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Broken Images: The Aesthetics and Ethics of Cinematic Iconoclasm

Chiara Quaranta

PhD in Film Studies
The University of Edinburgh
2018
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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signature:

Chiara Quaranta
Abstract

This thesis explores the issue of iconoclasm in Western European cinema after World War II. While little attention has been given to this topic in the specific field of film studies, history, philosophy and religious studies have investigated it thoroughly, so much so that it is possible to apply some of the work carried out in these disciplines to the analysis of iconoclasm in the cinema. Iconoclasm refers to the wilful destruction of images that can be either literal or metaphorical, and which depends on the interpretation of the nature of the image and of the copy-prototype relationship.

Scholars in history and philosophy (Besançon 2009; Bettetini 2006; Ladner 1953; Mondzain 2003, 2005; Wunenburger 1999) have examined the issue of iconoclasm, outlining its route from Plato’s dialogues in the fourth century BCE to the Byzantine controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries, up to the present day. The issue of iconoclasm in the cinema has only been partially investigated, primarily in a few articles (Groys 2002; Perniola 2013), and more recently in Poirson-Dechonne’s (2016) work on iconoclastic tendencies in cinema.

This thesis examines cinematic iconoclasm with particular attention to two types of images – the Greek eikôn and eidôlon. The eikôn, which eventually became the icon during the religious controversy over sacred representations, stands for an image that establishes a connection between both the sensible and the intelligible realms. Conversely, the eidôlon, which came to signify the idol, is an image grounded exclusively in the visible sphere and which hides its nature as a copy. In the thesis I demonstrate that the cinema embodies the same dichotomy that has inhabited Western thought about images since ancient times. This division occurs between the image as a faithful reproduction of reality, and the image as a false and deceitful copy.

The thesis is divided into three sections. The first section consists in the theoretical framework for the research and delineates the genealogy of the Western image and the development of an iconoclastic thought from Plato to cinema. The second and the third sections are dedicated to the discussion of theoretical and practical forms of cinematic iconoclasm. Specifically, the second section focuses on the critique of the cinematic image as eidôlon, namely as an illusory and deceptive
representation of reality, drawing examples from some exponents of Marxist film theory and filmmakers such as Isidore Isou, Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Godard. The third section examines the production of what I term the iconoclastic eikôn in the cinema. By this I mean a type of image that aims at representing an intelligible model, thus establishing a link between what is visible on the screen and an invisible prototype – the peculiarity of the eikôn – without resorting to mimetic reproduction. To this end I primarily engage with Ingmar Bergman’s and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s work.

My overall contention is that iconoclasm in the arts, and specifically in the cinema, consists in a questioning of our modes of producing and consuming what is visible. Furthermore, cinematic iconoclasm can produce an ethics of (in)visibility. That is, the negation of a figurative image (the destruction of the eidôlon) has the potential to stimulate a critical reflection on what and how we see, and on the responsibility of one’s look, thereby investigating the limits of our right to see and show everything on a screen.
Lay Summary

Moving images are now everywhere, from the tiny, private screens of our phones to the large, public screens of cinemas. We can easily make moving images and in much the same easy way we can destroy them – we only need to click a button. Hence, we tend to establish with these images an ambiguous relationship: we consider them both fascinating (we make them) and disposable (we delete them). Current research has shown the risk and power of films and moving images. However, little attention has been given to the importance of destroying them. Therefore, my aim is to examine this neglected aspect of film and image making, discussing why and how we decide to destroy certain images. The destruction of images (i.e., iconoclasm) reveals as much about contemporary attitudes towards visual representation as does their making. As such, the study of the destruction of film images is significant since it questions the ways we make and watch films. Iconoclasm allows us to explore our responsibility towards what we decide to show and see both inside and outside the cinema.

Therefore, my thesis develops as a study of image-destruction both philosophically and in the cinema. I first look at how Western philosophy has discussed the making and destruction of images, specifically in the work of Plato, Plotinus and Early Christian theologians. I then consider the so-called Byzantine crisis, that is to say, the historical opposition between those in favour of religious images (i.e., iconophiles) and those against such images (i.e., iconoclasts). This overview of philosophical approaches to images is useful as a frame to understand similar discourses in the field of cinema. I distinguish between two forms that iconoclasm can take in visual arts: 1) Images are destroyed as a way of critiquing how and what those images represent – for instance, a Marxist filmmaker destroying images of capitalist society as a way of criticising capitalism. 2) Images are destroyed because their content has an un-representable quality – for instance, images of extreme suffering or representations of genocides. I dedicate a chapter to each of these two forms of iconoclasm in the cinema, highlighting their aesthetic aspects as well as their ethical value. My main question is to understand whether there are limits to our right to show and see contents on a screen, and to explore how destruction in visual arts can be an aesthetic and ethical tool.
This thesis is important in showing possible ways in which we interact with images in general and then specifically with film images. The overlooked topic of image-destruction can be a means of questioning how we produce and consume moving images, and can be helpful for understanding more common attitudes towards images in our everyday life. Given that we are surrounded by images, the study of their destruction (and destructive potential) has become an essential task. Cinema, the art of moving images, is thus essential to understanding the threats and possibilities of iconoclasm.
Introduction

We live in an age and society profoundly affected by visual images. From the screens of our phones to work computers, from advertising images scattered across towns to films and television programmes, the emphasis on sight and recorded images (both still and moving) is stronger than ever in our quotidian life. And yet, this abundance of images has not brought about a greater awareness regarding their nature. The contemporary “‘iconocracy’”, as Marie-José Mondzain (2011, 13) aptly defines it, allows anyone to become a producer of images but, at the same time, it has not made it any easier for individuals to understand the power and risk of images. What is more, and seemingly paradoxically, this extremely visible society is characterised by an unprecedented and unnoticed destruction of images on a daily basis. Hardly anybody is immune to this dichotomic situation – for instance, we easily take pictures and make videos with digital technologies and just as easily we delete them (Bettetini 2006, 148; Larsen 2014, 32-34) for a variety of reasons, such as the lack of hard drive space or because a beloved face has become intolerable. Hence, the destruction of images, that is, iconoclasm (etymologically “the breaking of images”), constitutes a pervasive element of contemporary Western society and can, thus, be used as a way to investigate how we interact with and understand still and moving images.

Rationale

This dissertation develops from the potential value of iconoclasm in the ambit of the visual arts and cinema in particular. While the topic of iconoclasm has been at the centre of many scholarly works in philosophy, theology and history, it has been quite overlooked by the arts and film studies. The core of this thesis, therefore, coils around cinematic iconoclasm and what I term broken images in the cinema. I address these images as broken to both recall the etymological meaning of iconoclasm – “the breaking of images” – and specify that their relationship with the referents is broken. Indeed, the images analysed in this thesis are literally or metaphorically broken: no longer functioning as self-evident, mimetic images of reality, these images are
broken in their physicality (the film strip is literally damaged) or broken in their ability to figuratively represent something (monochromatic screens, fades to colour, altered velocity).

By cinematic iconoclasm I mean the deliberate, literal or metaphorical, destruction of film images which hinges on an interpretation of the relationship between the image and its referent in terms of alterity. My main argument is that the destruction of images in the cinema can be a breeding ground for an aesthetic and ethical investigation of the ways we understand and use moving images. Contrary to historic iconoclasm, which consists in the negation of the other’s point of view through the destruction of the other’s objects (an attitude evident in iconoclastic gestures such as the smashing of sacred icons in Byzantium in the eighth and ninth centuries and the destruction of Catholic abbeys in Scotland during the Reformation; or, more recently, in the blowing up of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and the ancient city of Palmira [Besançon 2000; Bettetini 2006, 92-104, 142; Latour & Weibel 2002; Mondzain 2011, 247]), iconoclasm in the arts has the potential to be an aesthetic as well as an ethical approach. That is, destruction as an artistic gesture within an artwork can be a way to challenge traditional canons, as well as a means to respect reality, its complexity and non-reducibility to a self-explanatory, mimetic reproduction. For example, when Kazimir Malevich makes monochromatic paintings or Robert Rauschenberg erases a de Kooning drawing, they are renewing the criteria for painting and, at the same time, reflecting on sight and mimesis; and when John Cage produces music with silence or Pierre Schaeffer inaugurates concrete music, they are redefining the concept of music itself (see, Belting 2002; Gamboni 1997; Weibel 2002, 570-684). In the cinema, iconoclastic approaches concretise in literal destructions of the film strip or in metaphorical negations of mimetic film images. For instance, Isidore Isou’s and Guy Debord’s material scraping of the film strip or Jean-Luc Godard’s, Ingmar Bergman’s and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s usage of monochromatic screens are iconoclastic gestures against the film image’s ability to mimetically represent the referent as well as a way to redefine what cinema can be.

I develop my argument on cinematic iconoclasm from the dichotomy between two types of images, the Greek 
\[ \text{εἰκόνας} \] and 
\[ \text{εἴδωλον} \]. While both terms can translate as image, they nonetheless refer to two quite different
conceptions of the image, and as such they are found in philosophical and theological discussions regarding the nature of images. The *eikôn*, which became the icon in the Christian controversy over the representation of God in a material frame, stands for an image which references its model, whereas the *eidôlon*, which came to signify the heretic idol, consists in a deceitful image with no relationship with the prototype. I have chosen to keep the Ancient Greek words rather than using the English equivalent for two main reasons. First of all, while the English “icon” and “idol” are strongly related to their usage in theology, where they refer to material representations of God, the Greek *eikôn* and *eidôlon* preserve their philosophical, and pagan, meaning. Secondly, the Greek terms maintain a richness of meanings, deriving from the depth of the Ancient Greek language, which the English “image” fails to convey. As I go on to explain in the first section of the thesis, any English translation of *eikôn* and *eidôlon* loses the etymological and philosophical meaning that the two terms contain. In a world in which digital communication is increasingly characterised by short messages, tweets and emoticons, words and their often hidden meanings become decidedly important. Therefore, I have resolved to keep the Greek *eikôn* and *eidôlon* because their meaning is slightly yet significantly different from any possible English translation.

Throughout the thesis I rework the dichotomy between the *eikôn* and the *eidôlon* in the cinema, tracing a thread from Plato’s philosophy up to contemporary films. What is more, I contend that the opposition between the *eikôn* and the *eidôlon* gives rise to forms of cinematic iconoclasm. The first form develops from a critique of the image as an illusory and deceptive copy (*eidôlon*), and bears many similarities to the arguments made by the iconoclasts in the eighth and ninth centuries. The second form of cinematic iconoclasm explores the ethical potential of what I address as iconoclastic *eikôn*. By this term I define an image which retains the character of the *eikôn* of referencing the prototype, while being reflective of an iconoclastic understanding of the image-prototype relationship. That is to say, an iconoclastic *eikôn* maintains at once the quality of being a mediator between two elements otherwise separated and an iconoclastic aspect given by the negation of mimesis; hence, the visual image is in some way insufficient to figuratively represent its model.
The questions tying the thesis together concern the ways in which iconoclastic film images establish a web of relationships with their models and the spectator. Can everything have a copy of itself? That is, can we make images of everything? This question, which is more of a quandary, also leads to interrogating the limits of our right to see and show something on a screen. Ultimately, when this right is challenged by iconoclastic gestures, we are left wondering what it is that we see when we see images of imagelessness.

Methodology and Literature Review

Because of the very nature of iconoclasm and the way I explore it in relation to philosophy and cinema, there is no specific section labelled as a literature review. Rather, the whole thesis contains several literature reviews due to the nature of the topic itself. Iconoclasm, in fact, encompasses different disciplines and cannot be ascribed to one field without referring to other disciplines. It is impossible, for instance, to discuss the iconoclastic value of a monochromatic image in a film without referencing the philosophical and historical interpretations of the copy-prototype relationship. Accordingly, I draw from a wide variety of scholarly works ranging from Ancient and Medieval philosophy to contemporary philosophy of the image, theology, history, history of art and film studies. In each chapter I include an appropriately defined literature review which integrates previous ones.

There are, nevertheless, some fundamental works which recur throughout the thesis and remain key points of reference for this dissertation. A crucial text discussing the *eikôn-eidôlon* dichotomy in Ancient philosophy is Suzanne Saïd’s article “Deux noms de l’image en grec ancien: idole et icône” [Two names of the image in ancient Greek: idol and icon] (1987), which also hints at the consequences of this dichotomy on contemporary interpretations of the image. An important guide for understanding the genealogy of images is Jean-Jacques Wunenburger’s *Filosofia delle immagini* [Philosophy of images] (1999), which delineates the main philosophical interpretations of the visual image. Among the essential works on philosophical and historical iconoclasm is Marie-José Mondzain’s *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (2005), which effectively explains the iconoclastic and iconophilic perspectives in the eighth and
ninth centuries, and traces the influence of Byzantine thought on current interpretations of images. Another invaluable source on the topic is Alain Besançon’s *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (2000), a detailed study encompassing iconoclasm from the seventh century BCE up to early twentieth century Russian Abstract art. Finally, Maria Tilde Bettetini’s *Le radici dell’iconoclastia* [*The roots of iconoclasm*] (2006) thoroughly discusses iconoclasm in history and philosophy, emphasising its enduring effects on contemporary society.

Because of the overall lack of works on iconoclasm in the cinema, Marion Poirson-Dechonne’s *Entre spiritualité et laïcité, la tentation iconoclaste du cinéma* [*Between spirituality and secularism, the iconoclastic temptation of cinema*] (2016) represents to date the main source on the topic. However, as I explain at the end of the third chapter, my treatment of iconoclasm differs considerably from hers. The other fundamental text on iconoclasm in cinema, to which I often turn throughout the thesis, is the special issue “*Cinema e iconoclastia*” [*Cinema and iconoclasm*] (Perniola 2013), which collects essays ranging from iconoclastic and iconophilic interpretations of the cinematic close-up to the anti-mimetic significance of monochromatic screens.

As it is clear from these few titles, my approach to iconoclasm in cinema is philosophically inflected. Not only because iconoclasm originated as a philosophical stance concerning the relationship between images and their referents, but also because it has been overlooked by film studies. In developing and defending my argument I, therefore, compare the philosophy of iconoclasm with the metaphorical, and at times literal, destruction of images in the cinema. The intertwining of philosophy and cinema on the issue of iconoclasm has also led me to circumscribe the scope of this dissertation to Western European films made after World War II.

The choice of Western Europe is a direct consequence of the fact that the currently available works on iconoclasm primarily investigate the topic in the philosophical and historical context of Western Europe, which is also significantly characterised by an increased emphasis on and a contradictory attitude towards the visual sphere. As such, the Western European context is particularly suitable for discussing both the pervasiveness of reproduced moving images and the potential of iconoclasm. The decision to take World War II as a temporal watershed for the thesis
comes from its being one of the defining historical events of modern and contemporary Europe and its cinematic production, as many scholars have pointed out (among others, Aumont 2003, 145-146; Bellour 2012, 133; Daney 2004; Deleuze 1997, xi; Grespi 2013, 41; Sinnerbrink 2016, 56; Witt 2013, 130). This does not mean that films made before World War II cannot be iconoclastic (for instance, there is an argument to be made about the iconoclasm of the historical avant-gardes of the 1910s and 1920s). However, I believe that the war, the Shoah and the Liberation have brought some of the already present issues of images to the limit and have accentuated the feeling of disorientation regarding reality that find a new expression in the cinema. What is more, the Shoah in particular has marked an unprecedented crisis in Western representation, famously expressed in Theodor W. Adorno’s then retracted claim on the barbarism of writing poetry after Auschwitz (1967, 34). Rather than placing the Shoah under such an extreme and dangerous ban, it should be considered as one of those historical “objects” that lack a direct image and yet demand to be made visible (see, among others, Nancy 2005, 27-50; Saxton 2007; 2008; Wajcman 1998).

Following this thread of thought, it would seem that films on the Shoah constitute the most appropriate works for discussing iconoclasm in the cinema, and in a way they are. However, I have chosen not to consider such films for several reasons. Firstly, the Shoah is a broad and extremely complex theme which would have taken most of the thesis if it were to be appropriately considered. My aim, however, is to delineate a wider notion of cinematic iconoclasm and its possible applications. Secondly, the issue of representing the Shoah in films, the absence of images of the event per se and its status beyond mimetic reproduction, has already been thoroughly discussed by film scholars such as, among others, Joshua Hirsch (2004), Libby Saxton (2007; 2008) and Oleksandr Kobrynskyy and Gerd Bayer (2015). Lastly, the issue of iconoclasm in relation to the cinematic representation of the Shoah has been considered, albeit not systematically, in Ivelise Perniola’s L’immagine spezzata: il cinema di Claude Lanzmann [The broken image: Claude Lanzmann’s cinema] (2007) and Gérard Wajcman’s L’objet du siècle [The object of the century] (1998).
Therefore, while my framework can be used to further discuss the problem of representation in relation to the Shoah, I have selected films which deal with a variety of topics, from self-reflexivity to the suffering of the other. Moreover, the initial selective criteria regarded film form. Rather than being concerned with depictions of iconoclasm at the level of content, my exploration of the topic focuses on iconoclastic film forms. Accordingly, the film images analysed here are characterised by the breaking of a mimetic audio-visual form: I examine monochromatic screens, freeze-framed shots, slow-motion sequences and scenes where sound is disjointed from the visual element.

These stylistic techniques have been frequently employed in experimental cinema; however, I have selected, when possible, broadly narrative fiction films. The reason for choosing narrative films is their resistance to iconoclasm. While it would not be surprising to see images destroyed in their relationship with the referent in experimental cinema, their use in a narrative film opens up sudden visual hiatuses that require spectators to fill them with meaning.

At times, nevertheless, I had to take into account experimental films which are fundamental for any argument on cinematic iconoclasm, such as Isidore Isou’s Traité de bave et d’éternité (Treatise on Venom and Eternity, 1951), Guy Debord’s Hurlements en faveur de Sade (Howls for Sade, 1952), The Society of the Spectacle (La société du spectacle, 1973) and In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni (We Wander in the Night and Are Consumed by Fire, 1978), and Jean-Luc Godard’s Histoire(s) du cinéma (1988-1998). These experimental works are paradigmatic of, mainly, the first form of cinematic iconoclasm since they all articulate a critique of the illusory nature of images and literally or metaphorically destroy those images understood as false copies. To discuss this form of cinematic iconoclasm I have also selected some of Godard’s narrative films, specifically Une femme mariée (A Married Woman, 1964), Alphaville: une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution (Alphaville: A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution, 1965) and Slow Motion (Sauve qui peut (la vie), 1980) because of their use of iconoclastic devices first found in Isou’s and Debord’s experimental works. I have preferred these specific films and directors to other possible ones (for instance, to Carmelo Bene’s Our Lady of the Turks [Nostra signora dei Turchi, 1968], where mimetic
relationships between images and their referents are destroyed by means of a savage montage) because they best exemplify cinematic iconoclasm as critique, making an extensive use of different iconoclastic devices.

To discuss the second form of cinematic iconoclasm, which is primarily concerned with ethics, I have focused on Ingmar Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers* (*Viskningar och rop*, 1972) and Krzysztof Kieslowski’s *Three Colours: Blue* (*Trois couleurs: Bleu*, 1993). Both films make a reiterate, iconoclastic use of colour monochromatic screens to visually express what goes beyond mimetic reproduction – grief, suffering, death. In their treating of such delicate themes I have found the clearest examples to illustrate my argument on iconoclasm as an ethics of (in)visibility. However, many other narrative films could have been considered in relation to iconoclastic *eikônes* in the cinema, albeit not being the most emblematic ones for my analysis. Particularly appropriate films would have been João César Monteiro’s *Branca de neve* (*Snow White*, 2000), a black monochromatic film at times interrupted by shots of a cloudy sky which recounts a less known version of the famous tale; some of Michael Haneke’s films such as *The Castle* (*Das Schloß*, 1997) and *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance* (*71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls*, 1994) for they both make a significant and somewhat iconoclastic use of black screens, or *Caché* (*Hidden*, 2005) and *Funny Games* (1997) for their use of the off-screen space. The most noticeable absentee is perhaps Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993), which is missing from the thesis due to time and my privileging of narrative, figurative films. While there is no specific chapter on these absent films, I do go over some of them in the thesis.

In the end, since I could not have appropriately discussed all the possible films, I have selected those which I consider to be the most emblematic regarding cinematic iconoclasm. The fact that many films lend themselves to be analysed through the iconoclastic paradigm shows the potential for iconoclasm in the cinema.

**Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis is comprised of three main sections, which are themselves divided into various chapters. This partition turned out to be the most coherent and logical for my argumentation. A first section provides the theoretical framework for the research
and two other sections, each dedicated to illustrating one form of cinematic iconoclasm, develop the film analyses.

Accordingly, the first section situates the existing body of literature on iconoclasm and cinema and on the more general debate on images. The first and second chapters focus on the status of the image in contemporary Western society and on the dichotomy between the image as *eidōlon* and the image as *eikôn*, delineating their conceptual history. The third chapter concentrates on the issue of iconoclasm in the cinema, from the existing literature to my own argument on cinematic iconoclasm.

The first form of cinematic iconoclasm constitutes the core of the second section. Here, I outline the critique of the cinematic image as *eidōlon*, namely as an illusory copy of phenomenal reality, in both theory and practice. The cinematic *eidōlon* is epitomised by the images of classical Hollywood cinema and, more generally, mainstream cinema. After considering the critique of illusionism in Marxist film theory in the fourth chapter, I analyse films which metaphorically or literally proceed to destroy audio-visual images, thereby reiterating the same criticism of the image. I begin by examining, in the fifth chapter, Isidore Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, which heralds the destruction of cinema and presents several iconoclastic devices. In the sixth chapter, I look at the iconoclastic use of monochromatic screens, sound and image disjunctions, and altered motion in some of Guy Debord’s and Jean-Luc Godard’s works. Specifically, I consider Debord’s *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, *The Society of the Spectacle* and *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*; and Godard’s *Une femme mariée*, *Alphaville* and *Slow Motion*. To conclude this section, in the seventh chapter, I discuss Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, which constitutes the work ideally bridging the second and the third sections. In this magnum opus, in fact, are found both the critique of the film image as *eidōlon* and the production of iconoclastic *eikônes*, that is, images capable of establishing a relationship with the model going beyond mimesis.

Finally, the third section focuses on iconoclastic *eikônes* in the cinema, exploring their ethical quality, and proposes an ethics of (in)visibility. Addressing questions concerning our right to show and see everything on a screen, the section revolves around the problematics of representing the others’ suffering. In the eighth
chapter I delineate my argument on iconoclastic eikônes as founders of an ethics of (in)visibility, exploring how ethical preoccupations underlie particular iconoclastic film aesthetics. In the ninth and tenth chapters respectively, I provide in-depth analyses of Ingmar Bergman’s Cries and Whispers and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s Three Colours: Blue, with particular attention to the possible iconoclastic value of colour in cinema and the ethics of film-making and film-viewing that they promote.

Throughout the three sections, I trace the thread of an iconoclastic thinking which goes from Plato’s suspicion of images of art, through Plotinus’s theory of emanation and the Byzantine crisis, up to film theorists’ and filmmakers’ investigation of the limits and ethical implications of mimesis in the cinema. Iconoclasm, both as a theoretical approach and an artistic practice, has proved to be a useful tool for exploring the aesthetics and the ethics of the film image. It embraces issues concerning the visible and the sayable, bringing the attention to potentialities and risks of the film image, and underlines the importance of taking responsibility for the images we decide to make and look at. Ultimately, the study of iconoclasm in cinema, by focusing on difficult images (i.e., images which resist an easy and direct attribution of meaning), becomes an exercise in thinking about the ways we interact and communicate with visual images. From Plato to cinema, our relationship with images is ambiguous and often conflicting. Visual images are always on the verge of being considered deceitful appearances; and yet, we continue to interrogate, produce and look at them.
Glossary of Terms

Throughout the thesis I employ some terms which have multifarious meanings and others which are my own. For the sake of clarity I have listed below the main terms which may be misleading, specifying the sense in which they are used in this thesis.

*Eidôlon (Είδολον)*: from *eidos/eïdoς*, “that which is seen”. An image exclusively grounded in the visible sphere with no connection with its prototype. Particularly in Plato, it translates as “phantom” and “image reflected in a mirror or water”, therefore carrying connotations of illusion and deception.

*Eikôn (Εικόν)*: from *eîka/εικα*, “to be like”, and *eikôs/eïkôς*, “like truth”. An image in a relationship of likeness with its prototype. It functions as an intermediary between the sensible (visible) world and the intelligible realm.

*Icon*: Latinisation of the Greek *eikôn*. Used in Christian theology to define a sacred representation of God. It retains the same quality of the *eikôn* of being an intermediary between the terrestrial world (humans) and the celestial sphere (God). Not to be confused with Charles S. Peirce’s semiotic use of this term to mean a sign which mimetically resembles in its features the physical appearance of the referent. While in Peirce’s use the relationship between icon and referent is imitational, in Christian theology is relational.

*Iconoclasm*: from *eikôn* and *kláô/κλάω*, “I break”; etymologically “the breaking of icons”. From an iconophilic perspective, attitude against sacred representations of God (icons). From an iconoclastic perspective, attitude against a certain type of images understood as false copies of the referent (idols). Had the iconoclasts won the controversy over sacred images in the eighth and ninth centuries, it would have been addressed as “idoloclasm”.

*Iconoclastic eikôn*: an image retaining the quality of the *eikôn* as that which mediates between a visual form and its model, but which does so by breaking with mimesis on the ground of an iconoclastic interpretation of the copy-prototype relationship.

*Iconophilia*: from *eikôn* and *philia/φιλία*, “friendship” or “fondness”, later “love”; etymologically “love for icons”. Historically, the attitude in favour of visual representations of God. In some texts on the Byzantine controversy, the term iconoduly is used in place of iconophilia (from *eikôn* and *douleia/δουλεία* “slavery” or “servitude”).

*Idol*: Latinisation of the Greek *eidôlon*. Used in Christian theology to address a false and deceptive representation of God; also, an image presenting itself as if it were a god.
**Figurative**: used in the sense employed in figurative arts as opposed to abstract and non-figurative art. That which reproduces recognisable aspects of phenomenal reality.

**Mimesis**: from *mimēsis/µιμησις*, “imitation”. In art, it implies a relationship of likeness with a world, be it phenomenal or fictitious. In this thesis, I follow a “‘world-reflecting’” model of artistic mimesis according to which “mimesis incorporates a response to a reality […] that is believed to exist outside and independently of art” (Halliwell 2002, 23).

**Model**: the original used for subsequent copies, i.e. “an object of imitation” (Oxford English Dictionary 2018, II). Here interchangeable with prototype, original and referent.

**Spectacularise**: to produce something which exclusively addresses the eyes of the viewer. More generally in this thesis, to reduce something invisible/intelligible to an object grounded in the visible sphere only. Drawn from the Latin *spectaculum*, which comes from the stem of the verb *spectāre*, intensive form of *specere*, which translates as “to look at something”.

Section 1. Iconoclasm from Plato to Cinema: A Theoretical Framework

Truth is an image: there is no image of truth.

(Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*)

Iconoclasm, whether historical or artistic, is an attitude towards images contingent on a specific interpretation of the relationship between certain images and their models. It is not a rejection and destruction of every image, but only of peculiar types of images deemed as false, deceptive and illusory. That is, iconoclasts lash out against those images which are understood to be in a relationship of alterity with their models. Moreover, iconoclasm constitutes a perspective on the world insofar as the destruction of certain images brings about a specific worldview. This will become clear throughout the first section, and especially in the second chapter, in which iconoclasm passes from being a philosophical stance in the works of Plato and Plotinus to becoming a physical attitude of destruction in the history of Christian images in Byzantium. As such, the study of iconoclasm involves a complexity of interwoven motifs. Before investigating the topic in the specific field of cinema, it is therefore necessary to consider its main turning points in philosophy and history, as well as its basic unit: the image. In the spectrum of possible attitudes towards images, iconoclasm and iconophilia constitute the opposite extremes. Etymologically, iconoclasm means the “breaking of images”,¹ which can be literal or metaphorical, whereas iconophilia translates as “love for images”.² Both these positions depend on the interpretation of the nature of the image and of the copy-prototype relationship, as I shall illustrate in this section.

¹ The translations from Ancient Greek into English are my own, unless otherwise specified. I have used Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry S. Jones, and Roderick McKenzie’s *Greek-English Lexicon*, ⁹th ed. (1940).
² I do not discuss here iconophobia, which translates as “fear of images” and refers to “the fear of the uncontrolled nature of iconic representation” (Kelly 1998, 451), because it does not necessarily imply the destruction of images, either literal or metaphorical. Moreover, iconophobia advocates the complete abandoning of the image, offering an unrealistic response to the issues raised by iconoclastic perspectives in regard to visual representations. For a further account, see Michael Kelly’s “Iconoclasm and Iconophobia”, in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (1998, 450-454).
The starting point for my research is, therefore, the image and its significance in the Western European imaginary. In order to understand the iconoclastic drive to destroy an image it is, in fact, necessary to first understand what an image is. In the context of a sometimes overwhelming saturation of the visual horizon in Western societies, our understanding of what an image is, is a conflicted one. On the one hand, we produce and interact with images every day, but, on the other, we are suspicious about the truthfulness of images and we tend to relegate them to the level of inferior knowledge. One possible explanation is the ambiguity of attitudes that have influenced Western understanding of images. As a result of the various semantic shifts experienced by the concept of the image, in Western thought there is the coexistence of the idea of the image as a faithful reproduction of a portion of reality (the *eikôn*) together with the conception of the image as a deceitful and false copy (the *eidôlon*). It is from this dichotomic interpretation of images that my argument on iconoclasm in the cinema develops.

This section provides the theoretical framework for the research, drawing a path that goes from Plato’s ambiguous attitude towards images of art to my own argument on cinematic iconoclasm. In the first chapter, I begin by considering the academic literature on the context of the research and on two peculiar attitudes towards images that have been developed, among others, within Western European society. Specifically, I discuss the attitudes of iconoclasm and iconophilia in relation to the Platonic suspicion of images and the faith in visual representations found in the Christian Catholic tradition. I then examine, in the second chapter, the literature on the status of the image and trace its genealogy, primarily focusing on the visible, material image, namely a representation perceivable through the senses (Casati 1991, 8). I look at the ambiguity inherent in the nature of the image, ultimately defining it as a paradoxical entity caught between the visibility of sensible things and the

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3 The term *imaginary* is here used in the sociological meaning of “the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world” (Thompson 1984, 6), which results from the physical and intellectual relationship individuals have with their society or community. I use the word *imaginary* because, as Charles Taylor (2002) points out, it refers to “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends” (106). The social imaginary thus constitutes the shared auto-representation of a community or a society, in which images and the visual horizon play a fundamental role.
invisibility of intellectual activities. To do so, I consider the copy-prototype relationship and the issue of likeness (mimesis), underlining the dual nature of the image and its dependence on socio-political and cultural contexts. In particular, I delineate a conceptual history of two kinds of images – the Greek *eikôn* and *eidôlon* – which constitute the fundamental notions for my argument on cinematic iconoclasm.

After situating iconoclasm both philosophically and historically, the third chapter is dedicated to introducing the issue into the ambit of cinema. I will first consider the dichotomy between reality and illusion in the cinema since it calls into question the copy-prototype relationship. I will then engage with the literature on the topic of iconoclasm in cinema and the opposition between iconophilic and iconoclastic stances, broadly referencing the special issue “Cinema e Iconoclastia” [Cinema and Iconoclasm] (Perniola 2013) and Marion Poirson-Dechonne’s *Entre spiritualité et laïcité, la tentation iconoclaste du cinéma* [Between spirituality and secularism, the iconoclastic temptation of cinema] (2016), which are the only works entirely dedicated to the topic of cinema and iconoclasm. The articles contained in the special issue discuss the theme of iconoclasm from different perspectives, stretching from the representation of the sacred in cinema to iconoclastic interpretations of the cinematic close-up and the monochromatic screen. Because of their great variety of approaches, I will consider these articles in different chapters of the thesis, mainly for the film analyses in the second and third sections. After discussing Poirson-Dechonne’s work, which examines in detail the themes of the Incarnation and the figurative representation of Christ in theology, art and cinema, I will delineate my argument on cinematic iconoclasm by distinguishing between two forms based on the *eidôlon-eikôn* dichotomy.
Chapter 1. The Western European Context

Western Europe, which provides the context for the thesis, is animated by seemingly incompatible stances towards visual images. As a place of daily image production, Western Europe also stands out as a site for the critique of visual representations. Two major influences have contributed to current positions towards images, namely Plato’s philosophical objection to aesthetic representation and Christianity’s Biblical ban on representations and the Catholic legitimation of sacred icons. Contradictory influences still shape the contemporary European imaginary to such an extent that a continuous production of images goes side by side with a sharp criticism and a mistrust of visual representations. Hence, in this chapter, I will consider some relevant authors who have extensively written on the status of images in the West and will outline the incongruous contours of Europe as a supposed society of the spectacle.

The Contemporary Imaginary

The pervasiveness of the image in the contemporary imaginary is at the centre of numerous scholarly works and has been variously addressed as a “bulimia of images” (Wunenburger 1999, 363: my translation), a “flood of modern visibility” (Mondzain 2005, 222), a “culture of images” (Mitchell 1994, 5), a “modern ocularcentric culture” (Jay 1993, 44) and a “civilization of images” (Bettetini 2006, viii: my translation; Nancy 2005, 32). Moreover, authors underline a contradictory attitude towards representation that has been developed, among others, in the West. This attitude is that of a society which overproduces images on a daily basis and, at the same time, relegates imagination to the Platonic level of inferior knowledge (Bettetini 2006; Mitchell 1994, 15; Nancy 2005, 31-32). In such a context, the idea of the image as a faithful reproduction of a portion of reality coexists with the conception of the image as a deceitful and false copy.

Several authors (Besançon 2009; Bettetini 2006; Mondzain 2005; Nancy 2005; Ross 2013) have linked the current Western European imaginary to both Platonism and Christian thought, something which would, at least partially, explain this contradictory attitude. Indeed, this “civilization of images”, bequeathed by the
Christian Catholic legitimation of icons, which I will discuss in more detail in the second chapter, is simultaneously heir to the Platonic and Biblical distrust of visual representations.

**Platonic and Christian Catholic Roots of the Western European Imaginary**

Among the most comprehensive sources on the Platonic and Christian Catholic origins of the contemporary Western imaginary are Maria Tilde Bettetini’s *Le radici dell’iconoclastia* [The roots of iconoclasm] (2006) and Alain Besançon’s *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (2009). Bettetini explores iconoclasm in philosophy, from Plato in the fourth century BCE via the Byzantine controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, before considering the present-day situation in order to link the current imaginary to those multiple and contradictory influences. Besançon follows a similar method, albeit adopting a historical point of view and discussing more sources and turning points in the debate on images. He begins his analysis in the seventh century BCE and continues it beyond the Byzantine crisis, taking into account the Renaissance, the Baroque, the English Reformation, the iconoclastic tendencies in the philosophy of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and concludes his investigation with early twentieth century Russian abstract art. Both Bettetini and Besançon demonstrate that the current ambiguous attitude towards images in Western Europe is profoundly connected to the history and philosophy that preceded it and that it finds its most influential sources in the Platonic conception of mimesis and the Christian theology of the image.

Another scholar who has thoroughly researched on iconoclasm and the philosophical understanding of images in the West is Marie-José Mondzain. In particular, her *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (2005) is dedicated to the study of Christian iconoclasm and the dependence of the contemporary imaginary on Christian thought and the Byzantine iconoclastic crisis. She draws a parallel between the themes that characterised the iconoclastic controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries and current concerns about images. What is more, Mondzain acknowledges the persistence of an opposition between iconoclasts and iconophiles, now stripped of religious connotations. The
issue of a secularised iconoclastic perspective also recurs in other scholars, who liken the iconoclastic distrust of sacred representations to present diffident attitudes towards images (Bettetini 2006, vi-viii; Jay 1993, 14; Wunenburger 1999, 357).

Furthermore, Bettetini (2006), Besançon (2009) and Jean-Michel Frodon (2002, 221-223) take into account this historical period to demonstrate how the legitimacy of sacred icons following the second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE has led to the pervasiveness of images in contemporary Western Europe. In addressing the different attitudes towards sacred images in the three monotheist religions, these scholars identify in the Christian Catholic trust in representation the seed for the later Western imaginary. Therefore, Western Europe has inherited from the Christian tradition both the iconophilic valorisation of images and its iconoclastic distrust.

Besides Christianity, the other source identified as foundational for the development of the Western European imaginary is Plato’s philosophy, in particular the dialogues in which he condemns images as degraded copies of reality (Jay 1993, 29; Maniura & Shepherd 2006, 7-10; Wunenburger 1999, 201). As I will discuss in more detail in the second chapter, the Ancient Greek philosopher develops a cosmology based on the notion of mimesis where the intelligible, supreme principles – Ideas – are the prototypes for every existent, whereas aesthetic images are illusory, potentially deceptive, copies. While in a few dialogues Plato slightly rehabilitation images (particularly in the Timaeus, the Symposium and the Laws; see, for instance, Besançon 2009, 45-53; Bettetini 2006, 3-16; Halliwell 2002, 37-97), in The Republic (390-360 BCE/2008, Book 3 and 10), as well as in other works, he de facto excludes images from true knowledge. As a result, Plato’s philosophy, which is a cornerstone of Western thought, has exerted an influence on belittling stances towards images. And, indeed, a cautious attitude regarding the truthfulness of images and, more generally, the visual dimension still persists today.

For instance, Bettetini (2006) and Robert Maniura and Rupert Shepherd (2006, 7-10) delineate how Western Europe has developed its relationship to images in a Platonic way. Maniura and Shepherd observe how the Platonic conception of the image as a deceptive representation endures today, so much so that “the western European tradition […] is inflected by a pervasive ‘Platonic’ understanding of the visible world” (2006, 10).
Finally, in his work on images, Jean-Luc Nancy (2005, 31-32) mingles the two perspectives, arguing that the interpretation of the image as a deceitful copy derives from both the iconoclastic interpretation of the Christian icon and the Platonic tradition. The intertwining of these motifs has shaped Western intellectual history to the point that contemporary society is marked by the paradox of a constant production of images which are looked at with a suspicious eye. Nancy explains,

for the duration of the West’s history, this motif [of the deceitful image] will have resulted from the alliance (and it is doubtless this that has so decisively marked the West as such) forged between the principle of monotheism and the Greek problematic of the copy or the simulation, of artifice and the absence of the original. Of course, this alliance is also the source of the mistrust toward images that continues unabated into our own time (and this in a culture that produces images in abundance), a mistrust that has, in its turn, produced a deep suspicion regarding “appearances” or “the spectacle,” as well as a certain self-satisfied critique of the “civilization of images”. (2005, 31-32)

Thus, the history of Western thought is the contradictory result of two extremes. On the one hand, it is always on the verge of refusing sensible representations, which derive from Platonic philosophy and Christian iconoclasm. On the other, it has welcomed the image following the second Council of Nicaea tradition, so much so that contemporary Western Europe is experiencing an exponential production of images and a complete saturation of the manufactured visual dimension.

**A Society of the Spectacle?**

Our daily life in Western societies constantly calls into question sight, from work computer screens to the screens of our phones and the advertising images spread across cities. Images are everywhere, constituting continuous but temporary visual flux that envelops individuals. Numerous scholars have fleshed out the almost obsessive focus that Western society grants to the visual dimension and have highlighted the risks inherent in such an attitude. Now engaging with the literature on images in contemporary Western society and the role attributed to sight, my discussion will develop from William J.T. Mitchell’s application of the expression
“society of the spectacle” (1994, 5), which he appropriates from Guy Debord,\textsuperscript{4} to contemporary Western society. The scholars considered here share a critical attitude towards the current emphasis on the visual sphere, variously exploring the extent of the spectacular character of the images daily produced in the West. Spectacular refers to the images’ addressing only the look for a fleeting moment as well as to the tendency to spectacularise life, bringing the private domain in full sight in the public sphere (e.g., the ever-increasing use of selfies on social media; see, for instance, Biressi 2017, 131-145; Giroux 2015; Rettberg 2014). While mainly engaging with a criticism of visual images in this chapter, in the third section of the thesis I will focus instead on images’ ability to provide an alternative engagement with the world when they stimulate thought and cease to be visual fluxes by turning into relational entities.

Mitchell (1994, 5) addresses contemporary Western society as “a society of the spectacle”, borrowing the expression from the French intellectual Guy Debord who coined it in the 1960s (Debord 1967/1994). This specific expression, in Mitchell’s use, is particularly suitable for conveying the increasing power that images have gained in contemporary Western society, becoming essential components of the quotidian horizon. Accordingly, Mitchell claims that “the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the image” (1994, 2) because visual culture has acquired a fundamental role in Western society.

What is more, defining contemporary society as a “society of the spectacle” can also refer to the negative connotation acquired by sight in the West, which has led to the transformation of the subject into the object of action. In a way, individuals suffer the continuous production of images. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (1995, 137-144), who has extensively written on the philosophy of images, describes the process by which individuals have become unable to creatively imagine in contemporary society, where images are overproduced on a daily basis. He includes the imaginative capacity in the process of alienation as described by Karl Marx, so that the alienated subject created by capitalist society is also deprived of the ability to actively and independently imagine. As a consequence, individuals are no longer responsible for their imaginative horizon, having been stripped of the capacity to produce their own

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\textsuperscript{4} I dwell on Debord’s perspective in the sixth chapter, entitled, “A Wavering Belief in the Image: Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Godard”.

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images. Wunenburger observes, “there is no more place but for the passive consumption of images produced by […] technicians of the imaginary (publicists or screenwriters/directors)” (1995, 142: my translation).

Both Mitchell (1994, 2-5) and Wunenburger (1999, xi, 341, 361-365) underline how the spectacle and its logics innervate everyday life, granting images an omnipresence and omnipotence never experienced before. Wunenburger (1999, 361-365) takes the argument further by drawing attention to the progressive replacement of reality with images. That is, the real itself has become an image. He refers here to the process by which individuals tend to attribute real consistency to those events that are reproduced via images, while having an overall disinterest in what cannot be represented in visible terms, so that the image constructs reality itself and not the other way around.

This leitmotif is also present in the work of Jean Baudrillard, who articulates it through the concept of “hyperreality” (1988, 166). As alluded to by the etymology, “hyper” means that which is over or beyond, from the Greek upér/ὑπέρ, the term “hyperreality” refers to the progressive shift of reality into something that goes beyond what is real, that is, into a simulation with no more real consistency. The hyperreal is a place inhabited by simulacra, namely images without a referent, which are the only possible inhabitants of this “age of simulation” (Baudrillard 1988, 167).

In Baudrillard’s view, the notions of copy and prototype lose their raison d’être in current Western Europe because everything has become a copy without a prototype. In the world of simulacra, images no longer have an original since reality itself is in a way absent and cannot function as a source for the image’s referent anymore. Hence, the society of the spectacle is no longer anchored by the referent. Recalling Byzantine iconoclasm and its lasting influence on contemporary society, Baudrillard remarks on the power of images, their ambiguous nature and the double relationship they establish with the model, whether as mere replicas of the referent or as intermediaries between physical and intelligible realities. He argues that perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real; murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the real. (1988, 170)
A similar attention to the pervasive role of sight informs Régis Debray’s (1995) and Martin Jay’s (1993) analyses. Debray defines the contemporary era of human history as “videosphere” (1995, 532) due to the ways society is profoundly affected by the visual dimension. The term “videosphere” effectively conveys how the centrality of being now revolves around the “video”, both as the techniques of the visible and, recalling its etymological meaning of “to see”, as the supremacy of sight. Likewise, Jay (1993) places sight at the centre of his enquiry, focusing on the critique of “ocularcentric” culture by French intellectuals. In discussing Debord’s thought, he observes that “the concept of the spectacle could be detached from its subversive political function and become a merely descriptive tool to describe current cultural conditions” (1993, 433). It is therefore the increasing power assigned to images in Western culture that allows for the application of the Debordian expression to contemporary society.

Wunenburger (1995, 137), Nancy (2005, 32) and Bettetini (2006, viii) accordingly employ the expression “civilization of images” to indicate the central role that images currently play in the West. Images have gained so much power that the entire Western European culture runs the risk of being described through them. Moreover, these authors remark the paradox inherent in Western society, which is intrinsically linked to image-making and, simultaneously, is sceptical of images (Bettetini 2006, viii; Nancy 2005, 31-32; Wunenburger 1999, 341-342). It is a culture strongly marked by the presence of images and yet suspicious of their truthfulness.

Therefore, Western society constitutes a breeding ground for both iconophilia and iconoclasm. In a culture that constantly communicates through images and in which the individual is surrounded by elements addressing sight, iconophilia and iconoclasm find a place in the spectrum of possible attitudes towards images. Western Europe in particular has been, historically and philosophically, the ground for competing interpretations regarding visual representations, as I will outline in the

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following chapter. These conflicting stances were, and still are, fed by the ambiguous status of the image which allows at once for a praising of the image and its deprecation.
Chapter 2. The Status of the Image

Given the complexity of defining the image, in this chapter I will consider some aspects pertaining to the concept of the image and will provide a conceptual history of the Western image. It is worth mentioning that in this thesis I consider the image as a referential entity, that is, as a copy of something else, in line with a tradition dating back at least to Plato (Plato Republic 595a-621d; Plotinus Ennead V.8.1-2; Wunenburger 1999, 5, 137). As such, the notion of mimesis acquires a fundamental role. I will first clarify the etymology of image and focus, specifically, on the Greek *eikôn* and *eidôlon*. I will then consider the relationship between the image as copy and its model, whether it is understood in terms of similarity or alterity, and its implications. Finally, I will conclude by engaging with the main historical and philosophical turning points in the debate on images. In particular, I will take into account Plato’s conception of artistic mimesis, Plotinus’ partial rehabilitation of images of art, early Christianity’s conflicting interpretations regarding the figurative representation of God, and the opposition between iconoclasts and iconophiles during the Byzantine controversy. My aim is to demonstrate that, from the image’s very etymology to its antagonistic interpretations, ambiguity is an inherent feature of images and is mirrored by the ambiguity of attitudes towards them.

**Defining *Eikôn* and *Eidôlon***

The category of the image encompasses a multitude of different objects (in addition to visible, material images there are many others such as mental images, verbal images, oneiric images, and so on) clustered under the same term (Mitchell 1984, 504), which makes it difficult to reduce to a single comprehensive definition. The imprecision of the terminology exacerbates the ambiguity of the status of the image, as both William J.T. Mitchell (1986, 9; 2005, 2) and Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (1999, 7), among others, spell out. Scholars who study images find themselves within the uncertainty of this term, which chimes with the difficulties in defining the image itself. As a result, many turn to etymology (Besançon 2000, 28; Bettetini 2006, 13-15; Saïd 1987, 309-330; Sörbom 1966, 153, 157; Wunenburger 1999, 8-11). In particular, scholars take two words into account when discussing the image,
the Greek *eikôn* and *eidôlon*, primarily as they are used in Plato’s dialogues. A look at the genealogy of the Western image is, therefore, useful for understanding the ambiguity that characterises it.

The term *eikôn* derives from *eikôs*, “like truth”, which is the perfect participle of the verb *eoika*, “to be like”. Thus, it contains in its very etymology the idea of resemblance. Indeed, *eikôn* refers to an image that is in relation of likeness with its intelligible model, which in Platonic philosophy are the ideas, namely the perfect beings that constitute the prototypes for any existing thing (Bettettini 2006, 13; Besançon 2000, 28; Wunenburger 1999, 8). What is more, in Plato the *eikôn* represents the object of the lowest type of knowledge, the *eikasia*, which is the “apprehension of or by means of images”.

Conversely, *eidôlon* translates as “phantom” or “image reflected in a mirror or water”. It comes from *eîdos*, meaning “that which is seen”, “form” or “shape”, thus referring to something immanent⁶ that is, first and foremost, characterised by its phenomenal appearance and external features (Wunenburger 1999, 9). The *eidôlon* is markedly tied to the realm of appearance and retains an overall negative connotation. For instance, Göran Sörbom (1966, 145) describes the Platonic *eidôlon* as the lowest existing thing which can be perceived only through the senses without any intervention of the intellect. Similarly, Suzanne Saïd (1987, 310-319) places the *eidôlon* in the sensible realm as an image imitating only the visible features of the model. Therefore, the main issue of the image as *eidôlon* resides in the fact that it is grounded exclusively in the visible sphere and addresses only the physical senses. Moreover, the *eidôlon* consists of an excessive similarity with the phenomenal referent, thereby assuming a highly deceptive quality given by its resembling too much of the appearance of the prototype.

There are, therefore, two types of images that differ from one another depending on the kind of relationship they establish with the sensible and the intelligible realms. More specifically, the sensible world defines the reality

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⁶ "Immanent" is here used in the Kantian sense of being in relation to the realm of experience. What is immanent in Kant “is experiental as opposed to non-experiental or transcendent” (Runes 1942, 141). This means that what is immanent exists in a specific given reality without transcending it. In the case of the *eidôlon*, it implies that the *eidôlon* does not transcend the realm of sensible things to establish a connection with another reality (that of intelligible Ideas), but is anchored in the sensible world of sensory experience.
perceivable with the physical senses, whereas the intelligible or super-sensible world refers to that which can be thought, that is, whatever can be known through the intellect but cannot be sensed (Runes 1942, 147). Accordingly, Maria Tilde Bettetini (2006, 13) and Saïd (1987, 311) remark that there is the image as eikôn and the image as eidôlon. While the eikôn is connected with the intelligible world inasmuch as it imitates the ideas, thus it involves both the sensible and the super-sensible realms; the eidôlon refers to an image that imitates only the external features of sensible things, hence it is incommensurably distinct from the super-sensible world.

What is more, Saïd (1987, 311) argues that the opposition between the icon and the idol during the Byzantine controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries follows from this distinction. She effectively points out that

the visible eidôlon eventually was reduced to a pure appearance and to apply itself to gods who exist only by their image, while the eikôn was exclusively reserved to the representation of God. (1987, 311: my translation)

The image as eikôn/icon will gain dignity in iconophilic thought, so much so as to allow for the production of sacred representations. On the contrary, the image as eidôlon/idol will acquire the meaning of a false god because it is understood as the presentation of something that does not have real existence (Besançon 2000, 65-66). More specifically, both Jean-Luc Nancy (2005, 30-31) and Saïd (1987, 319, 328-330) identify the main issue of the eidôlon/idol in its being in relation only with the visible sphere: the idol does not represent, it literally is “a fabricated god” (Nancy 2005, 30). Therefore, Christian iconoclasm condemns only a certain type of image, that which, far from being referential, is “a pure presence” (Nancy 2005, 30).

Wunenburger (1999, 9-10) outlines how the richness of the Greek terms merge together in the Latin imago, from which the English “image” derives, resulting in a loss of the different shades of meaning of both eikôn and eidôlon. A single term – image – condenses a wide range of meanings, from those related to the sensible sphere to the ones connected to the intelligible world. Indeed, imago translates as “phantom” or “apparition”, which designate realities lacking substance and consistency; but it can also translate as a concrete and material “representation”, as well as the intelligible “image or likeness of a thing formed in the mind”,

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“thought” or “idea”. Therefore, the loss of the Greek difference of meanings of \textit{eikôn} and \textit{eidôlon} leads to the unification, under the same term, of the sensible and the intelligible senses. That is, the word image refers to something that can go from the extremely poor quality of appearance to the invisibility of ideas and thoughts. The loss of the Ancient Greek terms’ breadth of meanings in the English “image” constitutes the main reason for my choice to use \textit{eikôn} and \textit{eidôlon} instead of their more obvious English translations.

\textbf{The Relationship between Copy and Prototype}

The image, considered in the Western Platonic tradition as a secondary mode of being, presupposes, as a direct consequence, a prototype that pre-exists it. Prototype is here used in its etymological sense of “original model” for subsequent copies (from \textit{prôtos}/\textit{πρῶτος}, “first”, and \textit{týpos}/\textit{τύπος}, “type”). Additionally, it is here interchangeable with terms such as “model”, “referent” and “original”, since they all stand for the original type used for possible copies. The relationship between the image as copy and its prototype becomes fundamental for understanding both the iconoclastic and the iconophilic positions. It is, in fact, the diverging interpretation of this specific relationship that leads to the two opposing stances, as I will explain.

Before exploring the copy-prototype relationship, it is worth looking at the relationship between signifier and signified in semiology, where “sign” is anything that \textit{stands for} something else (Hawkes 1977). For the purposes of my argument I consider here only Charles Sanders Peirce’s tripartition of icon, index and symbol because it designates three types of possible relationship between the sign and its object, in some ways recalling that between copy and prototype. I will also differentiate my use of icon from that of Peirce to avoid misunderstandings.

Greatly simplifying, in Peirce’s semiology, the icon is a sign that resembles in its features the physical appearance of the referent; therefore the relationship between the icon and its object is an imitational (mimetic) one (Hawkes 1977, 127-128).

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7 For the translation from Latin into English I have used Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, E. A. Andrews and William Freund’s \textit{A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary; Revised, Enlarged and in Great Part Rewritten} (1900).
129; Peirce 1932, 143; 1933, 211). For instance, a portrait of Van Gogh resembles the bodily appearance of Van Gogh. Peirce’s icon differs from the Christian icon in the theological debate on sacred images, where the term exclusively refers to sacred images and has a much more complex relationship with its model (see, following discussion in this chapter). However, as I go on to discuss in this chapter, in the iconoclastic view the Christian icon functions as Peirce’s icon since it figuratively reproduces the image of Christ, which is the reason why the iconoclasts reject the icon, dismissing it as idol. Conversely, for the iconophiles the sacred icon is utterly different from Peirce’s icon because the kind of relationship between the sacred icon and its model is not imitational but relational. As Marie-José Mondzain explains, “the icon […] will no longer be expressive, signifying, or referential” (2005, 81).

The second notion in Peirce’s partition, the index, is a sign having a factual relation with its referent and constitutes a physical trace of its object (Hawkes 1977, 127-129; Peirce 1932, 143; 1933, 211) – for example, a footprint on the sand. Finally, the symbol is a sign having a conventional and arbitrary connection with its referent; thus, it entirely depends on the interpretant – the word “tree” and the physical tree existing in reality (Hawkes 1977, 127-130; Peirce 1932, 143-144).

The relationship between the signal aspect and the meaning as expressed in Peirce’s icon, index and symbol resonates with some aspects of the relation between the copy and the prototype. Here, too, are at play the ways in which a physical aspect (the image) establishes a relation with a referent. However, the key concept in the copy-prototype relationship is mimesis and the degree of likeness between image and model.

According to different authors, the image is defined as a referential representation – image of something – which is related to its referent in a paradoxical sameness and otherness (Ladner 1953, 12; Mitchell 2005, 24-25; Sörbom 1966, 154; Wunenburger 1999, 5, 137). Wunenburger (1999, 137-195) in particular discusses the image as a referential representation that posits a certain distance from the model in order to constitute itself as representation and not presence. In this way, any image is haunted by an intrinsic absence – first and foremost, that of the thing represented (Wunenburger 1999, 138-139). On the one hand, the copy has to resemble its model to be recognisable as the image of such a model; on the other hand, it has to be
sufficiently different from the model in order to be its representation. Consequently, the image must be simultaneously the same as and other from its prototype, thereby forming a paradoxical object that reproduces a portion of reality without however identifying itself with it.

The different understandings of the copy-prototype relationship that I take into account remain within the ambit of mimesis as imitation that posits a reality that exists before the image. That is to say, the image as copy implies a prototype. Particularly relevant for this topic is Stephen Halliwell’s (2002, 23) differentiation between two interpretations of artistic mimesis. He distinguishes “a ‘world-reflecting’ model” from “a ‘world-simulating’ or ‘world-creating’ conception of artistic representation” (2002, 23). While the latter implies the creation of a self-enclosed, imaginary world, the former model, which informs my understanding of mimesis, conceives of mimesis as incorporating “a response to a reality […] that is believed to exist outside and independently of art” (2002, 23).

Following the “‘world-reflecting’ model”, artistic mimesis has to do as much with sameness as with otherness. Too much likeness between image and referent leads to the case of the eidôlon, in which the excessive resemblance distances the image from the truth of the model inasmuch as the image hides its nature as copy (Bettetini 2006, 9; Wunenburger 1999, 69, 139). The problem with the eidôlon, in fact, lies in its potential for deception of the viewer: since it is characterised by an excessive likeness with the model, it is always potentially on the verge of being mistaken for the prototype instead of being recognised as a copy. However, too much dissimilarity between copy and prototype excludes any possibility for understanding the image as a referential representation.

Wunenburger (1999, 137-138) also spells out how the uniqueness of the model ceases once it is possible to transpose it into an image, hence a copy, at least at the level of the visible form. Contra the prototype, which is by definition one of a kind, a copy is always potentially plural because if something can be replicated once, theoretically it is possible to replicate it any number of times. For instance, if we consider the image of the Eiffel tower in films, it is possible to distinguish between the prototype – the Eiffel tower existing in phenomenal reality in Paris – which is one of a kind, and the copies – the different films’ depictions thereof, such as in René
Clair’s *Paris qui dort* (1923), Francois Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, 1958), Louis Malle’s *Zazie in the Metro* (*Zazie dans le métro*, 1960), and so on – which are potentially infinite in number.

As a consequence, whatever is conceived as unique – the Platonic ideas; God in the monotheist religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity – cannot be shaped into a sensible form, otherwise the uniqueness of the being would be lost. According to scholarship, this is at the core of the Jewish and Muslim prohibition of sacred images, while also constituting the base for the distinction between iconophiles and iconoclasts in Christianity (Besançon 2000; Bettetini 2006, 44, 64, 101; Perniola 2010, 74-75; Wunenburger 1999, 218-219), which I will address later in this chapter.

*Eikôn-Icon, Eidôlon-Idol and the Issue of Likeness*

In order to discuss the shift away from the image as *eikôn* to the Christian icon and from the image as *eidôlon* to the idol, and thus the crisis between iconoclasts and iconophiles, I will now consider the major turning points in the debate on images. I will begin by discussing the two mutually incompatible interpretations of the image in Plato. Then, I will consider Plotinus’s more positive understanding of images, before concluding with an overview of conflicting stances towards sacred representations in early Christian theology and during the Byzantine controversy. This brief analysis is extremely helpful in situating iconoclastic thinking and highlighting a thread that runs through the European history of the image, and which involves also the cinema. At the centre of the various interpretations of the image are the copy-prototype relationship and the issue of likeness or mimesis. This issue concerns the kind of relationship that the image as a referential representation establishes with its model. Several scholars discuss the notion of mimesis in regard to philosophical understanding of images of art (Perniola 2010, 74; Potolsky 2006, 6; Sörbom 1966, 154-155; Wunenburger 1999, 133-134); however, Stephen Halliwell’s *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (2002) is to date the most complete work on mimesis in Western philosophy and offers, as I shall illustrate, the most complex and challenging interpretations of mimesis.
Plato: The Double Interpretation of the Image

Platonic philosophy constitutes an essential point of reference for the understanding of the nature and the overall issue of the image, as attested by the literature (Besançon 2009; Bettetini 2006; Ladner 1953; Mondzain 2005; Wunenburger 1999). In particular, scholars focus on two possible interpretations of the image contained in Plato’s dialogues. Although the more widespread is a negative conception of images, which makes Plato a sort of forerunner of iconoclasm, it is nonetheless possible to trace a positive understanding of images in some of his dialogues. Therefore, alongside the Plato who condemns images of art coexists the Plato who grants them some dignity, so much so that he has influenced both iconoclastic and iconophilic thought (Besançon 2009, 52; Bettetini 2006, 3; Ladner 1953, 6; Mondzain 2005, 79).

To understand Plato’s conception of the image it is necessary to briefly consider his cosmology. The Greek philosopher distinguishes between two separate worlds, that of the intelligible ideas and that of sensible things. While the former is the realm of the eternal and immutable beings, accessible through the intellect, sensible matter belongs to the latter and is a copy – mimesis – of the ideas. The phenomenal world is thus a copy of the intelligible world, so that Plato’s cosmology can be read as a descent from the perfection of ideas to the lowest copies of the copies thereof. There are the ideas, eternal models; then, there are sensible things, copies of the ideas; lastly, there are images and works of art, reproductions of sensible things, images of images. Halliwell defines as “primary mimesis” reality imitating the ideas, and as “secondary mimesis” (2002, 48) poetry and painting imitating reality. According to this cosmology, everything that exists, with the exception of intelligible ideas, is entangled in a mimetic relation with something else.

Plato’s thought regarding images of art takes form within this context. Alain Besançon (2009, 47), Bettetini (2006, 3-6) and Gerhart G. Ladner (1953, 6) observe that Platonic mimesis in art assumes a negative connotation because it implies an act of producing a tertiary mode of being. Since the sensible world is already a reproduction of the world of ideas, or a secondary mode of being, images and works of art as mimesis of reality are reproductions of a reproduction. Therefore, images of art have a degraded nature because they are three times removed from the perfection of ideas (Besançon 2009, 47; Ladner 1953, 6; Saïd 1987, 316; Plato Republic, 597e).
In discussing mimesis in Plato and his condemnation of art as mimesis of nature, many scholars use the example that Plato himself provides in Book 10 of the *Republic* (Besançon 2009, 47; Bettetini 2006, 10; Saïd 1987, 326; Wunenburger 1999, 147-148). Using the example of a bed, Plato delineates the different degrees of movement away from truth (i.e., the ideas). There are three types of bed: the intelligible idea of bed, the material bed made by the artisan and the bed created by the painter. While the artisan directly copies the idea of the bed, the painter copies the physical bed, which is a copy itself (Plato *Republic*, 596b-598d). As a consequence, if every sensible thing is already a secondary mode of being (copy of idea), then artworks are necessarily at a lower degree, being copy of a copy, so much so that the artist is capable of making only imitations of an imitation.

The issue with images of art lies in their model. Rather than imitating intelligible ideas, artworks consist in imitations of sensible things. As a result, Sörbom (1966, 138, 143) argues, art can be apprehended exclusively with the senses and belongs to the phenomenal world of appearances. Images of art are *eidôla* due to the fact that they relate only to the visible and sensible sphere, without establishing a relationship with the intelligible world. Their likeness concerns solely the appearance of things. Saïd remarks,

*eidōlon* appears every time that Plato wants to underline the degradation that accompanies the passage from the intelligible to the sensible or from a degree of the sensible to another thereof. (1987, 318: my translation)

Consequently, as Bettetini (2006, 5) notices, the *eikasia*, which is the imagination, constitutes the lowest type of knowledge in Plato’s theory since it leads only to the understanding of the sensible world. Art, relegated to the world of appearances, moves away from the truth of ideas and deceives insofar as it reproduces sensible things but not intelligible realities (Besançon 2009, 45-52). Hence, the more the image visually resembles the model, the more it potentially misleads the viewer.

In this sense it is possible to consider Plato as a precursor of iconoclastic thought, for his degradation of the image of art as a mere copy of a copy will influence the iconoclasts during the Byzantine crisis in the eighth century (Besançon 2009; Bettetini 2006; Ladner 1953; Mondzain 2005, 79; Saïd 1987, 319). However,
several scholars also point out that some Platonic dialogues, especially the *Timaeus*, the *Symposium* and the *Laws*, present a more positive reading of the image which complicates the simplistic view of Plato as exclusively against images (Besançon 2009, 45-53; Bettetini 2006, 3-16; Halliwell 2002, 37-97; Ladner 1953, 6-7; Saïd 1987, 324-325; Wunenburger 1999, 343).

It is Halliwell (2002), in particular, who challenges and rejects the oversimplified idea of Plato as utterly against images. He engages with conflicting views on artistic mimesis that can be found in Plato’s dialogues, which make him more cautious about peremptorily defining Plato as either against or in favour of images. Halliwell, in fact, emphasises the intricacies in Plato’s thought regarding mimesis, suggesting that such an ambiguity derives from the compresence of a negative and a more positive understanding thereof. He poignantly contends that such complexity is connected to a characteristic tension between discrepant impulses in Plato’s thinking. The first, a kind of “negative theology,” which leads sometimes in the direction of mysticism, is that reality cannot adequately be spoken of, described, or modeled, only experienced in some pure, unmediated manner (by *logos*, *nous*, *dianoia*, or whatever). The second is that all human thought *is* an attempt to speak about, describe, or model reality—to produce “images” (whether visual, mental, or verbal) of the real. On the first of these views, mimesis, of whatever sort, is a lost cause, doomed to failure, at best a faint shadow of the truth. On the second, mimesis—representation—is all that we have, or all that we are capable of. In some of Plato’s later writing this second perspective is expanded by a sense that the world itself is a mimetic creation. (2002, 70-71: emphasis in original)

What is more, Halliwell offers a convincing explanation for Plato’s worries about images of art, which resonates with modern and contemporary concerns regarding visual images. Particularly in the *Republic*, Plato is suspicious about images of art because he is deeply aware of their “psychological power” (Halliwell 2002, 73) – that is, their power of influencing thought and making someone believe in a falsity. This attitude is a direct consequence of “Plato’s approach to the psychology of mimesis [which] is grounded in the assumption that there is continuity, even equivalence, between our relations to people and things in the real world and the people and things presented in mimetic art” (Halliwell 2002, 76). Because of such a
continuity, Plato maintains an overall ambiguous perspective on images of art, now repudiating them as deceptive, now granting them some dignity.8

Other scholars also discuss Plato’s more positive perspective on images, with reference to the eikôn–eidôlon dichotomy. Saïd (1987, 324-326) contends that a less dubious interpretation is connected to the conception of the image as eikôn rather than as eidôlon. She highlights the fact that in some Platonic dialogues the image is not related exclusively to the sensible realm, but also establishes a connection with the intelligible sphere. Starting from this capacity of the image to address the super-sensible world, it is possible to rehabilitate it on the level of knowledge. Although the image as eikôn does not acquire the value reserved for intelligible ideas, it nonetheless ceases to be a mere replica of a physical appearance. Similarly, Besançon (2009, 49-53) and Ladner (1953, 6-7) argue that, although the image remains grounded in the sensible world and the knowledge of ideas occurs only by means of the intellect, in certain dialogues Plato grants some dignity to images insofar as they address the super-sensible realm. Thus, the image as eikôn gains a more positive meaning compared to the image as eidôlon because the relationship with the super-sensible sphere changes: in the case of the eikôn the image establishes a connection with what is intelligible.

Therefore, in Plato’s cosmology both the image as eidôlon and the image as eikôn coexist, paving the way for the future opposition between the Christian idol and icon (Bettetini 2006, 73; Saïd 1987, 311-330; Wunenburger 1999, 343). Indeed, the Platonic conception of the image is dense with shades of meaning, which go from the negative connotation of the eidôlon as a deceitful copy of appearances to a more positive interpretation of the eikôn as addressing ideas. Because of the coexistence in Plato’s thought of a negative and a more positive conception of images, his philosophy was used during the Byzantine controversy to sustain both the iconoclasts’ thesis and the iconophiles’ arguments (Besançon 2009, 52; Bettetini 2006, 3; Ladner 1953, 6; Mondzain 2005, 79). However, Platonic philosophy alone is insufficient to account for the influence of Hellenic thought on the Christian theology of the image. Another essential source includes Plotinus’s philosophy.

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8 An interesting point to note is that the lack of an unbridgeable gap between phenomenal reality and the reality of the work of art also allows art to be ethical or unethical (something I take into account in the third section of the thesis).
which constitutes a significant link between the Platonic interpretation of the *eikôn* and the Christian understanding of the icon.

**Plotinus: The Image as Intermediary**

In discussing the status of the image and its philosophical and historical shifts, many scholars engage with Plotinus’s philosophy since his cosmology has influenced the Christian Catholic tradition, which in turn has since been playing a significant role in the Western European imaginary (Besançon 2009, 63-71; Bettetini 2006, 26-34; Halliwell 2002, 314; Ladner 1953; Saïd 1987, 318-319, 320, 327-330; Wunenburger 1999, 204-206). Authors primarily discuss Plotinus’s notion of the image as an intermediary between the concreteness of sensible matter and the abstraction of the intelligible sphere, and the way it has subsequently influenced early Christian theologians in the debate on the legitimacy of sacred icons.

Bettetini (2006, 26), Besançon (2009, 64-65), Wunenburger (1999, 204) and Halliwell (2002, 314) delineate Plotinus’s conception of the world from which his understanding of the image comes. For Plotinus both the sensible and the intelligible worlds derive by emanation from the first principle of all, the One. In a downward movement, the One creates the intellect and the soul, belonging to the suprasensible realm, and then everything else, including sensible matter, which constitutes the lowest degree of being. These scholars point out that in Plotinus’s cosmology everything that exists, from what is sensible to what is intelligible, is part of the One, that being the principle that emanates every existent (Bettetini 2006, 26; Besançon 2009, 64-65; Halliwell 2002, 314; Wunenburger 1999, 204). Therefore, there is continuity between the intelligible world and the sensible sphere which breaks with the immeasurable Platonic distance between the two realms. This conception, where everything exists in a single world, shapes the overall Plotinian understanding of the image. As several authors emphasise (Besançon 2009, 64; Bettetini 2006, 26; Saïd 1987, 318; Wunenburger 1999, 204), the hierarchical nature of this cosmology, which Halliwell addresses as “metaphysical mimesis” (2002, 314), allows for a more positive interpretation of images. While what is intelligible continues to form the highest level of being and sensible matter is the last thing created by the One, images nonetheless belong to the same world of what is super-sensible, only at a lower
degree. In Plotinus’s philosophy all existents are part of the One because they derive from it by emanation; therefore, even sensible things are in connection with the intelligible sphere.

Scholars agree that Plotinus’s understanding of images derives from his ontological hierarchy and delineate his conception of the image as a means for passing from the sensible to the intelligible realm (Bettetini 2006, 27; Saïd 1987, 318-319, 327; Wunenburger 1999, 205). More specifically, Wunenburger (1999, 205) underlines the fact that the image is inserted into the realm of the One because of the continuum existing between the sensible and the intelligible spheres, and identifies the role of the image as a mediator between what is sensible and what is intelligible. Similarly, Bettetini (2006, 27) claims that the image constitutes the starting point for the soul’s journey from sensible matter to the intelligible sphere, since the two realms are closely linked, being emanations of the same principle. Saïd (1987, 318-319, 327) focuses, instead, on the distinction between the *eidôlon* and the *eikôn* in Plotinus’s cosmological schema. On the one hand, she argues that sensible matter – the lowest level of the hierarchy – corresponds to the *eidôlon* insofar as it is a formless reflection of the One. On the other hand, she points out that the image, when it is elevated to the role of intermediary between the sensible and the intelligible spheres, becomes *eikôn*, namely the first means for carrying out the interior journey to the One. Therefore, the image is partially rehabilitated in Plotinus because the relationship between the sensible and the intelligible worlds changes from that of Plato. Since the two realms are connected to each other, the image is no longer condemned to the sensible sphere only, but positions itself between the two.

The Plotinian artist, unlike the painter in the *Republic*, imitates what is intelligible rather than sensible things – or at least has the option to do so. In this way, images of art become sensible works able to entice the viewer to reach the super-sensible realm and, in maintaining a relationship with both the visible and the invisible spheres, they can correspond to images as *eikônes*. Bettetini (2006, 33-34), Saïd (1987, 320) and Halliwell (2002, 335-337) note that this conception of the image of art as *eikôn* will greatly influence the Christian theology of the image, specifically iconophilic thought, which will conceive of the icon as a means for diminishing the distance between man and God.
Notwithstanding such a rehabilitation of the image, scholars clarify that Plotinus, like Plato, maintains an overall ambiguous attitude towards mimetic art. Halliwell (2002, 316-318) offers the most thorough account of such ambivalence. Undoubtedly, mimesis acquires a positive role in the theory of emanation, thereby allowing for a more positive understanding of images of art. According to Halliwell,

[Plotinus] can reconfigure artistic mimesis in terms of something more than a correspondence to appearances, converting it into a movement upward in the direction of the formative principles, *logoi*, which lie behind the world of mere phenomena. (2002, 317)

Together with this interpretation of the image as *eikôn*, however, in other passages Plotinus diminishes art as a “plaything” that “produce[s] a simulacrum [*eidôlon*] of nature” (Halliwell 2002, 318). Yet, Halliwell (2002, 319) remarks, art belittled as “plaything” still occupies an important role in Plotinus’s philosophy in leading to the contemplation of the One.

Saïd (1987, 320), Bettetini (2006, 33-34) and Besançon (2009, 68) provide an intriguing discussion on a possible Plotinian “sacred” art (i.e., art having as its referent the One). While acknowledging the presence of the image as *eikôn* in Plotinus’s philosophy, namely that the journey towards the One can begin by contemplating sensible images, they nonetheless conclude that a potential “sacred” art would be essentially non-mimetic. The first principle, in fact, remains beyond any possible visual representation. As a result, Besançon (2009, 70-71) claims for a marked iconoclastic element in Plotinus’ philosophy, because the One is ultimately unrepresentable and its vision is purely intellectual.

In conclusion, it is possible to distinguish in Plotinus, like in Plato, an iconoclastic component of his thought and an iconophilic one. Or, in Halliwell’s words, Plotinian philosophy lends itself to be appropriated by both iconoclasts and iconophiles because “Plotinus had done enough to create two possible lines of influence on later thinkers in aesthetics” (2002, 322). Art and the image as *eikôn* acquire value as the starting point for the soul’s journey towards the One and as an intermediary between sensible and intelligible realms. However, the representation of the point of arrival of this journey – the One – is interdicted. As Saïd underlines, “in Plotinus’ philosophy, the *eikôn* and the *eidôlon* form a couple and constitute the
two aspects, positive and negative, of the same reality” (1987, 327: my translation). Christian Catholic thought about images will, however, ignore Plotinus’s iconoclastic aspect, focusing instead on his conception of the image as an intermediary between man in the terrestrial world and God in the celestial sphere.

**Early Christian Theology: The Question of “In the Image of God”**

In Christian theology of the image the Platonic, Plotinian and Neoplatonic perspectives are intertwined with the Biblical forbiddance of any graven image and the Christian conception of the Incarnation of God (Besançon 2009, 103-104; Halliwell 2002, 314, 334; Ladner 1953; Mondzain 2005, 73; Wunenburger 1999, 154). The nature of images and the issue of likeness are, in fact, rethought by combining Hellenic and Biblical ideas together with Christian thought, which leads to developing competing stances towards sacred representations. More specifically, the debate within Christianity on the legitimacy of sacred images revolves around the three main concepts of “image”, “similarity” and “Incarnation” (Besançon 2009, 103; Bettetini 2006, 69-91; Ladner 1953). There is, on the one hand, the issue of Christ as the image of God and of man as in the image of God, which calls into question the ambiguity of the image of Platonic derivation “as a blend of like and unlike, same and other” (Ladner 1953, 12). On the other hand, there is the problem of similarity that “is the term of reference which links the man-God relation to the image-prototype relation” (Ladner 1953, 12). What is more, the theme of Incarnation becomes fundamental for the debate on images as the event through which God himself has taken a sensible body, that is, a visible and subject-to-time form.

Besançon (2009, 83-172), Bettetini (2006) and Frodon (2002, 221) highlight the way in which Christianity has preferred the iconophilic route, promoting the image as a means for passing from the terrestrial realm to the celestial sphere. Quite differently, the other two monotheist religions of Judaism and Islam prohibit any image of God and have an overall suspicious attitude towards figurative representations. However, within early Christianity there were conflicting views on the legitimacy of sacred images deriving from different interpretations of the Incarnation, whether as a positive event or, at the opposite, as an act ontologically inferior to God (Besançon 2009, 103-132). Christianity at its origins was, in fact,
under contradictory influences, some which considered images in a positive manner and others that prohibited any visual representation.

Besançon (2009, 103-131) and Ladner (1953), who constitute my main sources on the topic, discuss the conflicting views developed by some of the early Christian theologians (from second to fifth century), likening their ideas to Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. While these theologians did not necessarily provide an aesthetics regarding sacred representations, they nonetheless offered two opposite ways of interpreting the sensible world which were to play a fundamental role in the development of iconophilic and iconoclastic arguments. Both lines of thinking share a similar understanding of the notions of “image” and “similarity”, but considerably diverge on the positioning of the “image” in relation to humans and on their appraisal of the sensible sphere. As Besançon (2009, 106-124) and Ladner (1953, 12) explain, for early Christian theologians the “image” is given to man by nature; therefore, it persists even in sin without the possibility of being lost. Quite differently, “similarity” consists in a continuous process of man towards God that requires a human effort to be maintained otherwise it would be lost in sin (Besançon 2009, 111, 124; Ladner 1953, 12-14). However, for the theologians who will influence iconophilic thought the “image” corresponds to both the human body and the soul (Besançon 2009, 111); whereas those who will inspire iconoclastic attitudes locate the “image” at the level of the soul only – namely the incorporeal, eternal and intelligible part of human beings (Besançon 2009, 117, 119-120, 124).

More specifically, theologians who will influence iconophilic arguments, such as Irenaeus and to some extent Augustinus, have an overall positive understanding of the Incarnation, the human body and sensible matter. They interpret the Incarnation as the act through which God himself has taken a visible and sensible form, and promote a rehabilitation of sensible matter to which the body belongs. Besançon (2009, 126-127) illustrates the influence exerted by Plotinus’s cosmology on this positive view. The Plotinian journey of the soul towards the One becomes that of the soul towards God. However, there is a fundamental difference between Christian thought and the Neoplatonic theory of emanation because the Christian soul is unable to reach the One (God) by itself, but requires an intervention of divine Grace (Besançon 2009, 125-126). Creator and creature are ontologically separated.
Therefore, the soul begins its movement towards God from the sensible world, which is the creation that contains God’s signs, but at a certain point it needs a divine act to elevate itself.

Conversely, theologians who will influence the iconoclastic thesis, such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, have an overall distrust in sensible matter and the human body, while they highly value the intelligible part of man – his soul (Besançon 2009, 113-123; Ladner 1953, 11-12). They discredit the body in all its aspects and interpret sensible matter as lacking being, because they understand corporeal things as a result of human sin (Besançon 2009, 116-117, 119-120). Consequently, the body is excluded from any relationship of similarity with the divine God, which is possible only at the intelligible level of the soul (Ladner 1953, 11). Furthermore, Besançon (2009, 114) and Ladner (1953, 12) point out, Christ is recognised as the only image of God, sharing the same divine nature, whereas man is “in the image of the image”. Thus, following a Platonic approach, any representation of Christ would be an image having a tertiary mode of being, three times removed from the model that is God. As Besançon (2009, 116) effectively explains, sacred images would be images of an image (Christ) of the image (God). In this overall exaltation of the intelligible realm at the expense of corporeal things, God is that which cannot be seen and, therefore, it is impossible to shape him into the sensible form of sacred images, which, if made, would be *eidôla* and not *eikônes* of God.

The Christian issue of “in the image of” was thus implicated in a complex web of relations among God the Father, Christ the Son, man and sensible matter. These elements and their reciprocal interactions were primarily influenced by Platonism, Neoplatonism and Biblical ideas, which eventually led to the controversy between iconoclasts and iconophiles. On the one hand, theologians who positively interpreted the sensible world viewed sacred images as possible intermediaries between man on earth and God in heaven. On the other hand, theologians holding a negative conception of the corporeal sphere could not possibly allow the reproduction of the intelligible God in a material frame. Gradually, two main conflicting attitudes became fundamental in the Christian debate on images, that of iconophilia and iconoclasm, openly and physically clashing in the eighth century.
The Byzantine Controversy: Iconoclasts versus Iconophiles

The iconoclastic crisis taking place in Byzantium during the eighth and ninth centuries started with the destruction of an icon of Christ at the command of emperor Leo III and a ban on sacred images in 726 CE (Besançon 2009, 139; Bettetini 2006, 92). Existing icons were smashed and the dispute between iconoclasts and iconophiles within Christianity began. It was to last until 843 (Besançon 2009, 139). Authors identify various causes for the crisis which were not exclusively religious, but also political and economic (Besançon 2009, 139; Bettetini 2006, 92-93; Mondzain 2005, 76). I will however engage only with the theological debate that has accompanied the Byzantine controversy, specifically the iconoclastic crisis in the eighth century, since it calls into question the relationship between image and prototype. At the core of this debate, scholars argue, was the figurative representation of Christ (Bettetini 2006, 84-85; Ladner 1953, 8; Mondzain 2005). More specifically, the main points in dispute consisted in the circumscribability of the divine God in the icon and the issue of consubstantiality (Bettetini 2006, 95-96; Besançon 2009, 140-141; Mondzain 2005, 72, 92).

“Circumscribability” is the term used by Besançon (2009, 140), Bettetini (2006, 96) and Mondzain (2005, 78) to refer to the inscription of God’s divinity into a material frame. The word translates the meaning of “draw[ing] a line around” and expresses the act of defining, enclosing or limiting the divine nature of God by means of his figurative representation in the icon. In the theological debate on sacred images, circumscribability constitutes one of the major conflicting points between iconophiles and iconoclasts: while the former denied that the icon circumscribes the divinity, the latter contended that painting Christ in figurative terms correspond to enclosing the nature of the divine, which is unlimited by definition, inside a material medium (Bettetini 2006, 95-96, 100-101; Besançon 2009, 140; Mondzain 2005, 71-72).

Mondzain (2005, 72) and Besançon (2009, 153) use the word “consubstantiality” in reference to the identity of substance between copy and prototype. In the case of sacred images, this relationship of identity concerns the divine nature of the model and the artificial nature of the copy. Besançon (2009, 152-
Ladner (1953, 4) and Mondzain (2005, 73-83) emphasise the importance of distinguishing between these two types of images: the natural image and the artificial image. Essentially, the natural image is generated and it is by nature, as in the case of father and son, so that Christ the son is the natural image of God the father (Ladner 1953, 4; Mondzain 2005, 73-82). Conversely, the artificial image is created by imitation (Ladner 1953, 4, 16-18), as in the case of the icon. Mondzain (2005, 72) underlines that both iconoclasts and iconophiles agreed on the impossibility of identity of substance between the icon and Christ. However, while the iconophiles excluded any relationship of consubstantiality between the artificial image – icon – and the natural image – God –, the iconoclasts conceived consubstantiality as being essential for any image, whether natural or artificial.

More specifically, the iconophiles – among which there are John Damascene and Theodorus the Studite – claim that the icon does not reproduce the divine essence of Christ, but only his human nature (Besançon 2009, 155; Ladner 1953, 11, 13). Thus, they reject the iconoclasts’ accusation of circumscribing the divine nature in a material frame: the icon only circumscribes the human essence of Christ, but not His divine nature, which remains unrepresentable. Besançon (2009, 146), Bettetini (2006, 84) and Mondzain (2005, 73-74) liken the issue of circumscribability to the theme of the Incarnation of God. The Incarnation, in fact, constitutes the event through which God has circumscribed himself, assuming a body of flesh, that is, a sensible form that offers itself to human sight. Christ is both man and God, having human nature together with divine essence. Therefore, according to the iconophiles, in manifesting God’s human essence the Incarnation allows for the production of icons that are in relationship with the human Christ and not with His divine nature. The icon of Christ is possible only insofar as it represents His human nature, but it has nothing to do with the divine essence. Thus, in the icon the super-sensible God is not enclosed within a corporeal frame (Besançon 2009, 154-155; Ladner 1953, 13). As Mondzain (2005, 83-85) effectively observes, the legitimacy of sacred icons comes from Christ’s double nature: while the divine essence remains invisible and unrepresentable, the carnal essence of the God made man can be represented in the image.
What is more, Mondzain (2005, 90), Saïd (1987, 330) and Wunenburger (1999, 222-223) stress the peculiar characteristic of the icon in iconophilic thought. The icon is “not the object of a passive fascination” (Mondzain 2005, 90), but aims at taking the viewer’s look beyond the visibility of the representation, that is to say, at transcending the materiality of the icon in order to reach the intellectual contemplation of God. The icon thus consists in a means for passing from the level of sensible experience to that of intelligible knowledge. In iconophilic thought, what differentiates the icon from the idol resides in the relationship they have with the sensible and the intelligible spheres: while the icon exists as an intermediary between the two realms, the idol purely addresses the world of corporeal things. Therefore, the icon “is a door open on the Afterlife, while the idol imprisons man in the appearance and the Here below” (Saïd 1987, 330: my translation). Conversely, in the iconoclastic thesis the icon is far from diminishing the distance that separates man and God and assumes, instead, the connotations of the idol, the false god that consequently has to be destroyed.

Besançon (2009, 148-151), Bettetini (2006, 95-96) and Mondzain (2005, 71-72, 116) also delineate the iconoclastic arguments, whose most forceful advocate is Emperor Constantine V, against the iconophiles in relation to the issue of circumscribability (enclosing the divinity into the sensible matter of the icon is a heresy) and consubstantiality (any image has to share the same essence as its model). For the icon to be an image of the prototype, it is necessary that they share the same nature. However, in the case of sacred representations, this would correspond to state that what is sensible and what is super-sensible have the same nature, which is impossible (Bettetini 2006, 95-96; Mondzain 2005, 71-72). Moreover, against the iconophilic claim that the icon reproduces only Christ’s human nature, the iconoclasts affirm that it is impossible to separate divine nature from human nature, so that the icon would circumscribe both essences. But circumscribing the divine essence is a heresy, since God is the invisible, unlimited and un-circumscribable par excellence (Besançon 2009, 150). The identity between model and copy is necessary, but the gap between the invisibility of the divine essence and its material image is unbridgeable. Therefore, the rebuttal of the iconophilic thesis derives from a different conception of the relationship between the image and the model. While
iconophilia does not require that the icon have any identity of substance (consubstantiality) with the model, iconoclasm demands consubstantiality as the necessary condition for any image.

Furthermore, Saïd (1987, 311) underlines the importance given to the terms “icon” and “idol” in the debate between iconoclasts and iconophiles. Icon and idol, coming from eikôn and eidôlon respectively, reiterate the same opposition found in both Plato and Plotinus between an image as icon/eikôn, which has dignity inasmuch as it relates with both the sensible and the intelligible realms, and an image as idol/eidôlon, which is a false copy and is connected to the sensible sphere only. Accordingly, the idol inherits the negative connotations of the Greek eidôlon as something that reproduces exclusively a sensible appearance, thus “addressing only the look” (Saïd 1987, 322-323: my translation) and as an image that implies the possibility of producing a visually identical double of the prototype (Mondzain 2005, 94). The image of God as idol/eidôlon is pure idolatry because it stands for a false god. Instead of addressing the God in the celestial sphere, the idol is itself venerated as a god in a relation with the terrestrial world only. Therefore, the idol offers itself exclusively to sight as the direct object of adoration, without being a means for passing from the visible contemplation of the image to the intellectual contemplation of God.

While both the iconophilic and the iconoclastic stances reject the idol, their conception of the icon differs. The iconophiles welcome the icon, attributing to it the meaning of the eikôn as that which mediates between the here below and the there above (Besançon 2009, 156-164; Bettetini 2006, 94; Saïd 1987, 322-324; Wunenburger 1999, 219, 226). Thus, in iconophilic thought, the icon starts from the visible realm in order to exceed it and give the look access to the invisible sphere. Vice versa, for the iconoclasts, the icon, as conceived by the iconophiles, is nothing other than an idol (and that is why, had the iconoclasts won the controversy, they would be addressed as idoloclasts, “breakers of idols”). The same image, therefore, is caught between two diametrically opposed interpretations.

The iconoclastic crisis of the eighth century eventually led to the second Council of Nicaea in 787 and the victory of the iconophilic thesis (Bettetini 2006, 96-97; Mondzain 2005, 71). The icon of Christ is legitimated and recognised as an
image having a privileged link with the divine model (Bettetini 2006, 100). The sacred icon thus becomes the intermediary between man and God, albeit not reproducing divine nature. To look on the visible sacredness leads ideally to the contemplation without images of God.

Interestingly, Bettetini (2006, 103-104) and Frodon (2002, 221-223) have linked the legitimation of icons in 787 with current Western European imaginary, arguing that the second Council of Nicaea has influenced the future of the image in Western society. They claim that the second Council of Nicaea produced an exaltation of sacred images that was to remain a constant in Western thought about images. Moreover, both authors contend that, once this praise of images was detached from the religious context, any type of image began to enjoy an ever-increasing power in the social imaginary that still continues today. Therefore, it is possible to trace a pathway that goes from ancient Greek philosophy to the Byzantine controversy up to contemporary Western society and cinema. As Bettetini insightfully observes,

there is no doubt that the second Council of Nicaea played a role in Western medieval, modern and postmodern civilization. The legitimation of sacred images drawn up in 787 by the council Fathers is universally recognised as the theoretical and political origin of our civilization of images: from Byzantium to Hollywood. (2006, 103: my translation)

The issue of the image, which began with an etymological ambiguity reflecting the overall uncertainty of its status, goes from ancient Greece to the present day. The history of Western imaginary is, indeed, marked by Platonic mimesis and Plotinian cosmology, then re-elaborated from a Christian perspective, leading to the paradoxical status of the image in contemporary society. According to, among others, Bettetini (2006, viii), Nancy (2005, 27-50) and Wunenburger (1999, 341-342), within current Western European society the image has acquired a central role, as attested by the continuous production of images on a daily basis, and, at the same time, the status of the image is still that of a secondary representation incapable of truthfully expressing reality.

Thus, Western Europe has inherited, on the one hand, the Platonic distrust and the iconoclastic reminiscences of the image as an inadequate representation; on
the other hand, the Plotinian and Christian Catholic faith in the image as an intermediary between terrestrial and celestial spheres. Starting from these premises, I will now examine the literature on iconoclastic tendencies in the medium most (theoretically) based on sight: cinema.
Chapter 3. The Issue of Iconoclasm in the Cinema

My argument develops from the assumption that the binary between the *eikôn* and the *eidôlon* can be found in the cinema as well, generating conflicting stances. More specifically, these different interpretations hinge on a dichotomy between reality and illusion which opposes cinema’s claim to a mimetic restitution of reality and cinema’s illusory nature. There are various stances in the spectrum of the reality-illusion dichotomy, which go from a quasi-religious faith in the revelatory capacity of the film medium to a fierce disdain for the cinematic image as a deceitful representation.

The relationship between the model and the copy constitutes the basis for both iconoclastic and iconophilic conceptions, in philosophy as well as in the cinema. Indeed, iconoclasm and iconophilia share the same metaphysical requirement, namely they posit the existence of a true(r) prototype to which any copy has to be compared. Following a representational understanding of cinema (i.e., film images are copies of something), this metaphysical postulate can be found in the relationship between phenomenal reality and the film image, where the former functions as the prototype for the latter. What is more, the division between sensible and intelligible spheres is also present in the ambit of cinema, although with a slightly different connotation. The sensible stands for what is visible and audible, namely what I can actually see and hear in phenomenal experience. The supersensible or intelligible becomes, instead, that which can be shown only through metaphors because it lacks an audio-visual form in phenomenal reality (e.g., emotions and thoughts) or because it consists in something which resists mimetic doubling (e.g., the Shoah). The issue of iconoclasm in cinema, then, concerns the problematic relationship between reality and its representation and explores how emotional contents or contents of thought can be transferred into audio-visual images. Accordingly, as I will delineate in the final part of this chapter, cinematic iconoclasm calls into question both the domain of aesthetics and that of ethics.

To better situate my argument, I will first engage with film theories and theorists regarding the dichotomy between reality and illusion. I will then provide an overview of the existing literature on the topic of iconoclasm and cinema, from the iconoclastic aspect of Marxist film theory to competing interpretations of the face in
the cinematic close-up, with specific reference to Bela Balázs’s notion of physiognomy and Jean Epstein’s concept of photogénie. Finally, I will discuss Marion Poirson-Dechonne’s (2016) work on iconoclastic tendencies in the cinema, concluding with my argument on cinematic iconoclasm. This chapter as a whole will illustrate not only that the issue of iconoclasm is present in the field of cinema, but also how this issue is inextricably tied to ancient philosophical arguments and theological debates.

The Dichotomy between Reality and Illusion

The issue between reality and illusion goes back to the beginning of film theory and involves clashing stances towards the film image. Cinema can be understood as both a tool for mimetically reproducing reality and a means of creating an illusionistic world (an opposition reminiscent of Stephen Halliwell’s distinction between “‘world-reflecting’” and “‘world-creating’” models of mimesis [2002, 23]; see second chapter). It is thus possible to identify a dichotomy between reality and illusion which opposes cinema’s claim to a mimetic restitution of reality and cinema’s illusory nature. As attested by the literature on the topic (Allen 1993; Andrew 1976; Andrew 1984, 37-56; Perniola 2013; Pezzella 2011; Rushton 2011; Thomson-Jones 2008), this polarity in cinema has led, among other things, to the development of different and often conflicting conceptions of the film image. There are various stances in the spectrum of the reality-illusion dichotomy in the cinema, which go from a quasi-religious faith in the revelatory capacity of the film medium, such as in the writings of Bela Balázs (1924/2010), Louis Delluc (1920), Jean Epstein (1921/1977) and Siegfried Kracauer (1960), to a fierce disdain for the cinematic image as a deceitful representation, as in the work of the exponents of political modernism (I employ the expression political modernism as defined by David N. Rodowick [1994] to refer to 1960-1980 Marxist film theory, which was concerned with the illusory nature of the film image and its effects on the spectator).

My aim here is not to extensively engage with theories of realism and modernism, but to draw attention to the problematic and ambiguous status of the film image.

The opposition between reality and illusion in the cinema develops as a clash between cinema as a tool for the mechanical reproduction of reality and as a means
of creating an artificial world that posits itself as transparent (Kibbey 2005; Pezzella 2011; Rushton 2011; Scruton 1981; Thomson-Jones 2008). The term transparent is equivocal since it can be employed by the advocates of photographic realism as well as by the exponents of political modernism with quite different meanings. In the perspective of photographic realism, transparent constitutes an essential quality of mechanically generated images and refers to the property of the photographic and cinematic image of enabling the viewer to see through it to its content (Carroll 1996, 58-63; Scruton 1981). Political modernism, instead, employs the term for critiquing Hollywood and alike cinema’s illusionism, where transparent comes to signify the illusory self-evidence of a filmic reality that presents itself as an objective representation of the phenomenal world (Comolli & Narboni 1971; Fargier 1971; Heath 1974; MacCabe 1974; Rodowick 1994; Wollen 1976). This picture is further complicated by the formalist position for which the fundamental aesthetic value of the cinema resides in the film image’s deviation from reality (Arnheim 1958; Eisenstein 1949; 1957; Münsterberg 1916; Sesonske 1974).

Underlying these various stances there is a specific understanding of cinema as a representational medium (Rushton 2011, 2-3). That is, cinema is a medium which records a reality existing prior and independently from it and, therefore, the film image defines itself according to the relationship it establishes with its phenomenal referent. Among the possible interpretations of this relationship there are the film image that reaches a quasi-complete likeness with its referent (for instance, the transparency of the film image as theorised by Roger Scruton [1981]); and the image that distances itself from its referent to the point of great difference (as in the case of several experimental films, such as Marie Menken’s Lights [1966], where the floating colourful lights abstract themselves from their phenomenal referent, or many of Stan Brakhage’s films like his testament Commingled Containers [1997], in which water and rocks lose their relationship with the model to become a pure optical experience). In both limit cases, as well as in the many stretched between them, the relation between the image and the model remains fundamental, whether it is carried out in terms of similarity or alterity.

Indeed, the copy-prototype relationship lays the foundations for iconophilic and iconoclastic attitudes. Mario Perniola (2010, 76-77) effectively delineates the
metaphysical requirement shared by both iconoclasm and iconophilia, that is to say, the existence of a true(r) prototype to which any copy has to be compared. Like in religion and philosophy, in cinema too there is an essential division between a true(r) reality (phenomenal reality or the intelligible sphere of thoughts and emotions), which functions as the prototype, and a less true sensible sphere, that of film images, which stands for the copy. Following a representational understanding of the cinema, it is possible to distinguish between the proponents of cinema as a mimetic reproduction of phenomenal appearances and the advocates of the film image as deceptive and illusory. The first perspective, also referred to as photographic realism, finds its most influential representatives in André Bazin (1967; 1972), Kracauer (1960) and, to some extent, Stanley Cavell (1979), for whom cinema’s mechanical reproduction of reality allows for a better understanding of the phenomenal world. An extreme and quite negative case of photographic realism is Roger Scruton’s (1981) argument on the transparency of photographic and cinematic images, which are deemed surrogates of reality. On the other side of the spectrum, the exponents of political modernism best exemplify the interpretation of a particular type of film image as an illusory copy of the real and thus as a means to impose a seemingly objective worldview rather than granting spectators access to an augmented knowledge of reality (Kibbey 2005, 1-44; Rodowick 1994; Rushton 2011, 1-41).

In sketching out the reality-illusion dichotomy, I will first engage with Scruton’s negative argument on photographs and film images and look at Bazin’s, Kracauer’s and Cavell’s positive accounts of the mechanically-based relationship between film images and referents. Then, I will recapitulate the antithetical view of the formalist tradition, primarily drawing on Hugo Münsterberg (1916), Rudolph Arnheim (1958) and Sergei Eisenstein (1949; 1957). Both realists and formalists investigate the relation that the film image establishes with its referent in reality. However, while the former highlight the correspondences between image and model, the latter stress the dissimilarities between the film image and the phenomenal referent. To conclude, I will examine Ann Kibbey’s (2005) and Richard Rushton’s (2011) work on the iconoclastic quality of political modernism and the parallel they draw between political modernism’s conception of the film image and the iconoclastic interpretation of sacred representations during the religious
Correspondences and Discrepancies between Film and Reality

Scruton’s (1981) claim regarding the transparency of photography, which he also applies to cinema as a succession of photographs, serves to demonstrate the non-art status of both media. His argument develops from the concept of representational arts, whose main feature is their ability to communicate thoughts about their content as a result of the intentional relation they establish with their subject. That is to say, representational arts constitute an interpretation of the subject and not a mere reproduction thereof. Scruton argues that photography and cinema reproduce reality as it appears by means of a mechanical process of cause and effect. Accordingly, in his view, photography and cinema cannot be representational arts because of their causal relation with the object recorded. Rather than producing an aesthetic interest in the object of representation, as in the case of a medium that establishes an intentional relation with its object such as painting, the photographic and cinematic relation produces interest only in the thing reproduced (Scruton 1981, 585-586). Scruton’s conclusion is categorical: “the photograph is transparent to its subject, and if it holds our interest it does so because it acts as a surrogate for the represented thing” (1981, 590). Scruton argues that photographs and films simply show that something has been there in the past, but they fail to constitute an interpretation of the portion of reality recorded because “the photograph [and the film] lack[s…] that quality of ‘intentional inexistence’ which is characteristic of painting” (Scruton 1981, 588).

This aspect is linked to another major point in Scruton’s argument, that of the absence of control over details (1981, 593). Although both photographic and cinematic images are intentionally framed, the photographer and the cameramen are unable to control every single element that enters the frame. Cinema cannot be representational, for the same reasons as photography, and at best “a film is a photograph of a dramatic representation” (Scruton 1981, 598). In Scruton’s view, if it is possible to find a representational aspect in the cinema, this is not the result of any cinematic property since the film medium is only capable of recording phenomenal reality. It is, instead, the content of the film, namely the film’s action,
which can configure itself as representational in Scruton’s sense. That is, only and exclusively the portrayed drama bears representational capacity, hence it can communicate thoughts about its subject, whereas cinema is a mechanic, unintentional device. According to Scruton, in the cinema as well as in photography, only the reproduced drama can generate an aesthetic interest, while the filming process is dismissed since it is at the mercy of its uncontrollable nature.

Cinema’s ability to mechanically reproduce reality has also led to far different and positive interpretations, such as those found in the work of Bazin (1967; 1972), Kracauer (1960) and Cavell (1979). What these scholars share is the assumption that the film image, as a derivative of photography, bears the traces of its phenomenal referent. For Bazin, as well as for Kracauer and Cavell, the film image has a privileged bond with its model because, by mechanically recording it, it attests that something has been there in front of the camera. Theirs is an indexically based understanding of cinema and photography. Like Scruton, these scholars conceive of cinema as a development of photography (a film is basically a succession of moving photographs); however, they reach quite different outcomes.

Bazin’s realism, which has been variably interpreted as primarily aesthetic or psychological realism, is grounded on an indexical relationship between the film image and the phenomenal referent. That is, the film image replicates, by mechanically recording, an object existing in reality and whose existence, by the very process of its mechanical reproduction, we cannot deny. He claims,

the objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. (1967, 13-14)

Film images and their referents are, therefore, in a relationship of likeness given by the mechanical nature of the reproduction. Because the film image references its prototype, it is possible for viewers to believe in the existence of the object reproduced. While the mechanical character of photography and cinema leads Scruton to conclude that the film image “acts as a surrogate for the represented
thing”, Bazin sees this acheiropoietic (i.e., not generated by human hands) quality of the film medium as a strength which allows cinema to maintain and express the ambiguity of the real. Bazin’s realism, however, does not correspond to a naïve equation between cinema and reality since he acknowledges the artificial character of any art – “realism in art can only be achieved in one way –through artifice” (1972, 26). Bazin thus delineates the contradictory character of cinema as being able to mechanically record reality and, at the same time, as being something other than the reality recorded (1972, 26-27). What Bazin never ceases to stress, while maintaining that cinema produces an illusion of reality (1972, 26), is the indexical relation between photographic/film images and their model in phenomenal reality.

Such an interpretation of the copy-prototype relationship is found also in Kracauer’s Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality (1960). Kracauer, in a manner chiming with Epstein’s and Balázs’s accounts of the cinematic close-up (see, later in this chapter, “Iconophilic and Iconoclastic Interpretations: The Face in the Close-Up”), attributes to cinema the power of revealing aspects of physical reality which would otherwise remain unseen. This revelatory capacity of the film medium derives from its mechanical reproduction of the phenomenal world. Indeed, Kracauer’s theory “rests upon the assumption that film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality” (1960, ix). Essentially, cinema is a tool for un-concealing phenomenal reality by means of its very reproduction (46-59). This revelatory function stems directly from the relationship the film image establishes with the referent in reality: while not being the referent itself, the film image is a mechanically generated trace of the model and, as such, their relationship is of likeness.

Like Bazin and Kracauer, Cavell (1979, 16-25) identifies a close link between film and reality because of cinema’s mechanical reproduction of the world. Engaging with Bazin, Cavell discusses the significance of cinema’s automatism – “photographs are not hand-made” (20) – in the economy of his ontology of film. Indeed, it is the indexical relation between the film image and the reality reproduced on the screen which allows Cavell to maintain that we cannot deny the physical existence of the people and objects recorded. While the profilmic elements are
physically absent on the screen, it is nevertheless impossible to refute the idea that they have had a physical existence which the film medium was able to record.

While photographic realism emphasises the correspondences between cinema and reality, the formalist tradition seeks to highlight the discrepancies between them. Some of the main advocates of the formalist tradition in film, such as Arnheim, Münsterberg and Eisenstein, devoted a great deal of their theoretical works to discussing the ways in which the film image differs from its referent. Ultimately, they claim that the copy cannot correspond to the phenomenal model to the point of being its surrogate. Dudley Andrew (1976, 17-76) straightforwardly discusses the formalist tradition, highlighting the devaluation of cinema’s mimetic capacity that it promoted. Münsterberg and Arnheim proceed using a similar approach (Andrew 1976, 28). That is, by differentiating cinematic perception from the everyday, naked-eye perception, they prove that the film medium fails to reproduce reality as such. Eisenstein concentrates instead on montage and the ways in which it can manipulate the pro-filmic material, assigning a new meaning to it. Albeit using different approaches, these theorists demonstrate that there is a fundamental lack of correspondence between film and reality, which is also what allows cinema to be an art form.

More specifically, Münsterberg in *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916) and Arnheim in *Film as Art* (1958) identify the art status of the cinema in its discrepancy from reality. Münsterberg (1916, 44-130) delineates those aspects of the film medium which differentiate cinematic perception from non-cinematic apprehension of phenomena. Accordingly, film is not a mere reproduction of reality, but transforms such reality into a new world (140-144). Similarly, Arnheim (1958) highlights the uniqueness of cinematic perception, decrying any technique that could enhance cinema’s realism. In Arnheim’s view, inventions such as sound and colour threaten cinema’s art status by reducing the distance between the film image and its referent. The possible reproduction of the colour of an object or the sound of a voice constitutes a more precise imitation of reality, thus putting at risk the art status of the cinema. For Arnheim the art of film derives from its technical limitations in the reproduction of reality; therefore, any invention designed to reduce such limitations is to be rejected.
Much more complex is Eisenstein’s theory. Here it suffices to mention his defence of cinema’s art status by means of distancing the final, edited film from phenomenal reality. In Eisenstein’s view the single shots are “fragments of reality” (Henderson 1971, 36), that is to say, they are pieces of recorded reality lacking any cinematic quality. It is montage that transforms this raw, unfilmic material into the art of cinema (Eisenstein 1949, 45-63). The fundamental cinematic principle is the re-assemblage and meaningful recombination of single pieces of recorded reality into something that transcends them, creating a new sense. As Andrew points out, “[the filmmaker] will build relations which aren’t implicit in the ‘meaning’ of the shot” (1976, 44). Eisenstein applies here the dialectical method, drawn mainly from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s philosophy, to the cinema. Like in dialectical materialism, where the interaction between thesis and antithesis leads to a synthesis that transcends them both, thus generating a change, so in the cinema meaning resides in the collision between two shots, which produces a new sense that they did not have individually. Cinema, therefore, begins when reality is pulled apart and recombined in such a way that it ceases to be real, in the sense of belonging to phenomenal reality, and becomes cinematic. Andrew underlines this aspect in Eisenstein’s theory of montage as follows:

The process by which a filmmaker comes to appropriate the true form of an event is not by merely recording the appearances of the event. Eisenstein had always held that to attain “reality” one must destroy “realism,” break up the appearances of a phenomenon and reconstruct them according to a “reality principle”. (1976, 54)

Consequently, even inventions such as colour and sound in the cinema can be used in a non-realist manner through montage. Unlike Arnheim, who condemns colour and sound because of their highly mimetic potential, Eisenstein “incorporated th[ese] ‘realistic’ invention[s] into his anti-realistic theory” (Andrew 1976, 45). Indeed, Eisenstein aims at abstracting colours from their referents, thus providing them with a new, essentially cinematic, meaning (Eisenstein 1957, 117-153), as he does, for

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*Although Marx and Engels never used the term, dialectical materialism was the appellative given to Marxist theory by its advocates in the Soviet Union (Allen 2005). The term is now commonly associated with Marxist philosophy and refers, among other things, to the dialectical movement of thesis, antithesis and synthesis.*
instance, in the colour sequence of *Ivan the Terrible, Part II* (*Ivan Groznyj II: Bojarskij zagovor*, 1958). Similarly, sound is used in a contrapuntal manner to create a discrepancy between the visual element and the sound element. The purpose is to treat sound “as a new montage element (as a factor divorced from the visual image)” (Eisenstein, Pudovkin, & Aleksandrov 1928/1985, 84). Eisenstein conceives of sound and colours, like any other component of film montage, as means to producing new possible cinematic meanings that reality does not contain in itself. Cinema cannot be a mere recording of the referent because the final film, that which spectators watch, is the process by which pieces of reality are semantically transformed by montage into sequences containing new meanings absent from the single shots. Therefore, in Eisenstein’s perspective, cinema has its roots in phenomenal reality, but its substance, the art status of cinema, lies in the breaking apart and the recombination of these “fragments of reality”.

A more recent formalist approach is that of Alexander Sesonske (1974), who discusses the differences between film and reality by means of the formal categories of space, time and motion, echoing Münsterberg’s and Arnheim’s approach. He contends that the cinematic experience of these three dimensions differs from naked-eye perception because of the control that the film medium has over them. What is more, this control and the manipulations that it allows are unique to cinema. Accordingly, those events that we perceive in their spatio-temporal dimension in non-cinematic life and whose movement we cannot control acquire a new dimension in the cinema: “the view through the lens of a camera transforms this familiar experience” (Sesonske 1974, 56). In Sesonske’s view, the space of the film is experienced only through the sense of sight and is characterised by a duality – the two-dimensionality of the screen and the three-dimensionality of the film’s action – lacking in non-cinematic space, that of our life when we are not watching a screen (Sesonske 1974, 54). Sesonske continues by stating the dual character of our experience of time in the cinema which is given by the length of the film, on the one hand, and the time of the events in the film, on the other hand. To conclude his differentiation between cinematic and non-cinematic perception, he delineates how

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10 By this expression I refer to the kind of perception of time, space, movement and in general to the apprehension of phenomena that we experience when we are not in front of a screen.
motion in film can be manipulated in many different ways, while non-cinematic movement follows its own flow, which escapes our control (Sesonske 1974, 56). Although one could argue that even in non-cinematic life we perceive different times and spaces at once, for instance the time and space of memory which coexists with that of the present of the remembering subject, Sesonske’s point here, like Arnheim’s and Münsterberg’s, is to stress the differences between the apprehension of the world without the mediation of a screen and the perception of the same world through the film medium.

While photographic realism places the emphasis on the points of contact between cinema and reality, the formalist tradition draws upon the differences between film image and phenomenal world, rejecting a conception of the film medium as a window into the world. Both perspectives, however differently they may have interpreted it, posit the existence of a relationship between the film image and the phenomenal referent. This relationship constitutes the basis for the development of an iconoclastic and an iconophilic thinking in the cinema.

The Iconoclastic Aspect of Political Modernism

Much more relevant to the issue of iconoclasm in the cinema is the conception of the cinematic image as *eidôlon*, a deceptive representation that feigns the true. Kibbey (2005) and Rushton (2011), in particular, point out the iconoclastic character of the exponents of political modernism for their “division between the false images of orthodox cinema and the true or real images of counter-cinema” (Rushton 2011, 15). Both scholars stress and decry political modernism’s critique of Hollywood-like cinema. While Kibbey focuses on those aspects common to Calvinist iconoclasm and leftist film theory, Rushton proposes to dismantle the reality-illusion dichotomy inherent in the work of the exponents of political modernism and theories akin to it. What Kibbey and Rushton more forcefully condemn in the perspective of political modernism is their reduction of cinema to an opposition between illusionistic – hence, false – images and self-critical images.

31 The notion of cinema as a window, to which at times I will refer in the thesis, has been discussed, among others, by Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010, 13-34) and indicates the alleged transparency of the film medium, namely its “offer[ing] the spectator a seemingly transparent view on an unmediated reality” (2010, 18).
Kibbey (2005) draws her conception of iconoclasm from Calvin’s Protestantism and then uses it to re-read Marxism and theories inspired by it. Although she tackles specific issues of Calvin’s doctrine, it suffices to refer to her linking of Protestant iconoclasm to Marxist theory of commodity and leftist film theory. In Calvin’s Protestantism the sacramental objects – the bread and the wine – and the people consuming them become the “‘true and living images of God’” (Crew 1978, as cited in Kibbey 2005, 10). More importantly, by consuming the sacramental objects, people turn into the community of the Protestants, thus assuming a new social identity without undergoing any material change. Kibbey institutes a parallel between Calvin’s sacramental theory and Marxist theory of commodity, arguing that “the taking of bread and wine was the prototype of the consumption of commodities. […] and participants were the prototype of the modern consumer” (2005, 17). In capitalist societies commodities function in a way similar to that of Calvin’s sacramental objects: it is not the object in itself that matters, but the value attributed to it, namely that which it metonymically stands for –the bread metonymically being the body of Christ; an expensive car standing for power and money. Likewise, Protestants and consumers, albeit not physically changing, acquire a new identity through the sacramental object or the commodity. A person ingesting the sacramental bread becomes a member of the Protestant Church; a person buying an expensive car comes to be associated with power and money.

What is more, Kibbey (2005, 1-44) outlines similarities between Calvin’s rejection of sacred images as false representations in favour of the sacramental objects as true images, and leftist film theory’s opposition between illusion and reality. She maintains that the theories of the image developed in the period 1960-1980 are inherently iconoclastic: “this era of film theory was fueled by an iconoclastic assault on the false images of Hollywood film, from the theorists of the cinematic apparatus to Laura Mulvey’s famous essay” (2005, 2). Kibbey likens Guy Debord’s spectacle, Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage, Jean-Louis Baudry’s cinematic apparatus and Laura Mulvey’s gendered approach to the iconoclastic distrust in images. These theorists, in her perspective, committed the sin of reiterating the Calvinist precepts of false images in their cinematic speculations without providing an alternative to the iconoclastic paradigm. Debord (1967/1994) branded the
overwhelming spectacular images of capitalist society as deceptive means for the mental annihilation of the citizens-spectators; Lacan (1968) defined as illusory the image of a unified and complete being perceived in the mirror stage; Baudry (1974-1975), following a Lacanian paradigm, criticised classical cinema as a mode for enchainning the spectator in a fixed and passive subjectivity through images of illusory completeness; and Mulvey (1975) promoted a “process of gendering the cinematic apparatus” (Kibbey 2005, 39), attributing the active gaze to the male subject and the passive role of object of the gaze to the female subject, without however escaping the cinematic apparatus’ paradigm. Kibbey emphasises how, in each of these cases, the theorists have echoed the iconoclastic dichotomy between true and false images in a secular manner.

In a similar fashion, Rushton defines the exponents of political modernism as “modern-day iconoclasts” (2011, 39), citing Kibbey’s parallel between Calvinist iconoclasm and 1960-1980 film theory. However, Rushton aims at overcoming the dichotomy by excluding the metaphysical requirement of a true(r) reality that pre-exists that of cinema. In posing phenomenal and cinematic reality on the same level, without the former coming before the latter, the cinematic image no longer has a term of comparison that could define it as either real or illusory (Rushton 2011, 1-19). Rushton’s argument thus develops from the non-hierarchical coexistence of cinema and reality, where the dichotomy ceases to exist. In order to prove his thesis, Rushton criticises political modernism, for its logic of illusion-reality opposition has informed and still informs much of film theory. He delineates the issue as follows:

The characteristic way in which this argument has been pursued […] is by distinguishing between transparency and reflexivity in the cinema. According to this logic, films which claim diegetic transparency are offering illusions to their audiences – the “illusion of reality” – while films that foreground the apparatuses of cinematic production are deemed to provide “reality”. (2011, 9)

This opposition is grounded in a representational conception of the cinema, which Rushton (2011, 3) rejects. That is to say, if cinema represents something, this object has to pre-exist its cinematic image, thereby establishing at least a chronological hierarchy between the two realities of the referent and the film. The illusion-reality
dichotomy implied in political modernism, as well as in Tom Gunning’s (2006) cinema of attractions and Miriam Hansen’s (1991) fragmented subjectivity for Rushton (2011, 20-41), or in Debord’s society of the spectacle and Baudry’s cinematic apparatus for Kibbey (2005, 1-44), occurs between the deceptive image of Hollywood-like cinema and the self-reflexive image of counter-cinema. The opposition sets images that claim to be transparent and to reproduce reality as such against images that declare their artificial nature. Hence, from the perspective of political modernism there is, on the one hand, the “illusion of reality” (Rushton 2011, 24), the sin of the cinematic image as *eidôlon*, a visual replica of a portion of reality which alleges to be transparent for its high mimetic potential; on the other hand, the image of counter-cinema which “denounces the representation of reality and all cinematic attempts at verisimilitude” (Rushton 2011, 28).

Rushton and Kibbey have the merit of pointing out a parallel between the iconoclastic suspicion of sacred images and some of the theses of leftist film theory. They illustrate the iconoclastic basis of political modernism and theories akin to it, and identify the limits of the iconoclastic critique of the film image. Partially sharing their argument, I contend that the iconoclasm of political modernism is fundamentally iconoclasm as critique. It is a critique of the *eidôlon*, since the image of classical cinema feigns the true by reproducing the prototype’s appearance so much so as to hide its nature of a copy. One of my aims is to re-read the 1960-1980 era of film theory and practice in light of the concept of the image as *eidôlon*, which escapes the reduction to a simple false image. The *eidôlon* is the double, that is to say, a copy that replicates the visible features of its model to the point of being always on the verge of replacing it. Like in Plato, where the *eidôlon* distracts from the contemplation of intelligible ideas, relating itself only to the sensible realm, so in the cinema the *eidôlon* is that image which overshadows the original and aims at substituting it. In political modernism, as I will discuss in the fourth chapter, the *eidôlon* is the kind of film image that hides its character of artificial copy through the naturalism of *mise-en-scène* and continuity editing. That is, the elements making up the shots are designed in such a way as “to create an impression of realism” (Bordwell & Thompson 2008, 113). The *mise-en-scène* has, thus, the appearance of objective reality and each of its elements is coherently linked to the others – the
costumes are appropriate for the setting, the acting is appropriate for the story, and so on. Likewise, the editing is at the story’s service, contributing to the creation of an illusory spatio-temporal continuity between the shots and cause-effect logic of the events (Bordwell & Thompson 2008, 231-251). This kind of editing is also known as invisible editing (Bordwell & Thompson 2008, 245; Kuhn & Westwell 2012, 94) because the cut between the shots goes unnoticed by spectators, who are not challenged in their mode of film viewing. In classical cinema the film style usually works towards a coherent and logical development of the events in the story. Hence, it creates an “impression of reality” through images that look like objective representations of the phenomenal world, presenting cinema as a transparent window into the world.

Before discussing the iconoclastic critique of the cinematic eidôlon in both theory and practice, which will be the focus of the second section of the thesis, I will take into account the existing literature on iconoclastic and iconophilic interpretations in cinema. The literature has focused primarily on the notion of the face in the close-up and opposes the film image as revelation of the human essence and as the place of inhumanity par excellence.

**Iconophilic and Iconoclastic Interpretations: The Face in the Close-Up**

Here I will take into account the modes in which the cinematic close-up has been discussed as a way of exploring the distinction between iconoclasm and iconophilia. While Jacques Aumont (2003) and Mary Ann Doane (2003) consider the conflicting interpretations of the close-up, Barbara Grespi (2013) and Angela Dalle Vacche (2003, 15) explicitly address the issue of the face in cinematic close-up as a field of debate between iconoclastic and iconophilic interpretations in the cinema. On the one hand, Dalle Vacche (2003, 15) and Grespi (2013, 42-45) identify a sacred conception of the cinematic medium as a tool for revealing a human essence that finds its most suitable expression in the magnification of the close-up – a position taken by, among others, Louis Delluc (1920), Jean Epstein (1921/1977) and Bela Balázs (1924/2010). On the other hand, Grespi (2013, 45-48) argues for an iconoclastic interpretation of the close-up as a site of inhumanity in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, 167-191). I will discuss the concept of the face and the significance it has
assumed in Western culture, drawing mainly on George Simmel’s (1901/1959) and Emmanuel Levinas’s (1969) analyses. Then, I will look at the ways the cinematic close-up has been interpreted, distinguishing between iconophilic and iconoclastic stances. While various authors (Aumont 2003, 129-146; Doane 2003; Grespi 2013, 42-45; Turvey 1998, 25-50) notice the quasi-mystical faith in the cinematic close-up and its strong link with the phenomenal referent in the work of Epstein and Balázs, the iconoclastic interpretation of the cinematic close-up is more controversial.

Grespi (2013) is the only scholar theorising a proper opposition between iconoclasts and iconophiles in the cinema with specific reference to the face in the close-up. On the one hand, she discusses the trust in film images in the work of Epstein and Balázs, addressing them as idolaters (42), and thereby assuming a slightly iconoclastic perspective in an article that otherwise maintains an overall neutral tone. (It is, in fact, the iconoclast that would refer to the iconophiles as idolaters, interpreting their images as idols rather than icons.) On the other hand, Grespi takes into account Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the face in cinematic close-up. She concludes that, in their view, the facial close-up consists in a dehumanizing device and, consequently, reads the defacement of such a close-up as an iconoclastic gesture. While her account of Epstein and Balázs is shareable, her interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari as iconoclasts is more controversial and open to criticism.

Both Grespi’s and Dalle Vacche’s opposition implies a conception of iconophilia as a faith in images and of iconoclasm as a distrust thereof. Their notion of iconoclasm suggests a disbelief in the revelatory capacity of the cinematic medium and in the close-up’s viability as a mediator between a visible, exterior surface, and a purported invisible, inner depth. It is “the face in close-up and the close-up as the face of objects” (Dalle Vacche 2003, 15) that elicits a division between iconophilic and iconoclastic interpretations in the cinema. The opposition originates from the interpretation of the face, whether as a door to the soul or as a surface of inhumanity. For both stances the subject of the close-up is always a face, even when we are presented with the image of a landscape or that of an object. However, in the iconophilic interpretation the close-up humanises even inanimate objects, revealing something about reality. That is to say, through the magnification
carried out by the close-up, the recorded object exhibits itself in a new, enhanced way, making it possible to notice details that usually go ignored in the everyday. Conversely, according to Grespi (2013, 45), in the iconoclastic perspective the close-up qualifies as a dehumanising device.

Some Features of the Western Concept of the Face

The Western concept of the face is dense with meaning and has undergone various semantic shifts throughout history. Camille Chamois, Daphné Le Roux, and Benjamin Levy (2012) identify some of the main shifts and define the face as a “semiotic construction” (2012: my translation), namely as something that constitutes itself through culture and changes meaning accordingly, rather than a natural given. An essential shift in the Western interpretation of the face occurred in the seventeenth century when “the face is not anymore the effect of an external impression, but becomes the place of revelation of a peculiar interiority” (Chamois et al. 2012: my translation). That is, the face became the place for the revelation of the soul [âme], although it was characterised by an essentially one-way movement from interiority to exteriority rather than an interchange between the two dimensions. Another significant change in the meaning of the face took place in the nineteenth century when the face configured itself as dual: it was at once the place for the expression of individuality and the manifestation of a type (Chamois et al. 2012). The face was that which allowed individuality to surface through facial expressions, but also permitted the categorisation of human beings into different types. Suffice it to mention, as an example, Cesare Lombroso’s (1876/2006) study on the correlation between physiognomy and criminology, where he identifies criminal types on the basis of their bodily, especially facial, appearance. Then, at the beginning of the twentieth century the face, albeit maintaining its duality, shifted from individuality-type to interiority-exteriority, or individuality-universality. The face, thus, becomes the locus where the universal and the particular meet, an interpretation that can be found in authors such as Epstein and Balázs.

In considering the meaning of the face, Grespi (2013, 43), Margaret Werth (2006, 85), and Aumont (2003, 142-143) resort to Simmel (1901/1959, 276-281) and his discussion on its role in modernity. Simmel attributes the process by which the
face is associated with the expression of the soul to Christianity, since it promoted the chaste covering of the body, leaving the face as the only unveiled body part (1901/1959, 278-279). As such, the face became that which allowed for an exchange between the individual and others. That is to say, it came to constitute the primary and most immediate tool for social interaction. In Simmel’s perspective, as well as in the iconophilic interpretation of the close-up, the face becomes the means for reciprocating the other’s gaze and for revealing the soul. Aumont (2003, 143) links this positive understanding of the face to Simmel’s overall conception of the face as belonging to a complete being, which is far from the fragmented subjectivity of the post-World War II period.

Levinas is the other major author considered in regard to the face for he has extensively written on the philosophy of the face-to-face encounter. In his account (1969), the face becomes the tool for the encounter with the other, but the meaning of this encounter radically changes from Simmel’s interpretation. The Levinasian face-to-face is the relation between the same,12 which refers to the “I” experiencing the encounter, and the other, which stands for another person. However, this relation remains beyond experience: it cannot be thought or seen. Levinas analyses the conditions of possibility for such a relation and argues against a reduction of the other to the same, affirming that “the face is present in its refusal to be contained” (1969, 194). That is, the face of the other is the manifestation of an infinite exteriority, of something that is and remains exterior to the subject, without the possibility of being reduced to the same, otherwise it would be contained and become finite. To reduce the other to the same would correspond to negating the uniqueness of the other by means of a mental image or a thought about the other person – a sort of cognitive copy of the other. Levinas continues by stating:

To manifest oneself as a face is to impose oneself above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation, the very straightforwardness of the face to face,

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12 Levinas (1969, 289) delineates the difference between “like” and “same”. While to be like implies an identification coming from outside, because “like” needs a second term of comparison, to be the same is instead an identification coming from within. Levinas affirms, “the identity of the individual does not consist in being like to itself, and in letting itself be identified from the outside by a finger that points to it; it consists in being the same – in being oneself, in identifying oneself from within” (1969, 289: emphasis in original).
without the intermediary of any image, in one’s nudity, that is, in one’s destitution and hunger. (1969, 200: emphasis in original)

The face configures itself as imageless and as that which is beyond thought since thought can think only of the same. It is an irreducible epiphany (from the Greek *epipháneia* /ἐπιφάνεια, “appearance”, “coming into view”, “manifestation”, often referred to deities) that in manifesting itself somehow also conceals itself. I am prevented from reducing the face of the other to the same, namely to my own thought or to an image. Therefore, the face founds something like an ethics of difference: the impossible reduction of the other to the same configures the face-to-face as at once the prerequisite for and the negation of the encounter with the other. According to Levinas, “man as Other comes to us from the outside, a separated – or holy – face” (1969, 291). The use of the term “separated” resonates with its Latin etymology, which translates more than a mere act of division: to separate is to divide in such a way that in dividing two entities are created. The Levinasian other as separated maintains the meaning of an entity independent from that of the same; the other person is separated in the sense of created as irreducible entity.

What is more, the face-to-face presupposes proximity and separation, that is, a certain nearness is necessary for the face to manifest itself, but the other is absolutely other, therefore separated. The face-to-face relation is thus transcendence, in the sense of that which transcends conceptualisation, for it is impossible to reduce the encounter with the other to a thought or an image. And in this impossibility of fully grasping the other lies the foundation for a relationship in which both terms – the same and the other – are respected. Levinas remarks,

expression, or the face, overflows images, which are always immanent to my thought, as though they came from me. […] Because it is the presence of exteriority the face never becomes an image or an intuition. (1969, 297)

From the transcendental conception of the face-to-face, Levinas goes on to discuss its ethical quality, concluding that “the epiphany of the face is ethical” (1969, 199). The imageless encounter with the other calls for personal responsibility towards the other because the nudity of the face corresponds to the commandment “you shall not commit murder” (Levinas 1969, 199). From an ethical point of view, given that the
encounter with the face of the other is an appeal to my responsibility towards this other, the face of the other, in its vulnerability and nudity, expresses the prohibition against killing. However, Levinas’s terminology is sometimes vague and takes on a mystical tone, making it difficult to fully understand his argument on the responsibility towards the other, which configures itself as a sort of a priori which the face of the other appeals to.

In addition to this, it is worth mentioning Levinas’s concept of being, which is made evident in the title of his work Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority (1969). In Levinas’s view, to be is essentially to be exterior (1969, 290-291). To exist is a proper ex-sistere, from ex which denotes “out of” and sistere which means “to be placed”, thus translating as “to step out or forth” and “to come forth”. Exteriority is thus infinity in the sense of that which is exterior to totality otherwise it would be finite. Unlike Simmel, whose interpretation of the face is based on the duality between interiority and exteriority, for Levinas there is only exteriority, which emerges in the encounter with the face of the other: “being is exteriority, and exteriority is produced in its truth in a subjective field, for the separated being” (1969, 299). If it is possible to trace an iconoclastic quality in Levinas’s philosophy, it is an iconoclasm with a Biblical flavour in which speech is understood as that which “refuses vision” (Levinas 1969, 296) and is superior to the image. While speech respects the exteriority of the face-to-face, the image is always on the verge of reducing exteriority to the interiority of the same because “vision is essentially an adequation of exteriority with interiority” (Levinas 1969, 295).

Grespi (2013 43, 45) institutes an affinity of thought between Simmel’s concept of the face and Epstein’s and Balázs’s cinematic close-up, on the one hand; and between Levinas’s imageless face and Deleuze and Guattari’s facial close-up, on the other hand. Indeed, Epstein and Balázs conceive of the face in cinematic close-up as a door to the soul, thus as a means for passing from interiority to exteriority and vice versa. In their perspective, there remains the Simmelian faith in the face as the place of interchange of an individual, interior dimension and a social, exterior one. Conversely, Deleuze and Guattari define the face as pure exteriority, echoing the Levinasian interpretation. However, while for Deleuze and Guattari the exteriority of the face concretises itself in an image, namely the affection-image, for Levinas the
exteriority of the face of the other cannot be reduced into an image. Thus, it is possible to venture an iconoclastic interpretation of Levinas’s philosophy insofar as his notion of the face is beyond image and thought; but it would be hazardous to attribute the same iconoclastic quality to Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis since in their argument the face acquires visibility in the cinematic close-up.

A further significant aspect concerning the Western notion of the face is its link with religion, primarily that of the Old and New Testament, found in both Simmel’s and Levinas’s analysis. In particular, it is the Christological influence, namely the influence of Christian thought and of the figure of Christ, that can be found in the various discussions of the cinematic close-up. There is a religious lexicon, mainly Christian, in both primary sources (Balázs 1924/2003, 122-123; Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987, 167, 172, 176-179, 182; Epstein 1921/1977, 9, 13; Epstein 1926/2012, 295) and in those who comment on them (Aumont 2003, 134, 145; Dalle Vacche 2003, 15; Grespi 2013, 41-42, 46-47; Turvey 1998, 35), thus maintaining the link that iconophilia and iconoclasm have, philosophically and historically, with the religious sphere. Grespi poignantly observes how “the Christological icon […] is fundamental for the entire path of sacralisation of the filmic image” (2013, 46: my translation). It is so because the face in Western culture is profoundly linked to Christ as face. Christianity represents one of the main cultural roots of Western Europe and has exercised its influence also and especially through the sacred icon of the face of Christ. Additionally, the Christological icon is also significant for the comprehension of iconoclastic, or at least non-iconophilic, interpretations, which maintain the reference to the face of Christ and Christ as the quintessential Western face (see, Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 176-184).

The Mystics of the Cinematic Close-Up

In the iconophilic interpretation of the cinematic close-up, the face configures itself as a site for the surfacing of the soul and a manifestation of inner life. In the work of Balázs and Epstein, the main exponents of this position, the term soul recurs several times.

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13 Jean-Luc Nancy, for instance, identifies an iconoclastic connotation in Levinas, affirming, “Levinas gives a striking example of a thinking that is mostly inspired by iconoclasm […], even if it is dominated by a motif of the face” (2005, 146 [note 17]).
times, providing their writing and the exposition of their notion of cinematic close-up with a mystic ambiguity. In the Western context the word soul retains, amongst its other connections, a link with the religious sphere, primarily Christian (Cooper 2013, 15-18; Fuller 2014, 1-4). Cooper engages with the topic of the soul in film theory, pointing out that the use of this term is found in various languages in film theory until the second half of the twentieth century:

From the silent to the sound era, different understandings of soul served a wide range of film theorists who sought variously to probe the psychological aspects of film and the film experience; to describe film’s specificity, enigmatic capacities, moral purpose, evocation of inner life, and access to other worlds; or to capture film’s vital force and mobility. (2013, 2)

The extensive use of soul in the discussion of cinema in the first half of the twentieth century testifies to the mystical undertone that enveloped film theory in that period. As a result, defining some of the then-used terms, such as soul or photogénie, presents difficulties. As I will examine in more detail later in this chapter, the word photogénie is left undefined by the authors who employ it. Similarly, the continual reference to the soul, at once a secularised soul and the Christian incorporeal spirit, complicates the analysis of theorists such as Epstein and Balázs. In their work the term soul comes to signify an undefined inner life of humans and things, a sort of humanist appropriation of the Christian concept of soul. Although there is no mention of a super-sensible realm, the cinematic close-up nevertheless becomes a locus of exchange between interiority and exteriority. Grespi highlights the mystical connotation of the cinematic close-up in Epstein and Balázs, defining their notion of face as “the place of mediation between the human and the sacred essence” (2013, 43: my translation).

Besides Grespi, two other significant sources for discussing iconophilic interpretations of the cinematic close-up are Malcolm Turvey (1998) and Aumont (2003). Although neither of them addresses Epstein’s and Balázs’s position as iconophilic, they nevertheless stress the revelatory power attributed to the film medium by the two 1920s theorists and their mystical faith in the cinematic close-up as a means for communicating inner life. Turvey focuses on Epstein alone and the concepts of augmented knowledge and immanent cinema. He argues that the
Epsteinian close-up “augments visual perception” (1998, 28) which, in turn, leads to an increase in the knowledge of the portion of reality represented on screen. Accordingly, Turvey proposes a reading of Epstein’s work as the demonstration of an “epistemological power of the film camera” (1998, 29). Linked to this claim is Turvey’s (1998, 34) definition of Epstein’s cinema as immanent since it is grounded in the body of the spectator, who physically experiences a sensory amplification through the literal magnification of the close-up.

Aumont concentrates on the face in silent films, focusing mainly on Epstein and Balázs. His point of view on the topic takes on a Deleuzian perspective, which he manifests in discussing the limits of Epstein’s and Balázs’s analysis of the face in relation to the cinematic close-up:

What Balázs did not see, what no one saw at the time except perhaps for Eisenstein, is the premise, and at the same time the consequence, of this equation [of the face and the close-up]. A face that is filmed intensively is always a close-up, even if it is far away. A close-up always shows a face, a physiognomy. “Close-up” and “face” are thus interchangeable. (2003, 134)

It is a Deleuzian perspective because, as I shall explain later in the chapter, it is the French philosopher who equates the close-up and the face of any beings, objects, or landscapes, independently of their shot size. Aumont takes into account Balázs’s physiognomy and Epstein’s photogénie, highlighting the mystical tone of their writings and the basically idealistic perspective they delineate since they conceive of the face as a totality belonging to a complete human being.

In the iconophilic interpretation of the cinematic close-up, the film medium has the merit of having shown the dual positioning of the face between interiority and exteriority. In particular, Epstein (1921/1977) and Balázs (1924/2010) attribute a secularised sacred role to the cinema, understanding it as a powerful tool for disclosing the human essence and able to augment our knowledge of reality. Both Grespi (2013, 42-45) and Turvey (1998) outline the epistemological enhancement produced by the close-up. While the former defines cinema as a means for intensifying the knowledge of the world in both Epstein and Balázs and stresses the sacred connotation they give to the film medium, the latter discusses only Epstein’s cognitive magnification carried out by the film medium, emphasising the role of the
body in the experience of the cinematic close-up. Also Aumont (2003, 143-145) underlines the importance of the revelatory aspect in Epstein and Balázs, the fact that the close-up allows for an enhanced vision of the phenomenal world. Indeed, for both theorists the face in the close-up constitutes the place for revealing inner life. While Balázs identifies as facial close-up only the human face and its micro movements, Epstein recognises any object of a close-up as belonging to the category of the face, including landscapes, body parts, and inanimate objects (Epstein 1926/2012; Grespi 2013, 45; Turvey 1998, 38-40). Both Epstein and Balázs, through the notions of photogénie and physiognomy, respectively, develop a religious vocabulary of the face in the close-up.

Epstein takes up the concept of photogénie from Louis Delluc (1920). The term is ambiguous in itself and is unclearly defined by both authors. Delluc presents photogénie through a series of impressions using a vague and quasi-liturgical vocabulary, so that the word acquires in its possible meanings that of a sacred and mysterious rite between the referent and the film medium. Likewise, Epstein defines “photogenic any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction” (1926/2012, 293). He continues by listing movement as an essential element of photogénie, specifying that “the photogenic aspect of an object is a consequence of its variations in space-time” (1926/2012, 294), and therefore it finds its best means of expression in the film medium. Despite the vagueness of the definitions of photogénie, both Delluc and Epstein stress its fundamental aspect, which is its capacity to reveal the soul of humans and objects. Photogénie thus expresses a correspondence between the qualities of the object and the properties of the cinematic medium, that is to say, it bespeaks of “an accordance between reality […] and its representation” (Carluccio 1992, 59: my translation). Described as such, Photogénie would be a property of specific objects and beings that the film medium can record and reveal, but is unable to create from scratch. It remains ambiguous insofar as it is a quality belonging to certain phenomenal referents – not everything can be photogenic – that cinema can make visible (or more visible). While the relationship involving the referent, its cinematic image, and the photogenic aspect remains unclear in Delluc and Epstein, in the Russian formalists’ appropriation of the term, photogénie is developed in a more defined manner. Photogénie becomes a
quality entirely given by the film medium through the stylistic manipulations of the phenomenal referent, which is not photogenic in itself (Eikhenbaum 1927/1982, 5-31; Tynyanov 1927/1982, 32-54). Conversely, in Delluc and Epstein cinematic devices can only accentuate the photogenic aspect, which remains distinctive of certain objects and subjects. Accordingly, photogénie finds itself necessarily bound to the phenomenal referent, which is the true holder of the photogenic aspect (Carluccio 1992, 64). For this reason, Mary Ann Doane (2003, 105, 110) addresses photogénie as a form of cinephilia in so far as it presupposes the very possibility of a nexus between reality and the cinema, which, in Epstein’s view, allowed for an increase in our knowledge of the world.

In this scenario, the close-up is recognised as that which enhances the photogenic aspect of living things and inanimate objects by virtue of its dimension (Epstein 1921/1977, 13). Turvey (1998, 35, 48) interprets the Epsteinian notion of close-up as a sensory and cognitive magnification. Enlarged on the screen, the object of the close-up intensifies the viewer’s perception of that portion of reality, thus establishing a close link between spectator and phenomenal world. That is, the experience of the close-up passes through the spectator’s body and results in an augmented knowledge of the recorded reality: “a superior sensory knowledge of the phenomenal world is enabled by the film camera” (Turvey 1998, 29). Likewise, Aumont (2003, 146) points out the peculiarity of the close-up as that which produces a sensory enlargement in the spectator, augmenting human knowledge of reality by showing details that usually go unnoticed to the naked eye. This deepened knowledge passes also and especially through the literal and emotional magnification carried out by the close-up. Epstein outlines the overwhelming power of the close-up to display and amplify emotions as follows:

The close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and that is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of this suffering. I would be able to taste the tears. Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. Ever closer it presses against me, and I follow it face to face. It’s not even true that there is air between us; I consume it. It is in me like a sacrament. Maximum visual acuity. The close-up limits and directs the attention. As an emotional indicator, it overwhelms me. I have neither the right nor the ability to be distracted. (1921/1977, 13: my emphasis)
Therefore, the close-up has the capacity to bring onto the epidermal surface of the face that inner life forgotten and hidden. As a secular sacrament, it opens a new dimension of the phenomenal world, positing itself as a concrete and visible mediator between interiority and exteriority. Apropos to this, Aumont defines the close-up as “the object of a sacramental transubstantiation” (2003, 145). By choosing this peculiar expression, which resonates with Epstein’s and which indicates, in a Christian context, a change of substance, the author is pointing to the profound change that affects the viewer of the Epsteinian close-up. The subject receiving the sacrament of the close-up undergoes a perceptive and cognitive change: there is the emotional intensification, followed by an epistemological growth.

Similarly, Balázs (1924/2010) discusses the revelatory power of cinema and the amplification of emotions produced by the close-up, focusing on the notion of physiognomy. By this term he means cinema’s capacity to reveal the multi-faceted dimension of human beings through the continuous changes of facial expressions (Balázs 1924/2003, 123-124). Physiognomy thus expresses a strong connection between interiority and exteriority: the body and its movements convey inner life and, by virtue of cinema and the magnification of the close-up, “the whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions” (Balázs 1924/2010, 10). The notion of physiognomy is at the core of Balázs’s overall argument on cinema as the instrument that has restored humans’ visibility, lost after the invention of the printing press. In his view, the civilisation of the written word operated a shift from the visible man to the readable man, a perspective that Balázs aims at reversing (Amengual 1986). The cinema, especially through the close-up, is that which permits this process because it at once imitates real behaviors and induces new ones, thus restoring the visibility of gestures and facial expressions that the metropolitan citizen has become incapable of seeing.

As a result, the face in the close-up constitutes the most effective way to

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14 From the Latin _trans_, which means “over”, and _substantia_, which translates “substance”. In Christian theology, transubstantiation defines the change of substance of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. While the physical appearance of the objects—the sacramental bread and wine—remains unaltered, the substance undergoes a complete transformation. For further reference see, William Benham’s _The Dictionary of Religion: An Encyclopedia of Christian and Other Religious Doctrines, Denominations, Sects, Heresies, Ecclesiastical Terms, History, Biography, Etc._ (1887, 1037-1041).
show inner life onto the surface of the screen. Like Epstein, Balázs conceives of the close-up as a mediator between the individual and the universal. Aumont appropriately remarks, “physiognomy is thus both appearance, the face of things, of beings, of places, and the window to their soul. Among these many physiognomies, one towers above all: the human face” (2003, 133). At the core of this renewed visibility of human beings there is the gesture, even the almost imperceptible movement of the face’s skin. Inner life, in order to become visible, needs to acquire a corporeal form in the facial expression:

The magnifying glass of the cinematograph brings us closer to the individual cells of life, it allows us to feel the texture and substance of life in its concrete detail. [...] The closeup in film is the art of emphasis. (Balázs 1924/2010, 38-39)

Hence, the face in the close-up expresses the inner transformations and manifests the human essence. Magnified by the close-up, the face intensifies its expressive power by filling up the whole screen and by connecting interiority and exteriority. In both Epstein and Balázs, mystics “of the 1920s close-up, the filmic face simply constitutes the place of interception of the sacred concealed in man” (Grespi 2013, 42: my translation). Furthermore, in their view, cinema feeds on everyday life and, at the same time, shows it more intensively. And indeed, Epstein’s photogénie and Balázs’s physiognomy have a strong bond with the phenomenal referent, which cinema reveals by means of close-ups. On the contrary, Deleuze and Guattari will “unhook the human face from its sensible evidence” (Grespi 2013, 45: my translation), elaborating a theory of the close-up as a means for revealing the inhumanity in human beings.

Epstein’s and Balázs’s iconophilic tendencies have an idealistic conception of the face in the close-up, as remarked by Aumont:

These two concepts [photogénie and physiognomy] outline an aesthetic of the face in film. Idealistic aesthetic that is, it is based on the hope of a revelation that it believes is possible because it believes fundamentally in the face as organic unit, infrangible, total. The form of this revelation is [...] the close-up. (2003, 139)
Epstein and Balázs undoubtedly promote the cinematic close-up as an idealistic door to the soul and as the locus of reciprocity with the other. The concept of the door in film theory is characterised by a plurality of meanings, which Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010, 35-54) discuss in detail. They take into account various senses of the door in film and film theory such as, among others, that of a physical passage between two spaces or that of a metaphorical threshold between two worlds. In both cases, the peculiarity of the door resides in the fact that it involves the co-existence of two dimensions: “a threshold always points in two directions, because it simultaneously connects and separates –a border can be crossed precisely because a division always implies spatial proximity” (Elsaesser & Hagener 2010, 37). Also Simmel (1909/2000, 170-174) reflects on the meaning of the door, spelling out its distinguishing characteristic as that which unifies and separates at the same time: “a piece of space was thereby brought together and separated from the whole remaining world” (1909/2000, 172). Like Elsaesser and Hagener, Simmel argues that the peculiarity of the door consists in the fact that it is both an instrument for enclosing a space, thus separating the interiority of the house from the exteriority of the outside world, and a means for connecting these two independent dimensions. Accordingly, the door is characterised by a dual movement of inside–outside, configuring itself “as the possibility of a permanent interchange” (Simmel 1909/2000, 173). Simmel’s notion of door becomes the metaphor for the possibility of the encounter with the other, breaking the strict boundaries between inner and outer. Thus, the face in Epstein and Balázs as a door to the soul retains this meaning of a place for the interchange between an individual inner life and a universal external dimension.

This position is at odds with that of Deleuze (1986, 87-122) and Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987). For the French philosophers the face ceases to be a door between interiority and exteriority and turns into a surface, hence pure exteriority. It is worth noting that while Epstein and Balázs wrote in the 1920s, Deleuze and Guattari dealt with the same topic after World War II. Grespi (2013, 41) and Aumont (2003, 145-146), among others, point out the importance played by the changed historical context in Deleuze and Guattari’s work, underlying the absence of revelation in the world post WWII. It was, and still is, a world stripped of any teleological meaning. The hardness of this new reality devoid of revelatory aspects
could partially account for the problematic reading of some of Balázs’s and Epstein’s arguments in the work of Deleuze (1986, 87-122) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 167-191).

Defacing the Close-Up

For the sake of clarity, I will differentiate between the notion of the facial close-up as found in Deleuze’s *Cinema 1: The Time-Image* (1986, 87-122) and that illustrated in Deleuze and Guattari’s “Year Zero: Faciality” (1987, 167-191). Although the two works share some common concepts and ideas, it is worth dealing with them separately due to the complexity of their arguments. The intricacies of Deleuze’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s books not only make the understanding of some of their claims quite difficult, but also leave a substantial margin to conflicting interpretations. Contrarily to Grespi (2013, 45-48), who presents Deleuze and Guattari as iconoclasts of the cinematic close-up, I argue for the impossibility of ascribing Deleuze’s thought to iconoclasm. Drawing on Deleuze’s “Plato and the Simulacrum” (1983, 45-56), and Foucault’s (1970/1994, 343-368) review of Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (1994) and *The Logic of Sense* (1990), I will situate Deleuze’s thought beyond the representational logic of the copy and the model, which is instead essential for any iconoclastic or iconophilic perspective.

Both Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari share some of Epstein’s and Balázs’s arguments, albeit reaching quite different conclusions. Like Epstein, they consider face everything that is a close-up, including objects and landscapes, and like Balázs they interpret the face as a totality rather than a detail. However, Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari identify a different connotation of the face in cinematic close-up. While in *Cinema 1* the facial close-up is characterised by a certain nihilism (Deleuze 1986, 100), in “Year Zero: Faciality” it is first and foremost defined as inhuman (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987, 170-171, 181, 190). Despite the employment of negatively connotated terms such as nihilism and inhuman, I shall explain how the two French philosophers use them in a quite positive manner.

What radically changes from the iconophilic interpretation is the definition of face which, instead of constituting a mediator between interiority and exteriority, configures itself as a pure surface. The fundamental point and the basis for Deleuze
and Guattari’s theory of the facial close-up consist in the fact that the face is not the human head (1980/1987, 170). That is, the face does not belong to the body but is essentially separated from it and, consequently, cannot reveal any inner life onto an external surface. In their view, “the head is included in the body, but the face is not. The face is a surface. […] the face is produced only when the head ceases to be part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body” (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987, 170). The face, therefore, occurs when the body ceases to exist. Similarly, Deleuze describes the face as a “reflecting surface” expressing “intensive micro-movements” (1986, 87-88). Here Deleuze at once echoes Epstein’s and Balázs’s perspective and overturns it by severing the nexus between the face and interiority. Deleuze’s notion of face does not correspond to the frontal surface of the human head, but consists in any thing that “has been treated as a face” (1986, 88), hence it includes inanimate objects, body parts, and landscapes. Moreover, the face is not the object of a close-up, but equals to the close-up itself: “there is no close-up of the face, the face is in itself close-up, the close-up is by itself face and both are affect, affection-image” (Deleuze 1986, 88: emphasis in original).

In order for a face to be produced, a process of abstraction is needed. This process is called “faciality” [visageité] (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987, 168) in “Year Zero: Faciality” and corresponds to the process of abstraction that Deleuze will later describe in Cinema 1: The Movement-Image (1986). Visageité is a neologism coined by Deleuze and Guattari. It comes from the French visage, which means “face”, and refers to the process of making a face, translated in English as “faciality”. In Cinema 1 (1986, 88) Deleuze employs another neologism, visagéifiée, which is the past participle of the non-existent verb visagéifier, which translates as giving a face to something, in this case to a surface, thus the English translation “faceified”. The English translations “faciality” and “faceified” maintain the reference to the face, as in the French visage, thus alluding to the frontal part of the head where the eyes and mouth are and which allows for the encounter or the failed encounter with the other. However, Deleuze’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s “faciality” is far more complex and the hinting at the face comes to signify a reference to any surface that functions as the cultural and political construct of face.

The faceified face is a surface abstracted not only from the body, but also
from every spatio-temporal dimension so that it loses its relations with the state of things (Deleuze 1986, 95-101; Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987). In Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987, 181-182) the process of facialisation designates the imposition of a face onto a subject and is codified by the binary system white wall/black holes which produces the face as a politics. The facialised face is a politics because it consists in the acquisition of a standardised face, that of the “white man” (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987, 176). Deleuze and Guattari, in fact, claim that “the face is […] White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black holes of his eyes. The face is Christ. The face is the typical European” (1980/1987, 176). As a socio-political construct, the face is closely linked to Christianity. Here the Christological reference acquires a political connotation rather than a religious one, in the sense of Christianity as the socio-political machine of meaning in Western Europe. Accordingly, the face contains in itself the seed for racism since it suppresses the other’s differences and aims at conforming all faces to its own. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, the face of the other than the white man “must be Christianized, in other words, facialized” (1980/1987, 178). Instead of establishing a relation with the other, the face produces a distance, with the specific purpose of ascribing every face to the dominant face, the standardised “white man”. The close-up thus turns into the site for the revelation of the inner inhumanity in human beings (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987, 171). In their account of the facial close-up, Deleuze and Guattari conclude,

*the face, what a horror.* It is naturally a lunar landscape, with its pores, planes, matts, bright colors, whiteness, and holes: there is no need for a close-up to make it inhuman; it is naturally a close-up, and naturally inhuman. (1980/1987, 190: emphasis in original)

Similarly, in *Cinema 1* (1986, 95-101) Deleuze describes the process of abstraction of the face as consisting in the breaking with every spatio-temporal dimension. Fundamental for the understanding of this process is the conception of the face not as a partial object or a fragment belonging to a body which would represent the whole, but as a whole itself. That is, the face is an autonomous entity. According to Deleuze,

the close-up does not tear away its object from a set of which it would form
part, of which it would be a part, but on the contrary it abstracts it from all spatio-temporal co-ordinates, that is to say it raises it to the state of Entity. (1986, 95-96: emphasis in original)

Everything can be the object of this abstraction process, the human head, body parts, inanimate things, and landscapes. Abstracted from their context and free from any dependency, they become autonomous entities. What is more, having lost its ordinarily roles, that of individuating, socialising and communicating, the face is equated to the close-up:

There is no close-up of the face. The close-up is the face, but the face precisely in so far as it has destroyed its triple function – a nudity of the face much greater than that of the body, an inhumanity much greater than that of animals. [...] the close-up turns the face into a phantom, and the book of phantoms. (Deleuze 1986, 99: my emphasis)

Here, like in “Year Zero: Faciality”, the emphasis is placed on the inhumanity of the close-up. In the face’s status as entity disconnected from reality in its hic et nunc lies the core of Deleuze’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s interpretation of the cinematic close-up. Complete in itself, the face does not contain the traces of its relation with the world. As a consequence, the face in the close-up, far from being the site of human revelation like in Balázs and Epstein, turns into a means for revealing “the inhuman in human beings” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987, 171) or becomes the manifestation of an inner void, “the fear of the face confronted with its nothingness” (Deleuze 1986, 100). In both works the facial close-up is stripped of any connecting capacity and presents, instead, the very void at the core of humanity, the fact that there is nothing to be shown and revealed.

As a result, Deleuze and Guattari identify the humans’ aim as dismantling the face, making it a pockmarked face that ceases to respond to the facialisation machine – the white wall/black holes system (1980/1987, 171). Indeed, if the facial close-up responds to a logic of eliminating differences in the uniqueness of the Christ-face, the defacement of this close-up would allow for a deviation from the standard and, consequently, for the expression of a face other than that of the “white man”. However, defacing the close-up does not correspond to a return to the human head, but constitutes a politics itself (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/1987, 188). The defaced
close-up is still a face and, therefore, is still inhuman. Likewise, Deleuze (1986, 100-105) delineates the beauty of this effacement. He finds a significant example of defaced close-ups in Ingmar Bergman’s work, especially in *Persona* (1966). It is a positive effacement: “Bergman’s cinema finds its culmination in the obliteration of faces” (Deleuze 1986, 105). Deleuze does not condemn Bergman for his cinematic close-ups where spectators are before the void inherent in humans’ life, but elevates him to a magnificent destroyer of faces.

In both cases – the Christ-face and the dismantled face – Deleuze’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s facial close-up ceases to configure itself as the Epsteinian and Balázsian mediator between the individual and the social life in the rising metropolis of the early twentieth century. In Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari, who write in the context of a globalised, post-war world, the face comes to signify the very impossibility of the encounter with the other. It is possible to trace here a specific change in the vision of the world, taking World War II as the separating event. Both the iconophilic interpretation and that of Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari assign to the facial close-up a revelatory power. However, in the iconophilic perspective there is always something to reveal, an invisible life of humans and things that the film medium is able to record and reproduce on the screen. It is the context of the 1920s, a world still responding to a positivistic understanding of reality, which was to be shattered a few years later. Quite differently, in Deleuze’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s interpretation the cinema lays bare the absence of revelation in reality, the fact that there is nothing to be unconcealed. It is the world that has seen two World Wars and has gradually turned into a phenomenal reality divested of any a priori meaning.

Grespi (2013, 45-49) proposes an iconoclastic interpretation of the inhuman and defacement in Deleuze and Guattari. She defines Deleuze and Guattari as iconoclasts because, in her reading, the facial close-up is a de-humanising device and its defacement would respond to an iconoclastic intent. For Grespi, erasing the face becomes the iconoclastic re-appropriation of the face and allows for the overcoming

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15 From the philosophy of positivism, first elaborated by Auguste Comte (Lacey 2005). Positivism came to express an optimistic understanding of human history as a constant civil and social progress. World War I produced a first movement away from positivism, and World War II and the Shoah put it definitively into crisis.
of the faciality process: from a facial twitch to a deformed or scarred face, the attack towards the unity of the facialised face enables a breaking with the politics of the faciality process. That is, by interpreting Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of inhumanity as something that ought to be escaped, she identifies in the defacement of the close-up an iconoclastic will to break with a false image of a true model. However, Deleuze and Guattari never mention the possibility of a humanity in humans. Rather, it is inhumanity itself that is constituent of human beings. Therefore, inhumanity would be the true essence instead of a false appearance. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to discuss Deleuze using the binary opposition true-false, since he overcomes, or at least aims at overcoming, this Western dichotomy in his philosophy.

Indeed, Deleuze himself provides the very reason against a classification of his thought under iconoclasm. In “Plato and the Simulacrum” (Deleuze 1983, 45-56) he delineates his attempt at overcoming Plato’s oppositional logic between model and copy, namely between the sensible and the intelligible. Deleuze draws a distinction between two types of image: the eikòn – which he calls copy or icon – and the eidôlon – which he addresses as simulacrum. However, Deleuze’s simulacrum does not correspond to the image as eidôlon in the way it has been considered so far. He begins his discussion by using the term simulacrum with the meaning of eidôlon, the false image – hence an image in a relationship with a model – (Deleuze 1983, 47-49). Then he continues his critique of the Platonic representational system by employing the same word – simulacrum – with the meaning of an image without a model (Deleuze 1983, 51-53). Deleuze leaves unexplained the transition from one meaning to the other, employing the same term for two quite dissimilar conceptions of the image. More to the point, what Deleuze reproves to Plato is his representational logic, the enclosing of the image in a relationship with the model. Deleuze rejects this dualism in favour of the simulacrum without model. His overturning of Platonism consists in the abolishment of the copy-model dichotomy and the exaltation of the image without prototype (Deleuze 1983, 52-53). Consequentially, Deleuze cannot be addressed as iconoclast insofar as his philosophy positions itself beyond the representational paradigm necessary for both the iconoclastic and the iconophilic perspectives. In his philosophy, the metaphysical
requirement of a true(r) model and the binary vision of the world collapse.

Likewise, Foucault (1970/1994, 343-368) discusses Deleuze’s overcoming of Platonism and of its opposition between essence and appearance, which has haunted Western philosophy since its origin. While Plato was entirely devoted to the intelligible realm, with a clear contempt for sensible appearances, namely for this phenomenal world we inhabit and apprehend through the senses, Foucault (1970/1994, 345), commenting on Deleuze, invites the opening up of the terrestrial sphere. He interprets Deleuze’s philosophy as that which is based on the rupture with the Platonic dichotomy between copy and model in favour of a copy without prototype – the simulacrum. In Foucault’s view, with Deleuze “the philosophy of representation – of the original, the first time, resemblance, imitation, faithfulness – is dissolving” (1970/1994, 348). Accordingly, Deleuze’s philosophy is not inserted in a representational system of thought. Being outside this system, which is instead the basis for iconoclasm and iconophilia, Deleuze escapes a categorisation of his thought as iconoclastic. In Deleuze there is no place for images referencing their model, but only for surfaces – *phantasmata*, or the exteriority of the facial close-up.

In conclusion, the topic of the face in cinematic close-up re-proposes in a different key some of the aspects of the *eikôn* and the *eidôlon*. In Balázs and Epstein the image of the face is *eikôn*, that is, a mediator between an invisible interiority and an external appearance. Although this conception of the face does not bring up the sacred in the super-sensible sphere, it nonetheless bestows a visible form on the “sacred concealed in man” (Grespi 2013, 42: my translation). Therefore, the exponents of this interpretation continue to believe in the very possibility of representing the sacred, whether celestial or human, in a figurative manner. Contrariwise, in Deleuze’s and Deleuze and Guattari’s perspective the image of the face, instead of referring to a remote interiority, constitutes a pure surface. Hence, it is exteriority, sensible appearance. It is not the *eidôlon*, the deceitful copy, but comes close to it insofar as it imitates only one face, that of the standardised “white man” – the Christ-face. However, the Deleuzian interpretation of the image overcomes the oppositional logic of the copy and the model, completely expelling the latter from his system. Therefore, while there is an iconophilic aspect in Epstein’s and Balázs’s interpretation of the cinematic close-up, its iconoclastic counterpart cannot be found.
in Deleuze or in Deleuze and Guattari. Nevertheless, these conflicting interpretations of the close-up are useful for the forthcoming discussion on cinematic iconoclasm.

**Cinematic Iconoclasm between the Eidôlon and the Eikôn**

What is, then, cinematic iconoclasm? It is, first and foremost, a worldview because, as in the case of religious iconoclasm, it bears witness to a peculiar interpretation of the world – cinematic as well as phenomenal. What underpins cinematic iconoclasm is an understanding of the relationship between certain film images and their referents in terms of alterity, or at least inadequacy – the image being inadequate for the representation of the model. Before illustrating my argument on cinematic iconoclasm, I will consider Marion Poirson-Dechonne’s *Entre spiritualité et laïcité, la tentation iconoclaste du cinéma* [Between spirituality and secularism, the iconoclastic temptation of cinema] (2016), which represents the most in-depth discussion on iconoclasm and cinema currently available. By establishing possible links between certain aspects of Christian Catholic theology and the film medium, Poirson-Dechonne identifies some secularised “iconoclastic tendencies” (2016, 9) in the cinema. I will in particular engage with her differentiation among aesthetic, political and ethical iconoclasm since it provides a useful starting point for developing my ideas on cinematic iconoclasm. I will then put forward my argument on iconoclasm in the cinema, discriminating between two forms on the basis of the *eidôlon-eikôn* opposition.

**Aesthetic, Political and Ethical Iconoclasm in the Cinema**

In discussing the issue of iconoclasm in the cinema, Poirson-Dechonne (2016) takes into account a variety of films, many of which are not iconoclastic *strictu sensu*. Her book is ideally composed of a first part dedicated to the Christian theme of the Incarnation and the concept of figure,\(^\text{16}\) and a second part centred on the notion of a

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\(^\text{16}\) Poirson-Dechonne devotes a great deal to the concept of figure, especially in relation to Christ in the icon and cinematic representations of inhuman bodies. However, I will only briefly touch on this topic because it goes beyond the scope of this chapter. Greatly simplified, she argues that “what defines a figure is essentially the imposition of a shape” (2016, 116: my translation), and
secularised iconoclasm, where she distinguishes among aesthetic, political and ethical iconoclasm.

In the first part, Poirson-Dechonne seems more concerned with the representation of religious themes rather than with an iconoclastic film form. Accordingly, she considers films at first glance unrelated to one another and whose iconoclasm, when present, resides in the content rather than in the film form. A first cluster consists of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Je vous salue Marie* (1985), the Taviani brothers’ *Good Morning Babilonia* (1987), David Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ* (1999) and Luis Buñuel’s *Viridiana* (1961), which are grouped together because of their investigation, in either religious or secularised terms, of the themes of the incarnation and the father-son resemblance. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), Fernand Léger’s *Ballet mécanique* (1924), Takeshi Kitano’s *Dolls* (*Dōruzu*, 2002) and vampire films (Friedrich Murnau’s *Nosferatu* [*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, 1922]; Carl Dreyer’s *Vampyr* [*Vampyr: Der Traum des Allan Grey*, 1932]; and Werner Herzog’s *Nosferatu the Vampyre* [*Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*, 1979]), among others, compose a second group whose focus is on the theme of the human figure. Poirson-Dechonne explores how cinema has represented non-human, or partially human, bodies as human (Christ; machines; vampires) as well as human bodies as inanimate (the lovers reduced to marionettes in *Dolls*). Although films from both clusters resonate with discourses on the status of the image and on the representability of invisible models, they nevertheless elude a classification as iconoclastic – at least in the meaning I have discussed iconoclasm so far. When present, their iconoclasm is primarily at the level of the content, as in the case of Godard’s *Je vous salue Marie*, where the birth of the baby is depicted in such a way as to preserve its unrepresentability and ineffability. In other cases, the religious subject is not addressed in terms of the relationship with the model, as in Gibson’s film where the figure of Christ is characterised by extreme visibility. It is, therefore, in the second part of her book that Poirson-Dechonne deals with proper iconoclasm in the cinema, taking into account films which directly question the relation between images and their referents.

Accordingly she discusses how non-human entities are shaped into human or human-like bodies in film.
Iconoclasm, now secularised, becomes a theoretical tool for investigating the status of certain cinematic images. Poirson-Dechonne (2016, 151-211) differentiates among aesthetic, political and ethical iconoclasm, although suggesting that this partition should not be taken as strictly fixed. Aesthetic iconoclasm consists in an investigation of the film medium, particularly its possibilities and limits before the complexity of reality. Presenting Godard as the most significant example of aesthetic iconoclasm, she delineates as one of its outcomes the halting of the spectator’s look, which potentially disrupts passive forms of film spectatorship. Political iconoclasm, best epitomised by the work of Isidore Isou and Guy Debord, focuses on the critique of capitalist society and of cinema as entertainment. Finally, ethical iconoclasm, discussed through Alejandro Amenábar’s films, explores the visibility of certain models, addressing the following questions: “do we have the right to show everything? [Do we have the right] to see everything?” (2016, 199: my translation). These questions are of primary concern also in my developing of cinematic iconoclasm; however, my approach significantly differs from Poirson-Dechonne’s for I concentrate on the iconoclasm of the film form by means of the two opposing notions of *eidôlon* and *eikôn*.

While focusing more on the content, Poirson-Dechonne still touches on two potentially iconoclastic devices: the black screen and cacophony. In her discussion, the black screen stands for what is, or should be, unrepresentable, and configures itself as that which produces a halting of the spectator’s look, whereas cacophony becomes the aural equivalent of the black screen. Indeed, while the black screen translates a visual impossibility, namely something that lacks or should lack a visual equivalent, cacophony renders what is ineffable, that is, something that cannot be said or can only be said by means of unintelligible sounds. Via the black screen and cacophony, cinematic iconoclasm sets limits for the eyes and the ears: not everything can be seen or heard.

While Poirson-Dechonne discusses iconoclasm in the cinema in a broader sense, I will mainly focus on the relationship that the cinematic image establishes with its model. More specifically, my argument on cinema and iconoclasm develops from the dichotomy between the image as *eidôlon* and the image as *eikôn*, thus maintaining a close nexus with philosophical and religious iconoclasm. Rather than
distinguishing among aesthetic, political and ethical iconoclasm, I propose to
differentiate between two forms of cinematic iconoclasm depending on the way this
dichotomy is developed. Accordingly, there is a form of cinematic iconoclasm that
focuses primarily on the critique of the *eidôlon*, which is epitomised by the image of
narrative entertainment cinema. Often associated with a Marxist critique of capitalist
society, this form of iconoclasm is characterised by a considerable attention to self-
reflexivity and the production of active spectatorship. Among the directors falling
within this form of iconoclasm are Isidore Isou, Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Godard,
whose work will be the focus of the second section of the thesis. Another form of
cinematic iconoclasm concentrates, instead, on the creation of an image that brings
together the critique of the *eidôlon*, hence the iconoclastic rejection of the
spectacularised image, and the peculiarity of the *eikôn* as that which establishes a
relation with the intelligible model. The iconoclastic *eikôn*, I argue, is profoundly
ethical since it challenges the contemporary obsession with extreme visibility and,
like Poirson-Dechonne’s ethical iconoclasm, questions our right to show and see
everything on a screen. This second form of cinematic iconoclasm will be discussed
in the third section, drawing examples from Ingmar Bergman and Krzysztof
Kieślowski.

**From the *Eidôlon* to the Iconoclastic *Eikôn***

To recapitulate, the *eidôlon* in the cinema is the double, anchored in the sensible,
hence visible, sphere. Resonating with philosophical interpretations of the *eidôlon*, it
carries connotations of illusion and deception. Like the *eidôlon*, the cinematic *eikôn*
belongs to the sensible sphere (it is an image offering itself to sight) and reproduces
the model following a mimetic paradigm. However, the *eikôn* distinguishes itself by
also addressing the intelligible realm. Finally, what I term iconoclastic *eikôn*
incorporates aspects of the *eikôn* albeit following an iconoclastic understanding of
the copy-prototype relationship. As such, the film image as iconoclastic *eikôn*, on the
one hand, would maintain the connection between the sensible and the intelligible
spheres; on the other hand, it would destroy the mimetic relationship between the
copy and the model. Drawing primarily on the work of Alain Besançon (2009),
Gérard Wajcman (1998) and Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (1999), in this last part of
the chapter I will clarify some aspects of the cinematic \textit{eidōlon} and will define the iconoclastic \textit{eikôn}. It is worth emphasising that these types of images – \textit{eidōlon}, \textit{eikôn} and iconoclastic \textit{eikôn} – are interpretations rather fixed categories; that is, an image can be \textit{eidōlon} for some viewers and \textit{eikôn} for others (as it was the case during the Byzantine crisis: the same image was an idol in the iconoclasts’ eyes and an icon in the iconophilic view).

The image as \textit{eidōlon} stands for a figurative image which replicates its model in such a way as to produce an impression of reality. That is to say, by doubling the appearance of the model, the \textit{eidōlon} has the potential to present itself as if it were the model – which is not to say that spectators could be tricked into thinking that a moving image of a thing is the thing itself; rather, it refers to the perilous psychological power that images of art have (see, Plato’s critique of artworks in the second chapter). The \textit{eidōlon}’s doubling of the model is what Wajcman (1998) most vehemently condemns in discussing the role of mimesis in art after World War II, with specific reference to the representation of the Shoah. He decries and rejects certain figurative images insofar as they constitute an “affirmation of presence. […]” Thus, any image is a negation of death and loss. A negation of absence” (1998, 242: my translation). Wajcman is explicitly against artistic mimesis since it presupposes the very possibility of duplicating an original. While mimesis is acceptable for some models, it becomes unethical when confronted with what does not (or should not) have a double, such as God for the Christian iconoclasts or death in the concentration camps for Wajcman.\footnote{The argument on the Shoah as that which places ethical limits to mimetic reproduction and yet necessitates to be represented has been extensively discussed in the cinema (among others, Downing & Saxton 2010, 95-106; Hirsch 2004; Kobrynskyy & Bayer 2015; Saxton 2004; 2007; 2008). With specific reference to iconoclasm, Ivelise Perniola’s (2007) analysis of Claude Lanzmann’s \textit{Shoah} (1985), together with that of Gérard Wajcman (1998, 230-231, 259-296), remains one of the most significant works currently available.} The image as figuration, hence imitation as duplication – the peculiar feature of the \textit{eidōlon} as the double – constitutes an affirmation of presence because it implies the reproduction of the model’s visual features and, consequently, the loss of the prototype’s uniqueness. However, from an iconoclastic perspective, some models should be affirmations of an absence: absence of images of the invisible God; absence of images of genocidal events themselves (hence, for
instance, Claude Lanzmann’s iconoclastic refusal of re-enacting the Shoah or using photos and materials from archives for his _Shoah_ [1985]).

What is more, the *eidôlon* in the cinema can come to signify the image of classical or mainstream entertainment cinema. Particularly in Marxist critique, the *eidôlon* corresponds to a self-evident, seemingly coherent image whose constitutive elements are reasoned (sound is in sync with the visual; the elements of the *mise-en-scène* are logically linked; the editing is invisible; and so on). As I will clarify in the second section, the critique of the illusory nature of classical cinema’s images echoes the Platonic condemnation of the work of art and resonates with Byzantine iconoclastic discourses. The cinematic *eidôlon* in classical and mainstream entertainment cinema is problematic (from an iconoclastic point of view) because it retains a highly psychological power and is likely to produce an impression of reality in the spectators. It does so by posing itself as objective representation of an uncomplicated reality depicted as if simply being there, beyond the screen. Hence, from an iconoclastic perspective, the cinematic *eidôlon* consists in the seemingly transparent image of the kind of cinema purported as a window into the world. Accordingly, iconoclastic filmmakers such as Isidore Isou and Guy Debord attack these images in order to dismantle the worldview they promote – in Isou’s cinema, *eidôlon* is any image that has already been seen in films as well as images of oppressive power; in Debord’s films and theoretical works (1967/1994; 1988/1990), *eidôlon* is any image produced by consumer society.

What distinguishes the cinematic *eidôlon* is, therefore, its capacity to mimesetically double the model which constitutes a threat to the uniqueness of certain prototypes as well as to challenging representations of reality. Everything is perfectly visible on the screen – Christ and its martyred body of flesh; the bodies and corpses in the concentration camps; an un-complicated reality in which characters always manage to reach a resolution by the end of the film. And yet, what matters is hidden, concealed under visual images that have partially lost (or never had) their ability to speak to spectators.

Quite the contrary, the iconoclastic *eikôn* consists in a refusal of certain audio-visual images out of respect for reality, for its complexity and elusiveness. It thus bespeaks a withdrawal of our representational capacities before specific models. I
draw the concept of iconoclastic *eikôn* from Besançon’s (2009, 361-423), Wajcman’s (1998) and Wunenburger’s (1999, 357-359) discussion of iconoclasm in non-figurative art. According to these scholars, non-figurative art reiterates the criticism of the image deriving from the arguments of religious iconoclasm. In abstract painting, for instance, the image ceases to imitate nature because the representation of the Absolute, whether religious or secularised, cannot pass through the reproduction of sensible forms of reality. It is the status of the model as that which is beyond the sensible world that determines the rejection of images as mimesis of nature (Besançon 2009, 418; Wunenburger 1999, 359). In this respect, non-figurative art recalls a conception of the image and of the copy-prototype relationship akin to that of the iconoclasts during the Byzantine controversy. The inadequacy of the material means for the reproduction of the model, and the consequent rejection of any mimetic principle for representing such prototype, distinctly brings to mind iconoclastic arguments against sacred images. Additionally, Wunenburger discusses how in non-figurative art the knowledge of the divine (whether intended in religious or agnostic-spiritual terms) is impossible by sensible means. He concludes that iconoclasm, religious or secularised, thus defines not so much a practice of deprivation or prohibition of images as the aspiration not to settle for an image that would claim to exhaust the being, especially when the being posits itself as absolute being. (1999, 359: my translation)

Abstract painting thus incorporates an iconoclastic component insofar as it refuses to circumscribe an intelligible prototype in a sensible frame, thereby breaking with mimesis. However, the outcome of this process (i.e., the negating of the *eidôlon* as a visual double of the model) does not remain grounded in the sensible sphere only. Besançon (2009, 401) delineates the odd peculiarity of (certain) non-figurative art as retaining some iconoclastic aspects together with the iconophilic intent to represent the absolute being, which was strictly opposed by the iconoclasts. In a similar manner, Wajcman (1998, 180, 195) addresses as iconoclastic icon an image that deals with both visibility and invisibility without resorting to mimetic reproduction. This type of image represents something that the eyes can see without figuratively limiting the intelligible model. While the iconophilic icon uses mimesis to represent the absolute being, reproducing features retraceable in phenomenal reality and thus
enclosing the intelligible prototype in a sensible frame; the iconoclastic *eikôn* respects the unrepresentability of certain models.

I contend that in the cinema this type of image is *eikôn* because it mediates between a visual form and its intelligible model, and it is iconoclastic because it refuses mimesis insofar as it would constitute an attempt to reduce what is invisible to a figurative form. That is, iconoclastic *eikôn* brings together an iconoclastic interpretation of the copy-prototype relationship with the iconophilic aim to visually represent an intelligible prototype: the material means are inadequate for the representation of the model and yet the model somehow needs to be shown. The model is here understood as something that can be thought of through the intellect or experienced emotionally, rather than something perceivable through the physical senses. The iconoclastic *eikôn* comes to define an image capable of maintaining the unrepresentability and ineffability of those models which lack a visible and audible equivalent in phenomenal reality. Requiring intellectual as well as emotional engagement, iconoclastic *eikônes* are rare in cinema. It is, in fact, hard to both create and consume them; but they possess a power of stimulating thought that the mimetic image in contemporary Western society has partially lost.

It should be clear now that cinematic iconoclasm does not consist in a rejection of every single image, but is a refusal of peculiar film images deemed as deceitful and illusory. The interpretation of certain images as false or inadequate depends on the prototype, on whether it can be apprehended via the physical senses or, quite differently, can only be thought through the intellect or experienced emotionally. For instance, love can be thought of or felt, but we don’t have a specific phenomenal prototype of love per se; we do not meet love in the streets like we do with people, animals, trees and other sensible phenomena. Therefore, love can be represented only metaphorically, for example through images of people kissing, holding hands and so on. There are some models, however, that pose ethical dilemmas to mimetic reproduction, and it is here that cinematic iconoclasm manifests itself. It does so via a rejection of mimesis that hinges on the distance between copy and prototype. That is, the gap between the image and its model is unbridgeable. Cinematic iconoclasm thus challenges mimetic reproduction rather than censoring images. In particular, it questions the Western obsession with mimesis and extreme
visibility, contrasting them with images and sounds that undermine our capacity of representing, seeing and hearing.

The original contribution of cinema to the debate on iconoclasm is its possibility of showing the very process of destruction of the image and not only the result of destruction thanks to cinema’s being in motion. That is to say, cinema has always the option of temporalising the *eidôlon* and the *eikôn* and, as such, it provides a variety of devices to destroy moving images. For instance, as I will show in analysing Isou’s, Debord’s and Godard’s films, techniques like slow motion and freeze-frame can be used to dismantle mimetic movement, namely the movement which mimics the way objects and people move in phenomenal reality. Or, in the case of monochromatic screens, cinema can display the sudden disappearance of figurative images into an imageless screen. Thus, the meaning of an iconoclastic image in the cinema is profoundly tied to the images preceding and following it, as it will become particularly clear in the analysis of Bergman’s and Kieślowski’s films. In all these cases, cinema displays, in its peculiar manner, the insoluble ambiguity which characterises the Western image and the iconoclastic discourses that surround it. Here, ancient arguments mingle with contemporary debates, thereby tracing a fascinating thread from Plato to cinema.
Conclusion

In this section I have focused on two conflicting attitudes towards images which have developed in the West – that of iconoclasm and iconophilia –, and have delineated a contradictory thinking that connects Platonic discourses about the deceptive potential of artworks, Plotinus’s partial rehabilitation of images and the Byzantine crisis over sacred icons with cinema’s dichotomy between illusion and reality and opposing interpretations of the cinematic close-up. What ties together these seemingly distant arguments is the issue of mimesis, namely the relationship between an image as copy and its sensible or intelligible referent. Accordingly, I have developed the discussion around the binary between the Greek eikôn and eidôlon, which express two peculiar relations that the image can establish with a model. While the eikôn is in a relationship with both the sensible world (of the image and the spectator) and the intelligible realm (of the model), the latter is exclusively grounded in the sensible sphere with no connection with the super-sensible model.

The ways in which the eikôn-eidôlon dichotomy is thought lead to various and often conflicting stances towards visual images, from Plato’s and Plotinus’s philosophical concerns to the material destruction of icons during the Byzantine controversy. Such antagonistic perspectives regarding images are also present in the cinema and revolve around the opposition between cinema as a tool for the mechanical reproduction of reality and cinema as a means of deception for spectators. The range of possible interpretations of this dichotomy demonstrates how the debate on images is an unresolved and problematic issue as much in the cinema as in philosophy and theology: however one looks at it, the visual image seems to eschew any easy and unambiguous definition.

Drawing on philosophy and theology, I have proposed to deal with the issue of iconoclasm in the cinema using the eidôlon-eikôn dichotomy, differentiating between theories and films mainly concerned with the destruction of the illusory image of mainstream entertainment cinema and others more focused on overcoming the level of critique to produce iconoclastic eikônes. On the one hand, there is the critique of the cinematic eidôlon at a theoretical and practical level: Marxist film theory’s criticism of the deceptive nature of classical cinema and the alleged transparency of its images is practically developed in the films of Isidore Isou, Guy Debord and Jean-
Luc Godard. On the other hand, there is a form of iconoclasm that aims at a shift away from cinema as a spectacle for the eyes and ears – the *eidôlon* consumed in the visible and audible realm – to cinema as a sensible stimulus for actively reflecting on the object of our look – the iconoclastic *eikôn* turned to the invisible sphere.
Section 2. Cinematic Iconoclasm as Critique: The Image as Eidôlon

“‘To make someone believe is to make them see’”\(^{18}\)
(Marie-José Mondzain, *Le commerce des regards*)

Cinema addresses and reworks the dichotomy between the image as *eikôn* and the image as *eidôlon* that has haunted Western understandings of the image since at least Plato. Depending on the way this dichotomy is thought, it is possible to distinguish between two forms of cinematic iconoclasm. These forms are not mutually exclusive; dividing cinematic iconoclasm in such forms is primarily functional to discussing it in a more straightforward and clear manner. Accordingly, on the one hand, there is iconoclasm as critique, which deals primarily with the criticism of the cinematic image as *eidôlon*, namely as an illusory copy of reality. On the other hand, there is a form of cinematic iconoclasm which founds an ethics of (in)visibility and is mainly concerned with the creation of an iconoclastic *eikôn*. This section focuses on cinematic iconoclasm as critique at both a theoretical and a practical level. As I will illustrate, this critique hinges on an opposition between certain film images understood as illusory and deceptive, and self-reflexive images conceived as more truthful – an issue with which I will deal in the sixth chapter of this section.

The theoretical as well as practical criticism of the *eidôlon* in the cinema occurs within an overall Marxist framework. A peculiar type of film image is interpreted as a deceptive copy retaining a highly mimetic, hence illusionistic, power. The exponents of such iconoclastic critique accuse this type of image, epitomised by classical Hollywood cinema, of reiterating capitalist ideology’s point of view. Theoretically, Marxist film theorists, in particular, develop a criticism of the image as *eidôlon* which bespeaks a fundamentally iconoclastic understanding of the relationship between the film image and phenomenal reality. That is, the film image as a copy of the real results inadequate to portray a truthful representation of such a reality. In the fourth chapter, I will consider scholarly works on the iconoclastic character of both Marxist doctrine and Marxist film theory by means of William J.T.

\(^{18}\) My translation of “faire croire, c’est faire voir”.

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Mitchell (1986, 160-208) and Rosalind Galt (2011, 177-212). I will then engage with some of the main exponents of Marxist film theory, highlighting the iconoclasm of their arguments on cinematic images.

Alongside iconoclastic theorists who critique the cinematic *eidôlon*, there are iconoclastic filmmakers who reiterate the same criticism of the image in their works. In the rest of the section, I will look at three filmmakers in particular, Isidore Isou, Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Godard, whose work is an explicit, practical critique of the cinematic *eidôlon*. My contention is that their understanding of cinema proposes, on a practical level, the iconoclastic critique of the film image found in Marxist film theory. The refusal of some or all film images derives from a Marxist-influenced worldview, as the key issues in their films suggest. Some themes shared by these filmmakers include a criticism of the image’s connivance with the capitalist system; a rejection of the impression of reality and the claimed transparency of mainstream narrative cinema; an emphasis on cinema’s self-reflexivity; and a focus on the spectator as producer of meaning rather than mere consumer of images.

In the fifth chapter, I will begin by discussing Isou’s ideas on cinema and examining the iconoclasm of his first and only film, *Traité de bave et d’éternité* (Treatise on Venom and Eternity, 1951). Then, in the sixth chapter, I will take into account some of Debord’s and Godard’s works with a focus on the iconoclastic devices they employ in such films. More specifically, I will look at Debord’s *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade, 1952), *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (We Wander in the Night and Are Consumed by Fire, 1978) and *The Society of the Spectacle* (La Société du spectacle, 1973); and Godard’s *Une femme mariée* (A Married Woman, 1964), *Alphaville: une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* (Alphaville: A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution, 1965) and *Slow Motion* (Sauve qui peut (la vie), 1980). These films are particularly appropriate to discuss some iconoclastic techniques, which Isou first uses in his film, such as the use of monochromatic black or white screens, the disjunction between image track and sound track, the employment of freeze-frames, and the extensive use of voice-

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19 I have maintained the original French title throughout the thesis because of “the unfortunate series of (mis)translations to which the film has been subjected” (Uroskie 2011, 23). The French *bave* can translate as “slobber” or “saliva”, the latter being more appropriate for Isou’s film. Thus, a possible translation for the title could be *Treatise on Saliva and Eternity*. However, the most widespread English translation of the film is *Treatise on Venom and Eternity*. 

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overs and intertitles. In the seventh chapter, I will conclude with some remarks on Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998) as the film bridging the second and the third sections because in this opus the aesthetic and political rejection of the cinematic *eidôlon* is accompanied by the creation of ethically charged iconoclastic *eikônes*.

While other filmmakers could have been used to discuss this topic, I have chosen to focus on Isou, Debord and Godard because of the significance of their work for any argument on cinematic iconoclasm, as it will become clear throughout the section. Their work on images and sounds, in fact, explicitly aims at contrasting the lure and fascination of the cinematic *eidôlon*. What is more, these three filmmakers are bound up with each other in interesting ways: Isou constitutes an essential point of reference for both Debord and Godard, and Godard himself has acknowledged Debord’s importance in *Histoire(s)*. Entangled in a web of influences, Isou, Debord and Godard epitomise cinematic iconoclasm as critique by destroying audio-visual mimetic relationships and by denouncing the perceptive and illusory power of certain film images.
Chapter 4. The Theoretical Critique of Illusionism

The major exponents of cinematic iconoclasm as critique are those whose thought can be ascribed under Marxist or leftist film theory, or using David N. Rodowick’s expression, political modernism. This is a criticism of the image of Hollywood-like cinema understood as a deceitful copy, and occurs within the context of a Marxist critique of commodities, mass media and capitalism’s fundamental values. A certain type of image, that of classical cinema, is decried insofar as it produces an illusory “impression of reality” (Rodowick 1994, xvi), thereby concealing a capitalist ideology under non-contradictory images. This chapter dwells on the theoretical critique of illusionism in cinema. I will first engage with William J.T. Mitchell’s (1986, 160-208) discussion on the iconoclasm of Marxist critique and Rosalind Galt’s (2011, 177-212) comparison between Marxist film theory and Plato’s distrust of visual representation. I will then look at some of the major exponents of political modernism, with a focus on the pronounced iconoclastic quality of their perspective on classical cinema. My overall aim is to provide an overview of the theoretical critique of illusionism in cinema, which also constitutes the ground for practical forms of iconoclasm as critique.

Iconoclasm of Marxist Critique

The main issue with the image as *eidôlon* is its illusory power. It deceives for it tries to pass for the model rather than revealing its nature of copy of. As such, the cinematic *eidôlon* resonates with Platonic discourses on the condemnation of sensible images, which is present in the Marxist critique of classical cinema. As in Plato, where images of art are illusionistic *eidôla*, in leftist film theory Hollywood cinematic images are deemed as illusory since they claim to represent reality objectively rather than making explicit their artificial nature. These images produce an “impression of reality”, understood as the illusionism of mimesis, which reiterates a dominant ideology. Several scholars point out the iconoclastic quality of Marxist film theory for its rejection of images as *eidôla* (Galt 2011, 177-212; Kibbey 2005, 1-44; Mitchell 1986, 160-208; Rushton 2011, 1-19). More specifically, the iconoclasm of Marxist film theory results from the intertwining of the notion of
ideology – in Marxist and Althusserian senses –, the concept of fetishism and the interpretation of peculiar images as illusory and deceptive.

Ideology is straightforwardly defined by Louis Althusser as “a system (possessing its own logic and rigour) of representation (images, myths, ideas or concepts, as the case may be) existing and having a historical role within a given society” (1969, 231). Hence, it consists in the imaginary relation that individuals establish with their social and cultural surroundings. What is more, in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971), Althusser distinguishes between two primary State apparatuses through which the ruling ideology works. The first is the “Repressive State Apparatus” (RSA), which directly exerts its power over individuals through “the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc.” (1971, 136). The second are the “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs) (1971, 136), which include the Church, the Schools, the family, political parties and other private apparatuses, and which are at first glance independent from the State. The ISAs, however, are the apparatuses that “‘function’ massively and predominantly by ideology” (139) because they infiltrate also and especially the private life of individuals by giving them a name, a profession, a religion and so on. Ideology, thus, produces a distorted, illusory representation of the relationships between individuals and their world. That is, following Althusser’s equation “ideology = illusion/allusion” (1971, 153: emphasis in original), ideology constructs an illusion through the allusion to reality.

In Marxist doctrine, ideology conveys the interests of the dominant class in each historical period, and while it represents the interests of a specific and delimited social group, it presents itself as expressing that of the many (Marx & Engels 1846/1970). Mitchell (1986, 160-208) discusses the iconoclasm inherent in this perspective and the consequently iconoclastic character of the criticism deriving from it, drawing a parallel between Marxist criticism and Plato’s philosophy. It is, particularly, the notion of ideology together with that of fetishism which constructs Marxist philosophy as iconoclastic. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels define ideology using the metaphor of the “camera obscura” (1846/1970, 47), which effectively expresses the very illusionism of the images of ideology. As in the camera obscura images appear upside-down, so the images of ideology are a distortion of reality.
However, these images tend to be understood as objective copies of reality. As Mitchell explains, “the camera obscura is thought to produce highly realistic images, exact replicas of the visible world” (1986, 162). Like the images produced by the camera obscura were understood as perfect visual copies of the phenomenal world, so the images of ideology are interpreted as objective expressions of reality. In other words, the types of images produced by ideology are *eidôla*. Mitchell accordingly reads Marx and Engels’s metaphor of the “camera obscura as a figurative descendant of Plato’s Cave” (1986, 163): in both cases images are shadowy copies of phenomenal reality which are experienced by individuals as if they were objectively real. The way in which historical materialism aims at overthrowing dominant ideology is by exhibiting its very process, which is what Marxist film theory attempts to do – show the hands at work, reconstruct the production process and make explicit the artificial nature of cinematic images.

Shifting from the level of ideas to that of material objects, Mitchell (1986, 186) argues that the illusionism of ideology concretises itself in the fetish, namely the commodities of capitalist society. Like the images of ideology, those of fetishism are deceptive images because they pretend to be the objects for which they are standing for. Both are reminiscent of the notion of idol in Christian theology, which is precisely a false, material image of God that presents itself as true god. Therefore, in ideology as well as in fetishism, the issue resides in the image’s capacity to feign the model. That is, images conceal their true status, the fact that they stand for something else. Mitchell poignantly observes, “ideology and fetishism are both varieties of idolatry, one mental, the other material, and both emerge from an iconoclastic critique” (1986, 187). These two Marxist notions become fundamental in leftist film theory, thereby reiterating the same iconoclastic quality in the field of cinema.

Similarly to Ann Kibbey (2005) and Richard Rushton (2011, 1-19) (see, third chapter, sub-chapter “The Iconoclastic Aspect of Political Modernism”), Galt (2011, 177-212) likens the Platonic “denigration of the image” (180) to Marxist film theory’s rejection of Hollywood cinema, and defines both perspectives as iconoclastic. In discussing the Platonic *eidôlon*, she identifies the same conception of the image in the cinema, specifically in the work of post-World War II leftist
theorists. Like Plato distinguished between perfect, true beings and false, illusory copies, Marxist film theorists differentiate between the illusionism of classical cinema and the reality of counter-cinema. Galt effectively claims that “in this model of the image [the *eidôlon*], Plato lays the foundations for an iconoclasm that grounds much modern image theory” (2011, 181). What is more, in Galt’s view, both Plato’s and leftist film theory’s understanding of some images as deceptive *eidôla* bespeak an iconoclastic attitude. Marxist film theory configures itself as iconoclastic insofar as it discriminates between deceptive images, which ought to be destroyed, and self-reflexive images, which are the only accepted ones since they lack the illusory power proper to Hollywood cinematic images. This will become clear in what follows, which directly engages with some exponents of Marxist film theory.

**Against the Impression of Reality**

As Rodowick (1994) delineates, the exponents of political modernism, or Marxist film theory, aim to criticise Hollywood cinematic illusionism and produce images capable of denouncing their artificial status, thus contributing to the creation of a critical spectator. Their critique primarily develops along two lines. On the one hand, there is the rejection of cinema as a window onto the world and the will to “erode identification with the image as real” (Rodowick 1994, xiii). On the other hand, these theorists focus on the relationship between film images and spectators, opposing the seemingly immersive and passive reception of classical cinema. For Marxist film theory, classical cinema reproduces the dominant, i.e. capitalist, version of ideology by presenting it as objectively real. In this way, ideology in film conceals the interests of the few under the claim of expressing that of the many. Here, I will briefly engage with some of the exponents of Marxist film theory, extrapolating those aspects which contribute to defining their perspective as iconoclastic. More specifically, I will consider the critique of the apparent transparency of the film image by means of Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni (1971) and Jean-Paul Fargier (1971). I will then look at Peter Wollen’s (1976) argument on counter-cinema, and Stephen Heath’s (1974) and Colin MacCabe’s (1974) project for an active spectatorship. I will conclude with some remarks on the correlation among illusionism, ideology and spectatorship in 1970s film theories drawing on Michele
Aaron’s (2007) work on spectatorship.

Comolli and Narboni (1971) delineate how, in classical cinema, images are understood as if conveying an objective representation of the phenomenal world, when in fact they express a dominant ideology. Contra capitalist ideology’s claim on the transparency of the film medium, namely that cinematic images represent the world as it is without taking a peculiar perspective towards it, Comolli and Narboni argue that “what the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology” (1971, 30). The two authors utterly reject the idea of a self-evident reality simply waiting to be filmed. The phenomenal referents reproduced by the film medium are always filtered by ideology. As a result, the purpose of film criticism, in their view, is to disrupt this claimed transparency and the illusory impression of reality to reveal the hidden ideology.

Likewise, Fargier (1971), in discussing the relationship between cinema and ideology, underlines how the dominant ideology is carried out by the impression of reality in Hollywood-like cinema. He claims that

it [the cinema] PRODUCES its own ideology: THE IMPRESSION OF REALITY. There is nothing on the screen, only reflections and shadows, and yet the first idea that the audience gets is that reality is there, as it really is. [...] People say “The leaves are moving.” But there are no leaves. The first thing people do is deny the existence of the screen: it opens like a window, it “is” transparent. This illusion is the very substance of the specific ideology secreted by the cinema. (1971, 136-137: capital blocks and emphasis in original)

There is here a clear Platonic understanding of the film image as *eidôlon*, manifested also in the vocabulary used which resonates with that of Plato – “shadows”, “reflections”. The problem with Hollywood cinema resides in its deceptive potential, for it hides the artificial status of its images pretending to show reality objectively. The more mimetic the image is the more it lies, misleading the spectator in believing in the objective reality of what is represented on screen. Accordingly, Marxist film theory yearns for the destruction of the cinematic image as *eidôlon* through images that lay bare their artificial nature.

Wollen remarks on the necessity of such a cinema, addressed as counter-cinema, achievable through
the conscious exploration of the full range of properties of the photochemical process, and other processes involved in film-making, in the interest of combatting, or at least setting up an alternative to, the cinema of reproduction or representation, mimesis or illusion. (1976, 11)

A too perfect mimesis, i.e. an excessive visual likeness between copy and model, can easily lead to the impression of reality. Therefore, from the perspective of political modernism, the film medium ought to attack the perfect mimesis, exhibiting the artificial status of film images by means of self-reflexive stylistic techniques. Marxist film theory is thus characterised by an oppositional logic between the illusion perpetrated by classical cinema and its critique articulated by counter-cinema. Rodowick effectively outlines this antagonism as follows:

Stylistic devices of Hollywood films that present an illusionistic “impression of reality” as opposed to the reflexive devices of countercinema that criticize or deconstruct this illusion by promoting a critical awareness of the materiality of the film medium: flatness of picture plane instead of depth illusion; elimination of continuity to stress the formal integrity of each shot; nonlinear exposition to undercut narrative coherence; and the rejection of verisimilitude to burst the illusion of a believable fictional world, complete in itself. (1994, xvi)

The ultimate goal is the creation of a politically progressive awareness in the spectator. That is, through the devices of counter-cinema, which expose the artificial nature of film images, Marxist film theory promotes the shifting away from the spectator as passive consumer of images to the spectator as active producer of meaning. It is therefore necessary to “establish […] an awareness of a gap or distance between […] what the image represents and how it represents it” (Rodowick 1994, xvii). To this end, scholars such as Heath (1974), MacCabe (1974) and Wollen (1976) resort to Bertolt Brecht and his concept of distanciation or distancing effect [Verfremdungseffekt] (Brecht 2015, 151). The purpose of Brecht’s distancing effect is precisely the creation of a gap between the spectator and the representation in order to arouse a critical and analytical response in the audience. Once viewers cease to identify with the characters and the scene represented, they “can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator[s] at an event which is really taking place”
Heath (1974) endorses Brecht’s distanciation as an anti-illusionistic device. The issue of illusionism in classical cinema is a Platonic one, as it is evident from Heath’s comment that “no one […] has ever taken the illusion as reality; the point is always the illusion of reality” (1974, 113: emphasis in original). By applying Brecht’s theory of epic theatre\(^{20}\) to cinema, Heath promotes the breaking of the fourth wall to push the audience towards critical thinking. In Heath’s view, classical cinema produces a separation which follows the mechanism of fetishism: spectators experience a state of illusory completeness given by the fetish object, namely the highly coherent film images. It is important to note that fetishism is based on belief—the subject believes that the fetish object is the object itself—rather than on knowledge—the subject is aware of the lack which the fetish object occupies and fills in. Against the illusionism of Hollywood cinema, which fixes spectators in a passive position of mere consumers of images, Heath (1974, 107-108) longs for a rupture with belief in favour of knowledge. While belief induces a false sense of plenitude and coherence in the audience, knowledge, by demolishing the non-existent completeness given by belief, pushes spectators towards a critical reading of the representation before them. Distanciation thus opposes the separation produced by Hollywood-like cinema, where the audience consume the film images as if they were objectively real. That is, in Heath’s perspective, classical cinema promotes immersive reception through the identification with what is happening on screen. This identification severs the possibility for critical thinking and, at the same time, presents the dominant ideology as objective, “placing […] the subject in a fixed relation to a stable ‘Reality’” (Heath 1974, 118). Conversely, counter-cinema, by disrupting such an identification, allows for more critically active and politically charged modes of film viewing.

\(^{20}\) The concept of epic theatre was developed, among others and most notably, by Brecht throughout his career. Particularly in “A Short Organum for the Theatre” (1964, 179-205), Brecht sets out the function and characteristics of epic theatre, which is fundamentally based on the alienation effect as opposed to identification (191-193), and defines as “epic” the kind of acting which allows for the actor and the character to be present on stage together. Accordingly, “epic –comes to mean simply that the tangible, matter-of-fact process is no longer hidden behind a veil; that […] the actor] is actually there, standing on the stage and showing us what he imagines […]the character] to have been” (194).
Similarly, MacCabe (1974) engages with the issue of realism in the cinema, contending that the film medium fails to deliver an objective representation of the world. For MacCabe, cinematic images feign to represent reality when in fact they are reiterating the nineteenth century novel’s dynamic of objective point of view (1974, 8-12). According to this dynamic, an omniscient narrator is believed to objectively describe the phenomenal world as it is, without taking a peculiar, subjective perspective towards it. The world *is*, and it is possible to depict it as it is. MacCabe claims that the camera in classical cinema works like the narrator of the realist novel. That is to say, the cinematic world on screen is portrayed in such a way as to induce an impression of reality, thereby concealing its underlying ideology:

The unquestioned nature of the narrative discourse entails that the only problem that reality poses is to go and look and see what *Things there are*. The relationship between the reading subject and the real is placed as one of pure specularity. The real is not articulated – it is. (1974, 12: emphasis in original)

MacCabe contests classical cinema’s claim of an objective and almost scientific reproduction of the phenomenal world. The problem with Hollywood film images is their conveyance of a dominant ideology by means of alleged neutral representations of reality. It is the same critique found, among others, in Comolli and Narboni, Wollen and Heath, namely the denouncing of the illusion of a coherent, self-explanatory reality inhabited by unitary, non-contradictory beings. Therefore, from the perspective of Marxist film theory, the issue with Hollywood film images is that of the Platonic *eidôlon*: an image which posits itself as objective reality. What leftist theorists more vehemently condemn is the inability of this type of film images to manifest its artificial status. Like the idol in religious iconoclasm, the cinematic *eidôlon* commits the sin of positing itself as true presence: it deceives spectators insofar as it pretends to be an objective representation of the phenomenal world. The coherence of all the elements making up such film images contributes to fixing the spectator in a non-existent completeness, and implicitly conveys a dominant ideology, which presents itself as objective reality rather than as a specific point of view on a portion of the world.
Apropos of ideology and spectatorship in Marxist film theory, I would like to conclude with Aaron’s (2007) observations on the importance of Althusser’s philosophy for the development of 1970s film theories on spectatorial passivity. She focuses on Althusser’s distinction of “a two-pronged process of subject formation taking place in ideology’s acting through the ISAs: *interpellation* and *mis(recognition)*” (2007, 8). That is to say, society, by means of the ISAs, interpellates individuals by attributing them an identity – the Church identifies individuals as religious, the family gives individuals their names, the employer gives individuals a profession and so on. While individuals are much more than the identity assigned to them, for the sake of social life they (mis)recognise themselves as such. This (mis)recognition, Aaron argues, is fundamentally based on an illusion:

This system of subject formation hinges upon individuals’ acceptance of a falsity: that they are, undoubtedly, what they have been interpellated as; that, crucially, they have exercised individuality and choice (that is, agency) in assuming this identity. Ideology, then, is the willing acceptance of things not really true, it is an embracing of illusion, and the illusion of agency. What better place, then, to explore ideology than in the home-ground of illusion: cinema. (2007, 8-9)

In such a way Marxist film theorists have applied ideology to film spectatorship, thereby locating spectators in a state of passivity. In their view, classical cinema’s spectators experience something akin to the fundamentally illusory agency undergone by individuals in society. To oppose this dynamic, Marxist film theorists identify self-reflexivity as that which is capable of eliciting a more critically active response since, as Aaron explains, it “inhibit[s] the spectator’s ability to do that ‘artful forgetting’ [i.e., forgetting that the film is a spectacle and not reality] by consistently reminding us that we are watching a film” (2007, 94). As I will discuss in the next chapters, in Isou’s, Debord’s and Godard’s works self-reflexivity acquires this function, preventing any immersive consumption of the films.

In conclusion, in Marxist film theory are to be found some characteristics proper to religious and philosophical iconoclasm, such as the interpretation of specific images as *eidōla* and their consequent condemnation. Indeed, the exponents of cinematic iconoclasm as critique consider peculiar images as false for the illusory impression of reality they carry out. In the notions of ideology and fetishism there is
the same issue in common with other iconoclastic tendencies, namely that of an image which feigns to be the object it represents. It is the Platonic *eidôlon* which fails to declare its inherent separation from the reality of ideas; it is the Christian idol that posits itself as true presence. The limit of this critique, however, is its incapacity to overcome the logic of self-reflexivity and to bring the discourse beyond the mere criticism of the image as illusory copy.Caught in the urge of dismantling the impression of reality of Hollywood-like cinema, the exponents of iconoclasm as critique risk to remain trapped in their own criticism.
Chapter 5. Isidore Isou’s Aural Cinema

Isidore Isou is a prominent figure for any discussion on cinematic iconoclasm because of his explicit programme to literally and metaphorically destroy cinema. What is more, his ideas on cinema were to greatly influence other filmmakers such as Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Godard, who employ in their films some of the techniques Isou first formulates both theoretically and practically. In his cinematic project, Isou grants sound a fundamental role while undermining the image as a mimetic copy. His critique of mimesis stems from his consideration that the film image has exhausted its imitative value – namely that there already are great films which have shown a brilliant use of mimetic film images; it is now time for cinema to become something else. Accordingly, Isou proposes a cinema where sound becomes the constructive principle of the film and images acquire significance only from their opposition to the sound track. In this chapter, I will look at Isou’s discrepant cinema [cinéma discrépant], mainly drawing from its manifesto contained in his film Traité de bave et d’éternité (Treatise on Venom and Eternity, 1951), delineating its iconoclastic quality. To this end, I will first discuss Lettrism, the avant-garde art movement he founded, and the primary role attributed to sound in all its artistic practices. I will then consider his cinematic project and its two fundamentals, “discrepant editing” [montage discrépant] and the “chiseled” [image ciselante] as they are theorised in Traité, before examining the film in more detail. I will conclude with some remarks on spectatorship and the sadistic quality of Isou’s discrepant cinema.

Lettrism, or The Struggle of the Image

Lettrism is the cultural avant-garde founded in 1946 by Isou (Cabañas 2014, 4), a Romanian communist Jew who had moved to Paris a year earlier. The context is post-World War II France, a country exhausted by the Nazi invasion and the Vichy regime during the war. A general sense of meaninglessness spreads from this post-war situation through diverse areas of life and especially the arts. Isou founds Lettrism as a reaction to the existential and identity crisis that the war had provoked.

21 Following academic tradition for the spelling of “chiseled” with one “l”.
The feeling of powerlessness and overall senselessness in the face of war and the Shoah manifest itself in the Lettrists’ rejection of words in favour of the letter. In their view, words are always already imbued with, and thus convey, a meaning. But in a world that has lost any meaning and where language itself is found guilty of having colluded with Fascist propaganda, Isou and the Lettrists refuse words and articulated speech in order to return to the pure aural dimension of the letter.

As Hannah Feldman observes, “Isou’s focus on purifying language by stripping it of customary semiotic association was certainly not unique in the period” (2014, 80). Other former and contemporary avant-gardes had explored the limits of language and the potential of sounded words. Some of these artistic practices constitute the major influences for Lettrism and include Symbolist poetry for “the spatialization of the written word on the printed page” (Feldman 2014, 96), Dadaism and Surrealism (Bandini 2005, 21-23; King 2016, 423-424; Plant 1992, 55) for the disruption between words and meaning of the former and the creative anarchism of the latter, and Futurist poetry for its use of onomatopoeia (Feldman 2014, 97; King 2016, 423).

As the name suggests, Lettrism refuses words in favour of the letter (lettre) as the basis for a type of poetry founded on sounds able to transcend the limits of national boundaries (Feldman 2014, 78, 85). That is, while words are always in a specific language, letters maintain a much wider inclusive power. As such, letters contrast the exclusionary quality of words. Abandoning the semantic constraints of language, the Lettrists explore the possibilities of single letters by recovering their aural dimension, therefore creating poems made up of human noises. In this way, Lettrism opposes the abstract sonic quality of letters to the meaning that words always bear. Notwithstanding the typographical aspect of Lettrist poems, the visual arrangement of letters on the page is a guideline for the declamation of the text which is meant to be sounded. Lettrist poetry is, in fact, an aural performance rather than something to read individually. Albeit initially focused on poetry, the Lettrist avant-garde gradually opens to other artistic practices such as cinema, where it brings a focus on the aural dimension of film.

Lettrist cinema, despite the influence it has exerted over filmmakers such as Guy Debord, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais (Cabañas 2014, 17,
34; Field 56-57; Uroskie 2011, 28), as well as over international experimental cinema like that of Stan Brakhage (Cabañas 2014, 6; Uroskie 2011, 22), has been quite overlooked by scholarship. The most thorough work on Lettrist cinema available in English is Kaira M. Cabañas’s *Off-screen Cinema: Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Avant-garde* (2014), which dwells on Isou’s project for a disjunctive cinema and analyses the major Lettrist films. Andrew V. Uroskie’s (2011) article is another significant source on Lettrist cinema for it examines some of its defining aspects with a focus on Isou’s film, and discusses the scholarly neglected significance of Lettrism for the development of later experimental cinema (22, 25). Other scholars include a discussion of Lettrist cinema in more general examinations of Lettrism. For instance, Feldman (2014) effectively contextualises Lettrism and delineates its poetics by means of Isou’s discrepant cinema and a few Lettrist poems; whereas Mirella Bandini, in her *Per una storia del Lettrismo* [For a history of Lettrism] (2005), provides an overview of Lettrism from its origin to its splitting into conflicting groups, sketching the diverse fields of application of its theories which ranged from painting to poetry, cinema and architecture.

Other authors mention Lettrism or Isou’s film mainly to provide a background for the Situationist International and, specifically, Debord’s work. Thomas Y. Levin (2002, 337-341, 345-347) outlines the main features of Lettrist cinema to situate Debord’s poetics and films, which constitute the core of his analysis. Similarly, Allyson Field (1999, 56-58) briefly discusses Isou’s cinematic project to highlight Debord’s indebtedness to Lettrism, and Sadie Plant (1992, 55), in her work on the Situationist International, concisely acknowledges the Lettrist influence over Debord’s avant-garde. Finally, Daniele Dottorini (2013, 54-55) and Marion Poirson-Dechonne (2016, 180-182) identify Isou’s film as iconoclastic because of its destructive impetus, which concretises itself in the physical attacks against the filmstrip and the recurrent claims against the film medium.

**Lettrist Cinema: Glory of Sound and Martyrdom of the Image**

The exploration of the possibilities of sound continues in Lettrist cinema, although language as a constructor of meaning is reinstated as an element of the sound track. First theorised by Isou in his film and then developed more coherently in “Esthétique
du cinéma” [“Aesthetics of cinema”] (1952), Lettrist cinema refers to a cluster of films realised in Paris in the Lettrist ambit during 1951 and 1952. Isou’s Traité de bave et d’éternité inaugurates it in 1951 and is followed by Maurice Lemaître’s Le film est déjà commencé? (Has the Film Already Started?, 1951), Gil J Wolman’s L’Anticoncept (The Anticoncept, 1951), François Dufrêne’s Tambours du jugement premier (Drums of the First Judgement, 1952) and Guy Debord’s Hurlements en faveur de Sade (Howls for Sade, 1952). The defining feature of Lettrist cinema consists in the privileged role assigned to sound and an overall depreciation of the image which can go from Isou’s physical scraping of the film celluloid to Dufrêne’s forsaking of the film strip for “a live sound film with no visual images” (Cabañas 2014, 6).

Like its poetry, Lettrist cinema grants a significant role to the sonic dimension of film. Sound ceases to be a supplement to the visual component and becomes, instead, the primary, organising element of the film. By contrast, images, condemned for their deceptive character, are physically attacked: the filmstrip is soaked in water, scratched, over or under exposed to light, or simply abandoned. The Lettrists, thus, problematise the relationship between the sound track and the image track, and they do so primarily to counter previous forms of cinema, in particular the illusionism of narrative cinema, and immersive modes of film viewing. As Cabañas observes, “each Lettrist film defie[s] cinema’s established conventions (e.g., continuity editing, synchronized sound, screen), and sometimes the necessity of its image support (i.e., film), in order to generate new conditions and communities of viewing” (2014, 3). Lettrist cinema, therefore, pursues the twofold aim of destroying cinema as it had been conceived until then and promoting more critically active ways to experience film. To this end, theoretically in “Esthétique du cinéma” and practically in Traité, Isou formulates the notions of “discrepant editing” and the “chiseled image”.

Discrepant editing is the main and most innovative feature of Isou’s film and his cinematic project, and consists in the disjunction between the sound track and the image track which are treated as independent from each other. Poirson-Dechonne (2016, 181) goes over the Latin origin of the term “discrepant” and its kinship with music vocabulary to emphasise the centrality of sound in Isou’s montage. Composed
of dis-, which indicates separation, and crepāre, which translates “to make something sound”, discrepant editing points to a cinema that emits a deviant sound, that is, a sound which does not adhere to the norm. In theory, it invokes the breaking apart of any logical relationship between what is heard and what is seen. In practice, there is a disjunction between the sound track and the image track which, however, does not always exclude a possible relation between the two. Undoubtedly, the then-traditional status of sound in cinema, that is, the conception of cinematic sound as an addition to the image, no longer exists in Lettrist films. Sound acquires an unprecedented autonomy, becoming the most significant element in Lettrist cinema and the primary tool to criticise the privileged status of the film image and the spectator’s (supposed) passivity.

Isou and the Lettrists are vehemently critical, in particular, of narrative cinema for it promotes immersive spectatorship and a certain fascination with the images on screen. As several scholars note (Cabañas 2014, 3; Feldman 2014, 86-87; Field 1999, 57; Uroskie 2011, 26), the importance given to the aural dimension of film and its disjunction from the image track is a way to dismantle narrative cinema, whose premises are the dominance of the image over sound and the correlation between what is seen and what is heard. Accordingly, Lettrist sound does not correspond to the clearly articulated speech of narrative cinema, but is built up from disjointed voices and bodily noises that do not necessarily bear any specific meaning. What is more, Lettrist poetic practices such as “mégapneumie” (Cabañas 2014, 80) and “crirhythmes” (Feldman 2014, 92), types of physical poetry which use breathing and cries respectively as their constitutive elements, are integrated in the sound tracks alongside spoken, intelligible speech.

Together with the concept of discrepant editing, in Traité Isou proposes the production of a chiseled image, which results from a series of aggressive manipulations of the filmstrip. The film celluloid is, among other things, scratched, written on, immersed in water and over or under exposed to light. As a consequence, it is often difficult to discern what the images represent because of the tamperings they have undergone. Feldman explains the significance of these damages and their role in disrupting immersive spectatorship. She argues that “the marks made on the film’s celluloid reduce its capacity to capture and register an image in its most
primary quality as material ground to an imposed figure” (2014, 89). In other words, the chiseling process mars the image as a reproduction or visual copy of a referent. Because of the disfigurements, the image’s content becomes difficult to distinguish and the image loses the relationship with the referent that has produced it in the first place. The chiseled image thus causes a rupture with mimesis and with the idea of the image as a faithful copy of a model. It does so by exhibiting the film image in its materiality, since it is its corporeality that allows the scratches and other physical manipulations to occur.

The word “chiseled”, used to define the marred images in Lettrist cinema, is reminiscent of Isou’s partition of poetry first, and cinema later, into two phases, the amplique (amplifying) and the ciselante (chiseling), which he outlines in Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique [Introduction to a new poetry and a new music] (1947, 83-148). Applied to cinema, the amplique phase denotes the beginning of cinema and the development of stylistic conventions; whereas the ciselante phase designates Lettrist cinema and its intention to employ the film medium to destroy cinema as it had been conceived until then. Indeed, both discrepant editing and the chiseled image are the products of a radicalisation of non-mimetic approaches to cinema and are directed towards a reconfiguration of the relationship between sound and image. The Lettrist problematising of such relation also aims at disrupting any possible immersive experience of the film, as it will become clear in the rest of the chapter. These ideas about cinema assume a visible and audible form in the first Lettrist film, Isou’s Traité de bave et d’éternité.

Announcing the Destruction of Cinema: Traité de bave et d’éternité

Isou’s Traité de bave et d’éternité inaugurates Lettrist cinema in 1951 and configures itself as an experimental essay-film theorising the destruction of cinema. The film explicitly aims to counter the illusionistic image of narrative cinema and the pleasure it arouses in the audience; but also wishes to break with all previous forms of cinema, promoting a new way of making and viewing films. Accordingly, Isou employs discrepant editing and chiseled images as the constructive principles of the film. By rejecting the referentiality of images and sounds, namely their having a phenomenal referent, Isou explores cinema’s possibilities beyond the illusionism of
mimetic reproduction. In considering *Traité*, I will look at Isou’s discrepant cinema, teasing out its two main aspects. My contention is that, on the one hand, discrepant cinema promotes an iconoclastic, destructive way of making films; on the other hand, it contains a sadistic quality in its treatment of spectatorship deriving from Isou’s manifest intention to metaphorically hurt the audience, as he claims in the film.

**Discrepant Cinema**

*Traité* is a 120-minute film divided into three sections explicitly labelled as chapters, whose unifying thread consists in Isou’s reflections about cinema. The first chapter, entitled “The Principle”, is a manifesto of discrepant cinema; the second chapter, “The Development”, follows the love story between a girl named Ève (Blanchette Brunoy) and the protagonist Daniel, played by Isou himself, which leads to a reminiscence of the past love story between Daniel and another woman, Denise (Danièle Delorme); finally, the third chapter, “The Proof”, framed by the love story with Ève, focuses on Lettrism and Isou’s ideas on cinema. The film first premiered at Cannes in 1951 as a fringe event of the Film Festival (Cabañas 2014, 1; Feldman 2014, 86). At its premiere, the image track of the second and third chapters, which in the final version contain figurative images, consisted in a black screen. However, Cabañas (2014, 25) explains, the absence of images in the Cannes version did not correspond to an aesthetic choice, but was more simply due to Isou’s running out of time to complete it.  

The most striking feature of *Traité* is the disjunction between the image track and the sound track which not only develops audio-visually Isou’s theories on cinema, but also prevents any immersive experience of the film because of the lack of connections between what is heard and what is seen. This is evident from the opening, where spectators are faced with a black screen and hear an unintelligible bodily sound, similar to a rasp intertwined with guttural choral noises, which Feldman (2014, 86) identifies as a Lettrist symphony. While the black screen lasts 24 seconds, the Lettrist symphony continues, like a tormenting spell, through the

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22 For the present analysis, I will be using the 1951 final version of *Traité* which contains figurative images in every chapter.
opening credits, the intertitles and the beginning of the first chapter, for a total duration of 4 minutes and 34 seconds. This symphony will also return in intervals throughout Traité, punctuating the whole film obsessively. Alongside this Lettrist motif, the sound track is an intertwining of human voices and bodily noises that include the protagonist Daniel’s diatribe about cinema, a narrator’s (Bernard Blin) monotonal voice-over commenting on Daniel’s thoughts, the shouting and whistling of the audience at a ciné-club now insulting Isou’s film, now praising it, and recitals of Lettrist poems. The image track consists of a similar layering structure, composed of shots of Daniel/Isou’s slow wandering in the streets of Paris, building’s facades, boulevards congested with traffic, texts, found footage images of soldiers, military marches in Indochina, Vietnamese fishermen and temples, photographs of Ève and Denise, black screens and shots of Lettrists reciting poems.

These extremely diverse images are intentionally “indifferent” to both each other and the sound track. That is, on the one hand, almost every image is not causally or logically related to the ones preceding or following it. On the other hand, images are disjointed from what is heard, according to Daniel/Isou’s intention “to make the flow of images indifferent to the sound story”. In Daniel/Isou’s view, by disconnecting the image track from the sound track, words could “reveal the limitations and the possibilities of the image”. What is more, from the second chapter of the film the chiseled image makes its appearance. The filmstrip has been, in fact, physically manipulated and defaced by literal attacks, so that it presents deleted faces, painted figures, scraped blank screens and deformed images [figure 1 to 4].

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23 Although the protagonist is played by Isidore Isou and the commentary exposes his ideas on cinema, the voice-over associated with the character of Daniel is not Isou’s, but that of Albert J. LeGros, so as to produce a further disassociation between what is seen – Isou – and what is heard – LeGros (see, Traité’s opening credits).

24 There is here also a clear critique of French foreign politics and the First Indochina War (1946-1954), which Feldman (2014, 80-108) effectively references and likens to the Lettrist overall condemnation of war.
Images are therefore destroyed both metaphorically and literally. Isou’s iconoclasm resides in the physical and metaphorical attack against images due to their pretense of being true copies of reality, in an overall “attempt to destroy the false transparency of its [the cinema’s] images” (Dottorini 2013, 54: my translation). Feldman’s insightful reading of Traité’s chiseled images brings forth the iconoclastic quality of the film. She argues,

the implications of this [the chiseling process] and the multitude of marred frames that follow are crucial. First, the scratching undermines the representational function of the original image. Instead of an image of a carpenter at work, we are presented with the fragments of what had been that image. These fragments can only begin to suggest what they had stood to signify before. Indeed, the image is quite literally defaced, as the visage of the carpenter falls victim to Isou’s violent scrapes. It bears repeating here that most of the scratches in Traité de bave et d’éternité are made over the faces of individuals. (2014, 89)

Faces of carpenters, fishermen, soldiers and officers, as well as those of some Lettrists including Isou himself, have been scratched. In a sort of democratic
destruction no face is immune from the chiseling process. These defaced images posit themselves as both a literal and a metaphorical attack against the mimetic image, namely against its being a faithful reproduction of a phenomenal referent. But they also constitute a further impediment to an immersive engagement with the film because spectators are often deprived of the most evocative and emotionally charged image, that of the face. In this way, Isou “provok[es] a dismantling of realist expectations with regard to the images one sees” (Cabañas 2014, 31).

Discrepant editing and chiseled images are the two fundamentals of Isou’s cinematic project, which he addresses throughout the film and most clearly in the first chapter. The programmatic exposition of Isou’s ideas about cinema is realised, visually, via shots of Daniel/Isou’s slow wandering in the streets interspersed with shots of building façades and Parisian boulevards, and, aurally, through Daniel/Isou’s intelligible speech which alternates with the nervously excited outcries of the audience of the ciné-club and the monotony of the narrator’s voice-over. Here Daniel/Isou condemns cinema for it keeps repeating the same story over and over again instead of exploring new possibilities for images and sounds. While he acknowledges some films as cinematic artworks, such as that of the directors to whom the film is dedicated (D. W. Griffith, Abel Gance, Charlie Chaplin, René Clair, Sergei Eisenstein, Erich Von Stroheim, Robert J. Flaherty, Luis Buñuel and Jean Cocteau), he nonetheless provides a harsh critique of imitation – both the imitation of reality and of previous films – because it prevents cinema from evolving. This evolution passes through the destruction of the cinema that had been until then and, especially, narrative cinema which is characterised by a concord between images and sounds. As the voice-over asserts,

I’d like to separate the ear from its cinematic master, the eye. […] The films they make these days have a completed, perfect and calm quality. It is a result of the harmony between the components, the classic unity between the constitutive elements: word-image.

Both discrepant editing and the chiseled image are manifestly in contrast with narrative cinema where shots are linked to each other via continuity editing and coupled with sound to convey an easily comprehensible story. And, indeed, Isou deliberately dismantles the images and sounds of narrative cinema because he notes a
fundamental problem with images, namely that “it is possible to make them say whatever one wants and that which they do not say”. To subvert this perceptual power of images, *Traité* mars not only the images themselves but also the relation they have with the sound track. That is to say, it is no longer the image that originates sound, but sound that constructs the film:

The word would no longer come from the screen, in order to coincide with its sequences, but would always come from an elsewhere, as if concretely and visibly it were an excess without any relationship with the organism.

However, images still count, since Isou does not entirely do away with them. He butchers the filmstrip, but these tortured images remain an essential component of discrepant cinema. Without images, i.e. without a filmstrip, there would be no discrepant editing because it presupposes the presence of images with which sound can establish a disjunctive relation. Albeit devalued in comparison to sound, images continue to retain significance in Isou’s cinematic project. Daniel/Isou, in fact, reels off his plan for the filmstrip in several occasions with phrases such as “I will blow up the filmstrip with rays of sun”, “I will take pieces of films and I will scratch them so that unknown beauties will come into light”, and “I will engrave flowers on the filmstrip”. Discrepant cinema is nothing other than this, the disjunction of sound and image and the slaughtering of the filmstrip.

**The Sadism of Discrepant Cinema**

Discrepant cinema, besides being a new mode of filmmaking, proposes a new way of viewing films. In particular, it presents itself as most forcefully opposed to narrative cinema, not only to its film form and content, but also to the kind of spectatorship it promotes. While scholars usually interpret the chiseled image and discrepant editing as tools for countering passive spectatorship (Cabañas 2014, 16; Feldman 2014, 90; Poirson-Dechonne 2016), Field (1999, 57-58) explicitly identifies a sadistic quality in Isou’s cinematic project.²⁵ Indeed, throughout *Traité* Isou not only literally warps

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²⁵ It should be noted that the sadism of Isou’s discrepant cinema differs from Aaron’s (2007, 51-52) discussion of 1970s film theory’s understanding of cinema as sadistic. In the latter, sadism stands for classical cinema’s depriving of the spectator’s agency. Conversely, Isou’s sadism
the filmstrip, but also recurrently voices his intention to inflict metaphorical pain on spectators. In this way, the film, and the notion of discrepant cinema as a whole, is imbued with violence and animated by a destructive thrust, which goes from the physical aggressions on the filmstrip to the (not so) metaphorical harm to the spectators. Furthermore, the referentiality of the image and its relation with the sound track destroyed, Traité problematises the relationship between spectators and the film, making immersive reception impossible and the audience continuously aware of their status.

Isou himself provides references to de Sade in Traité and contemplates physical repercussions of his film on spectators. As the voice-over associated with Isou’s character on screen proclaims,

I would like a film that could really hurt the eyes. […] One has to leave the cinema with a headache. […] I prefer to give you neuralgias rather than nothing. […] I prefer to ruin your eyes rather than leave them indifferent. […] It is necessary that the spectator leaves blind, the ears destroyed, lacerated in this disjunction of the word and the image, and numb in any of these distinct zones.

Field discusses Isou’s appropriation of de Sade’s rhetoric, relating it to his destructive fury against the film medium and the experience of film viewing. She claims that the character of “Daniel remarks that he would like ‘a film that hurts your eyes’, connecting sadistic pain to his manifesto for the destruction of cinema. […] Indeed, the entire concept of discrepant cinema is analogous to an aesthetic sadism” (1999, 58: emphasis in original). It is in particular by means of black screens and voice-overs that Isou’s “aesthetic sadism” exhibits itself, as I shall explain through the following examples.

A significant example of the film’s “aesthetic sadism” takes place in the second chapter. Unlike the first and third chapters of Traité, this chapter presents a narrative – the love story between Daniel and Ève, and the reminiscence of Daniel’s past romance with Denise. However, this narrative is constantly interrupted by reflections on a variety of topics, such as politics, the communist party and religion, consists in his desire to metaphorically and physically hurt spectators. More importantly, and quite paradoxically, Isou’s sadism implies an actively engaged spectator as opposed to the allegedly fixed, passive spectator of classical cinema.
which prevent any immersive consumption of the love story. The sound track alone articulates this romance, which however does not find a visual correspondence in the image track except in the rare occasions where short shots or photographs of the three main characters appear on the screen. The sound thus constructs a visual desire that remains unsatisfied because the spectator is continuously deprived of the image that could create a harmonious unity between what is heard and what is seen.

Two black monochromatic images effectively display the sadistic quality of Isou’s discrepant cinema. The frenzy of chiseled images, which have made their appearance in this chapter, comes to a halt on two occasions. The first time happens when Daniel/Isou, while recounting his romantic involvement with Ève, whom he does not love, reminisces of Denise, a woman he was formerly in love with. In recalling the night he spent with Denise, the screen remains completely black, without scratches or drawings. Intimacy remains beyond the realm of visibility and spectators are faced with blackness and the eroticism of the ear. However, this monochromatic image does not bear any ethical value, but rather consists in a direct, metaphorical attack against viewers. Unlike, for instance, Godard’s use of black screens (see, sixth and seventh chapters), Isou’s hankering to negate figurative images does not originate out of a respect for reality or a recognition of the incommensurability between a profound, ineffable sentiment such as love and its visible reproduction on the screen. Quite simply, Isou sadistically wishes to deprive spectators of visual pleasure. It is no coincidence that the black screen occurs in this moment of the narrative: the image of the pivotal event of narrative cinema – the formation of the couple; the kiss – is entirely negated to the audience and their expectations frustrated.

The second time a monochromatic black image sadistically invades the screen happens just before the end of the second chapter when Isou directly addresses spectators as follows:

The author knows that spectators go to the cinema to ingest their Sunday and weekly dose of tenderness and, although he does not give a damn about this [love] story, he tells it with the hope of a well-deserved success. The author doesn’t love this kind of legends because it is a personal matter of taste, and the systems and forms that go beyond these stories are the only things that matter to him.
Again, this black screen configures itself as a metaphorical assault against spectators. After having deprived viewers of figurative images of the love story, Isou mocks them by condemning their taste. His statement that he has inserted a love story only for the spectators seems, at first glance, a sort of kindly concession to fulfil their appetite for narrative pleasure. However, this aural flattery is visually expressed by a completely black screen. Therefore, while sound makes itself accessible to spectators, images – the figurative impressions of reality – are once again fully negated. On both occasions, by using a black screen, Isou deliberately deprives spectators of cinematic illusion. The spectators’ look is twice blocked by a complete non-chiseled (or completely chiseled) blackness, which becomes emblematic of the critique of the illusory nature of film images.

There is, however, a moment in the film where Isou makes some concessions to the audience. In the last chapter he introduces the spectator as active producer of meaning, counterbalancing the more pronounced sadism of the previous chapters. In the third chapter, Ève and Daniel’s love story becomes the framework for a discussion on Lettrism and cinema. Having lovingly praised Lettrism, Isou provides a succinct summary of his discrepant cinema, laying out the spectators’ contribution to the film’s construction:

As of today, the character turning towards the partner was shown, his gestures were seen. From now on, [spectators] will hear: “Daniel has turned”, without seeing him turning. Imagination is incorporated in the cinema because the real, the concrete, is destroyed. The spectator will be able to invent his character like he has never been allowed to do before in the history of cinema.

Viewers are encouraged to actively participate in the film production during reception by bringing about something very personal, namely their capacity to imagine what is not shown on the screen. Hence, Isou is invoking a kind of thoughtful spectatorship in which viewers cease to be exclusively receivers of images and sounds. While it is certainly true that spectators are never utterly passive, as David Bordwell (1985a, 29-47) explains, because they respond to audio-visual stimuli through perceptive and cognitive activities, they nevertheless do not
necessarily initiate a process of critically questioning the images they are watching, as authors like Jean-Louis Baudry (1974/1975, 39-47) and Laura Mulvey (1975, 6-18) have discussed. *Traité* stimulates spectators to more critically active modes of looking at film by destabilising the mimetic relationship between sound and images.

In conclusion, Isou’s cinematic project is both metaphorically and literally iconoclastic. Not only does he physically attack the filmstrip, invoking its destruction, but also metaphorically dismantles the image as illusory copy of a phenomenal referent. Reiterating the gesture proper to religious iconoclasm, namely the material breaking of images, Isou proceeds to destroy what cinema had been until then. Here the cinematic *eidôlon* corresponds to any image that has already been used in cinema as well as any figurative image. Images are stripped not only of any intermediary role – there is no place for the *eikón* in Isou’s cinema –, but also of any possible imitative value by the chiseling process. These disruptive ideas on cinema were to significantly influence other Lettrist filmmakers, such as Debord, as well as prominent exponents of the French New Wave, like Resnais and Godard, who attended screenings of *Traité* (Cabañas 2014, 17, 34; Uroskie 2011, 28). Debord and Godard were particularly receptive to Isou’s cinematic theory and practice so much so that their films, although with different outcomes, display some of the stylistic techniques first found in *Traité*. 
Chapter 6. A Wavering Belief in the Image: Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Godard

Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Godard will be treated together in this chapter on the basis of their conception of some images as *eidôla* to tear apart. My contention is that their iconoclasm echoes that of the Byzantine controversy, and thus of the iconoclastic thinking that precedes it, and produces something very similar, namely the remnants of the destroyed image. Both directors, in fact, share a vivid contempt for certain images and the vision of the world they carry. Profoundly influenced by Marxism, Debord and Godard identify as *eidôla* those images which retain a highly seductive and alienating power affirming the values of the bourgeoisie.

In this context, the question of belief in images becomes a significant factor for discussing and discriminating between their ideas of cinema. While Debord’s work is animated by a destructive impetus against spectacle-images, which ends up including almost any visual representation, Godard’s incessant search for more veracious relationships between images counterbalances his rejection of illusory *eidôla*. Taking the issue of belief as reference, this chapter is split into three parts. I will first discuss the concepts of belief and truth so as to clarify my usage of these terms throughout the chapter and the thesis as a whole. I will then consider the absolute negation of figurative images in the black and white screens and the decomposition of the film movement in Debord and Godard, drawing examples from various films. My aim is to illustrate the iconoclastic quality present in both directors, pointing out that their self-reflexivity prevents the discourse on images from attaining the creation of iconoclastic *eikônes*. However, while Debord’s oeuvre, heavily affected by an almost complete loss of belief in images, ends up remaining enclosed in the critique of the *eidôlon*, echoing the Christian destruction of idols; Godard positions himself between the destruction of *eidôla* and the production of iconoclastic *eikônes*. It is so because Godard has progressively shown that, although there is no true image, truthful relationships between images are still possible, thus paving the way for iconoclastic *eikônes*.

To this end, I will consider various films from both directors. Where possible, I have privileged narrative films over experimental works since the focus of my research is on cinematic iconoclasm in overall narrative films (see, the thesis Introduction). However, while Godard’s oeuvre contains a variety of options from
fictional to experimental films, Debord made exclusively avant-garde films. In order to discuss the iconoclastic value of the monochromatic screen in Debord, I have chosen his first and last films, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (*Howls for Sade*, 1952) and *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (*We Wander in the Night and Are Consumed by Fire*, 1978), because they effectively outline Debord’s cinematic journey from his Lettrist experience to the post-Situationist International context. To examine the same technique in Godard, I will consider *Une femme mariée* (*A Married Woman*, 1964) and *Alphaville: une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution* (*Alphaville: A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution*, 1965), since they are narrative films close in time which discuss the fragility and complexity of sentimental relationships via the blank screen. Regarding the decomposition of film movement, I will focus on Debord’s most famous film, *The Society of the Spectacle* (*La société du spectacle*, 1973), and the way in which it articulates a critique of consumer society through the alternation between stillness and motion, whereas I will take into account Godard’s *Slow Motion* (*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, 1980) for, as the English title suggests, it is the best example in his filmography of the manipulation of movement in a narrative film.

The choice of looking at Debord’s and Godard’s film practice together comes from their many similarities. Indeed, notwithstanding the invective against Godard launched by Debord and his avant-garde movement – the Situationist International (SI) – 26 via a number of articles in the SI journal (see, for instance, Debord 1961/2006; *Internationale situationniste* 1966/2006; *Internationale situationniste* 1969/2006), the two directors long for a cinema able to provoke thoughts in the audience and challenge passive and immersive modes of film viewing. Among others, Giorgio Agamben (2002) considers their comparable use of montage and the messianic quality of their most significant films – Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* and Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Likewise, Michael Witt (2013, 99, 105) points out their similar stylistic techniques and the tribute Godard pays to Debord in *Histoire(s)*. Others, such as Thomas Y. Levin (2002, 425-426), and Monica Dall’Asta and Marco Grosoli (2011, 22-27) call attention, instead, to

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26 I shall not dwell on this diatribe here and will focus, instead, on Debord’s and Godard’s iconoclastic inclination and their precarious belief in the cinematic image. For a detailed account of this invective see, for instance, Monica Dall’Asta and Marco Grosoli (2011, 20-27).
Godard’s artistic indebtedness to Debord’s film practice. What is more, many scholars spell out the great influence that Lettrism and Isou’s _Traité de bave et d’éternité_ exerted over both Debord and Godard (Cabañas 2014, 5, 17, 106; Dottorini 2013, 55; Field 1999, 56-58; Levin 2002, 337; Poirson-Dechonne 2016, 180; Uroskie 2011, 28, 31, 37). Therefore, although they never collaborated – and Debord never recognised any filmic or political merit to Godard –, their desire for a renewal of the film medium originates from a similar critique of capitalism and consumer society, and concretises in comparable stylistic techniques.

Debord’s uncompromising and intransigent attitude is evident throughout his turbulent intellectual history. In _Off-screen Cinema: Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Avant-garde_ (2014), Kaira M. Cabañas outlines Debord’s artistic journey, from his enthusiastic joining Lettrism under the wing of Isidore Isou, to his breaking with it to found, first, the Lettrist International in 1952 and then the SI in 1957. Cabañas’s work is a good starting point for an understanding of Debord’s Lettrist experience since it delineates the poetics of Lettrist cinema and includes an analysis of Debord’s first film, _Hurlements en faveur de Sade_, which was realised in the Lettrist ambit. For an overview of the politics of the SI, Sadie Plant’s _The Most Radical Gesture_ (1992) traces its theoretical framework with particular emphasis on the concept of “spectacle”, which I shall address later. Another source providing an overview of various aspects of the SI is Tom McDonough’s (2002) edited book, whose essays range from politics to cinema and urbanism, integrating scholarly articles with translated texts from _Internationale situationniste_, the journal of the movement. The book contains, among other works, Agamben’s “Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s Films” (1995/2002) and Levin’s “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord” (1989/2002) – perhaps the most thorough analysis of Debord’s filmic experience to date –, which examine some innovative aspects of Debord’s cinema. Both Agamben and Levin include references to Godard but, while the former establishes similarities between the two directors, the latter focuses on Debord’s influence on Godard’s film practice. Finally, a useful monograph dedicated to Debord’s cinema is Dall’Asta and Grosoli’s _Consumato dal fuoco: il cinema di Guy Debord_ [Consumed by fire: the cinema of Guy Debord] (2011), which
delineates Debord’s cinematic theory and practice, and includes contributions from Cabañas and Levin’s article.

While the literature on Debord, and specifically on his cinema, is relatively small, much has been written on Godard. Given the wealth of material on Godard, I have opted for some general texts on his oeuvre and for others which deal with devices that can be addressed as iconoclastic. For an overview of Godard’s films and thought, useful sources include Colin MacCabe’s *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (1980, partially co-written with Mick Eaton & Laura Mulvey) and *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at 70* (2003), which privilege the political, far left dimension of the director. I also rely on the edited book *For Ever Godard* (Temple, Williams & Witt 2004), whose essays’ interdisciplinary character and deliberate open structure contribute to preserving the unfinished nature of Godard’s work. Albeit not containing analyses of the films that I will discuss in this chapter, David Sterritt’s (1999) close reading of six films that span Godard’s career is helpful in illustrating the director’s filmic evolution, with particular attention to the concept of invisibility. Finally, my main sources on Godard’s later works are Michael Witt’s *Jean-Luc Godard, Cinema Historian* (2013), a passionate and thorough inquiry into Godard’s masterpiece, and James S. Williams and Michael Temple’s *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard 1985-2000* (2000), a collection of essays on Godard’s films from 1985 with a focus on *Histoire(s)*.

There are also a few scholarly works that succinctly tackle the topic of iconoclasm in Debord or Godard. Marion Poirson-Dechonne (2016, 151-163, 180-190) is the only one who addresses the issue in both directors. She briefly discusses Debord’s (ab)use of images and sounds, finding that his iconoclasm stems from his political analysis of contemporary consumer society. She dwells more on Godard’s iconoclasm, categorising it as both aesthetic and ethical, and focuses in particular on his substantial use of the black screen. Other authors outline iconoclastic qualities in either Debord’s or Godard’s films. For instance, Nicole Brenez (1998) traces an iconoclastic aspect in Godard’s oeuvre, likening his conception of cinematic images to the Byzantine thought on sacred representation; Ann Kibbey (2005, 32-33) institutes a parallel between Debord’s cinema and the iconoclasm of Calvinist doctrine (see, third chapter) and Boris Groys (2002) outlines a possible iconoclastic
usage of the freeze-frame in cinema, taking Debord’s films as the epitome of this method. Furthermore, albeit not explicitly considering iconoclasm, Raymond Bellour’s (2012) investigation of the cinematic freeze-frame and Ágnes Pethő’s (2011, 265-283) discussion of the blank screen in Godard’s films constitute significant sources for developing my argument on iconoclastic devices in the cinema.

**On Belief**

The issue of belief is at the core of both Debord’s and Godard’s conception of cinema and of the film image; therefore, it constitutes an essential notion for an understanding of their ideas about cinema and, ultimately, their differences. Belief is also a central concept for any argument on iconoclasm or iconophilia. A belief in a truthful relationship between copy and prototype or a lack thereof is what leads towards one of the two attitudes. Given that generally “beliefs are ‘truth-directed’” (Lengbeyer 2009, 75), “to believe” is here employed as the act of understanding something as being true. This act occurs between a subject who believes and an object that is believed to be true. Contrarily to knowledge, belief does not necessarily require tangible proofs (e.g., someone believing in aliens does not need to see an actual extra-terrestrial to believe). Thus, while belief is objectively located in the sphere of possibility – for the lack of proofs –, it is subjectively situated in the domain of certainty by the social actors who experience it as true. As an example, we may consider belief in God. Belief in a religious context is faith – although faith is not necessarily a belief.27 People believing in God consider God as a true existing entity even though they cannot physically and incontrovertibly prove His existence. Accordingly, while objectively impossible to demonstrate, God’s existence is experienced as subjectively true by believers.

By something being true I follow the correspondence theory of truth and, specifically, Thomas Aquinas’s metaphysical version. This theory as a whole entails “the idea that truth consists in a relation to reality, i.e., that truth is a relational property involving a characteristic relation (to be specified) to some portion of reality

27 There are many models of faith which do not necessarily entail belief, such as the affective model, the practical model or the cognitive model. See, John Bishop (2016).
(to be specified)” (David 2016). Thomas Aquinas defines truth as “*adaequatio rei et intellectus*” (equation of thing and intellect) (1923, 126) which points to an accordance between a given reality and one’s thought about that particular reality. More precisely, Fabrizio Amerini explains, this accordance occurs between a copy and its ideal model:

According to Thomas Aquinas, a true thing is a thing that exists, but a thing exists inasmuch as it exemplifies an ideal form, that is, inasmuch as it complies with the model. Being true, for a thing, expresses exactly the relation of conformity that that thing establishes with its ideal model. […] Hence, for Thomas, something is true when it is related to an ideal model, whether that model is the divine intellect (which is thought as anterior to and cause of the being of a thing) or the human intellect (which is thought as subsequent and subdued to the causality that the thing exercises on it). (2009, 38: my translation)

That is, in Aquinas’ definition, truth is a relational concept and not a quality of the thing itself. In much the same way I conceive, and use throughout the thesis, the notion of truth.

In the case of images, belief concerns the image’s capacity to reference its model, namely to posit itself as *eikôn* rather than *eidôlon*. It is this belief that originates different attitudes towards images, including that of iconophilia and iconoclasm. The iconophiles believe that the image is true – that it represents the human essence of God, referencing His divine nature (it is *eikôn*) –, whereas the iconoclasts do not believe that the image is true (it is *eidôlon*). In cinema, this belief, as I shall illustrate via the film examples throughout the chapter, deals with the film image’s relational capacity. That is, it involves believing in the image as a relational entity capable of establishing a link with its model, be it phenomenal or intelligible.

In Debord and Godard the confidence in the possibility for the image to be a truthful representation of the referent is lost. What becomes, instead, of primary importance is the relationship that images establish with each other. In Debord’s

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28 The issue of belief and cinema has been developed by a number of scholars using different approaches. For a discussion of cinematic belief as a way to recover a belief in the phenomenal world, see, for instance, André Bazin (1967, 9-16), Gilles Deleuze (1997), Richard Rushton (2011, 42-78), Stanley Cavell (1979) and Robert Sinnerbrink (2012). For an argument on cinematic belief as emotion, see David Sorfa (2017).
quasi-nihilistic view, almost any link between images is deemed as false since it, too, is impregnated with the omnipresent logic of the spectacle. However, something that might carry a feeble truth persists, such as a beloved face or a blank screen. Godard’s view is more complex due to his being open to doubts. For him, belief in the film image can be restored via truthful relationships between images. Single images may be *eidôla*, but there remains the possibility of redemption in the superimposition of images or in the in-between images, those invisible zones that make possible for images to become visible.²⁹

Pragmatically, there are two orders of relationship involving images: 1) that between an image and reality, and 2) that between an image and another image. The diagrams below illustrate these image relationships and the shift in Godard’s work from the image-reality relation to the image-image relation.

[Figure 5] Godard’s and Debord’s break with the image-reality relationship.  
[Figure 6] Godard’s image-image relation as that which conveys a sense of the real.

Debord breaks with both orders of relationship because of their being poisoned by the spectacle logic. In contrast, Godard never loses complete belief in the image (Saxton 2004, 376). As Serge Daney cogently argues,

Godard is too Bazinian to commit himself to the loss of “reality”, which is replaced by a generalised interplay of references from one image to another, or to an acceptance that the image can no longer be used as a human means of communication, even negatively. (2004, 71)

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²⁹ For further accounts of images as relational entities see Marie-José Mondzain (2011; 2017).
In this context, spectators acquire an essential role since they are called upon to identify these image relationships. In Debord’s case, the viewer’s task is to recognise the alienating character of images and of the relationship they establish both between each other and with spectators. In his spectacle-dominated perspective, any relationship is rotten and illusory. By “spectacle” Debord means not only spectacular media such as television and cinema, but a more general socio-economic situation, that of capitalist society, where every aspect of life, from public to private, is regulated by the logic of the spectacle. In his words, “the spectacle is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 1967/1994, thesis 4). Spectacle as spectare, to look at something, stands for a society that has attributed to sight a prominent role so much so that rather than acting upon things people are content with looking at them. Hence, the appellation of citizen-spectator: to live in the society of the spectacle is to be spectators. Debord’s aim is therefore to awaken these citizen-spectators from their alienated life, stimulating them to pass from the contemplative life of looking at things to the active life of doing something.

Godard’s spectators have a similar yet more complex task which involves the becoming aware of an invisible space that permits the existence of any visibility. This invisibility made visible [figure 8] is the in-between images, namely the editing cut that glues images together and which entails a number of consequences that I shall discuss later in the chapter. Accordingly, Godard’s viewers, like Debord’s, are called upon to recognise the illusory nature of particular images. But they are also challenged to confront themselves with a small lump of invisibility that is more than just what remains of the destroyed eidôlon. There is, in fact, a delicate interplay of visibility and invisibility at work in Godard’s oeuvre which originates from his “steady conviction that something not directly visible must be taken into account if we are to gain control (or at least understanding) of our relations with the world around us” (Sterritt 1999, 24).
Thus, a belief in cinematic images, in the possibility of their being truthful, vacillates in both directors. Debord’s approach is imbued with a certain nihilism inasmuch as only the destruction of film images can break with the alienating power of the spectacle by showing that there is no longer something to see in images. Or, if something visible remains in images, it acknowledges a pandemic ideological oppression. Godard’s attitude is more ambiguous, oscillating between refusal and something akin to mystical belief, which I will further discuss in the seventh chapter.

It is thus possible to trace an iconoclastic tendency in Debord as well as in Godard for their rejection of particular images. More specifically, in his books on the society of the spectacle, Debord (1967/1994; 1988/1990) identifies an illusory and deceptive quality in the images of the West because of their association with consumer society and its leading class, the bourgeoisie. Debord ignores any other type of images and his criticism addresses exclusively the images of capitalist societies, which are found guilty of reiterating Marxist alienation. He argues that the alienation process undergoes a further shift away from the Marxist theory of commodities. That is, from the alienation of the proletariat from the product of their work, to the alienation of citizen-spectators from the images they see. The situation further worsens, in Debord’s view, because citizen-spectators are not even the producers of these images, thereby being twice separated from the objects of their sight. The notion of alienation, thus, develops from Marxist commodities to Debordian appearances: advertising images as well as television and film images become *eidôla* rather than *eikônes*. In Debord’s perspective, images, severed from any relationship with the model that has produced them, are appearances that present a falsity. Godard’s understanding of images is far more complex. However, he, too, criticises certain images for their bearing a capitalist worldview, as a voice

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30 For an argument on film, spectatorship and ideology, see fourth chapter.
articulates in *British Sounds* (Dziga Vertov Group, 1969), “the bourgeoisie created a world in its image. Comrades, let us destroy that image”.

**Almost Nothing to See: Black Screen, White Screen**

Both influenced by Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, Debord and Godard repurpose, albeit with quite different outcomes, some of the stylistic devices Isou employs in his film, such as the monochromatic screen, the disjunction between sound track and image track, the oral cacophony of human voices and ambient noises, the use of freeze-frames and the physical manipulations of the film strip. While Debord continues Isou’s experimentations in the context of the cinematic avant-garde, Godard begins to bring these iconoclastic devices into narrative cinema. In what follows, I will focus on the monochromatic screen as an iconoclastic device in their films. To illustrate this argument I will draw examples from Debord’s *Hurlemons en faveur de Sade* and *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, and Godard’s *Une femme mariée* and *Alphaville*.

Among the stylistic techniques used with an iconoclastic intent in the visual arts, the monochromatic image constitutes perhaps the most radical one. It is, in fact, the gesture against figuration most emblematic of the crisis of mimesis in Western arts. Like in abstract painting (Besançon 2000, 319-377; Gamboni 1997; Lowe 2002; Poirson-Dechonne 2016, 163-179; Wajcman 1998), in cinema, too, the monochromatic image marks the rejection of mimetic representation and manifests “the paradox of a cinema that makes invisibility a visible matter” (Dottorini 2013, 57: my translation). The monochromatic screen configures itself as an interruption and negation of vision, an image of imagelessness in which the look is denied access to the world of mimetic representation.

In *Cinema 2* (1997, 189-224), Gilles Deleuze considers the role of the black and white screens in contemporary cinema. This discussion relates to his defining of the concept of the interstice in modern cinema, epitomised by Godard’s practice of making the editing cut visible. Drawing on Noël Burch (1981), Deleuze notes that
“the absence of image”, the black screen or the white screen, have a decisive importance in contemporary cinema. For, as Noël Burch has shown, they no longer have a simple function of punctuation, as if they marked a change, but enter into a dialectical relation between the image and its absence, and assume a properly structural value. (1997, 200)

The white and the black screens configure themselves as thresholds between what is visible and what is invisible, thus disconcerting the spectator’s look, which is compelled to confront an absence of figurative images and colours. While the black and white screens in cinema do not usually acquire an iconoclastic value, Debord and Godard employ them as an area in which to question the experience of film viewing and the image’s status. In discussing their work, Agamben considers their use of “black and white, the ground where the images are so present that they can no longer be seen, and the void where there is no image” (2002, 317). The monochromatic screen in Debord’s and Godard’s films thus constitutes a deliberate iconoclastic gesture that, by opening visual vacuums in the cinematographic space, requires a conceptual operation in order to be translated into a system of meaning.

**Guy Debord’s *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* and *In girum imus nocte et consumimus igni***

Debord constructs his first film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (1952), on the alternation between a black screen and a white screen. Cabañas’s (2014, 98-122) detailed analysis situates the film within the context of Lettrism, discussing the influence of previous Lettrist films on it and the innovations brought about by Debord, with particular focus on spectatorship. Similarly, Field (1999) specifies the film’s considerable debts to Isou’s *Traité* and Lettrism, outlining the genesis of the film from the original idea, according to which *Hurlements* was supposed to contain figurative images, to the final film. Levin’s (2002, 334-349) enthusiastic and detailed reading tends to point out the innovative aspects of the film, establishing a

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31 For instance, the monochromatic screen can have a diegetic function (Ugenti 2013, 75-76); a conventional punctuation function, signaling a passage of time primarily in the form of the fade to black (Burch 1981, 57; Venzi 2013, 62); or construct the illusion of film movement (Shilina-Conte 2015, 15-23).

32 On this issue Levin argues that Debord himself told him that *Hurlements* was never meant to have images and that “the first scenario was never more than a conceptual experiment” (2002, 439).
dialogue with Debord’s later works. Only Dottorini (2013, 55-56) and Poirson-Dechonne (2016, 188-189), although briefly, consider the film’s use of monochromatic screens as an iconoclastic act of image-negation.

Both Cabañas (2014, 98) and Levin (2002, 342) define Hurlements as a “sound film without images”. Indeed, the film is composed of 26 monochromatic screens of different lengths, 13 white and 13 black, for a total duration of 75 minutes. When the screen is black the sound track is without speech or noises, when the screen is white there is speech. Only 20 minutes of the overall running time contain human voices, with the film ending with 24 minutes of black screen without speech. Hurlements opens with a white screen accompanied by a wheezing and rasping sound, which is Gil J Wolman, an exponent of Lettrism and a Lettrist filmmaker, reciting a “mégapneumie, what Wolman elsewhere describes as a poésie physique (physical poetry) that is based on breath, rather than on the letter as with Isou, and that explores the use of ‘all human sounds’” (Cabañas 2014, 80). Although this sound differs from that of Isou’s film, it nonetheless resonates with Traité’s motif of the guttural, unintelligible human sound heard throughout the film. Wolman’s mégapneumie is followed by intelligible speech in which Debord outlines his personal history of cinema, providing the cinematic influences for his film such as Dadaism, Surrealism and Lettrism. He lists Voyage dans la lune (Georges Méliès, 1902), The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, Robert Wiene, 1920), Entr’acte (René Clair, 1924), Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potëmkin, Sergei Eisenstein, 1925), Un chien andalou (Luis Buñuel & Salvador Dalí, 1929), City Lights (Charlie Chaplin, 1931), Traité de bave et d’éternité (Isidore Isou, 1951), L’Anticoncept (The Anti-Concept, Gil J Wolman, 1952) and concludes it with his own film Hurlements en faveur de Sade. During the remaining 12 white screens we hear the monotonal voice-overs of Debord, Isou and other Lettrists reading bits and pieces taken from different texts, such as the civil code and James Joyce’s work, together with seemingly nonsensical conversations.

In this film, Debord applies to sound the device of détournement, which will become the constructive principle of all his subsequent films and a paradigmatic device of the SI (see, Debord & Wolman 1956/2006; Internationale situationniste 1959/2006, 67-68). Détournement, meaning “diversion” or “hijacking”, is the
practice of appropriating visual or aural elements from their context – in this case that of the society of the spectacle – and investing them with a meaning often antithetical to their original one. That is, by subverting the context, the *détournement* produces anti-spectacular meanings (Cabañas 2014, 103-104, 110; Levin 2002, 331-332; Plant 1992, 86-89). In *Hurlements* the *détourned* sound intensifies the overall negative aesthetics of the film. This negative aesthetics is the result of two aporias (i.e., difficulties of the thought): a visual aporia, produced by the imageless black and white screens, and an aural aporia, caused by the *détourned* sound. Divested of their original context and pronounced almost without changes in tone, the spoken words lose the reference to their original meaning and context. For instance, the individual sentences taken from the civil code, now separated from larger paragraphs that would provide a meaningful context, “are made ridiculous” (Field 1999, 64). It is hardly possible to feel involved in these voice-overs, due to both their tone and content, and even less when faced with the double negation of images and sounds when the screen is black: it is no longer possible to see anything but blackness, it is no longer possible to hear anything but noisy silence. In Levin’s passionate and at times hyperbolical reading, this film is an attack against the spectators [who], confronted with their *desires and expectations* for a (the) spectacle, are provoked to the point of screams (*hurlements*) when it is revealed to what extent they themselves are an integral part of this spectacular economy. (2002, 348: emphasis in original)

*Hurlements* does indeed dismantle classical modes of spectatorship, testing the viewers’ patience. The complete absence of figurative images, annulled in the black and white screens, together with silence and *détourned* sounds, is a manifestation of a radical distrust in audio-visual images. In Debord’s perspective, images are at the service of the spectacle and, thus, they perpetuate its logic by entrapping viewers in a passive state – what Boris Groys (2002, 287) addresses as the “*vita contemplativa*” (contemplative life) of immersive cinema in opposition to the “*vita activa*” (active life) encouraged by Debord’s films. That is, whereas mainstream cinema promotes

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33 I employ the term aporia in its etymological meaning of “impasse” (from privative alpha α- and πόρος/νόρος, “passage”), and in the Ancient philosophical sense of an insuperable difficulty or puzzle presented to the thought in its search for knowledge.
active life on screen while relegating spectators to a state of immobility (contemplation), Debord’s films, in Groys’ view, restore the spectator as an active subject. In a similar manner, Field points out how Hurlements challenges habitual modes of film viewing through the use of monochromatic screens, détourned sounds and long silences. In her reading, “Debord makes the film difficult to watch, to hear, and to sit through, thereby making a film that aims to revolutionize the relation of spectator to film” (1999, 64: emphasis in original). The project for a renewal of modes of consuming what is visible will be a constant throughout Debord’s life, reaching its apex in his last film.

While reintroducing figurative images in his subsequent films, Debord did not give up the monochromatic screen as a direct attack against passive reception and the fascination of spectacle-images. Of particular notice are the black and white screens used in his last film, In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni (1978), the third film produced by Gérard Lebovici, a French film producer and publisher friend of Debord, and his company Simar Films (Milan 2009, para. 6). Levin (2002, 402-423) provides a close reading of the film and a thorough account of its distribution complications that resulted in the film being screened three years after its completion. He (2002, 402), as well as Dall’Asta and Grosoli (2011, 11), describe In girum as a highly autobiographical comment on Debord’s previous films, the SI and Lettrism. Similarly, Serge Milan (2009) presents a brief yet significant overview of the film, spelling out the importance of the voiced commentary over the image track. An interesting perspective is offered by Benjamin Noys (2013), who discusses the film in relation to the concept of time, delineating the dead time of both the spectacular capitalist society and immersive cinema as opposed to Debord’s film practice, and the political potential of this different way of engaging with time. All these scholars share a common focus on spectatorship, which is the main theme of the film. The discussion here, too, fits into this perspective, taking into account Debord’s critique of sight in both everyday life and at the cinema. However, I will mainly concentrate on two monochromatic images in the film and their iconoclastic value.

In girum explores the issue of film spectatorship, metaphorically attacking viewers and passive modes of cinematic experience for a running time of 90 minutes.
Like previous works by Debord, *In girum* is primarily composed of détourned found footage images, film sequences and personal photos, accompanied by the director’s voice-over as the unifying element. From the opening the film makes manifest its subject, that of alienated spectatorship, by presenting a still image of an audience at the cinema. Here the détournement is at its acme because it disallows any possibility of identification between images and spectators. Viewers are, in fact, at once observing subject and observed object: they metaphorically watch themselves watching themselves. The film continues with an intermingle of photographs and shots of urban views, film spectators and citizens in their daily life so as to establish a parallel between living in the society of the spectacle and going to the cinema to watch films that promote an immersive – in Debord’s view, passive – experience. Levin notes that,

according to Debord, the mimetic appeal of a cinema based on the principle “when one loves life one goes to the movies” stems not from the supposed “realism” of the depiction but rather from the fact that, since this cinema is just as impoverished as the real world, both film and world are similar in that they are contemplated with the same indifference. (2002, 405: emphasis in the original)

The assault on spectators, which is a constant throughout Debord’s filmography, comes back more vehemently towards the end of the film, when Debord inserts a black screen on which a white text aggressively addresses the audience as follows: “here the spectators, having been deprived of everything, will even be deprived of images”. Then, the screen becomes white for about 2 minutes and 9 seconds, while Debord’s voice-over launches into a defence of his work, emphasising his status as exiled and misunderstood. The choice of a monochromatic screen is an explicit provocation to the audience, in line with Debord’s theoretical view as it is systematically expressed in the texts *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/1994) and *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988/1990). Debord wishes to dispossess viewers of figurative, familiar images in order to awaken them from the numbness of their alienated life. What is more, the monochromatic screen is also exemplary of Debord’s claimed project against cinema, for he criticises the spectacular quality of both classical cinema and auteur cinema (Dall’Asta & Grosoli 2011, 12;
Internationale situationniste 1958/2013; Levin 2002, 329-334, 428; Noys 2007, 396). Hence, his intent is to destroy cinema as it had been understood until then. As his monotonal voice-over argues,

it is a particular society, not a particular technology, that has made the cinema like this. It could have consisted of historical analyses, theories, essays, memoirs. It could have consisted of films like the one I am making at this moment.34

To contrast the illusionism of the spectacle and articulate its critique Debord privileges sound over image and, specifically, speech over other sounds. Both in his first and last films, as well as in the rest of his cinematic works, “Debord uses language to counter the purported truth of an image” (Cabañas 2014, 114). Indeed, Debord’s distant and monotonal voice-over is the very foundation of all his films. The distrust in the image is compensated by a faith in the word – in its ability to communicate a meaning. This belief in the word over the image, clearly reminiscent of Lettrism, also echoes the Biblical rejection of the eye in favour of the ear. In this sense, Debord is an almost pure iconoclast for he considers images only in their ability to deceive rather than believing in any redemptive power. Levin effectively explains,

Debord contends that, in fact, images as such can prove nothing, save perhaps the reigning deception. By misusing images however, by subjecting the cornerstones of the cinematic edifice to détournement, something may perhaps be revealed about the medium itself, Debord suggests, even if only negatively. (2002, 407)

Rejecting the fascination of the image, Debord has showed that the cinema “can be reduced to this white screen, then this black screen” (Debord 1994, Guy Debord, son

34 While this quote most evidently expresses Debord's destructive anti-illusionism, it also interestingly affirms a separation of the technology of image-making and image-viewing from socio-cultural ideology – “it is a particular society, not a particular technology, that has made the cinema like this”. This conception contrasts, for instance, with Stephen Heath’s (1976) argument on the ideological dimensions of Western perspective – the technology of cinema, as a development of that of photography which, in its turn, reproduces the Quattrocento perspective, is ideologically coded. In Heath’s view, it is impossible to separate the technology and the socio-cultural context/ideology: “cinema is not simply and specifically ideological ‘in itself’, but it is developed in the context of concrete and specific ideological determinations which inform as well the ‘technical’ and the ‘commercial’ or ‘artistic’ sides of that development” (1976, 79-80).
art et son temps). *Hurlements* is a de facto “sound film without images”; but for certain aspects also *In girum* could be regarded as such: while it would still exist without any image, it would disappear without the sound. The monochromatic screen is therefore symptomatic of a disbeliev in the image, in its ability to represent the model veraciously. In Debord’s view, there is no space for doubts about the deceitiveness of images and his conclusion on the impossibility of a true or trustworthy image is categorical. Quite the contrary, Godard’s precarious and yet irreducible belief in film images leads his use of the monochromatic screen to more open and ambiguous outcomes rather than dogmatic assertions.

**Jean-Luc Godard’s *Une femme mariée* and *Alphaville***

Indeed, Godard often employs monochromatic images in his films, but they acquire a somewhat different meaning from Debord’s usage. The blank screen takes on two functions that Godard himself develops theoretically in *Scénario du Film ‘Passion’* (1982) through the metaphors of the white page [*page blanche*] and the white beach [*plage blanche*]. Ágnes Pethő suggests, “both metaphors emphasise the underlying, ‘primordial’ emptiness of the screen” (2011, 269). The screen as a white or blank page functions as a blackboard (Deleuze 1997, 185; Dubois 2004, 233; Pethő 2011, 271-276) or “a page for writing” (Bellour 2012, 387). That is to say, as a surface where the director can unfold the relation between image and text – a method that resonates with a Lettrist quality, as Pethő (2011, 272) notes. Accordingly, the screen as a white page is a way to develop the aesthetic possibilities of cinema in relation to the dynamic between image and text.

More related to cinematic iconoclasm is the screen as a metaphorical white beach, which points to the interstitial space between images. This liminality consists in the space between the shots which is usually hidden by the movement of the film (Bellour 2012, 168-173; Deleuze 1997, 179-181; Pethő 2011, 276). It is the editing cut that, sealing images together, conceals the process of editing through the flow of images. However, Deleuze observes, “if the cut […] grows larger, if it absorbs all the images, then it becomes the screen” (1997, 215). Godard’s in-between, what Deleuze describes as “Godard’s intersticial [sic] method” (1997, 214), is this enlargement of the cut which becomes visually and temporally present. As such, it opens up hiatuses
in the film space, hinting at something that cannot be shown or spoken. Thus, Godard’s black screen as in-between, by undermining the completeness of figurative representation, bespeaks a constitutive deficiency, namely the impossibility of seeing and saying everything.

Nicole Brenez attributes to Godard’s black screen a similar function, calling it “the ultimate Question-Image” (2004, 174). She describes four possible meanings of the black screen:

Firstly, a black image is an image that one does not want to make; secondly, a black image is an image that one must not accept […]; thirdly, a black image takes the place of a just image; and fourthly, a black image indicates what is outside the film. (2004, 174)

In a few lines Brenez summarises all the complexity of an apparently simple black screen: the evocative power contained in the absence of figurative images and the potential of the “imageless” screen for stimulating thoughts via a visual blockage. As she continues, in Godard’s cinema “the dialogue between different kinds of images accords an essential place to the virtual, to the conditional, to the absent, to the negative, to the unacceptable – in a word, to the problematic” (Brenez 2004, 174). In Godard’s films, the monochromatic image not only functions as a tool to challenge passive spectatorship, but also acquires the meaning of an act of respect towards the real – respect for its complexity and non-reducibility to a single image.

This use of the black screen is evident in a number of Godard’s work. I have chosen two early films, Une femme mariée (1964) and Alphaville (1965), for they are narrative films that treat the similar theme of the complexity and irreducibility of sentimental relationships making a systematic use of the black screen as interstitial space. They are also close in time, being the films Godard made while waiting to shoot Pierrot le fou (1965), postponed due to Jean-Paul Belmondo’s unavailability (MacCabe 2003, 164). Realised after the success of Breathless (À bout de souffle, 1960) and Contempt (Le Mépris, 1963), these films particularly lend themselves to illustrating “Godard’s intersticial method” without eschewing narrative and figuration.

Many scholarly works on Une femme mariée contain references to the world of commodity exchange and the extensive use of advertising images, as well
as remarks on the representation of women. For instance, MacCabe’s 2003 analysis focuses on the “iconography of consumer capitalism” (165) and the Brechtian aesthetic of the film, partially reiterating some arguments found in his 1980 book. There, with a similar attention to the economic context and advertising images, his essay co-written with Mulvey (1980, 79-101) examines the problematic representation of the female body and sexuality in the film. In their reading, while the story is indeed filtered through the female protagonist’s point of view, her image nevertheless “is distanced, re-presented as the problem of woman’s image in consumer society” (90). Similarly, James Monaco (1976, 145-152) discusses female sexuality and its consumer dimension, exemplified metonymically through the protagonist’s breasts for they “have a cultural function more specific and more powerful than any other part of the female body” (146). Tom Milne’s (1965) lyrical essay deals, among other things, with the advertising images surrounding the female protagonist which act as if whispering in her ears the model of beauty to follow. However, his analysis primarily develops around the motif of fragmentation in the film at the level of both story and form: bodies cease to be unitary and become, instead, assemblages of fragments, thereby leading to a further degree of separation between individuals. Albeit not disagreeing with the other scholars, my reading of the film is closer to Milne’s because I look at the black or blank screen as an element visually fragmenting bodies to express the complexity of human interactions. For this reason, I do not discuss other elements and themes present in the film, concentrating only on Godard’s use of monochromatic images.

In Une femme mariée, as the subtitle “Fragments of a film shot in 1964” suggests, the dissolution of a love affair is developed also through the visual decomposition of the lovers’ bodies. The film has an episodic structure, following the protagonist in her daily life as a wife, lover and mother, and her dilemma on whether to stay with or leave her husband. The opening sequence introduces the female protagonist, Charlotte (Macha Méral), the married woman of the title, and her lover, Robert (Bernard Noël), during one of their encounters. In a hotel room we see fragmentary shots of the two lovers tenderly getting dressed. However, the bodies seem unable to reach for each other for a prolonged amount of time because soon after every time they touch one another, their image fades to a black screen. Shots of
body parts are interspersed with black screens throughout the sequence. In this way, the human body is twice fragmented: by the framing which shows only pieces of hands, legs, faces, and by the enlarged cut between the shots. This black screen, while also foreboding the final break-up between these characters, references the cinematic process since it gives visibility to the editing cut, thus bearing witness to the space between film images. Moreover, the black screen in-between the shots of the protagonists’ piecemeal bodies hints at the irreducibility of this love affair, in particular, and of sentimental relationships in general, through the surfacing of a zone of invisibility and ineffability. Something has to remain in darkness and silence as a way to respect reality and the complexity of sentimental encounters.

A similar use of the black screen is present in *Alphaville*, a film set in a dystopian society where emotions and illogicality are banned. Readings of the film deal with a variety of themes, the main ones being Paris as the emblem of a dystopian society, the interrelationship between technology and de-humanization, language and the use of Paul Eluard’s poems in the dialogue. For instance, in his book introduction, Sterritt (1999, 11-15) discusses *Alphaville* by engaging with the disturbing relation between entertainment and death in the film. He highlights how the computer Alpha 60, which regulates life in Alphaville, “turn[s] death into entertainment” (14) since its death sentences are carried out in front of the citizens in the form of a public spectacle. Chris Darke’s 1994 review of *Alphaville* on occasion of its re-release focuses, instead, on the analogy between the film’s fictional city and Paris, sketching the importance of the French capital in the imaginary of the New Wave. Darke’s subsequent monograph on the film, *Alphaville* (2005), expands on some of the ideas contained in the review, such as that of dystopian society and modern technology, and is conceived as a sort of “‘Users’ Guide to Godard’” (4) which establishes a dialogue with the filmmaker’s oeuvre as a whole. Allen Thiher (1976), too, likens Alphaville to Paris, exploring their status as dystopias via the film’s pop aesthetic, and outlines the importance of language in the film as a means to control thoughts and emotions, since some words have been banned from the city. James Monaco (1976, 155-160) also looks at language in the film and considers the significance of the term “conscience”, which is one of the words that have been prohibited in Alphaville, defining the film as “*con-science* fiction” (159). Finally,
Adrian Martin (2004, 252-271) centres his analysis on the linguistic and poetic pastiche Godard composes through Paul Éluard’s verses.

The film follows the story of an agent from another planet, Lemmy Caution (Eddie Constantine), who encounters and falls in love with Natacha von Braun (Anna Karina), an inhabitant of Alphaville unaccustomed to emotions. Natacha’s unawareness of emotions is particularly evident in a sequence in which Lemmy Caution questions her about the definition of love. Her mellow voice-over, almost a sibylline whisper, tries to give an oral form to love; however, language fails to express the complexity and mystery of such a sentiment. While chunks of sentences – a lyrical collage of verses from different Paul Éluard poems (Martin 2004, 264) – evoke the irreducibility of love, Anna Karina’s face intermittently plunges into and emerges from a black screen. The fragmentary nature of love and, as a direct consequence, of any discourse on love is conveyed through the incompleteness of the visual and aural elements. There is here a refusal of an exhaustive definition of love to preserve its ungraspable nature.

Both in Une femme mariée and Alphaville, Godard does not entirely negate a figurative representation of sentimental relationships but, by inserting black gaps, renders them highly partial. What is denied, then, is a full image insofar as the visual and aural completeness would remove, or at least undercut, the complexity of loving interaction. As Deleuze puts it in discussing Godard’s black screen, “that void […] is the radical calling into question of the image” (1997, 180). Indeed, by breaking the figurative image via a black screen, Godard is alluding to something that cannot be said or seen. That is, the monochromatic screens punctuating the interaction between characters show that not everything can have a fully visible or expressible form. There remains a portion of reality which is invisible or ineffable, and to which the black screen respectfully alludes. Hence, the bodies in Une femme mariée, which seem to be constantly prevented from encountering each other, or the protagonists in Alphaville oscillating between figuration and blackness. This use of the black screen as a locus whereby invisibility takes visible form will be radicalised throughout Godard’s filmography and will return as one of the constitutive principles of Histoire(s), as I shall discuss in the seventh chapter.
Decomposing Cinematic Flow

Both Debord and Godard challenge the idea of the film image as a mimetic copy of reality by employing iconoclastic devices. Alongside the absence of figurative images of the monochromatic screen, other techniques can lead to the nullification of the referential, self-evident image without entirely renouncing to figuration. This can be achieved via the intensive manipulation of figurative images and of film movement. Indeed, the dissection of cinematic flow, namely the movement produced by the succession of shots, mars the nexus between images and the models that have produced them. Debord utilises visual and aural détournements to dispossess images of their alienating value and to show the logic of the spectacle. It is a negative-affirmative method: his anti-cinematic films make seemingly incontrovertible statements (individuals have become passive consumers of images; cinema is a tool of the spectacle; images are false; only Lettrist and Situationist cinema can make a considerable change; and so on) leaving little or nothing to the benefit of doubt. Quite differently, Godard’s work on images and sounds aims to investigate their status without necessarily providing answers to the many questions he raises. His films are, thus, a constant enquiry into the nature of cinema, reality, and their mutual relation. This different approach is apparent in Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle (1973) and Godard’s magnum opus Histoire(s) du cinéma (1988-1999), which however will be discussed separately due to its complexity. Here I will primarily look at the manipulation of cinematic flow as an iconoclastic gesture in Debord’s film, which is structured on the alternation between stasis and movement, and Godard’s Slow Motion (1980), which is the clearest example in his filmography of the manipulation of cinematic movement in a narrative film.

Like the monochromatic screen, the interruption or manipulation of filmic movement is not iconoclastic per se. It acquires an iconoclastic value when used as a way to redirect the look: through stillness or slowness the attention is brought on the absence of regular motion which, in turn, should stimulate an interrogation of this stasis’ meaning. The abolition or alteration of movement counters cinematic illusion and, in establishing a distance between images and viewers, allows spectators to think about cinema while at the cinema. Therefore, these images of decomposed movement aim at producing what Raymond Bellour
defines as “pensive spectator” (2012, 86) inasmuch as they break the possibility of a totally immersive consumption of the film.

As Bellour observes, the freeze-frame is “the often unique, fugitive, yet perhaps decisive instant when cinema seems to be fighting against its very principle” (2012, 130). Although Bellour, citing Peter Wollen (1984), remarks several times that movement is not a necessary condition for cinema, it is also undeniable that, since its origin, cinema has had close ties with it. Films have celebrated motion in multiple ways, both through the movement of the pro-filmic and via camera movements and editing. And indeed “moving images” is the very definition of cinema, as its etymology makes clear. The term cinema, short for the French cinématographe, comes from the Ancient Greek words of κίνημα/kinēma, which means movement, and γράφω/gráphō, which translates as “I write”. What is more, the term κίνημα/kinēma derives in its turn from the stem of the verb κινέω/kinēō, which means “I move”, and the suffix –μα–/–ma which denotes the result of an action, thus translating as that which has moved. Therefore, cinema etymologically translates as writing of that which has moved. Although it is of course possible to make films without images that move, movement is nonetheless a constant possibility for cinema. As Noël Carroll argues in his defining of “moving image”, “movement in a film image is an artistic choice which is always technically available” (1996, 64). Accordingly, the interruption of motion contains an anti-cinematic quality.

Taking movement as a defining feature of cinema, Groys (2002) examines stillness as a potentially highly anti-cinematic and iconoclastic technique. First considering mainstream cinema, he opposes the contemplative state promoted by narrative films in spectators to the movement celebrated on screen. In mainstream films, the vita activa so intensively lauded on screen is, in fact, negated, at least partially, to the audience who cannot directly intervene on the film and are asked to contemplate the action happening on the screen. Conversely, Groys (2002, 287-288, 295) contends, the abolition of the film flow can become an iconoclastic device able to return agency to the viewers. The interruption of motion on screen thus stimulates spectators to engage with the film in more thoughtful ways. Like Groys, Bellour identifies in the halting of the cinematic movement the potential to provoke a more
active response from the audience. He aptly claims that, “as soon as you stop the film, you begin to find the time to add to the image. You start to reflect differently on film, on cinema” (2012, 92).

To this very end, Debord and Godard decompose cinematic flow in their films. By deliberately thwarting the mimetic movement of images, both directors intend to disconcert viewers so as to elicit a critical response from them. Debord uses stillness to awaken spectators from their contemplative state and make them take notice of their alienation in the society of the spectacle. Quite differently, Godard’s decomposition of cinematic flow introduces hiatuses in the film, whereby still images consist in visual questions directly addressing the spectator. That is, while Debord verbally and verbosely provides a meaning for this altered motion, Godard employs it to express doubts that remain open and up to spectators to make sense of.

**Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle**

Debord’s approach is evident in his perhaps most well-known film, *The Society of the Spectacle*, where he delineates how the logic of the spectacle has permeated any social aspect to the point of turning individuals into spectators. In his analysis of the film, Levin (2002) fleshes out its “anticinematic film aesthetic” (403), bridging the film, thematically and stylistically, with Debord’s previous and later works. He highlights the film’s “violation of the syntax and economy of pleasure characteristic of spectacle” (2002, 396) because viewers are unable to passively consume the film. This theme is reiterated by Noys (2007), who observes how “Debord’s cinema is a cinema of ‘unpleasure’, at least in terms of what we might usually think of as the pleasures of cinema” (396). Noys explores the ways in which Debord negates cinema in order to negate the capital in this film, with a focus on the *détournement* and the juxtaposition of soundtrack and image track. He also cites Agamben on montage’s “power of stoppage” (Agamben 2002, 317, cited in Noys 2007, 399) as that which discloses the image as such, namely the image divested of its spectacular patina.

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35 Since in celluloid-based cinema movement is generated by the filmstrip being moved at a certain velocity, I address this movement as mimetic (i.e. it mimics the way we perceive movement naturally by moving the single shots at the velocity which allows us to perceive this motion as natural. However, film images can be moved at other velocities which do not imitate our habitual perception of movement).
Indeed, Agamben (2002) delineates the political and ethical outcomes of Debord’s practice of montage by examining its two fundamentals – repetition and stoppage –, identifying *The Society of the Spectacle* as his best example. Finally, Poirson-Dechonne (2016, 189-190) concisely describes similarities and differences between Debord’s film and Godard’s *Histoire(s)*, listing visual and oral citations and repetitions as tools for destroying cinema.

In my discussion, I will pay particular attention to the relationship between stillness and motion in the film, and how this alternation is used in an iconoclastic manner to critique the *eidos*, the false image produced by the spectacle. More specifically, following Debord’s statement that “the spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of nonlife” (1967/1994, thesis 2), I will discuss film movement as an allegory of the spectacular nonlife, whereas the paralysed film image functions as a space of re-appropriation, for spectators, of their thought and time. That is, by freezing images Debord suppresses any possible identification between them and the viewers, thus promoting the arousal of critical thoughts on consumer society and the world of commodities.

Indeed, *The Society of the Spectacle* is an explicit and bitter critique of capitalist society by means of its own images, which are understood as direct expressions of the spectacle. The film is an adaptation of Debord’s 1967 book, a collection of theses on the concept of the spectacle in contemporary capitalist society. It is the first film produced by Gérard Lebovici, who would produce Debord’s following and last two films, and is also Debord’s first feature-length film, realised one year after the dissolution of the SI (Levin 2002, 373) and twelve years after his previous film, thus marking his coming back to filmmaking. Debord’s monotonal voice-over, accompanied by a single, repeated music motif, articulates the critique of the spectacle-image by reading some of the theses from the book together with extracts from other authors. This un-modulated voice is counterbalanced by the rhythm of the image track, which is structured on the continual alternation between movement and stasis. The images’ sources range from advertising and television to

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36 These are, Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu’hostiles, qui ont été jusqu’ici portés sur le film “La Société du Spectacle” [Refutation of All the Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film “The Society of the Spectacle”] (1975) and In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni.
films, found footage images, and Debord’s photos of friends and his life partner Alice Becker-Ho. With the exception of the personal photos, the film images are emblematic of the consumer and alienating society of the spectacle. Images of pin-ups and models recur throughout the film alongside that of serialised factory work, world politicians, soldiers and armies, stock market, the accumulation of waste, urbanism’s devastation, concerts and ecstatic crowds. Debord also employs excerpts from various films such as *Battleship Potemkin, October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (*Oktjabr’: Desyat’ dney kotorye potryasli mir*, Sergei Eisenstein, 1928) and *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954). The critique towards contemporary society develops from the variation between movement and stasis of these diverse images: the immobility of photos and freeze-frames constitutes the negation of the false movement of the film image. That is, cinematic flow is a reactionary movement which suppresses the time and distance necessary for viewers to reflect on the images before them. Therefore, the illusory filmic flow, which mirrors the endless movement of the spectacle, is a paradoxical movement to maintain the status quo.

The image, whether figurative or monochromatic, is constantly negated as a truthful representation because of its ties with the pervasive logic of the spectacle. As Dall’Asta and Grosoli observe, “the trust in the (possible) authenticity of reproduction is that which ceases to exist in Debord’s vision” (2011, 14: my translation). Via the détour membrment, Debord shows that even those images apparently closest to their phenomenal referent constitute an illusion, a false surrogate of reality. There is no belief in cinematic and photographic images’ capacity of a veracious representation of reality insofar as “‘in a world that has really been turned upside down, truth is a moment of falsehood’” (Debord 1988/1990, 50). Debord takes the reflection on the status of the image to its extreme, negating any possibility for the image as intermediary – as eikôn. The sensible world, turned into spectacle, becomes unknowable through direct experience and can be apprehended only via the continuous mediation of spectacle-images. However, this mediation establishes a nexus neither between these images and their models – since images posit themselves as if they were the models – nor between individuals and the sensible world, which is primarily lived passively through sight (Debord 1967/1994, especially thesis 18). The image is a tool of the spectacle, marked by its illusory
appearance. Broken the eikôn, Debord displays “the image as such, that is to say, according to one of his principles from The Society of the Spectacle, the image as a zone of undecidability between the true and the false” (Agamben 2002, 319).

**Jean-Luc Godard’s Slow Motion**

While Debord’s critique of the illusion produced by film movement remains enclosed in the context of the avant-garde, Godard brings these experimentations into narrative and figurative film with *Slow Motion*. This is Godard’s first film after his television interval and indeed marks a new beginning, as the director often defined it as a “‘second first film’” (MacCabe 2003, 261). Many readings of the film concentrate on the representation of the sexes and the violence of their interactions through the analysis of the pivotal sequence with the two prostitutes. These readings range from cinema as functioning as sex and its economic implications (Bellour 2012, 118-127; MacCabe 2003, 263-264), to feminist accounts of the violence of women’s representation (Grant 2004, 100-117; Penley 1982, 12-19), to Deleuze’s (1997, 248-249) discussion of the relationship between sound and images in this scene. Christa Blümlinger (2004, 178-187) considers, instead, the closing sequence of Paul’s death in relation to the arrest of film movement, making similar points to Bellour’s and Groys’ discussions; whereas Robert Stam’s (1981-1982) analysis spans from the sequence with the two prostitutes to that of Paul’s death, taking into account the various senses assumed by the altered velocity in the film, from being a self-reflexive technique to a device revealing “the epidermic abrasiveness of contemporary sexual relations” (197).

What manifestly characterises *Slow Motion*, as highlighted in the scholarly analyses, from its title to its film form, is the sudden yet recurrent alteration of motion, to the point that the film breaks “the pact that links its movement to the spectator” (Bellour 2012, 147). That is to say, spectators usually expect to see film images moving at the velocity that mimics the way we perceive movement in phenomenal reality. Here, instead, Godard interrupts this mimetic movement, bewildering spectators. Throughout *Slow Motion* the director makes repetitive use of freeze-frames and slow motion as tools for investigating and breaking down the film movement.
Composed of five parts, each introduced by a title – “Life”, “The Imaginary”, “Fear”, “Commerce” and “Music” –, the film is centred on an incestuous fantasy shared by almost all the male characters. In terms of form, the film frequently opposes the jamming of the visual elements to the naturalism of sound. While the image track is slowed down or intermittently freeze-framed, the sound continues naturalistically so that the scene produces an estranging effect as if something was hampering vision. For instance, in the progressively slow-motioned opening sequence of Denise (Nathalie Baye) cycling in a Swiss countryside, the altered movement, paired with a naturalistic soundtrack, causes a certain bewilderment. In other cases, the effect of combining slow motion with natural velocity is disturbing, such as in the slap scene, where a man is slapping a woman now in slow motion – “at the same speed of a kiss” (Stam 1981-1982, 196) – now at a natural pace, which releases an even harsher violence by directly and suddenly following the slowed-down caressing slap.

The relationship between stasis and movement, as well as that between sound and image, is problematised throughout the film, but a sequence in particular epitomises it. It takes place towards the end of the film and revolves around the secondary plot of Denise and Paul’s (Jacques Dutronc) break up. Denise and Paul are sitting in front of each other at the kitchen’s table of the apartment they once shared and which is now up for rent. Suddenly, in slow motion Paul throws himself onto Denise and, entwined, they fall to the floor. While the image track shows the anti-naturalistic slow-motioned fall, the sound progressively dissociates itself from the visuals. The first part of the scene is characterised by an alienating electronic music, on the one hand, and the realistic noise produced by objects breaking – those on the table that Paul crushes in his lunge at Denise –, on the other hand. The co-presence of these two elements produces a highly disturbing effect, heightened by the slow motion of the images. Nonetheless, the first part of the scene maintains an overall legibility because of the domestic and naturalistic sound of broken objects. On the contrary, the second part of the scene undergoes a process of abstraction provoked by the vanishing of ambient noise and the resulting dominance of the music. Denise’s and Paul’s interlaced bodies slowly and jerkily fall to the ground. No diegetic sound accompanies this fall which, through the slow motion, assumes the proportion of a
true and proper crash. Only the obsessive electronic music remains, and for an instant the spectator loses awareness of what is happening in and to the image.

What is constantly invalidated here is the completeness of the representation, even in the presence of figurative images. Bellour, in his poetic analysis of this film, “I Am an Image” (2012, 118-127), comments on the creation of an impossible image through the decomposition of movement:

the images seem to hit each other, musically, pictorially, striking each other admirably and thus making impossible any continuity of movement which would produce – when it becomes a matter of bodies and sexes – an imaginary ideality that has simply ceased to exist. (2012, 125)

The fragmentation of cinematic movement, like the monochromatic screen, interrupts any possibility for an immersive consumption of the film. The temporal and spatial discontinuance produced by freeze-frames and slow motion alludes to something that escapes mimetic reproduction. Or something whose complexity would be partially downplayed by mimesis. Rather than in single images, meaning resides in these “halts on the image in Slow Motion (Where does the caress end and the slap begin? Where does the embrace end and the struggle begin?)” (Deleuze 1997, 195). These interrupted images hint at a zone in-between, which progressively acquires more and more importance in Godard’s films to the point of becoming the locus where meaning is at stake, as I shall discuss in relation to Histoire(s) in the following chapter.

Whether as a direct attack against passive spectatorship or as a way to investigate and challenge the film image’s status, the devices considered in this chapter – the blank screen and the decomposition of movement – assume an iconoclastic value in both Debord’s and Godard’s cinema. Iconoclastic devices they are because their use implies a precarious belief in the film image and a consequently sharp critique of mimesis. By dismantling the images of capitalist society (i.e., those images through which that society spreads its worldview, subtly imposing it), Debord and Godard aspire to defang the alienating power to which citizens and spectators are subjugated. However, their degree of belief in the image, therefore their appetite for image destruction, differs. While Debord provides a critique of the
film image but not a way forward because he does not overcome his extremely self-reflexive paradigm, Godard positions himself between the breaking of *eidôla* and the search for iconoclastic *eikônes*.

In Debord’s films the monochromatic screens and the freeze-frames are a clear rejection of the figurative image and of the cinema usually associated with it, namely any cinema other than the Lettrist and Situationist one – classical narrative cinema as well as auteur cinema. Like the Byzantine iconoclasts before him, Debord’s destruction of figurative images derives from a distrust in the image’s ability to represent the model. Spectacle-images are *eidôla* because they feign their referents with which they have severed any relationship. Hence, they are reduced to pure appearances with no possible redemption. Enclosed in an absolute critique of the cinematic *eidôlon*, from *Hurlements* to *In girum*, there is no place for the *eikôn* in Debord’s filmography.

Godard’s iconoclasm, too, takes the form of a critique, his initial experimentations largely concerned with film aesthetics (although ethical concerns were always already bubbling under the surface of his New Wave films [e.g., the images from the concentration camps in *Une femme mariée*]). But he is also committed to creating iconoclastic *eikônes*, those images capable of establishing more truthful relationships – between each other as well as with spectators –, which will become the core elements of *Histoire(s)*. Much like Debord, Godard puts into crisis the mimetic image, but he does so to favour relationships between images. His films call into question the cinematic and phenomenal world, giving visibility to the space in-between images both via the blank screen and the interruption of the mimetic film flow. While in his earlier films these devices are more symptomatic of an aesthetic renewal of cinema rather than of an iconoclastic intent, in his later films, above all in *Histoire(s)*, they constitute an explicit gesture against the plenitude of the image.
Chapter 7. In Search of a True Image: *Histoire(s) du cinéma*

At the beginning of *Hurlements* Guy Debord heralds his personal history of cinema, concluding it with himself. Jean-Luc Godard will dedicate 266 minutes to his own, highly personal cinematic historiography in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998). Although *Histoire(s)* is not a narrative film, it nonetheless constitutes an essential crossing point to understand how thin the line separating iconoclasm as critique of the *eidôlon* and iconoclasm as creation of iconoclastic *eikônes* is. In *Histoire(s)*, in fact, a criticism of the insufficiency of certain images to represent specific models coexists alongside a belief in the image’s ability to establish a relationship with and represent its prototype, albeit in an iconoclastic manner, as I shall explain. Stylistically, this opus fully develops the devices discussed in the previous chapter, such as black screens, altered velocity and aural and visual superimpositions, with aesthetic as well as ethical purposes. Due to its complexity and denseness, there are a variety of possible ways of approaching *Histoire(s)*. I will concentrate on the status of the film image as a relational entity and on the Christian references that abound in the film, so as to link back to the profound historical and conceptual bond that the image, and its iconoclastic understanding, has with Christianity in Western Europe. To this end, I will focus primarily on two fragments, one from chapter 3B “Une vague nouvelle” and one from chapter 1B “Une histoire seule”, which appropriately illustrate Godard’s concept of the film image as an entwined set of relationships. I will then conclude with a seemingly paradoxical definition of Godard the filmmaker as an iconophilic iconoclast. That is to say, in Godard’s films, and particularly in *Histoire(s)*, a love for images accompanies an urge to destroy them.

*Histoire(s)* is an enigmatic and bewildering opus realised over a period of ten years and represents a summa of Godard’s thinking about cinema, the world and their intertwined history. The film condenses the stylistic devices used in his narrative and experimental films which here work towards a further investigation of

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37 For an argument on the image and Christianity in Western culture see the first section, especially the first and second chapters. For a further account on images as relational entities, see Marie-José Mondzain’s *Il commercio degli sguardi* [The commerce of the gazes] (2011).

38 Because of its film form, *Histoire(s)* escapes the language usually employed for film analysis. When discussing this film, terms such as sequence or scene lose their significance. For this reason, I have preferred the word “fragment” which preserves the overall fragmentary character of *Histoire(s).*

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the status of images. Michael Witt (2013, 3-44) traces the complex pre-production and production history of *Histoire(s)*, concluding that the film could be completed only after Gaumont became the major producer and distributor. Indeed, Gaumont took care of the most critical issue, namely the gaining of the rights for the images and sounds Godard appropriates from different sources and edits in *Histoire(s)*.

The film is composed of eight chapters, or sections, of different length: 1A “Toutes les histoires” [All the histories] (51 minutes); 1B “Une histoire seule” [A single history] (42 minutes); 2A “Seul le cinéma” [Only cinema] (27 minutes); 2B “Fatale beauté” [Fatal beauty] (28 minutes); 3A “La monnaie de l’absolu” [The currency of the absolute] (26 minutes); 3B “Une vague nouvelle” [A new wave] (27 minutes); 4A “Le contrôle de l’univers” [The control of the universe] (27 minutes); 4B “Les signes parmi nous” [The signs among us] (38 minutes). While the chapters reverberate, especially stylistically, with one another, they nevertheless differ in their themes. Chapter 1A constitutes an introduction to the audio-visual history of cinema and the twentieth century that is *Histore(s)*, with particular emphasis on World War II and Hollywood cinema, and contains the main ideas developed in the other sections. Chapter 1B focuses on cinema’s main features and explores sex and death as the two spectacular themes that have taken over cinema’s documentary potential since its inception. Chapter 2A opens on Godard in conversation with Serge Daney (an influential French film critic); they discuss the many histories contained in *Histoire(s)* and draw attention to cinema’s peculiarity and superiority in comparison to other art-forms because films are projected. Chapter 2B examines the cinematic representation of beauty and its most frequent expression through female beauty. Chapter 3A centres on the ways cinema has dealt with the topic of war, with specific emphasis on Italian Neorealism and its influence on the New Wave, which is the main subject of chapter 3B. Chaper 4A is a reflection on the nature of power, which then progresses into observations on cinema by means of Alfred Hitchcock’s mastery of the film medium. Chapter 4B, dedicated to himself and his partner Anne-Marie Miéville, briefly and fragmentarily overviews the main themes of *Histoire(s)*, with particular attention to notions of ineffability and unrepresentability – Godard remarks, for instance, that one cannot see anything in the places of the worst history of humankind (Hiroshima, Dresden, Hanoi, Sarajevo, etc.), in much the same way as
one cannot really talk about cinema, thereby uniting once more history and cinema. The opus concludes with a further declaration of love for cinema and ends over the enigmatic image of Godard superimposed on a yellow rose and Francis Bacon’s *Study for a Portrait of Van Gogh II* (1957).

The complete film was released as a video series in 1998 (Witt 2013, 3); however, sections of *Histoire(s)* were released over the years through different media and contexts, contributing to *Histoire(s)*’s overall status as a complex in-betweenness of cinema and television. Early drafts of chapter 1A and 1B premiered out of competition at Cannes Film Festival in 1988 and later versions were broadcast on television in 1989, as well as screened at the Vidéothèque in Paris and presented at various film festivals (Witt 2013, 34-35). Drafts of other chapters circulated at festivals in the 1990s – preliminary versions of 1A, 1B, 2A and 2B at Locarno Film Festival in 1995; of 3A and 4A at Cannes Film Festival in 1997 (Witt 2013, 41). The difficult positioning of *Histoire(s)*, first as a “tele-film”, is further complexified by the publication of a collection of art books in 1998 and a set of audio CDs in 1999 under the same name (Witt 2013, 5). What is more, the dissemination history and the structure of *Histoire(s)* also contribute in making this opus a “complex integrated multiform work” (Witt 2013, 5).

The literature on *Histoire(s)* is extensive. One important source is Witt’s *Jean-Luc Godard, Cinema Historian* (2013), the most in-depth monograph on *Histoire(s)* available in English, which dwells on the many thematic and stylistic aspects of the film, establishing a dialogue with the filmmaker’s work as a whole. Other useful sources include James S. Williams and Michael Temple’s *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Work of Jean-Luc Godard 1985-2000* (2000) and Williams, Temple and Witt’s *Forever Godard* (2004), which are both edited books characterised by an interdisciplinary approach and a variety of themes discussed. Finally, I rely on Marion Poirson-Dechonne’s (2016, 151-163) analysis, which understands the film from an iconoclastic perspective, focusing on the relevance of Christianity and the sacred in Godard’s work.

With the exception of Witt’s 2013 monograph, which thoroughly discusses *Histoire(s)*, analyses primarily focus on one or two fragments, or on a specific topic. One of the most examined fragments is taken from Chapter 1A and presents in the
same frame shots of Elizabeth Taylor’s serene face in *A Place in the Sun* (George Stevens, 1951) juxtaposed with footage shot by the same director at concentration camps in 1945 and Giotto’s *Noli me tangere* rotated 90 degrees. This fragment is particularly suitable for discussing some of the major themes and stylistic techniques found in the film. Colin MacCabe (2003, 299) uses the Elizabeth Taylor/concentration camp fragment to engage with the seminal idea of *Histoire(s)* as both a history of cinema and an audio-visual story of the history of the twentieth century – the history of World War II and the Shoah are here cinematically juxtaposed to a fictional film shot. Similarly, Jacques Rancière (2002, 113-119) discusses the entwined relationship between cinema’s stories (*histoires*) and the twentieth century history (*Histoire*), as well as cinema’s potentiality to redeem the traumatic past in sequences like the camps/Taylor/Giotto (2004, 225-226). Williams (2008, 14-16) focuses on the montage of this fragment and the ways it creates “‘forms that think’” (15) by manipulating and combining a variety of seemingly disparate materials. Libby Saxton (2004, 366-379; 2008, 49-51) analyses this fragment in a broader discussion on the cinematic representation of the Shoah. In the clashing juxtaposition of the concentration camps and Elizabeth Taylor, whose image is later superimposed to Giotto’s fresco, Saxton observes how “an image of separation, absence, an empty tomb, is transfigured, becoming an act of resurrection” (2004, 366). That is, cinema “resurrects” historical reality by projecting the past in a disjunctive, layered montage. In discussing the possible redemptive potential of Godard’s film images, she also references the *eikôn-eidôlon* dichotomy, contending that

sequences such as the Auschwitz/Taylor/Giotto encounter, where the falsity of the *eidôlon* recruits to itself the truth of the *eikôn*, testify to a faith in the “bleeding”, intrinsically multiple “Image” (with a capital “I”) produced at the interstice as a vehicle not only of resurrection but also of truth and redemption: “I believe in images”, the director proclaims quite simply. (2004, 366-367)

39 While Godard and most scholars identify the shots of the concentration camps in this fragment as filmed in Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, according to Michael Witt (2013, 132) they were filmed in Dachau instead.
Witt (2013, 130-134) also considers this fragment in relation to cinema’s power of resurrection, that is, a secularised resurrection of its documentary roots which would allow for the historical past to be recuperated and projected. Moreover, Witt elaborates on the substantial presence of Christian references in both the Taylor/Giotto fragment and Histoire(s) as a whole, claiming for their non-religious and allegorical function.

Other scholars examine the theme of Christianity in Histoire(s), pointing out the secular quality of Godard’s religious references and the redemptive potential he attributes to the film image. Rancière (2002, 113-119) establishes an analogy between Godard’s conception of the cinematic screen and the Christian Veil of Saint Veronica,\(^40\) and argues for a “new sacralisation of the image” (118) made possible by montage, with which I will engage later in the chapter. Junji Hori (2004, 334-349) makes a similar argument by comparing the Veil of Veronica’s bearing of the traces of reality – Christ’s face – to the “cinematographic image[’s ability to] preserve the duration of reality” (347). What is more, Hori identifies a salvific function of cinema because it allows documenting history, and likens this capacity to the film image’s power of redeeming cinema from the crime Godard assigns to it, namely cinema’s failure to record the Shoah – something that both Williams (2008, 12) and Rancière (2002, 115-116) also take into account. However, Godard’s j’accuse against cinema in regard to the recording of the Shoah is somewhat problematic because it is not so much a sin of omission (we could have filmed it but failed to do so), but one that is systemic (we could never have adequately filmed it). Saxton (2004, 364-379; 2008, 46-68) engages with this problematic in Histoire(s) and other films, spelling out the representational issue surrounding the Shoah because of its being that which lacks a direct representation and yet necessitates to be represented. She contends that the horror of the Shoah and its image exclude each other insofar as images fill in gaps while no image could fill the void of the Shoah without running the ethical risk of normalising it. At the same time, however, Saxton argues that the point is “how it

\(^{40}\) Also known as Sudarium or Holy Face, The Veronica is considered a true, visible image of God on earth (from the Latin *vera*, “true”, and *icona*, “image”). In Christian theology it is the cloth with which a woman wiped Christ’s sweating blood face on the road to the Crucifixion; accordingly, it bears the traces of Christ’s face (Melton 2008, 349-351). The Veil of Veronica is also conceived as an acheiropoietic image, that is, not made by human hands (Mondzain 2002, 324-335; 2011, 46-47).
[the Shoah] might adequately or responsibly be represented” (2008, 2: emphasis in original). Her argument develops by contrasting Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) with Godard’s *Histoire(s)*: while the former pursues an iconoclastic representation of the Shoah’s void, the latter seeks its iconic recovery. Saxton effectively illustrates that in the two films we have “‘Absence’ against ‘Excess’: the two figures of the ineffable proper to the communication of the experience of the camps” (2004, 377).

The ethics of *Histoire(s)* resides in its problematising of the notions of image and representation by means of images which “constitute sites of resistance to mainstream aesthetics” (Saxton 2008, 64). The montage in *Histoire(s)*, through an excess of multiple images, is able to speak about the Shoah without negating the absence that is at its very core. And “it is the capacity to reveal this lack, this absence, this unfigurable otherness, that the images of *Shoah* share with the Images of *Histoire(s)*” (Saxton 2004, 378). What is more, Saxton explores the meaning and implications of a phrase used throughout *Histoire(s)*, “the image will come at the time of the resurrection”, which is frequently attributed to Saint Paul but is instead another example of Godard’s method of appropriating (Saint Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians) and recombining elements. This phrase expresses the redemptive quality Godard attributes to film images, for they can redeem reality by projecting the past in the present.

Williams (2004, 288-311) and Witt (2013, 132-134) observe how Christianity in Godard is part of the heritage of sacred art in Western Europe (e.g., the numerous sacred paintings edited in *Histoire(s)*) and has primarily an “allegorical or historical” (Witt 2013, 132) function, something that Godard himself has stated in interview with Youssef Ishaghpour (2005, 98-99). Similarly, Poirson-Dechonne (2016, 151-157) emphasises the importance of the sacred in Godard’s oeuvre and the way he shifts away, both theoretically and practically, from religion to aesthetics, concluding that Godard’s cinema is “a mystery, in the theological sense of the term” (156: my translation), which I will go on to discuss later in more detail. The concept of cinema as mystery and the idea of an underlying mysticism in Godard’s masterpiece are recurrent motifs in *Histoire(s)*, as various scholars point out. Mysticism, in both theistic and non-theistic tradition, “is understood as an experience beyond ordinary human experience and reason, but not antagonistic to them” (Hinnells 1995, 333).
Mysticism, therefore, designates an experience characterised by an ineffable and unrepresentable component because “it cannot be adequately expressed” (334). Accordingly, when Witt (2013) describes Godard’s as “a form of secular mysticism” (133) or Serge Daney (2004) talks about a “mysticism of the image” (71) in Histoire(s), they are referring to its images’ transcending of our most habitual experience of film. In Histoire(s), in fact, we are presented with diverse still and moving images coexisting in a single frame, rather than a serial succession of moving images. It is in this multiple image, which is the result of superimpositions and layering, that Godard’s iconoclasm, both aesthetically and ethically, concretises itself.

No Image for Itself

Among other things, Histoire(s) is a reflection on images, on their nature and power. Ironically, it is also a demonstration of Isidore Isou’s claim against images for “it is possible to make them say whatever one wants and that which they do not say” (Traité de bave et d’éternité). Indeed, Godard makes images do whatever he wants so that his history of cinema consists in a “clash of heterogeneous elements” (Rancière 2007, 55), very much in the tradition of Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov. The multitude of images that compose the visual track comes from different sources, such as films, paintings, books, photographs and lithographs, which are repeatedly manipulated and reassembled. Still and moving images are superimposed on one another as if lacerating the screen, frozen in stills, framed in close-ups, slowed down or speeded up, obsessively replayed and covered with texts. Likewise, the sound track results from the layering of aural elements coming from a variety of sources. Godard’s own voice-over, which is the dominant and unifying element of the soundtrack, is accompanied by excerpts from films’ soundtracks and dialogue, music, popular songs, ambient noises and silence. As a result of this collage, images and sounds are removed from their original context and their meaning becomes increasingly ambiguous.

Given its formal features, Histoire(s) proceeds by “do[ing] two things at once: […] organiz[ing] a clash and construct[ing] a continuum” (Rancière 2007, 60). By tearing apart a variety of images and simultaneously layering them in a single
frame, Godard emphasises the importance of the audio-visual image as a relational construct. While taken individually images cannot disclose any truth about the world (i.e., they cannot “resurrect” the traumatic past), they acquire a possible redemptive power when entangled in a multitude of relations with each other. The generative power of images, Nicole Brenez (1998, 348) observes, is a constant feature of Godard’s oeuvre and is the supreme principle at work in this film. In *Histoire(s)*, no image exists for itself, but only in relation to other images and sounds. A single frame can reach a denseness of meaning due to the superimpositions of different still and moving images and sounds which precariously coexist, thus giving life to an image made up of many images – what Saxton terms “‘Image’ (with a capital ‘I’)”.

Interviewed, Godard explains his layering of images and his use of “very fast superimpositions so that there is only one image but we understand there are two” (Godard in Smith 1996). As Rancière aptly affirms, Godard “construct[s] the world of ‘images’ as a world of general co-belonging and inter-expression” (2007, 63). Instead of a serial succession of images, which is nonetheless present in *Histoire(s)*, Godard creates stratified images composed of different images, both still and moving – for instance, the moving image of Elizabeth Taylor superimposed to the still image of the concentration camps, and then the sharp cut to the still image of Giotto’s fresco which is slowly superimposed by another moving image of Taylor, this time slow motioned. As Saxton points out, in *Histoire(s)* “the images establish disruptive new relationships which begin to produce a compelling logic of their own” (2008, 50). It is the logic of “no image for itself”, namely the logic of superimposition which allows Godard to create a profound entanglement among cinema, the other arts and the history of the twentieth century that all coexist in the space of a single frame.

Furthermore, Rancière notes that, in *Histoire(s)*, “being an image still means being a link” (2004, 224). But an image as a link is an *eikôn* – an intermediary between two elements. In this sense Godard’s film images, and especially those in *Histoire(s)*, can be addressed as *eikônes*. However, they are iconoclastic because in their entanglement they break their mimetic bond with the reality that has produced them in the first place. Isolated from one another, the images in *Histoire(s)* are appearances unable to convey a truthful sense about the world and its past because
reality is far more complex than a single image. Conversely, in the superimposition of diverse images reality’s ambiguity can transpire. Indeed, it is the highly iconoclastic interaction among images which makes it possible for a true image to take form – a true image being an image capable of expressing something true about the cinematic and phenomenal world. Witt argues, “a true image [...] is always the result of the combination, tension, and dynamic interplay among a number of component elements” (2013, 180). Similarly, Godard himself defines the relational status of images as follows:

The image is a relationship. It’s either two distant things that we bring together, or two things that are close together that we separate. “As thin as a hair, as vast as the dawn”. A hair is not an image; dawn is not an image; it’s their relationship that creates an image. (Godard as quoted in Witt 2013, 180)

Accordingly, in Godard’s films a true image is not a single image; it is always at least two coexisting images. What is more, in Histoire(s), the enlarged cut already present in Godard’s New Wave films acquires the status of image in its own right. It is the image of cinematic editing, which is the constitutive principle of Histoire(s), but it also becomes an image of blindness which punctuates the film and remarks cinema’s limits: film cannot record everything or show everything. The expanded cut is, thus, fundamental for the making of Histoire(s) as a work between the audio-visual frenzy of the superimpositions and the blind ecstasy of the black screen which at once contains all images and none.

The Redemptive Potential of the Film Image

The relational status of images is evident throughout Histoire(s). I will focus on a fragment from chapter 3B, “Une vague nouvelle”, and a fragment from 1B, “Une histoire seule”, because they explicitly deal with the nature of images and their close connection with Christianity in the West. The reference to Christianity is of particular importance for discussing the status of Godard’s use of images because of the redemptive power the filmmaker attributes to them. Like Christ in the theology of the image is eikôn tou Theou/εἰκών τοῦ Θεοῦ (“eikôn [i.e., true image] of God”) (2
Cor. 4:4c), and thus the mediator who has redeemed humanity, so the film image as *eikôn* is that which contains the potential to redeem the past. In Godard’s *Histoire(s)*, redemption can be attained via a continual superimposition of sounds and still and moving images. On these composite film images the director spells out his comparing of cinema with Christianity through the concept of belief. According to Godard, belief in the image and, more specifically, in the images of cinema, like belief in God, requires something akin to religious faith on the part of the spectator. Mingling the sacred and the profane, Godard’s montage is reflective of both cinema’s general suspension of disbelief and the faith in the revelatory power of images that *Histoire(s)* calls for.

“*That the Image is in the Domain of Redemption – That of Reality*”

As the title “Une vague nouvelle” suggests, this chapter of *Histoire(s)* is both a lyrical evocation of the New Wave (*nouvelle vague*) and a vague short story (*une vague nouvelle*) on cinema’s creative power. The disquisition on cinema is developed through the persona of Henri Langlois, founder of the Cinématèque Française and a key-figure for many directors of the New Wave. The fragment I have chosen takes place roughly at two thirds of the section and lasts 7 seconds (00:18:33-00:18:40). It opens with a black screen over which Godard’s voice-over begins with the sentence “That the image…” [figure 9]. This blank screen almost immediately cuts to a shot of Godard in his study room finishing the sentence in sync, “is in the domain of redemption”. Superimposed over this shot of Godard is the text “CINÉMA HISTOIRE(S)”, as well as a still image which begins its superimposition from the centre of the frame and radially takes over the whole frame [figure 10]. This still image is a detail from Fra Angelico’s fresco *The Mocking of Christ* (ca. 1438-1440). Godard frames Christ’s blindfolded face in an extreme close-up, while his voice-over specifies that the domain of redemption is “that of reality” [figure 11]. The image remains still for 2 seconds, before it, too, is lacerated by the superimposition of the following image, a still frame of an ecstatic Brunella Bovo from Vittorio De Sica’s *Miracle in Milan* (*Miracolo a Milano*, 1951) [figure 12].

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41 For an account of Christ as the natural image of God, see second chapter.
The superimpositions in this fragment brilliantly convey the sense of generative power that the images in Histoire(s) have. Every image, whether moving or still, opens up like a wound from the centre of the frame and promptly expands itself to fill the entire frame: the still detail of Christ's face is generated from and covers the moving image of Godard in his study room; the still image from Miracle in Milan, in its turn, is generated from the fresco and ends up taking its place. This editing method continues throughout Histoire(s), giving life to an interplay of images which at once are generated from and destroy each other, thereby communicating the idea of a multiple and composite film image. At the same time, however, this montage carries a somewhat violent component given by the continuous lacerating of images – I say “lacerate” because still and moving images momentarily coexisting in a single frame seem to be literally tearing each other apart, like an open wound lacerates the skin, showing the flesh beneath. These continually superimposed images, which exist in a reciprocal entanglement, are however forced to
metaphorically destroy one another in their competing for some visibility in the frame.

In terms of content, everything in this fragment is rife with Christian references, from the visual elements to the spoken words. The face of Christ from the fresco refers to both the Incarnation, which has allowed sacred images in the iconophilic understanding, and His martyrdom, which, according to Christian theology, together with the Resurrection has led to human salvation (redemption). While linking the nature of the image to Christianity, thereby acknowledging the influence of Christian thought over Western interpretations of images, Godard also explicitly indicates that redemption has to be pursued in this terrestrial world rather than in a distant celestial sphere. Indeed, he claims that “the domain of redemption [is] that of reality”. This fragment’s mixing of sacred (the detail from Fra Angelico’s fresco; the term “redemption”) and phenomenal reality (the still frame of Piazza del Duomo from Miracle in Milan; the reference to “reality”) expresses well Godard’s atheistic mysticism, which exudes everywhere from Histoire(s). The idea of a magic or sacred aspect of reality is also skilfully conveyed via the superimposition of the still frame from De Sica’s film on Christ’s face: on the one hand, the reference to one of the most eminent exponents of neorealism remarks that “the domain of redemption [is] that of reality”, which is also expressed through the contrast between a painted Christ and a photographic image of the Piazza; on the other hand, the choice of using a still frame from Miracle in Milan, a magic, neo-realist fable where the fantastic element is quite predominant, is a way of acknowledging the presence of a mystical aspect inherent in phenomenal reality.

“The image is in the domain of redemption – that of reality”, Godard enigmatically affirms. The world incarnates in an image which, in turn, has the potential to redeem. However, a single moving or still image cannot bring about this redemption; it is in the intertwining of moving images that some solace can be found, as the continuous superimpositions reveal. In this fragment, as well as in a good part of Histoire(s), there is little or no time to arrest the look on a single image in the frame, because diverse still and moving images are so profoundly entangled with
each other. Meaning, thus, resides in the interrelationship between these fleeting, multifarious images.42

“Cinema, like Christianity…”

Links between cinema and Christianity abound in *Histoire(s)*, so much so that some religious notions can be used as tools for an understanding of Godard’s conception of cinema. A fragment (00:19:18-00:19:36) from chapter 1B, “Une histoire seule”, is particularly significant for discussing Godard’s likening of cinema and Christianity via the concept of belief. In a rapid montage which alternates and juxtaposes still and moving images, we see a shot of a train cutting to a black screen, a white screen with the text “L’IMAGE” appearing and disappearing in the blink of an eye [figure 13], the black screen cutting to a still image of a detail from Giotto’s *Flight into Egypt* (ca. 1303-1305) which then cuts back to the black screen [figure 14], a still image of Ingrid Bergman in absorbed prayer from Roberto Rossellini’s *Joan of Arc at the Stake* (*Giovanna d’Arco al rogo*, 1954) intermittently superimposed to a blue-tinted still frame of Birger Malmsten and Doris Svedlund from Ingmar Bergman’s *Prison* (*Fängelse*, 1949) [figure 15], then the same still image from *Prison*, now tinted in green, intermittently superimposed to a shot of Godard in his study room, to which the still image of the text “L’IMAGE” on a white background is continuously superimposed – that is, various still and moving images compete for their visibility in the frame [figure 16]; however, they all succumb to the black screen upon which the text “I CONFESS” rapidly appears [figures 17-18]. While we see this bewildering montage, we hear Arthur Honegger’s symphony *Pacific 231* (1923) and Godard’s voice-over declaring twice “cinema, like Christianity, is not founded on historical truth”, then repeating for two times “cinema, like Christianity”, and finally concluding with “it [cinema] supplies us with a story and says: Now, believe!”.

42 The discourse on a possible redemptive power of film images resonates with Siegfried Kracauer’s (1960) argument on cinema’s power to reveal aspects of physical reality that otherwise would go unnoticed. However, while in Kracauer’s theory cinema can redeem reality by mechanically reproducing it – namely, by indexically bearing the traces of the recorded reality –, in Godard’s *Histoire(s)* cinema’s revelatory capacity derives from the possibility of establishing new relationships between diverse images which coexist in a single frame. That is to say, Kracauer’s trust in cinema’s ability to mimetically reproduce phenomenal referents as a way to redeem the otherwise concealed reality is put to the test by Godard’s multiple images.
Here Godard’s generative-destructive montage articulates a reflection on belief that both cinema and Christianity entail. It does so by alternating the various superimposed images, which all contain explicit or hidden references to Christian religion, with 8 black screens as if remarking that for everything that we see there is always also something else which remains hidden. Cinema demands that viewers believe in something which does not exist (i.e., the fictitious narrative) or something which is not tangible or physically accessible. As such, cinema, like Christianity, requires a belief in an absence, be it the terrestrial absence of God or of the
characters, the physical absence of the pro-filmic during reception (images of absents) or the absence of images (the monochromatic black screen as the image of imagelessness).

In this sense the belief in film images acquires a religious, yet secularised, connotation in Histoire(s). Following Godard’s argument on cinema and images in this opus, cinema has the potential to redeem historical reality by resurrecting the past (the camps) and projecting it into the present of the screen. However, redemption and resurrection necessitate faith – if one does not believe in resurrection, one will fail to recognise it. Witt poignantly highlights the “leap of faith required in religious (and, for Godard, cinematic) belief” (2013, 132). Belief is here the result of two seemingly clashing perspectives: the metaphysical one of Christianity and the immanent one of atheism. These two worldviews are united under the concept of belief because, as Gilles Deleuze contends, “whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world” (1997, 172: emphasis in original). According to the French philosopher, cinema is that which provides, or should provide, these reasons, and it is in this manner that Godard conceives cinema in Histoire(s). This discussion resonates with some of Stanley Cavell’s arguments on cinema, in particular with his contention that movies convince us of the world’s reality in the only way we have to be convinced […]: by taking views of it. […] What enables moving pictures to satisfy the wish to view the world is the automatism of photography. (1979, 102)

But while for Cavell it is the automatism of the film medium which permits viewers to believe in the world represented on screen as a reproduction of a phenomenal world existing prior to and independently from the film, for Godard the belief in cinema and in the world maintains a mystical quality that partially transcends language and representation. According to Godard, in fact, the belief in the world that the cinema would allow demands a faith, albeit secularised, which cannot be exhaustively explained through words.  

Godard’s images of and claims on Christianity in Histoire(s) are close to some arguments of mysticism (especially that of Meister Eckhart) and negative or apophatic theology. This tradition postulates that God can be known only negatively, by means of what God is not, because God is ultimately ineffable (Milem 2002, 1-13). For instance, while Godard in Histoire(s)
The Christian yet atheist quality of Godard’s belief in film images is also evident in the recurrent statement of cinema as mystery. In Christian theology, mystery is a supernatural truth which can be grasped neither through sensible experience nor via the intellect. It is, however, revealed to humans who can accept it by means of an act of faith (see, for instance, First Vatican Council 1868, Sess. III, *De fide et ratione*; Pohle 1912, 194-195). If we apply the Christian understanding of mystery to Godard’s claim, cinema would be that which cannot be grasped in its entirety and whose images require from viewers something akin to Christian faith. That is, to believe in entities or events – the Incarnation, the Holy Trinity; historical reality, film images – whose meaning cannot be visually or verbally exhausted. As Hori effectively claims,

it is not a question, therefore, of any religious doctrine but of having faith in the invisible image and in the cinema that cannot be seen. […] What enables Godard to redeem reality through the image is precisely his secular faith in images. (2004, 341)

Godard manipulates images and sounds, stratifying them, to transcend the limits of mimetic reproduction since it cannot account for the complexity of reality. Hence, he destroys the image as a copy of: the images in *Histoire(s)* are a sort of Frankenstein monster which articulates an elegant critique of mimesis. With *Histoire(s)* Godard writes his personal history through montage, intertwining the history of cinema with the history of humans, interlacing the different artistic means of expression and their history with each other – cinema, photography, painting, music, literature – and investigating the visible and the sayable and their respective limits. In the end there is no true image, but only more or less truthful relationships between images. That is, in the interrelation between disparate moving and still images and their coexistence in a single frame, something of the real can be expressed. Indeed, the possibility of approaching and expressing the complexity of reality lies in the superimposition and stratification of moving audio-visual images. But a zone of unseen and unsaid underlays these transient images, constituting the premise for their existence.

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is claiming for an audio-visual representation of the Shoah, he nonetheless preserves its void through incomplete, stratified film images.
**Godard: An Iconophilic Iconoclast**

Godard believes in images as relational, and redemptive, entities. Yet, he is suspicious of mimesis since it entails a relationship between an image and a model instead of an interrelationship between images. This results in the coexistence of diverse and at times conflicting tendencies in his cinema. In *Histoire(s)*, as well as in other films of his, there is a sharp critique of consumer society and the desire to destroy its illusory images, which reiterate capitalist ideology; but there is also a sheer, mystical love for cinema and its images, and a tender belief in their redemptive power. These contradictory sentiments prevent a fixed categorisation of Godard’s cinematic perspective. Not utterly iconoclastic nor fully iconophilic, Godard, like his images, is in-between: between destruction and creation, between iconoclasm and iconophilia. As a consequence, some authors identify him as iconoclast, for his films often exhibit the image as in some ways insufficient for representation (among others, Bergala 1986, 58; Brenez 1998; Poirson-Dechonne 2016, 151-163), whereas others address him as iconophile because, in his films, moving and still images, once manipulated and entangled, can be adequate for representation (for instance, Rancière 2002, 118; 2007, 41; Williams 2016, 13). My contention is that Godard as a filmmaker could be defined as a paradoxical iconophilic iconoclast because a belief in film images endures with the urgency to destroy those same images.

Hori appropriately outlines the opposing tensions at work in Godard’s masterpiece by noting that “the inexhaustible historiographic power of *Histoire(s)* lies precisely in the incessant alternation between iconophilia and iconoclasm, the religion of the image and the science of montage, blindness and clairvoyancy” (2004, 334). That is to say, a love for images, evident in the density of the image track, coexists alongside a montage that breaks them into pieces. The visual richness attainable in a single frame via superimpositions is frequently followed by the blankness of the black screen. Thus, in *Histoire(s)*, destruction and creation precariously cohabit with one another, as both Witt (2013, 26) and Poirson-Dechonne (2016, 157) also observe. On the one hand, Godard destroys images, both moving images (which are replayed, slow motioned or freeze-framed) and still images (which are dissected, rotated or put into motion), to which one should add the
black screen, image of imagelessness and perhaps a metaphor for a non-existent image. On the other hand, he creates new film images via the continuous interplay of still and moving images.

Brenez (1998) and Poirson-Dechonne (2016) go further by explicitly discussing Godard’s cinema as iconoclastic. Brenez examines the similarities that Godard’s cinematic thought shares with some aspects of Byzantine iconoclasm. More specifically, she observes that iconoclastic arguments against sacred images and the need to tear such images apart find a resonance in Godard’s conception of the image “as a limitation and a thinking of absence” and in his “dilacerating montage” [“montage dilacérant”] (1998, 342: my translation). Having broken the trust in the copy’s ability to reproduce the model, Godard attacks single images and recombines them in a layered, multiple moving image which is able to convey ideas about the limits of our capacity to represent and see. In a similar manner, Poirson-Dechonne situates Godard’s thought “at the extreme opposite of that of the iconophilic theology” (158: my translation), pointing out that, “in his films, the emphasis is placed on the distance that the image has with its model” (157: my translation). In defining Godard’s iconoclasm, she puts emphasis on aesthetics, without, however, neglecting the ethical dimension present in his films and, especially, in Histoire(s).

While Poirson-Dechonne’s discriminating between ethics and aesthetics is not strictly fixed, it nonetheless risks overlooking that aesthetic choices conceal ethical preoccupation – something that Saxton (2008) extensively discusses. My argument here is that Godard’s iconoclasm in Histoire(s) develops as both an aesthetic and ethical rejection of the eidôlon. As Saxton (2004) explains, the negation of the singular image in favour of a “collision” (377) of images, which she terms “Images” with a capital “I”, is a vehicle for an ethical questioning of the Shoah because the excess of images alludes to that which resists representation without however exhibiting it. Godard does not fill the void of the Shoah, but finds a way to show it without making it utterly visible: “Godard’s privileging of the visible does not […] mask invisibility” (2008, 65), Saxton aptly claims. Therefore, the work on images and sounds in Histoire(s) not only creates an aesthetic masterpiece, but also acquires an explicit ethical meaning. For this reason, I place Godard’s Histoire(s) as
the film bridging the second section, focused mainly on the political and aesthetic critique of the cinematic image, and the third section, which deals with the ethical character of the iconoclastic eikôn.

While Brenez and Poirson-Decohon delineate an iconoclasm in Godard’s films, Rancière claims that “the apparent iconoclast of the Sixties has slowly changed into one of the most rigorous servants of the icon (iconodules)” (2002, 118). “Iconodule” is an even stronger term than iconophile because it etymologically translates as “servant of images” (from eikôn/eikóv and douleia/douleía “slavery” or “servitude”). In Rancière’s view, Godard is more of an iconodule for he produces icons by cutting and tearing images apart and then reassembling them into a new image which becomes an icon – the new icons thus being the residue of the past idols. However, what Rancière mistakes for iconoduly is the making iconoclastic of the eikôn (for further discussion of iconoclastic eikônes, see third section). Indeed, the new composite images that Godard creates in Histoire(s) break with the Christian tradition of the icon, in which the copy figuratively reproduces the model. The iconodules never put into question the figurative representation of Christ (i.e., that an image could figuratively represent the sacred model) and, as Brenez explains, “iconoduly conceives the relationship between the image and its model in a continuous mode, the prototype passing in the image in nature if not in substance so that the adoration of the icon refers to the prototype” (1998, 352: my translation; for an argument on iconophilic understandings of the icon, see second chapter). In Godard’s Histoire(s), there is no such thing, since a single image cannot account for its prototype. Moreover, underlying the creation of such multiple images there is an iconoclastic understanding of the copy-prototype relation – namely that the image cannot fully express its model – and, not so dissimilarly from mystical tradition, Godard’s film images maintain an ineffable and unrepresentable quality. Therefore, contrary to Rancière’s claim, Godard cannot be addressed as iconodule because, while there are eikônes in Histoire(s), that is, images as mediators, the trust in a mimetic relationship between image and model is however missing.

44 In Christian religion, the term defines the defense and veneration of sacred icons, and is employed as a synonym of iconophilia (especially in reference to the Byzantine controversy). However, the word iconoduly etymologically carries a stronger attitude in favour of sacred images than does iconophilia (“veneration”/“servitude” versus “kinship”/“love”).
Furthermore, Rancière’s claim of a “new sacralisation of the image” (2002, 118) in Histoire(s) needs to be further problematised. For instance, also Poirson-Dechonne talks about a gradual “sacralisation of art” (2016, 158: my translation) in Godard’s films, but it consists in a secular, iconoclastic sacralisation which belongs to the domains of aesthetics and ethics. If we can speak of a “sacralisation of the image” in Histoire(s), this does not correspond to an iconophilic interpretation of the image as icon. Rather, it is a sacralisation which takes on a clear iconoclastic value. That is to say, like in Christianity, in Godard too there is faith – faith in cinema’s capacity to convey something about the real; faith in the film images’ potential to maintain the memory of what has been. But this faith also testifies to the image’s insufficiency to directly represent reality. The possibility of redemption lies in the destruction of single images and their recombination in an entangled unity.

For the contradictions constitutive of Godard’s work, I propose to define him as an iconophilic iconoclast. A belief in images, in their capacity to convey a sense of the real, lingers in his films alongside a critique thereof. Godard is, first and foremost, iconoclast on a practical and a conceptual level. Practically, the process of destruction is fundamental to the logic of Histoire(s) and prior to the process of creation, because his film images result from the manipulation, superimposition and breaking with the model. For instance, the detail of Christ’s face from Fra Angelico’s fresco in chapter 3B implies the cutting of the full image of the fresco and, therefore, not only its visual dissection but also the destruction of its original meaning. We do not, in fact, see the hands and face of Christ’s persecutors; therefore, the detail cut by Godard becomes the image of a contemplative interrogation on sight and Christianity rather than the representation of Christ’s unperturbable calm during His Passion. Conceptually, Godard is iconoclast since in his films there is no longer a belief in a truthful relationship between images and models – hence, his privileging of relations between images – and he considers the images of consumer and capitalist society as eidōla, namely illusory and false appearances.

At the same time, however, an iconophilic component remains in Godard’s filmmaking because he does believe in a possible true image, that is, a film image able to do reality justice. Godard’s multiple film image is, thus, eikôn because
it mediates; however, it is iconoclastic because it mediates not between itself and a model, but between itself and another image through the destruction and recombination of both images. It is, therefore, possible to define Godard the filmmaker as iconophilic iconoclast. While Godard’s work and thought maintain aspects of both iconoclasm and iconophilia, my defining him as an iconophilic iconoclast is however not reversible. That is, Godard is not an iconoclastic iconophile because his conception of film images and his montage practice hinge on an iconoclastic rather than iconophilic perspective. The term “iconophilic” serves to contradictorily adjectivise the nominal definition of “iconoclast”, but cannot become the defining noun.

Godard destroys still and moving images as a way to create new film images. He seems to suggest that a true image can only originate from the superimposition of many images, relationships between (fragments of) images rather than single images. In *Histoire(s)* every image is, at least partially, destroyed in the process of Godard’s appropriation – for example, the 90-degree rotated detail from Giotto’s *Noli me tangere*; the green and blue tinted frozen frame from Bergman’s *Prison*; the obsessively replayed still image from Rossellini’s *Joan of Arc*; and so on. We also constantly see throughout *Histoire(s)* the black screen, as if reminding the viewer that Godard’s creation through destruction implies that something invisible or ineffable slips away during the process. The black screens, but also altered velocity and the layering of images and sounds, allude to something missing, to a blind or silent spot. In many of Godard’s films, but especially in *Histoire(s)*, there always remains something hidden, unseen, an image that cannot come into existence. As his voice-over announces in section 3A, “true cinema was the kind that can’t be seen”.

*Histoire(s)* marks a clear move forward from, as well as a summa of, Godard’s previous films – especially his 1960s-1970s works where the crucial point was to dismantle the world-image of the bourgeoisie. Godard’s artistic path thus develops from an exigency to renew film aesthetics, as his New Wave films attest, to the urgency of ethically reflecting on cinema, which culminates in *Histoire(s)*. In other words, there is a movement from a critique of the cinematic *eidôlon* to the creation of iconoclastic *eikônes*, which is the main subject of the following section.
Conclusion

This section has highlighted a form of iconoclasm which consists in a critique of the cinematic *eidôlon*, namely a film image understood as deceptive or illusory. From a theoretical rejection of the images of Hollywood classical cinema to the practical destruction of certain mimetic film images, iconoclasm can be a useful tool for discussing destructive and yet innovative ideas on cinema. The cinematic criticism of the *eidôlon* derives from an overall Marxist inflected world-view: leftist film theorists as well as Isidore Isou, Guy Debord and Jean-Luc Godard show contempt for and wish to destroy, metaphorically or literally, those images which express a capitalist ideology reiterating the values of the bourgeoisie. These directors destroy particular types of images because they clearly understand the power and risks of such images, echoing some of the philosophical or religious arguments of iconoclasm.

Indeed, some of the destructive claims on cinema and against self-explanatory film images found in leftist film theory and Isou’s, Debord’s and Godard’s films are reminiscent of Plato’s worry about the “psychological power” (Halliwell 2002, 73) of artworks and the Byzantine iconoclasts’ refusal of potentially idolatrous and false images of God. Like in philosophy and religion, in cinema too the issue concerns the image’s ability to reproduce the model. When the model is deceptive in itself, as in Isou’s and Debord’s films, or is far too complex, as in Godard’s oeuvre, iconoclastic choices become a way to challenge habitual forms of film-making and film-viewing.

Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’êternité*, while invoking the destruction of cinema, is also a declaration of love for the cinema that can be (in this case, the Lettrist one) and contains some of the most insightful claims on film images’ potentialities – first and foremost, their power of liberating the spectator’s creative imagination. Debord’s films, built around a harsh critique of narrative and auteur cinema, illustrate cinema’s ability to provoke thoughts via the negation of mimetic images. Finally, Godard’s œuvre, characterised by a constant questioning of cinematic and phenomenal reality, well displays the aesthetic and ethical charge of iconoclastic images. The film examples examined in this section illustrate, in different manners and with dissimilar outcomes, the significance of iconoclasm and especially the critique of the *eidôlon* in
the cinema. The step following on from this criticism is the creation of iconoclastic *eikônes* and the foundation of an ethics of (in)visibility, which are at the core of the next section.
Section 3. Cinematic Iconoclasm as an Ethics of (In)visibility: The Eikôn as Iconoclastic

For accustomed to believing in image, an absolute idea of value, his world had forgotten the command of essence: “Thou Shall Not Create Unto Thyself Any Graven Image”, although you know the task is to fill the empty page. From the bottom of your heart, pray to be released from image.

(Derek Jarman, Blue)

This final section deals with the film image as iconoclastic eikôn and investigates its ethical character. While there are numerous films whose content is ethical, i.e. the fictional characters are faced with ethical dilemmas or the narrative presents an ethically informed subject matter (see, for instance, Choi & Frey 2013; Jones & Vice 2011; Shaw 2012; Sinnerbrink 2016), I am primarily concerned with an ethical film form. That is, an aesthetic form that acquires an ethical value. Hence, my primary source on the topic is Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton’s Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters (2010) because it carefully examines the issue of cinema and ethics at the level of both narrative and film form. Following their claim that “every aesthetic decision has an ethical dimension” (Downing & Saxton 2010, 18), I argue that the iconoclastic eikôn is the result of an aesthetic and ethical choice: a figurative image is negated out of a respect for its model – for its non-reducibility to a mimetic reproduction. My overall contention, which shapes the entire section, is that the iconoclastic eikôn founds an ethics of (in)visibility.

Ethics is an extremely dense notion, whose understanding is further complicated by its use now as a synonym now as opposite of morality. In philosophy, ethics and morality are more often than not interchangeable, given that both terms originally translate as “customs” or “habits”, one from Ancient Greek (ethos/ἔθος) and the other from Latin (mòs, mòris). Therefore, there is no clear distinction in philosophy and “ethics [is] the philosophical study of morality” (Audi 2015). However, when a distinction is made, ethics stands for the set of principles regarding what is right and what is wrong that are external to a person, namely they are decided by a group or a society. Morality becomes, instead, the set of internal
rules on what is right and wrong, independent from what a group or society may think. When such a division between ethics and morality occurs, the two can enter in conflict – society/group versus individual. Nevertheless, philosophers tend to investigate the notions of right and wrong, bad and good, independently from what a society/group or a single individual may say; hence, the non-necessity of strictly distinguishing between ethics and morality (with the exception of specific philosophical strands, such as Relativism [only ethics exists]) (Gert & Gert 2017). In this thesis, the use of ethics/ethical is interchangeable with morality/moral, and ethics is broadly intended as the philosophical doctrine which investigates moral behaviours. Moreover, I understand ethics in relation to cinema as it is explored by Downing and Saxton, according to whom “ethics […is] a process of questioning” and “designates a way of responding to the encounter between the self and other/s” (2010, 3). Accordingly, cinematic ethics involves issues of responsibility and desire in regard to the images one decides to show and look at.

Hence, the section unfolds as an enquiry into the ethics of showing and looking at film images. Through the analysis of iconoclastic eikônes in cinema, I seek to explore how ethical preoccupations underlie particular iconoclastic film aesthetics. The question that guides my argument, and which I address without providing incontrovertible answers, concerns whether we have the right to show and see everything on a screen.

In this final section, the dismissal of the cinematic eidôlon corresponds to rejecting a spectacular image of the model. That is to say, in the films that I will examine, intimate and complex states such as the others’ suffering, death and grief, are visually and aurally addressed in a manner respectful of their, at least partially, invisible and ineffable character. Specifically, I will focus on Ingmar Bergman’s Cries and Whispers (Viskningar och rop, 1972) and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s Three Colours: Blue (Trois couleurs: Bleu, 1993), which are narrative, overall figurative works. However, in both films there are pivotal moments of blankness in which a figurative shot slowly fades to a red (Cries and Whispers) or a black (Three Colours: Blue) monochromatic screen. Such fades out and the resulting monochromatic screens are suitable examples of iconoclastic eikônes in which a mimetic, self-explanatory and potentially spectacular image is replaced by an image which hints at
its intelligible model without exhibiting it in a figuratively accessible manner. Here, like in Plato, Plotinus or the Byzantine iconoclasts, the gap between the model and its visible form is understood as unbridgeable.

In the eighth chapter I will engage with the scholarship on ethics and cinema and will outline my argument on iconoclastic eikônes as founders of an ethics of (in)visibility. I will also specify some notions regarding the use of colour in cinema and how such element can be employed in an iconoclastic manner. In discussing this compositional element, I will go over two films – Derek Jarman’s Blue (1993) and João César Monteiro’s Branca de neve (Snow White, 2000) – which, albeit absent from the in-depth analyses, are nevertheless important to mention because of their iconoclastic use of colour.

In the last two chapters, I will analyse Bergman’s Cries and Whispers and Kieślowski’s Three Colours: Blue, which are particularly appropriate for discussing iconoclastic eikônes because of their dealing with delicate themes that strongly call into question, by their very nature, the domain of ethics. Both films investigate invisible subject matters in a visible medium; however, they do so through images that put into crisis cinematic mimesis, while stimulating a reflection on sight and on the film image’s ability to show what cannot be seen. Hence, the fades to red/black and the red/black monochromatic screens that punctuate Bergman’s and Kieślowski’s films, in which the need to show invisible models meets an iconoclastic choice: there is no mimetic image able to visually translate the emotional states at the core of the films; but certain non-mimetic images can.

In Cries and Whispers and Three Colours: Blue the representation of intimacy, intended not only as sexual intimacy but also and especially as intimacy of affections, thoughts and emotional states, is never obscene thanks to iconoclastic images. Of uncertain etymology, obscene refers, in this thesis, to a representation that makes what pertains to intimacy utterly visually and mimetically accessible. In this regard, Slavoj Žižek (2001) talks about representations that constitute “obscene violations of the ‘No trespass!’ sign; the only proper thing to do is to maintain a distance towards the intimate, idiosyncratic, fantasy domain – one can only circumscribe, hint at, these fragile elements that bear witness to a human personality” (73). For its very nature of being visible, the film image always runs the risk of
trespassing into the obscenity of showing it all. In a similar manner, director Michael Haneke discusses in interview the extensive yet un-shown presence of violence in his films against the spectacularisation of exhibited violence. At the journalist’s assertion that his “films are filled with violence”, Haneke simply replies, “but they don’t show it and they take away its value as an attraction. Because that’s obscene” (2009). The boundary between hinting at and showing something in cinema is thin, and yet ethically and aesthetically immense. As André Bazin reminds us, “the cinema can say everything, but not show everything” (1972, 174). From Plato to cinema the image exhibits its insufficiency to represent specific models; but it also remains one of the most powerful and significant ways we have at our disposal to express and make visible complex models.
Chapter 8. An Ethical Film Form

The theme of the image’s insufficiency to represent recalls the ongoing issue of mimesis, which has troubled aesthetics since its inception. How can the image, conceived as copy, represent a referent? And what about when the referent lacks a phenomenal equivalent (i.e., it can only be thought or experienced emotionally)? This chapter outlines the ethical significance of going beyond mimesis in cinema (which does not, however, imply that mimesis and ethics exclude one another). More specifically, I will delineate the iconoclastic eikôn’s breaking with mimesis and the ethics of both film-making and film-viewing that it promotes. My starting point is the assumption that the act of looking is never neutral and there are specific subject matters that more forcefully entail a taking of responsibility from producers and viewers of images – as Marie-José Mondzain inquires, “who shows what to whom? [Qui fait voir quoi à qui?]” (2008, 206: my translation). The film image as iconoclastic eikôn constitutes a way of showing something without making it completely visible and directly accessible. While being an eikôn, namely an image which references its model, the iconoclastic eikôn implies an acknowledgement of the image’s insufficiency to mimetically reproduce the model without trespassing into an obscene representation. Therefore, such a film image, by rejecting mimesis, encourages an ethics based on the fragile equilibrium between visibility and invisibility. The iconoclastic eikôn constitutes an example of ethical film form, that is, a film form adequate to its content, which passes also through an iconoclastic usage of colour.

Beyond Mimesis

As already discussed in the third chapter (sub-section “From the Eidôlon to the Iconoclastic Eikôn”), the iconoclastic eikôn is a coalescing of apparently conflicting features. On the one hand, it retains the philosophical meaning of the eikôn as that which mediates between the sensible and the intelligible sphere, namely between a

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45 I am aware of the vagueness of this claim which, however, mirrors the inherent ambiguity of ethics (what is adequate for one philosopher may not be adequate for another). While I am not making an argument in favour of censorship, I strongly believe that different subject matters should be represented in different manners, as I go on to explain in this last section.
visual form and its model. On the other hand, it attains so by breaking with mimesis. This anti-mimetic aesthetics, which hinges on the distance between copy and prototype, is iconoclastic because it implies that the image cannot truthfully reproduce the model. While the reproduction of visual features of the model is hypothetically acceptable when we are dealing with sensible phenomena (i.e., anything apprehensible via the physical senses), it however poses ethical quandaries when it comes to intelligible models, namely something that can only be thought through the intellect or experienced emotionally. It is from cinema’s “privileged bond with reality” (Downing & Saxton 2010, 26), that is, from its possibility to mimetically reproduce images, sounds and movement, that ethical questions arise.

There are models, in fact, that transcend phenomenal reality and can thus be represented only metaphorically. For instance, love can be thought or felt, but we lack a specific phenomenal prototype of love per se; we do not meet love in the streets like we do with people, animals, trees and other sensible phenomena. Therefore, love can be visually reproduced only metaphorically, for example through images of people kissing or holding hands. Some models, however, question mimesis itself, because mimetic reproduction – whether metaphorical or not – potentially risks concealing the unbridgeable gap between the image and its model. In this respect, the possibility of representing the Shoah is one of the most controversial and debated issues, opposing those in favour of its mimetic re-enactment to the advocates of more subtle ways to represent it without doubling it (see, for instance, Hirsch 2004; Kobrynksky & Bayer 2015; Perniola 2007; Saxton 2008; Wajcman 1998). However, I will not examine iconoclasm in relation to the Shoah, as already explained in the introduction to the thesis, and will elaborate instead on the representation of suffering, grief and death in narrative, fictional films. My argument is that the iconoclastic eikôn constitutes a way to represent intelligible or ethically delicate subject matters without running the risk of spectacularising them. What changes is the relationship between the cinematic world and phenomenal reality: in

\[46\] It is worth recalling that I conceive mimesis in art as a “world-reflecting model” (Halliwell 2002, 23), that is to say, a work of art is dependent on a world existing outside and prior to it, as opposed to the “world-creating model” (Halliwell 2002, 23), according to which the artwork creates an autonomous brand-new world. For more on mimesis, see second chapter. For a thorough account of the aesthetics of mimesis, see Stephen Halliwell (2002).
order to preserve the complexity of the latter, the former ceases to have a mimetic relation with it.

In the film analyses that will follow, I will focus primarily on the monochromatic image as the iconoclastic eikôn par excellence – although this is non-exclusive because iconoclastic eikônes can also originate from image-sound disjunctions or the manipulation of perceived movement (see, seventh chapter on Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*). In either cases – negation of any figuration in the monochromatic image, or altered velocity and aural disjunctions – it is mimesis which is under attack. By unsettling our ordinary perception of images and sounds, iconoclastic eikônes question our right to show and see everything on a screen. Thus, they found an ethics of both image-making and image-consuming. On the one hand, the iconoclastic eikôn constitutes a way to express and respect the unrepresentability and ineffability of certain models, as well as a refusal to spectacularise them, by making such models inaccessible to the world of mimetic representation. On the other hand, by disrupting the regular narrative flow and producing an audio-visual hiatus, the iconoclastic eikôn promotes a pensive spectatorship.

The film examples chosen for this last section are paradigmatic of the ethical dimension of the iconoclastic eikôn. The recurrent monochromatic images that haunt Ingmar Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers* (1972) and Krzysztof Kiešlowski’s *Three Colours: Blue* (1993) utterly break with mimesis, presenting images of an absence. These images bear witness to a refusal to render everything visible, withholding a mimetic, illusory totality. They also advocate for taking responsibility for one’s look, because watching a film is never neutral. Additionally, watching a film that depicts the suffering – physical or psychological – of others calls more strongly upon spectators to reflect on their act of looking (see, Aaron 2007; Downing & Saxton 2010, 62-75). Bergman’s and Kieslowski’s monochromatic images, which suddenly decompose the figurative shot, compel spectators to an act of thought. Indeed, when a figurative shot is abruptly cancelled by a colourful, monochromatic screen, something visibly perplexing happens to and in the images before the spectator’s eyes.

The images where mimetic representation is broken address more strongly the spectator, who is compelled to attribute to them a meaning, as I will further
discuss in this chapter. It is where mimesis ends that spectators and images can enter a more fruitful relationship of reciprocity. When we are confronted, for instance, with the intense faces consumed by the fade to red in Bergman’s film or Juliette Binoche’s plunging into a black screen in Kieslowski’s work, we are inclined to question this sudden disappearance of figuration. Essentially, these broken images directly address spectators. Why are the faces in Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers* decomposed by a fade to red? Why is there a black monochromatic image in the middle of a scene in Kieslowski’s *Three Colours: Blue*? New possibilities for cinema as a locus for ethical reflections lie in such iconoclastic *eikônes*’s capacity to pose questions to spectators. In a world where everything has become excessively visible, ethics takes refuge, also, in the beyond-mimesis.

**A Liminal Ethics**

I propose an ethics of (in)visibility echoing Gérard Wajcman’s expression “ethics of visibility” (1998, 292: my translation). In Wajcman’s account, artistic iconoclasism constitutes such an ethics because it aims at “‘showing’ (*faire voir*) and ‘making present’” (1998, 219: my translation) unrepresentable and ineffable subject matters by means other than mimetic reproduction so as to preserve their uniqueness. I have added the parenthetical (in) because the ethics I propose relates to both the visible and the invisible sphere since it arises from a visible image which references some invisibility. The iconoclastic *eikôn*, in fact, offers itself to sight – it is an image –, but also perturbs the spectator’s look by presenting an absence. Whether it is the absence of figurative images or the absence of our quotidian perception of movement, the iconoclastic *eikôn* forecloses mimetic reproduction, thus troubling our modes of consuming what is visible. Accordingly, this type of image promotes a liminal ethics that sinks its roots in what is visible while reaching out to an invisibility that inhabits, and haunts, every visible image.

Similarly to some of the scholars who have delved into ethics and cinema, such as Downing and Saxton (2010), Asbjørn Gronstad (2016) and Robert Sinnerbrink (2016), I conceive cinema as a potentially highly ethical medium for not only does it present ethical quandaries in its content, but can also produce an ethical form in respect to its content. Cinema can indeed mingle aesthetics and ethics,
thereby generating an ethical film form. It is in this perspective that an iconoclastic image is able to produce an ethics of (in)visibility. More specifically, the iconoclastic *eikôn* at once embodies an ethics of film-making and solicits an ethics of film-viewing by circumventing mimetic forms of representation.

Indeed, the ethics promoted by the iconoclastic *eikôn* concerns both the production and the consumption of images since it interrogates the limits of our right to show and look at images. As Grønstad observes, quoting Jean-Luc Nancy, “to capture images is ‘an ethos, a disposition, and a conduct in regard to the world’” (2016, 3). At the same time, Michele Aaron remarks, “spectatorship is ethically loaded” (2007, 88) because the act of looking implies a taking responsibility for what we decide to look at. The terms and methods within which what is visible is produced and consumed, especially in a society where sight and images have acquired a fundamental role in the everyday, call into question the ethical dimension. As it was the case with Christian iconoclasm, also in cinema it is the content that raises ethical concerns. For instance, even in fictional films, there is or should be a difference between showing and looking at a sequence of a football match and showing and looking at a scene of rape or torture. The form needs to be adequate to the content (see, Saxton 2010, 22-35).

The content, in fact, determines (or should determine) the film form. The Christian, iconoclastic ban on images occurred because of the model – the content of the image –, and it was not extended to other types of representation. This is not much dissimilar from iconoclasm in cinema, which goes from a critique of the *eidôlon*, which already involves ethics but has a greater focus on the political and aesthetic dimension, to the production of iconoclastic *eikônes*, which are explicitly ethical because of their subject matter. Iconoclastic *eikônes* in narrative films, which constitute the core of this section, originate from complex, delicate models that not only the physical senses but also thought has a hard time processing, and which can never be fully cognised. The others’ suffering, loss, grief and death are some of the contents at the edge of representability that I will discuss in the film analyses. In particular, I will look at those film images which, by rejecting mimesis and the idea of the film’s content as figuratively accessible, open up visual gaps that spectators are called upon to fill with meaning.
In addition to interrogating the limits of our right to show everything, the iconoclastic *eikôn* also questions our right to look at every image. What, indeed, does it mean for spectators to look at extremely intimate or painfully delicate events in the lives of others? Do we have the right, just because we have the technology, to entomologically scrutinise the lives of others? Iconoclastic *eikônes* destabilise this right from both a filmmaking and a spectatorial perspective. As such, they configure themselves as ethical, appealing as much to reflection as to emotion. An emotional response alone, in fact, would be insufficient for spectators to make sense of the visual aporia produced by these images and to take responsibility for what they see.

Regarding an ethical spectatorship when it comes to the representation of others’ suffering, Aaron, in *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On* (2007), emphasises the necessity of a reasoning response. According to Aaron, who primarily draws on Susan Sontag’s (2003) argument on being moved by photographs of others’ pain, “being moved […] marks the experience as moral but not ethical: involuntary emotion is the opposite of reflection and implication” (2007, 116). (In Aaron’s discussion there is an implicit distinction between ethics and morality: while moral experience concerns the emotional sphere of an individual, ethical experience encompasses a much broader sphere to include the social life with others, which more intensely involves issues of responsibility.) She continues by pointing out that an emotional response alone, such as crying in front of scenes of others’ suffering, does not imply a conscientious act of responsibility from the spectator because “these involuntary or visceral reactions symbolise a requisite, defensive denial of the profundity or implications of the representation. […] we are denying our part in what we are watching” (116-117) and, eventually, “when we are moved […] we are not taking responsibility for” (117) what we are watching. Saxton (2010, 62-75) also considers reflective responses when it comes to looking at images of others’ suffering. Engaging with Aaron’s reading, as well as that of Sontag, Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) and Luc Boltanski (1999), she delineates how these scholars all share the idea that an emotional response alone is insufficient to stimulate viewers towards actively questioning the meaning and implications of what they are looking at. What is more, Saxton explores spectatorial responsibility in regard to images of others’ real or fictional suffering in films, and concludes that
what and how we view has consequences, [...] spectators are not isolated from the spheres of ethical action and accountability, but [...] our privileges – including the privilege of looking – are linked to others’ suffering in ways we need to actively interrogate. (2010, 74)

Although iconoclastic eikônes are not limited to the representation of others’ suffering, they nevertheless deal with similar delicate and complex issues. Like the real or fictional images of others’ pain as discussed by Aaron and Saxton, iconoclastic eikônes require a reflective response from the spectator in order to become fully intelligible. Reasoning becomes essential for the constitution of a pensive and ethical spectatorship, and for reflecting on the questions posed by the iconoclastic eikôn. Spectators, in fact, need to fill the visual gaps on screen if they are to make any sense of what they (do not) see. As a consequence, the iconoclastic eikôn assumes an additional relational character: not only does it establish a relation with its model – it is eikôn following philosophical tradition –, but also mediates with the spectator. That is, it configures itself as a relational entity.47 Meaning resides in the encounter between spectators and the iconoclastic eikôn, in the relation they can potentially establish together, as it will become clear through the film examples. What I set out to explore, then, is the web of relationships that the iconoclastic eikôn has the potential to stimulate and which concern the ethics of producing and looking at images.

**On the Potentially Iconoclastic Value of Colours**

One of the most striking features of the films chosen for the analyses in this section is colour. Both Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers* and Kieślowski’s *Three Colours: Blue* are punctuated by fades to colour and colour monochromatic screens which constitute, as I will demonstrate, the iconoclastic eikônes present in these films. Consequently, a closer look at colour and its use as independent from mimetic reproduction is helpful in clarifying its importance in the making of iconoclastic

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47 Marie-José Mondzain (2008; 2011; 2017), in particular, elaborates on the constitutive relational character of the image as eikôn, building on its etymological meaning and Ancient and Medieval philosophy’s interpretations. While my understanding of iconoclasm in an artistic context diverges from Mondzain’s, I nevertheless share her defining of the eikôn as relational.
eikônes in the cinema. Not only the two films that will be analysed, but also some of the films left out from the analysis are significantly built around a consistent, antinaturalistic use of a dominant colour. In such cases, colour assumes connotations and meanings independent from the coloured objects, and is employed in an iconoclastic manner. I will, therefore, outline the relevance of the autonomy of colour for iconoclasm, drawing examples from *Cries and Whispers* and *Three Colours: Blue*, as well as from Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993) and João César Monteiro’s *Branca de neve* (2000). While providing the reasons for my privileging of Bergman’s and Kieślowski’s films, I acknowledge the importance of Jarman’s and Monteiro’s films for cinematic iconoclasm and will discuss how colour becomes the constitutive image track in their films.

**The Figurative Image Disappears into Sheer Colour**

Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers* and Kieślowski’s *Three Colours: Blue* both deal with suffering and grief without spectacularising them, that is to say, without reducing these states to figurative images addressing the eyes only. While being narrative, overall figurative films, they include several images that go beyond mimesis and do so through a particular use of colour. Colour, in fact, becomes fundamental for the process of complicating a simple reproduction of the phenomenal world, in an attempt to produce an ethical representation of suffering and grief. Colour does so in a twofold way: on the one hand, scenes are lit in a way that tends towards a single dominant colour and props are also chosen in that colour, thereby producing a slightly anti-naturalistic mise-en-scène; on the other hand, there are several fades to colour and colour monochromatic images, in which the anti-naturalism of the mise-en-scène turns into explicit abstraction. Red in Bergman’s film and blue in Kieslowski’s not only colour objects which can phenomenally be red or blue (e.g., a red apple; a blue lollipop), but are also liberated from the mimetic replication of red and blue in reality (fades and monochromatic screens). Hence, they are employed as autonomous elements in the film. Such autonomy of colour carries out the metaphorical destruction of the mimetic shot, thus creating iconoclastic eikônes in the encounter between the film and the spectator. Before discussing the relationship between colour and mimesis in the cinema by means of Luca Venzi (2006) and
Richard Misek (2010), who explore colour in film as independent from mimetic representation, I will outline some aspects of the philosophical debate over colour.

The philosophical debate over colour is an intricate and ongoing issue which originates from and addresses two problematics concerning colour: colour seems to be both a property of objects – something is in a specific colour – and a property of someone’s experience – I perceive something as being in a specific colour (Barry 2012; Byrne & Hilbert 2001; Levine 1998). Different philosophical approaches tackle the issue in different manners, and the overall debate is dense, complex and goes considerably beyond the scope of the present thesis. Therefore, I will briefly delineate only those aspects of the debate which will prove useful for the understanding of the autonomy of colour in cinema.

To put it quite simplistically, the debate coils around colour-feeling experience (i.e., how one experiences a colour) and colour-representing experience (i.e., how a colour is embodied in a physical object), and how these two kinds of experiences (mind-dependent and mind-independent) occur (Byrne & Hilbert 2001, xii-xix). For instance, if we consider a red apple, there are a number of questions that could be raised in relation to the red-feeling experience and the red-representing experience (and on which I will not dwell), such as: if one, in normal conditions, is having a red-representing experience (a red apple), does this imply that one is also having a red-feeling experience? Is this proposition reversible (red-feeling → red-representing)? Is it possible for one to have, for example, a blue-feeling experience while having a red-representing experience? And so on.

The ways philosophers address colour-feeling and colour-representing experiences lead to four main methodological approaches, which take different forms within the same approach and at times intersect with one another: Eliminativism (colour is not a property of physical objects; this approach is based on the distinction between world as it physically is and world as humans perceive it), Dispositionalism (colours are dispositions which cause certain colour-experiences in a subject), Physicalism (colours are independent from the experiencing subject and are properties of “spectral reflectance” [Levine 1998]), and Primitivism (colours are objective [i.e. mind-independent] properties of things, and “are simple intrinsic, non-
relational, non-reducible, qualitative properties” [Barry 2012]) (Barry 2012; Byrne & Hilbert 2001, xix-xxv).

There is no conclusive outcome to the philosophical issue of colour, which, in the end, remains an enigma. In cinema, and less philosophically, I understand colour as both a property of objects of the mise-en-scène (mimetic/figurative use) and as absolute entity (from absolutus: ab, “from”, and solutum, “loosened, untied, unbound”), that is, colour as loosened from any tie with the objectual world. In this latter usage, colour is employed as autonomous. As such, its chromatic presence on the screen acquires meanings that go beyond those related to the mimetic reproduction of such colour in phenomenal reality. One consequence of this usage of colour is that the experience of the film is likely to become a dominant-colour-feeling experience. Bergman’s Cries and Whispers and Kieślowski’s Three Colours: Blue, for instance, encourage red-feeling and blue-feeling experiences respectively, even though not every object of the mise-en-scène allows for a red-representing or blue-representing experience. This overall red- or blue-feeling experience of the film is caused by the continual and insisted recurrence of such colours not only in physical objects, but also and especially in the fades and the colour monochromatic screens, which Venzi thoroughly discusses.

In his work on colour in cinema, Il colore e la composizione filmica [Colour and Filmic Composition] (2006), Venzi claims that colour is rarely treated as an autonomous element in films. He remarks that, while early film theorists such as Louis Delluc, Béla Balázs and, above all, Sergei Eisenstein, emphasised the importance of colour as an autonomous element of film, very few films have used it in this way. More often, we tend to perceive colour in films matter-of-factly, as something belonging to the mimetic reproduction of the world. Instead, like any other element of film, colour can become an expressive means in its own right, able to “saturate the spectator’s attention and de-realise the content and meaning of the image” (Venzi 2006, 15: my translation).

I contend that Bergman in Cries and Whispers and Kieślowski in Three Colours: Blue employ colour in Venzi’s de-realising way. That is, colour is essentially separated from the thing represented and, therefore, is fundamentally liberated from mimesis. In saying this, I do not mean that colour exists in a
fluctuating state – it is, in fact, embodied in the screen; thus, it phenomenally exists as the colour of a physical object. However, in the film’s economy and its overall experience, colour is abstracted from visible forms to produce a dominant-colour-feeling experience. That is, in our experience of the film, we suddenly see red or blue (the being-red or being-blue of the screen). Bergman’s red and Kieślowski’s blue are not mere attributes of the coloured things, but acquire further meanings independent from mimetic reproduction, as I will illustrate in the film analyses.

In *Chromatic Cinema: A History of Screen Colour* (2010), Misek engages with the history of colour in cinema, from the development of colour technologies to art-house filmmakers’ views on the use of colour in film. Particularly in the second chapter (50-82), Misek delineates how for filmmakers in the 1950s and 1960s the transition from black-and-white to colour was neither automatic nor uncomplicated. The heightened mimesis of reality brought about by colour film threatened the filmmaker’s ability to control the image in order to convey specific meanings. He observes, “for the film-maker, whose intentions typically diverge from nature’s, the natural superabundance of color is always a potential threat” (2010, 61).

The use of red in *Cries and Whispers* and blue in *Three Colours: Blue* diverges from a mere representation of such colours in reality. The red of an apple is not just an apple being red, in much the same way as a blue lollipop is not just a lollipop being blue; rather, they chromatically resonate with the being red and being blue of the films. That is, red and blue objects, as well as filters and lighting, enhance and create the possible meanings that these two colours acquire in the films. Bergman’s red and Kieślowski’s blue recur not only in the totalising monochromatic screens, but also in the objects of the *mise-en-scène* – from the burning red of the walls to the bright red of the blood; from the slightly dark blue of the room to the clear blue of the swimming pool’s water. In both films, therefore,

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48 While the monochromatic images in *Three Colours: Blue* are black, I sustain Venzi’s (2006, 129) claim that in this film black acquires the symbolic value of an intensified blue. Also Michel Pastoureau, in *Black: The History of a Color* (2009), points out the closeness between black and blue, arguing: “for a long time, blue, an unobtrusive and unpopular color, remained a sort of ‘sub-black’ in the West or a black of a particular kind. Thus the histories of these two colors can hardly be separated” (12).
colour is also employed with autonomous value and becomes “an abstract, un-
objectual [inoggettuale] entity that flows in the film through things” (Venzi 2006, 25: 
my translation; emphasis in original). Colour thus exhibits itself in two ways: by 
concretising in objects of the mise-en-scène, which already produce a first departure 
from pure mimesis to something more symbolic and at times anti-naturalistic, albeit 
remaining in the figurative realm; and by offering itself as colour separated from any 
object, in a monochromatic screen. Both usages of colour and their iconoclastic value 
will become clear throughout the film analyses.

Notes on Two Absent Films: Derek Jarman’s Blue and João César Monteiro’s 
Branca de neve

The discussion on colour is likely to bring the attention on the great absentee in this 
thesis: Derek Jarman’s Blue (1993). Due to time and words, I had to leave out some 
important films of the in-depth analyses in the third section. My privileging of 
Bergman’s Cries and Whispers and Kieślowski’s Three Colours: Blue was 
determined by several factors: 1) they are both narrative and, for the most part, 
figurative films, thereby showing the resistance of narrative film to iconoclasm, as 
well as iconoclasm’s potential through the sudden dissolution of a figurative shot; 2) 
they are similar in themes, both exploring complex and intimate states of suffering, 
and make a consistent, iconoclastic use of fades to colour and colour monochromatic 
screens; 3) because they are composed of mimetic shots for the most part, in the 
fades to colour and the resulting monochromatic screens both films exhibit the 
exclusively cinematic process of destruction of the film image – namely, the process 
by which a figurative shot progressively disappears into a colour. While I stand by 
my film choices, I do acknowledge the evident absence of Jarman’s Blue and the less 
apparent absence of João César Monteiro’s Branca de neve, which is a small, little 
known Portuguese film with an incredible potential.

Both Jarman’s Blue and Monteiro’s Branca de neve would have appropriately 
complemented the analyses in the third section, bringing the discussion on cinematic 
iconoclasm to the extreme because they are both monochromatic, narrative (in the 
sense that they tell a story, whether actual or fictional) films. While the former is a 
76-minute International Klein Blue (IKB) monochromatic film, the latter is a 75-
minute black monochromatic film at times interrupted by shots of a cloudy sky. Both films employ the monochromatic screen as the constitutive or predominant image track, and place great emphasis on the significance of colour – in one case via the choice of a colour, the IKB, which retains specific connotations; in the other case, through the negation of colour (black) and the stark contrast with the colour moving images of a blue sky and grey clouds. Finally, both films, in their diversity, recount stories of suffering, death and love.

With Blue and its absence of figurative images, Jarman is doing two things at once: he is subverting the negative representation of the AIDS body and is forcing spectators into experiencing his own blindness due to the disease. In the 1980s and 1990s, when HIV was a death sentence, the AIDS body was the object of a stereotypical mode of representation: the ill subjects were de-sexualised and stripped of their personal identity (Lawrence 1997). The overall image of the AIDS body that emerges not only in the media and politics, but also in the works of those artists who claim to support the AIDS cause, is negative and tends to equate HIV/AIDS inescapably with male homosexuality, implying that the virus is a punishment for moral depravity (Jarman 1992; Lawrence 1997). The person with AIDS, usually male, white, is portrayed as the living dead; his body carrying the visible marks of a sexually active life outside the heterosexual paradigm. Jarman’s Blue operates a subversion of such a representation of the AIDS body, and proposes an ethics of representation based on invisibility. Jarman, in fact, gives a personal identity back to the ill subject – himself – by leaving the AIDS body invisible through the use of a blue monochromatic screen as the only image track of the film. Blue is a negation of the spectacularised image of the person with AIDS, whose identity is restored through the sound track, and obliges spectators to experience the same blindness which Jarman himself suffered because of the virus. Thus, the blue monochromatic screen as that which annuls any figurative image constitutes an ethical rejection of a stereotypical representation of the AIDS body; but also directly questions spectators who are called upon to actively construct the meaning of that which they cannot see.

What is more, Jarman chooses a deep, ultramarine blue hue patented by the French artist Yves Klein, who named it International Klein Blue (Solnit 2005, 178), and whose work is strongly related to monochromes. This particular hue, in Klein’s
Neo-Platonic view, expresses the unity between what is intelligible and what is sensible (Bois 2007, 87-88), and represents the colour of harmony between every existent as opposed to division and conflict (Solnit 2005). Jarman explicitly employs the IKB in his last film because of its connotations, and uses it to express the tension between the negation of visible forms (the monochromatic image) and the access to a vision (the interrogation and understanding of AIDS and homosexuality in an heteronormative society, blindness, solitude and death). In this single, ultramarine blue screen that constitutes Blue’s image track, Jarman conveys his total refusal of the film image as spectacle and abolishes the image’s limits imposed by mimesis and figuration. Blue is also, and especially, Jarman’s iconoclastic epitaph for himself and his dear dead ones, whose names resound in the whispers of a voice-over as well as in the written words of his memoir At Your Own Risk: A Saint’s Testament (1992): “didn’t you know I died years ago with David and Terry, Howard, the two Pauls. This is my ghostly presence, my ghostly eye” (9).

While Jarman’s Blue is an intimate, lyrical and personal sound story of the director’s experience of AIDS, Monteiro’s Branca de neve is a fictitious sound tale of Snow White after her coming back to life – where the fairy tale usually ends, this film begins. The film is based on Robert Walser’s anti-fairy tale version of Snow White (1985) and is shot with the camera lens closed (Monteiro 2014, 154). Walser’s continuation of the tale transforms the flat, unidimensional character of Snow White into a complex and troubled figure. Snow White now longs for death and objects to the Prince’s kiss that has awoken her; such a kiss is a violent gesture against her will because she did not ask to come back to life. Monteiro privileges sound over image to express Snow White’s existential quest for her forced awakening, for this life she did not choose to live. The film’s image track is, in fact, composed of a black screen at times interrupted by shots of a cloudy sky, a photo of Walser’s suicidal corpse in the snow and a medium shot of Monteiro himself. Like in Jarman’s Blue, voices tell the story on a dominating visual blankness.

In Branca de neve, there is a subversion of Jean-Luc Godard’s enlarged cut. What Raymond Bellour terms “between-the-images” (2012; see, sixth chapter) here becomes the predominant image, while the moving image is turned into an in-between: a non-figurative image (the black screen) is repeatedly fragmented by a
mimetic shot. There is a stark contrast between the black of the monochromatic screen and the colour of the moving shots which momentarily tear apart the immobile blank image. Daniele Dottorini (2013), in spelling out the iconoclastic value of Monteiro’s film, establishes a parallel between Branca de neve’s monochromatic screen and Isidore Isou’s and Guy Debord’s blank screens. He claims,

from Isou to Debord and Monteiro, the journey shows that “to negate” the image means to negate the clarity and the self-evidence of the image, it means to negate the image as absolute value, as something always totally available to the look. (2013, 57: my translation)

Thus, a tale on the “search for a whiteness that cannot be innocent” (Monteiro 2014, 160) is also the site for an interrogation on cinema and the act of looking at film images. While Snow White’s voice-over desperately looks for a life meaning, we as spectators are left wondering about the meaning of images and their absence. “Black is the color of cinema itself” (2012, 9), Carol Mavor points out. And so, we watch the colour of cinema spreading out over the screen like an enigma.

These films are examples of a radically iconoclastic approach to cinema: figurative film images are conceived as inadequate for the representation of the model. Thus, the iconoclastic choice of making a monochromatic film where the necessity to show the AIDS experience, in Jarman’s Blue, or Snow White’s existential quest, in Monteiro’s Branca de neve, meets an ethical, and political, need to not trespass into obscenity. What is more, the negation of mimetic, self-explanatory film images passes through an iconoclastic usage of colour – in one case a multivalent colour such as the IKB, in the other case the colour of cinema, of the editing cut. While composed of iconoclastic film images, namely film images destroyed in their mimetic relationship with a referent, Jarman’s and Monteiro’s films do not show the exclusively cinematic process by which an iconoclastic image is produced. Bergman’s Cries and Whispers and Kieślowski’s Three Colours: Blue, instead, display via fades how a figurative shot is progressively destroyed by means of colour.
Chapter 9. Crumbling Faces: Ingmar Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers*

The filming of colours in movement […] could open up a vast domain of human experience which could not find expression in any other art, least of all painting. For a painter may paint a flushed face but never a pale face slowly being warmed to rose-red by a blush; he can paint a pale face but never the dramatic phenomenon of blanching.  

(Bela Balázs, *Theory of the Film*)

Ingmar Bergman’s oeuvre is aesthetically astonishing and ethically fraught. It suffices to mention some of the themes that many scholars have discussed, like the evocative cinematography of both Gunnar Fisher and Sven Nykvist, the intensity and expressiveness of the acting, the enigmatic tension of the close-ups, the settings mirroring the characters’ interiority, as well as the exhausting search of God, the tainted and frustrated human relationships, the others’ pain, the unspeakable loneliness of death and the almost-inexpressible fragility of love. *Cries and Whispers* (1972), mingles aesthetics and ethics in such a way as to produce an ethics of (in)visibility. My contention is that, in this film, the recurrent fades to red that suspend figuration, decomposing the magnified faces, constitute iconoclastic eikônes. What is more, I argue that in this film we continuously pass from the moving image as iconophilic icon – the facial close-up – to the moving image as iconoclastic eikon – the monochromatic red screen.

After a brief introduction to Bergman’s oeuvre, the chapter is divided into two main parts. I will first engage with the scholarship on *Cries and Whispers*, touching on various motifs such as the analogy between the protagonist and Christ, the significance of the colour red and the dreamlike sequence of the resurrection. I will then develop my argument on the iconoclasm of the film by illustrating the exquisitely cinematic passage from the film image as iconophilic icon to its iconoclastic destruction in the fades to red and red screens, and how such a destruction carries an ethical value.

Many scholarly works on Bergman’s oeuvre spell out the importance of Bergman’s personal biography for his artistic path, namely that his work, from theatre to cinema and television, is inflected by his highly intimate obsessions and
life events. Birgitta Steene’s monumental work, Ingmar Bergman: A Reference Guide (2005), spans many aspects of Bergman’s career, from his personal life to his films, radio productions, television works, theatrical plays and scripts. Steene dedicates to each type of production a chapter, which constitutes a non-sequential overview on a specific practice. The chapter on Bergman’s cinema include a chronological and thematic categorisation of the films into groups, and offers a succinct but effective synopsis, commentary and reception of every film. Another major source is Peter Cowie’s Ingmar Bergman: A Critical Biography (1992), the most thorough biography on Bergman available in English, which contextualises his work and identifies in his childhood one of the main sources of inspiration. While underlying the importance of the Swedish context, Cowie remarks that “Ingmar Bergman’s themes and obsessions are his alone” (37). Hubert I. Cohen also puts the emphasis on the highly personal character of Bergman’s oeuvre. His Ingmar Bergman: The Art of Confession (1993) develops the idea of Bergman’s work as confessions of his personal concerns and anxieties, and ultimately as a portrayal of his vision of life. Going even further, Frank Gado’s The Passion of Ingmar Bergman (1986) explicitly proposes an “examination of the artist in order to understand the art” (xv). Gado begins by outlining Bergman’s biography—his life and recurrent themes— in order to penetrate the complexity of his films. At times adopting a psychoanalytical approach, Gado provides close analysis of Bergman’s films, from his early years to Fanny and Alexander (Fanny och Alexander, Bergman 1982). Philip Mosley, in Ingmar Bergman: The Cinema as Mistress (1981), provides an overview of Bergman’s theatrical and filmic production, with attention to the Swedish context and, particularly, to the Lutheran sense of guilt and the significant influence exerted by playwright August Strindberg. Finally, Jerry Vermilye’s Ingmar Bergman: His Life and Films (2007) is composed of a first biographical part in which Bergman’s life is explored through his films, and a second part dedicated to synthetic presentations of the films which include extracts from film reviews.

Other scholars, without undermining the importance of Bergman’s personal life on his work, take on a more philosophically inflicted approach, or focus primarily on thematic aspects. Irving Singer’s Ingmar Bergman, Cinematic Philosopher: Reflections on His Creativity (2009) unfolds, without following a strict
structure, as a series of reflections on Bergman’s cinema, his life and the themes and motifs that have obsessed him. Egil Törnqvist’s *Between Stage and Screen: Ingmar Bergman Directs* (1996) elaborates on Bergman’s theatrical and filmic career, and on the thin line between these two practices in Bergman. Both theatre and cinema are, in fact, animated by the same existential themes based on dichotomies such as “good and evil, dream and reality, art and life, mask and face, men and women, adults and children, conscious and unconscious” (13). Moreover, Törnqvist discusses playwright Strindberg’s influence on Bergman apropos of the blurred edges between reality and illusion, the concept of unmasking, and the active participation of the spectator through emotion and imagination. Laura Hubner’s *The Films of Ingmar Bergman: Illusions of Light and Darkness* (2007) develops around the multifarious notion of illusion, which can refer to the dichotomy between mask and real self, the presence of dreams and hallucinations in the films or life as a “tissue of lies”, as a character will affirm in *Cries and Whispers*. Hubner specifically draws from Lloyd Michaels’s notion of “necessary illusion” (1999, 1), which he develops in his monograph on *Persona* (Bergman 1966). This concept points to the constructive and positive role that illusions acquire in Bergman’s oeuvre, namely that “by such illusions […] do we all manage to live” (Michaels 1999, 19). Hubner pushes this notion further, claiming that Bergman’s films progressively evolve towards the idea of the character’s subjectivity as that which constructs the film itself, so much so that “illusion is not only necessary, it is inevitable” (Hubner 2007, 3). She then analyses some of Bergman’s films by means of a set of binary oppositions, such as mask versus inner self, love for God versus love for humans and dreams versus reality. Jesse Kalin’s *The Films of Ingmar Bergman* (2003) focuses on Bergman’s career as a filmmaker, identifying him as a rather metaphysical artist. After briefly overviewing Bergman’s career, Kalin provides close analysis of some of his films which are particularly appropriate for illustrating his highly personal, almost metaphysical, questioning and recurrent motifs. Like other scholars, he observes that “Bergman throughout his work is concerned with a common set of themes, situations, feelings, and images as he probes this question of whether life offers either mercy or meaning” (2003, xvii). Accordingly, Kalin delineates a series of psychological turning points around which Bergman’s plots develop and which investigate what it
means to be human, that of “judgment, abandonment, passion, turning, shame, and vision” (2003, 2). What is more, implicitly recalling Cowie, who is an explicit source for his book, Kalin emphasises the significance of landscape in Bergman’s films, further developing it both as a physical, natural landscape in which the characters move and events occur, and as the spiritual and moral landscape of the characters’ interiority. Finally, Paisley Livingston’s *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy* (2009) is manifestly the most philosophically imbued. The book explores theses on cinema and philosophy, first in more general terms and then by means of some of Bergman’s films. In the third part of the book, Livingston focuses on the philosophical dimension of Bergman’s cinema and the role and extent of the influence of Finnish philosopher Eino Kaila over Bergman. According to Bergman himself (Livingston 2009, 7, 126), Kaila and his argument on irrational behaviour exerted a great influence on his oeuvre. Livingston delineates the mainline argument of Kaila’s treatise in philosophical psychology, which develops from the recognition of “only one effective psychic force […] translatable as ‘want’, ‘need’, or ‘desire’” (129). The unfulfillment of one’s desire can lead to irrational changes in one’s beliefs and behaviours, what “Kaila calls […] a form of *inauthenticity*” (130: emphasis in original). That is, unable to satisfy a desire, one could irrationally project such unfilled desire onto a “surrogate object” (131), which constitutes an inauthentic solution to one’s desire (Kaila’s example at this point is “the sadistic punishment of children” [131], a recurring topic in Bergman’s oeuvre). Simplifying Livingston’s argument, in Bergman’s films, characters are often animated by irrational behaviours and inauthentic desires, through which issues of moral judgements, self-knowledge and authenticity are explored.

**A Film of Red and Faces**

*Cries and Whispers* is Bergman’s third colour film and the only one where colour is treated as a proper autonomous element. The film was marked by a turbulent history, from pre-production to distribution. Bergman had troubles finding producers for the film, which was considered not particularly appealing to the general audience (Cowie 1992, 276; Vermilye 2007, 139). In the end, the funding for the film came from the Swedish Film Institute, Bergman’s own money and the main actresses and the
director of photography, Sven Nykvist, forgoing of their salaries until the film had found a distributor (Steene 2005, 299). After its completion, a year had to pass before the film could finally be released in 1972 by New World Films in the US (Cowie 1992, 282; Steene 2005, 300). Unexpectedly for Bergman – given all the difficulties he had to face to make this film –, *Cries and Whispers* was a box-office success, and was nominated for several academy awards in 1972, winning the Oscar for best cinematography (Cohen 1993, 250).

Several authors recount Bergman’s own telling of the images that had haunted him and pushed him to make *Cries and Whispers*: “the first image kept coming back, over and over: the room draped all in red with women clad in white” (Bergman 1994, 83). This is basically *Cries and Whispers* reduced to its minimal form. Two sisters, Maria (Liv Ullmann) and Karin (Ingrid Thulin), are taking care of a third, Agnes (Harriet Anderson), who is dying of womb cancer. Anna (Kari Sylwan), a servant devoted to Agnes, is however the person physically and emotionally looking after Agnes. To accompany Agnes in her final days, the women find themselves together in the manor of their childhood: outside there is the large park lit by a faint Nordic sun; inside, where most of the story occurs, there are the claustrophobic, intensely red rooms. While Agnes embraces her pain maintaining compassion and gratitude, her sisters remain entrapped in their inability to empathise. Both unhappily married, Maria indulges in fleeting moments of superficial tenderness and Karin hides her overwhelming hatred behind a stiff coldness. Agnes dies, and the sisters dismiss Anna in a heartbeat, before harshly departing from each other.

The film is structured on a continuous alternation between present and past, in which the boundaries between reality and its distortion are increasingly thin. Three flashbacks and a dream interrupt the unfolding of the events in the present, and a last flashback concludes the film. Each of these interruptions belongs to one of the female characters, conveying a sense of their personality – Agnes’s capacity to love unconditionally, Maria’s narcissistic egotism, Karin’s inability to overcome the hatred for both herself and others and Anna’s compassionate love. Maria’s and Karin’s flashbacks and Anna’s dream are shot and edited in the same manner. A figurative shot fades to red and the screen turns into a red monochromatic image.
Then, an extreme facial close-up of the character, in which only one half of the face is lit, appears. This face slowly decomposes into another fade to red, leaving the screen completely red for a second time. Then the flashback, or the dream, begins. At the end of the flashback, the same transition is repeated backwards: the figurative shot fades to red, the screen becomes a red monochromatic image, an extreme facial close-up of the character, in which this time the other half of the face is lit, appears and then plunges into a fade to red, then the screen becomes completely red for a fourth time. Accompanying these transitions from the face to the monochromatic red screen are indecipherable whispers and, from time to time, the feeble sound of a distant bell. Agnes’s flashbacks, however, differ from Maria’s, Karin’s and Anna’s because they are not introduced by a fade to red, but by a dissolve, and for the fact that there are no extreme close-ups of Agnes’s face in between the fades. The sisters’ flashbacks and Anna’s dream, in which the fades to red signal the transition to and fro the past, are the most cinematic scenes in the film and those which lead to iconoclastic eikônes, as I will explain in the next section.

The first flashback belongs to Agnes and, differently from the ones that will follow, is dominated not only by the colour red but also white, and partially occurs in the well-lit, open space of the manor’s park. After we are introduced to the character and her pain in the present, Agnes reminiscences about her childhood and her beloved mother, played by Liv Ullmann. During a magic lantern show on the Twelfth Night, Agnes gazes at her mother’s blithely enjoying of Maria’s company, remembering how the mother could be, instead, “playfully cruel” with Agnes. From Agnes’s past emotional discomfort we are taken back to her current physical agony. The presence of the doctor, David (Erland Josephson), called to assist Agnes, leads to Maria’s flashback. While in the present David refuses Maria’s advances, in the past, when he was called for Anna’s dying daughter, he spent the night with Maria. In an intense monologue in front of a mirror, Maria and David acknowledge their shallowness and selfishness. The day after, Maria’s husband, Joakim (Henning

49 While a fade signals the passage from an image to a blank screen, thereby implying a stark interruption of figuration, a dissolve indicates the gradual transition of one shot to another. As David Bordwell (1985b) points out, “visually, the dissolve is simply a variant of the fade – a fade-out overlapped with a fade-in – but it is a fade during which the screen is never blank” (46). In this film, dissolves are used only for Agnes’s flashbacks as a way to partially deprive her character of the violence proper to the fades to red.
Moritzen), returned from a work trip and having sensed the cheating, is caught stabbing himself with a paperknife by an uncaring and slightly repulsed Maria. Back in the present, Agnes dies, and the priest recites a surprisingly agnostic sermon for her, before Karin closes the chamber’s doors and everything fades to red. Karin’s flashback coils around the disgust for her husband, Fredrik (Georg Årlin), 20 years her senior, and her self-harm. In a loveless atmosphere of tension and uneasiness, Karin and Fredrik are dining when she accidentally breaks a glass, spilling red wine over an immaculate white sheet. Returned to her room, Karin uses the shard of glass broken at dinner to cut her vagina, and then smears her face with the blood, defiantly smiling at a repelled Fredrik who had come to claiming his matrimonial rights. Finally, there is the dreamlike sequence of Agnes’s resurrection, shot as if it were a flashback of Anna. Hearing someone crying, Anna rushes into the bedroom where Agnes supposedly lies dead. Caught in a liminal state, Agnes resurrects, beseeching her sisters to assist her trespassing. First Karin enters the room but, overcome by repulsion, she runs away. Then Maria approaches Agnes with seeming tenderness. However, when the dead sister begins to touch the living sister, who is capable of only superficial displays of affection, Maria screams in disgust and hastily leaves the room. Only Anna remains beside the unresisted dead, taking Agnes in her arms in the manner of a pietà. In addition, there is a further flashback which concludes the film. Like the first flashback, it belongs to Agnes, is introduced by a dissolve, and is white dominated and shot in the sunny park. It is a reminiscence of Agnes’s joyous day with her sisters and Anna. The sisters dressed in white gowns, Anna in grey, share a startling moment of grace in the warmly lit park of the manor.

While there are a variety of possible themes to explore in relation to Cries and Whispers, my analysis will focus primarily on the magnified faces consumed by the fades to red and their value as iconoclastic eikônes. I will, however, first engage with some scholarly analyses of the film in order to outline aspects of Cries and Whispers which, while excluded from my reading, are nevertheless significant for its understanding. Most of the film analyses discuss a definite cluster of topics. There is the idea, supported by Bergman himself (Bergman 1977), of the female characters as representing different aspects of Bergman’s mother (Cohen 1993, 249; Cowie 1992, 277; Gado 1986, 409-422; Sitney 1989), the possible interpretations of the dreamlike
sequence of Agnes’s resurrection (Hubner 2007, 108-116; Törnqvist 1996, 157-158),
the analogy between Christ and Agnes (Cohen 1993, 257-260; Gado 1986, 409, 416-419;
Kalin 2003, 134-141, 145; Törnqvist 1996, 153) and the significance of the
extensive presence of the colour red both in the mise-en-scène and the editing
(Cohen 1993, 250-251; Kalin 2003, 147-149; Misek 2010, 63-64; Venzi 2013;
Törnqvist 1996, 149).

More specifically, Gado (1986, 408-422) provides a detailed analysis from an
overall psychoanalytical, specifically Freudian, perspective. His reading of the film
unfolds through the prism of Bergman’s personal life, his childhood memories and
the tormented relationship with his parents – the religious severity of his father and
the frequent coldness of his beloved mother. Accordingly, Gado lingers primarily on
the motif of Oedipal guilt, the significance of the figure of the Mother – here split
amongst the female characters of the fictional mother, the two sisters and Anna–,
Agnes as standing for Bergman, and the theme of crucifixion. Similarly, P. Adams
Sitney (1989) concentrates on the female characters as embodiments of different
motherly facets, from the terrible (Karin) to the Madonna (Anna), delineating the
symbolic meaning of the colours in the film. His analysis develops from Bruno
Bettelheim’s (1976) discussion of white and red in fairy tales as the colours
symbolically tracing the passage from childhood to puberty. Accordingly, Sitney
lingers on Oedipal guilt and identifies Karin as the witch in fairy tales because of her
profound hatred and her self-harm, and Maria as the fairy tale mother who abandons
her children in the forest because of her privileging of selfish seduction over her
daughter’s father.

Cohen (1993, 249-262) also interprets Cries and Whispers as representing
different, conflicting aspects of Bergman’s mother, and concludes that Bergman
“make[s] the world of his film as extension of his own mind” (262). After some
initial remarks on the film’s overall style and the importance of the fades to red,
Cohen examines it through a scrupulous description of the narrative, drawing
parallels with previous works by Bergman. While agreeing with most of the points
he makes, I nevertheless partially reject his claim that “Cries and Whispers is […]
novelistic and theatrical” (1993, 250). Undoubtedly the presence of a voice-over
narrator and the action’s occurring almost entirely inside the manor retain a certain
novelistic and theatrical quality. However, the film is extremely cinematic, perhaps the most cinematic of all Bergman’s works, because its force resides in the facial close-ups and extreme close-ups, which do not exist in theatre, and in the tearing apart of these faces by the fades to red, which is impossible in both literature and theatre. *Cries and Whispers* is, therefore, only apparently “novelistic and theatrical”, given that it is profoundly based on inherently cinematic techniques. While for Cohen “the film’s fabric is woven of mise-en-scène more than giant close-ups” (250), I contend that the close-ups and their destruction in the fade to red construct the most powerful sense of the film, namely the impossibility of fully expressing, both in visible and audible terms, a person’s inner life and inner inferno—an argument that I will develop in the next section.

Törnqvist (1996, 146-159) places the emphasis, instead, on the film’s rupture with a clear distinction between reality and dreams. Consequently, he primarily discusses the sequence of Agnes’s resurrection, exploring the analogy between Christ and Agnes. He identifies Agnes as *agnus Dei* [lamb of God], and draws a parallel between her last two days and Christ’s Passion: both Agnes and Christ are pure, suffer excruciating pain, and have an unwavering faith. And both resurrect and experience the disbelief of the livings. Kalin (2003, 134-162) also identifies Agnes as *agnus Dei*, and delineates the Christological symbolism of the film—the references to the Twelfth Night, the blood and wine as symbolic of the Eucharist, Agnes’s resurrection, and the *pietà* image. He then considers the characters’ psychology, outlining Maria’s narcissistic superficiality, Karin’s failed attempt towards a more profound affectivity, Anna’s deep and yet exclusive love for Agnes, and Agnes’s flabbergasting compassion. Kalin concludes by interpreting the four women as embodiments of different aspects of the human psyche and thus, if taken together, as representing a unitary human being.

Drawing on Törnqvist’s analysis, Hubner (2007, 108-116) focuses on the sequence of Agnes’s resurrection and its dreamlike quality, while also touching on the illusory character of the film as a whole. Engaging with the literature on this specific scene, she points out its contradictory status of a dream which is stylistically shot as if it were real—it is, in fact, shot in the same manner as the previous flashback sequences. According to Hubner, the opposition between content and style
contributes to making Agnes’s resurrection the most startling and horrific scene in a film where the boundaries between reality and hallucination are incredibly thin. However, while in her account “this image of the corpse rising has to be seen as truly horrific” (114), I find it instead tender and disarmingly lonely. Agnes’s skeletal hands are not the brutal hands of a zombie, but a desperately poetic metaphor of the loneliness of death. What is more, I would add that the final, white dominated flashback that ends the film is the most dreamlike sequence of *Cries and Whispers* because of its style and overall atmosphere. This sequence is stylistically at odds with the rest of the claustrophobic, intensely red film, in which resentment and selfishness regulate most of the relationships among characters –to the exception of that between Anna and Agnes. This concluding image of the four female characters dressed in white, harmoniously spending time together, seems a shared fantasy, or an impossible image, because of its light colours, its outdoor spaces and its unexpected peacefulness that are absent from the rest of the film. The white is so candid and the calm so sweet that it seems impossible for them to exist in the harshly red reality that dominates the film. As Gado notes, “this idyllic finale” is a “gentle illusion” (1986, 421).

Mosley (1981, 157-162) summarily touches on various aspects of the film, from the inner decadence of a wealthy family –and a class– at the end of the nineteenth century, to the religious references and the style –close-ups, voice-overs and colours. He concludes by reproaching Bergman for overindulging on suffering and his personal obsessions, and argues that “he needs to find a new direction in which all is not hell on earth. He is otherwise in danger of becoming a flawless technician without an audience, apart from masochists in search of regular emotional battering” (162). Contra this objection, I contend that *Cries and Whispers* is a film where the representation of grief and pain is never obscene. The reality of others’ suffering is preserved and respected in the cries on the magnified faces and in the whispers on the red screens. Physical pain takes, indeed, a visible form in Agnes’s body writhed in agony, Joakim’s suicide attempt and Karin’s self-harm. However, the presence of the fades to red and the red screens, in which we sense that something deeply and painfully violent is invading the screen, functions as a means
to safeguard the invisible and inexpressible quality of a person’s interiority, thereby refusing to spectacularise suffering.

Indeed, the obsessive presence of the colour red – in the mise-en-scène, the fades and the monochromatic screens – and its autonomy from mimetic reproduction or conventional meaning constitute the most astonishing and innovative element of the film. While most of the authors mention the use of red in the film, a few scholars elaborate on its significance. First and foremost, red is understood as the colour of the soul, following Bergman’s own telling of

the color red as the interior of the soul. When I was a child, I saw the soul as a shadowy dragon, blue as smoke, hovering like an enormous winged creature, half bird, half fish. But inside the dragon everything was red. (Bergman 1994, 90)

Following Bergman’s likening of red and soul, scholars further define this colour in relation to Cries and Whispers’ economy. Red is thus connected to the character’s troubled inner life as representing “raw emotion” (Hubner 2007, 114), or “some mood of rawness or passion or anger, some feeling of interiority” (Harcourt 1974, 252). It is also linked to blood, thereby becoming “symbolic of the widespread physical and mental wounds” (Mosley 1981, 161), as well as “of life but also of sacrifice, of death. It is the color of erotic love, passion” (Törnqvist 1996, 149). Cowie insightfully describes the power of red and its startling contrast with white:

the pervasive red of the film lingers on the retina like an after-image. […] Bergman’s vision of the interior of the soul-monster coincides with the sensation of bloodletting that the film transmits. The glistening white dresses of the women appear all the more striking, even violent, by comparison. (1992, 280)

Likewise, Kalin identifies in the autonomy of colours the very innovative aspect of Cries and Whispers, and effectively spells out the chromatic value acquired by red:

within [the manor] it is red, as though this were the blood-filled interior of some person’s body. Bergman says that ever since childhood, “I have pictured the inside of the soul as a moist membrane in shades of red.” When we enter the manor at the film’s beginning, we thus enter the human soul with all its mysteries. (2003, 149)
Red becomes a meaningful element in its own right, conveying something of the characters’ interiority through its sheer visual presence. Misek (2010, 63-64) emphasises this totalising force of the red in the film. While acknowledging the meaningful occurrence of white and black, he recognises the dominating presence of red, claiming, “watch the film in an unlit room with white walls, and these walls too become drenched in red” (63). Such statement resonates with some aspects of the philosophy of colour, since what Misek argues would very much correspond to sustain that someone’s experience of Cries and Whispers is likely to produce an overall red-feeling experience even if the individual is having a white-representing experience (the white walls). Besides the absolute redness of the monochromatic screen and the progressively one of the fades, Misek lists the many objects which are coloured in red, such as blood, walls, carpets and curtains. Everything is overwhelmed by red, so much so that “the film emerges from red, returns to red in the spaces between scenes, and concludes with red” (Misek 2010, 64).

Finally, Venzi (2013) and Cohen (1993) make some remarks on the fades to red, which are unusual in films where such transitions are mainly by means of fades to black. Both scholars observe that there is something in the fades to red which goes beyond the conventional meaning of the fade as signalling a passage of time. Clearly, the fades to red in Cries and Whispers are associated with a passage of time, since they precede and conclude the flashbacks and dream sequence. However, because of the autonomy acquired throughout the film by the colour red, these fades also point to something else, namely to a subtly violent force that surfaces on the screen.

More specifically, Venzi briefly discusses the use of colour in Cries and Whispers in his article on the iconoclastic value of autonomous colours in film. In particular, he opposes the meaning of the traditional fade to black to the iconoclastic fade to colour, which blocks and troubles the spectator’s look:

in the first case [fade to black], spectators read the black as a purely syntactical scan and fill in, without disorientation, the absence of image confronting them: what they encounter is a discursive convention rather than a visual transformation; in the second case [fade to colour], the spectators’ capacity to detect a discursive note in the film, which the film is continuously
asking them, has to be replaced by the fact that a figurative image has gradually become a colour. (2013, 62-63: my translation)

Venzi goes on to briefly outline the use of the fade to red in *Cries and Whispers* as that which destroys the figurative image, concretely manifesting “the wide, amorphous lump of a suffering not fully representable” (2013, 68: my translation). He also delineates the cultural significance of the three dominant colours of the film – black, white and red. Black is associated with death and retains an overall funereal quality, whereas white is tied to a lost, lively force. Finally, red is the colour of the soul and manifests the inner tragedy of every person. Similarly, Cohen dwells on the peculiarity of the fades to red and their violent character. The fade to red both tries to give visibility to a hidden, brutal impulse, and challenges the spectator’s look through the sudden destruction of the figurative image. Cohen argues,

> when a scene ends, the fade is not to black but to red. Besides calling attention to the filmmaking process, these “red-outs” deprive us of that restful closure that black provides; instead, they create a feeling of low-key excitation, of free-floating anxiety, even of discreet or latent violence, all of which contribute to the film’s underlying violence. (1993, 250)

The colour red, therefore, acquires some autonomy, conveying meanings that go beyond the mere reproduction of such colour in reality. Tied to a disquieted, unshapen interiority, which emerges in its unfigurability in the red screens, the colour red concretely destroys the figurative shots, producing iconoclastic *eikônes*. What is more, the fade to red replaces the figurative facial close-up of the female characters with the iconoclastic facial close-up of their tormented interiority, as I will now discuss.

**From Iconophilic Icons to Iconoclastic *Eikônes***

My analysis will focus on some of Agnes’s, Maria’s, and Karin’s facial close-ups, and on the fades to red that interrupt the narrative in the present, dissolving the figurative shot in a red monochromatic screen. While there are numerous fades to red in the film, I will primarily consider those which precede and follow the flashback sequences because these transitions, where faces crumble in the red, concretely
illustrate the passage from the iconophilic icon to the iconoclastic eikôn. My overall argument is that in the fades to red we pass from the moving image as iconophilic icon – the facial close-up – to the moving image as iconoclastic eikôn – the red monochromatic screen. Like in Balázs’s and Epstein’s accounts, in which the face in the close-up is that through which interiority surfaces on an exterior, visible means, the facial close-ups in Cries and Whispers attempt to convey something of a person’s inner life. At the same time, however, this possibility is partially negated by the fades to red which dismantle the figurative image and give rise to iconoclastic eikôn: the intensely red monochromatic screens. The decomposing of these giant faces in a red that covers everything affirms the impossibility of fully representing a person’s interiority. Sound similarly remarks the failure to express through words a human being’s inner state. Thus, we pass from the cries on the magnified faces to the whispers on the red screens: in both cases we are confronted with sounds that ultimately remain indecipherable. I will begin by briefly considering issues of suffering and empathy because of their role in the making of iconoclastic eikôn in the film. Indeed, the status of the disquieted interiorities that animate the film, namely their being beyond figurative representation and intelligible expression, is directly linked to pain, both physical and psychological, which constitutes that place of our interiority where we never go back easily. I will then pass on to discuss the sisters’ facial close-ups as iconophilic icons, before exploring their iconoclastic destruction in the fades to red and the monochromatic screen as iconoclastic eikôn.

Cries and Whispers is, ultimately, a film of decomposing faces. It is, also, a film on physical pain and inner suffering. This theme is introduced from the beginning through close-ups of Agnes’s face contorted in a grimace of pain, followed by her literally writing and underlying that she is in pain. Physical pain recurs in the film also through Joakim’s stabbing and Karin’s mutilation. However, pain in the film is not solely physical, but includes emotional pain to which none of the main characters is immune. From the most superficial of Maria’s disappointment for her unfulfilled desire for David, to Karin’s failed attempts to face her deepest emotions, to Anna’s grief for her daughter. Being a film on pain, it is also a film on

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50 For a discussion of a possible iconophilic interpretation of the facial close-up in Balázs and Epstein, see third chapter, sub-section “Iconophilic and Iconoclastic Interpretations: The Face in the Close-Up”.

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empathy and its absence. Empathy is here intended in its etymological meaning of “to suffer with” (from *en*/*ἐν*, “in; within”, and *páthos/pάθος*, “that which happens to a person; suffering”, which comes from the verb *páschō/pάσχω*, “I suffer; I am or come to be in a state”) and refers to an individual’s capacity to find in themselves that place of sorrow which enables them to suffer with someone else, that is, to share the pain of others. Moreover, as Sinnerbrink (2016) observes, “empathy is *feeling with*” (92: emphasis in original) another person, and can be defined as “the capacity to imaginatively adopt the other’s perspective […] from a first-person point of view” (93). Thus defined, empathy refers not only to the sharing of suffering, but also of any other emotional state, including positive ones.

*Cries and Whispers* shows a wide spectrum of behaviours towards others, from Agnes’s unworldly compassion to Fredrik’s complete inability to feel with others. Agnes is physically in pain because of the cancer, and emotionally capable of empathising with others – she smiles when she catches Maria sleeping instead of looking after her. Anna utterly empathises with Agnes; yet, she seems unable to understand or relate to Karin’s suffering, refusing to forgive her after being slapped. The late mother blissfully spends time with Maria, reserving a cold and un-empathic attitude to Agnes as a child. Maria and Karin both lack empathy and recoil at Agnes’s imploration of love during the resurrection scene. However, while Karin is at least practical when it comes to Agnes’s illness, Maria is visibly uncomfortable in front of Agnes’s physical pain. Finally, David has no hesitation in humiliating Maria both in the present and in the past, and Fredrik is selfishly indifferent to everybody. Therefore, to the exclusion of Agnes, who is a true sacrificial *agnus Dei*, a general inability to empathise affects all the characters at different levels: more clearly Fredrik, David, Maria, who is not afraid of physically touching because she remains at the epidermal surface of things, Karin, who abhors being touched because she understands its profundity, and Anna, who can empathise with Agnes but “refuses even to make a gesture or an attempt to recognise what Karin feels or see how wounded she is” (Kalin 2003, 141).

In particular, Agnes, Maria and Karin are the most fascinating characters because of their painfully conflicting interiority, the complexity of their personality and the intensity of their facial close-ups. Consequently, I will mainly discuss their
faces in the close-up and the fades to red associated with them. The face in the close-up as iconophilic icon, namely the figurative image of the face as that which can express something of a person’s interiority, recurs throughout the film. As Singer notes, Cries and Whispers, as well as other Bergman’s films, “rel[ies] extensively upon close-ups of faces that disclose what is happening in a character’s innermost feelings” (2009, 83). While this is the manifest intent of Bergman’s facial close-ups, in Cries and Whispers there is also the acknowledgment that this is an impossible task. The facial close-ups which plunge into red are symptomatic of the impossibility to ultimately reveal such “innermost feelings”. Bergman searches the magnified faces which, by means of progressive changes in the expression, convey a sense of the character’s inner state. However, as I will later discuss in reference to the fades to red and the monochromatic screens, a person’s inner suffering remains beyond mimetic reproduction.

The Face as Icon

Cries and Whispers is rife with close-ups of faces, and each of these close-ups does express something about the character, thereby constituting what can be addressed as iconophilic icon. The facial close-up as iconophilic icon is present from the beginning of the film, when we are first introduced to Agnes [figure 19]. Agnes’s face writhed in pain, her eyes closed tight, the mouth curved into an excruciating grimace and the head slowly turning in distress as if looking for some solace somewhere, effectively disclose the character’s state. Here, an internal, invisible pain surfaces on the exteriority of the character’s face and offers itself to viewers. In much the same manner, the moving image concluding the film before the last pouring of red is a close-up of Agnes’s serene face during a moment of grace [figure 20]. Such peacefulness is enhanced by its being at odds with Agnes’s aching face in the rest of the film. On this peaceful face, which seems more angelic than terrestrial, we read the serenity of her soul.

Maria’s facial close-ups also disclose something about her character. Her uncomfortable smirks and unrested eyes give a glimpse of her nervous beguilement and overall shallowness: she shuns seriousness and seemingly cannot focus on anything but for a fleeting moment. In her flashback there is a mirror scene which at
once affirms and negates the possibility of expressing a person’s interiority through the exteriority of the face. Maria and David are reminiscing about the past, when David puts her in front of a mirror. With Maria’s face occupying most of the frame in an extreme close-up [figure 21], David starts listing the almost imperceptible changes that have occurred on her face as evidences of her inner alterations:

DAVID: I want you to see that you’ve changed. Now you cast rapid, calculating sidelong glances. You used to look directly, openly, undisguisedly. Your mouth, once soft, has an expression of discontent and hunger. Your complexion is pallid, you use make-up. Your fine, broad forehead now has four wrinkles above each eyebrow. You can’t see them in this light, but you can in daylight. Do you know where they come from?
MARIA: No.
DAVID: Indifference, Maria.

[David’s lower face, primarily his lips, enters the frame beside Maria’s face]
DAVID: And this fine contour, from ear to chin-point, is no longer so implicit. It shows that you’re easy going and indolent. Look here, at the nostrils: why do you sneer so often? You sneer too often; do you see, Maria? Beneath your eyes the sharp, barely visible wrinkles of boredom and impatience.
MARIA: Can you see all that?
DAVID: No, but I feel it when you kiss me.

Throughout the scene, Maria’s expression, at first curiously amused, slowly changes into an uncomfortable smile. We follow David’s account while searching Maria’s face for these signs. And we see them. We notice the faint wrinkles, we become aware of the make-up over her cheeks. The micro movements of Maria’s face, which allow for her inner state to become visible, bring to mind Béla Balázs’s physiognomy and Jean Epstein’s photogénie. As if following Balázs’s claims on the power of physiognomy to disclose a character’s emotions, or Epstein’s account of the close-up as that which augments our knowledge of the magnified reality, Maria’s continuous and subtle changing of expression from a seeming self-confident smile to a self-conscious smirk reveals her uneasiness at David’s words. However, Bergman investigates the limits of this epidermal, cognitive enhancement throughout the film. In this scene, the faith in the facial close-up as that which discloses a person’s interiority is verbally dismissed. David cannot read this inner state on Maria’s face, but can feel it when he kisses her. Interiority is, ultimately, beyond audio-visual
representation. While formally Ullmann’s face remains to dominating the frame, the facial close-up as iconophilic icon is partially negated by David’s words.

Finally, Karin’s facial close-ups are soaked with intense distress and, in a way, they complement Agnes’s: while the latter’s close-ups are mainly expressions of a physical pain, the former’s give a visible form to an emotional suffering. From the extreme close-up of her face in doleful bewilderment introducing her flashback, to her face smeared with blood, to that following an attempt at intimacy with Maria, Karin’s close-ups reveal her status as wounded beast. Shortly after Karin’s flashback, there is a sequence for the most part composed of facial close-ups and extreme close-ups against a red wall. This sequence displays a first failed attempt to a more profound bond between Karin and Maria. The two sisters look for each other, Maria tenderly caressing Karin, who at first refuses to be touched before dolefully abandoning herself to the caresses. It seems as if an emotional bond had been established. But suddenly Karin jumps away from Maria with a desperate cry, throwing herself against the wall. Her cries act as a counterpart of Agnes’s: there it is a physical pain devouring the character, here it is an emotional suffering trying to find an outflow. On Karin’s face, where everything is deformed by a profound and sharp anguish, we read her soul’s disquietude [figure 22]. While she relentlessly repeats “don’t touch me”, first in a cry then in whispers, her face slowly disappears swallowed by a fade to red.

[Figure 19]  [Figure 20]
The Becoming Red of the Face

The sisters’ facial close-ups as iconophilic icons are, indeed, destroyed by the fades to red. In the fades to red and in the monochromatic red screens that follow, interiority is denied a figurative form. Something can be expressed in the face, but always remains something else which is impossible to bring to the surface. Thus, the fade to red progressively covers what is figurative and the soul – Bergman’s red – invades the screen. But this red is not exclusively that of the monochromatic images, since it is linked to other reds that occur throughout the film: first and foremost, the red of blood – of Joakim, who stabs himself and the red shines on his white shirt, of Karin, who cuts her vagina and then rubs blood on her sadly satisfied face. It is also the red of the suffocating house, which seems itself to be bleeding, and the dark red of the wine that stains the candid sheet. It is, therefore, a violent, intense red, tied to destructive impulses. Not a red belonging to a soul at rest, but the colour of a disquieted interiority.

Given that in Bergman’s view red is the colour of the soul, the fade to red can be read as a fade to the soul, the soul being the red monochromatic screen. As such, the soul is at once that which can transpire from the changes of expression occurring on a face and that which remains, ultimately, unrepresentable in mimetic terms. Bergman, like the viewer, searches the actresses’ faces, showing what he can, but he also acknowledges cinema’s impossibility to figuratively express a person’s interiority. The red monochromatic screen bears witness to that which stays beyond mimetic reproduction and intelligible words. Thus, whispers accompany the red screens without articulating the clear meaning that intelligible sentences have.
Interiority, in this film, does not become fully intelligible or expressible. In *Cries and Whispers*, Bergman states, “words will ultimately become meaningless, and the behavior will be out of sync; illogical forces that one cannot account for will come into play” (1994, 89). While in quotidian, social life individuals are most often expected to live according to logic, as the characters in the film strive to do, interiority follows its own, not necessarily logical, laws of desire. Words, like figurative images, fail to express such inner life. Echoing Bergman’s account of language, Törnqvist explains that “Bergman distrusts language as a means of establishing contact. On the contrary, he maintains, language is normally used to build walls between people behind which they may hide” (1996, 15). The characters in *Cries and Whispers* do not establish a profound bond through words, and the most powerful scenes in which they manage to express something about their troubled interiority occur without words being spoken. As Cohen remarks, “Bergman knows that words cannot convey what humans feel or what feelings do” (1993, 258-259). Therefore, we hear evocative whispers in the transitions from a face to a red screen which hint at both something obsessively tormenting the character’s interiority and the possibility of a sincere emotional bond beyond the misunderstandings brought by words.

What is more, in the fade to red transitions, Bergman films the passage from an image as iconophilic icon to an image as iconoclastic *eikôn*. We first see a facial close-up that augments our knowledge of the character, and then are confronted with an image beyond mimesis; we hear whispers, at times accompanied by stifled cries and the tolling of a bell. In the extreme facial close-up being decomposed by the fade to red Bergman, thus, exhibits the very process of destruction of the icon [figure 23-26].
What is most striking in terms of iconoclasm in *Cries and Whispers* is precisely the fact that we see the process of the un-making of the giant faces, not only the result. That is, an iconoclastic *eikòn* is concretely produced before the spectator’s eyes. Most importantly, only cinema can show this process because of its being movement in time. A monochromatic painting, for instance, can only display the result of destruction, but not how something had been progressively destroyed. Cinema, instead, can film how a face gradually vanishes into pure colour. In Bergman’s film, we first see a figurative, magnified face, we can almost “taste the tears” à la Epstein (1921/1977, 13); and then, progressively, tragically, we witness the decomposition of this face, its slow dissolving into a red screen. The showing of this process also attests that, while a face can expose something of a person’s interiority, the soul exceeds our capacity to give it a fully figurative and intelligible form. Interiority and intimate suffering cannot be exhausted by figurative images or comprehensible words, because they also comprise an inexpressible part, which nonetheless exists and demands to be acknowledged as such. This is what takes place in the transitions to and fro the flashbacks, and more in general in the fades to red, and here lies the inherently cinematic greatness of *Cries and Whispers*: not only we see an iconoclastic image (the red screen), but we also witness the process of destruction of
iconophilic icons and production of iconoclastic *eikônes*. In front of our eyes, a figurative shot crumbles because of the unbridgeable gap that separates it from its referent.

The magnified faces decomposed by the fade to red are icons shattered into red fragments; then the fragments recompose themselves into a red screen. Introducing Maria’s and Karin’s flashback, as well as Anna’s dream, we see an enigmatic, vivid close-up of one of the female characters: Maria’s lips writhed in a self-conscious smirk, her eyes incapable of settling on anything; Karin’s straight look, the eyes and mouth wide open in fear, before she shuts them with sorrow and resignation; and Anna’s blank expression, as if incapable of having thoughts of her own. Then, each time, the red swallows the sisters’ troubled faces and Anna’s inscrutable face, and the screen becomes a red monochrome. In each face we get a sense of the character’s interiority – we can almost feel Maria’s discomfort, Karin’s emotional wounds and Anna’s saintly devotion. But we can only gain access to a minuscule fragment of their doleful state, which remains beyond visual or aural representation. The fades to red and the monochromatic red screens, which intermittently interrupt the narrative, thereby destroying the figurative shots, and the whispers accompanying them express the failure to visually and aurally represent a person’s inner life and inner inferno. These monochromatic red screens are iconoclastic *eikônes*: they are the iconoclastic facial close-ups of what is inner and invisible.

*Cries and Whispers*, therefore, displays the very process of destruction of the icon and production of iconoclastic *eikônes* through the faces first consumed by the red and then hesitantly reconstructed from the red. In an exclusively cinematic manner, a movement from the iconophilic icon to the iconoclastic *eikôn* is established: from a figurative face on which something interior exhibits itself, to a monochromatic red screen where the unrepresentable face of the soul appears. The representation of others’ suffering, always in danger of falling into obscenity, is respected in these movements from a restless face to a red screen. In the unfolding of the process we read at once the possibility to evoke something on a face and the insufficiency of mimetic images to account for a person’s intimate suffering.
Ultimately, interiority – with all its demons and desires – is located beyond mimesis, in a blinding vision of red surrounded by wistful whispers.
Krzysztof Kieślowski is a director who has explored in cinema the boundaries between what can be figuratively shown and what does not have a visible equivalent in phenomenal reality. Profoundly interested in intimate stories in both documentary and fiction, he concludes his filmmaking career with a trilogy that investigates, through the extremely physical medium of film, ideals and concepts that pertain to the domain of metaphysics. In this last chapter I will focus on the first film of the trilogy, Three Colours: Blue (Trois couleurs: Bleu, 1993), which is a narrative, overall figurative film four times interrupted by fades to black. My contention is that these four fade-outs constitute iconoclastic eikônes because they are a visible negation of mimetic reproduction in the face of an unfigurable and uncognisable grief. As the analysis will demonstrate, in the four fade-outs spectators see what the protagonist’s feel: a grief beyond thoughts or figurative images. To this end, I will provide an overview of Kieślowski’s artistic path with specific emphasis on his shift away from documentary to fiction, since it has to do with the ethical risk of mimetically recording another person’s intimacy. The forsaking of documentary, which originated from questions regarding the possibility of filming everything, brings Kieślowski to explore in fiction the tension between cinema’s ability to visually represent that which cannot be seen and its ultimate insufficiency attested by the presence of undecipherable images in his films. The investigation of such a strain is at the centre of Three Colours: Blue, a film caught between the aestheticism of mimetic images and the blankness of the monochromatic screens. The thread that ties this chapter together, thus, concerns the limits of mimetic representation and the ethical implications of showing the intimate suffering of others.

Kieślowski’s career spans from the small Polish productions of his early documentaries to the successful fictional 10 short-film opus The Decalogue (Dekalog, 1989), to the European co-productions of The Double Life of Véronique

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51 My free translation of: “curae leves loquuntur, ingentes stupent”.

Light is the grief that can speak; the great one leaves you speechless.51
(Seneca, Phaedra)
Thus, the considerable literature on Kieślowski takes into account different aspects of his film practice, such as the political relevance of his works, his shift from concerns with realism (documentary) to questions of metaphysics (fiction), the theme of chance and alternative realities, and his constant interest in the personal lives of individuals. One significant source on Kieślowski’s oeuvre, from his Polish documentaries up to the Colours trilogy, is Slavoj Žižek’s The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory (2001). The book adopts a Lacanian perspective to explore the films, with particular attention to the strain between reality and its partial loss (the Real). What is more, Žižek explicitly, although briefly, engages with the issue of iconoclasm in Kieślowski’s oeuvre, contrasting the director’s iconoclastic ban on real intimacy in documentary to his emphasis on feigned intimacy in fictional films. Žižek, thus, highlights a tension between iconoclasm and iconophilia in Kieślowski’s work, which I will discuss in the following section. Marek Haltof’s The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski: Variations on Destiny and Chance (2004) mainly focuses on Kieślowski’s Polish works and their political relevance, and delineates the critical reception of his shift from documentary to fiction. Paul Coates’ edited book Lucid Dreams: The Films of Krzysztof Kieślowski (1999) collects articles from Polish critics which consider various aspects of his oeuvre, interestingly providing one of the rare Polish perspectives in the English language. Annette Insdorf’s Double Lives, Second Chances: The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski (1999), overtly “meant to be sympathetic scholarship” (xiv), provides an overview of his career while examining in detail his major fictional films. Danusia Stok’s Kieślowski on Kieślowski (1993), a collection of interviews with the director taking into account his whole artistic career, offers a highly intimate insight into his oeuvre. Nicholas W. Reyland’s Zbigniew Preisner’s Three Colors Trilogy: Blue, White, Red: A Film Score Guide (2012), while explicitly focusing on the film composer Zbigniew Preisner and his collaboration with Kieślowski, also takes into account the director’s oeuvre, the main motifs, the significance of his passing to fiction, and style and themes of the Colours trilogy. Finally, Geoff Andrew’s The “Three Colours” Trilogy (1998) is a personal and delicately passionate “way of saying ‘thank you’ for the films
Kieślowski’s gave us” (9). The book provides a brief overview of the director’s career from the early documentaries to The Decalogue, teasing out thematic and stylistic recurrences, before dwelling on the trilogy and the numerous interconnections among the three films.

From Real Tears to Glycerine

Kieślowski begins his career as a documentarist filming a Polish social reality foreclosed by official media. His documentaries mainly focus on the lives of individuals “working for, or fighting against, State institutions” (Andrew 1998, 13), such as factory workers or surgeons on exhausting shifts. Polish politics and social issues play an essential role in Kieślowski’s documentary oeuvre since they shape the lives of individuals, thereby determining their choices. Slowly turning to fiction, he achieves a first significant success with Camera Buff (Amator) in 1979, earning international fame in 1989 with The Decalogue, a magnum opus for Polish television composed of ten short films which are variations on the Ten Commandments. In his Polish fictional films, especially in the early ones, the socio-political climate continues to have a significant role in influencing and interfering with the lives of the characters; however, chance also makes its appearance and becomes increasingly fundamental (for instance, Insdorf argues that Kieślowski’s films suggest that “the cinema is no less the quintessential medium for the ‘conditional’ tense –what might have happened” [1999, 53]). Finally, the European co-productions of The Double Life of Véronique and the Three Colours trilogy consecrate him as European art cinema auteur. Explicit socio-political issues are now in the background of highly intimate stories, which follow fascinating and emotionally fragmented female characters.

While scholars agree on the presence of political engagement and on the emphasis upon individual lives in Kieślowski’s documentaries, they are however divided on the issue of politics in his fictional works, especially in the European co-productions. Although Kieślowski himself maintained an apolitical view on his films, claiming that even his documentaries were about individuals rather than politics, the issue of politics has been frequently raised in regard to his films. Stok
(1993, xiii), Andrew (1998, 12-14) and Haltof (2004), in varying degrees, contend that the Polish documentaries are political in their subject matter and in their portrayal of how the daily lives of individuals are affected by the socio-political climate. They nonetheless admit that Kieślowski’s interest, even at the beginning of his career, was already directed towards the personal stories of particular individuals. Because of the constant emphasis on individual lives, Reyland (2012) reads Kieślowski’s entire oeuvre, from documentary to fiction, as political for in each film the director explores how individuals are affected by the cultural and socio-economic situation.

The passing from documentary to fiction and from Polish fictional films to European co-productions has triggered various readings. They range from interpreting this shift as a forsaking of social and political issues to understanding it as a continuation of Kieślowski’s investigation into the ways individuals are influenced by their socio-political surroundings. Moreover, Reyland (2012), in pointing out the existence of “a problematic division in the director’s critical reception” (80), delineates how the criticism involved not only the content (from social issues to metaphysical dilemmas) but also the film form (“from beautiful starkness to superfluous beauty” [80]). One of the most ardent critics of Kieślowski’s European co-productions is Haltof (2004, 108-114), who interprets the passage from documentary to fiction as an abandonment of politics in favour of metaphysics, and the passage from Polish to European productions as a shift from a sober, functional style to an ornate, superficial form. Although admitting that certain aspects of Kieślowski’s later films can be found in his earlier works, Haltof is particularly critical of the European co-productions for “a director of detailed realistic observations becomes a director of metaphysical experiences” (2004, 111). In his view, the gloomy, raw reality of the Polish documentaries and fictional films is replaced by the polished, glamorous images of The Double Life of Véronique and the Colours trilogy. For Tadeusz Sobolewski (1999), Kieślowski passed, during the 1970s, from being concerned with the Socialist regime’s interference with the lives of Poles “to a complete disinterest in politics” (26). He delineates the director’s

52 Stok and Andrew place more emphasis on the depiction of individuals, whereas Haltof insists that “the documentary works by Kieślowski constitute an apt reflection of the Polish communist party” (2004, 23).
increasing interest in metaphysical dilemmas, endorsing the thesis of political disengagement in the later films. According to Coates (1999, 2-3), Haltof (2004) and Reyland (2012, 81-82),\textsuperscript{53} however, the harshest criticism came from Polish reviewers who accuse Kieślowski’s later works of superficiality and hollow artistry, at times making arguments not so dissimilar from Haltof’s.

Quite a different perspective is that of Andrew (1998), who reads the shift to fiction as a natural evolution. Kieślowski’s interest, in fact, had always been on individuals and their quotidian struggles, even in his documentary works. Therefore, Andrew interprets the abandonment of documentary as a further development of the director’s concerns with the lives of others: from the explicit references to the communist party to the subtle allusions to the influence of the socio-political context, and from an observational style to a more ambiguous, enigmatic form apt to the representation of metaphysical questioning. Similarly, Reyland (2012) conceives of the metaphysical quest in Kieślowski’s later films as an additional value. After discussing the conflicting reception, Reyland resolves the opposition between politics (the documentaries) and metaphysics (the fictional films) by arguing for a political and metaphysical reading of Kieślowski’s oeuvre as a whole. That is, Kieślowski’s films share a common focus on the individual “in late-modern times […] which] can be interpreted as a politically engaged response to cultural narcissism” (84). Coates (1999) interestingly contends that, while Kieślowski did turn to fiction, his outlook remained close to that of documentary: “‘documentary’ would become an attitude, rather than a genre: a non-hierarchical world-view, open to the unpredictable” (42). Accordingly, even the European co-productions are imbued with a “documentary ethos” that includes “modes of production (non-hierarchical), shooting (the documentary-style camera behaviour […] ) and conception (organisation around ideas)” (Coates 1999, 44).

It is Žižek, however, who proposes the most compelling interpretation, identifying Kieślowski’s forsaking of documentary for fiction as primarily ethical (2001, 72). Žižek develops his argument on Kieślowski’s own claim about his

\textsuperscript{53} Because I could not find translations of these Polish reviews, I rely on Coates’, Haltof’s and Reyland’s accounts.
decision to stop making documentaries, which is included in Stok’s book and which I reproduce in full here:

_Not everything can be described._ That’s the documentary’s great problem. It catches itself as if in its own trap. The closer it wants to get to somebody, the more the person shuts him or herself off from it. And that’s perfectly natural. It can’t be helped. If I’m making a film about love, I can’t go into a bedroom if real people are making love there. If I’m making a film about death, I can’t film somebody who’s dying because it’s such an intimate experience that the person shouldn’t be disturbed. And I noticed, when making documentaries, that the closer I wanted to get to an individual, the more the subjects which interested me shut themselves off. That’s probably why I changed to features. There’s no problem there. I need a couple to make love in bed, that’s fine. Of course, it might be difficult to find an actress who’s willing to take off her bra, but then you just find one who is. Somebody’s supposed to die. That’s fine. In a minute, he’ll get up again. And so on. I can even buy glycerine, put some drops in her eyes and the actress will cry. I managed to photograph some real tears several times. It’s something completely different. But now I’ve got glycerine. I’m frightened of those real tears. In fact, _I don’t know whether I’ve got the right to photograph them. At such times I feel like somebody who’s found himself in a realm which is, in fact, out of bounds._ That’s the main reason why I escaped from documentaries. (Kieślowski in Stok 1993, 86: my emphasis)

It is clear that Kieślowski’s abandonment of documentary was dictated more by an ethical need rather than a will to exclude politics and social issues from his work. Here the director questions the rightfulness of recording and reproducing real, highly intimate experiences such as sex, death and sadness. He does not, however, renounce the filming of fictional experiences – we are, for instance, shown Weronika’s death on a stage, and Véronique and Julie making love and crying. Žižek inquires, “how, then, is Kieślowski’s ban on real tears related to the Old Testament ban on images?” (2001, 74). The philosopher concludes that Kieślowski’s fictional works are characterised by an aesthetics opposite to the dictates of Christian iconoclasm:

Kieślowski seems to share the Old Testament injunction to withdraw the domain of what really matters from degrading reality. However, in a spirit which runs counter to Old Testament iconoclasm, he supplements the prohibition to depict intimate moments of “real” life with, precisely, _fiction_, with “false” images. While one should not show “real” sex or intimate emotional moments, actors can _feign_ them, even in a very “realistic” way (as they definitely do in Kieślowski’s films). (2001, 74: emphasis in original)
Žižek continually opposes Kieślowski’s fictional works to Christian iconoclasm for their realistic (mimetic) representation of intimacy. Undoubtedly, at first glance it seems that the director has no problem in showing fictional intimacy in a decidedly mimetic manner. And yet, even in the arthouse European co-productions, where bodies are exhibited both in pleasure and in pain, there is always at least one out-of-focus image, a blurred image, an undecipherable image that suspends mimesis. Above all in Three Colours: Blue, as I will discuss in the film analysis, by annulling any possible figurative image in the four black-outs, Kieślowski acknowledges that not everything can be represented, even in fiction.

Indeed, one essential aspect for an understanding of Kieślowski’s filmmaking practice is the importance given to that which cannot be seen but can only be hinted at. The director himself has stated, “the moment something is named, the possibility of free interpretation is cut off. The moment you leave something unnamed, and leave the place of the name open, that place can be filled by anyone [...]. If I fill that space, it cannot be filled by the viewer” (Kieślowski in Coates 1999, 169: emphasis in original). Kieślowski neither tells nor shows it all; rather, he leaves to the spectator to make sense of the incomplete or missing images. Undoubtedly, he now has glycerine, films naked entwined bodies and shows life suddenly leaving a human being. But he never trespasses into the obscenity of the telling it all (see Žižek 2001).

Several scholars underline Kieślowski’s capacity for rendering visible – without stepping into excessive mimesis – that which pertains to the invisible sphere. For instance, Reyland lists as one of the director’s filmmaking traits his “attempt to represent the unfilmable […] through the filmable details of the material world” (2012, 79). Andrew (1998) inserts Kieślowski in a limited cluster of filmmakers (which also includes Ingmar Bergman) “who have attempted to explore, through a medium that is by its very nature materialistic and confined to the visual reproduction of physical surfaces, a world that is obscure, metaphysical and transcendental” (68), probing “the topography of the immaterial and the abstract […] in the spaces that exist between images” (69: emphasis in original). Žižek (2001, 66-72) relates Kieślowski’s practice of leaving gaps in and between images to the de facto impossible experience of reality as a whole. That is, in our experience of reality
we always also experience its partial loss, which in Lacanian terms corresponds to the Real.\textsuperscript{54} Kieślowski’s oeuvre at once is haunted by and attests to this interplay between reality and its partial loss: there is a gap in our experience of reality since we cannot experience “the ‘whole’ of reality”, “and this gap runs through the very core of Kieślowski’s work” (Žižek 2001, 72).

While the theme of invisibility, of that which cannot be seen, runs through Kieślowski’s entire oeuvre, it is most clearly present in the \textit{Colours} trilogy. The director explained, “all the three films are about people who have some sort of intuition or sensibility. […] Very often everything that’s most important takes place behind the scenes, you don’t see it. Either it’s there in the actors’ play, or it isn’t. Either you feel it, or you don’t” (Kieślowski in Stok 1993, 216). Indeed, in the trilogy, dialogue is thinned out, at times reduced to the minimum, and images alternate mimetic clarity with out-of-focus, blurring or destruction of figuration. There are fictional tears (all three films end with one of the main characters crying), there is sex, there is death; and yet, the point remains that not everything can be filmed because “not everything can be described”. This impasse, which concerns not only the film medium (can/should everything be filmed?), but also reality (can everything be cognised and made intelligible?), is that which the \textit{Colours} trilogy set to explore.

\textbf{A Trilogy on Entangled Love}

The \textit{Three Colours} trilogy is a French, Polish and Swiss co-production, which was completed within two and a half years, and marks Kieślowski’s last filmmaking fatigue before his retirement (Andrew 1998, 24, 79). Kieślowski’s long-time collaborator, Krzysztof Piesiewicz, suggested the basic idea for the trilogy, namely the exploring of the ideals of the French Revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity – from an intimate, personal perspective (Andrew 1998, 21; Coates 1996/1997, 19; James 2002, 34; Reyland 2012, 3, 101; Stok 1993, 212; Žižek 2001, 155). Accordingly, the first film, \textit{Three Colours: Blue}, deals with personal freedom and its

\textsuperscript{54} Žižek describes the tension between reality and its partial loss (the Real) as follows: “we cannot ever acquire a complete, all-encompassing, sense of reality – some part of it must be affected by the ‘loss of reality’, deprived of the character of ‘true reality’, and this fictionalised element is precisely the traumatic Real” (2001, 66).
limits, the second, *Three Colours: White* (*Trois couleurs: Blanc*, 1994), investigates the precarious equilibrium between individuals who are supposedly equal but practically one is more equal than the other, and the last one, *Three Colours: Red* (*Trois couleurs: Rouge*, 1994), engages with the ways people can touch and positively change each other’s lives through acts of kindness.

The trilogy was an overall popular and critical success, doing very well at the box-office and winning some major prizes. However, it also generated some harsh criticism. Andrew (1998, 77-78), who is an enthusiastic admirer of the trilogy, indicates excessive artistry and political disengagement, on the one hand, and narrative obscurity, on the other hand, as the two main critiques that were raised against the *Colours* trilogy. Reyland’s (2012) account echoes Andrew’s, for he defends the trilogy, rebutting critiques regarding the lack of political issues. In Reyland’s view, *Blue, White and Red* extends the politics of Kieślowski’s Polish films because the “protagonists’ journeys […] continue to stress a key political theme in his earlier work, but under new socio-cultural circumstances: how one lives with, and beyond, painful events in a particular cultural context” (2012, 85). Quite the contrary, Macnab (1993) considers the trilogy as far removed from Kieślowski’s early works and condemns its apolitical nature and lack of attention to social issues. Haltof (2004, 108-112), too, criticises the trilogy for its excessive aestheticisation, to the point of defining the three films as “colourful postcards from Kraków, Paris and Geneva [which] replace the portrayal of the unrefined Polish reality of the 1970s” (112), and denounces the absence of focus on social and political matters (122). What is more, both Reyland (2012, 81-82) and Haltof (2004, 125) report the accusations of superficiality made by various Polish reviewers, in particular Mariola Jankun-Dopartowa’s harsh critique of the films’ perfunctory plot and kitsch style.

Albeit grouped in a trilogy and replete with mutual references, the three films are to be considered, in the director’s words, as “individual, […] separate films” (Kieślowski in Stok 1993, 220) in their own right. Each film focuses on the protagonist’s personal experience of liberty (Julie in *Blue*), equality (Karol in *White*) and fraternity (Valentine in *Red*) and how these ideals intersect with the concept of love, specifically love as agape/ἀγάπη. Both Reyland (2012) and Žižek (2001) mention this particular type of love which makes its literal appearance at the end of
Three Colours: Blue in the chorus sung in Ancient Greek (the lyrics are taken from Saint Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians) where the word *agapē* recurs several times. Reyland (2012, 1-4) examines various definitions of *agapē*, ultimately defining it “as a self-sacrificial act carried out on behalf of the other, but with no expectation of the good that may be returned to the self” (2). In the New Testament, *agapē* mostly refers to Christ’s deeds, the love of God towards humankind and God himself, therefore maintaining the meaning of a gratuitous love par excellence (see New Testament, particularly 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; 1 John 4:8). In the Colours trilogy, *agapē*, free of any religious connotation, comes to signify a love which stems from “the acceptance of others” (Žižek 2001, 161), that is, from accepting that one cannot live far removed from the world and is inextricably entwined with the lives of others. Accordingly, Reyland argues, “the films propose, in their tales and their tellings, a journey one might take to live better in late-modern times: the transition from solipsistic individualism to the mutually beneficial practises of *agapē*” (2012, 3). This view resonates with that of Žižek, who claims that “each part of the trilogy focuses on the voyage from a certain mode of radical self-withdrawal to the acceptance of others” (2001, 161), and that of Dave Kehr, who observes how “three films that seemed to have been carefully distinguished by tone, content and appearance turn out to be the same film, telling the same story of […] isolation subsumed by a sense of infinite interdependence” (1994, 20). The Colours trilogy can, thus, be understood as an ode to love in all its subtle and peculiar manifestations. In particular, the montage coda at the end of Three Colours: Blue expresses the mutual entanglement which ties together the three film.

Three Colours: Blue ends, in fact, with the protagonist Julie (Juliette Binoche) finally breaking into tears, followed by an extremely evocative montage coda. Four shots, each showing one character that has inevitably affected Julie, are linked through fades and accompanied by a chorus sung in Ancient Greek. The lyrics are taken from Saint Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians which proclaims the primacy of love above all things, thereby tying together the shots forming the film’s coda (Andrew 1998, 36; Haltof 2004, 130; Reyland 2012, 1-2, 127-128). As Žižek (2001, 175-178) and Clewell (2000, 204) observe, Julie’s tears signal her acceptance of others. She is able to cry only after having come to terms with the fact that she
cannot live without others, shutting herself from the world for the fear of losing, and therefore suffering for, someone else again. The four consecutive shots, paired with the evocative music, convey a sense of entanglement, that one’s life is connected in mysterious and inextricable ways to the life of others. According to Žižek,

perhaps, Kieślowski’s entire artistic development can be condensed in the formula “from Solidarity to solidarity”: from the political engagement epitomised by the “Solidarnosc” movement [his documentaries] to the more comprehensive depoliticised experience of the “solidarity of sinners” [the Colours trilogy]. (2001, 172)

When Blue Turns Black: A Grief Observed

One striking feature of Three Colours: Blue is the presence of four fade-outs, which are true visible black-outs (see Žižek 2001, 165), that punctuate the otherwise figurative film, interrupting the flow of images. Anticipating and accompanying these interruptions is a funereal music which overwhelms the protagonist. Significantly, the four black-outs occur in those moments when Julie’s thought is brought to think about the death of her husband and daughter. However, even thought refuses to think these deaths. My analysis will therefore develop the idea of the four black-outs as iconoclastic eikônes which, bearing witness to the unthinkable nature of such deaths, allows for the representation of grief without making it obscene. The questions underlying the analysis concern if and how it is possible to represent in images and words grief – is it ethical to mimetically reproduce the others’ grief? How can grief be represented without running the risk of making it obscene? To this end, I will first touch on the significance of the colour blue and music as the fundamental elements for the representation of the protagonist’s grief. I will then look at the four black-outs, spelling out their ethical value as iconoclastic representations of grief.

Although the scholars’ approaches and arguments may differ, they nevertheless share the idea of Three Colours: Blue as being strongly related to the theme of mourning (Andrew 1998, 37; Clewell 2000; Haltof 2004, 129; Reyland 2012, 176; Venzi 2006, 124-129; Wilson 1998, 350; Žižek 2001, 167). Whether the film is understood as a journey through mourning or towards mourning, it is
undoubtedly centred on the protagonist’s grief for the tragic loss of her husband and daughter. Julie (Juliette Binoche) survives a car accident in which her husband Patrice (Hugues Quester), a famous composer, and her daughter Anna lose their lives. Consumed by grief, she sells everything and moves to a flat in Paris where nobody knows her. However, Olivier (Benôit Régent), her husband’s collaborator who is desperately in love with her, finds her and tries to convince her to finish Patrice’s *Concerto for a Unified Europe*. At first Julie refuses in an attempt to shut herself from the world; but gradually she begins to establish relationships with the people around her: she befriends Lucille (Charlotte Véry), a prostitute and stripper who lives in her building, and leaves to Sandrine (Florence Pernel), Patrice’s mistress now pregnant with his child, her house. Slowly accepting that she cannot withdraw herself from the world, Julie finishes the *Concerto* and makes love with Olivier.

Profoundly centred on grief, the film also allows for analyses variously focused on the constant presence of the colour blue, the obsessive occurrence of the funereal music, Julie’s self-withdrawal, the exploration of liberty on a personal level and the concluding coda on love. Luca Venzi (2006) provides a thorough and engaging examination of the use of colour in *Three Colours: Blue*, interpreting it as a reminder of the past and the embodiment of Julie’s grief. Žižek (2001) offers a Lacanian reading of the film according to which the protagonist breaks out from the Real (“of her ‘psychic reality’ [...] and the ‘external’ Real of life” [176]) by reconstituting the fantasy that allows her access to reality (and thus to begin the process of mourning). Andrew’s (1998) analysis draws attention to the role of chance in the film and the concept of personal freedom. Haltof (2004) gives an overview of *Three Colours: Blue*’s themes and style, from personal liberty to the constant presence of the colour blue and the role of music. Insdorf (1999, 139-152) also focuses her analysis on the style, particularly the recurrent blue and the evocative music. Reyland (2012) provides the most exhaustive discussion of the film’s score, carefully examining the musical flashbacks that haunt Julie and the final chorus, interpreting it as an ode to love containing the film’s ultimate meaning. Coates (1996/1997) discusses the opposition between love and nothingness in regard to *Three Colours: Blue*, before stressing the primacy of sound for the film’s overall
mechanism. Finally, Emma Wilson (1998), in her analysis which touches on various aspects of the film from colour to the issue of representation, locates Three Colours: Blue at the threshold between postmodernism – for its self-conscious style – and modernism – for its subject matter (a troubled, fragmented and traumatised subjectivity).

**Four Black-Outs and Funereal Music**

While Ingmar Bergman’s Cries and Whispers was imbued with red, Kieślowski’s Three Colours: Blue is haunted by blue, from its title to its opening (blue filters, blue objects). Due also to its being a cold primary colour, blue is commonly associated with moods of melancholy and sadness (Andrew 1998, 25; Haltof 2004, 129; Reyland 2012, 11-12; Žižek 2001, 164). In addition to this general connotation, blue in this film is profoundly linked to the past, embodied in objects that once belonged to either Patrice or Anna (Haltof 2004, 129; Venzi 2006, 128; Žižek 2001, 165). The colour blue, therefore, recurs throughout the film as an objective correlative of Julie’s grief. According to Venzi, blue is the most immediate and insisting symbolic-expressive manifestation of Julie’s grief and, more generally, of the past that she obstinately tries to remove from her existence. But the past stays close to her: in Trois couleurs: Blue the past preserves itself in the colour. (2006, 128: my translation, emphasis in original)

Through the use of blue filters (Haltof 2004, 129) and blue objects, the whole film is haunted by this colour. Most evidently, blue are Anna’s candy wrapper in the opening, Anna’s bedroom, Anna’s crystal lamp – which is the only object Julie brings with her in her Paris apartment –, Anna’s lollipop – which Julie dolefully and furiously devours –, Patrice’s book binders, the notes written on Patrice’s musical sheets and the swimming pool where Julie takes refuge from the world. Thus, the colour blue becomes the “indelible trace of an absence, [the] cristallisation of a lack […]and] of an unfillable void, […]as well as] the past which preserves itself and the grief which renews itself” (Venzi 2006, 128-129: my translation).

But, the four fade-outs punctuating the film are black, not blue. Venzi (2006, 125-129) proposes a convincing reading of the colour black in these four fades as an
intensified blue. That is to say, while the fade-outs are figuratively black, they are symbolically blue and express the extreme point of grief – that in which blue “becomes black” (129: my translation, emphasis in original). Quite a similar interpretation is found in Wilson who, quoting the abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky, argues that “when it [blue] sinks almost to black, it echoes a grief that is hardly human” (Kandinsky as quoted in Wilson 1998, 350). In the film’s economy, black can indeed be understood as an intensification of the colour blue, namely as the point in which grief and the doleful past (blue) are so intolerably present that they turn black. Defined as such, blue stands for a clotted grief located inside Julie – the four fades to black – and around her – in the omnipresent blue objects. “Blue is the invisible becoming visible”, Yves Klein (as quoted in Weitemeier 2001, 19) once argued. In Three Colours: Blue the invisible, painful past concretises in the blue objects of the mise-en-scène, and Julie’s unfigurable grief becomes visible in the four “blue-turned-black” fade-outs.

While the blue objects mostly embody the memory of Anna, Patrice comes back through music, which is the other element haunting Julie throughout the film. Not only does music play a fundamental role in the narrative (Patrice was a composer; Olivier tries to complete the unfinished Concerto commissioned by the European Council; Julie completes the Concerto), but is also an essential stylistic component which extra-diegetically evokes the painful past (see, Haltot 2004, 129-130; Reyland 2012, 104, 174-250). The music, which seems to be coming from an elsewhere, bursts suddenly, like a fragilely dormant grief, provoking Julie’s black-outs. Indeed, “throughout Blue, Julie is haunted, terrified and, occasionally, beguiled by the music from the Concerto and elsewhere” (Reyland 2012, 119). This melancholic music thus constitutes the aural equivalent of the fades to black. Patrice is embodied by a funereal music and Anna by a colour; together, the Concerto and blue, represent the becoming audible and visible of Julie’s grief.

55 I will not deal with the critical reception of the film’s score, which Reyland (2012, 124-136) carefully discusses. It suffices to mention that most critiques regarded the issue of authenticity in the plot (did Patrice compose the music or Julie?) and the score being mediocre as a Western classic composition. Reyland rejects both points by defending the score for it serves the narrative (e.g., Patrice was famous because of his accessible music) and remarks that the music should be considered in relation to the film rather than compared to great Western music compositions.
Indeed, the four interruptions that bring back the past and its grief, plunging Julie in a state beyond words or images, are composed of fade to black, visually, and funereal music, aurally. The music precedes, accompanies and follows the fade, thence disappearing when the scene resumes. Besides the black-outs, in which a figurative shot is destroyed, there are also two moments in which images are on the verge of disappearing. The first time occurs when Julie is at the hospital, asleep on an armchair, when suddenly the music erupts, waking her up, and the figurative shot falters under an almost-fade to blue. That is, Julie almost disappears swathed in the blue [figure 27]. The second time a figurative shot seems to be disappearing (now in an almost-fade to black), and yet resist the fading, occurs in the Parisian café where Julie habitually goes. Here, too, it is music which firstly threatens the image. While in the previous case the music was extra-diegetic, in this occasion is diegetic: a mendicant outside the café plays with the flute the melody from the Concerto that Patrice was composing. Julie’s coffee cup is traversed by black shadows that seem on the verge of swallowing it in a fade to black which, however, does not happen [figure 28]. Both cases display the fragility of the figurative image when confronted with the eruption of grief. In the four black-outs, however, the figurative image collapses, devoured by a blue-turned-black.

The first black-out occurs at the hospital soon after the almost-fade to blue, while Julie is watching her husband and daughter’s funeral at a TV. Julie sits in an armchair, suddenly a voice off says “Hello”, Julie turns and looks with hollow eyes at the off-screen space. The funereal music erupts on Julie’s facial close-up, the scene fades to black, the screen remains black for 6 seconds, and then the scene continues from the moment in which it was interrupted. Julie replies “Good morning” and has a quick and unpleasant exchange with a journalist who wants to exploit her tragedy. The second black-out happens when Julie meets Antoine (Yann Tregouet), the hitchhiker who witnessed the fatal accident at the beginning of the film. He has contacted her to give her back a golden necklace he found near the car and which belonged to Anna. Antoine asks Julie if she has any question since he got to the car just after the accident. She replies with a blunt “No” and the music – the “string and brass version of the faltering funeral march” (Reyland 2012, 219) of Patrice and Anna’s funeral – bursts onto screen. The scene fades to black and the
screen remains black for 9 seconds, before the scene continues with Antoine asking a question to Julie regarding Patrice’s last words (which we find out were the conclusion of a joke he was telling Julie and Anna before the accident). The third black-out occurs in the swimming pool where Julie takes refuge from the world. Julie is swimming when she sees Lucille by the pool. Surprised to find her there, Julie swims towards her. To Lucille’s question, “Are you crying?”, the music erupts, followed by a fade to black on Julie’s blankly stunned face. While the screen remains black for 9 seconds, “two separate and, in both symbolic and musical sense, opposed themes are brought into conflict” (Reyland 2012, 220): the funeral march in G minor and the memento of the Concerto in B minor intersect. Then the scene continues with Julie replying, “It’s the water” [Figures 29-34]. The fourth and last black-out takes place in Olivier’s apartment when Julie finds confirmation of Patrice’s long-term mistress. Olivier questions Julie about her intentions, now that she has found out about the adultery – and hence that Patrice was not the irreprehensible and perfect husband she had built in her head. The music erupts and the scene blackens out for 11 seconds. Then, surprisingly smiling, Julie replies, “I’m going to meet her”.

The black-outs take place either soon after or while Julie is exposed to something regarding the past and which demands her to confront it. In the first case, it is a voice from the outside world; in the other three cases, it is a question that anticipates the black-outs – “Hello” (the journalist, who knew both Julie and Patrice before the accident); “If you want to ask me something...” (Antoine); “Are you crying?” (Lucille); “What are you going to do?” (Olivier). It is not solely something from the past that plunges Julie into this black stillness of time (memory only needs a sound or an image to awaken, violently); but it is the request to confront with such a past that triggers Julie’s black-outs. Unable to express her grief in verbal or image form, because that would be tantamount to accepting what has happened as incontrovertibly real, Julie abandons herself to the thought’s incapacity to deal with a too painful reality.
Almost-fade to blue.

Almost-fade to black.

The third black-out at the swimming pool.
An Unfigurable and Ineffable Grief

What is, then, the meaning of these sudden black-outs in the overall figurative *Three Colours: Blue*? First of all, like the fades to red in Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers*, the fades to black in *Three Colours: Blue* transcend the conventional function attributable to the fade – that of signalling a considerable passage of time. In Bergman it was the fading to colour, specifically to red, which broke the traditional usage of the fade, thereby troubling the spectator’s look; in Kieślowski it is a convention – the fade to black – which is made out to be other than itself. That is, instead of signalling the passage of a substantial calculable time, the fade to black is here employed to express the stillness of experiential time of the individual in the face of grief. The fades to black in *Three Colours: Blue*, thus, represent something akin to a suspension of time: they interrupt a scene which then continues as if nothing had happened. Kieślowski himself has explained the meaning of these four fade-outs in *Three Colours: Blue* as follows:

> there are various fade-outs. There’s the typical elliptical fade-out: time passes. A scene ends, there’s a fade-out and a new scene begins. And there are four fade-outs which bring us back to exactly the same moment. The idea is to convey an extremely subjective point of view. That is, that time really does pass but for Julie, at a certain moment, it stands still. (Kieślowski in Stock 1993, 215-216)

In the black-outs, therefore, spectators see what Julie feels. In the face of a grief which she cannot, at this point, cognise, we see Julie experiencing the shutting down of her thought. The becoming black of the image is nothing other than the intensification of the blue, with all its implications, and therefore bears witness to Julie’s “unmodulated, inconceivable (and, to a certain degree […] unrepresentable) grief” (Venzi 2006, 126: my translation). The first black-out imposes itself, unfathomably, upon spectators, who experience a halt of vision and the cancellation of a figurative shot without being able to attribute a meaning to it. The repeating of the black-outs, however, allows viewers to “comprehend that it is a colour that which they see recurring in the becoming black of the image” (Venzi 2006, 127: my translation). Thus, spectators can progressively read in the destruction of the figurative shot Julie’s inner state, her incommensurable grief, becoming visible.
It is no coincidence that the black-outs occur on Julie’s petrified facial close-ups, something which resonates with Bergman’s fades to red. Like in *Cries and Whispers*, in *Three Colours: Blue*, too, mimetic reproduction cannot account for the most intimate and painful states of a person. Julie never explicitly talks about her grief, only mentioning matter-of-factly her husband and daughter’s death on rare occasions (e.g., with the journalist; with her mother). She might say that they are dead, but she avoids expressing how she feels or what she thinks because hers is an ineffable and unfigurable grief. Only in the removal of figuration can her feeling acquire a visible form. Notwithstanding Kieślowski’s claim about the lack of problems posed by fiction because actors feign, he nevertheless does not put Julie’s grief into words or show her thoughts by means of figurable images.

The four black-outs can thus be understood as iconoclastic *eikônè* in the sense I have attributed to this term. They are, indeed, images of Julie’s impossibility to cognise her grief, and are iconoclastic because they refuse to spectacularise suffering, namely to transform something extremely intimate into a spectacle addressing the eyes only. In *Three Colours: Blue*, the destruction of figurable shots by means of fade-outs is of ethical nature (see, for instance, Venzi 2006, 134-135). The sudden fade-outs that interrupt the regular narrative flow are a way to express and respect the unrepresentability and ineffability of certain models; but are also a refusal to spectacularise death and grief, making them inaccessible to the world of mimetic representation. Rather than concealing the unbridgeable gap between grief and its representation by means of figurable images and intelligible words, Kieślowski inserts four fade-outs, leaving to the viewer to make sense of them.

According to Wilson (1998), “this is a film caught in contradiction between representation and its refusal” (351). While making an overall figurative film, Kieślowski in *Three Colours: Blue* challenges the film medium’s capacity to represent: he now has glycerin and actors who feign, and yet shots are destroyed by fades to black and intelligible speech is replaced by a funereal, evocative music. Wilson appropriately argues,

in this way Kieślowski totally eschews the filmmaker’s privilege to give us access to cinematic reconstructions which might function as projections of Julie’s inner thoughts, the personal cinema of her memories. We are denied
this omniscient viewpoint which would allow us effectively to make sense of the film, and of the psyche of its protagonist. Rather than uphold the spectator's position of privilege, the film places her/his powers of ordering and organization under attack. *Blue* seeks different means to represent the psychic reality of its protagonist, means which directly question the status of audiovisual representations. (1998, 353).

A medium like cinema, which is based on moving images of recorded phenomenal referents, is here employed to represent that which cannot be seen – a person’s grief and the memory of her dear dead ones. Kieślowski could have used figurative metaphors to illustrate Julie’s mournful mind state (e.g., flashbacks of Anna and Patrice followed by her bursting into tears); instead, he opts for the destruction of any figuration, turning grief/the past into a pure colour that covers everything. An image of imagelessness thus replaces any figurative metaphors of grief. Kieślowski does so to preserve the invisible nature of that which lacks a sensible (i.e., phenomenal) equivalent, as well as a way to attest that not everything can be shown. Interviewed by Andrew, the director comments that “film is very materialistic: all you can photograph, most of the time, is things. You can describe a soul but you can’t photograph it; you have to find an equivalent. But there isn’t really an equivalent” (1998, 82: emphasis in original).

The four black-outs, therefore, constitute the becoming present of a grief which cannot find a figurative form. That is, they iconoclastically display Julie’s thought in its refusal to think about Patrice and Anna’s deaths. What is more, the black-outs also manifest Kieślowski’s rejection to exhibit grief in mimetic images and to give figurative form to what cannot even be put into thoughts. As such, these four interruptions configure themselves as iconoclastic *eikônes* insofar as they represent their unfigurable model without spectacularising it. In so doing, they also leave the spectator free to fill the gaps, imagine and attribute meanings. The negation of figurative, self-explanatory images, therefore, contributes to the creation of a “pensive spectator” (Bellour 2012, 86).
Conclusion

In this section, I have focused on the ethics of cinematic iconoclasm, illustrating how an iconoclastic aesthetics implies ethical concerns (on the part of filmmakers) and promotes an ethics of looking (among spectators). The premise for my argument is that the acts of making and looking at images are not neutral, but have ethical implications with regard to our responsibility for what we decide to make visible and offer to the look of others. Mimesis is, once again, the central issue in the investigation of the ways in which specific contents can be shown cinematically. I have ultimately argued that, in the extremely visible world we currently inhabit, the creation and sharing of images at the edge of invisibility, namely iconoclastic images, can be a stimulus for reflecting on the power of sight and the necessity for mimetic blindness in the frenzy of images.

In discussing the potential of film aesthetics beyond mimesis, I have emphasised the role of colour. Colour, in fact, can be employed in an anti-naturalistic manner to produce dominant-colour-feeling experiences, such as those promoted by Derek Jarman’s Blue (IKB-feeling experience), João César Monteiro’s Branca de neve (black-feeling experience), Ingmar Bergman’s Cries and Whispers (red-feeling experience) and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s Three Colours: Blue (blue-feeling experience). In all these cases, the constitutive or recurrent dominance of a colour on the screen gives rise to iconoclastic eikônes in which an intimate and almost-uncognisable model is referenced without filling the gap that separates it from its image.

Particularly in the in-depth analyses of Cries and Whispers and Three Colours: Blue, I have underlined the tension between cinema’s capacity to mimetically reproduce reality and its ability to hint at that which does not have a phenomenal equivalent. Hence, the tormented interiorities in Bergman’s film now acquire mimetic visibility in the figurative shots – especially in the facial close-ups – now disappear in a red monochromatic screen. Similarly, in Kieślowski’s film, Julie’s uncognisable grief is embodied in the blue objects of the mise-en-scène, the actress’s petrified face and the funereal music; but also finds powerful expression in the visual black-outs that allow the audience to see what Julie feels. In both films, certain images are metaphorically destroyed in their mimetic relationship with the
model so as to maintain the partially invisible and ineffable character of such models. Never a rejection of images *tout court*, cinematic iconoclasm constitutes a way to critique a certain morbid fascination with extreme visibility, as well as a means for representing something without making it utterly visible.
Conclusion: A Future for Broken Images

“No one ever writes something […] that is not also always a love letter” (2011, 243: my translation), Marie-José Mondzain writes. This dissertation is my love letter to cinema, especially to its images at the edge of invisibility and its potential as a means of sharing complex and delicate experiences. It is also a reflection on the power of images to create or destroy a communal vision. Images create it by hinting at what cannot become a figurative image and destroy such a vision through excessive mimesis and the obscenity of showing it all. In this scenario, iconoclasm has proved to be a particularly suitable paradigm to investigate the ways we conceive and relate to images, in general, and film images, in particular, in the West. While historically iconoclasm carries a violently destructive drive directed against the other’s point of view (Besançon 2000; Bettetini 2006; Gamboni 1997; Latour & Weibel 2002), in philosophy and the arts it can become a stimulating and fruitful perspective to challenge habitual forms of image-making and image-viewing. In positing the existence of an unbridgeable gap between an image and its model, iconoclastic stances provide insightful critiques of mimesis and highlight one contradictory attitude that persists in the West since at least Plato: the appetite for an easily accessible representation which, however, most often than not ends up being interpreted as an appearance far removed from truth.

The existence of such a contradictory attitude in regard to cinema and its images constitutes the premise of this thesis. Indeed, throughout the three sections composing the dissertation, I have demonstrated that iconoclasm can be a useful tool to investigate non-mimetic film images and have established an iconoclastic aesthetics of cinema. This aesthetics comprises various film techniques and iconoclastic gestures, which can go from the literal manipulation of the film strip to the metaphorical dismantling of film as moving images of a recorded reality, which finds expression in monochromatic screens, altered velocity and sound-image disjunctions. But this iconoclastic aesthetics also implies ethical concerns, which range from the more subtle chiseled images against war in Isidore Isou’s Traité de bave et d’éternité (Treatise on Venom and Eternity, 1951) and the détourned images in Guy Debord’s oeuvre, to Jean-Luc Godard’s composite images apt for the
representation of the Shoah to Ingmar Bergman’s and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s explicit questioning of mimesis when it comes to images of suffering.

Finally, this thesis has also emphasised that cinema (and in general any visual medium) cannot account, always and in all cases, for every possible reality. While cinema should be able to talk about everything, it needs, nonetheless, to match its images (and sounds) to its content. Accustomed to images and their quotidian, pervasive presence to the point of being partially anesthetised (Bettetini 2006, v-ix, 142-149; Latour 2002, 240-241), the halting of a mimetic, accessible vision that cinematic iconoclasm produces can provoke a more active engagement with images and stimulate a taking of responsibility in regard to the images we decide to make and look at. Issues of image-making and image-consuming date back to Ancient philosophy and find one of their most forceful, literal expressions in the destruction of icons of Christ during the Byzantine controversy. In what follows, I sum up some of the main outcomes of this dissertation by tracing a thread that goes from the physical smashing of Christ’s icons to the metaphorical or literal dismantling of figurative shots in cinema. I finally conclude with some ideas on how the study of cinematic iconoclasm could progress, with a focus on the opposition between the image as inadequate for mimetically representing certain models and sound as a vehicle for expressing what is forbidden to the image.

From Christ’s Icon to Film Images: A History of Destroyed Faces

This thesis has demonstrated the complexity of iconoclasm and cinema’s ability to subvert historical iconoclasm’s violently destructive force against the other into a means for reflecting on film images and their ethical potential. More specifically, the emphasis on the dichotomy between the image as eikôn and the image as eidôlon has allowed me to explore different facets of the film image in its relation with a model, placing it at the centre of an intricate and fascinating web of relations – What does an image represent? Who makes film images of what? Who watches these film images?

Visual images are the objects of intense debate because of their being placed at the centre of such a relational system (model – image – image-maker – image-consumer). Indeed, Plato’s concerns about images of art as copies of a copy (Idea – sensible thing – image) and their consequent potential for deception originate from
the series of relations in which the image finds itself and which involve the model, the maker of images (imitator) and the viewer. In a similar manner, the Plotinian revaluation of images, which become intermediaries between humans and the First Principle, derives from their relational character (images and the First Principle belong to the same realm, only at a different ontological level). However, in Plotinus and in Plato, the image is insufficient to represent intelligible models – Plato’s ideas as well as Plotinus’s the One are beyond visual representation. Subsequently, the Christian theology of the image reworks Platonic and Plotinian philosophy with the Biblical ban on graven images and the Christian concept of the Incarnation of God. As a result, a division opposes those who allow the material image to mimetically represent God to those who fully reject such a position, interpreting it as idolatrous. Therefore, the image can be an intermediary between two elements otherwise separated (εἰκών), but can also be inadequate, blasphemous or obscene (εἰδώλον) – a dichotomy which persists in contemporary Western society.

Indeed, based on the εἰκών-εἰδώλον dichotomy, various and conflicting understandings of visual images have developed in the West. Cinema, for its being founded on moving images, becomes a privileged medium for the study of the image in its relation with a model. In this thesis, the focus has been on the metaphorical and literal destruction of the most widespread film image, that is, the self-evident, in any case mimetic, image of narrative cinema. Thus, my analysis of cinema’s broken images – broken in their mimetic relation with a model that eschews figurative reproduction. Cinematic iconoclasm, therefore, constitutes a possible answer to the contemporary iconic overload and the increasing necessity to show by means of mimetic images. It is, undoubtedly, Isidore Isou’s, Guy Debord’s and Jean-Luc Godard’s reply to those figurative film images which are fraught with capitalist ideology; it is Ingmar Bergman’s and Krzysztof Kieślowski’s attempt to an ethical representation of complex, in themselves invisible, models.

The cinema of Isou, Debord and Godard, which is at the core of the second section, consists in a questioning of the film image’s status and its ability to represent reality. Their iconoclastic aesthetics underlies ethico-political concerns and an overall distrust of certain self-evident, mimetic images which are understood as illusory eidôla. Already in the playful and anarchic spirit of Isou’s *Traité de bave et
d’éternité, it is possible to find images expressing a condemnation of war and French foreign politics, and an attention to cinematic iconoclasm’s potential for a refreshing relationship between film images and spectators. Political motivations are the main thrust behind Debord’s films, which aim at demolishing a capitalistic worldview and promoting critically active forms of spectatorship. From his first to his last film, Debord subverts the images of capitalism as well as that of narrative and auteur cinema, making films that are actually difficult to watch. Finally, in Godard’s oeuvre, political and ethical preoccupations mingle not only to complexify those film images which reiterate a capitalistic ideology, but also to interrogate cinema’s ability to represent reality. In his films, a critique of the illusionism of certain film images – the eidôla of capitalism – is accompanied by a belief in relationships between images able to convey something about reality – the iconoclastic eikônes of a cinema “that can’t be seen” (Histoire(s) du cinéma, [1988-1998]).

Thus, in the second section of this thesis, from Isou’s invocation for the destruction of cinema to Godard’s multi-layered images, I have engaged with some of the most explicit stances against the film medium (“I proclaim the destruction of cinema”, Daniel/Isou argues in Traité; “the cinema, too, must be destroyed!”), Debord insists in Sur le passage [1959]; “let us destroy that image”, Godard urges in British Sounds [1969]). What is more, through the analysis of Isou’s and some of Debord’s and Godard’s films, I have defined the major iconoclastic devices at work in the cinema, that of the blank screen, which consists in an image of imagelessness and is ultimately a metaphor for an impossible image, altered velocity, which goes against cinema’s mimetic movement, and image-sound disjunctions, which mars the harmonious and intelligible relation between the image track and the sound track.

From a more experimental cinema to Bergman’s and Kieślowski’s narrative, overall figurative films, the iconoclastic perspective continues to explore the film image’s relation with reality. In Cries and Whispers (Viskningar och rop, 1972) and Three Colours: Blue (Trois couleurs: Bleu, 1993), narrative cinema’s resistance to iconoclasm intensely shows itself. This is so because, in both films, it is the figurative shots which are dismantled in a sudden visual hiatus of mimesis, thereby displaying the potential proper to the absence (or iconoclastic manipulation) of figurative images. Once again, the negation of mimetic film images hinges on an
iconoclastic understanding of the relationship between such images and their models. In Bergman’s and Kieślowski’s films, cinematic mimesis results insufficient to represent the others’ suffering without running the risk of producing an obscene representation. Hence, the directors’ iconoclastic choice of inserting abrupt images of imagelessness: a monochromatic screen undermines a figurative shot to the point of metaphorically destroying it.

In this third section of the thesis, I have paid particular attention to the ethical value of iconoclastic eikônes, arguing for an ethics of (in)visibility that such images encourage. It is an ethics of both image-making and image-viewing which insists on the importance of interrogating our complicity in the making and viewing of films. In *Cries and Whispers* and *Three Colours: Blue*, on the one hand, Bergman and Kieślowski refuse a mimetic, self-evident representation in favour of images at the edge of invisibility that could preserve the partially invisible character of the model. On the other hand, spectators share “the invisibility of a sense” (Mondzain 2011, 140: my translation) in the absence of self-explanatory images and are free to independently fill the visual gaps on screen. This final section complements the analyses of Isou’s, Debord’s and Godard’s films in the second section, making explicit the ethical value that iconoclasm can acquire in cinema as a means to challenge habitual forms of showing and looking at images. I have particularly defended cinematic iconoclasm’s significance in narrative, overall figurative films, since in these films it expresses the potential of image destruction in the most effective manner thanks to the stark contrast between figurative shots and the halting of vision produced by iconoclastic devices. Accordingly, I have contended that iconoclastic images in narrative cinema have a higher potential for provoking thoughts and challenging our ways of producing and consuming what is visible, precisely because they are not the predominant images of the film. The sudden and yet temporary disappearance of mimetic shots carries important consequences for critical reflections on the responsibility of one’s look and on the limits of our right to show and see something on a screen.

Significantly, the majority of iconoclastic image-destructions in the analysed films occur on the face – Isou’s chiseled faces of carpenters, military authorities and exponents of Lettrism; Debord’s frozen faces of cinema audience; Godard’s faces
plunging into blackness in *Une femme mariée* (A Married Woman, 1964) and *Alphaville* (1965), the slow motioned slap in *Slow Motion* (*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, 1980), or the multi-layered superimpositions on painted and cinematic faces in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*; Bergman’s faces slowly fading into a red screen in *Cries and Whispers*; and Juliette Binoche’s face progressively swallowed by a black screen in Kieślowski’s *Three Colours: Blue*. Involuntarily or not, in all these cases, iconoclasm echoes its historical roots: from Christ’s icon to cinematic faces, the face is the privileged site for destruction.

There is a philosophical and historico-religious tradition which accompanies the development of iconoclasm and which is also found in its cinematic expression. This thesis has instantiated the potentialities and ethical correspondences that the cancellation of film images can have. Examining a tendency which sinks its roots in the birthplace of Western culture, the present dissertation contributes to the debate on visual images and the technologies of vision through the fascinating prism of iconoclasm. Ultimately, this thesis has proved that iconoclasm in cinema is a productive tool for questioning cinematic mimesis and its ethical perils, and constitutes a way to give visibility to that which poses problems to representation. In a world where everything is becoming increasingly mimetically visible, iconoclasm urges to open the eyes on absences which become present invites to take responsibility for our images and construct a shared vision.

**Cinema between the Insufficiency of the Image and the Truth of the Voice**

While in Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers* and Kieślowski’s *Three Colours: Blue* the destruction of figurative shots is accompanied by language’s failure to express the other’s suffering (in one case, through undecipherable whispers, in the other, via an evocative, funereal music), in many films the negation of figurative images is counterbalanced by a manifest privileging of sound, specifically in the form of the voice. Not only in Isou’s, Debord’s and Godard’s films, but also in the many not present in the thesis, sound/the voice is capable of expressing what the image is forbidden to show. That is to say, the voice often becomes the constructor of meaning when there is no longer anything to see. Such a preference for sound carries
a Biblical quality, since God in the Old Testament is that who cannot be seen (He is a "Deus absconditus, “hidden God” [Isaiah 45:15]), but can be heard (for instance, Exodus 3:2) (for further accounts of the dichotomy between image and word in the Old Testament see, among others, Bettetini 2006; Besançon 2002; Mondzain 2011). Cinema’s diminishing of the image’s value in favour of the voice, thus, resonates with ancient iconoclastic discourses. A possible move forward in the study of cinematic iconoclasm could be the exploration of such an attribution of value to sound to the detriment of the mimetically visible image.

For instance, an extreme case is Carmelo Bene’s *Our Lady of the Turks* (*Nostra signora dei turchi*, 1968), in which the negation of intelligible images via a destructive editing and the elimination of intelligible speech work towards emphasising the voice as pure sound. In this film, however, even the voice is understood as incapable of producing meaning. Conversely, in many other cases, the voice is allowed to express what the figurative image would render obscene. Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), for example, is built around the power of the survivors’ voices to give meaning to the absence of images. While we do not see anything of the Shoah per se, the voices are able to talk about it, or at least to express something about it. The power of testimony accorded to the voice is found also in Derek Jarman’s *Blue* (1993), where literally the only thing we can see is a blue screen, while four voices – that of Jarman himself, John Quentin, Nigel Terry and Tilda Swinton – construct “an archaeology of sound” (Khalip 2010, 73). On the total absence of figurative images, which attests to the mimetic image’s insufficiency to represent Jarman’s experience of AIDS, the voice is often conferred the ability to produce meaning. Similarly, in João César Monteiro’s *Branca de neve* (*Snow White*, 2000), voices create an anti-fairy tale, which finds a visual expression in the blankness of a monochromatic black screen. A further example is Michael Haneke’s iconoclastic use of the off-screen space. In several of his films, we hear the violence, which however remains beyond the cinematic frame.

These few examples clearly illustrate how a study of cinematic iconoclasm in reference to the value attributed to sound, and the voice in particular, could open up interesting paths. In cinema, like in philosophy and religion, those who attack visual images attribute to the voice the power of expressing meaning and truth (see, for
instance, Mondzain 2011). When there are no images or when mimetic images run the risk of producing an obscene representation, sound comes in support of the image’s insufficiency – and so we hear the hysterical sound in Bene’s story, the dramatic voices in Monteiro’s tale, the choral account of Jarman’s experience of AIDS, and the survivors’ words testifying to what has happened in Shoah.

Essentially, the study of cinematic iconoclasm could develop around the couple image-sound/voice – to which I have referred in the thesis, but with which I have not thoroughly engaged. What is more, it could explore sound as both the constructor of meaning and as the expression of an ultimate ineffability, drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy’s (2007) philosophical argument on sound. According to Nancy, there is a difference between to listen (écouter) and to hear (entendre) which, in a way, resonates with the dichotomy between the eikôn and the eidôlon. While to listen presupposes a relation between sound and the listening subject, to hear does not imply any relationship between the elements involved (2007, 12). Hence, the study of cinematic iconoclasm could develop as an investigation of the lacerating, intimate and yet conflictory relation that the film image can establish with sound. But it could also unfold as an exploration of the possible uses and understandings of sound in cinema, whether as the exclusive means for expressing what remains without intelligible images, which resonates with Nancy’s écouter and the work of Isou, Debord, Lanzmann and Monteiro, or sound as an echo of the image’s insufficiency, incapable of expressing a meaning placed beyond intelligibility, which brings to mind Nancy’s entendre and the incomprehensible whispers in Cries and Whispers and Blue, or the hysterical voice in Our Lady of the Turks.

In any case, cinematic iconoclasm configures itself as an extremely appropriate framework to examine disruptive relationships at work in films and question our capacity to express in intelligible manners visual and aural models. At the edge of invisibility and ineffability, iconoclastic film images are among the most powerful means at our disposal to actively engage not only with cinema but also with the current visual sphere in which we live and build relationships.
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