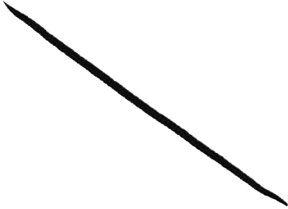


PERFORMATIVE CINEMA
AND ITS EMERGENCE.
A DISCUSSION OF
A UNIQUE AND
TRANSGRESSIVE APPROACH
IN **CONTEMPORARY**
CINEMATIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to establish a frame of reference and allow a better understanding of an unexplored section of cinema which is performative in nature, as it relates directly to the audience, the same way performance art does. Some of the emerging forms of performative cinema shall be listed and analyzed, using examples from the works of relevant and important directors to support the proposed argument. Some of the directors whose films I will discuss are Pere Portabella, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Ruben Östlund, and Lars von Trier. The article will also highlight the division inherent to performative cinema, as its means of expression can be either direct, through an unfiltered narrative, or indirect, with the basics of performance built into the very structure of the plot. The differences between the two shall be thoroughly examined, alongside some stylistic tendencies that have started to accumulate over the last decades. This continuous evolution has led to the transformation and innovation of the cinematic language.

Keywords: performative cinema, narrative truthfulness, metadiscourse, “performative” reality, critique of the *Zeitgeist*, director’s “God complex,” semantics of theatrical dramaturgy.

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Performative cinema is present in today’s cinematic language as an underlying, subversive, and yet unclassified form of cinema. It is neither a wave, nor a conscious collective choice in filmmaking, but more of a stylistic tendency in the craft of film directing that has emerged over the last few decades. The motives for its rise are varied, as are its different implementations across the modern cinematic spectrum. But before moving on to analyze the various nuances of this area of filmmaking, a clear definition is needed.

What does the term *performative* mean? On hearing it, one immediately thinks of performance art and its implications for the direct relationship between artist and spectator, where the artist strives towards both physically and psychologically immersing the spectator into the work they are performing. One can argue that performance art has been around since the invention of Greek tragedy, taking on many forms before becoming a central focus for twentieth-century modern artists. *Commedia dell’arte*, or even the circus show, is to some extent connected with the idea of performance—as in performing a certain spectacle for the audience with the purpose of mass entertainment. The twentieth century saw the widespread use of the phrase *performance art* to designate a wide array of artistic orientations—among them, the most popular being live installations by renowned visual artists from Antonin Artaud and the Dadaist movement to Georgia O’Keeffe, Andy Warhol, and later on, Marina Abramovic. The main focus of conceptualism and performance

art is clearly a socio-political critique of modern society and the perception of art and its role in the emancipation of the spectator.

Throughout its existence, its peak included, performance art has always strived towards improving its ability to immerse the spectator in its medium. To achieve that, it either stirred strong, conflicting emotions in the span of a short period of time, or it involved the spectator as a participant in the work of performance art. Examples, once again, abound, with many installations that prove how performance art has never allowed itself to stop advancing and evolving, maintaining its status as a promoter of the *avant-garde*. A key feature lies in the performer's reason for creating a spectacle that usurps expectations—or, in a *meta*, almost *chaos-making* sense, that can even usurp the usurping of expectations. Performance is meant to send a strong, unfiltered message from the artist directly to the audience in real time, in a definite space-time continuum, that cannot be reproduced in any other medium but the one that it is happening in.

It becomes quite clear then that performance art cannot be literally translated into cinema. Film is a medium that exists outside the limits of time (toying with the notions of past, present, and future), and as such the direct relationship between the artist (in our case, the director) and the spectator cannot exist in the traditional sense of the word. The director's message is woven into their film—a work of art that *performs* for the audience in real time, but that does not (yet) allow the spectator full interaction. Sure, there have been a couple of interactive films made, with the most famous being *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), but the viewer is limited in their so-called interaction, as the choices are pre-defined by the filmmakers, and the spectator's input is limited to pressing some buttons to enable different endings. As such, this is not so different from a regular video game, where the player is much more immersed in the storyline because they actually control most of the actions.

While there is a plethora of modern and contemporary examples that prove the emergence and continuous transformation of a subgenre of cinema that is performative in nature, the ones that I will mention based on in-depth and meticulous empirical research are landmark advancements of modern filmmaking. While researching this article, I couldn't find much written on the subject of performative cinema, but rather on the politics of performativity and how they relate to the cinematic language through narrative inclusion of body art. However, there is a manifesto of performative cinema written by **Oskar Chmiola**, a Polish visual artist. Most of the points the author is trying to make stand for an idealized version of the process of filmmaking—which is very much the case of any manifesto ever conceived on cinema. It is quite similar in this regard to the *Dogme '95* manifesto, only much more experimental.

How can then performance art have any kind of impact on the cinematic language, seeing as their media and means of expression are drastically different? The answer is probably twofold: the director's creative choices, for one, and the public's craving for newer forms of storytelling. Cinema can be a volatile and fertile ground for experiments. One needs only remember the Impressionists, Dadaists, and Surrealists of the Silent Film era to understand that the different realities and manifestations of *story* in film have already been experimented with for more than one hundred years. Cinema possesses this amazing duality: it is always linked to the *Zeitgeist*, while always in danger of becoming *passé*, outdated. This is maybe the most important reality check for filmmakers. All the great *auteurs* have become *auteurs* due to their innate genuine humanism, as they did not try to establish themselves as the paramount artists in the cinematic field. This is visible in the masterpieces of the past and in those of the present, from the films of Bergman, Kurosawa, and Fellini to those of Almodóvar, Weerasethakul, von Trier, and many other masters who have changed the face of cinema forever. And then there is another category: directors who focus on innovation for the sake of innovation, in their constant search for new forms of expression (from a technical or stylistic standpoint), merely trying to bring something new, not necessarily congruent with the film's actual core. As a result, the film is irremediably altered, losing its main purpose of showing a unique story to the audience, as filmmaking becomes more about formalist tendencies than about storytelling.

This definitive understanding of the director's craft leads us to the main focus of this article: the emergence and evolution of a stylistic approach to cinema which is *performative* in nature, as it tries to mimic the inherent spectacular nature of performance art. Performative cinema is, first and foremost, spectacular in the formalist sense. It borrows from the Surrealist movement without necessarily being a branch of Surrealism. The influences of Buñuel, Jodorowsky, and Fellini are strongly felt, while a convention of reality and realism is maintained. As such, performative cinema reproduces the impact of performance art through form and *impression*—the same impression that the French Impressionists revered as a *mantra* and cultivated in conveying their message to the spectator (with Germaine Dulac, Abel Gance, Jean Epstein as the promoters of Impressionism in the 1920s). Performative cinema does not directly or physically involve the spectators, but rather interacts with them “directly” through the characters' corporal movements, making a statement that generates a raw, unfiltered impression. And these characters are usually placed in situations that defy the “natural” sequence of events in plot development, acting as moments that are meant to communicate with the spectator from beyond the “fourth wall” by means of the metadiscourse.

The best example for the emergence of a performative cinema in connection with a *meta* cinematic language is **Pere Portabella's *Warsaw Bridge*** (original Spanish title *Pont de Varsòvia*, 1989). It might not be the first movie where performance art plays an undeniably essential role in the development of the plot, but it certainly is one of the earliest examples worthy of a closer look from the point of view of performativity translated into cinema. Portabella is an intellectual and a man with a complex understanding of the artistic world; he produced Buñuel's *Viridiana* (1961), directed several experimental documentaries (1971 *Cuadecuc, vampir* being a landmark of the genre), and dabbled in fiction filmmaking with *Warsaw Bridge* and *The Silence before Bach* (original German title *Die Stille vor Bach*, 2007). *Warsaw Bridge* is a film that more or less touches on everything. And this might explain why it did not pass the test of time that well and is not remembered as a film that had an impact on today's style of cinema. Even though, in a subliminal way, it did. In its attempt to build a metadiscourse on cinema and art, it keeps falling into the trap of elitism. The film is an ode to the idea of story identity—a narrative puzzle in itself. Music and literature are major characters in the plot development, where vignettes are interwoven with a non-linear story thread built around a love triangle between a teacher, a conductor, and a writer. Unsurprisingly, the main theme of the film centers on the very idea of story and how it is conveyed to the audience. The characters' paths cross, the dramatic threads are deliberately left unresolved, the sequences follow each other in a blur, and at the end the viewer, though unable to articulate what the film is about, is left with a strong, indescribable emotion—be it nostalgia, or purely not understanding what they have just watched. Even further, one of the main characters in the film, the writer, is unable to articulate what the book he has just finished writing is about. The audience simply has to read it. And in this lies the performative nature of *Warsaw Bridge*: it needs to be watched, as it speaks directly—and not always successfully—to the viewer.



Still from *Warsaw Bridge* (1989), directed by Pere Portabella, showing a shot from the opera scene in the fish market. Source: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0098139/mediaviewer/rm3750275585/?ref_=tt_md_1

After the film's opening credits (twenty minutes into the movie), the conductor is shown lying in an autopsy room, having died from an unknown freak accident. After that, the whole film turns into a flashback leading to the point of the conductor's death, with vignettes inserted in the ongoing interactions between the three main characters. In the end, the conductor's fate is revealed to have been as "random" as the film itself—while scuba diving, he was "swallowed up" by a fixed-wing plane that was filling up on water from the ocean to dump it on a forest fire happening on the mainland. This event is actually the real-life inspiration for the film. Portabella admitted having read a news article about a diver found dead in a scorched field, kilometers away from any body of water. And starting from this event, he built the rest of the film using metadiscourse, in a directorial style that centers on the aesthetic and the opulent, where moments of stylistic refinement coexist with moments of both deliberate and nondeliberate kitsch. While in some scenes, art direction and photography are complex, in others they are willingly simplistic. This alone signals some sort of performance by the director; however, not only he, but also the plot will become performative, as there are multiple scenes taking place in a "performative reality" that exists within the film's convention of "realist" reality. For example, there is the staging of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* opera in a fish market, where the Overture is sung by a soprano and a tenor on top of huge heaps of dead fish and sharks, in a huge freezer hall where workers are taking out the insides of the dead sea animals. This event has no connection to the main plot, except for the musical piece which happens to be the same one that the conductor rehearsed with his orchestra. Yet another scene consisting of naked older women singing in a Roman bathhouse (a clear homage to Fellini's *Satyricon*) proves to be a photography installation at a modern art museum which the main characters happen to visit. It becomes therefore apparent that the narrative puzzle of the plot consists of storytelling that employs frame stories which are almost too literal, in an almost too literal "performative" sense.

However, throughout the film, the moments of performance in the "performative reality" mingle with the "realist" reality that the characters inhabit. One such example is the scene where the professor boards a metro and everything appears to be normal and mundane in the beginning. All of a sudden, an inexplicable violent urge arises in a random passenger, and all the people in the metro seem to revert to their animal impulses of domination, randomly and savagely attacking one another. The professor barely makes it out alive, and no explanation is given as to why this act of destruction occurred in the first place. One can notice the strong similarities that this scene bears to the one in Ruben Östlund's *The Square* (2017), where the performance artist pretending to

be a gorilla starts harassing and attacking guests during a high-class meal. And therein lies the very relevance and unrecognized importance of *Warsaw Bridge*: contemporary cinema is full of *Warsaw Bridge*-s, where “performative” reality mixes with the reality of the main plot (the one I have been calling “realist,” i.e., the film’s conventional reality). From Charlie Kaufman’s *Synechdoche, New York* (2008) to Leos Carax’s *Holy Motors* (2012) and *Annette* (2021), and Ruben Östlund’s *The Square*, many twenty-first-century filmmakers have unknowingly embraced a cinema movement that can only be described as indeed performative, due to the overuse of *meta* elements that imbue entire scenes with performance art made by the characters.

Clearly, the metadiscourse of *Warsaw Bridge* is about resisting any attempt at summarizing the story in order to deny an answer to the question, “What is this story about?” Portabella’s risky bet to make unsummarizable films is admirable, as he tries to introduce in cinema the same abstruseness that some postmodern literature and contemporary music possess. It is a remarkable venture, and while his movie may be interesting and even pleasant for most to watch, the amount of self-indulgence and mannerism weigh heavier than its important political critique of society. However, his attempts at dramaturgical reinterpretation are still very much relevant today.



The final shot of *Warsaw Bridge* (1989), directed by Pere Portabella, showing the fate of the conductor.

Source: <https://mubi.com/films/warsaw-bridge>

It follows from this that performative cinema, just like any other type of cinema, evolves with the times, both as a response to and as a critique of the *Zeitgeist*. The aforementioned directors—Kaufman, Carax, and Östlund—are just some of the more successful ones who have continued to work within the frame

of performative cinema by embracing the metadiscourse and adapting it to the modern cinematic style. Their works include entire scenes of performance, and an in-depth analysis would reveal many similarities with those in *Warsaw Bridge*. This is because all these films belong to the category of *direct* performative cinema, the kind that sometimes disregards the meaning and essence of the story it is telling and instead focuses on the formal in order to “break open” the viewer’s limits of perception. This straightforward approach to translating performance into cinema causes the director, because of their personal intervention in the drama, to go beyond their status as custodian of the story. The “God complex” thus replaces the narrative thread which requires that however unexpected the dramatic events throughout the film, they must remain true to the chosen convention in order for the story to function organically. The director’s interferences with the filmic convention, if not carefully filtered out by the director, can become unwarranted and detrimental to the work precisely because they come from a different universe than the one the film exists in. It is extremely rare for a director’s creative “madness” to penetrate the work without it corrupting the spirit of the story.

But there is also *indirect* performative cinema. Now, one thing that both the cinephile and the filmmaker must agree on is that, while movies come in many shapes and forms, there is a core, unbreakable rule of cinema, namely the inherent honest relationship between filmmaker and spectator. **Cristi Puiu** makes a powerful comparison that illustrates this rule. And while there is nothing performative in his realist and always truthful style of filmmaking, he touches on a universal truth that applies to any branch of cinema. Paraphrasing the argument that he has made repeatedly in both public and private contexts (masterclasses, workshops, etc.), the director plays a game of cards with the spectator. And in this game of cards, the director cannot have aces hidden up their sleeve, as cheating in the game would mean fooling the spectator in a way which breaks the inherent rules of the game, building a toxic relationship between the two. In truth, the director’s cheating affects both the quality of the game, the relationship with the spectator, and the director’s own credibility. By cheating, the director bypasses the possibility to beat the spectator fair and square at the game, thus making the film dishonest, as it no longer represents the whole truth, but rather an augmented one.

With this example in mind, it can be said that the audience has no difficulty taking in “indirect” performative cinema, because the latter respects the rules of the card game. The elements of performance are built into the very structure of the film, and they do not aim to randomly challenge the viewers, but rather to challenge them in a controlled, solid manner that is deeply rooted in the universe of the story. This confrontation has a strong foundation, it has a reasoning, a meaning that is pivotal to every work of art, regardless of the convention, whether

realist or absurd. Directors that have genuinely understood and accepted these facts have made extremely powerful films—just to name three such directors, **Yorgos Lanthimos**, **Lars von Trier**, and **Apichatpong Weerasethakul**. They are all very different from one another, yet the major influence of performance art is visible in their works if one knows where to look. **Von Trier's *Dogville*** (2003) is in its entirety a statement inspired by Bertold Brecht's theatre, where characters behave naturalistically in the setting of a studio space, bounded by walls, fences, and other objects, in the eponymous village drawn in chalk on the ground. The semantics of theatrical dramaturgy thus merge with the convention of film veracity, where the actors have to play out varied situations in an almost empty space with boundaries that do not exist. Thus, von Trier's metadiscourse clearly goes against his own *Dogme '95* manifesto, written together with Thomas Vinterberg. In **Lanthimos' *Alps*** (Greek orig. *Alpeis*, 2011), the main characters take on the roles of the deceased in bereaved families who are not ready to move on from their loss. The film presents both the personal lives and personalities of these actors and their temporary identities, which makes it all the more interesting and unique. The members of the Alps group give a performance that is real in an absurd context, where their own identity is questioned and the dark and twisted side of human nature is observed. In this context, the film follows the way in which the characters cope with their own emotions and feelings and how they try to heal.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul has juggled in his career with the world of film and the world of modern art exhibitions and installations, standing out as the undisputed master of the film puzzle, the postmodernist *par excellence*. In his 2004 film ***Tropical Malady*** (Thai orig. *Sud pralad*), the narrative splits halfway through the film—the first part follows the romantic relationship between a soldier and a young man, and the second follows the same soldier hunting a shamanic spirit materialized as a tiger (the only connection between the two parts being that the main character is the same). When it premiered at Cannes, the audience got up from their chairs after the first half, thinking that the film had ended and another one was about to begin. This is yet another illustration of cinema's performative capacity, as it drew the public in its convention and made them accomplices to the deliberate splitting of classical dramaturgy, while maintaining the film's core untouched by the “God complex.” In that, *Tropical Malady* remains a very human story that provokes the viewer because of the sudden change in tone. The spectator may or may not like it, but when done in this manner, the piece of performative art accomplishes its goal.

Through his unique style and approach deeply rooted in animism, magic realism, and Asian mythology (with influences coming from Japanese Noh theatre as well), Weerasethakul is among the very few filmmakers who

manage to be experimental while fully respecting the rule of the “card game.” How he does it is a mystery, but it definitely has something to do with his ability to remain truthful enough to be able to express his own fantastic universe and share it with the rest of us.



Still from *Tropical Malady* (2004), directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, showing the soldier hunting the tiger spirit in the jungle.
Source: <https://www.nottelevision.net/tropical-malady-article-for-sight-sounds-greatest-films-of-all-time-issue-2023/>

Conclusion

The conclusion of this discussion is that more and more films and directors are embracing a straightforward approach to **metadiscourse** (mainly influenced by Jean-Luc Godard's work). For some years now, Romanian filmmakers too have been producing prize-winning examples of performative cinema that employ a strong, unfiltered direct message. These are the works of **Adina Pintilie** (*Touch me Not*, 2018) and **Radu Jude** (from *I Do Not Care if We Go Down in History as Barbarians*, 2018 to *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*, 2021). And this trend will probably continue one way or another.

Only time will tell in which direction performative cinema will go and to what extent it will take over the more classical approach. There certainly is room for multiple approaches, and the most relevant practice that contemporary film directors could adopt is to follow their inner voice with truthfulness. They should spare nothing to defend the story they are telling—above all from themselves.

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