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Face of the Human and Surface of the World
Reflections on Cinematic Pantheism

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Article abstract

In this article, the surface of the world is envisaged as a face. Cinema as a record of this surface, and as a medium which “re-invented” the face in the close-up shot, makes it possible to reflect on the status of the human subject in the universe, thanks to the concept of cinematic pantheism. Following Elie Faure, the author underscores the pantheistic nature of cinema and claims that cinematic pantheism is the way by which film produces simultaneously transcendence and immanence, and materializes the unity of both, thus confirming Siegfried Kracauer's theory according to which man, nature and culture are part of the same “visible phenomena” in cinema. Cinema transforms all beings into surfaces: it operates by facialization and surfacialization. On the other hand, the article revisits Deleuze and Guattari's concept of faciality and argues that it describes a surface operating as the interface of the body in its interaction with other bodies in the media, the realm of the divine, or the universe. Thus faciality is also landscapity, and activating the camera means “transfiguring” the human (or the landscape) into face and introducing a vis-a-vis: the face of God, as immanent transcendence. In that sense, cinematic mysticism, as in Paradjanov's, Makhmalbaf's and Mikhalkov's films, is pantheistic.

Face of the Human and Surface of the World:

Reflections on Cinematic Pantheism

Walid El Khachab

In this article, the surface of the world is envisaged as a face. Cinema as a record of this surface, and as a medium which historically made a significant "re-invention" of the face, especially through the close-up shot, makes it possible to reflect on the status of the human subject in the universe. Pantheism is the key concept in this investigation. This article is a case for the acknowledgment of the pantheistic nature of the cinematic medium, its "panthed" *(panthée) modus operandi*, as Élie Faure puts it.[1]

Pantheism here does not refer to the "spirit" of history animating the becoming of Being. Rather, as in Spinoza's thought expressed in his *Ethics*, it is the assumption that God is Nature.[2] The corollary is that transcendence—whatever name it bears—is simply part of the world of immanence. As some pantheist philosophers would say: transcendence emerges with immanence. It is not located in a specific part of the world or "mixed" with a particular body. It is not in the world nor out of it. It simply has no location.[3] It functions as an energy, coextensive of matter and does not belong to a separate stratum.

Hence, pantheism in this article means to acknowledge that transcendence is produced from an immanent starting point and that transcendence and immanence are coextensive on the surface of the world, where no stratum is managing the other.

1. Élie Faure, *Fonction du cinéma*, Paris, Éditions Gonthier, 1964. Henceforth, references to this text will be indicated by the initials "FC," followed by the page numbers, and placed between parentheses in the body of the text.

2. Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics & Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley, Seymour Feldman (ed.), Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co., 1982.

3. *Cf.* Jozjani in Henri Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire*, Paris, Éditions Verdier, 1999, p. 395.

This "radical" definition of pantheism restores the equality in power between immanence and transcendence. The democratic agency of pantheism lies in its opposition to a hierarchical worldview where transcendence is considered as superior to immanence (or the opposite). Another egalitarian consequence of pantheism is that the status of the human is no more privileged as the occupier of the upper stratum of immanence, or as the hyphen connecting it to transcendence.[4]

As much as cinema and screen media theory are concerned, cinematic pantheism is the way by which film produces equally and simultaneously transcendence and immanence, and materializes the unity of both. In cinema, all beings are equally flattened on the screen's surface and are equally submitted to the oppositional intensity of light and darkness. The act of filming renders the multiplicity of beings in a unified flattened form, where both immanence and transcendence are unequivocally the simultaneous result of that act, since both come to being when projected on the screen.[5] It is thus safe to argue that cinema materializes the "unity of Being," which is a medieval formulation of the concept of pantheism.[6]

Élie Faure underlines this equalization and unification of beings operated by cinema, which amounts to the performance of the unity of Being. According to him, cinema is the material proof of that unity: "*L'infinie diversité du monde offre pour la première fois à l'homme le moyen matériel de démontrer son unité* [thanks to cinema]." ("Mystique du cinéma," FC, p. 67)

Élie Faure's contention that cinema is pantheistic explains the connection between the agency of the medium on the one hand, and the resolved tension between the unity and the diversity of the world, on the other hand. Faure does not restore a spirit, an *anima* of the world. Rather, he draws a parallel between cinema's animation of things, and the animated movement of becoming. The mere projection on screen of "inanimate" things, such as a wood or a city panorama, provides them with a "murmuring animation." The latter reveals the complexity of becoming and provides evidence that: "*nous ne connaissions encore que par fragments discontinus le vrai visage de ce monde, qui est un devenir infatigable et complexe vivant cependant dans le même moment et dans le même lieu que nous*." (FC, p. 64-65)

The face of the world, or its sur-face, especially in a cinema that is conscious of its pantheistic nature, ultimately functions like the face of the human.

4. For a full discussion of the epistemological and political implications of cinematic pantheism, see Walid El Khachab, *Le mélodrame en Égypte. Déterritorialisation, intermédialité*, Ph. D. thesis, Université de Montréal, 2003, *e.g.* p. 264-267 and p. 275-277.

5. *Cf.* Walid El Khachab, "Un cinéma soufi? Islam, ombres, modernité," *Cinémas*, Vol. 11, No. 1, "Écritures dans les cinémas d'Afrique noire," automne 2000, p. 133-149.

6. Ibn Arabi, *Traité de l'amour*, Introduction, translation and notes by Maurice Gloton, Paris, Albin Michel, coll. "Spiritualités vivantes," 1986, p. 235.

The status of the human as subject in cinema is essentially one of a fragment of Being. In spite of the fact that the close-up of the face very often takes part to the human's valorization, cinema is epistemologically the site of the de-subjectification of the human. It is the place where the human is restored to its own humility. The human has a modest size on the scale of the universe recorded by cinema. He is part of nature on film, not a *homo faber* manipulating natural resources. Faure insists on the aspect of humility—of which I underscore the political implications—inherent to his pantheism:

> […] le Cinéma ne se contente pas de réintégrer l'homme dans l'univers, de lui rendre ses rapports réels et permanents avec le temps, l'espace, l'atmosphère, la lumière, la forme et le mouvement. […] Il nous apprend peu à peu à replonger notre voix même dans la totalité de l'Être comme l'une des plus humbles — puisque condamnée à obéir consciemment à son rôle — entre les sonorités et les images innombrables qui font de l'Être même une incantation multitudinaire où il se cherche dans sa propre exaltation. (FC, p. 58)

Another theorist of cinema emphasizes the nature of the medium as one of the flux of life, which does not proceed from the modernist distinction between man and nature. In Siegfried Kracauer's theory of cinema, man, nature and culture are part of the same "visible phenomena." "The cinema in this sense is not exclusively human. Its subject matter is the infinite flux of visible phenomena—those ever-changing patterns of physical existence whose flow may include human manifestations but need not climax in them."[7] I interpret this understanding of cinema as a materialist acknowledgment of its pantheistic nature. Life and its constant becoming are the principle of (a unified) Being. Both are the subject matter of cinema as well as of pantheism. This "unity of Being" means that the human is only part of Being, not necessarily its major Subject.

Kracauer's contention, following Delluc, that the human is only a fragment of matter, is more than an assertion of the materiality of cinema. When he says that: "[…] Louis Delluc tried to put the medium on its own feet by stressing the tremendous importance of objects. If they are assigned the role due to them, he argued, the actor too 'is no more than a detail, a fragment of the matter of the world,'"[8] Kracauer aligns himself with an "ecologically" democratic worldview supported by the materiality of cinema, in which the human is not hierarchically superior to other beings. Kracauer is not making the case for the objectification of the human. He is subverting a predominant discourse of hierarchy.

7. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 97.

8. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 45.

FACES OF FACIALITY

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari propose that a face is also a surface.[9] A face is not just an attribute of the human, magnified in cinema by the close-up. It is the product of an abstract machine they name "faciality," located at the intersection of two semiotic systems. The white surface (of the face) is the base of significance and the realm of the signifier's semiotic system. The face is marked by two black holes—the eyes—, which operate the subjectification process. (MP, p. 205) "*Le visage construit le mur dont le signifiant a besoin pour rebondir, il constitue le mur du signifiant, le cadre ou l'écran. Le visage creuse le trou dont la subjectivation a besoin pour percer, il constitue le trou noir de la subjectivité comme conscience ou passion, la caméra, le troisième œil.*" (MP, p. 206)

The semioticized face is hence the absolute cinema shot, where the screen of significance is inseparable from the camera of subjectivity. But in the following, it will be clear that subjectification through faciality is but one of the many processes resulting from cinema's pantheistic *modus operandi*.

The production of the face as an autonomous entity—a talking head—, a face cut from the location of the subject—its body—, is not the only example of faciality in cinema. The facialization of the whole human body is a process by virtue of which the body becomes a face, *i.e.* a surface and a site of the concomitant production of significance and of subjectivity. The latter is a set of discourses and practices about a rhetorical self, not a manifestation of a transcendental consciousness and an acting anthropomorphic entity one may call subject.

Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the entire body also can be facialized: "*La bouche et le nez, et d'abord les yeux, ne deviennent pas une surface trouée sans appeler tous les autres volumes et toutes les autres cavités du corps.*" (MP, p. 209) Cinema by default transforms all beings into surfaces—both on film and on screen. In other words, it operates by facialization and surfacialization.

The views of another theorist of the face in cinema shed a different light on the facialization process. Béla Balázs argues that close-ups reveal "The Face of Things" and his account of this process implies that the camera, in the same movement, operates a surfacialization which invites the viewer to "skim over life—and over film. […] By means of the close-up, the camera in the days of the silent film revealed also the hidden mainsprings of a life which we had thought we already knew so well […]. We skim over the teeming substance of life."[10]

9. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, coll. « Critique », 1980, p. 208. Henceforth, references to this text will be indicated by the initials "MP," followed by the page numbers, and placed between parentheses in the body of the text.

10. Béla Balázs, *Theory of Film. Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone, New York, Arno Press & The New York Times, 1972 [1930], p. 54-55.

Balázs' metaphor of revelation is mystical and his phenomenology is twisted by a contradictory movement towards both the realm of spirituality and that of enlightenment, thanks to the trope of the veil: great metaphysical mysteries are *veiled*, and rationality is a secular process of *unveiling* the truth. This double movement explains why Balázs' metaphysics lying on the face of things is unable to free itself from the assumption of Man's centrality in the semiotics of the world. When the film close-up strips the veil of our imperceptiveness and insensitivity from the hidden little things and shows us the face of objects, it still shows us man, for what makes objects expressive are the human expressions projected on them.[11]

Béla Balázs' reading of the expressiveness of objects conforms to Deleuze's theory about the close-up. Both objects and faces can act as surfaces of intensiveness and of expressiveness and thus participate in the production of subjectivity. But Deleuze does not formalize expressions and passions as attributes of the subject entity. He dissolves all articulations of significance and subjectivity into what he views as intensities and speeds. Ultimately, the screen for him is a plane of immanence on whose surface intensities of light and darkness speed variably. There is no mold for the incarnation of the subject in Deleuze's ultimate speculations on cinema.[12]

Yet Balázs' restoration of Man is not one of absolute transcendence. He establishes a connection between the material production of the soul and the faciality of the close-up. In the silent film, facial expression, isolated from its surroundings, seemed to penetrate strange new dimension of the soul. It revealed a new world—the world of microphysiognomy which could not otherwise be seen with the naked eye or in everyday life.[13] Ultimately, Balazs himself dissolves the subject into details of facial expression, themselves being ones among infinite other microscopic fragments of the world. The metaphysics of revelation acquire here a technical dimension, whereas revelation is part of the machinic process of magnification by lens, as in the close-up.

FACIALITY AND LANDSCAPITY:

I will explore in the following pages the ways in which the flattening of the subject's image and its transformation into a sur-face is also applicable to the world. The concept of faciality describes the surface when it operates as the interface of the body in its interaction with other bodies in (/and) the universe, media, and the divine. The latter is understood here as figured by the surface of the world,

11. Béla Balázs, *Theory of Film*, p. 60.

12. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma I. L'image-mouvement*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, coll. "Critique," 1983, p. 132-135.

13. Béla Balázs, *Theory of Film*, p. 65.

or as the universe conceived of as a surface. Thus faciality is also landscapity, as Deleuze and Guattari remark: "*Or le visage a un corrélat d'une grande importance, le paysage, qui n'est pas seulement un milieu mais un monde déterritorialisé.* […] *Le gros plan de cinéma traite avant tout le visage comme un paysage, il se définit ainsi, trou noir et mur blanc, écran et caméra.*" (MP, p. 211-212)

Faciality refers to the common proprieties shared by both face and landscape. This comparison originates in Deleuze's analysis of the close-up. A close-up is defined by a relationship of either intensive tension or reflection, between a surface and a spot located on it, *e.g.* the eye marking the surface of the face, or the hand indicating time and suspense on the surface of a clock.[14] Deleuze's concept approaches "landscape" (and the world) as "face"—that is as a plane of immanence—organized around tension between close-up and wide-shot, as well as between intensive and differentially speeding points between seemingly fixed plane and dynamic or vectorized points. These types of assemblages could also inform a landscape, if tension or reflection between a surface and two holes could be found.

Both concepts of faciality and landscapity actually refer to face and landscape, as far as they are organized as a particular assemblage of two semiotic regimes, constantly articulated between the semiotics of signification—dominated by the signifier—, and those of subjectification, dominated by the Subject.

Deleuze argues that the body as well as the landscape can be facialized, *i.e.* treated as a face. He gives evidence of that from Carl Dreyer's films. In *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), extreme facialization occurs, in the guise of a strong concentration of close-ups on the French saint's face. In his following films, Dreyer does not emphasize the face nor the close-up, but his landscapes are surfacialized, *i.e.* treated as surfaces.[15]

Therfore, I argue that cinema is *per se* the technical means to transform, not only the body, but the whole world, into a surface and to surfacialize "deep" transcendence, since it re-produces landscapes, bodies and objects in the guise of a celluloid surface, then re-actualizes these on the surface of a screen. The reverse cognitive process is also possible: cinema is the means to rediscover the world as an immanent divine face of God, through the techniques of cinematic pantheism. In this sense, film—literally *epidermis*—is somehow the surface of the world and the material form of (the surface of) God.

Surface is understood here in two ways: as the skin, the outer envelop, and as an extended two-dimensional area. Film is the skin of the world and is also

14. Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-mouvement*, p. 125-126.
15. Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-mouvement*, p. 150-152.

the ersatz of extended matter[16]. Given the pantheistic nature of cinema on the one hand, and the (almost) synonymy between world and God within this article's theoretical frame, film's connection with pantheism sheds a light on the supernatural and spiritual functions of the media and of its fetishes, particularly the screen and the celluloid reel. The need to be exposed to images or to be in presence of a screen is probably the trace of ancient magical practices and experiences of the sacred, where the unity of Being or the mythical memory of a primordial paradise were reiterated through rituals of union between man and the world, human and divine. Most importantly, in these rituals, the human body was part of Being, without holding any privileged or predominant position. In that context, there was a particular spiritual need for ritual bidimensionnal objects (*e.g.* batiks, frescos, *mandalas*, rugs), where the trace of flattened, surfacialized gods is concrete. This alleged need explains the relationship I argue between pantheism and the celluloid film which functions as a ritual rug or skin. Film creates a secular modern connection between human and Being, in other words, between the human and the divine[17].

Not surprisingly, the facialization of landscape and the flattening of the universe are intimately linked to the trope of the cinema screen as rug. This trope is forcefully present in contexts where the rug is a cultural icon, such as in central Asia. The rug is one of the first artifacts produced by humans to function as a magical skin, which covers the world (by means of covering walls and floors) and flattens Being on a bidimensional surface.

Sergei Paradjanov is probably the first modern filmmaker to epitomize the connection between rug and film in the performative flattening of landscape he introduces in *Sayat Nova* (*Color of the Pomegranate*, 1968). Wide shots featuring

16. Laura Marks has extensively written on the tactile aspect of the audiovisual image, she rightfully calls "the skin of the film." My ambition is to explore the potential of the reversed proposition: the implications for film theory of an approach of "film as skin." See Laura Marks, *The Skin of The Film. Experimental Cinema and Intercultural Experience*, Ph. D., New York, University of Rochester, UMI Dissertation Services, 1996, p. 241-265.

17. See for example : Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1958, p. 451, where he argues what the ritual function of *batik* is about: "becoming one with the cosmos;" Mircea Eliade, *Briser le toit de la maison*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1986, p. 311-314, particularly p. 311, about *mandala* as *imago mundi*: "*Le terrain plat est l'image du Paradis ou de tout plan transcendant*;" Mircea Eliade, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses*, vol. I, Paris, Éditions Payot, 1976, p. 29-30, about the shamanic dimension of Paleolithic frescos: Edgar Morin, *Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1956, p. 19 et 35, on frescos and shadow performances in Paleolithic caves as archetypes of cinema.

dozens of rugs disposed over the soil and over roofs, or hanging, some of which showing the sky in the upper part of the frame, are a seminal moment in a cinematographic pantheistic process. These shots are preceded by images showing the manufacturing and the coloring of threads. They are a reminder of the process by which cinema manufactures and colors the world as well as of the becoming of Being. Rugs seen from the sky appear as separate frames, parts of an imaginary film of life, covering the face of earth, like a magical skin or a film enveloping the world. The alternation between the view from the earth and that from the sky intensifies the "communion" between the two "poles" of the universe, the upper and the lower ones. The rug's presence at the heart of this sequence is a strong indication that this artifact is seminal to the pictorial perpetuation of sites of fusion between fragments of beings, which fusion aims to reenact the unity of Being.

It was only three decades later that Mohsen Makhmalbaf articulated a similar act of cinematic pantheism in *Gabbeh* (1996) featuring the *Gabbeh*, *i.e.* the rug, as the central ritual piece in a process of cinematic pantheism.[18] In this film, the face is explicitly filmed in the reverse process of the body's fusion with the rug and the landscape. The central character "emerges" from the rug, through a dissolve between two medium shots, one showing the artifact bearing a female figure, the other showing the actual female character as if coming out of the rug. Elsewhere in the film, the rug is semioticized as the textile of the universe, thanks to a wide shot where the landscape—a green plane surface—is filmed through the threads of a loom in the foreground, as if the act of filming landscape was equivalent to that of weaving the world. Thus, Makhmalbaf visually states the unity of Being, by underscoring the parallels between face, landscape and rug, and through the camera's agency which shows the pantheistic process of fusion between the subject and the universe.

The cinematic rug is then a relative of the ultimate iconic piece of textile: Veronica's veil, on which Christ's face was imprinted. According to legend, Saint Veronica used her veil to wipe the sweat off Christ's face on the Via Dolorosa. The Holy Face was miraculously imprinted on the cloth. Deleuze and Guattari might have thought about the cult of the Holy Face when they proclaimed that: "*Le visage, c'est le Christ. Le visage, c'est l'Européen type*, […] *il invente la visagéification de tout le corps et la transmet partout (la Passion de Jeanne d'Arc, en gros plan)*." (MP, p. 216-217)

As a matter of fact, Veronica's veil is one of the first close-ups of our era. The comparison is not only justified by the similarity of the human face's scale both

18. For a thorough analysis of cinematic pantheism in *Gabbeh*, see Walid El Khachab, *Le mélodrame en Égypte*, p. 320-327.

on the cloth and in a standard close-up. Veronica's veil is one of the first material productions of a close-up through impression. This artifact is unique because it illustrates the idea of transcendence materialized in the process of printing an image. Saint Veronica's gesture is one of the first instances of secularization of our era. By putting the image of God (or that of his son) on "film," she included the divine in history, since her veil bore the "analogical" image of the divine.[19]

The close-up and cinema in general are not only sites where the modern Subject is produced. They are also the *locus* where the Subject is "undone" and fused in the landscape, on the face of the world, on the face of God as universal landscape, on the surface of the universe.

FLAT EDEN

Nikita Mikhalkov's film, *Urga* (*Close to Eden*, 1992) opens with the landscape *par excellence*. A wide shot of Mongolian steppes, on the frontiers between Mongolia, Russia and China. It is rather the scene of frontiers' negation, of constant deterritorialization, because of its permeability to people coming from behind political boundaries. Montage alternates wide shots with close-ups featuring the head and legs of a horse and the rider's face.

The visual tension at the beginning of the film between the different shot scales, and the auditory one produced by the alternation of magnified sounds in close-ups and the wind in the large shots, exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's views on the facialized landscape. The plane of the landscape (or that of the face) is the realm of significance, while the "black holes," *e.g.* the eyes or other points recorded on the plane, are the windows of subjectivity.

19. The cult of Christ's face is dedicated to many relics, chief among which are the Mandylion and the Holy (Turin) Shroud, besides Veronica's veil. The Mandylion's legend is about a piece of cloth on which Christ himself imprinted his own image. Glenn A. Peers devotes a remarkable interpretation of the Mandylion's legend in this issue (see Glenn A. Peers, *Masks, Marriage and the Byzantine Mandylion: Classical Inversions in the Tenth-Century*, p. 13-31). The Turin Shroud allegedly enveloped Christ's dead body and features an imprint of a whole face and body. In *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari refer to that Shroud, in a laconic way, as an example of the facialization of the whole body. I chose to refer to Veronica's veil because it used to feature a face in the scale of a close-up, and because it is not a self-portrait, which is a special case in the mediated production of the human face. The study of the Holy Face's cult can be a useful basis for a new understanding of the relationship between cinema and the sacred. The Islamic concept of the face of God as "readable" on the surface of landscape can also be of help. The last section of this article, "Man-Face and Body-Eye," develops this notion.

In the film, the steppes are the plane of immanence on which the semantics of hospitality and "feeling at home" are inscribed thanks to the movements of the Mongolian shepherd Gombo and his new friend, the Russian distressed truck driver Sergei. In the wide shots, characters appear as almost black points on the surface of the landscape dominated by homogeneous vivid colors, mainly yellow and green. The landscape frames the Mongolian family's hut, which acts as the major signifier, the ultimate home and the absolute realm of hospitality, where the urban "civilized" foreigner finds refuge. The movement of the black-hole truck and that of the black-hole horse, together with the bodies of both the shepherd and the truck driver whom he saved, results in the subjectification of the two men. The film produces Gombo as the nomad wild subject in constant movement amid nature, as opposed to Sergei, the urban one, rooted in culture, in spite of his perpetual travels.

The film sets clear cut spheres: the steppes, realm of spirituality, of pantheistic fusion between man and nature, body and ether, on the one hand, and on the other, the city, realm of rationalized modernity, of the transcendence of technique regulating the course of bodies' movement within a rather predictable space. The end brings—unconsciously?—the death of the gods to the foreground, as the separate transcendence of history, of (ancient) civilization invading the realm of the non-separated, the steppes/face of the world, where the face of the Human is inscribed.

The materialization of pantheism in *Urga* occurs within two techniques. The first is a linear narrative one. Its most blatant example is the communion between nature and the (dead) body of Gombo's uncle. The unburied body lying on a hill under the sky, in the middle of grass, eaten by vultures, is in constant contact with the elements and is literally transformed and absorbed into nature. The second technique, a pictorial one, is inherent to the tradition of landscapes' filming, where wide shots—of steppes in this case—show the encounter between land and sky in the horizon. These images act as metaphors of the communion between earth and heaven.

The fusion between the two types of pantheistic techniques is epitomized by the dissolve, which involves a combination of at least two shots. A traveling starts from the grass in which the uncle's body lies, and progresses forward in an accelerated movement, then tilts up, creating the impression of an energy (a soul?) departing from the body and traveling across the land, then flying in the sky, as if joining heaven. This traveling is echoed by the medium shots of a vulture flying in the sky, as if it were an incarnation of the dead man's soul joining heaven, or as if it materialized the course followed by the body in the process of its unification with the world.

The film opposes the non-territoriality of the steppes, the "white" plane, when void of a predominant signifier, to the urghas, the long sticks used by the

shepherds of Mongolia, which mark a territory when plunged into the ground. Urghas are the plane's frame. Mongolian shepherds plant them in the steppes when they have moments of intimacy with their women, so that the others notice them from distance and refrain from intruding. The film almost ends when Gombo plunges his urgha in the ground and—for the first time in the film—successfully makes love to his wife. The long stick appears as a material hyphen between earth and sky, and functions as a phallus inseminating the earth, while the bodies of man and woman unite, in communion with both soil and sky at the same time, since they meet in the wilderness under the sun. The trope of communion between human and landscape, and between the male and female principles of Being (man/woman; earth/heaven) is here a crystallized instance of cinematic pantheism.

This narrative intensively performing the unity of Being is blurred by the agency of the TV antenna outside Gombo's hut, shattering the sky with its verticality. The antenna is here reminiscent of the urgha driven in the soil at the outset of an act of love and of physical union. This cinematic comparison between the urgha and the antenna eroticizes the medium and implies a parallel between God as viewed in modern media, and the nature conceived of as the realm of an immanent God. The antenna hyphenates the hut and the ether. It mediates the magical skin of flattened transcendence and brings it to the screen in the hut.

Yet, the antenna gives evidence that although TV deterritorializes the images thanks to its transnational transmission, it performs an act of territorialization. Unlike cinema, TV marks even the deterritorialized world of the steppes and transforms it into a space framed by visual and political boundaries. It is TV that connects the steppes to the geopolitical remapping of the world after the end of the cold war. Right after the steppes are "split" by the antenna, the Mongolian family watch the American and the Soviet presidents expressing their wish to create a "new world order," in the news.

The transformation of the landscape's infinity into a territorialized milieu is paralleled by the territorialization of history and of memories on the body. Sergei, the Russian driver, bears a tattoo on his back, featuring his favorite folk tune transcribed on his skin. In a way, he always moves within history, under the grip of its transcendental order. In the Chinese city's nightclub, he removes his shirt and sings. The orchestra reads the notes on his back and accompanies him. The performance of music in communion with the club's audience is a reduplication of the ecstatic experience of Sergei's body infusing his own history transcribed on his back, into the world. This communion appeases his nostalgic remembrance of his homeland and of his national history, as they irrupt in a black and white flashback, featuring scenes from World War II.

A similar intrusion of history in the world, in the subject's present, occurs forcefully towards the end. Back from the city, Gombo holds a TV set in a box,

an iconic epiphany of the modern medium. He opens it and lays the set in the middle of the steppes. We see the dark screen as a catalyst of the screen-*epidermis* magical and/or pantheistic function, as it reflects the image of landscape.

Then, we see the image of Ghenkis Khan leading his army, reflected on this "absolute" screen, unconnected with any source of electricity. The screen becomes a black hole, through which history enters. At this point, we witness a process of subjectification by history. In this intriguing allegory, film shows how screen media produce the historical subject. The trope of Ghenkis Khan in this film is not the example of a war machine nomadic operator, who destabilizes the state, as in Deleuzian thought. It is rather that of an emperor, an icon of the state in its imperial stage. In the scene where the emperor reprimands his "subject" Gombo for not having enrolled in the imperial army, the Khan is a figuration of historical depth and an illustration of how a state-based past glory would help to construct the nomad as a historical Subject.

Urga presents a tension between, on the one hand, the facialization of the landscape and the landscapation and "immanentization" of the divine, and on the other hand, the "transcendentalization" of history. Screen dominated media, like cinema and television, appear in the film as a plane of consistency, as the surface of immanence on which the semiotics of faciality operate. They so do in two contradictory ways, either in the sense of desubjectification, or in that of subjectification.

In some instances, the screen desubjectifies the body, *i.e.* it deconstructs the conception of the body as an autonomous and hegemonic subject. This is the case in the close-ups and the wide shots where Gombo's body is fragmented or is shown as a tiny spot fusing into the steppes. The body is here part of the surface of Being. In other instances, the screen subjectifies the body, *i.e.* it constructs the body as subject. This is the case in the Khan sequence, where the production of the specifically historicized subject takes place. The pantheistic images of man fusing into the landscape, freed from the conception of a subject opposed to nature, are conflicting with the scenes where history emerges as a means to construct man as a subject inscribed on the page of the steppe's landscape.

After the fantasy sequence of Ghenkis Khan coming back from the dead, Gombo installs the TV in his hut. From that point on, the screen plays an ambiguous role. It becomes the window, the black hole of history transforming the nomad family into modern subjects of media consumers, witnessing Bush Sr. and Gorbatchev in a joint press conference preparing the end of the cold war. Yet, the TV screen also functions as a magical skin, a filmic *epidermis* of the world, when it features the nomadic couple running joyfully across the steppes, uniting with nature.

This ambiguous skin performs its modernized functions in another unexpected way. After the installation of TV, Gombo's young son wears a robe made of the set's white plastic wrapping. Hence, he reverses the idea of the screen

and the film, both being magical skins or ersatz skin of the world. The white wrapping acts as a surplus of mediated images supplanting the magical film/skin/rug. Instead of perpetuating cinema's function as the instance which provides the body and the world with magical celluloid skin, here television formats the surface of the world—or at least that of the body—in a uniform guise. It simply turns the body into a white surface, that of the white wrapping, waiting for images to erupt from the TV screen and to be inscribed on the youngster's new body, in order to construct him as a subject. In this case, TV screen does not facialize the body. It transforms it into an arid plane void of significance, waiting to receive any signifiers to be painted on it, through the antenna.

This predicament is balanced by a final moment of cinematic pantheism, coinciding with the last frames of the film. Gombo's wife goes out of the hut, in the open air. Yet we see her only on the TV screen, set on the hut's central wall. This is the advent of medial modernity: we do not see the world through the window, but through the cathodic or electronic screen. The irruption of history—as a discourse, not as a phenomenon of accumulation of experiences and prints on the body—brings off the interruption of man's direct inscription is nature. It also alienates man—not through mechanized labor—but through the mediation of man's intercourse with the world. The scene where Gombo fully and physically unites with both landscape and his wife's body is not immediate. It is mediated by media, and hence the intensity of this union is altered.

Nevertheless, this scene is still refreshing, because it features the perpetuation of the epidermal pantheistic function of both the screen and the film, resulting from the landscapation of the world. In these last images of the film, the world is re-produced as a large clear plane where Gombo and his wife run, like two black nomadic holes taking part in the production of the semantics of fertility, while being constructed as the subjects of love. This face of the world is ultimately the face of transcendence produced by the speed of two humans. By the very end of the film, the face of the world and the face of the human unite, performing the unity of Being.

MAN-FACE AND BODY-EYE

The concept of "faciality" (*Wajhiah*) has first appeared in the 13th century, in the writings of Andalusian pantheistic mystic Ibn Arabi. It described the state of a human who is "wholly a face" and who could thus "face" God in every position or posture, whichever direction he takes.[20] In this context, God is not a destination, but an orientation (*Wejhah*), a dynamic factor giving meaning to the vectoriza-

20. Ibn Arabi, *Al Futuhat Al Mecciah* (Spiritual Illuminations of Mecca), Cairo, GEBO, 1989.

tion of the territory, binding the physical human to the metaphysics of geography, without becoming a "separate" principal organizing the world from "above".

If God were cinema and the human were the viewer, the consequences would be important for an understanding of the agency of face, and specifically of Deleuze's face semiotic machine in film experience. Face, the absolute cinema shot in Deleuze's semiotics, can also inform our understanding of film experience, not as subjects/viewers, but as faces and bodies "facing" film, if we take Ibn Arabi's speculations into account.

A man who is a mere face seems to be the prototype of film viewer and of media consumer in general, because experiencing media is not only a matter of gaze. It is a predominantly visual experience, but where the whole body "watches" the film. In this experience, the entire body—at least its surface, the skin—becomes an eye. Using the same words, the medieval mystic, Iranian poet Attar, describes his body becoming an eye, in order to sense God. This man-face, this body-eye is the body-film produced by cinematic experience. He is not a cameraman but a man-camera. The man-face is ultimately not a subject, but a pure energy of vectorization, unrelated to the specific point of transmission or caption.

Ibn Arabi's man-face secularizes the world, since he becomes the focal point of transcendence, always facing it. As a precursor of the assemblage of camera and film, both vectorized on the plane of the landscape, he is the emblem of the act of seeing-and-being-seen. This act transforms the world into a skin which simultaneously envelops oneself and the world. This is basically the magical surfacialization function of film, as described in the above.

One can argue, for the purpose of a theory of cinematic pantheism, that Ibn Arabi's facial mystical (read pantheistic) human is at the same time camera and spectator, acknowledging that matter is coextensive of the divine—or at least of transcendence—through the agency of the (face's) gaze. Thus, activating the camera means "transfiguring" the human (or the landscape) into face and introducing a vis-à-vis: the face of God, the face of immanent transcendence. In that sense, cinematic mysticism, as in Paradjanov's, Makhmalbaf's and Mikhalkov's films, is pantheistic.

Yet, the films of these directors re-enact the process of the simultaneous production of immanence and transcendence, and even give evidence that it is immanence that produces transcendence. The latter claim can also be attributed to Deleuze. The transcendence of the signifier is only produced by the white surface of the face: significance only occur when the materiality of the face is articulated. Since the cinematic shot is the absolute face, one can safely claim that the camera's effect is pantheistic in essence. Camera operates as an instance of production of transcendence and at the same time as a vector flattening this transcendence in a plane of immanence, through a process of "facialization" of both the human and landscape.