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TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE MONTAGE OF THE FEMALE PORTRAIT. THE THEATRE OF THE BODY: FICTIONAL TEARS AND REAL TEARS

One of the many ways of approaching film history—and probably one of the most neglected— is to examine how filmmakers portray actresses: the distances, relationships, and stories which, behind the main plot, are captured between the one filming and the one being filmed. In cinema, unlike literature or painting, a character is not only an imaginary being, but also a real person who inscribes his or her voice, gestures and gazes into the experience of the film; this occurs "in the world and with the world, with real creatures as raw material, before the intervention of language" (BERGALA, 2006: 8).

In this article, I will explore this work with corporeal matter, the signs inscribed as *real presences*, through the tears of actresses in performances filmed by D. W. Griffith, Josef von Sternberg, Nicholas Ray, John Cassavetes and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. As is well known, in modern cinema actresses have abandoned or at least moved away from the figure of the *movie star* in the interests of presenting a more realistic image, thereby eroding the distant, ideal image constructed in the studio: a transition from an *iconic* image to an *indexical* image, in which the effects of reality and the passing of time on the body are made visible. In the 1960s, filmmakers such as Bergman or Cassavetes would take these signs to the absolute extreme, stripping the actress of all but her condition as a person or a mask.

An actress usually portrays crying as a fictitious and depersonalised dramatic moment of her private life. However, when modern filmmakers transformed the cinematic forms of the female portrait, in an effort to expand the limits of everyday realism, they sought to make tears evoke or reveal something that belonged to the performer's private world and made visible a personal or autobiographical emotion. In this respect, it is important to differentiate *real tears* from *fictional tears*: between the two manifestations a tension will often occur in what is visible, between the artifice (feigned

A Day in the Country (Partie de campagne, Jean Renoir, 1936)
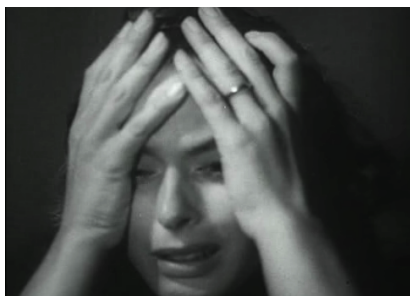
Stromboli (Stromboli, terra di Dio, Roberto Rossellini, 1949)
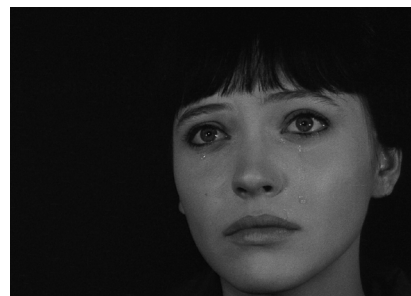
Her life to live (Vivre sa vie, Jean-Luc Godard, 1962) / Courtesy of Regia Films

tears) and a presumed transparency (uncontrollable tears that fall beyond our will). Since we learn to use tears and understand what they represent, many dramatic scenes suggest a character's doubt about the truth or the motivations of another character who cries. Film, in general, follows the classical perspective in which tears belong to the realm of emotion and not of feeling, as the neurologist Antonio Damasio observed: "emotions play out in the theatre of the body, while feelings play out in the theatre of the mind" (DAMASIO, 2005: 32). In this sense, in scenes in which tears are portrayed, the body acts as a theatre or a depiction in which there is a friction between the iconic and the indexical image. It is thus hardly coincidental that some of the

most meaningful moments in modern cinema are those showing an actress's tears: Sylvia Bataille, after the romantic encounter in *A Day in the Country* (Partie de Campagne, Jean Renoir, 1936), Ingrid Bergman on the volcano island in *Stromboli,* (Stromboli, terra de Dio, Roberto Rossellini, 1949), or when she sees the burnt bodies of two lovers in *Journey to Italy* (Viaggio in Italia, Roberto Rossellini, 1953), or as Anna Karina in *My Life to Live* (Vivre sa vie, Jean-Luc Godard, 1962), or while watching the theatrical tears of Falconetti in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (La passion de Jeanne d'Arc, Carl T. Dreyer, 1928). In this essay, I will compare different film scenes from the perspective of the formal ideas exchanged between filmmaker and actress, according to

the construction of her image as an icon or as a real body.

Fictional tears

The portrayal of suffering in the female face emerged very early in film history, thanks to the possibilities of the close-up and its way of enlarging the smallest and almost imperceptible details of the face, thus exploring exhaustively all of the actress's expressive and facial dynamics at close range, turning her face into a theatrical stage. The film actress's portrayal of emotions has surely never been as central as it was in Griffith's films: every emotion seemed to correspond to a gesture, and Lillian Gish's mastery consisted of her ability to play these performative notes at an extremely quick *tempo*. It was a rhythm

Way Down East (David Wark Griffith, 1920)

that left the spectator amazed, as cinema seemed able to capture whole stages of an emotional life in just a few seconds (from laughter to mourning, from pain to joy, from passion to fear): "Granted that the person has a moving-camera face–that is, a person who photographs well–the first thing needed is 'soul' [...] For principals I must have people with souls, people who know and feel their parts and who express every single feeling in the entire gamut of emotions with their muscles" (GRIFFITH, 1971: 50-51).

In *Way Down East* (D. W. Griffith, 1920), when the male seducer confesses his unfaithfulness to Lillian Gish, she crosses the full emotional arc that from tears to laughter in just a few seconds: there is not a single frame without a complete expressive gesture; that is, not a single expressive gesture is prolonged, because what matters is its dynamic energy, the maximum force of expression and facial mimicry. On the other hand, this iconic composition of the face in transformation illustrates a conception of time (the flash, the ephemeral vibration) that contrasts with the drawn out depiction of the expression to the point of emotional emptiness in Warhol's or Garrel's starkly real actresses. In Griffith, the gestures accentuate the expression because of the extreme use of their performative and dramatic potentiality, and are perfect analogies (representations of our idea of panic or excessive emotion) as icons of suffering or visible forms of the poetic idea of suffering. In *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919), the father of Lillian Gish's character asks her to smile. The expression would be very different, as would also be seen in Cassavetes's films, where the face is pushed to its limits and shows signs of real suffering. But in the history of the landscape of the face, Lillian Gish was virgin territory that the filmmaker had yet to conquer. She kept her purity intact because pain could still be depicted through mimicry and the actress could be freed (or purified) from it by embodying it. Her face could return to its

original, unharmed state without any marks or signs of a real experience.

This conception of the face that kept its beauty unchanged projected the iconic dimension and force of the star, like Dietrich or Garbo: a being impervious to the effects of time, able to go from one film to the next with her image intact, with no signs of the corrosion of time, a sort of mask or ideal beauty, frozen and imperishable.

For Josef von Sternberg, the face was a landscape: "The camera has been used to explore the human figure and to concentrate on its face [...] Monstrously enlarged as it is on the screen, the human face should be treated like a landscape. It is to be viewed as if the eyes were lakes, the nose a hill, the cheeks broad meadows, the mouth a flower patch, the forehead sky, and the hair clouds. Values must be altered as in an actual landscape by investing it with lights and shadows" (STERNBERG, 1973: 323).

This was a task in which the filmmaker needed to find beauty under the explicit or ordinary layers and masks to reveal it in its ideal form: "The camera by itself is a destructive instrument and the men behind it need a lot of time and effort to tame it. It has its own concept of beauty and it dramatizes what it sees; it cuts, deforms and flattens mass. The term *beauty* describes the most nebulous concept of all" (STERNBERG, 1973).

There is a valuable document of Sternberg filming a close-up included in *Josef von Sternberg, een retrospektieve* [Josef von Sternberg, a retrospective] (Harry Kümel, 1969). In this piece for television, made at a time when the filmmaker had not shot a film in fifteen years and shortly before his death, Sternberg prepares the shot by moving the lights with his own hands, managing areas of shadow and subjecting the actress to the directives of the only shot possible, with a single angle and lighting.

During the preparation of the shot, Sternberg explains some of his aesthetic doctrines, based on the suppression of the will of the actress, who has
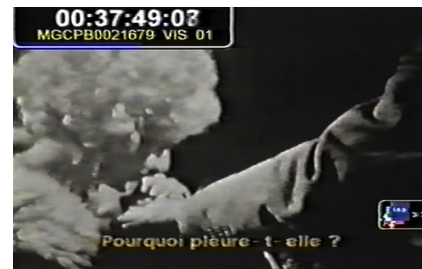
Josef von Sternberg, een retrospektieve (Harry Kümel, 1969).

to become a mere surface or a piece of clay for the filmmaker to shape: "Tell her not to think, to forget everything. There is nobody here, except me" or "When I finish with an actor he is exhausted. He doesn't know what he wants: and that is what I want." During shooting, Dorothée Blanck, the actress, bursts into tears: "Why is she crying? Is it my fault? Tell her that in this business, we work with our heads, not with our hearts. An actor doesn't cry. If he cries, the audience won't cry. Our job is to pretend, not to be real. My actors never know what to do." Sternberg, on this point, seems to share Diderot's theory in *The Paradox of Acting*: taking up Horace's precept for drama and all literature in *Ars Poetica*, line 102, "*si vis me flere primum dolendum est ipsi tibi*" ("if you wish me to weep, you yourself must first feel grief"), Diderot argues for a distance or mental coldness on the part of the actor in relation to the

The Scarlet Empress
(Josef von Sternberg, 1934)

emotion in order to "transfer to the theatrical and the literary the ambiguity of all moral characterisations" (VALVERDE, 1999: 166).

At the end of the film shoot, when the lights are already set, Sternberg gives only one instruction to the actress: "Look at my hand." Throughout the seven films he made with Marlene Dietrich, his *marionette* (as he refers to her in his memoirs), Sternberg maintained the idea that tears should be kept veiled, barely intuited or glimpsed, rather than made explicit, so that the spectator could be brought closer to the drama and its emotion. The beauty of his style lies in the way he sublimates tears through visual motifs that are able to contain or express the inner potentiality of weeping. For instance, in *The Scarlett Empress* (Josef von Sternberg, 1934), the flame of a candle which, placed in front of the actress's iris, reveals the emotion in her eyes, in the theatre of the body, without any theatrical performance by the actress, who acts here as cold matter sculpted by the filmmaker: as her pupils grow moist, a tear wells up.

On the other hand, in the scene of *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932) where Marlene Dietrich is unfairly forced to give up her child, Sternberg elegantly shows the modesty and the discretion —in this case, forced rather than proud— of her tears. After her husband tells her: "Stay away from Johnny, for good. Give him a chance to forget you. That's the only way you can be a good mother to him now", Sternberg shows a close-up of Marlene Dietrich, a tree branch blocking our view of her left eye, which almost seems to be drawing the tears she sheds onto her face. The aesthetics of the character —and the actress— are identified the contention of the cinematographic style, as the emotion in the distant shot is that of a body that suppresses its tears. Later in the film, when her son says goodbye to her, her hat discreetly hides her face, leaving it to us to imagine her pain. It is, of course, a rhetorical device: although we see that she is covering her gaze, it is really only covered to us, because in the actual reverse shot her son can see her eyes.

After this scene, when the son leaves with his father on the train, the actress no longer has to hide her tears. Sternberg conceives these moments as an emotional combination: he apparently distances us from the figure in the wide shots, although his composition shows her loneliness and abandonment, in a kind of identification through distancing —she is sitting on a bench waiting for her son to board the train and leave— which is reinforced by a shot from her point of view. In the first shots, we move progressively closer to Marlene Dietrich to see the moment when she can no longer contain her tears, and to feel the depth from which they come and the silent pain they reveal, reinforced by the sound of the departing train: first, her hat covers one eye; then, we see the first tear; and finally, two uncovered watering eyes. When a tear appears in Sternberg's cinema, it is but a brief flash.

Blonde Venus (Josef von Sternberg, 1932)

Finally, his way of filming the Hollywood star begins to take the form of an approach towards a portrait of intimacy, either through the actress' position or through body gestures in close-ups, with an intimacy that is shared or constructed only for the spectator: for instance, in *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), in the scene where Shanghai Lily (Marlene Dietrich) weeps alone after deciding to give herself up to Chang to save her former lover, Captain Harvey (Clive Brook). This scene has the appearance of a shot filmed in the privacy of a studio, an intimate portrait that anticipates Jean Seberg's shots in *Les hautes solitudes* [The High Solitudes] (Philippe Garrel, 1974).

In short, it is a contained and discreet beauty that reveals (in art and art theory) the difficulty faced by the actress in portraying crying (in front of the spectator, other characters, and the camera) when she should not or does not want to cry, and the difficulty faced by the filmmaker who wants to film the deep, inner emotion of tears, not merely their outer manifestation: "To know what to reveal and what to conceal," wrote Sternberg, "and in what degrees to do this is all there is to art" (STERNBERG, 1973: 311-312). And in a letter, he wrote: "All art is an exploration of an unreal world [...] it comes from the search for abstraction that doesn't normally appear in things as they are" (MERIGEAU, 1983: 36). Sternberg's poetics of the portrait depends on safeguarding the beauty of the icon from the irruptions of reality while at the same time finding the distance at which the invisible and the abstract can be embodied dramatically in the human figure. What do we see in the scenes discussed here? Nothing that does not arise from our own projections and from the mechanisms through which, from our distance as spectators, make us feel close to the image of the actress. In contrast to Rossellini, for whom a tear will always be a tear (according to his famous idea that if things are there, they don't have to be manipulated), the index or trace of a real presence,

Shanghai Express (Josef von Sternberg, 1932)

for Sternberg a tear is an ideal form that we compose in our minds. Thus, the spectator constructs the scene and makes the mental comparison between the little tear, real, filmed or suggested, and its ideal or dramatic form in our imagination: an iconic presence, the unreal way in which we feel the vibration of beauty.

Real tears

In *La Rampe*, Serge Daney suggests that what made Garbo or Dietrich stars "was their way of looking at something far away that wasn't even imaginable. Modernism began when the photo of Bergman's Monika transfixed a whole generation of cinephiles without making a star of Harriet Andersson" (DANEY, 2004, 81-82).

In modern cinema, many films (by Rossellini, Bergman, Godard or Antonioni) composed a documentary layer beneath or underlying the fiction: sentimental chronicles of the filmmaker filming his wife or lover, in a sort of intimate diary or portrait which was at the same time a self-portrait. This way of filming the other gave importance to how to show the tension between the real woman and her condition of actress, and at the same time established a form of activating the visual correspondence (or reverse shot) of the character/actress/woman from the position of the camera, off-camera, towards the filmmaker, instead of towards the fictional male character. It was a temporal relationship that generated a move towards to the filmed body, or a move away from the mythical and iconic vi-

Les Hautes solitudes (Philippe Garrel, 1974)

sion of the star, which ultimately revealed the signs of the passage of time in the faces filmed, to the point of showing them in their depletion and evanescence. In this history of forms, filmmakers established their ideas on the ontology of film.

In his distinction between symbols, icons and indexes, Pierce placed photographic images in the last category: "Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection [index]" (DUBOIS, 1986: 67).

In his essay on the photographic act, Philippe Dubois comments on some of the implications of the conception of photography as index: "in typological terms, this means that photography

> In that same period in Hollywood, Nicholas Ray, using an autobiographical background, created another approach to the intimate portrait

Arriba. *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966)
Abajo. *Husbands* (John Cassavetes, 1970)

ing mechanism of the camera, in an effect of dramatisation of time, or where the camera close-up maximizes the porosity of their faces, revealing its filmic gesture and desire through imperfect, out-of-focus images, in aggressive misframes.

It is a very well-known fact that Rossellini's films with Ingrid Bergman were among the founding moments of this decline of the female portrait. Here, the Hollywood actress, instead of losing her star status through contact with reality and the ordinary world, ends up exposing her *mask*. Placed in natural settings that assault her figure, and faced with the vision of the real, full of uncertainty, the actress moves, turns on herself and is forced into a state of alienation —her famous foreignness— which makes her confront herself, as if she were seeing her image mentally, but abrasively, in a mirror, with her status of Hollywood actress, while trying to fake naturalness or a performative realism. In the morning at the end of *Stromboli,* in the images of her serene tears, we witness a moment of weakness in the actress, who had spent the shooting of the film crying —and perhaps her tears provoked Rossellini's need to film them— over the consequences of her love for the filmmaker, for whom she had abandoned her daughter and become the object of stern criticism in the United States: "I cried so much that I thought there wouldn't be any tears left [...] (Roberto) had seen all the tears I'd cried on Stromboli... People thought I was having such a marvellous time being in love, when all I did was cry because the real guilt of my offence was grinding me down" (Bergman, 1981: 294). Thus, the image documents the depression and exhaustion of the actress, who no longer forces a naturalist expression or an artificial act of weeping, and where the mask of the actress is indistinguish-

able from the mask of the woman, in a recognition of the impossibility of unravelling a truth concealed behind the appearance: the truth is the appearance, which in its objectivity reveals that what characterises Ingrid Bergman is precisely that *she is* an actress. When the actress tries to detach herself from her mask she realizes it is impossible because her mask has become or is now her face.

In that same period in Hollywood, Nicholas Ray, using an autobiographical background, created another approach to the intimate portrait. His relationship with Gloria Grahame was shorter and much less intense than Rossellini and Bergman's: it started during the shooting of *A Woman's Secret* (Nicholas Ray, 1949) and ended a year later, during the shooting of *In a*

Arriba. *Stromboli* (Stromboli, terra di Dio, Roberto Rossellini, 1949)
Abajo. *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950)

is related to that category of signs in which we also find smoke (index of a fire), a shadow (index of a presence), a scar (index of a wound), a ruin (vestige of something that was once there), the symptom (of an illness), or the footprint. All these signs share the fact of 'being really affected by its object' (Pierce, 2,248), of maintaining a relationship of 'physical connection' with it (3,361). In this sense, it is radically different from an icon (which is defined only by its similarity) and from symbols (which, like words from a language, define their object by a general convention)" (Dubois, 1986: 47).

Smoke, shadow, scar, ruin, symptom, footprint: images and metaphors that characterise a new way of filming the face. Consider the films of Rossellini, Bergman, Godard, Warhol, Cassavetes, Pialat, Garrel or Dwoskin, in which actresses must hold their gaze in the face of the violence of the recording or film-

Lonely Place (Nicholas Ray, 1950). Nevertheless, in this sorrowful film we find a quality similar to Rossellini's, as Erice pointed out: "The almost documentary use of the Humphrey Bogart-Gloria Grahame couple, very much a reflection of the relationship between Ray himself and the actress (to whom he was married and from whom he separated during the shooting), gave *In a Lonely Place* an almost autobiographical tone, whose only parallel in Europe was Rossellini's films with Ingrid Bergman. *In a Lonely Place* was filmed at Ray's first home in Hollywood and the last scene —improvised on the set— must have been quite a faithful reproduction of his own breakup with the actress" (ERICE, 1986: 128).

In Gloria Grahame's last scene in the film, when she says goodbye to Dixon (the screenwriter played by Bogart), a tear falls slowly down her left cheek, leaving a mark in its wake, while she says: "I lived a few weeks while you loved me. Goodbye, Dix." In this shot, real life or a real separation seems to have left a painful residue, a scar on the fiction. If we compare these real tears to some previous ones in the film, which are clearly fictitious, such as the scene where Laurel comforts herself with Dixon's agent and expresses her discomfort, we can see that she is an acting body, a body pretending, while in the final scene her face is the index of a separation that is happening at that moment and whose final outcome is as yet unknown: this final scene is left open, without a narrative closure, and escapes the controlled limits of the fiction. What mattered to Ray was the melody of the eyes, and the way cinema was able to capture the thoughts or the emotion flowing between filmmaker and actress: "«The camera is an instrument, it's the microscope which allows you to detect the melody of the look. It's a wonderful instrument because its microscopic power is for me the equivalent of introspection in a writer, and the unrolling of the film in the camera corresponds, in my opinion, to the train of thought of the writer" (Ray, quoted in ERICE: 1986, 84).

The camera as a microscope or as a supplement to vision has entailed a new emotional perception of corporeal matter: for instance, the enlarged tear as a mark, a trace, a fluid matter that dramatises the skin and decomposes the expression of the face or makes its make-up run is an essential motif in John Cassavetes' poetics. In his films, which avoid any decorative stylisation, the scenes are filled with off-centre and overexposed shots, where the filmmaker pushes the limits of the sensibility of the film with different emulsions that expose the filmic matter (its granularity) and, at the same time, add a sort of tactile vibration to the image, as if the camera were caressing, stroking, or even hitting the actress in the filmmaker's rage or desire to film/touch the other. Hence the jarring violence of Cassavetes's style in fragmenting the figure, filming until he finds something painful in the form of traces and marks on the cheekbones, the cheeks, the eyes, the face, as seen in the close-ups in *Faces* (John Cassavetes, 1968), in which Lynn Carlin's tears appear *enlarged* after her suicide attempt, with her face distorted and almost asphyxiated by the borders of the frame. The tearful scenes of Cassavetes's wife, Gena Rowlands, in *Minnie and Moskovitz* (John Cassavetes, 1968), the tears of a girl after her boyfriend's rejection in *Shadows* (John Cassavetes, 1959), or the tears of a young Chinese woman in a long, out-of-frame and then out-of-focus shot in *Husbands* (John Cassavetes, 1970): the concentration of time shared, compacted and lived out in those faces has such an intensity that it becomes difficult to distinguish where artifice ends and reality begins. The intimate pain that Ray exposes in Gloria Grahame's tears has exploded, leaving only the effects of its devastation. As Jacques Aumont would say: "the face could not go through all of this, the apocalypse and the hardships, without being marked by it. [...] Long scenes of wordy conversation, performed in a state of empathy

Faces (John Cassavetes, 1968)

disconnected from reality, fill the faces with emotions, making them overflow, always to the limits of breakdown, only then to regain control of themselves. Cassavetes's relentless camera hunts them down, makes off with them and draws them out in prolonged close-ups, magnified all the more by the texture of the swollen 16mm print. They are shown as passive prey to all that passes through them, all that flows and spills, tears, words, emotions" (AUMONT, 1986: 161).

Alongside this energetic dramatisation of the flow of time and emotions, other filmmakers started working on shots of suspended, abrasive duration, the violence of prolonged filming, in which the actress is immersed

Screen Test (Andy Warhol, 1964)

The Mother and the Whore (La maman et la putain, Jean Eustache, 1972),

in an introspective image or an inner thought, as she starts to meditate or to search inside herself in response to being filmed without knowing what to do or how to react. This is the device revealed in Ann Buchanan's tears in her *Screen Test* (Andy Warhol, 1964). In the 1960s, starting with *Tree Movie* (Jackson Mac Low, 1960) and Warhol himself, the spaces filmed highlighted their duration as a major theme and compositional rhythm, and cinema reached a level of poor or private realism where it had not yet been, a private bedroom, the intimate space that would be the setting for some of the films of Garrel, Akerman or Estauche. Having moved from the fifty-second reels used by the Lumière to the ten-minute reels, the shot could now last longer and extend the synchrony between real time and filmed time, at the same time broadening the possibilities of the domestic film and stretching the dramatic duration of the weeping to a more ordinary and realistic time, as in the final confession of *The Mother and the Whore* (La maman et la putain, Jean Eustache, 1972), unsustainable precisely because of the sustained duration of the shot, utterly overwhelming and distressing. Again, as we saw with Griffith or Sternberg, the aesthetic of the filmmaker — his desire for the shot— is identified with the aesthetic of the character — her emotion in the drama— through the rhymed time between life and its depiction.

All of these questions on the forms of the cinematic portrait were ultimately turned into dramatic plots in the films

of Fassbinder or Werner Schroeter. But while Schroeter starts with the iconic face to take its indices to explosive extremes, Fassbinder, who mythologises actresses in a different way, goes in the opposite direction, starting with a wounded, wrinkled face, with no make-up, to dream of filming an imaginary, ideal face. This process is marked —unlike the softness with which Schroeter or Garrel filmed faces— by jealousy and aggression. In *Veronika Voss* (Die Sehnsucht der Veronika Voss, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1982), a film about the decline of an actress in 1950s Germany, the meeting with the journalist at the beginning of the film allows us to glimpse the almost abstract vestiges of an old icon, of imaginary, ideal beauty. Veronika Voss is an old star, one who could go from crying to laughter in a fraction of a second, who ends up consumed by drugs. In the end, on a film set, she will be unable to express artificial tears in a natural way and will have to use glycerine. Fassbinder films this scene as a psychological humiliation and a visual corrosion.

These few fragments, which could be extended and problematised with many others, at least point to the aesthetic tension generated in the sensibility of the film by the dual iconic and indicial nature of the film portrait: rather than separating by periods, what I wish to suggest here is that these two are the negative and the positive side of

the same image, depending on the filmmaker's perspective. In the different types of cinematic approaches to the tears of the actress we find, rather than different narrative forms, the ways in which different filmmakers build their ideas about time in working or in the work of the body.

Notes

*The pictures that illustrate this article have been provided voluntarily by the author of the text; it is his responsibility to localize and to ask for the copyright to the owner. (Edition note.)

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