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## Not Yet

**Duration as Detour in Emmanuelle Demoris's *Mafrouza* Cycle**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Mafrouza* is a twelve-hour-long documentary by French director Emmanuelle Demoris, shot in a now-demolished neighbourhood in Alexandria, Egypt. Demoris is one of a long chain of western filmmakers who appeal to some form of 'taking one's time' as an instrument for — morally, politically, epistemologically — adequate representation. Based on the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, Eduard Glissant, and Poor Theory, this chapter evaluates what happens when a film adopts a strategy of deferral in cases in which it is not clear how questions of 'doing justice' could be resolved. Using long duration and an insistence on the quotidian, Demoris's film forces us to think about the conditions that make pronouncements about character, situation, and narrative possible, continuously postponing the moment when it will become possible to say: 'this film is about ...' By setting itself up for failure, the film proposes one possible approach to the ethics and politics of visibility.

**KEYWORDS:** Slow cinema; Documentary films; Time in motion pictures, Demoris, Emanuelle; *Mafrouza*; Duration

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## Not Yet

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Emmanuelle Demoris's *Mafrouza* Cycle

ROSA BAROTSI

Mafrouza was a shantytown of around 10,000 inhabitants situated next to the port of Alexandria, Egypt. Built on top of a Greco-roman necropolis that was carved into stone in the fourth century BCE, the neighbourhood also went by the name Gebel — the rock. Mafrouza was one of many shantytowns (or 'Ashwa'iyyat', meaning disordered or haphazard) in Alexandria and one of quite a few 'cities of the dead' in Egypt (most of them in Cairo). The area had electricity but neither running water nor a sewage system. Most of the inhabitants had come from Upper Egypt, from the 1970s onwards, to find work in the city. They would do odd jobs at the port, work at the Misr textile factory, or sort and resell refuse. They were mechanics, carpenters, drivers. Some were better off than others: Abu Hosni was a freelance docker at the port and lived in a perpetually flooded house next to the neighbourhood dumping ground. Mohamed Khattab was more fortunate: a factory worker by day, the owner of Mafrouza's shop in the afternoon, and also the much-loved local imam. In the late 1990s, a French archaeologist discovered a cemetery camouflaging as the foundation of the Mafrouza community of self-produced space. The largest cemetery of its kind in the Mediterranean, it was uncovered during the last stages of

the construction of an elevated highway connecting the harbour to the main route to Cairo in 1996. Archaeologists were excitedly working to excavate the site from 1997 until 2000, when the dig was closed down to continue construction work. It was around that time that Emmanuelle Demoris followed an archaeologist to this place where the living were shacking up with the dead. But she soon abandoned the mystique of this cohabitation and spent the next few years filming the people of Mafrouza. In 2003, she had accumulated 150 hours of footage. With the help of her producer, Jean Gruault (famous as the screenwriter of Jacques Rivette's *Paris nous appartient* (1961) and Francois Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962)),<sup>1</sup> she edited and released the first two parts of the five-part, twelve-hour documentary in 2007 around the same time that the neighbourhood of Mafrouza was demolished to expand the port.<sup>2</sup> The inhabitants were relocated to a massive housing project around 20 km from the city centre, which made access to most forms of employment difficult. The heavily criticized project was part of 'Mubarak's promise', a subsidized housing scheme he had announced in the run-up to his election in 2005. Its name, until 2011, was Mubarak City. After the revolution, it was renamed after the old neighbourhood: Mafrouza.

Despite the remarkable cut from 150 hours down to a mere twelve hours, one of the first features to stand out is *Mafrouza's* unusual length. The five-part structure helps make it easier to watch a documentary that is more than six times the length of an average feature film, at a time when streaming services had yet to normalize the consumption of serialised films with feature-length episodes. But within each of the episodes, the distension of time is equally present. Extended temporality is therefore hardly exhausted by the overall duration of the film. An unflinching focus on the temporal pacing of the everyday, as well as an above-average shot length and the single point of view of the DV camera guarantee that time is experienced as unspectacular and loose despite the abundance of people, activities, and micro-stories. Given

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1 *Paris nous appartient*, dir. by Jacques Rivette (Diaphana, 1961); *Jules et Jim*, dir. by François Truffaut (Cinédis, 1962).

2 *Mafrouza — Oh la nuit!*, dir. by Emmanuelle Demoris (Les Films de la Villa, 2007), *Mafrouza/Coeur*, dir. by Emmanuelle Demoris (Les Films de la Villa, 2010), *Que faire?*, dir. by Emmanuelle Demoris (Les Films de la Villa, 2010), *La main du papillon*, dir. by Emmanuelle Demoris (Les Films de la Villa, 2010), *Paraboles*, dir. by Emmanuelle Demoris (Les Films de la Villa, 2010).

the film's predilection for the quotidian, we could perhaps quite easily imagine a significantly shorter version with tighter editing: skip a *zaffa* (wedding procession) here, one less song by Hassan, no reason to hang out in Mohamed's shop for so long ... But duration is evidently a structural concern for Demoris — although 'to what end' might be a more complex question. Are the twelve hours of the film an attempt to show everything? If so, is the underlying concern to make as transparent as possible the object of observation? Similarly, is the accommodating display of ordinariness an attempt to interfere with the material as little as possible, a form of a quest for authenticity, truth, or empathy? Or, as I will try to demonstrate, does the *Mafrouza* project betray, not so much a longing for realism or 'doing justice', but an anxiety, a hesitation in the face of an effort to establish a different relation to its subject — one that is perhaps (in both senses) positively *inauthentic*, because it deviates and defers?

#### A CERTAIN OPACITY

Demoris, a one-person film crew, used a small DV camera to shoot *Mafrouza*. She talks about the digital camera not in terms we might be more familiar with, such as indexicality, quality of the image, freedom from the predetermined length of the filmstrip, freedom of movement, etc. Instead, she is preoccupied with the modified relationship digital technology forces into motion between gazes, bodies, and machine. She says:

The camera is too small to rest on one's shoulder. It is therefore the hand and the forearm that carry it. It's tricky to link the eye to the hand. To look is a movement that engages the body towards the exterior but at the same time pulls towards an interior, sometimes down to the neck and shoulders, the gaze pulling its tension out of the chest where it breathes. It's difficult to accommodate this momentum in the hand, which caresses more than it looks.<sup>3</sup>

Along with the displacement of the role of observer to the hand, the small DV camera causes another dislocation, that of the conventional

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3 Emmanuelle Demoris, *Camera con vista* (Marseille: Shellac Sud, 2012), p. 20.

relationship between documentarist and the filmed subject. She continues:

No need to bring the face to the eyepiece [...] the screen that folds out on the side of the camera permits to check on the frame without being glued to the camera. [...] Moreover, since it's small, like the camera itself, it doesn't hide you, the person filmed can see you.<sup>4</sup>

A twist on Vertov's 'camera-eye', the cinematic gaze becomes a camera-hand necessitated by technology, which undoes the conflation of camera and gaze. Of course the hand can grasp as much as it can caress. Édouard Glissant is right to point to the manual features of epistemological violence: he speaks of the French *com-prendre* as evoking precisely this violent pursuit of a phantasmatic transparency of relation, which becomes a tool for control.<sup>5</sup> The verb *comprendre*, 'to understand', but also 'to grasp', contains 'the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation.'<sup>6</sup> Nothing seems to guarantee that an empirical, 'fly on the wall' approach to visual representation will lead to social recognition rather than epistemological violence.<sup>7</sup>

Glissant proposes errantry as a way around 'summarizing' the world, a letting-go of the generalizing instinct to sum up or possess the world. Perhaps it is this resistance to summary, with its connotations of cutting down for efficiency's sake, that leads Demoris to the protracted duration of *Mafrouza*. Opacity, Glissant's central term for his poetics of relation, is intimately linked with the erratic, constantly slipping and slithering away from reduction — another term that brings together the meanings of 'bringing back to' and a temporality of economics, of cutting back or trimming down. Demoris similarly talks about the strategy of 'taking one's time' as offering a path for the creation of a

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4 Ibid., p. 20.

5 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 26.

6 Ibid., pp. 191–92.

7 As Heather Love points out, a similar debate regarding the potential and pitfalls of empirical observation has been ongoing in sexuality and queer studies since the shift to treating homosexuality as a sociological phenomenon rather than a medical one. Heather Love, *Norms, Deviance, and the Queer Ordinary?*, lecture, ICI Berlin, 22 June 2015, video recording, mp4, 47:09 <<http://doi.org/10.25620/e150622>>.

generous distance from the subject filmed, as opposed to the instant recognition of styles of documentary that, as she says, 'surplombent', overhang or supervise their subject.<sup>8</sup>

Even so, I am aware of the twin danger of appealing to opacity in order to create a framework for some form of 'ethical' representation. On the one hand, this danger has to do with opacity becoming merely another word for othering, especially when the 'right to opacity' does not belong to those represented but is decided and bestowed upon by her who records, the filmmaker. On the other hand (but not unconnected to this), there is a risk of equating opacity with gradations of visibility, a sort of becoming not-quite-invisible. In the Otolith Group's *Nervus Rerum* (2008),<sup>9</sup> for instance, a film essay shot in the Palestinian refugee camp of Jenin, there is a direct appeal to Glissant's concept in order to explain the film's strategy of representation. As a way of turning Glissant's opacity into a visual practice, the filmmakers, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, use a combination of distance (no close-ups, mostly long shots and backs to the camera), lack of diegetic sound combined with an alienating score and a calm velvety voiceover of texts by Fernando Pessoa and Jean Genet, and an eerily gliding Steadicam. They describe this as producing an effect of 'non-empathy. There is a wariness of the idea of the Other speaking for themselves either from a state of victimhood or a state of defiance.'<sup>10</sup> As T. J. Demos points out, there are many risks here:

Might the embrace of opacity as a strategy of resistance against oppressive identifications [...] end up unintentionally silencing the other, as the unforeseen mimicry of political erasure reenacts the very effect of colonization? And does this invocation of the opaque not also negate positive identifications with Palestinians in the act of collective and transnational solidarity, mitigating or undermining support for their struggle for liberation and self-determination? And if Pallywood cinema [i.e. 'victim reportage'] is deemed ineffective, then what real consequence does the recourse to opacity promise? And

8 Demoris, *Camera con vista*, p. 25. She poses this not as an 'axiom' but as 'just another weapon in the resistance'.

9 *Nervus Rerum*, dir. by The Otolith Group (2008).

10 Irmgard Emmelhainz and the Otolith Group (Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar), 'A Trialogue on Nervus Rerum', *October*, 129 (Summer 2009), pp. 129–32.

where does the evocation of the nondiscursive phenomenological experience of the camp, creating the existential sense of estrangement, leave the viewer, if not in a state of debilitating confusion and alienation?<sup>11</sup>

The gliding camera of *Nervus Rerum*, with which the filmmakers intended to approximate the sense of a ‘lost ghost’, instead risks placing the spectator in a position of unaffected superiority, of a transcendental point of view compounded by a complete inaccessibility to identification with anything else on screen. The sense of superiority risks being further compounded by the voiceover, which provides abstracted interpretations of ‘universal’ human suffering in the words of famous European writers.

*Nervus Rerum* provides an example of the complex effects of a certain iteration of opacity — one that slips too far on the side of obscurity and ends up reproducing the ‘impenetrable autarchy’ Glissant cautions against. It appears to me that, in order for opacity to have the potential to be operative to some extent (and for the purposes of this essay), we need to posit at the very least that opacity should not be ‘conferred upon’ and that (to paraphrase Glissant) it should be the by-product of equality and solidarity. In other words, opacity is not about being invisible, just as it is not about being obscure. It is perhaps more accurately, following Ntone Edjabe, about a reluctant visibility:<sup>12</sup> reluctant both in the sense of hesitance (which I’ll discuss later) and, as per its etymology, resistance.

Demoris is one of a long chain of filmmakers who appeals to some form of ‘taking one’s time’ as an instrument for a — morally, politically, epistemologically — adequate representation. Before I discuss this hesitation I have described as a temporal term operative in *Mafrouza*, I want to give an overview of long duration in western cinema. It will hopefully become clear in the process that the problem of extended temporality in the west has a history of being linked with questions of

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11 T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 156–57.

12 Moses März, “Embracing Opacity”: Interview with Ntone Edjabe (Chimurenga Magazine); *AfricAvenir International — African Renaissance, Development, International Collaboration and Peace*, interview conducted on 14 July 2011 <<http://www.africavenir.org/nc/news-details/article/embracing-opacity-interview-with-ntone-edjabe-chimurenga-magazine.html>> [accessed 5 May 2016].

ethics, both as adequate and (or) realist representation. Inversely, long duration has been intimately connected in western film history with the anxiety of realism, an anxiety which includes the ethical question of 'doing justice'.

#### THE THREAT OF DEAD TIME<sup>13</sup>

Long duration in Western accounts of cinema has a long and complicated history. Over the course of this overview, I will try to demonstrate that this complication stems partly from the problem of 'dead time' and its double inadequacy: 'dead time', such as when a shot goes on for too long after an action has been completed, is both excessive (that is, redundant, wasteful) and lacking (that is, narratively insufficient). Long duration is most often associated with the technique of the long take. But as ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall points out, what constitutes a long take is not straightforward and in fact 'is obviously an artificial and somewhat arbitrary concept, formed in relation to an average notion of shot length and affected by content and position as well as by duration.'<sup>14</sup> Even in the strict terms of shot duration one has to allow for historical relativism for example. If we are to trust quantitative studies of average shot lengths, such as those by Barry Salt or James Cutting et al., shot lengths in mainstream US cinema have gotten significantly shorter in the seventy-five years since the Hollywood studio era.<sup>15</sup> One would then assume that our expectations for how long a shot should be in order to be perceived as too long would have also evolved over time. Moreover, the definition of the long take is not exhausted in questions of temporal length, but is largely based on considerations of structure — for example whether or not it is an uninterrupted sequence shot or part of an edited sequence.

13 An earlier version of this section appears in Rosa Barotsi, 'Contemporary European Cinema, Time, and the Everyday' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2014).

14 David MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 211.

15 See Barry Salt, *Moving Into Pictures: More on Film History, Style, and Analysis* (London: Starword, 2006); James E. Cutting, Jordan E. DeLong, and Christine E. Nothelfer, 'Attention and the Evolution of Hollywood Film', *Psychological Science*, 21.3 (2010), pp. 432–39.



MacDougall's view therefore is that the long take is 'a method of film construction' rather than a question of shot length.

The filmmaker reminds us that in the very early days of cinema, before editing, the long take was the norm by necessity.<sup>16</sup> Helen Powell traces the advent of 'real time' shots back to those early actualities of the end of the nineteenth century and sees their chronologically 'archaic' positioning as a reason why these shots get perceived as 'regressive' in later production.<sup>17</sup> Mary Ann Doane, on the other hand, sees in the very earliest instances of edited actualities the same use of editing that encapsulates a persistent anxiety in the history of cinema: the exclusion of dead time, 'time which is, by definition, "uneventful."<sup>18</sup>

Trimming the excess duration around 'meaningful' time was one of the earliest impulses of filmmaking. As Doane rightly points out, however, the existence of uneventful time, that is, time outside the event, implies that the latter is self-evident and clearly definable. Doane suggests, and I agree, that it is more accurate to perceive the singling out of dead time as the condition of possibility for an 'event' to come into being. An event appears therefore to consist of '*eminently meaningful*' material, as opposed to the wastefulness and unproductivity of undramatic time. It seems that this inherent meaningfulness exists *outside* of time, insofar as, despite its actual duration, the event 'is packaged as a moment', or as MacDougall puts it (in terms that remind us of Walter Benjamin), 'a spark or a stab of lightning'.<sup>19</sup>

Like an electric shock, according to this line of thinking, a film shot 'discharges most of its meaning at once'. If the shot continues uninhibited, beyond that 'moment' of recognition, the response of the spectator might range from impatience and annoyance to inattentiveness, boredom, perusal, or distraction. This is, for example, how filmmaker Jackson Mac Low describes his imagined project:

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16 MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, p. 211.

17 Helen Powell, *Stop the Clocks!: Time and Narrative in Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), p. 22.

18 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 159–60.

19 MacDougall, *Transcultural Cinema*, pp. 209–10.

## Tree\* Movie

Select a tree\*. Set up and focus a movie camera so that the tree\* fills most of the picture. Turn on the camera and leave it on without moving it for any number of hours. If the camera is about to run out of film, substitute a camera with fresh film. The two cameras may be alternated in this way any number of times. Sound recording equipment may be turned on simultaneously with movie cameras. Beginning at any point in the film, any length of it may be projected at a showing.

\*) For the word 'tree', one may substitute 'mountain', 'sea', 'flower', 'lake', etc.

Most shots are nonetheless not, as MacDougall puts it, 'allowed to' go on for too long.<sup>20</sup> His revealing phrasing reflects a constant anxiety on the part of filmmakers and producers, one that lurks in the most unlikely of places: even schools of filmmaking that championed the ordinary time of everyday life were inherently terrified of the 'dead spot'. He recounts that in *cinéma vérité* and American 'direct cinema' filmmakers 'still contrived to avoid dramaturgical dead spots': they had to defend their 'interest in the ordinary by making sure that the ordinary played well'.<sup>21</sup> In the oft-cited 1960 premiere of Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* at Cannes, 'the reiterated shot of a girl running down the corridor brought bellows of "cut"' from the audience, reaffirming that fear of spectatorial response to empty time.<sup>22</sup> By using the long take and undramatic time, Antonioni was of course consciously undercutting spectatorial expectations, by performing a double subversion of cinematic conventions: substituting the temporal ellipses conventionally employed in the name of efficiency and succinctness with ellipses in the narrative. Antonioni was following Roberto Rossellini's interest in distended time and narrative stasis, although the younger director's undercutting of exposition was seen as utilized 'in the best modernist fashion', whereas the Neorealist Rossellini was perceived as reflecting Cesare Zavattini's realist theory of *pedinamento*.<sup>23</sup> Zavattini

20 Ibid., p. 209.

21 Ibid., p. 211.

22 Peter Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 29.

23 Ivone Margulies, 'Exemplary Bodies: Reenactment in *Love in the City*, *Sons*, and *Close Up*', in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. by Ivone Margulies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 217–44 (p. 241).

is frequently quoted as proclaiming that his ideal film would consist of ninety minutes in the life of a man to whom nothing happens. This attitude had moral implications for the Neorealists and Zavattini in particular: his theory indicated a natural link between factual knowledge about fellow humans and a resultant solidarity.

A few years after Antonioni's *L'avventura* was released, Andy Warhol would make a series of real-time structuralist films in which the vacuous time of non-events glimpsed in Antonioni's film would be brought to their radical extreme. A forty-five minute long film portrayed pop artist Robert Indiana consuming a meal in real time; another one showed the poet John Giorno sleeping for five hours and twenty minutes.<sup>24</sup> *Eat* (1963) and *Sleep* (1963)<sup>25</sup> appear to thoroughly enact the principle of non-interference and continuity Zavattini had called for. At the same time, Warhol's structuralist films dramatically undermine the neorealist ethics of observation. The hyperbolizing of duration appears to mock Zavattini's radicalism — after all, as Ivone Margulies points out, the ninety minutes of Zavattini's ideal film merely represent 'the normal length of a commercial feature.'<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the obstinately fixed camera in Warhol taunts the humanist empathy of Neorealism by transforming it into a politics of passivity, 'the equally ethical, and [...] actively political, stance of indifference.'<sup>27</sup> The Warhol films defy 'transparent representation and the naive concept of realism that has commonly been associated with the long take', by stressing through hyperbole the abstract qualities of real-time representation.<sup>28</sup>

Warhol's use of the long take questions the privileged relationship between cinema and reality expounded by the Neorealists. This *other* legacy of the long take — not as a gateway into reality, but as an enabler of critical distance from that reality — includes European political filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. The 'insistence of observation' here, as Brian Henderson

24 The film is actually composed of six seamless shots. Malin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 89.

25 *Eat*, dir. by Andy Warhol (1963); *Sleep*, dir. by Andy Warhol (1963).

26 Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996) p. 38.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

28 Wahlberg, *Documentary Time*, p. 90.

has pointed out in relation to Godard's *Week-end* (1967),<sup>29</sup> does not draw the spectator into the image, but keeps them at a distance, from which they can judge it 'as a whole'<sup>30</sup> and proceed to accept or reject it. In this instance, the spatiotemporal integrity of the long take does not serve to better 'reveal physical reality' in the realist manner,<sup>31</sup> but to present a singular perspective that denies the bourgeois world any depth or complexity.

In the 1970s, Belgian director Chantal Akerman combines Neo-realism's equivalence between dramatic and undramatic events with the flat literalness of Warhol and Godard's long takes in order to create films with a feminist micro-politics derived from that oscillation between materiality and presence on the one hand and distance and indifference on the other.<sup>32</sup> As Ivone Margulies argues, through Akerman's obsessive gaze everyday gendered gestures are 'simultaneously recognized and made strange.'<sup>33</sup>

Two issues arise from this overview of long duration in Western accounts of film history. Firstly, the sustained focus on everyday activities through distended temporal structures takes the form of a double frustration. The long take is perceived as both a 'nothing happens' — a lack — and a 'too much' — an excess. We have seen that the question of what to do with 'dead time' has been posed again and again amongst filmmakers. This lack has been nonetheless constantly counterposed with an overabundance seen as inherent to the complexity of the long take: in sustained duration 'one sees more than one needs in order to "read" the image.'<sup>34</sup> The first problem of the long take is therefore that it seems contemporaneously situated at two extremes of redundancy: as overflow and emptiness, 'excess of detail resulting from a fixed stare'<sup>35</sup> versus the deficit of signification resulting from the lack of editing and dramatic events.

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29 *Week-end*, dir. by Jean-Luc Godard (Athos Films, 1967)

30 Brian Henderson, 'Toward a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style', *Film Quarterly*, 24.2 (1970), pp. 2–14 (p. 4).

31 Siegfried Kracauer, quoted in Roy Armes, *Patterns of Realism: A Study of Italian Neo-Realist Cinema* (South Brunswick, NJ: A. S. Barnes, 1971), p. 20.

32 Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p. 23.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

35 *Ibid.*

The second issue regarding distended duration is a question of distance and proximity. Different attitudes towards long duration have posited different levels of immersion into some form of the 'real': do distended temporalities act as a probe into reality (Zavattini), a surface literality (Warhol), or an alienating fixity (Godard)?

#### A FABLE

Hassan and his friend are lounging in the plastic chairs of a café on one of the main streets close to the port, a short walk away from the wall that separates the city from Mafrouza. It's been a long night. After an evening of hanging out, playing games at the theme park situated under the overpass, dancing at a concert, Hassan refuses to put an end to the fun, rejecting his friend's frequent suggestions that some sleep would be in order despite his obvious exhaustion. Not yet. He tells a story:

The louse and the flea. The louse asks the flea to boil him some water. The flea is taking too long; the louse goes and finds her dead. The louse is sad. A crow asks him why. The louse says, 'I'm sad because the flea is dead.' The crow rips off his feathers and falls into a tree. The tree asks him, 'Why are you sad?' 'I'm sad because the louse is sad because the flea is dead.' The tree snaps in half out of sadness. A donkey comes up to the tree. 'Why are you sad?' 'Because the crow is sad because the louse is sad because the flea is dead.' Desperate, the donkey breaks his leg. He goes to drink some water from the sea. The sea asks, 'Why are you limping?' 'I'm sad because the tree is sad because the crow is sad because the louse is sad because the flea is dead.' The sea dries up out of grief. The fisherman asks, 'What's wrong?' 'I'm sad because the donkey is sad because the tree is sad because the crow is sad because the louse is sad because the flea is dead.' The fisherman hurts his eye, his wife asks him why: 'I'm sad because the sea is sad because the donkey is sad because the tree is sad because the crow is sad because the louse is sad because the flea is dead.' The wife screams, 'My God!' The neighbours come and ask why. 'I'm sad because the man is sad because the sea is sad because the donkey is sad because the tree is sad because the crow is sad because the louse is sad because the flea is dead.'

Hassan's lengthy story traces a series of creatures and elements devastated by the sadness of their interlocutors. When the fisherman,

despondent, hears the lament of the sea, I can't stop myself thinking that the story must be coming to an end: the man seems like an convenient last link in this bizarre evolutionary chain of events. But that's not the case. When the man tells his wife, I can't help but imagine this domestic scene will provide the final punchline. But I'm wrong. The wife's misery attracts the neighbours' curiosity. By this point, I have no idea where the fable is heading. I've exhausted my assumptions. It is at this moment that the story comes to an end, just like that. Hassan shrugs his shoulders as if to say 'that's it'.

#### WHEN IN DOUBT, HESITATE

In *Mafrouza*, the anxiety about the film's relationship to visual justice is performed through duration. This worry is enacted temporally, through what Poor Theory might name a 'working around' intransigent problems, of tinkering with one's subject. Tinkering, such a modest word, evokes a sustained activity of dubious productivity: 'to work as a tinker' means 'to work imperfectly, keep busy in a useless way'. Poor theory is self-effacing and anti-heroic: it pays attention to 'the murky, unsystematic practices and discourses of everyday life', and chooses description over interpretation, in particular 'descriptions [...] that do not leave what is described unchanged'.<sup>36</sup> In *Mafrouza*, the question of the French woman's presence in the shantytown is often evoked, with varying degrees of entertained curiosity and aggressive mistrust. 'The foreigner will make a mockery of us abroad' is a recurring accusation that constantly snaps us out of immersion. Technical errors have a similar effect of distancing and reminding the audience of the presence of the woman behind the camera: we see her fingers slipping over the edge of the lens as she's correcting the light or protecting the camera from the rain, we catch glimpses of the boom, or her silhouette on the wall. More importantly, perhaps, Demoris's limited Arabic meant that a lot of the time she didn't know what people were chatting about. After spending some time in *Mafrouza* on her own, she recruited a

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36 Ackbar Abbas and D. Goldberg, 'Poor Theory: An Open-Source Manifesto' (2019), published on the platform 'Foundry', University of California Humanities Research Institute (UCHRI), <<https://uchri.org/foundry/poor-theory/>> [accessed 16 September 2021].

translator, Rania Berro, who became the routine interlocutor in the film — although she is never shown. Berro would every now and then explain to Demoris what was being talked about, but oftentimes the camera, although often talked at or interpellated, is not fully complicit with what is happening. This fundamental failure is perhaps the most potent performance of the limits of legibility, enacted for instance when Demoris's camera would be slow to follow a developing mise-en-scene by missing out on conversational cues.

Tinkering, this prolonged and constantly imperfect approach that seems to have no end: Demoris had originally thought of calling the film 'Lessa schwaia,' 'not yet,' a *ritournelle* that people would often use in the neighbourhood. This endless process of ending, to evoke Roland Barthes, can produce as much the paradoxical infinity of weariness that he meant for it to describe,<sup>37</sup> as the pleasure of continuing to tinker pointlessly.

But more than anything, I suggest, *Mafrouza's* endless ending is 'a way of proceeding', a strategy of deferral when solutions are not discernible.<sup>38</sup> The film hesitates — not yet, not yet — as if weary of the fact that an ending brings pronouncement: By deferring termination, the film continuously postpones the moment when it will become possible to say: 'this film is about ...'. The parallel I am drawing here between end/death and rationalisation/pronouncement, also crops up in Pier Paolo Pasolini's ruminations on the long take. He draws an analogy between montage and death, in which the life of a man remains suspended in ambiguity — the attribute closest to reality, according to him — until the final 'cut' of death. Just as, after their life has ended, it is possible to be conclusive about a person's life, editing in film explains, rationalizes, and undercuts the ambiguity of the uninterrupted long take.<sup>39</sup> The difference of course is that for Pasolini the long duration of the uninterrupted take is (closest to) reality, whereas my assertion is that the extended temporalities of *Mafrouza* — manifesting as total film duration, use of the long take, and a focus on the empty time of the quotidian — showcase not authenticity but reluctance. Joseph

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37 In Elena Gorfinkel, 'Weariness, Waiting: Endurance and Art Cinema's Tired Bodies', *Discourse*, 34.2–3 (Spring–Fall 2012), pp. 311–47 (p. 315).

38 Abbas and Goldberg, *Poor Theory*.

39 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Empirismo eretico* (Milan: Garzanti Libri, 2000), p. 241.

Vogl celebrates hesitation as going against a long Western tradition of imperative decision-making that sees it as ‘a capricious act that frustrates work.’<sup>40</sup> Vogl hails the ‘heroes of reluctance’ for standing up for the unproductive and distracted, but I feel that this operation of heroization undermines the premises of the argument: I believe the reluctant and hesitant would find themselves more at home with the likes of the good soldier Švejk and other such petty actors of resistance.<sup>41</sup> The film resists the impossible task it has set for itself — how to ‘do justice’, what else to do if ‘doing justice’ does not seem an adequate objective in the first place — by ‘using the lag’. Ackbar Abbas suggests this as a strategy for when something threatens to ‘outpace our understanding.’<sup>42</sup> But can one also use that lag to suspend understanding?

#### DIS-ESTABLISHING SHOTS

I think there’s something to be said here about this form of durational opacity (opacity created through the accumulation of dead time), which is somehow similar to that accumulation of petty acts that we have been discussing as resisting weakly.

*Mafrouza* begins with a neighbourhood, a situated locale in Alexandria, Egypt. Yet instead of recounting a community, it gravitates towards a small number of people. Demoris describes the necessity she felt to avoid situating the spectator visually and spatially from the very start. In fact, the first panorama shots of *Mafrouza* only occur after the first hour. Instead, the film begins by slowly introducing us to some of the people who will reappear throughout the twelve hours. This choice was part of an effort to avoid the pronouncement that

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40 Maaikela Lauwaert, ‘Helden van de tegenzin’, *Tubelight*, 66 (January 2010) <<https://www.tubelight.nl/helden-van-de-tegenzin/>> [accessed 16 September 2021], English trans. as ‘Heroes of Reluctance: On Hesitation as an Active Act’, author’s website <<http://maaikelaauwaert.com/articles/joseph-vogl/>> [accessed 16 September 2021]

41 See the discussion of Švejk in Preciosa de Joya, ‘The Punakawans Make an Untimely Appearance: In Praise of Caves, Shadows, and Fire (or, A Response to Plato’s Doctrine of Truth)’, in this volume.

42 Ackbar Abbas, *Poor Theory and New Chinese Cinema: Jia Zhangke’s ‘Still Life’*, public lecture, Critical Theory Institute, University of California, Irvine, 3 December 2008 <<http://www.humanities.uci.edu/critical/pdf/AbbasPoorTheoryStillLife.pdf>> [accessed 5 May 2016]



she felt would proceed from opening with establishing shots of the shantytown, which would situate the spectator, unambiguously, in a *bidonville*.

By contrast, the film begins with a misunderstanding. The opening shot finds us walking through a narrow corridor of the neighbourhood. No people are visible yet, but indiscernible voices are heard in both Arabic and French. The first trace of a figure is that of the filmmaker herself. Her voice, unmistakably hers because it is heard from behind the camera, and the unsteady pace of the hand-held camera, are followed by a shot in which the shadow from the boom can be discerned against a sun-lit wall. The rest of the first scene takes place at Ghada and Adel's house. Here, a perplexed Adel is trying to help a French archaeologist figure out the layout of the tomb to which the house is attached. The scene contains a series of entertaining miscommunications. Adel doesn't understand what the archaeologist is doing: 'What is he measuring? There's nothing there. He's a professor. What can I say?' The French don't understand what Adel is saying: He asks in Arabic, 'Is this cemetery *important*?' The French debate the meaning of this obscure word. After a while, Adel decides to take matters into his own hands and walks up to the camera, grabs the lens and points it to the area of interest: 'Important, or no interest?' The archaeologist replies in his clumsy Arabic: 'I don't understand "important";' to the amusement of Adel ...

Demoris's use of what we might call 'dis-establishing shots' forces us to confront the ethics of 'making visible'. Making the invisible visible is often cited as one of the underlying objectives of documentary filmmaking that deals with issues, people, or places that are usually disregarded. Yet it goes without saying that this task is not inherently informed by some principle of equality. Who 'makes' visible, for instance? The documentarist, as Trinh T. Minh-ha knows from her own practice, 'in "giving a voice", might forget that she thereby becomes the "giver"'.<sup>43</sup> That is one risk. The other risk is that one might take for granted a clear dichotomy between visibility and invisibility. *To whom* does one make visible? How is invisibility constituted? What

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43 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 67.

about visible invisibilities — a recent example being the Lebanese documentary film *Makhdoumin* (2016),<sup>44</sup> where the violently obvious absence of the domestic workers at the centre of the documentary makes a point about their position in Lebanese middle-class society — or invisible visibilities, akin to a Gramscian notion of hegemony as naturalized ideology? Perhaps the challenge would be to break with an easy division between visibility/invisibility or as Trinh suggests,

not to fall prey to the dominant process of totalization: rather than working at bringing, through gradual acquisition, what has been kept invisible into visibility, one would have to break with such a system of dualities and show, for example, what constitutes invisibility itself as well as what exceeds mere visibility.<sup>45</sup>

As an example, in the first sequence with Om Bassiouni, the woman who bakes bread in an outdoor makeshift oven, the camera introduces us very slowly over the course of around half an hour first to the woman and her daughter, to their struggles with the handmade oven and the persisting rain. Only much later does the scene switch to wider shots of the locale where all this takes place. Since this site is the Mafrouza garbage dump, the film wants us to invest time on Om Bassiouni and her bread-baking before seeing the difficult images of the dumping ground. Demoris insists that if she showed an establishing shot first, we would then only be able to see the garbage dump and nothing else.

And yet, nothing much seems to have changed. At the end of the day, deferring and accumulating is the emphatic perpetuation of a lack and the persistence of a hoarding — too little, too much; diluted, dilated, yet again. But this might just be the point. The durational opacity that results from the accumulation of time and everydayness, twice redundant, places us at the centre of the most fundamental queries regarding cinematic representation. What I appreciate about *Mafrouza* are its impossibilities — in some sense, a film by a Frenchwoman in the bidonville of a country that has been an economic colony of France can never be anything but a failure. In another sense, however, the film

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44 *Makhdoumin / A Maid for Each*, dir. by Maher Abi Samra (Icarus Films, 2016).

45 Marina Gržinić, 'Shifting The Borders of The Other: An Interview With Trinh T. Minh-ha', *Telepolis*, 12 August 1998 <<http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/3/3265/1.html>> [accessed 5 May 2016].

acts as a springboard for a set of important questions. The decision not to begin with an establishing shot of the garbage-filled yard in which Om Bassiouni bakes betrays an assumption that that particular form of visibility would trigger an immediate jump to abstraction: everything else would be blinded by it and subsumed into it. In that sense, abstraction is a form of transparency. Talking about long duration as a strategy of decolonization in the work of Philipino filmmaker Lav Diaz, William Brown notes: ‘Applied to films, the process of abstraction can be understood the moment a viewer experiences unhappiness about the length of a film “because they got the film already”’.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, to claim that there’s anything intrinsically ethical about long duration would be naïve, to say the least — the long debates in documentary ethics have done their part in establishing the ingenuity of conflating uninterrupted spatiotemporality with any form of adequate ethical representation. It is my contention that the careful montage work that takes us at a snail’s pace from Om Bassiouni to her surroundings has very little to do with preserving any kind of spatiotemporal integrity and is equally irrelevant to any kind of realist impulse that would guarantee access, presence, empathy, or authenticity. Instead, I think its strategy comes closer to an anxious and self-conscious response to the complex issue of the ethics and politics of visibility — and here, the use of long duration and the undramatic temporalities of everyday life become crucial, both as a tool (something with which to) and as a medium (something within which).<sup>47</sup> In other words, accumulation in *Mafrouza* does not operate as the steady acquisition of visibilities — a quasi-Marxian accumulation of understanding as property. Instead, the accumulation of everydayness and dead time pushes the event further and further back as it swells.

I’ve tried to show that the film attempts to sabotage the landmines it sets for itself at every turn. By using this form of durational opacity, it creates a hesitation that accumulates in order to defer. It doesn’t really matter if it fails.

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46 William Brown, ‘*Melancholia*: The Long, Slow Cinema of Lav Diaz’, in *Slow Cinema*, ed. by Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 112–22 (p. 119).

47 Thank you to Claire Nioche-Sibony for this insight.

Rosa Barotsi, 'Not Yet: Duration as Detour in Emmanuelle Demoris's *Mafrouza Cycle*', in *Errans: Going Astray, Being Adrift, Coming to Nothing*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 24 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 75–92 <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-24\\_3](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-24_3)>

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