Cinema of Process
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The cinema is the art form that embodies process more than any other. Cinema is change. It is not a symbol of change, because there is no need for symbols in cinema. Every aspect of cinema is in relation to the other, and their relations are always changing. As grains move around the frame and the image changes, new relationships are born by the second. When a cut takes us from one shot to the other, it is as if the two shots a conversation with each other. The sound in a film moves from one second to the other like a great flowing river, it should not be in chunks because life is more like water than it is like wood. Artists for centuries have attempted to embody the fluidity of life within a medium, but none can encompass it the way that a film does. Much of today’s and yesterday’s cinema suffers from the traditionally Western mindset of stagnancy, substance and subject/object relations. This rigidity is like blood clotting the veins of the organic, live entity of the moving image. We were not born thinking of life this way, or cinema subsequently. There are diseases of the mind that are as old as 2000 years which still plague us from the freedom of process. To step back from this dominant mindset is to embody Whitehead’s “great refusal”, the search for answer closer to complete. An answer within an unlikely place but to be made greatly aware. Subject-predicate grammar itself influences Western thought. “He”, “she”, “they”, “it” are distinctions many languages do not make. In Turkish and Farsi, two languages I am fluent in, there is no gender distinction to be made with pronouns In Turkish, there are two options for the pronoun: “You”. One is “sen”, and the other is “siz”. The distinction here is one of respect, as someone you would call “Siz” is someone whom you respect too much to refer to them on a basis of equality. Such a distinction is clearly unrelated to gender, and therefore any such distinction is simply a construct of whatever culture it has sprung from. In Rastafari, “I and I” can mean “I and they”, “I and he” or any other combination. As an alternative, we should focus on the model of the world as a process of becoming, constant intervals of being and non-being. The only inarguable grammatical subject is the “I”, and we spend our entire existence trying to escape it. To open the mind to the fluidity and interconnectedness opens a gateway to process, and the two films I look at, Daughters of the Dust and Symbiopsychotaxiplams: Take One.
handle the cinematic (and spectatorial) process in inventive and unusual ways. Cinema is the perfect medium to encompass process philosophy and to fully do so we must also find the most truthful and direct way of displaying images, and in doing so we will also have to tap into the imaginal realm.

In Julie Dash’s 1991 drama Daughters of the Dust, there are beautiful ways in which substantialism is rejected in favour of a fluid process. The film is set in Saint Simons Island in 1901 and follows a group of safe and free African Americans who have created themselves a new life. Their version of the African American culture preserves much more of their roots, and there’s a harmonic coexistence between different backgrounds, various religions and genders and so on. We are introduced to Muslim characters, Christians and some who don’t seem religious at all and it somehow doesn’t seem to matter too much. Although the film is narrated by an unborn daughter of the island from the future (Which vastly opens up the chronological component of the film), there is not a clear protagonist. The film begins and ends without the hopes of beginning and concluding one human being's desires. For the audience, it is not the feeling of attaching themselves to one person, whose plight is relatable to theirs. St. Simons Island, seems not to be constrained by an immediacy. There’s a feeling as if this story extends beyond the frame, before and after we have begun experiencing it. It is as if it begins with an ellipsis and ends with one. It extends to infinity like the universe itself. It is unmistakable that a film will always begin and end, as it is a time based medium. But here is a film that makes us believe this beginning and ending are simply scissors chopping off a piece of the infinite puzzle of life so that we may figure it out for ourselves. When the film is over, there is not a sense that this situation is resolved and there is no longer a reason to go back to the island. It will continue to exist. The film is however given a loose plot through the Paezant family who are conflicted about leaving the Island, although it is not centred around their plight. It is hard to deem any one character a protagonist, and its even difficult to St. Simons Island the protagonist. To do such a thing to do the film, would undermine anything about it
which is significant. The audience member in this film, takes on an omnipotence of sorts. We are able to float through many situations and perspectives across time within this place. We also observe plants, animals, the sea, the wind, without substantiation, as if its something for the background. They are all alive and co-existing like the film itself. Apart from when we follow these characters, there is no distinctive beginning or end to many of the scenes. For instance, there’s a scene in which we observe seemingly important narrative information, a dialogue between two major character. In the background is a group of children singing and dancing in front of the high noon sea. In the midst of the dialogue, there is a crossfade to a closer shot, solely of the children. Usually a crossfade will indicate a passage of time or a massive jump in space. Here, it instead has the lovely effect of harmonizing the disparate elements of the scene, and lifting importance from what happens in the foreground. We are brought deeper into the interconnected now rather than taken into a focused, singular future. The grain particles slowly move from forming one body to the other. The film’s sound has a similar effect in terms of process as what the picture edits do. Sound elements flow from one scene to the next with no hard cuts. The film’s music, takes us from one situation and location to the next, often times while incorporating identical musical themes. This elaborate “Sound bridging”, made me often forget that we were now viewing a new scene, rather it feels like one large train of thought. The music never tells the audience how to feel, conveying the interior state of a single character Instead, it feels like the mood of the space across fluid time. The cinematography and camera work in the film was done by the award-winning African-African filmmaker Arthur Jafa. The camera work in the film does not feel structured, and the style evolves with the situations in front of it. The movement is handled with musical and meandering sensibility, and this looseness create a sense of freshness with every passing minute. Jafa made use of a 35mm ariflex camera with a hand crank, which allowed him to control the shutter as each shot was transpiring, sometimes in the midst of the take. Here, the cinematographer is able to invent speed in the moment, rather than leaving it up to the editor later on. There is a pivotal cinematographic moment in the film, wherein Mr Snaed, a travelling
photographer, is taking a photograph of some children. As he is getting ready to frame, the frame rate is sped up to an unnatural degree so that the film appears to be fast forwarded, this I believe, was intended to depict the rush of an artist deciding the destiny of his printed image. Just before the picture is taken, Snaed tells the children to get ready, and the rush is over. And as he hits the button, time slows down drastically and we feel the weight of the photograph. The photography here involves the audience in the process of creation, and as the artist in the film is creating, so is Jafa, and finally the audience member.

In Laura Marks’ essay, “Real Images Flow: Mullā Sadrā Meets Film-Philosophy”, she speaks of an imaginal realm beyond the material world. Mulla Sadra was speaking of such a realm that can be a portal to the spiritual and is often found in our dreams. A plain of existence that is closer to God than the material world. Although Sadra is speaking of this in a religious sense, to get close to God. Marks is suggesting that this idea, if taken not so literally, is a beautiful metaphor for the nature of the filmic image. We have somehow gotten quite far away from imaginal realm films, which do not take themselves for images, with holy power. We are always simplifying things by using symbols. Literature is often creating symbols for images that may be created in each reader’s head. We wake up from an incredible dream, and to make sense of it we want to share. We describe it to our friend, and through her facial reactions we can tell she sees a different dream in her mind. With cinema, finally, we are able to show each other our dreams. Celluloid fact. Digital objectivity. If a film is always making the audience imagine separate images in their own mind, the audience will be left behind in a literary wasteland, always lagging behind the film. In order to create a process-oriented, we must then embrace this imaginal realm, wherein things are always flowing, and there is no disconnect between viewer and artist. Films have long suffered from the use of metaphors and symbols, which use the screen as a springboard of sorts. There’s no need for such a springboard, as the screen itself is the main event. Alfred North Whitehead, in his book “Process Metaphysics, an Introduction to Process Philosophy”,
mentioned that most people suffer from “a fallacy of dictionary”. The belief that language has expressed all fundamental ideas of existence, but of course it has not because language is always a broken vessel attempting to simplify the whole. Images are yet another vessel of sorts, but they are not symbols. If we are to treat images as images, we can achieve the truth of the imaginal realm within the cinema. This cathartic transcendence can achieve an awakening. Perhaps, by achieving this spiritual state while watching films, we can carry some of it into our daily life and attain spiritual improvement. And this formal openness can allow us to discover “the ever differentiating sea of actualization”, as Whitehead calls it. It is pointless to attempt to symbolize the sea. The cinema has to become the sea itself so that the viewer may dive in and become part of the process. The cinema of process can not symbolize process. It is process itself. This is why the idea of the imaginal realm may beautifully elevate the process based cinema, as chiefly evident in Daughters of the Dust. Dash’ film embodies the truth of the image. The images do not convey information, they instead contain feeling. Jafa’s cinematography employs the constant use of available light to create sublime images that were made with a process involving truthful reality, yet they achieve the dream-like state of the imaginal realm. The film’s love for everything inside the frame, without a distinct hierarchy between objects, subjects, and humanity on the top (Perhaps it only does so with the amount of screen time given to each, yet the landscape gets more screen time than the humans.) soaks the viewer in the into the interdependence between humans and the world around us.

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One is an experimental documentary by William Greaves. The film is directed and edited by Greaves, and it also stars him as a director of a film within the film. The film opens with a montage of various citizens at a public park, who have many different interactions with this film’s true protagonist, the camera. We watch a man in discomfort with the fact that he’s been documented, with genuine self-consciousness. We also observe a child pursuing an off-screen object, genuine during a moment of truth with no awareness of the camera. Then the film moves on to a
montage of various actors attempting to bring this absurd screenplay to life. Greaves embodies a facetious director, who attempts to direct a peculiar screenplay about a couple who are having an extended argument about their relationship which goes to absurd places including accusations of homosexuality. The scene is handled with less than delicate taste in regards to the subject matter, and the actors seem to somehow be out of touch with reality. As the film goes on, members of the crew begin to converse about the odd nature of Greaves’ behaviour, which is just as facetious as that of the actors. The film most directly addresses the place of the actor (And the director who who should guide the actors) in relationship to the filmmaking process, how it should be handled and how that may affect the spectatorial experience. Unlike Daughters of the Dust, this film is a satire, directly attacking the traditional substantialist filmmaking structures in the hopes of providing a new one for future filmmakers, all while a deeply humourous and process-oriented sequence of events unfolds. As the crew members discuss during their extended conversations, every moment that transpires before the camera will have a certain truth to it. A great filmmaker will always be aware of what this truth is, and to do so its as if he must become the guru without a facade, who does not act but is. Most filmmakers fall into the trap of playing the character of the “director”, who is traditionally an authoritarian who imposes a structure on the actors, controlling his malleable subjects. Greaves portrays this character taken to an absurd extreme, a man who is obviously inauthentic about his presence and does not quite know how to control. And since he can not control, his vision cannot be imposed, and the acted scenes in the film are no longer about the director’s vision but are about his failure. What’s unique about this film’s process, is the game it plays with the audience. The film does not quite claim to be a documentary, it begins with a credit crawl listing the subjects as cast members as if they are part of a fictionalized story. It also does not quite claim to be fiction, since it portrays documented events. Even the subjects within the film are not quite sure about the nature of the film we are viewing. Therefore, we as the audience member have to use our own critical eye to discover the truth behind the process of the film, and that in itself is the transpiring spectatorial process. James
Williams defined the Whiteheadian event as “a fragile and passing harmony of convergence and divergence”. This is especially interesting in relation to Greaves’ film. The unanswered questions that the film poses about its own integrity, the layers of artifice, in relation to Williams’ definition, come to question the interdependence of artifice and reality itself. Perhaps, it is insignificant how the different portions of the film are different in terms of performance and reality, because whatever elements are present can mesh together in an interesting relationship regardless of their legitimacy. The apparent and obvious divergence and convergence in Tree of Life is not too different perhaps from the many different layers of performance in this film, which all need one another in order to have meaning and purpose.

As Greaves continues directing the film within the film, the actors become increasingly agitated and concerned about their performances. Greaves continually asks them to move on with the screenplay. The constraints of the scripted dialogue slowly become tyrannical. Symbiopsychotaxiplasm satirizes the traditional screenplay-to-screen process of films, where the directors seem to be married to the screenplay even when something is wrong. To adapt a film into a screenplay is not much different than adapting a book into a film, or a song into a book. The screenplay is an art form to be judged the quality of the mental movies its readers watches. Too many films suffer from being filmed screenplays. A filmed screenplay is a film that was so tied to its screenplay, that the filmmaker lost sight of the process happening all around him at any given moment while the film was being produced. When we watch Greaves direct, we feel as if life and reality are happening all around the actors, but the camera is repeatedly pointed at the horrible actors. Eventually, the actors take a stab at improvisation, and the blocking is freed up. However, Greaves directs the actors with his absurd interpretation of the script, and the performances are just as laughable. If artists are tied down, they become rigid and stagnant, products of the substantiated world, and inventing in the moment becomes impossible.
The scripted scene seems to be about a paranoid woman who is getting suspicious about her husband falling out of love with her, perhaps because he is distant. She makes an offhand remark about him, saying he might be a homosexual. This, could be performed with some humour if it seems like a ridiculous event that is not backed up at all, but the actors, under Greaves’ brilliant (or awful if you’d like to be less imaginative) direction, the actors interpret the husband truly as a homosexual, and in preparation have long conversations about whether he’s a “faggot or a butch gay” and so on and so forth. This ends up becoming the main plot point in the performed scene. It appears that more control the director imposes, the more artificial the performances become. A controlling director is playing a dangerous game, for the face of a film director is like a mirror. If the director’s mirror is unclean, it will not be ready to reflect the purity of life and the interconnectedness of everything before him, primarily of his cast and crew.

“But why should there be a single mind making decisions for those around him?” This is a question one of the crew members asks in the film. We may want to inhabit the director’s world, but not when reality offers a more enticing proposition. While we are experiencing the many layers of this film, the acting styles are constantly changing. The crew within the film, appear to be acting just facetiously as the director himself, and at a certain point one of them looks at the camera and poses the question: “What if this is a planned scene as well?” and it very well could be. So who do we really follow in this film? The park that it is set in, is a character for sure, with all of its inhabitants. But much of the film takes place in what appears to be a studio room full of the arguing crew. I believe that the filmmaking process itself is the centerpiece of this film, and there is no protagonist.

Symbiopsychotaxiplam: Take One ends with a wandering hermit happening upon the production and subsequently entering the frame to relate to the crew members. He is performative and funny, and somehow he is the only genuine subject in the film. He claims to speak the truth, and even if he may be lying this claim is truer than anything anyone else in the film makes, because it is remarkably genuine and it does not
question the film itself. Rather it is life itself which is in question. Its as if the ending suggests that the only true "acting" can be when someone has no idea that they are acting. One can not be more intimately woven into the process than if they are not aware that they are involved in a process. To be at once aware and not aware, that is the ultimate goal. Laura Marks describes the individual who is aware of the interconnectedness of the world as the: “the wandering thinker who strives to know the totality of the world”. The hermit who enters the film out of nowhere, shows more interest for the outside world than any character, and shares many anecdotes about his travels and brags about his awareness, sexual and life awareness. This is the only striving to know the totality of the world. Perhaps in the world of William Greaves’ Symbiopsychotaxiplas: Take One, this man is the Buddha.

Julie Dash and William Greaves who have tackled process philosophy in the cinema from two wildly different directions. Let us take these films from the 20th century as headlights illuminating a frequently unseen part of the cinema, and give us hope for what is to come in the future because if we are open to change, it will find us. As process cinema is discussed within academic settings, and its hallmarks are to be found in more films, more individuals can gain awareness to the totality of the world and let go of subject-object relations that reduce human beings and demean their surroundings. Symbiopsychotaxiplas: Take One by William Greaves and Daughters of the Dust by Julie Dash are two films that shocked me in the core of my being and awakened a new vitality that opened up the cement blocks set all around us. Let us hope that with each new film another piece of matter shatters until reality presents itself to us in its actuality, extending to infinity.
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