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Pisters, P.

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The Mosaic Film: Nomadic Style and Politics in Transnational Media Culture

Patricia Pisters

ABSTRACT

In contemporary media culture the formal, narrative, and stylistic structures that are most pervasive can be described as an aesthetics of the mosaic. Multiple main characters, multiple interwoven story-lines, multiple or fragmented spaces, different time-zones or paces seem to be specifically apt for engaging with the migratory nature and politics of our times. In this essay, I will look at *Babel* (USA: González Iñárritu, 2006), *WWW. What a Wonderful World* (Morocco/Germany/France: Bensaidi, 2006), and *Kicks* (Netherlands: Ter Heerd, 2007). In relation to these films I will discuss the ways in which an aesthetics of the mosaic is related to migratory movements and contemporary globalized media culture.¹ This aesthetics, I will argue, is closely related to transnationalism, which can assume different forms. Its style and politics can be characterized as nomadic, a concept that should be understood in its Nietzschean implications of mixing heterogeneous codes and referring to the Outside world. By means of a nomadic style and nomadic politics these films assert a Deleuzian “becoming-minoritarian” as everyone’s affair.

(New) Mosaic Aesthetics in Cinema

The mosaic film is not a new phenomenon. Although it has never explicitly been classified as a genre, from early on in the history of film there have been films with multiple stories. In *Intolerance* (USA, 1916), D.W. Griffith cross cuts between four stories that are set in four different periods and places (a modern story set in America in 1914, a Judean story set in Christ’s Nazareth in A.D. 27, a story that relates the

circumstances of the St. Bartolomew's massacre of 1572, and a story set in Babylonia in 539 B.C.). Although each story is shot in a different tint (amber, blue, sepia, grey-green) that makes them recognizable, it is already a complex, nonlinear approach to epic storytelling, bound together by the themes of human intolerance, hypocrisy, injustice, and discrimination. Nevertheless, this type of narrative structure never became the primary form of classical Hollywood films, nor of other film schools or movements. In classical Hollywood films, two plot-lines (action-plot and romance-plot) usually unite perfectly to tell the story of a goal-oriented protagonist (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985). Epic stories that tell larger stories of a period or of a nation are usually structured in a linear fashion.

Other examples of mosaic films are Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (USA, 1941) and Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (Japan, 1950). *Citizen Kane* begins with the death of the newspaper tycoon Charles Foster Kane and the last word he pronounces before dying, "Rosebud." A journalist then sets out to investigate the meaning of this word, interviewing many people who knew Kane, who tell their stories of Kane in a mosaic-like flashback structure that creates a colorful picture of Kane. In *Rashomon*, the central point around which the film revolves is the murder of a samurai, which is described from four different points of view. These examples of well-known mosaic films are less epic than Griffith's, describing, rather, multiple versions of the life of a single person or a single event. In these films, there is a central point that ties together the different pieces of the puzzle, and, in that sense, they present a different type of mosaic structure than the multiple epic narratives of *Intolerance*. What all of the early mosaic films have in common is the fact that they relate to the past, either to collective history or to personal memories that are presented as different moments or different versions of past events.

In contemporary media culture, it seems that the mosaic film has evolved, gaining importance to the point that we could even speak of a new genre. The film that is often described as the starting point of the contemporary mosaic film is Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (USA, 1993).² Most strikingly, the mosaic structure of this film does not refer to a history, a person, or an event presented in recollection, but relates to a shared time and place in the present. The film presents a cross section of Los Angeles at the beginning of the 1990s. Twenty-two characters are presented in ten interwoven stories (based on short stories by Raymond Carver). None of the stories, or rather "occurrences," as Altman himself calls them in the documentary *Luck, Trust and Ketchup* (USA, John Dorr and Mike Kaplan, 1993), really ends or is fundamentally connected to the others, except through the common event of a small earthquake at the end of the film and by the news broadcasts that are televised in every household. The characters sometimes meet in significant ways; at others, much more superficially. Compared with the earlier mosaic films, the frames of individual stories are opened up and intertwined in much more complex, subtle, and sometimes even

random ways in the contemporary mosaic film.³ Television and other media seem to play an important role in these random connections between otherwise often unrelated people.

Besides shared time and space in the present, another dimension of the contemporary world that is addressed in the new mosaic films (though not yet present in Altman's film) is an awareness of transnational connections that are made possible not only by the media but also by the increasing migratory nature of today's populations. In these films, the shared space potentially extends over the entire globe, which has consequences for the experience of time and temporality, which becomes more "out-of-synch" or "heterochronic."⁴ Different time zones, differing cultural significance and experiences of time, and different conceptualizations of time are now sensible through the narratives and in the images of these films. I will return to temporal aspects with respect to transnational migration in the new mosaic film later in this essay. First, I would like to look more generally at types of transnationalism.

Types of Contemporary Mosaic Transnationalism

The transnational dimension in contemporary mosaic film can manifest itself in different ways. Of course, by defining different categories of transnationalism in the mosaic film, I do not wish to make absolute distinctions. The distinctions are fluid and the categories are open. Nevertheless, the films that I am focusing on here, *Babel*, *What a Wonderful World*, and *Kicks* take different positions with respect to contemporary transnational migration and its implications, which is why I think it useful to make a rough categorization on this basis.

I will first address a group of recent mosaic films that literally move between countries and continents.⁵ *Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh, USA, 2000), for instance, gives a multilayered picture of the drug war between Mexico and the U.S. through three alternating stories that finally coincide. *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, USA, 2005) also moves between continents to tell four intertwined stories related to the oil industry.⁶ In its own particular way, *Babel* also belongs to this cross-continental type of mosaic film. *Babel* tells four stories, divided over three continents, and includes five different languages. The film starts in a small Berber village in the bare mountains of Northern Morocco, where a shepherd sells a gun to a neighbor who wants to use it to chase jackals that attack his herd of goats. His two young sons, Said and Yussef, are in charge of using the gun to protect the goats. We then move to San Diego where a Mexican nanny, Amelia, takes care of two blonde children, Debbie and Mike. Back in Morocco, Australian Susan and American Richard, who are on a bus tour, clearly have an argument to settle during their vacation. Then the film takes us to Japan, where we witness a volley ball game played by deaf-and-dumb girls, among whom is Cheiko, who is watched by her father from the tribunes. The stories will be connected by an accidental bullet, fired by Yussef while playing with his brother, which hits a touring

car filled with American tourists. It is Susan who is hit by the bullet. While Susan and Richard have to stay longer in Morocco than planned, Amelia takes their children, Debbie and Mike, to her son's wedding in Tijuana. In Tokyo, the police investigate whether the gun that was used to shoot the American touring car formerly belonged to Cheiko's father.

In *The Making of Babel* on the DVD of the film, González Iñárritu states that he has always been fascinated by the air that we all breathe and travel through, that invisible entity that we all share. With this film, he wants to show that although we are in different spaces and different time zones there is a literal cross-continental connection. Not only that the same air that we breathe connects us, but also that a Japanese gun, given as a present to a Berber shepherd in Morocco, can have enormous consequences for people in Morocco, Mexico, and the U.S. On a less literal level, the film expresses another transnational aspect that we share: a common way of expressing through the body when words fail.

A second type of transnationality can be found in mosaic films, set in third world countries, that address different iterations of migration. In this type of mosaic film, the stories are always infused with a longing-for-elsewhere. In André Téchiné's *Loin* for instance, Serge, who is French, Sarah, who is Jewish, and Said, who is Arab, meet in Tangiers, where the fate of those from the West who travel to Morocco intersects with illegal immigrants who want to leave North Africa to find a better living in Europe.⁷ This category of transnationalism would also pertain to *WWW. What a Wonderful World*, which is set in Morocco, mainly Casablanca and Rabat, cities that are rendered as hyper-modern urban spaces. Here too, multiple characters interconnect: the contract killer, Kamel; the police officer, Kenza; the cleaning lady and occasional prostitute, Souad; the hacker, Hicham; and his father and several other characters together create a picture of contemporary Morocco. Here, it is neither cross-continental settings nor a transnational cast that set up the transnational dimension, but, rather, an emphasis on contradictions related to globalization and postcolonial conditions in many former colonies. One such contradiction is embodied in the dilemma of the hacker, Hicham, who accesses the digital murder assignments of Kamel. Although he can communicate with the whole world ("Club Internet l'Univers" is the name of the internet café he frequents), his dream of actually travelling to Europe is an impossible one. This aspect of transnational culture, called "fake-globalization" by the filmmaker Bensaidi, is clearly addressed in the film (Bensaidi 2007, 1). Morocco's history as a French colony is also alluded to when Kamel and Kenza speak in French instead of Arabic. I will elaborate on other aspects of this film further on in this essay.

First, I want to touch on a third type of mosaic film related to transnationalism and the migratory mobility of people: the multicultural-meeting-point film, usually set in a Western city, where people of all colors and origins share a contemporary urban space. Here, the crux is not so much a longing for an elsewhere as it is the

difficulties associated with a newly diverse population living together in close juxtaposition. Ignorance of cultural differences, misunderstandings, racism, and (fear of) terrorism are central elements of these stories. *Crash* (USA, Paul Haggis, 2004) is an example of this type of mosaic film. Comparable to *Short Cuts*, the film presents a cross section of Los Angeles at the beginning of the second millennium. In *Crash*, a transnational dimension is added because of the racial tensions that pervade the film, though never in a one-dimensional way. Perhaps the most touching scene in this film is when a racist white cop (who takes care of his old father) saves a black woman from a car accident, even though we just saw him humiliate this woman a few moments before.⁸

In a different way, *Kicks*, set in the Netherlands in the new millennium, presents a similar type of multicultural mosaic society. Dutch-Moroccans and indigenous Dutch from different classes who live more or less segregated lives in the same city (Amsterdam) are portrayed in several plot lines. The film deals with contemporary society in several ways. A kick boxer, Said, has a Dutch girlfriend, Danielle, (“a cheese head chick” as she is unappreciatively referred to by other Dutch-Moroccans) and works with youngsters to keep them off the streets; his younger brother, Redouan, is more of a rebel and loves rapping political texts with his friend Karim; Kim is a well-to-do Dutch woman who, after she decides one day that she should get to know some of her Moroccan fellow countrymen, enters a Moroccan snack bar to talk to “real Turks,” as she says when she orders a drink, indicating that she cannot tell the difference between Moroccan and Turkish immigrants. Here, she meets Nordin, a funny, conservative Dutch-Moroccan who applies double standards to all of his behavior; her husband, Wouter, is a frustrated filmmaker looking for a good story; a trainee police officer, Aaliya, and Marouan, who works for the Dutch army, are about to marry; and Lisette runs a shelter, has a husband and son but longs for a different (more glamorous) life. Here again the connections between the characters are made possible through an accident: the killing of Redouan by a Dutch police officer, Frank, when he is caught in what seems to be a burglary attempt (in fact, he has been inspired to write more rap texts and has called Karim to join him at the clubhouse). Here again, the effects of migratory movements in the Western world in the form of racism, as well as ignorance and misunderstanding, feed the underlying tensions of the film. As with the two other films that are the central focus of this essay, I will elaborate at greater length on *Kicks* below.

The multiple storylines and multiple characters that these films share reflect the ongoing shifts in the loci of focus and importance between the center and the periphery in a transnational world. In the three films that I discuss in this essay, Morocco is a central location or point of reference, displacing the traditional centrality of the West. In addition, the conventional relationship between center and periphery with respect to the cast (Hollywood stars vs. amateur actors) is also disturbed: the

multiplicity of characters evens out the status distinctions between the characters. Even Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett, who play Richard and Susan in *Babel*, are just a part of the larger cast in which a number of nonprofessional actors take part.

Media Technology: Binding and Separating Forces

Media technology also plays an important role in the new mosaic film. Paradoxically, the pervasive reach of television news appears to be both a binding and splitting force. Both in *Babel* and in *Kicks*, news of the accident spreads quickly, and is then interpreted in relation to ethnic tensions and threats of terrorism. In *Babel*, the news media immediately interprets Susan's being struck by the bullet as a terrorist attack on American tourists, a news item that Cheiko, in Japan, stumbles on while flicking the channels. In this way, global television news creates a strange (paranoid) kind of transnational "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) that functions like an anxiety machine. "Media are spreading the fear of the other," Iñárritu says in *The Making of Babel*. *Kicks* provides a similar view of television news when, after the death of his brother, journalists confront Said with the rap texts Redouan sung earlier; in doing so they are trying to characterize Redouan one-dimensionally, as a (potential) terrorist. The television news further enhances polarization by announcing that an opinion poll held immediately after the incident shows that 79% of the Dutch-Moroccans think the motives for the murder were racist, while 77% of the indigenous Dutch think this is not the case. On the other hand, the news (both on television and on the radio) also provides all of the members of the community with a common point of reference, and provokes Kim to begin, naively perhaps, to change her own attitude, and to look for connections beyond her own circle of well-to-do Dutch friends.

The technologies featured most prominently in *WWW. What a Wonderful World* are the computer and the mobile phone. As noted above, the Internet connects Hicham (and many other Moroccans) to the rest of the world, while, at the same time, political conditions are restrictive with respect to their ability to physically travel abroad. The mobile phone is another important connector. Kamel falls in love with Kenza's voice, which he has heard only through the phone and which he does not recognize in embodied form until the very end of the film. Kenza earns some extra money by renting out her mobile phone to friends and acquaintances. Here too, new technology does not change everything: not everyone owns a (mobile) phone, the new is not for everyone. Technology connects and disconnects.

In *Babel*, the telephone is also used as a cinematographic enfolder of time. Here, communication technology's ability to bind and/or separate is realized particularly in a temporal dimension. Most of the events in the film are presented more or less chronologically, except for one moment when time is enfolded in a sort of loop.⁹ At the beginning of the film, Amelia, the Mexican nanny, picks up the phone when she is playing with the kids, Debbie and Mike. It is their father Richard, who phones from

Morocco to tell Amelia that his sister will take care of the kids the next day so that she can go to her son's wedding across the border. He also talks to Mike on the phone, who tells him about his day at school. At the end of the film we return to the same phone call—but now it is presented to us from Richard's point of view in Morocco. What makes this scene particularly touching is the fact that we not only now know what happened to Richard and Susan *before* the call was made (we did not know at the first iteration that Susan was hit by a bullet and that Richard is calling from the hospital in Casablanca). We also now know what will happen to Amelia *after* this call. Richard's sister will not come after all and, in desperation, Amelia will take the kids with her across the border. In Mexico, they will attend a wonderful wedding party, but on the way back home they will get stopped at the border. Amelia's nephew, Santiago, who is driving the car, then panics and drives away, leaving Amelia and the kids in the desert. They will survive, but Amelia, who has been taking care of Debbie and Mike since they were born, will be sent back to Mexico for illegally taking American kids over the border. Because we know what happened before and what will happen after the phone call when we see it for the second time, Amelia's answer, "Everything is fine, Mr. Richard" is just as heartbreaking as the tears that fill Richard's eyes when he hears the voice of his son, knowing, as we do, that Susan is still in critical condition. The significance of the shared moment in the present (the phone call) has been augmented by virtue of its interrelation with the past and the future. Temporally has multiplied, become "heterochronic" (Bal, this volume, p. 218).

On a narrative level, the telephone is here used for its dramatic possibilities—the play between embodied and disembodied voices, and the spectator's knowledge of a particular situation. But the telephone also reveals the temporal out-of-synch or dyschrony that is characteristic of migratory movements and migratory aesthetics. As Miguel Hernández-Navarro asserts, "the conviviality of times as a collision and irreducible tension, a fundamental "dyschrony," impossible to assimilate" (Hernández-Navarro, this volume, pp. 193–94). The transnational mosaic film reveals the contradictions and temporal tensions that come into existence when (via technology) time and space are traversed in an out-of-synch way.

Finally, the cinematographic technology itself must be addressed. In the second part of this essay, I will examine the political implications of the mosaic film, and argue that this type of film can inject narratives that are political, that constitute acts of resistance, into the mainstream media network. I will first describe how the particular nomadic styles in which these films are shot enhance their relation to contemporary reality.

Nomadic Style: Mixing the Codes

The contemporary mosaic film is often presented in a nomadic style. As the term derives from Deleuze and is often misunderstood, I will briefly revisit Deleuze's

thoughts on the nomadic before returning to the films. Postcolonial theory has put forward many objections to Deleuze's conceptual response to the postcolonial situation. His concept of the nomad has met with particularly heavy criticism. It is often seen as an all too easy way of describing migrants as nomads without any roots, or without any hierarchical relations. Deleuze's notion of the nomad is seen as both romanticizing and assimilating. Hence, this concept is believed to contribute to "perpetuating a universalized and unmarked western norm, [leaving out], or marginalizing local knowledges and prioritizing theoretical validation over political exigencies" (Wuthnow 2002, 194). While acknowledging the dangers pertaining to simplified equations of the nomad and the migrant and the universalizing powers of conceptual thinking, however, I would like to argue that the films under discussion are nomadic experiments in the sense that Deleuze explains in his essay "Nomadic Thought," in which he argues that "the nomadic adventure begins when the nomad seeks to stay in the same place by escaping the codes" (Deleuze 2004, 260). As the different types of mosaic film discussed above make clear, real mobility is not a necessary condition for establishing a transnational dimension, hence the nomad does not need to be a migrant. Other elements of the mosaic aesthetics of these films make them nomadic. As such, I am not arguing that nomads (as a special category of people) escape the codes, but that escaping the codes (in any possible way) is nomadic.

By presenting complex, fragmented, and multiple stories and characters, the films that I am discussing here themselves escape or mix the codes of conventional filmmaking that demand a central narrative and clearly goal-oriented main characters.¹⁰ *Babel* escapes the code requiring a star-driven plot by giving equal amounts of attention and screen time to Hollywood stars and amateurs. The unusual combination of Moroccan, Mexican, and Japanese settings and story lines is also refreshing. Even though the cinematographic techniques applied to making the transition from one scene to another are conventional (match on action, graphic matches or sound bridges), they are handled with such brilliance that crossing continents feels quite enchanting.

Stylistically, *WWW. What a Wonderful World* is more obviously concerned with mixing the codes (genres) of the crime film, the romantic comedy, Buster Keaton (the director, Besaidi, who plays Kamel himself, has an inexpressive face like Keaton), and Jacques Tati (some of the scenes where Kenza directs the traffic in Casablanca call *Playtime* to mind). And by presenting a stylized and modern image of Morocco, the film also breaks with Moroccan cinema's clichéd images of pitiful women, poor children, and powerless or/and tyrannical men. This nomadic representation of Morocco is often funny in its absurdity, but also in the intensity with which it confounds Morocco's traditional images. This is typical of nomadic style: "You cannot help but laugh when you mix up the codes," Deleuze argues (258). The mood in transnational mosaic films is not exclusively sombre; it also embraces cheerful moments, moments of humor and lightness.

Moments of laughter are also present in *Kicks*, in those situations when cultural codes are explicitly scrambled by Nordin, who, for instance, loves singing typical Dutch songs by the 1960s singer Boudewijn de Groot. The characters in *Kicks* may typify certain recognizable figures in contemporary Dutch society; the fact that Dutch Moroccans and indigenous Dutch meet and interact is a mixing of social codes that is not often seen in Dutch cinema. Cinematographically, the characters break another code: especially at the beginning of the film, during the introduction of the characters, but also at moments later in the film, the characters look straight into the camera, into the eyes of the spectator. This is unusual in feature films and sets up the very powerful effect of direct address, enabling the direct involvement of the spectator: it is not just the world on the screen but our own world that we are engaging with.¹¹ Which leads me to the second important attribute of the nomadic, namely its political implications.

Nomadic Politics: Outside and Intensity

Nomadic politics appears to be an essential constituent of the contemporary mosaic aesthetic. A political engagement with the contemporary world is an important aspect of all of the mosaic films that I am discussing here, and is generally characteristic of this type of film. Therefore, it must be observed that “escaping the codes” does not mean envisioning the world in terms of some transcendental realm wherein politics is no longer necessary, a formulation that is central to the critique that Peter Hallward and others have deployed against Deleuzian nomadism (Hallward 2006). On the contrary. The ideas that Deleuze distinguishes as characteristic of Nietzschean philosophy, and which are the basis of his nomadic thinking, point toward an engagement with the world. Nomadic thought connects works of art (here, cinema) to the outside and to intensity. Both concepts, the outside and intensity, relate to what Deleuze describes as “being in the same boat,” where everyone is pulling an oar, is sharing something beyond any law, contract, or institution:

We are in the same boat: a sort of lifeboat, bombs falling on every side, the lifeboat drifts toward subterranean rivers of ice, or toward rivers of fire, the Orinoco, the Amazon, everyone is pulling an oar, and we're not even supposed to like one another, we fight, we eat each other. Everyone pulling an oar is sharing, sharing something, beyond any law, any contract, any institution. Drifting, a drifting movement or “deterritorialization”: I say all this in a vague, confused way, since this is a hypothesis or a vague impression on the originality of Nietzsche's texts. A new kind of book. (Deleuze 2004, 255)

The relation with the outside is thus *not* the exclusion of reality but, on the contrary, the opening up of a philosophical text, a work of art, or a film to the forces of life. As Deleuze points out further:

What is this: a beautiful painting or a beautiful drawing? There is a frame. An aphorism has a frame, too. But whatever is in the frame, at what point does it become

beautiful? At the moment one knows and feels that the movement, that the line which is framed comes from elsewhere, that it does not begin within the limits of the frame. It began above, or next to the frame . . . Far from being the limitation of the pictorial surface, the frame is almost the opposite, putting it into immediate relation with the outside. (255)

Let me first look at some of the ways in which *Babel*, *WWW*, and *Kicks* open up to the outside and engage with the world. This is done in several ways. A classic way of engaging with politics in art is by means of metaphors or other tropes. When film is not overtly political (such as the Soviet revolutionary films of the twenties, or other overtly propagandistic films), political references are often made by using a small incident to illustrate something bigger, or by using symbolic images that allow allegorical readings. At moments, *Babel*, *WWW*, and *Kicks* all express their concerns with the contemporary world in this classical way. In *Babel*, the accidental gun shot that sets all of the other events in motion is clearly intended to be read in an allegorical way. By means of this small incident, we understand how quickly assumptions and misunderstandings turn every incident into an act of terrorism and add to the fear of the other. It is not just the events of the story that are being told. *Babel* reveals all of the tragedies that are generated by the events that the media isolates to present as news items. And, in doing so, the film actually shows not what divides us, but what binds us: the air we breathe, the love we feel, the miscommunications we cannot circumvent.

WWW presents symbolic images that have evident political significance. When, after his first attempt to cross the ocean (which costs him and his father all of their money), Hicham is thrown back on the Moroccan shore, he disassembles all of the computers in Club Internet l'Univers and sells the separate parts to get money for a second attempt. Then, in a striking and heartbreaking twist that is at the same time almost comic in its absurdity, we see the image of the little boat with Hicham and other immigrants encountering an enormous cruise ship, full of lights and music. Although the people on board the tiny boat begin to wave and scream to the cruise ship, their boat is heedlessly obliterated by the ship, which does not even notice them. We never see Hicham again after that moment.

Kicks begins with an announcement that everything in the film is based on true events. Here too, a gunshot accident is the basis for further reflections on the media's propensity to swiftly categorize the other as a potential terrorist, and, on the other hand, immediately label the police officer (and indigenous Dutch society) as racist. Although the rap songs of Redouan and Karim are strongly worded expressions of frustration about their own situation that are related to or projected onto world politics, in fact, misunderstanding, fear, and frustration are the experiential roots of this tragic incident, which is emblematic of many other tragic incidents and misunderstandings in contemporary multicultural societies.¹² More explicitly, the film also self-reflexively comments on how sensationalism and opportunism drive the

media to misrepresent multiculturalism. In this sense, the role of the filmmaker, Wouter, is telling. Wouter trolls news sources to seek out ideas for his films. When he finds a story that describes female illegal immigrants being harried by dogs in a shed, he sets out to reproduce the story on film, looking for (as he says) “real illegal women” and “real dogs” to tell a “real story” of present-day Netherlands. Wouter’s eagerness to “do something” related to multicultural society without any real involvement can be considered another example of the abusive potential of the media, while, at the same time, *Kicks* itself clearly addresses all these multicultural issues in a much more clever way. So the use of symbolic and allegorical images is one way of relating to the outside.

In *The Making of Babel*, there are a few other instances that indicate how this film relates to the outside more implicitly, beyond what can be seen on the screen. One of the scenes that is shown in rehearsal is the scene in which Said, Yussef, and their father are surrounded by Moroccan police officers with guns, and Said gets shot. After several failed attempts at shooting the scene, Said finally gets it right, at which point the Palestinian-Arabic translator of the film begins to cry. She explains that the scene reminds her of a moment in her own past, when she and her father were surrounded by men with guns. In the Mexican part of the film, the actor who plays the border patrol agent who arrests Amelia remarks that his own parents are Mexicans who illegally crossed the border to settle in America. And that, for him, it now feels very paradoxical to perform the role of an American cop who could have arrested his own parents (which would have prevented his performing this role in the film now). This bonus-DVD information does not directly feature in the film. But the real emotions and direct engagement that are related by members of the cast and crew are felt beyond the frame of the images. In all cases, the outside that the films relate to is shared by the audience, either through personal experience, or by way of the more extended shared image culture (including the bonus DVD) that we share, and through which we know or are able to imagine more than what is seen strictly on the screen. In these ways, the mosaic film is “hooked up to its [external] forces . . . like a current of energy” (Deleuze 2004, 256).

The second crucial dimension of nomadic thought with respect to the work of art is that of intensity:

The lived experience is not subjective, or not necessarily. It is not of the individual. It is flow and the interruption of flow, since each intensity is necessarily in relation to another intensity, in such a way that something gets through. This is what is underneath the codes, what escapes them, and what the codes want to translate, convert, cash in. But what Nietzsche is trying to tell us by this writing of intensities is: don’t exchange the intensity for representations. . . . There is a kind of nomadism, a perpetual migration of the intensities designated by proper names, and these interpenetrate one another as they are lived on a full body. The intensity can be lived only in relation

to its mobile inscription on a body, and to the moving exteriority of a proper name, and this is what it means for a proper name to be always a mask, the mask of an operator. (Deleuze 2004, 257)

The intensity of the images in the mosaic film is also felt through the bodies of the actors. In *Kicks*, the nomadic, nonrepresentative intensity is mainly felt in the body of the kick boxer, Said (Mimoun Oaïssa). He is the one who has learned to channel his frustrations and anger in a positive way, apparently taking the news of the death of his brother calmly, waiting for the results of the official investigation before judging what happened. This response is not appreciated by Karim and other friends of Redouan. Said remains in control, but one can feel the mounting tension expressed in his body, in the look in his eyes. It is only in his final boxing match that Said expresses his pain, which translates into a series of intensities related to the complexity of the contemporary situation, both personal and collective. Other characters express themselves bodily as well. Most striking is the silent scream that Lisette (Eva Duijvestein) utters the day after her thirtieth birthday party; she is fed up with everything and longs for more substantial recognition, a successful career as a singer or as an actress perhaps. In this way, Lisette embodies the pervasive contemporary sentiment that in order to count one must actually become a media star. Everything else is dull and boring. It is a sad sign of the times, but one that can give rise to intensive feelings of longing and boredom. Chiel (Jack Wouterse), a middle-aged drop out of Dutch origin, expresses his anger and frustration by bursting into racist slogans and constantly getting into fights.

WWW achieves intensity through abstraction and minimalism, especially in the body of Bensaidi in the role of Kamel. His face is always impassive, like a blank slate, his body performing his actions in ritualistic style: downloading the data of his next victim, performing the murder, having sex with Saoud, whom he literally throws out of bed at 4 a.m. sharp, etc. The only time we hear his voice is when he is on the phone with Kenza. Which is when we realize that she must mean a lot to him. It is by means of this minimalistic and nonrealistic approach that *WWW* translates the intensity of love.

In *Babel*, it is striking to notice how the body takes over when communication fails. This is why Iñárritu gives so much emphasis to close ups of faces and hands, so called affection-images that work directly on our senses (Deleuze 1992, 87–111). Susan and Richard are both devastated by the loss of their third child and cannot communicate. It is only after Susan is shot, and her emotions are expressed through the extremely physical gestures that are the vocabulary of a wounded body, that things between them start to move again. In Mexico, it is through Amelia's body, carrying the children through the extremely hot and dry desert, that we experience the intensity and tragic implications of the situation. And, since Cheiko is deaf and dumb, her mode of expression is physical from the beginning. Her movements are very expressive; she tries to embrace her dentist, and she takes off her panties out of frustration with not

being accepted by boys as soon as they discover her deafness. The camera work and use of sound reveal how Cheiko perceives the world very well. A scene in a hip Japanese night club is especially amazing in the way that stroboscopic light effects and sudden silences translate Cheiko's perspective. Cheiko's loneliness and longing is also captured in the last scene of the film, where she is shown standing naked on the balcony of a very high Tokyo apartment building. When her father puts his arms around her, the camera zooms out until we see only the lights of Tokyo by night to the point where the image becomes a sea of particles. And, through this image, we feel and know what intensities are traversing the city, the world.

The outside and intensity open up the interiority of the text or the image, thus giving the new mosaic films nomadic political dimensions. By relating to the virtual (invisible) but very real forces in the world that we truly share, they express and address what we can call a universal consciousness of becoming-minoritarian, which notion I will further develop in the last part of this essay.¹³

Becoming-Minoritarian as Everyone's Affair

The nomadic nature of the mosaic film relates to a politics of becoming-minoritarian. Again, this is a concept to be used with caution. Just as the nomadic should not (automatically) be equated to the migrant or the nomad as a category, becoming-minoritarian does not necessarily mean becoming a member of a minority group. This is, in the first place, because becomings in general are not representational. In fact, "any becoming is a movement of de-identification" (Marrati 2001, 211). The notion of becoming has also stirred many debates, but here I would like to refer to just the political aspect of becoming-minoritarian as it is explained by Paola Marrati. Marrati compares becoming-minoritarian to the concept of the majority. The majority is usually related to its representational value in politics. However, Deleuze has argued that the majority can never have genuine representative value:

First and foremost, the majority is a constant, a model determining what is, independent of relative qualities, what is majoritarian and what is minoritarian . . . The representation cannot but confirm the relationship between existing forces . . . The majority represents literally no one. It is a model of the construction and attribution of identities; as such, it is necessarily an empty model. (Marrati 2002; 207, 208)

The majority is thus the normative, but in fact empty, model of measurement. According to Deleuze (and Guattari), the face relates to Nobody (Ulysses) because it functions as an "abstract machine." (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 167–191) The normative face provides a model of identity and normality in relation to which deviations can be detected.¹⁴ Becoming-minoritarian, on the other hand, is always a process of deidentification and defiguration. It needs an encounter that "allow[s] for new relations to be established and new experiments in life to take place" (Marrati 2001, 212). It is a flight from the face, which in its final stage will reach a becoming-imperceptible.¹⁵

As Marrati explains, the “man of becoming” must go unnoticed; there must be nothing special to be perceived from the outside. Becoming involves a becoming-everybody,

but “becoming-everybody” (*devenir tout le monde*) is not just a matter of being unrecognisable, of being like “everybody else.” Deleuze and Guattari are playing here with the different possible meanings allowed by the French expression “*tout le monde*.” Thus *devenir tout le monde* also entails a becoming of everybody, a becoming-everything and a becoming of the world itself . . . Deleuze and Guattari oppose the figure of a universal minoritarian consciousness that in principle concerns everybody to the majoritarian “fact” that itself is the product of a state of domination, but is the analytical fact of nobody. (Marrati 2001, 214)

Becoming-minoritarian is what Deleuze and Guattari call micropolitics, which is not related to any form of representation either of majorities or of minorities. Its aim is to resist, to resist power, resist the intolerable, resist fear and to shame, resist the injustices of the present. Contemporary mosaic films function precisely as such micropolitical acts of resistance, first and foremost by proposing for the spectator an intensive, affective encounter that can provide a slightly new perception of the world.

A final point that should be noted in this respect is that this act of resistance does not entail a pure moral judgement as to who is good and who is bad. On the contrary, micropolitical acts of resistance reveal the complexity of all emotions; they do not express any judgemental value. In *Babel*, *Kicks*, and *What a Wonderful World* none of the characters are judged, precisely because they are shown in the context of their multiple relations. In *Kicks*, the Moroccan boy who seems to be a burglar is actually innocent; the police officer who shoots him seems to be terribly racist, but the film also presents him as a stranger in his own country (especially when he visits the wedding of his Moroccan colleague), who simply does not know very well how to deal with this new situation. Richard, in *Babel*, seems to be a jerk at first, not allowing his Mexican nanny to go to her son’s wedding, until we find out why he does so. In *What a Wonderful World*, nobody (murderer, hacker, prostitute, drunkard, police officer) is judged either. This nonjudgmental quality of the mosaic film is part of its non-normative strategy to provoke a universal minoritarian consciousness.

It is through nomadic aesthetics and its political implications as described above that these films relate a becoming of the world as a “possibility of inventing new forms of life, different modes of existence” (Marrati 2001, 214). As Mexican actor Gael García Bernal (who plays Santiago) says in *The Making of Babel*: “We still haven’t realized we are sharing the same planet, building fences where there are none; things have to change, one day will change.” In any case, the contemporary mosaic film clearly addresses a micropolitics of becoming-minoritarian and makes us feel and experience that this is everyone’s affair, transversing minorities and majorities by affecting and addressing us as “participant observers” of the same world beyond the screen.¹⁶

Notes

1. I would like to thank Albert ter Heerdt and Mimoun Oaïssa for giving me the opportunity to see *Kicks* outside of its theatrical release and René Wolf (EYE Film Institute Netherlands) for a viewing tape of *What a Wonderful World*.
2. To the point that a filmmaker who presents a mosaic story is quickly labeled “an Altman-clone” (Ockhuysen 2006, 1).
3. This does not mean that all mosaic films today are just about randomness. In some mosaic films, like *Magnolia* (USA, Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999) the different plots are much more tightly connected around a few themes (facing death, relationships between parents and children, regret) and a surreal ‘biblical’ ending of a rain of frogs.
4. See Miguel Hernández-Navarro and Mieke Bal in this volume.
5. This literal transnational movement between countries and continents can also be found in conventionally narrated films that are related to migratory politics. For instance, the French beur filmmakers (second generation Maghreb immigrants) now frequently leave the *banlieue* in order to travel back to their country of origin. See, for instance, *Beur, Blanc, Rouge* (Mahmoud Zemmouri, France, 2005) and *Du côté de chez soi* (Rahma El Madani, France 2004).
6. Another example of such a transcontinental mosaic film would be Claire Denis’s *L’Intrus* (2005).
7. In *Loin* and also in *Les temps qui changent*, there are multiple Western characters who choose to stay in Morocco for several reasons. See Pisters (2010).
8. The car accident seems to be another typical characteristic of the mosaic film. In *Winterschläfer* (Germany, Tom Tykwer, 1997), *Amores Perros* (Mexico, Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), and *21 Grams* (USA, Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003), a car accident is also a force that connects random lives. In *Crash*, the car accident is used more politically, with the implication that in LA today it seems to be almost the *only* way people can still connect.
9. There is also one flashback in the film that occurs at the moment when Said has been shot by the police in which we see how he and his brother Yussef used to hang into the wind on the top of a mountain, imagining they could fly.
10. This does not mean however, that more conventional stories cannot have means of “escaping the codes” on other levels. Or that mosaic aesthetics of multiplicity are necessarily already nomadic to begin with.
11. In *High Fidelity* (Great Britain, Stephen Frears, 2000), the main character also looks directly into the camera regularly. Here, the camera and the spectator are addressed by way of a confession of the character’s attitude towards his previous girlfriends.
12. The text of the song they perform together is as follows in English translation: “We can’t forget how Palestinians sweat/how they sigh, cry and die/young Palestinians defend their land/caught up in the struggle/stone in the hand/fathers and mothers all are dead/missiles, grenades, bullets in the head/moms and kids are the ones they scare/dirty fucking Jews have gone too far . . .”
13. A third characteristic of nomadic thought is “humor.” Although this is an aspect that can certainly be related to *Kicks* and *What a Wonderful World* (though less to the emotions in *Babel*), I will not deal with this aspect in this essay. See Pisters (2010).
14. Deleuze and Guattari take the face of Jesus (white man) as the prime marker of this normative model, which functions as a “computation of normalities” and then as a “deviance detector.” It is an “abstract machine” in that it very often works in an unconscious or implicit way without a particular agent. See the

chapter on “Faciality” in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 167–191).

15. A film that most beautifully expresses “becoming-imperceptible” is *Bin-Jip* (South Korea/Japan, Kim Ki-Duk, 2004).

16. The term “participant observers” derives from visual anthropology but is introduced by Martha Blassnigg to discuss the experience of the film viewer (Blassnigg, 2007).

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