scope of this study, but the *Cameraperson* can be a case limit for the authorship in classical sense. The relationality of the author's personal voice (cinematographer-director, director-film subjects) can open a ground for discussions around a new understanding of authorship. In that sense, the position of the self in essay/ essay films can be reconsidered with respect to this point. This can point at a remarkable break from classical understanding of the self in essay film (like Montaigne's emphasis on 'I').

the story of the Thales who fell into a black well, a scene cited by Derrida earlier on.

Thus, the film reminds us of the materiality of the director and the camera; indeed, the framing process by an individual and her naturally limited gaze. Johnson works with the images that remain from the previous frames, the surplus images as I call them. They widen the scope of the frame. Yet, the focus on what is left behind does not imply a comprehensive look. Whatever direction one looks, one still looks from a frame. The frame can overlook its borders by eschewing its presence. Or, as in this case, it can show its materiality by confronting us with the least perfect moments of the process of framing, such as falling to the ground after bumping at a column. This imperfect moment leads me to think, not just about the materiality of the body and the cinematic apparatus but also about the structure of the material of bodies at stake. What kinds of bodies do we talk about when we consider an embodied ethics?

### **3.2. Do Not Take Me For Granite<sup>15</sup>**

Kirsten Johnson's letter on the black screen in the opening sequence of the film indicates a vulnerability which her words imply too: "these are the images that have marked me and leave me wondering still" (Johnson, *Cameraperson*, 2016). Put into words, the indexing of the places and the situations that Johnson has been in the last quarter of a century is tremendous in volume. At this point, Johnson's question makes perfect sense: "Where do all images go inside us?" (Johnson, 2017) It is hard to pin an exact place in our hearts for the "atrocious images". It is yet certain that in portraying such images in film; the self should be receptive and vulnerable to live with the ghosts of these memories. In this context, Johnson's breathing camera is the ground on which we can discuss how the role of the self/the director operates in the context of the essay film making process

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<sup>15</sup> I am borrowing from Ursula K. Le Guin's essay "Being Taken For Granite."

and this film in particular. The role of the self has to do with one's vulnerability, the capacity to "be marked."

In her essay, "Being Taken For Granite," Ursula K. Le Guin writes about the two modes of self-being: granite vs. mud. Granite persons are those who are not affected by the others. They are characters of "stone, upright, immovable, unchangeable, opinions the general size shape and pliability of the Rocky Mountains" (2013: 21). On the contrary, considering herself like mud, Le Guin writes:

"Being mud is really different from being granite and should be treated differently. Mud lies around being wet and heavy and oozy and generative. Mud is underfoot. People make footprints in mud. As mud I accept feet. I accept weight." (Le Guin, 2013).

In the light of Le Guin's articulation of different materials of the self, it is timely to revisit Spinoza's account of an "embodied ethics." In the preface of the third book of *Ethics*, Spinoza writes about the flow of the Cartesian idea about human beings and their total control of the order of nature:

"Most of those who have written about the affects and human conduct seem to be dealing not with natural phenomena that follow the common laws of Nature but with phenomena outside Nature. They appear to go so far as to conceive man in Nature as a kingdom within Kingdom. They believe that he disturbs rather than follows Nature's order, and has absolute power over his actions, and is determined by no other source than himself." (E, III, Preface: 277)

The self of the Cartesian idea is akin to what Le Guin describes as granite. S/he stands in the nature, thinking that s/he does not follow the order of nature. Her/his so called determined structure is blind to the affects of the order of things on

itself. However, the self of Spinoza, similar to what Le Guin describes as mud person, indicates a self that is inevitably open to the order of the things. S/he affects and is affected by other bodies. In that sense, people are marked (like how they “make footprints in mud”) by others in their affective communication.

Thereby, the way in which Le Guin refers to the material of the body reminds us of the bodies in Spinoza’s “embodied ethics.” When she speaks of herself as being mud, she also implies that we should not take her for granite.<sup>16</sup> The body as mud is receptive. It accepts and allows for continuous metamorphosis. And it does not make the mistake of being blind to the affect of the order of things on itself.

In the context of the material of the self, Johnson’s embodied presence in the film is like mud. She, too, “accepts the feet,” “accepts the weight.” Johnson is marked by specific moments during process of recording different films. Although the whole film can be considered as the statement of the condition of the director’s capacity to be marked, in some sequences, being vulnerable is a quality which underlies the situation at stake. One such situation is in a maternity clinic in Kano, Nigeria. We see a room with a couple of nurses who help a woman to give birth. When the baby is finally born, they realize that s/he cannot breathe. A nurse immediately takes the baby with her and gets out of the room. Johnson follows her in panic, calling to one of the crew members, “Can I get another battery?” She enters the room right after the nurse. She waits and rolls the camera while the nurse tries to bring the baby back to life. After a while, the baby starts crying, and Johnson’s camera gets close to his face. We hear Johnson’s voice, almost ready-to-cry: “Oh God. He is breathing. I am so happy.”

A similar situation occurs in a scene in Afghanistan. Johnson talks with a boy who has lost one of his eyes in a bomb attack in Kabul. He talks to Johnson about his memories of the explosion and tells about his brother’s death in the same bomb

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<sup>16</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin makes a pun of the idiom, “do not take me for granted.” Thus, she questions availability of someone to serve in same way with an emphasis on changes, formations in a person. She writes how the changing nature of the selfhood eliminates the possibility of taking a person for granted.

attack in Dari. The tears run down from his eyes. He cannot answer Johnson's following question. She does not force him. They wait in silence. Then Johnson talks and cries at the same time: "You made me cry though I did not understand any word."

Both sequences end in a similar way, by depicting Johnson's presence behind the camera and uttering her emotions about the filmic events. She cries, either from happiness or sadness. Her last sentences at the end of the sequences seem to indicate what Johnson meant when she said: "the images that have marked me and leave me wondering still." She accepts the joy of life that is revealed in the struggle of a newborn baby to breathe. At the same time, however, she accepts the weight of the world, in the tone of the Afghan boy's voice. Her tears show how images leave a mark on her. A receptive, vulnerable, "oozy," muddy body creates a permeable surface between the self and the others. "That is why the house is all dirty and tracked up," (ibid. p.22) writes Le Guin. That is also why Cameraperson is all tracked up by images that left Johnson wondering still.

### **3.3. A Permeable Frame**

As mentioned above, the body of the filmmaker is receptive like mud. The body of the breathing camera in her hands is reminiscent of a similar material. One can analyze how the act of including surplus images makes the frame of the camera permeable. Likewise, one can also analyze the changes brought about to the images of suffering by this minute attention.

Elsaesser and Hagener, in their book, *The Film Theory: an introduction through senses*, discuss the first ontological metaphor to analyze "cinema as window and frame." They state that there has been an irresistible controversy between these two metaphors within the film theory; "the frame corresponded to film theories called formalist or constructivist, while the model of the window held sway in realist film theories" (2009, p.15). "The notion of the window implies that one

loses sight of the framing rectangle as it denotes transparency, while the frame highlights the content of the (opaque) surface and its constructed nature, effectively implying composition and artificiality” (ibid, p.14). Inspired by Umberto Eco, Leo Braudy presents another opposition corresponding to this paradigm; open films of windows and closed films of frames. “‘Closed’ refers to films in which the universe depicted in the film (it’s diegesis) closes in upon itself... have its predetermined place following the dictates of some invisible, but omnipresent hand or elaborate master plan.” On the contrary, “open films offer a segment, a snapshot, or a fragment from a constantly flowing and evolving reality” (2009, p. 16 cited by Elsaesser & Hagener).

One question which may serve to solve this opposition might be, how we can create narratives and narrations without falling into the misconception of conveying the reality as it is, but at the same time, by being open to possibilities, lifting the restrictions imposed by the master plans of omnipresent hands. Cameraperson gives a worthy response to this opposition, marking a change in the material of the frame. The frames will not be made of solid materials such as gold, plastic, or granite, but will be made of mud in the film.

This indicates the way in which the film works on the images that did not make their way to the films before. This ensures that the moments that could not pass through solid frames before get a chance to be on screen. The result is a shift in the regime of images of atrocities in solid frames, which is Sontag claims that the familiar visual regime is based on “the ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image—of an agony, of ruin” (Sontag 2004, p.25). A permeable and a receptive frame like mud does not only change the structure of the frame but also makes it permeable to the not so familiar and non-celebrated images. Thus, it changes the representation of the images of suffering.

One of the moments which highlights this aesthetic choice takes place in the abortion clinic. As the film progresses, it turns into a frequently applied motif. In the scene, a young woman talks about her unintended pregnancy and her need for

an abortion. The camera only shows her hands plucking lines of her jeans anxiously. The sound of the fabric torn apart in distressed hands accompanies the shot as she tells her story and cries. Johnson repeats this formal choice in a scene where she talks with of one Muslim woman who was raped during the Bosnian War. Once again Johnson only shows her hands while she talks about her memories. Narrating the stories of mass rape, her hands and voice shake from time to time. These details would ordinarily escape our attention in a medium or a long shot which probably would focus on the woman's crying face. Johnson blocks our accustomed vision of seeing the pain in peoples' faces. The film subverts cinema's focus on the facial expression as displaying innermost emotions. It focuses on hands. Thus, the women's hands convey and remind their pain.

This formal aspect of the film is further highlighted in a montage sequence halfway through the film. At the very beginning of the film, we see a white house in Foca, Bosnia. The house has a crack where the wall meets with the ground. Flowers cover the foreground of the frame. That is probably why the frame leaves a positive impression on the audience by restoring the feeling of the crack. When the film shows the previous shot of the same house once again, a title appears on the screen, written "Karaman's House: rape and enslavement site during the Bosnian War." The story of this white house creates an effect to the point of shocking the audiences. The next shots create a similar effect by editing tranquil images with information titles. The sports hall where we see a group of children play ping-pong on a sunny day turns out to be the "location of the imprisonment and mass rape of Witness 99 and other Muslim women and girls, The Partizan Hall." The next shot shows a concrete ground cracked by growing grasses, which was the site of the Aladza Mosque, destroyed during the Bosnian War. The other shot follows with the image of an old building with the "motel" sign. Like the previous scenes, a title follows the image: "Motel Milejevina: headquarters for Serb soldiers orchestrating mass rape." In the next scene, we are inside a car. The camera shows the steering wheel, then cuts to the gas pedal. Then, the title

appears, written “Shawn Allen Berry’s Pickup Truck: used to drag James Byrd Jr. to his death,” the crime device that was used for the killing of a black man by a group of whites in Texas. Then the film cuts to a field of sunflowers in the sunset. Contrary to our expectations that warm sunlight and sunflowers swinging in the wind will save us from overwhelmed emotions caused by the previous shots, another title appears: “Wounded Knee: site of the massacre of hundreds of Sioux men, women and children.”

Wounded Knee. It implies a scabbed wound. Yet the wound is still there under the scab. It only needs a moment of contemplation to see the wounds under this beautiful sunflower field or under any other places, to see the bodies that have scars. Georges Didi-Huberman comments on the significance of a careful look at the site of violence, in his case, Auschwitz-Birkenau:

“So, we can never say this: There is nothing to see, nothing to see. In order to doubt what we see, we still need to know how to see, despite everything. Despite the destruction, despite everything being erased... We need to know how to look through an archaeologist's eye. And here is such a look, thanks to such an inquiry, things begin to look at us from their hidden places and past.” (2018: 60)

Revisiting her memories of wounded bodies 20 years later, Johnson develops a way to view others’ pain. She dismisses the images that contain graphic violence which are “ultra-familiar, and “ultra-celebrated.” Instead, she directs her gaze to details that have been cast aside. Just like Johnson’s receptive, vulnerable, “oozy,” muddy body creates a permeable surface between the self and the others, her “oozy”, muddy, receptive frames provide the space for these micro moments that convey pain, suffering and grief.

### **3.4. Navigating Through Memories**

As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the simplest motive behind making *Cameraperson* is Johnson's will to revisit her memories after her film was called off due to one subject's wish to be removed from the film. I mentioned earlier that Johnson started to question the ethics of representation, and in particular, of those who are in precarious situations. Working as a cinematographer more than 20 years, there is a wide time span to cover. Yet, Johnson does not reconstruct this temporal coverage on the assumption of a total comprehension of the past with a chronological and linear line of consideration. The film consists of a non-chronological juxtaposition of forty-four distinct episodes gathered for twenty-four different film projects. This episodic editing mimics Johnson's existence between different places and times for twenty years. Moreover, it marks the film's essayistic approach of nonlinear, multi directional thinking. In that sense, episodic editing creates a permeability in the film with respect to the fluid interrelations between episodes.

Siegfried Kracauer argues that episodic narrations are the most suitable to cinema due to their ability to build fluid interrelations between different episodes. Permeability is a precondition to implement this method. "The more permeable it is to the flow of the life it is born from within an episode, the more appropriate it is. That is, its cinematic quality changes in direct proportion to the degree of permeability; Every increase in transmittance equally increases the inflow of camera reality" (2015, p. 461). Alongside the permeability of camera, a loose composition to provide the transmission between episodes is also needed. "They do not apply pre-established story patterns, otherwise there would be no gaps between them. The story they tell is immanent in how they follow each other" (ibid. p.462).

In the structure of the episodic films in *Cameraperson*, we see the two kinds of permeability addressed by Kracauer. The flow of the minimal moments occupies a place on the screen via the permeable frame of the camera. At the same time, the editing which is freed from the linear, "pre-established story patterns" provides an inter-episodic movement. This movement can be considered under two categories

in the film. One is by applying graphic matches between two following fragments; such as the transition from women's hands cutting trees in the desert in Darfur to a woman's hands kneading dough in Foca, Bosnia. Thus, a trans-geographical, trans-temporal dialogue occurs between these moments which represent the women's efforts to sustain the continuity of life, despite all the suffering they experience.

Another flow between the episodes indicates a distant oscillating movement. One is particularly important. It is a scene from the very beginning of the film which was left unfinished. Johnson turns back to that scene, almost towards the end of the film. Revisiting the scene not only reflects Johnson's main motive which is revisiting her own memories of filming, but also offers an important take on Johnson's ethics of filming the suffering of others.

The transition in question starts with a scene in a courtroom in Jaspers, Texas which also serves as the film's entry point to stories of traumas. We see two men carry some cases and signboards to the empty courtroom. The film cuts to Guy James Gray, Jasper County District Attorney, who sits on a table in the courtroom. An off-screen voice asks the attorney, "Can you take us through these items and tell us what they are?" The attorney gets up from the table, clears his throat while the camera slowly pans over some shattered, dirty pieces of clothes. These are the clothes of James Byrd, a black American man, who was killed by a group of white men. They drag him behind a car. Acknowledging that these items do not have evidentiary value, the attorney shuffles the pages of a black booklet, titled James Byrd, Jr., made up of 13 pictures to establish specific evidentiary points for the court. Then the same voice-off asks whether he can describe some of the pictures in the booklet. The brutality of the event unfolds. He starts to describe some photos that prove James Byrd was dragged while he was still alive. As the attorney's description of the photos becomes hard to bear, he stops describing and explains why they made these booklets. "We gave each juror a copy of this booklet, and that eliminated the need to show the pictures on a screen or showing'em in the court. That creates a whole lot of extra emotion. We had all the

emotion we needed in this case.” Then the camera cuts to the black book’s cover. The book is closed, yet some things flop out due to the attorney’s description. Does this coda of the episode symbolize the ethical border we should stand, or the curiosity for the photos inside of the booklet?

The scene/case does not close with a ready-made answer. After showing different episodes about traumas in different places in the world, the film shows a meeting in the Bronx, New York. Charif Kiwan, the spokesperson of the Syrian film collective, is talking about the recent refugee crisis and its representation on media. He says: “If on the street you see a dead man, you cover his face, right? Why have we to look injured and dead people on the media? Because that attract people and it is good for advertisement. It is good for ads.” Then an audience raises a question about the photograph of Alan Kurdi, a little Syrian boy whose dead body washed the Aegean ashore in Turkey. Kiwan answers that “When you focus on death, you say ‘It has done. It is finished.’ There is nothing, voyeurism, except watch and ‘Wow!’ So here is the main problem for us. We have to find a way to represent horror, to represent death, respecting the golden rule ‘dignity’.”

After Kiwan’s remarks, the film cuts to the courtroom in Texas again. The sequence opens with where we left, from the booklet’s black cover. The voice-off asks the attorney, “Is there anything in that you would show us?” He hesitates and adds, “I would need to talk to the Byrd family, but if they permit me, I will release something on ankles.” Then he drops the booklet in a case and asks, “what else do you want to talk about?” The film crew wants to go on some shreds of evidence, then decide to film a long chain in a case. Addressing two men behind the attorney, the voice-off asks, “can you guys pull it and show it to us?” Then two men pull the chain and exhibit it by holding both ends. The camera focuses on the chain in the first man’s hand and follows it to the other end. One of the men asks, “Enough?” Johnson answers, “Yeah.” They put the chain to its place. The sound of the chain’s crash echoes in the room.

What does it mean to revisit the courtroom in Texas once again right after Charif Kiwan's important warning about respecting the dignity of the dead? Although they did not reveal the photographs, they still provided a description. Did the first episode violate James Byrd's dignity by crossing the borders through this detailed description? Does the second turn cut its tie from the photographs and focus on the chain to symbolize the brutalities of atrocity as a correction of an error? Does the insistence on not showing the inside of the booklet remind us of the ethical border that the film should respect and so we do?

From that moment in Afghanistan when her film was called off, Johnson has meditated on the cores of these questions. She continued to do so during the filming process of *Cameraperson*, trying to find out "way to represent horror, to represent death, respecting the golden rule "dignity" in Kiwan's words. Her way is to put her vulnerable, receptive, and muddy body in the same image ecology with others to create a permeable membrane between her, her camera, and others. This permeable membrane does not allow the transition of graphic violence; so, she tries to find new images and sounds to represent death, pain, and grief.

Her position calls for an ethics of vulnerability which is rooted in the situated questioning of every specific moment that concerns the ethics of filming those in precarious situations. The interstices in the storyline disrupt a linear temporal thinking which leads forward and progress smoothly. On the contrary, these interstices provide vulnerability and receptivity for a continuous rumination on the subject. Significant in this regard, Johnson does not have ready-made answers or a list of ethical rules to follow. Still she adopts an ethical stance by going back in time to moments of filming others' pain, revisiting and questioning herself and her act of filming. The questions leave a mark on her body. This caused her to meditate on ethics of filming horror and deaths. The starting point of this ethics may have been with the act of covering the face of the dead.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PEARL BUTTON

Recordar: To remember; from the Latin records, to pass back through the heart.

(Eduardo Hughes Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*)

Patricio Guzmán's first film, *The Battle of Chile* (1975, 1976, 1979), a three-part documentary, recorded the chronicle of how the dictator, Augusto Pinochet seized power in 1973 and dismantled the "Chilean road to socialism" program implemented by Salvador Allende government. The first part of the documentary opens with the burning of the presidential palace in Santiago on the day of the coup. We see the smoke mounting through the façades of the building, "the perfect metaphor for Pinochet's termination of a century and a half of almost continuous Chilean democracy" (Beckett, 2002). This moment is the gravity center for the following parts of the documentary, as well as for Guzmán's oeuvre. Guzman has dealt with the violent demolition of Allende's dream by Pinochet's junta regime throughout his career. The image of the burning of the presidential palace on the day of coup is emblematic. In the sense that it symbolizes the end of dreams of a "socialist Chile" and the beginning of a violent era.

After a period of imprisonment during the coup, Guzman lived in exile, where he completed *The Battle of Chile*. After having finished the film, Guzman has entered a long period of depression which almost lasted for ten years. He did not make any other films at that time. He describes this period as follows: "the body somehow stays still, as if had been frozen, and then gradually you wake up again" (Guzman, 2012). After this period, his first film project was another documentary *Chile, Obstinate Memory* (1997). Similar to *The Battle of Chile*, the film's

opening sequence portrays the bombardment of the presidential palace on the day of the coup. From this moment onwards, metaphorically speaking, Guzman frozen body has started to defrost, and his memories awaken.

*Chile, Obstinate Memory* depicts Guzman's return to Chile, Santiago, for the first time after the Pinochet dictatorship. During his visit, Guzman realizes that the oppression of the dictatorship has created a state of amnesia in which the recent past is either unknown or reconstructed as a victory of economic development, a victory over communism. Nevertheless, there are people like Guzman in Chile who have shared Allende's dream and remember its violent demolition by the coup; the imprisonment, the "disappearance," and the murder of their beloved ones. Although many of them are mute about their feelings and thoughts, one can sense sadness and disappointment in their eyes when Guzman show them pieces from *The Battle of Chile* (which had never been screened in Chile until 2004), scenes of enthusiastic crowds on streets, Allende's political rallies, people shot on streets and people without graves.

After watching these scenes, Ernesto Malbon, an interviewee in the film, articulates his feelings in the following way: "'to remember,' means 'volver a pasar por el corazon,' 'to pass again through the heart,' to prick it even." Impunity for state crimes prevents the healing process of the victims' families, especially the relatives of the 'disappeared' ones. Each time the past is remembered, peoples' hearts are pricked over and over. As Guzman says in one of his interviews, "I am convinced that memory has a gravitational force. It is constantly attracting us." For Guzman, this gravitation is centered around the state of affairs in Chile, marked by the steel fist of the Pinochet junta. Therefore, his films revolve around this gravity center, yet each film follows different paths.

Probably the most profound change in his method of filmmaking can be observed in his trilogy about Chile's past; *Nostalgia For The Light* (2010), *The Pearl*

*Button* (2015), and *The Cordirella of Dreams*<sup>17</sup>(2019). The cinema verité style of his previous documentaries is replaced by a poetic, an essayistic mode in which the metaphysical, astronomical, spiritual, ethnographic and political aspects are brought together to create an affective constellation. The last image of *The Battle of Chile*, the vast landscape of Atacama Desert, is now the site of the astronomers in *Nostalgia For The Light*. It is where they look for the secrets of the universe. Yet, the desert is also the place where women search for their loved ones who were killed during Pinochet's dictatorship, many of whom are buried in the desert. *Nostalgia For The Light* is an audiovisual essay, a poem which narrates the memory of violence through minimal yet determined movements of women's shovels. They dig the Atacama to find their relatives' bones. It also narrates the story of astronomers who turn their gaze to the sky with the help of huge telescopes.

Guzman maintains the essayistic mode and "heteroscalarity" that "attends at once to macroscopic-or rather: telescopic- and to the microscopic; it is both stellar and terrestrial" (Radisoglou 2019: 197) in *The Pearl Button* (2015) too, focusing on different bodies, ranging from the water drops to the Pacific Ocean. Yet, this time he applies the method of heteroscalarity to the concept of time, too. He extends his perspective to conceive of the past of this landscape to the times when it was colonized by the white settlers and the Patagonian indigenous people were killed. He explains the motive behind his decision as follows: "I was in the north of Chile finishing *Nostalgia for the Light* and I asked myself if the same thing is happening in another part of Chile where the native peoples had died and where also stories of disappeared people." (Guzman, 2016) So, as Guzman progresses through the layers of the time and the landscape, the sounds he hears increase in frequency. As

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<sup>17</sup> The date refers to the release date of the film in France. Because the film has not come to the cinemas in Turkey, I do not see the last film of the trilogy. My analysis and comments are based on the first two films of the trilogy.

he films, he creates a symphony, conveying the voices of pain<sup>18</sup> coming out of different subjects.

#### 4.1. Landscape and Absence

The first doctrine of sacred texts: “thou shalt not kill” is also the most basic ethical principle on which the judicial rules of secular systems are based on. The relatively long human history has shown that this ethical principle has not been applied in practice. However, this principle has paved the way to another ethical principle to be followed after death; that is, the dead must be buried.<sup>19</sup> The humanity has learnt this principle long ago from the Antigone<sup>20</sup> of Sophocles. Antigone objects to Kreon’s edict that her brother (who has fought against the Kingdom, Thebes) should not be buried. Kreon accuses Antigone for opposing the law:

“Antigone: well if you call that law

Kreon: I do

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<sup>18</sup> I want to thank you Prof. Veysi Tamer Kondu for this phrase. A couple of years ago, we had a talk about Svetlana Aleksiyeviç’s *Chernobyl Prayer* (2016). He used the phrase to express Aleksiyeviç’s methods of bringing voices from Chernobyl after the nuclear catastrophe. It pricked me. And it made me a more careful listener.

<sup>19</sup> Although every culture does not burials, they have ceremonies for dignity for the dead and mourning process for those remained.

<sup>20</sup> For Sophocles’ Antigone, I used the recent translation by Anne Carson, “Antigonick.” In the introduction, she writes a poem about the tragedy in which she addresses Antigone: “dear Antigone: you also are someone keeping faith/ with a deeply other organization that lies just beneath what we see/or what we say/to quote Kreon you are *autonomous*/ a word made up of *autos* “self” and *nomos* “law” ...” (p.6)

Antigone: Zeus does not/ Justice does not/ the dead do not/ what they call *law*<sup>21</sup> did not begin today or yesterday/ when they say law they do not mean a statue of today or/yesterday/ they mean the unwritten unfailing eternal ordinances of/ the gods/ that no human being can ever outrun/ of course I will die/ Kreon or no Kreon/ and death is fine/ this has no pain/ to leave my mother's son lying out there unburied that/ would be pain." (Sophokles 2015: 20, trans. Anne Carson)

Antigone designates the law of all law; the right to bury beloved ones to dignify the dead and to give the chance who are left behind to mourn and heal. What happens to those who are left behind when their beloved ones "disappear" and be deprived of the dignity of a burial and a grave? Many people in the past half-century have been experienced this situation during military junta regimes in different geographies, including Turkey, Argentina, and Chile. Taking the issue of forced disappearance in Argentina as a reference point, Estela Schindel and Pamela Colombo pose some questions in *Space and the Memories of Violence*, about the relationship of space and memory in the nexus of state violence, "disappearances," absence and impunity:

"A series of questions related to this specific form of violence concerned us then. How is a repressive method aimed at erasing all traces of the crime to be located and re-inscribed in space? Why does a crime that leaves no apparent material residue still reconfigure the social production and practice of space? How does it haunt places and individuals subsequently? " (Schindel & Colombo 2014: 8-9)

Both *Nostalgia For The Light* and *The Pearl Button* revolve around similar questions about the effect of violence in the landscape of Chile that experienced a similar fate with Argentina. Thousands of people were killed, and their bodies

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<sup>21</sup>Emphasis belongs to the translator.

were buried in the vast Atacama Desert and the Pacific Ocean during Pinochet's dictatorship. The regime tried to erase the traces of its crime by dispersing the "material residues" to vast landscapes. In that sense, the landscape reminds of the graveless victims of the state violence.

That was Antigone's point when she defended the right of burial, risking her death. The pain that would override all other pains would be when a "mother's son lying out there unburied that/ would be pain," she says. Guzman, in a similar affective ground, looks for traces of the violence in the vast landscape from the deserts to the oceans. In this context, the aesthetic and thematic occupations of *The Pearl Button* (and *Nostalgia For The Light*) have been interpreted in the light of the notion of "planetary turn" <sup>22</sup>(Grønstad 2016; Guynn 2016; Radisoglou 2019). It is an approach that attuned "the differentiated histories of human (and non-human) life in the long durée" (Friedman 2015, 4 cited in Radisoglou). Guzman applies this approach to engage with the traumatic past of Chile with respect to represent the violence that different subjectivities have witnessed. In this sense, he uses a "planetary lens" (Radisoglou 2019, p.196) that focuses on a wide range of subjects from different human communities to water.

#### **4.2. The Sounds of Earth/ The Listening Capacity**

The Pearl Button opens with a close-up shot of an ancient chunk of quartz (3.000 years old) in which a drop of water is sealed. The camera cuts to an extreme close up to the quartz, the sound of the water drop's moves constitutes the soundtrack. A couple of seconds later, we hear Guzman's poetic voice-over. After providing brief information about the quartz and the water in different

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<sup>22</sup> The planetary turn is also associated with the discussion of ecocinema. As an example see *Transnational Ecocinema: Film Culture in an Era of Ecological Transformation*, eds. Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kaapa, 2013.

bodies on the planet (from stars to nebulas to human bodies), he delivers his perspective on this subject. He says, “As I watched the stars, I was drawn to the importance of water. It seems that water came from outer space, and the life was brought to earth by the comets, that shaped the seas.” Guzman starts with an observation of the sky and stars. Then an image of the sky gives Guzman an idea, which makes him drawn into another idea, the importance of water.

A brief emphasis on the verb ‘drawn to’ is essential in two ways. Firstly, it unfolds one of the main aspects of the essay/essay films, the role of the self/the filmmaker. In this particular example, it indicates the flow of ideas within the self. This aspect manifests itself in the editing juxtaposes scenes that symbolize a stream of Guzman’s consciousness. This editing avoids a linear causal line. Moreover, this flow, the condition of being “drawn to” indicates a degree of openness to affection from different subjects that undoes the conventional omniscient, voice-over in the film. Guzman's voice is not an authoritarian voice which knows everything in advance. On the contrary, it is a voice that opens up space for other sounds and gives them opportunity to them to be heard. So, Guzman’s commentary position is the position of a subject who talks as well as listens. In terms of the dialogue between the filmmaker and the subjects, this film shares a similarity with the other films in this thesis, Guzman, the director, is also one of the subjects in the film. However, the originality of Guzman's position derives from his capacity to listen to different voices.

The first subject in this polyphony is water. We see water and we hear the sound of water at the very beginning of the film. Let us remember the opening of the film once again. The film opens with a close-up of a chunk of quartz in which a drop of water is sealed. The sound of the water flow accompanies the shot. The camera cuts to an extreme close up to the icy surface of the quartz; its image covers the screen. The volume of the sound fills our ears. While Guzman gives information about water and talks about his ideas, we see the images of different bodies which consist of water. We also hear their sound. The sound of water drops of different sizes hit the surfaces, the sound of the rain touches the copper roof,

the sounds of glaciers' movements, melting and breaking, form the set-up of the film.

Accompanying these images and sounds, Guzman, discusses the subjectivity of water, a rather critical idea. While he explains that all the bodies on the planet are made up of water, he says, "water is essential for the life to exist." Considering the focus on water at the beginning of the film, we can infer that water is not just a tool to sustain lives; water is a subject itself. Therefore, Guzman undoes the cinema's focus on human subjects or the cinematic convention of representing other subjects through an anthropomorphic lens. In doing so, he makes an essential ethical choice. Guzman opposes the idea that the different subjects in the films serve to narrate the stories of humans only. Alternatively, seen in the light of Spinoza's ethics, Guzman does not make the mistake of "widespread misconception" (Spinoza, p. 239) that most people make. In the appendix of the first book of *Ethics*, Spinoza explains this delusion as, "men always act with an end in view, to wit, the advantage they seek" (p. 239). Furthermore, he exemplifies the condition as such:

"Since they find within themselves and outside themselves a considerable number of means very convenient for their pursuit of their own advantage- as, for instance, eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, cereals and living creatures for food, the sun for giving light, the sea for breeding fish- the result is that they look on all things of Nature as means their own advantage." (p.239)

But in contrast to this erroneous view, Spinoza states in the third book of *Ethics* in proposition 6, "each thing, insofar as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being." (p.283) This order, where everything tries to maintain its existence, is the order of encounters between different bodies. The involvement is sustained by the interaction of the simplest bodies (because "an individual thing composed of the simplest bodies" (p. 254)) within different bodies.

In this context, we may consider the interaction, the communication between different bodies in the film over the particulars of the water in the bodies. The film presents an example of the encounters and the interaction of beings that have certain amounts of water in their bodies. In this sense, the film indicates that subjects touch each other with the water particles in them. When Guzman says, "water is an intermediary between cosmos and us," I think he means a community rather than a means of communication that does not participate in interpersonal dialogue. It is the idea of a community that does not deny the alterity of the other. This idea manifests itself in the film by casting aside the conventional cinematic experience of hearing focused on the human voice only, and focused particularly on language. It represents water as a subject to be heard. In this way, our capacity of listening which is stuck with human voice only, is bent, twisted, and becomes sensitive to other voices.

With the expansion of our listening capacity that can hear the voice of water, it is no coincidence that the film passes on to the stories of the long-ignored genocide of the Patagonian indigenous, a genocide mostly unheard of. Patagonians are the water nomads who lived on the islands on the south of Chile. They have roamed the Pacific Ocean with handmade canoes, have accepted everything that came from water, and have established harmony with water. In Guzman's words, "the water is one of the members of their families." While Guzman conveys us this information, Patagonians' photographs taken by white settlers flow on the screen. Guzman's voice is withdrawn from the soundtrack from time to time, and the voice of the ocean waves falls over the photographs. The sound of the water at the background of these images function as the Patagonians' inner sound, a language that has been inhabited by its surroundings, by water. Significant in this regard, the withdrawal of Guzman's voice-over from the soundtrack from time to time, seemingly imitates the water waves. In this sense, even though the language of the water, of Guzman and the Patagonians' are not the same, their different voices meet at a similar frequency. The film identifies the subjects of the dialogue that emerge from this meeting; firstly, Guzman as a filmmaker and a witness to the

Pinochet regime; secondly, the Patagonians who are the victims of white settlers and, thirdly, the water, especially the Pacific Ocean.

### 4.3. Self and Time

Walter Benjamin writes in his text “Excavation and Memory”, “memory is the medium for exploring the past” (1932, ed. 2005, p. 576). The explorer should excavate in different layers of the memory like an archaeologist. This work is “epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of a person who remembers” (ibid., p. 576). This means that the memory work is more than making an inventory record. It refers to reflecting on the person’s path of travel through the layers of time and also a constitution of the self during the process.

*The Pearl Button* is located at the crossroads of the essay film practice which considers the director’s subjectivity and the kind of memory work that Benjamin talks about. Guzman travels through the layers of Chilean history as a memory worker, a director and a writer. As he travels, the layers of the landscape reveal the violence and pain inflicted upon diverse subjects. In his encounters with different time segments, Guzman is endowed with different subjectivities and identities. Thus, Guzman’s memory work subverts the conventionally constructed binary oppositions of the victim and the perpetrator. This aspect of the film invites us to think about ethics in relation to temporality, particularly in the sense of assuming responsibility for the pain inflicted on others.

To this end, Guzman first maps out the relations between different violence stories in Chile’s history. He thinks about the relationship of different identities and collectivities to water. In the film, one of the Patagonians, Gabriela, answers Guzman’s question: “Do you feel like Chilean?” She answers with a definite “No.” “I am Kawesqar.” She emphasizes her roots as a water nomad. Guzman describes his identity as Chilean, “but I as Chilean don’t feel close to the water.”

These different relationalities towards water on the collective level marks a historical moment that intertwines two positions. The white settlers and missionaries confiscated Patagonians' land with the support of the Chilean central government. Most of the indigenous people were murdered in human hunts. The lives of those who stayed alive were irreversibly changed under the name of missionary acts. Although the white settlers confiscated the lands and the water, they did not comprehend this landscape in the way that the Patagonians have perceived and lived. As Guzman says, "modern, white Chileans have lost intimacy with water." Thus, Guzman marks how the modern sense of losing intimacy with water originates in the history of Patagonians' forced disconnection from the water.

Then, Guzman progresses one more layer in time; he speaks about British ships that came to Patagonia in the 19th century. The British, after landing in Patagonia, took captive a native Patagonian to England (as part of a "civilization project") in exchange for a pearl button. That is why they name this man Jeremy Button. Jeremy was dressed like an Englishman and learnt a bit of English. They brought Jeremy back to Patagonia after a while. Jeremy no longer felt himself attached to Britain, neither to Patagonia. As Guzman says, "He became exiled in his own land." In addition to the personal tragedy of this story, we learn that the maps used by the white settlers to reach Patagonia were drawn by those who came with these British ships. These stories and the layers of time have been muted under white Chilean governments. What does it mean for Guzman to tell these stories as a white Chilean? How does Guzman think about himself as he who progresses through these layers?

Considering that the relationship between the self and the time in the film is situated in the context of violence and crimes, our question would be whether and if at all, the individuals take responsibility for what they have not done themselves? Should we feel responsible for the old generations' crimes? Blaming our ancestor or praising them would take us to a dead end. Instead, we should approach this issue from the perspective of Gatens and Lloyd who draw on

Spinoza's philosophy in the framework of the "cultural self-understanding in the present." They use the concept of "Spinozistic responsibility," that is the "ways of understanding for what is involved in taking responsibility not only for what we do but also for what we are" (2002, p. 72). If we consider the individual as a freely contracting being, we cannot account for the ways in which we can hold ourselves responsible for past injustices. Spinoza's contribution to consider the role of imagination inscribed in individuality opens a door to possibilities, to think about the self, collectivity and time. In this context Gatens and Lloyd write:

"For Spinoza awareness of bodily modifications which are casually determined by the impingement of other bodies which are consequence understanding our own bodies. But this bodily awareness involves not only the awareness of what is happening in the present but also the awareness of traces of past modifications, the deliverance of memory and imagination."(ibid., p. 76)

Thus, we can say that one of the particles that make us up is time. We develop different subjectivities in terms of our relationships to the past and the present.

"To talk an inner multiplicity selfhood is to evoke an open-ended range of possibilities... some of these come from memory of direct experience in the past; others arise from imaginative appropriations from, and emotional identifications with, the powers of bodies other than our own bodies which carry as ours do, their past with them." (Gatens and Lloyd, 2002, p. 79)

As a result, we develop an awareness of our bodily modifications due to our involvement with time. In this regard, we can answer the question that we posed earlier: we are responsible for the past not because what we as individuals have done, but because of what we are. It is in this context that Guzman, as a Chilean, revisits the violent crimes that his ancestors have committed against Patagonians. This is taking responsibility rather than blaming oneself. It is to realize how his identity is formed by the layers of time building one onto another. One of these

many selfhoods can be culturally, historically being related to perpetrators' identity. The poet Raúl Zurita who was interviewed by Guzman in the film, emphasizes a similar point, that is "without participating in the crime we are responsible." We do not necessarily need to be accused of these crimes, not be punished for them. However, it is our responsibility to hear, know, and convey what has happened.

The conversation between Guzman and Zurita about responsibility for the past falls on to the image of the Pacific Ocean. Once again, the intermediary position of water is emphasized between different part of Chilean history and different communities. The image serves as a surface that allows passages of couple of images, which visualize establishment of an analogy between the suffering of Chileans and Patagonians. Guzman generates this analogy in these three contexts: the Dawson island, the Pacific Ocean and a pearl button. The island of Dawson has been the site of camps in which Pinochet gathered the socialist Chileans with similar motives that his ancestors held in the 1830s while "trying to tame" Patagonians. The story of the ocean is more striking at this point. I mentioned that the arrival of the white settlers brought death and genocide to Patagonians through the ocean. Years later, white Chileans who have not understood the water turned the ocean into a cemetery. Approximately 1400 opponents were thrown into the ocean and were attached to the rails during the Pinochet regime. Guzman says "they hoped that the sea would keep the secret of their crime." However, the secret has been revealed when the body of Marta Ugarte<sup>23</sup> hit the shore. Her body has brought to light the cemetery at the bottom of the ocean. Finally, in 2004 when a prosecutor decided that these deaths should be investigated, a pearl button is found on one of rails removed from the sea. This is proof that a person has adhered to this rail and there is a cemetery under the water. Thus, the story of Jeremy Button, which portrays the fate of indigenous people and those killed during the Pinochet's regime is woven with a pearl button. Like Guzman says

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<sup>23</sup> In regards to Marta Ugarte's story see Feride Çiçekoğlu's essay "Marta Ugarte'nin Açık Giden Gözleri" on *Manifold*. <https://manifold.press/marta-ugarte-nin-acik-giden-gozleri>.

“both buttons tell the same story. A story of extermination.” The visual equivalent of this interconnectedness is represented by a dissolve from the found pearl button to the surface of the world in the vast space. Patagonians believe that their ancestor’s souls have become stars in the space. Thus, the vastness of the ocean and the space is intertwined as refuge to souls of beloved ones.

This fascinating narrative and narrational arc offers Guzman’s ethical take on representing the suffering of a land, within a broad time frame. Guzman’s ethics is a “multi-centric, pluralizing,” (Elias and Moraru 2015 cited by Radisoglou) all-hearing, all-listening ethics that sees and listens to animate and inanimate subjects with an equal, minute attention. Thus, he establishes a dialogue between different subjectivities in the nexus of violence, trauma and grief without effacing the alterity of the others and alterity within the self, emphasizing the “multiplicity of selfhood” through the relation with time and the others. This dialogue indicates a community of the wounded. In a community as such, Guzman gives the last words to the Patagonians only twenty people remain, the most wounded community is about to disappear. The film fades into black with the voice of Gabriela accompanying the scene, telling how she was navigating in the ocean when she was a child in Kawesqar. Thus, Guzman remarks that the construction of collective traumas is a matter of oscillation between those who never forget and those who do not remember. And those who do not forget must prevail. For this, it is necessary to listen to others’ voices and respond to the look of Marta Ugarte and other souls who look back at us under the deserts, the oceans and the sky.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have focused on the representation of collective traumas in essay films at the nexus of ethics and the film form. Within this context, I analyzed three essay films: *ABC Africa* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2001), *Cameraperson* (2016) and *The Pearl Button* (2015). My main goal was to explore the audio-visual ethical propositions that are inscribed in the form of these films.

The relationship between collective traumas and ethics is critical for me. I have always thought that human beings should occupy themselves with the pain of others. In view of this, I have always been interested in films about collective traumas. I consider these films reflect the ethical responsibility of filmmakers towards others. They give voice to human beings, who have experienced tragic events and have subsided into silence. However, the films about collective traumas do not only dramatize ethical issues such as death, torture, racism. Films' narrational structures are also part of the cinematic dispositif. I have wondered what perceptions might arise if we scrutinize ethics in the context of the film form. Consequently, I problematized aesthetic choices as ethical choices, in particular, when "regarding the pain of the others" (Sontag, 2004).

The cultural trauma theory conceptualizes collective trauma as cultural work. It differs individual trauma from collective trauma. And it highlights that the individual traumas are translated into collective traumas through cultural works, such as rituals, monuments, plays and films. The culturally constructed nature of collective traumas points at the question of agency. As it social actors who produce representations of collective traumas. Following this conceptualization, I argued that the production of symbolic representations of traumas bears upon the question of ethics, which is interconnected with the question of agency.

Within this context, I was particularly interested in essay film practice. The distinctive authorial position of the essay filmmakers (as holders of authorial responsibility) is compatible to discuss ethics of thematic and aesthetic choices.

Furthermore, the historical formation of the essayistic practice resonates with the traumas of World War II. As mentioned before, Elsaesser argues that “the essay film was first developed as a deliberate break with the propagandistic nonfiction films after World War II” (Elsaesser, 2015, ed.2017, p.243). Essay films unsettle the conventional formal aspects of filmmaking. The subversion of these conventional formal aspects draws on the legacy of the critical tradition which they originate from. The essayistic mode of filmmaking, in its different ways, materializes subjectivities of filmmakers and film subjects in a non-formulaic manner. They subvert the conventional boundaries between the filmmaker and film subjects by positioning the filmmaker as one of the film subjects. Significant in this regard, the filming process becomes visible. Therefore, they reflect on the cinematic apparatus. Furthermore, essay films do not conform to generic representations. With their fragmentary, non-linear, anti-methodical method, essay films subvert the classical realist films’ offer of the comprehension of traumatic events. And by proposing editing of fragments towards a unique disjunction, essay films carry a singularity. This singularity presupposes a unique form of representation of each collective trauma. Accordingly, essay films have potential to propose unique audio-visual ethics, in particular concerning the representation of collective traumas.

Aesthetics and ethics are deeply interconnected. The aesthetic simply means appeals to sensory and cognitive perception. Ethics is about our judgements and conduct in regards to the world we unfolded in. On this ground, ethics is strongly related to how we perceive and feel the world surrounding us ourselves, which constitute the components of a vast network of interrelatedness. Highlighting the interconnectedness between ethics and aesthetic experience, Asbjørn Grønstad argues that “aesthetic form, in particular cinematic images, is potentially capable of generating ethical knowledge of kind not easily accessible, if at all, outside of the domain of art” (2016, p. 26). He marks three strands of research that are emblematic for the discussion of a visual ethics: thematic, conceptual and artistic strands. The discussions in the artistic strand (due to their preoccupation with film

aesthetics and philosophy of ethics), that concern images of suffering in particular, informed my approach in this thesis.

Against this background, I engaged with an array of essays, theoretical works about filmic images, trauma and memory studies. For a philosophical discussion of ethics, I draw on Spinoza's ethics to make sense of the relationship between the filmmaker and filmic subjects, and the film form, focusing on the use of digital cameras, framing, editing, and sound. There are two contexts in which Spinoza's ethics provided a perspective in my discussions of ethics in relation to the essay film form.

Firstly, Spinoza's ethical judgment of the self that "starts from the relation of a person with herself" (Talay Turner, 2018) serves to understand and critically evaluate the role of the filmmaker in essay films. The director is situated himself/herself within the film as one of the subjects. In this regard, I discussed the films' take on subverting the conventional boundaries between the filmmaker and the film subjects. Secondly, Spinoza's ethics indicates an affective communication between bodies, marking an ongoing differentiation and the process of becoming in bodies. I operationalized this perspective to analyze the ability of essayistic form to interact, be affected and transformed as a result of its relationality with the film subjects. I consider the essayistic film form as a body which resembles the changing, differentiating bodies mentioned in Spinoza's ethics.

In the light of these arguments, I scrutinized the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, the film form in particular and explore the audio-visual ethical propositions that are inscribed in the form of the essay films analyzed in this thesis: *ABC Africa*, *Cameraperson* and *The Pearl Button*.

The most distinctive feature in these three films is the subjective position of the filmmaker. Kiarostami, Johnson and Guzman as filmmakers are one of the subjects in the films. Kiarostami's embodied body expresses itself in his use of a hand-held digital video camera. Johnson highlights the materiality of her body and

the body of the camera both operate on a very tender and affectual ground. Differently, Guzman marks his authorial presence with his voice-over narration. Unlike conventional voice-over use, Guzman's voice reflects the flow of ideas, symbolizing his stream of consciousness.

Within this context, the classical distinction of behind the camera and in front of the camera is blurred. There occurs an affective communication between the filmmakers and the film subjects. These encounters change, deforms the authoritative, omniscient, all-knowing directorial positions. This authorial position replaced with directorial bodies open to influences. This change manifests itself in *ABC Africa* when Kiarostami becomes part of the same image ecology with the filmic events/subjects, not just with his onscreen body, but also, he shares the space behind the camera with the subjects in the film. In *Cameraperson*, Kirsten Johnson further emphasizes the importance of dissolving the position of autonomous and autogenous director, frequently confronting us with her most vulnerable, most uncertain, least perfect moments such as crying due to filming war victims, or falling to the ground while filming people. Guzman's stand in this regard is more complex. It is about undoing his authorial director position in his long filmmaking career based on making classical documentary films as a victim of the Pinochet regime. Unlike omniscient positions in his earlier films, he puts himself forward by his first-person, poetic voice-over narration. Furthermore, he questions his identity position changes due to his relation with the past of Chile's history. His encounter with the Patagonian indigenous people raises the question of the crimes that his ancestors have committed and puts his victim position into question.

Significant in this regard, these essay films also reflect upon the cinematic apparatus self-reflexively. In *ABC Africa*, the use of digital video camera reflects embodied body of the filmmaker. Yet, also it reminds its presence in a self-reflexive manner. The body of the filmmaker and the filming process are visible, emphasizing both frame and framing. *Cameraperson* highlights the presence of the camera and filming process, too. Moreover, the film consists of forty-four

distinctive episodes that are interwoven by black screens in between. By dismantling conventional invisible gaps between different scenes, the film underlines gaps between each episode. Therefore, it reflects upon the conventional editing technique of “suture” that makes audiences forget the artificiality of representation. In *The Pearl Button*, Guzman reflects upon the conventions of film narratives that are based on human subjectivities only. He subverts the anthropocentric cinematic lens by deploying a planetary perspective. Consequently, the ethical knowledge that arises from these films is deeply engaged with the filmmakers’ embodied bodies/thoughts in the films. In this regard, the directors reflect upon both their positions as filmmakers and cinematic apparatus. In view of this, these films are not only films about collective traumas, but they are also about making films about collective traumas.

In light of the inquiry about filming the pain of others, these films dismantle well-known methods. Unlike classical realist films, they offer a fragmented temporality, not a linear one. The discontinuous editing is constituted by unique juxtapositions of fragments in the films. Kiarostami’s intention was not making the film when he visited Uganda at the beginning. He states that “It was sort of location scouting, but we had cameras with us, and we started shooting- not for the purpose of making the actual film” (Kiarostami, 2002). After, he used these footages. Therefore, it is a film produced from the notes that have taken for a non-actualized film. In this sense, Kiarostami preserves the randomness that has occurred from strolling around and capturing different images and sounds. *Cameraperson* consists of a non-chronological juxtaposition of forty-four distinct episodes gathered for twenty- four different film projects. The episodic editing marks the film’s essayistic approach of nonlinear and multidirectional thinking. Furthermore, the loose composition of fragments provides inter-episodic movements through which novel meanings occur in the film. Thus, Johnson disrupts temporal thinking which leads forward and progresses. In *The Pearl Button*, Guzman creates an affective constellation of metaphysical, astronomical,

spiritual, ethnographic and political aspects. Given this, the filmic time oscillates between the past and the present, dismantling a linear temporality.

Accordingly, instead of narrating a temporality with cause and effect relationships, these films create cracks in the representation with a fragmented style. In doing so, they point out the gap/cracks between the reality of traumas and their translation into a representation. So, these filmmakers do not pretend that they comprehend the pain of others in all aspects. In this regard, they do not provide the viewers with a sense of comprehension of these different traumatic situations. In *ABC Africa*, the trauma of the AIDS epidemics and the situations of orphans, in *Cameraperson* the series of traumatic events in the last quarter century and in *The Pearl Button* the traumas caused by state crimes are not comprehended with linear storylines based on cause and effect relationship. Instead, these films suggest the possibility of a dialogue between their films and viewers due to these cracks/gaps between fragments. Therefore, these films offer a “dialectical disjunction” in which different thought patterns and questions occur about traumatic events as well as their realization via cinematic images.

From this perspective, these films question the generic representations of traumatic images by proposing different perspectives. In *ABC Africa*, Kiarostami arranges the catastrophe and the routine affairs of life in a compelling way. He refuses the way tragedies are represented by “tearing of images” until there are no other things than painful scenes. Therefore, Kiarostami highlights the complexity of traumatic areas that are constituted by the flux of different affections and thoughts. As mentioned before, Johnson uses the images, what I called surplus images, that could not make their way to the previous films. Johnson dismisses the images that contain graphic violence which are “ultra-familiar and ultra-celebrated” (Sontag 2004, p.25). Instead, she directs her camera to the details that have been cast aside. In *The Pearl Button*, Guzman constitutes the film’s narrative with different subjectivities. He expands the community of wounded beings, including water as one of the subjects. In this regard, he subverts the cinematic imagination’s restricted focus on human beings.

Each pain, each trauma creates its own intellectual and affective layers, and it requires a unique way to work through it. The essay films discussed in this thesis establish particular film forms with respect to the singularity of each collective trauma. As mentioned above, each film applied features of essayistic form in different ways. Therefore, they propose unique audio-ethical knowledge. In *ABC Africa*, Kiarostami focuses on closeness and distance towards the pain of others concerning the complexity of the traumatic areas. He designates his place that is close enough to enter the same image ecology and share the front and back of the camera with subjects in the film. Yet, it is far enough to consider his position and the limits of representing others' suffering. I argued that this approach proposes an ethical knowledge that is inscribed in his just distance with the subjects of the film, being emblematic of a just ethics. In *Cameraperson*, Johnson dwells on how every specific moment creates its questions of ethics. Significant in this regard, she does not have any ready-made answers or a list of ethical rules to follow. Still she adopts an ethical stance by going back in time to moments of filming the others' pain, revisiting and questioning herself and her act of filming. In this regard, I argued that Johnson proposes an ethics of vulnerability that is rooted in the receptiveness of her body, her breathing camera and the inter-episodic movements within the film. In *The Pearl Button*, Guzman focuses on the representation of different subjects' painful experiences in Chile in a wide time frame. He establishes a dialogue between different subjectivities in the nexus of violence, trauma and grief without effacing alterity of the others and alterity within the self, emphasizing "multiplicity of selfhood" through relation with time and the others. In view of this, I argued that Guzman proposes a multi-centric ethics that sees and listens to animate and inanimate subjects with minute attention. This ethical stand points at how to establish a community of wounded subjectivities.

I came to the conclusion that these essay films, as cultural objects, produce new translations of collective traumas into the visual imaginary. They unsettle the conventional formal aspects of filmmaking, drawing on the legacy of the critical

tradition from which they originate. With the subjective position of the filmmaker and a flexible film form, they provide a ground for embodied and situated ethical discussions bear upon differentiation of film forms as a result of their relationality with each particular trauma. In view of this, the films discussed in this thesis propose unique audio-visual ethical knowledge that enriches the relationship between cinematic imagination and ethics, in particular when “regarding the pain of others” (Sontag, 2004). This relation has not been exhausted yet. Traumatic events are piling up all around the world. Furthermore, “the essay has flourished in the new era of digital filmmaking more recently.” (essayfilmfestival). The transnational art world that is based on advancement and accessibility of technological devices and online screening platforms provide a significant potential for the proliferation of the essayistic filmmaking practice in the contemporary age. Research to develop approaches for analyzing films’ visual ethics that differs from language-based ethics would be fruitful to develop the relationship between philosophy of ethics and cinema. In this regard, this particular juncture (the representation of collective traumas, essay films and audio-visual ethics) deserves more research.

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