



FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

POETIC CINEMA
AND THE SPIRIT OF THE GIFT
IN THE FILMS OF
PABST, PARAJANOV, KUBRICK AND RUIZ

LALEEN JAYAMANNE

Amsterdam
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Remembering my students,
who have given me so much over so many years



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Foreword: In Memory of Thomas Elsaesser

An email from Amsterdam University Press, dated 4 December 2019, informed me that Thomas Elsaesser – whose work has been of fundamental importance to me as a film scholar since the late 1970s – had endorsed my book proposal for the series he edits, *Film Culture in Transition*. Soon after, I heard that Elsaesser had suddenly died on that very day in Beijing, where he was on a visiting professorship. This uncanny coincidence, of what appears to me to be an endorsement by death, immediately reminded me of my treatment of the death of the Sufi minstrel, his astonishing manner of dying, and his burial between a rock and a hard place, in Parajanov's *Ashik Kerib*. It is this chapter on two films by Sergei Parajanov that I sent as a sample of my writing, which I know Elsaesser had read. The following passage on death now appears in Chapter Two of this book.

There are a great variety of ways of dying on film, some spectacular and violent, some sensuous, others quiet, soft even, some almost imperceptible, so much so that I feel that death awaited film to find its full, capacious, expression in all its magnitude. Its cross-cultural expressions on film are profoundly creative, diverse. One could not say the same of birth on film which mostly seems to be reduced to its existential physical coordinates, screaming or groaning, perhaps a brief silence, shattered by the wail of the new born.

I now feel that death has cast its shadow over this project. Does death have a shadow? Death is shadow-like. Elsaesser has shown us how and why Weimar cinema invested the shadow with vitality, a non-organic life which displaced the opposition of the organic and the inorganic. Parajanov's *The Colour of Pomegranates* presents us with the Angel of Death, who arrives as a blindfolded, stumbling, winged soldier, to present the poet Sayat Nova with a parcel of earth wrapped in a piece of unleavened bread. The usual solemnity and fear accompanying the arrival of death is undone in these

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scenes of levity, in which two boy angels push and pull the Angel of Death towards the poet, in an ancient Armenian Apostolic Christian cemetery. Moreover, in this book, it so happens that the Angel of Death appears to me, the writer, and offers the chance to see just two clips one last time. I chose the death of the Sufi minstrel and the nativity presented by Pier Paolo Pasolini in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. A birth and a death – you can't get more basic than that. Raul Ruiz spoke eloquently about the penumbral qualities of the shadowy film image; his desire to explore these qualities and the closeness of film (celluloid film with its black space separating each photogram, leaving us in the dark for a fraction of each second), to death (oblivion); and how this ontological reality was a spur to invent and play in the face of death.

Strangely enough, now, as I look back on the films engaged with in this book, in the wake of Elsaesser's death, it would appear that they all stage an encounter with death in the most unusual of ways. In Pabst's *Pandora's Box*, a film on which Elsaesser wrote a foundational essay, Lulu dies ever so lightly, nearly imperceptibly, at the hands of Jack the Ripper. Then, there are the deaths of the Sufi minstrel and that of the poet Sayat Nova in Parajanov's films. In *Eyes Wide Shut*, Kubrick invests the cadaver of the prostitute in the morgue with a strangely disturbing vitality, altogether absent when she was alive as the beautiful, naked prostitute, splayed on a chair, in a drug-induced, nearly comatose state, in Ziegler's luxurious bathroom and certainly absent from the perfectly standardized bodies at the orgy. And finally, Ruiz's Klimt is seen semi-conscious, dying in a hospital for the entire duration of the film, which ends with his death and cinematic resurrection.

One of Elsaesser's earliest essays, in *Monograph*, 'Tales of Sound of Fury', photocopies of which circulated in the inaugural film studies classes in Sydney of the mid to late 1970s, gathered together previous scholarship on the topic and synthesized a conceptual framework for considering film melodrama as an important mass-cultural generic form with both literary and theatrical antecedents. Formulated as a way to frame and critically redeem the work of Douglas Sirk's 1950s Hollywood films, the essay helped create the film melodrama boom that we are experiencing now. Not only could high-end Hollywood and Indian melodrama now be analysed with sophisticated analytical tools. I was also able to study a significant sample of critically, thoroughly abject, lowly melodramas in Sri Lankan cinema. Using the tools provided by Elsaesser, and without embarrassment, I studied 103 of these melodramatic Sri Lankan films (dating from 1947 to 1979) for my dissertation on that film industry, as a young scholar.



Elsaesser's important book *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* revised some of his early essays on Expressionist cinema and combined a historiography of the German film industry of the Weimar period with an analysis of its aesthetics and film criticism. For me, among the enabling new elements were Elsaesser's formulation of a camp aesthetic – and the related importance of a discourse on fashion and design – for an understanding of the aesthetic durability of some of the Weimar film canon. His recent formulation of media archaeology, while generating large-scale empirical and speculative research projects into the new media in the twenty-first century, is yet again marked by what is singular in Elsaesser's philosophical understanding of audiovisual culture. For him, film/cinema was always the vanishing object, always already in transition, from its very inception in 1895. And it is this 'object' or desire for cinema and an intellectual devotion to it that orientated his multifaceted, scholarly, and institution-building work. Film was, forever, Elsaesser's North Star.





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Introduction: Spirit of the Gift: Cinematic Reciprocity¹

I have already said this before: cinema is condemned to be poetic. It cannot but be poetic. One cannot ignore this aspect of its nature. For poetry will be there, within our reach. If so, then why not use it?²

Each of the four chapters of this book is dedicated to a film or two by a master film-maker. They span the period from the silent film *Pandora's Box* (1929) by G. W. Pabst, to a late film by Raul Ruiz, *Klimt* (2006). In between, I explore two celebrated films by Sergei Parajanov – *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969) and *Ashik Kerib* (1988) – and the critically maligned last film of Stanley Kubrick, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). The oblique mode of address of each of these films makes it possible to think of them as poetic. A basic assumption that governs my film criticism here is the thought that the image is prior to the narrative and gives rise to it. As Ruiz says, 'In all narrative films – and all films are so to an extent – it is the image that determines the type of narration and not the contrary'. As a result, the image has an aesthetic richness, a magnetic force irreducible to the narrative line. In these films, the image may even show something that does not coincide with narrative meaning. Such moments make the image poetic, mysterious, unforgettable. It may even pose 'inexplicable enigmas', as Ruiz would have it. If only we yield to them, all of these qualities generate unique cinematic emotions and thought. Gilles Deleuze supports the view that film, in its very ontology, is an image in movement, which generates the narrative. For him, too, the image and its powers are primary.

The kinaesthetic and proprioceptive sensations stimulated by these films are especially powerful in the silent film *Pandora's Box*, because Louise

1 I discuss, in the body of this introduction, the way in which I have borrowed these Māori ideas of the economy of gift exchange to frame my book.

2 Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema* 2, 22.

Brooks, the star, was primarily a trained modern dancer. Silent cinema had achieved an astonishing level of aesthetic sophistication, abstraction, and plasticity of the image within a few short decades by the time it was made obsolete in 1929 with the arrival of sound. But then there is poetry of a few nanoseconds in even the most abject, ill-conceived, badly executed, hard-to-watch genre films of my national cinema of Ceylon (as it once was).

The rhythmic multiplicity of the films analysed are always registered on the surface; it's not a hidden dimension, more a matter of not seeing or feeling what is always already there, but might need to be sensed subliminally through the imprint left on our body, in our muscles and in our minds. It may seem hidden only because, to use Henry Corbin's ideas, our 'cognitive imagination' is dormant or has never had a chance to flourish. As I understand it, sensitivity to rhythm and light are what matters most in being open to the kinaesthetic register of the 'imaginal world' (*Mundus Imaginalis*) of film.³ I use Henry Corbin's twofold ideas of 'cognitive imagination' and 'imaginal world', derived from a strand of Sufi Islam, to contribute a set of ideas outside the purview of Anglo-American film theory and aesthetics. In doing so, I use these two specific Sufi Islamic mystical ideas to explore a secular cinematic sense of the sacred. I feel I can do this because the films under discussion enliven our spirit, stimulating thought and feeling. They encode a spirit of the gift. Corbin's Iranian Sufi Islamic ideas are locatable within the Neoplatonic mystical philosophical tradition of the Mediterranean Middle East. The work of Henry Corbin is entirely new to me and became necessary when working on Parajanov's *Ashik Kerib*, which is about a Sufi minstrel's journey through Transcaucasia. It is still rather rare to use concepts from non-European sources for theoretical work on film. While diversifying our methodological toolkit is a good idea in itself, it is also the case that, without the precise Sufi ideas elaborated by Corbin (based on the Iranian Sufi philosopher/mystic Suhrawardi's theosophy 1154–1191), my work on *Ashik Kerib* would not be satisfactory at all.

The 'imaginal' is a neologism invented by Corbin to express a Sufi idea of a world suspended, as in a mirror, between the purely empirical sense perception and the purely intellectually abstract domain. The idea is expressed by drawing on the word 'imago' (image), which becomes the neologism 'imaginal', similar, Corbin says, to the way 'original' is created from 'origo'. Between sensible cognition and intellectual cognition, there is, according to this philosophy, an imaginal world, which is more immaterial than the purely sensory and less immaterial than the purely intellectually abstract. It

3 Corbin, 'Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal'.



would appear to be a paradoxical vision of an immaterial materiality. This is not imaginary in the sense of being unreal, as in fantasy. Rather it is a non-spatial topography of a visionary experience, of the subtle body, of dreams, of symbolic rituals. It is a mode of being suspended in an inter-medial world accessed in an inter-medial state between waking and sleeping. In this state, the imagination itself becomes 'a sensory perception of the supra-sensory'. The faculty that apprehends and experiences this psycho-cosmic world is called the 'cognitive imagination'. Light and its manifestations are fundamental ontological principles of this 'Philosophy of Illumination' which, it has been suggested, derives from Zoroastrian metaphysics. According to Corbin, 'this philosophical cosmology includes a plurality of universes in an ascending order, which presupposes a scale of being with many more degrees than ours'.⁴ Parajanov's singular cosmos-centric vision of cinema may perhaps be thought of as just such a world.

It seems to me that certain films have the power to activate these paradoxical states of perception. Such films have the power to constitute an interiority composed of all the senses in a single 'synaesthesia'. The emphatic noetic, active function attributed to the imagination also enables approaching film as such. Perhaps these very ideas might be repurposed in a manner that might become serviceable for others in the field as well. But I rather believe, heeding Bergson, that one must invent for each film explored a particular set of analytical tools that fit the requirements of the film itself. This is a strict Bergsonian imperative that I worked with in my previous book, *The Epic Cinema of Kumar Shahani*.⁵ There, I first encountered a Sufi ethos in Shahani's film *Khayal Gatha*, which is based on the classical Indian musical form. Interestingly, I had not encountered Corbin's ideas at the time of writing that book. Now I can see how my approach to that film might have been somewhat different had I known Corbin's work. After all, *Khayal* is an Urdu word derived from Persian, which means 'imagination'! The choice of a theoretical framework or an idea makes a great deal of difference to one's mode of perception, conception, and writing on film.

I borrow the dyadic ideas of the 'spirit' (*Hau*), of the 'gift' (*Taonga*), and of reciprocity derived from Māori cultural practice and metaphysics, as presented by Māori scholar Tamati Ranapiri in his letters written, in Māori,

4 Ibid. Corbin was a philosopher, theologian and Iranologist and professor of Islamic Studies at the Sorbonne and in Iran. He edited and translated the work of Suhrawardi. Iran, situated between India and the Arab world, with its rich pre-Islamic Persian religious thought and practices, represents a spiritual world formed through a synthesis of syncretic traditions. It is important to know that Suhrawardi was executed as a heretical thinker.

5 See Jayamanne, 'Lapidary Dynamism', *The Epic Cinema of Kumar Shahani*, 95–123.

to the white ethnologist Elsdon Best, in the first decade of the twentieth century in New Zealand. It is this correspondence, translated and published by Best in 1909, which formed an integral part of Marcel Mauss's famous 1925 anthropological text *The Gift*.⁶ Mauss asked the generative anthropological question, 'In primitive archaic type societies what is the principle whereby the gift has to be repaid? What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?'⁷ I attempt, with some trepidation, to navigate, as a student, this deep anthropological archive with the help of two contemporary visionary Māori scholars of education – namely Georgina Stewart and Manuka Henare – as my guides.⁸ Both these scholars, who have read Ranapiri's text in Māori, appreciate his educational vision in making this vital cross-cultural effort to make an aspect of his culture intelligible to Best. According to Henare, Mauss understood that the Māori concept of *Hau* encodes an intangible idea of 'the spirit [*Hau*] of the gift [*Taonga*]', as an obligation to reciprocate it. It is the 'spirit' in the thing given, as well as that within the giver, which elicits reciprocity. Henare provides a valuable discussion of how the emerging disciplines of anthropology and sociology in the West theorized and debated the concepts of *Hau* and *Taonga* as a purely contractual, secular, materialist exchange, based on Best's original mistranslation and misinterpretation. Henare argues that his translation fails to account for the spiritual and ethical dimension of exchange integral to Māori sociality. He says that this basic lack of understanding led, in turn, to Levi Strauss and others' rationalist, contractual reading of the dynamics of gift exchange. Importantly, Henare states that, in contrast, Mauss had an intuitive grasp of the affective, ethical values integral to this remarkable Māori practice.

It is this affective, ethico-aesthetic dimension of gift exchange that I borrow for my own transcultural purpose of thinking about the, often intangible, power of film on us, as "spirit [*hau*] of the gift". Georgina Stewart says that the everyday meaning of the word *hau* is 'wind', which is, again, very suggestive for my purposes. Air as wind, like film, is an intangible but felt reality. I perceive film as a gift that calls forth a reciprocal act of reception. It

6 Mauss, *The Gift: The Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*.

7 *Ibid.*, 3.

8 For Māori dialogical, cross-cultural, and intercultural readings of *The Gift* and the white anthropological archive generated by this highly influential text from 1925, see Stewart, 'The "Hau" of Research: Mauss Meets Kaupapa Māori'. For a further contribution to understanding this archive from the point of view of Māori philosophical-anthropology and pedagogy, see Henare, "'Kote hau tena o to taonga [...]": The words of Ranapiri on the spirit of gift exchange and economy'.

is a mode of reception that may be animated by the “cognitive imagination”. Stewart, as a scholar of Māori education, is clearly animated by what she calls the cross-cultural “*Hau of Research*” that creates generous intellectual communities across diverse disciplines and cultures and, in my instance, between anthropology, philosophy of education, and cinema studies. It would appear that Ranapiri, in his engagement with Best, was animated by the *Hau* of teaching and learning, which is one of my concerns in this book. Henare says that *Hau Taonga* exchange takes place within an expansive understanding of spiritual, environmental, economic, and kinship relations of the Māori. It follows, then, that the neoliberal command economy that now governs university education violates our capacity to learn and teach film, for example, within a capacious and complex understanding of the processes of learning and teaching.⁹ I have, in a previous book, crafted the bio-anthropological idea of ‘mimesis’ as a transcultural cinematographic concept.¹⁰ Film as a non-organic form of life, in its unpredictable aesthetic density, affective vitality, and cross-cultural reach, incites scholars to invent concepts and ideas with which to respond to it. The work and indeed labour of fashioning tools of conceptual analysis may be thought of as acts of reciprocity essential to a gift economy as explained by Henare.¹¹ I believe that these crafted tools enhance our capacity to respond to the unknown and the unforeseeable in film.

As a teacher of film for well over 30 years, I have had a strong feeling that my own mentor is film and it still remains so. The very sensory surplus of the image, its poetic mode of address, makes it so. I believe that film trains us to see in singular ways and conceive as well. So, this book is, among other things, concerned with modes of learning and teaching and is intended as a gift in return. This attitude may appear fanciful (a feeble thought of a septuagenarian scholar, perhaps), given that film is an industrial product of the scientific and industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. How can a commodity of mass entertainment, in which every second is calibrated and monetized (from its inception in 1895), be thought of as encoding a ‘spirit

9 In the field of the philosophy of education, there is a growing robust literature developing educational theory and practice by engaging with Deleuze and Guattari’s mode of philosophizing and concept creation. I provide just a few examples of this literature. Semetsky, *Deleuze, Education and Becoming*; Semetsky, *Nomadic Education: Variations on a Theme by Deleuze and Guattari*; Cole, ‘The Power of Emotional Factors in English Teaching’. In the afterword to this book, I discuss an aspect of my own pedagogic impulse and practice (over a lifetime), stimulated by specific films.

10 See Jayamanne, *Toward Cinema and Its Double: Cross-Cultural Mimesis*.

11 Henare, ‘Maori on *Hau*’, 56–58.



of the gift' (*Hau Taonga*), as in Māori cultural practice based on indigenous modes of knowing and doing and ethics of receptivity and generosity? One can, I think, because the film-makers under consideration (and others) have burned so much money and energy just to capture, through a collective labour of love, at least a minute or two of intensity on film and have offered it to us. The martyrs of cinema are not many (most know how to play the contractual game of equivalence and the market well – some better than others), but there are a few exemplary figures, such as Erich Von Stroheim, Robert Bresson, Chantal Akerman, Sergei Parajanov, Glauber Rocha, Ritwick Ghatak, and Kumar Shahani... who stand out. They 'signal to us through the flames'. To forget their work and their spirit would simply be our loss. Stanley Kubrick, however, was special. He was a master at playing the contractual game to buy inordinate amounts of time, which he said was gold in the business. The stars Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise knew full well that Kubrick proffered a gift to them, which they reciprocated by giving him 'world enough and time' to work on *Eyes Wide Shut*. These exchanges were above and beyond any contractual arrangements. They enabled the couple to go where angels fear to tread.

In this book, I work with intuition as method, from Henri Bergson's theory of duration.¹² The threefold steps that constitute Bergson's method of intuition has been, for some time, part of my intellectual toolkit through Gilles Deleuze's exposition of it. The stating or formulation of a problem, instead of picking up a ready-made one from the film studies bureaucratic filing cabinet, is the first step of the method. The next step is to learn to differentiate between differences of degree from those of kind. This way, one will not spend a lifetime analysing badly composed composites or badly stated problems. Finally, I try to think in time – time as duration – rather than in spatial categories. The imperative is to problematize, differentiate, and temporalize!

The stars and actors in these films warrant special discussion in terms of their unique styles of acting. We are able to fully register their tantalizing ways of moving and being still, their modulation of voice and silence, only when our 'cognitive imagination' is stimulated by these delicate processes. Otherwise, they are often missed and simply go unregistered, becoming inconsequential. An awakened 'cognitive imagination' creates a field of awareness, of variations and modulations, of anything whatsoever, in any space whatsoever. The actors in these films are creatures who animate an

12 See Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, especially Chapter One, 'Intuition as Method'. Also see Bergson's *Matter and Memory*, especially Chapter Three, 'Of the Survival of Images; Memory and Mind'.

imaginal world by hovering between a purely sensory register and the purely intellectually abstract, all in their own singular manner.

Louise Brooks in *Pandora's Box* and Nicole Kidman in *Eyes Wide Shut* offer most unusual performances at two epochal ends of the history of cinema: the end of silent cinema in 1929 and the demise of celluloid as the light-sensitive medium of registration of the image in 1999, respectively. Sound arrived in 1929, making *Pandora's Box* among the last of the silent films, while the digital revolution was well underway by the time *Eyes Wide Shut* was produced. This digital revolution eventually rendered celluloid obsolete. It is a matter of considerable interest to me that, at the time of their original reception, both Brooks and Kidman were strongly criticized for what critics and the general public thought of as 'very bad acting'. If this were the case, as critics ferociously maintained, then one would logically have to also say that both Pabst and Kubrick did a bad job directing each of their films at the height of their creativity. This was indeed the critical opinion at the time of their release. *Pandora's Box*, however, has by now been critically redeemed in a way that *Eyes Wide Shut* has yet to be. In the mid twentieth century, there had been a re-evaluation of *Pandora's Box* and Brook's performance, not to mention the celebration and even fetishization of her youthful image by male critics and curators, starting with Henri Langlois and Jean-Luc Godard, among a host of others. Despite this belated adulation and intellectual interest in her, Brooks firmly maintained that she is not an actress and never wanted to be one; she claims that all she ever wanted was to dance. Kidman's performance has not yet received the same retrospective scholarly attention, though some critics and even audiences have finally woken up to the fact that Kidman is a brilliant actress with a formidable filmography and an astonishing range of roles in blockbuster films, art films, small-scale experimental independent films, and, more recently, on television as well. *Eyes Wide Shut* has recently made an interesting return in popular music.¹³

John Malkovich's performance in *Kliment* also needs to be reconsidered, as it has been dismissed as bad acting, overly mannered. But critics forget that mannerism is an aesthetic mode of high artifice available to actors and should be accepted and judged as such. One might ask how mannerism was performed and how it functioned in a film of fantasy, in fact in a dying man's reverie. I will discuss and theorize the original work of these performers in some detail in the following chapters as well as the unique

13 Frank Ocean's song 'Love Crimes' plays Kidman's voice when she quarrels with her husband in *Eyes Wide Shut*, Stanley Kubrick, 1999. Her voice is heard just underneath Ocean's vocal.

mode of androgynous performance that Parajanov and Sofiko Chiaureli developed in *The Color of Pomegranates*. This film, about the eighteenth-century Armenian poet-troubadour Sayat Nova, and Raul Ruiz's *Klimt* are not biopics of the artists, but rather explorations of vital multicultural epochs of exchange, creativity, and political violence through a focus on the artists and their unique modes of perception. The cultural zones of contact of Transcaucasia, with its deep civilizational history, and the Viennese social world of the declining Austro-Hungarian empire in its last decades, are perceived through the singular visual and auditory points of view created by the artists themselves.

The four directors – Pabst, Parajanov, Kubrick, and Ruiz – offer us hovering ‘imaginal worlds’ on film which are not exhaustible in purely narrative terms. In their hands, the image and sound catch fire, and matter becomes spirit. So, this book is an attempt at reciprocation of an abundant gift.

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