

ON THE PROCESS OF **VIRTUALIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY REALITY AT OLIVER STONE**

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Abstract: Reality becomes a hybrid construct in the context of global communication. Direct perception is no longer the criterion of veracity, but the convergence of opinions about all aspects related to some kind to a given existence. Relating to the truth is the stake of the era and its contemporaries, each citizen dedicating himself to activism in all areas of personal or universal life. Performing arts naturally adapt to social change. Film and theater reflect the phenomenon by developing new styles and contaminating genres with various influences. The series signed by Oliver Stone, *Putin's Interviews* represents an example of this phenomenon. It offers a new approach to the performing arts relationship with the current reality and opens up new perspectives on new ways to enter into dialogue with the fast-paced history of the early 21st century. The hybridization of the classical genres thus seems to be a formula for taking their final re-definition. Included in the ongoing dialogue between society and the creator, the performing arts become players in a global flow of information.

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Motto:

Something imponderable. A warning sign. An illusion. What happens, say, when a magnet releases the filaments of iron filings and they mix again. Like when the strands of a ball tangle again. Like when a bow that is too tense relaxes. Like when an orchestra starts playing out of tune. However, no details could be disclosed now that could not be identified before, but all the circumstances had changed barely noticeable. (Musil, 2018, p. 59)

Introduction

Hybridism in the artistic field has become constant with the development of technology. The unprecedented pace of transformation of consciousness in the capitalist world (from the Western European and American area), has built for a century the shaping of a human ideal beyond all that history has recorded so far. The circulation of information, once liberated by the monopoly of religious elites and, later on, due to the freedom of virtual space, by that of economic elites, radically transformed art forms leading to the fundamental change of even that human ideal or standard that culture has always legitimized. Unlike the fresh look at the world that a child of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century launched to receive back elements of the reality of his future life, the young man of today is a being pre-constructed by informational reality before becoming an adult. The millennial dilemma between objectivism and subjectivism, regarding man's ability to perceive reality in its details, not colored by the viewer's personal context, disappears in the face of another type of obstacle. The flow of information makes the difference, and it is the information that causes the foundation of reality to the point where it risks destroying it. The result will be paradoxical, as long as the

propagation of information of scientific, journalistic, educational origin (relative to what all those codes mean in social, political or other environments) has as a consequence primarily the relativization of perceptual reality and its subtle replacement with a pre-established reality. The latter must have the capacity to sum up only the counter-initial statements of countless recognized courts. And yet, what will follow from this will mean nothing more than the capitulation of the individual observer to the collective observer represented by society.

The more information, the greater the anxious insecurity of the individual in the face of the overwhelming number of real elements that escape the quantification and certification of direct sensory perception. But the flow of information that began with the first encyclopedias of the eighteenth century quickly created a mirage, not at all unfounded, in essence, that of the wisdom, the grinding of man by exposing him to knowledge and his superior preparation for critical thinking necessary for social progress. It is no coincidence that the obsession with information belongs to democratic societies with capitalist economies, and the obsession with the deprivation of information is traditionally the prerogative of dictatorial societies. The reason seems to be related to another myth of modernity, a myth/ideal that underlies scientific activity in the first place and which was most often outlined by negation, a negation that is intended to become a statement: the truth.

Truth should mean objective reality or the opposite of lying. But the truth is one of those notions that define reality by reflecting it. It is thus a philosophical stake of human existence in relation to the universe and, implicitly, an important artistic stake. The search for truth in the multiple reflections of reality, i.e., in the information system, is in the age of virtual communication the equivalent of seeking and defending religious truth in the age of the Crusades.

The fascination of power and the dilemma of visual realism

In the virtual debate, the cinema intervenes through its form closest to the journalistic formula, but also the most natural to the cinema itself: the documentary film.

We always go back to the documentary. Not as a first love, but as a first necessity. That of trust. It has been said that documentary film does not support forgery, that it is impossible for a documentary filmmaker to lie, that a good director lives in the midst of problems, at their core... (Damian, 2003, p. 221)

The beginning of the second millennium and the development of the Internet bring to the documentary genre, the moment of its glory. The mirage of easy access to the most diverse information (be it scientific, historical, about communities and cultures everywhere) conquers the audience that becomes a

loyal consumer. What is the purpose? The goal seems to be to find out, to acquire certain truths about the world and people, but this cannot be a goal in itself. It is possible that the abundance of information stimulated that ideal of omniscience and ubiquity, attributes of the gods that people secretly want to arrogate from time immemorial, times that gave birth to the ideal. So the continual consumption of information would maintain the illusion of gaining an impressive baggage of knowledge (impressive is a vague quantitative determination, but the only one possible in the vague realm of knowledge) so that, ultimately, it leads to the discovery of the truth in its entirety. The truth about reality.

But in the context of documentary film, although the illusion of reality transmitted directly to the public is stronger than in any other field, probably the author's formula as an objective witness is there the easiest betrayed and, perhaps, the most effective. Of course, the reason is often involuntary. It is primarily related to the subjectivism inherent in the human being who, through simple perception, filters and interprets information from the surrounding world.

Oliver Stone is an established filmmaker, early in his career, through his fiction films. Titles such as *Platoon* (1986), *JFK* (1991), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), established him in the history of cinema as a creator, perhaps controversial, but certainly original. What motivates such a personality to approach the documentary genre? The search for the truth for sure and, in the case of Stone, a temperamental and committed artist, even his denunciation. What is the difference between a director with a documentary vocation and a regular fiction author in approaching this genre? The difference is the consciousness of manipulation, obvious in Stone, often non-existent in the other. The portrait documentaries proposed by the American director invite a reflection on the genre itself because the subtle hybridity of Stone's documentaries denounces an inevitable lack of neutrality of the information itself and even more so of the visual information.

A parenthesis is required here. The case of visual communication is extremely relevant primarily because the image seems to be the least elaborate form of information transmission. Imagine a picture: a child looks out the window. His figure is seen from the back, and the camera captures, beyond the window frame, let's say, an inner courtyard of blocks with a tree grown in the middle of a playground. The sky is gray, and the season is dull, cold, heralded by nature's asceticism. The image is static and nothing attributed to the author's contribution influences its orientation in one way or another. The image seems to provide us with objective information. It gives us details about the child's location, the environment in which he lives and, possibly, the condition in which that environment surprises him. The spectator's illusion will be that he participates in a moment in someone's reality and will know from now on enough elements to

make the child's life more familiar. Even an attitude towards what he sees will be outlined in the viewer, depending on the strength of the composition of the frame, which is more or less *effective* in its emotional impact. It is precisely the persuasive ability of the visual image that hybridizes the documentary desideratum. The reply to reality easily replaces reality itself. We don't know what we have beyond the frame, but we assume that nothing more important, more relevant would have been presented as long as the viewfinder of the camera, naturally assimilated to our own eye, did not focus on another element. Perhaps, by recording the background, the viewer could discover a colorful room where comfort and warmth would cancel out the sad message in the composition. Maybe, on the contrary, a poor interior would accentuate it or the presence of a noisy group of friends would make the window frame just a momentary frame of carefree boredom. But the viewer doesn't take anything into account. The representation of reality has the ability to conquer the interlocutor without resistance. The information, as it is processed, more or less artistically by the author of the recording, ends up successfully bypassing critical thinking.

Oliver Stone is a special case, perhaps even unique, in the cinema space, because rarely has a filmmaker with such a strong personality in the field of fiction, leaned so consistently on the documentary genre. In the second part of his career, Oliver Stone often approaches this genre and dedicates himself to the study of personalities of contemporary history such as Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, Benjamin Netanyahu, etc. Even if his desire to reflect the real dimension of these political leaders is obvious, as the great painters of European culture once did for the prominent members of the royal houses, the artistic structure of cinematic fiction turns his approach into a hybrid work. The hybridity is subtle, Stone being very attentive to the professional rules. But he manages to distort the result, giving reality the commentary of the great playwright. We can easily assimilate the portraits of Oliver Stone with updates of the well-known theatrical characters, the Shakespearean ones, for example, very close to the controversial and turbulent air of these modern effigies. A strong and relevant example is that of Vladimir Putin, outlined in four episodes of interviews, conducted between 2015 and 2017.

The interview technique is a recognized mastery of journalism, able not only to provide a certain media exposure to the interviewee, but also to reveal truths that he would have managed to successfully hide. Stone is a formidable interlocutor for Vladimir Putin. He decides to get out of the director's position, to appear in front of the cameras where he becomes an acting director *working* with his interlocutor as well as with an actor/character. We seem to be witnessing the preparation of a film, that is, a making off, the only genre that allows us to

reveal the presence of the camera and the production team, the directing tactics and even the director's notebook. At first glance, Stone's agenda is ubiquitous, and the director's relationship with it, an effective tactic to induce a less formal connection between the famous director and the Russian president, as well as an apparent continual hesitation that Stone assumes, eager to relax his dialogue partner and eventually catch him off guard. A *stalking* relationship is established between the two strong personalities. Stone pursues his subject by trying and maintaining control, and Vladimir Putin oscillates between the temptation to demonstrate his power and the desire to present the portrait of a popular, jovial and relaxed man. It is interesting how the two leaders reflect in each other – one, leading to exceptional results of prestigious film sets in complex film projects, the other, holding with his iron hand the reins of a country of great importance on the geopolitical map of the world. They work in tandem like two mirrors revealing about each other the temptations of two forms of power in seemingly extremely different, *de facto* intensely similar realms, as both represent the application of personal narrative to reality, an act that determines history, but also the art of the show, the latter circumscribing its purpose in the purely mental and not at all material dimension of existence.

Starting, therefore, from the premise of an interview, Oliver Stone calls in for own desideratum (announced since the title) the means of other cinematic formulas. Very quickly, he accumulates elements of another documentary genre, the portrait film. We can follow Vladimir Putin in different poses and environments, from his official office, to the hockey rink or the church of his summer residence (Dacha). Real film sequences begin to take shape, real sketches of cinematic moments, and the real character sometimes behaves exactly like a perfectly integrated hero in a fictional setting. Remarkable is, for example, the sequence in the Kremlin Throne Room. In the middle of the monumental palace and in front of the seats where the Russian tsars announced their decisions, Putin becomes a certain museographer. Separated from the insignia of power by the museum cord, he physically places himself outside the Russian monarchical tradition. Stone's comment finds its perfect place when he reminds Putin that he is called „*the Tsar*”. What immediately follows overlayed on Putin's answer is a scene of the famous movie from 1958, *Ivan the Terrible* (Part II) directed by Serghei Eisenstein in which the famous historical figure rises from the throne with a threatening attitude, looking over the camera as above the heads of his subjects. The montage obviously comments on the facade modesty of the Russian president, who overbid his despotic image through a distortion caused by the simple preconception of the traditionalist Russians. Stone adds to the dream of glorification of the improvised museographer. The compliments flow one by one

and the president naturally enters the trap set by the director. He admits that he is always able to control himself and that he does not allow himself any moment of hesitation. It is only a matter of time before the political figure who compared himself a few minutes earlier with the founders of Russian glory enjoys his own pettiness. Putin feels beyond any moment of weakness because he is not a woman. He smiles contentedly at this witty retort in front of an Oliver Stone, laughing even more contented at the effectiveness of his tactics, which in an instant caused the oversized president to line up with absolutely every man in the world just out of the desire to emphasize how different he is from the feminine gender. Putin only realizes that he may have lacked diplomacy in his expression and, out of a desire to justify himself, concludes even more firmly by adding that only the nature of things is to blame. Total capitulation. Putin returns to his modest stature, a mere human being, subject to biological data, and Oliver Stone escapes from the Kremlin Palace to critically quote George Bush's 2001 statement, when he declared his confidence in the Russian leader as a future partner.

What vitiates Stone's documentary approach seems to be the magic that his own idea of reality exerts on himself. First of all, the director is an artist with a message. Obviously, it is also the quality that made him dedicate himself to fiction film and the trait that makes him deeply betray the documentary genre. In fact, in the interviews with Vladimir Putin we find many of the stylistic features of some films that made him famous (some of them, especially if we refer to the director's cut, have obvious affiliations with *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles). Thus, we review the way the filming angles comment on the character. As in *JFK* or *Nixon*, the camera is often placed in low angle, letting the central character dominate the frame, or lurks, filming beyond the various objects that surround him. These stylistic elements, doubled by the slowing down of the shot (slow motion) and the sudden interruption of the real sound to make room for music are the specific instruments of Oliver Stone – the fiction director. Through these elements, Stone induces the viewer to feel that the character is trying to hide, and the camera becomes the magnifying glass that fixes the hermetically sealed man in the film frame as in a glass container in a researcher's laboratory. In fact, a simple comparison with *Nixon* of the Kremlin scene in *The Putin Interviews* is in itself a study of fundamentally different state systems, the Russian and the American systems. If Nixon played by Anthony Hopkins walks the aisles of the CIA surrounded by collaborators, Putin is strikingly alone, the American film crew as partners is the only companion of the Russian president. The visual commentary that interrupts Nixon's remarks expresses responsibility and fragility (archive frame with American soldiers getting off a plane and a detailed filming of a flower). In Putin's case, all the images added in the editing process represent the

despotic figures of Russian history. The music has the same engaging character, but in Nixon's case, it's rhythmic, suspenseful music, while for Putin the imperial trumpets that once announced the monarch's descent into the palace play. In the case of Nixon, the surveillance camera is visually quoted, which catches him advancing through the corridors, for Vladimir Putin we have the detailed plan with the monitor of the video camera recording the interview. The themes are fundamentally different between the two, even opposite. Nixon is threatened by the tracking system, Putin is eager to build up the marketing of his own image.

Of course, the stylistic lushness of the *Nixon* film cannot be compared to *The Putin Interviews*. The first is the equivalent of a painting, the second of a sketch. In this respect, the titles are also suggestive. If *Nixon* is named after the protagonist, here we are dealing with the relativization of Putin's hypostases. We are dealing with interviews, that is, an image exercise that Putin is apparently doing himself because Oliver Stone is withdrawing from the process. In fact, discourses about power in the performing arts invite authors to contaminate the original forms, to create hybrid shows. Ostermeier uses in *Hamlet* the cinematic image through live video projection to comment on the truth on stage. In his book, *Theatre and Fear*, he proposes a moment that explains through a metaphor the insatiable curiosity felt before the human figure:

We can easily imagine a situation in which, for example, the light on the stairs goes out and someone waiting downstairs and hearing the sound of your footsteps asks, „Who's there?“ What would you answer? What might be the answer to this question? Would you just call his name? What is hidden behind the mask of your physical appearance – behind the name? Who are you? Who are we? What is your „self“? (Ostermeier, 2016, p. 79)

The man's face returns in response to a question from Ostermeier. The human face, oversized either physically or by the obsessive fixation of the camera is intuited at the same time as the over-theme of power because the latter is generated by the ego, by the over-evaluation of the mysterious human being. The approach of great artists such as Stone or Ostermeier is not unique, other creators with equally important names and whose artistic personalities have marked both theater and cinema, bring into question the same motive, confirming it as possibly being one of *the keys to* understanding the dilemmas of the modern age. If we remember, for example, Theo Angelopoulos (with the obsessive image of Lenin's bust floating on a barge on the Danube in *Ulysses' Gaze*) or the vivid portraits scenically created by Bob Wilson, we see with them the phenomenon of the conflict the human being develops regarding the limitation of its own dimensions. It is a kind of game or test that started with the first societies, with tribal communities when the oversized human face was called divine image and

then turned into a portrait of the leader with divine origins and was recognized, starting with the twentieth century, as the direct expression of the supreme ambition of the human being to master all and sundry, to show himself to others as, in fact, he is believed to be, superior, omnipotent, God himself. But, beyond its dimensions, the face remains the main communicator of information in human reality and thus we return to our original theme.

Communicating information does not have only one direction, the one I detailed above, namely, from the content creator to the viewer. Just like any real dialogue, the opposite is as important: the reaction of the viewer or, more broadly, of the consumer of information. In a world marked by an exceptional dynamism of transmission channels, there is a growing dilemma related to the most efficient formula in which informational content can be communicated. The logic of informational dialogue involves agreeing on a series of common codes. They are based on the familiarity of those involved in the circuit, from education, to culture and even temperament. However, as the size of the community expands, as the community transforms into a diverse crowd spread across the globe, the more specific the formulas of informational content lose their nuances. In this case, they become the equivalent of a loose, broadly integrative framework that relates essentially to one common element: the human being. Forced by the sometimes radical differences between individuals or groups involved in information trafficking, *formulas* or, more precisely, their creators, tend to avoid any reference to possible socio-economic realities, anthropological evidence, etc. preferring the generality to the specificity. Such a resolution quickly leads to two effects that fundamentally transform, of course, the information formula, but also, what is called the information community. The change of the first will also determine the way in which the communities will relate to themselves, and the nuances that were lost in the communication process will also fade from the image of the human being about oneself.

It is the sacrifice that globalization has required to become a reality, first and foremost through the non-discriminatory but also undifferentiated fraternization of all communities around the world. At this stage, the frustrations of giving up are felt as well as those of the hybrid, intermediate forms. One feels the option of simplicity, often superficial, in front of the much more complex textured formula where only the accents indicate the direction of the content. What is this simplicity? It has often been accused of clichés, but it is really an essentialization of what is fundamental and undeniable human: emotion. That is why the essence of any means of information communication at the beginning of the 21st century appeals to the sentimental involvement of the public. Trick assimilated to easy expressions, especially in the cultural field, it reaffirms itself

with audacity in the space of classical arts, cinema or other forms of message transmission such as social networks or media. Very quickly, all the information channels became infected with the emotional commitment, generating naturally or even inciting a suitable response in their audience. Thus, the global intra-community dialogue became a gradual emotional inflammation that found its stake with the greatest temperamental load: the truth. Truth is a chameleon-like concept and, having become a declarative goal, it will be colored according to the field of reference in topics that are subordinated to it, such as: justice, political correctness, equal opportunities, ecology, etc. As a result, humanity was quickly drawn into an endless series of activist movements, but not a concrete community, more an abstract, emotional one. Empathy is a noble human trait that, when overstimulated, can become a dangerous drug that can fuel violence and radicalism. Regardless of the consequences, reality requires modern man to position himself.

It is an issue that has been of concern to capitalist societies without a solution. Observations on the degree of commitment required of each citizen through any information flow, be it mainstream or social media or cultural, did not lead to the drawing up of a deescalation plan. Societies have become more and more combative, often this trend being attributed to the comfortable life, free from real challenges that economic well-being has been able to provide to its citizens. History, however, would not prolong its patience with the peace of prosperous nations, and as soon as global events further inflamed global communication, an unprecedented phenomenon took shape: historical activism. Historical activism denounces an unprecedented participation in the millennia of evolution of human society, a participation of each individual in *the great change*, as any moment that transcends the importance of regional limitation could be defined.

The Covid pandemic, with its onset in 2020, raises the stakes of the communicative game to dizzying heights. Now we no longer have to deal with what seemed almost an inventory of history, a thorough drilling for arguments for civilian combat, this time it is about the realization of history in full swing. And the activism is ready. Every citizen already has the weapon of his own opinion, he has his own battalion of communication cohesion, the reflection of his daily involvement in the topical commentary and the practiced code of empathy ready to harden him in the trenches. Suddenly, we are no longer talking about sporadic outbreaks that will be reunited by the post-factual historical vision, nor by live TV accounts (as was the case with the revolutions of the '90s). From 2020 to 2021, history beats through every citizen, and the daily interpretation of the narrative influences it, directs it and certainly changes its course. We can witness the democratization of what we knew as history, that history that unfolded on the scale of humanity, determined by leaders with oversized authority. The

measure of massive involvement in the established stake of the truth, launches in the historical plan a new player, incapable of exercising power until now – the masses. Citizens, each of them individually, stimulate the flow of communication that rolls into global currents of opinion. The power tries to adapt by intervening through the famous *trolls*, false profiles that formulate propaganda messages or spread false news. There is a real war of the mind. However, the ability of the central government to control an entire millennial world skilled in the art of communication is becoming less and less impressive. Thus, globalization could bring to power the representatives of billions of members of humanity, as much event creators as the recognized leaders of the world. In this context, reality itself changes its consistency. Most citizens will be more actively involved in what is not happening in their daily lives and will live mostly the life of the world and not their physical existence limited to a specific time and space. Reality itself, therefore, is hybridizing, already mixing with its opposite – the virtual. The truth is no longer verified by the proof of its concrete viability, but becomes more and more the prerogative of the vision, the opinion, in short, the convincing information.

In this context, art only reflects in its turn such a society of successive reflections and also because of the context it cannot but become militant. Basically, its value to society would disappear if the artist thought less about his historical commitment than the man on the street. Also, insofar as the same artist lives and works in a society engaged in the construction of history, it becomes unnatural to evade involvement by any motivation (among the secular ones we could mention the superiority of the elite, the asceticism of the spiritual life, the sacrificial dedication to form). The means of the performing arts, in particular, are taken over and rolled in informational formulas: scriptwriting, interpretation, filming, editing, etc. they spread as natural practices of expression beyond even the word. The attitude of the creator then acquires the quality of an informed opinion and subordinates the valorization conferred so far to the means used. Most of the artists quoted, both Oliver Stone and Ostermeier were visionaries and foreshadowed, through their creations with a direct address to contemporary history, the absolute challenge of the age they live in: the disintegration of the statuary-revolt authority, already belonging to past times. With or without direct intention, in his interviews with Vladimir Putin, Oliver Stone decomposes the living but already worn in the effigy figure of the Russian president. The specific face of the president is reflected by the film to the audience to be carefully examined. Condemned in a press cascade for promoting Putin's image, Oliver Stone must defend himself only through his own creation, and the repeated observation that those who accuse him are the ones who did not watch his film draws attention to one significant detail. The image is far from a mere statement.

The image can be compared, in literary terms, to an essay.

The image assembles a series of statements and contradictions and does not represent what was said at the beginnings of the visual offensive, *a thousand words*, but an articulated construction of sentences that make up a vision. It is true that in order to become a vision, the image must be organized by the eye of a creator. In Stone's interviews, few shots lack that value. They do not reproduce a random reality but choose the representative elements from a real *offer* carefully studied by the filmmaker. Putin's face is the map on which the camera seeks to decipher the energies of thought, just as by exposing himself on the huge screen of the stage, Ostermeier exposes the face of Hamlet as he offers the world his prestigious reflections on life and death. For a millennial, anthropocentric history, man is the generator of his own glory and decay. The springs of this power are hidden in his being whose sophisticated expression is the human face. Let us not forget that the obsession of authority has always been to reproduce the image of the one who represents it, just as the church understood to reproduce centrally the image of the One, man-above-men, God. In his narcissistic dream, humanity insists on the figure of the individual and gives in to its hypnotic effect by insisting with the question: what is your story and who marked it on your face?

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