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On Wrinkles, Laughter, and the Self-Reflexivity of Joris Ivens's *A Tale of the Wind*

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Abstract

In his swan song *A Tale of the Wind* (1988), Joris Ivens undertakes the seemingly impossible task of capturing the invisible—the wind—on film. At the same time, the film looks back over the director's own career, in a spirit that is at once self-reflective and youthful. Set mainly in China, it functions both as an allegory of the wind and as a search for a middle ground between realism and more poetic approaches to cinema. This article examines the film through the lenses of self-reflexivity, the cinematic portrayal of old age, and the relation between life and death. It first delves into Stanley Cavell's ontological understanding of self-reflexivity, before examining how this self-reflexivity unfolds in *A Tale of the Wind*. In this regard, it analyses the relationship between technique and magic, the search for a "theory of cinema", and the importance of imagination and childhood. Taking into consideration the Deleuzian correlation between face and landscape and the notion of "any space whatever", the article concludes by analysing old age through its marks and gestures: wrinkles, laughter, waiting, and searching—elements that contribute decisively to the film's self-reflexivity.

Keywords: Joris Ivens; Marceline Loridan; *A Tale of the Wind*; self-reflexivity; childhood; imagination; old age; face; landscape; waiting

1. Introduction

In his swan song *A Tale of the Wind* (1988), Joris Ivens undertakes the seemingly impossible task of capturing the invisible—the wind—on film. At the same time, the film critically yet playfully revisits its director's long career. Though that career spanned six decades, the film is not weighed down by the past. Instead, it is driven by a sense of balance—in the dual sense of seeking equilibrium and taking stock. Such balance may be possible only once life experience has taught that some things must be relinquished so that others may be explored, much as a ship must cast off ballast in order to sail faster, or at least to navigate more favourable depths.

In an interview published in *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1989 following the release of *A Tale of the Wind*, Ivens acknowledged that during the almost ten years that had passed since his previous film—*Commémoration of the Death of Mao Zedong (News Item)* (1979), made for Chinese television—he had begun to reassess the perspective that had informed his earlier work: "what I believed in, utopias, very fixed ideologies . . . [T]he wind, I believe, carries everything away" (Ivens et al. 1989, p. 38).¹ Here, the wind is a corollary of self-reflection and an expression of the desire to push boundaries further. Marceline Loridan, Joris's wife and a close collaborator for decades, who in recognition of her key role in the making of the film is credited as one of the directors, quotes Picasso to stress the freshness and inaugural



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character of the film: “‘It takes time to become young.’ Joris is a man who makes films and who is not at the end of his career” (Ivens et al. 1989, p. 39). Joris would die only a few months after this interview and was therefore unable to continue his work. Nonetheless, this double spirit of self-reflection and youthfulness forms the lifeblood of their final film—a testament that looks back, yet does so with the strength of a new beginning.

In the same issue of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Toubiana (1989, p. 34) identifies several features of Ivens’s body of work, already discernible in films from the 1920s and 1930s, that help to situate *A Tale of the Wind*, whether through contrast or continuity, self-criticism or expansion. The first is a dedication to reality—to human struggles and the fight for liberation—marked by a distinctly political orientation grounded in a commitment to socialism, as exemplified by *Borinage* (1934). The second is experimentation and avant-garde cinema, a line of work that at times approaches formalism, such as in *The Bridge* (1928) and *Rain* (1929). The third is an exploration of the poetic dimension of places and elements—rain, rivers, mountains, or wind. With regard to the second and third features, it is worth recalling not only the originality of Ivens’s treatment of rain in the film *Rain*, but also the later film *The Mistral* (1966). However, even when these features predominate, Ivens’s films never lose sight of the social and cultural issues they address on multiple levels, including the dialectic between natural elements and the struggles of human life. Drawing on the concepts of realistic and formative tendencies developed by Siegfried Kracauer in *Theory of Film*, Bakker (2006, pp. 653–58) interprets Ivens’s documentaries in terms of the pervasive interplay—though with varying modulations and balances—between these two tendencies. From his earliest films to his last, the complementarity between them evolves as Ivens experiments with new technical and aesthetic solutions.

A Tale of the Wind, however, is a singular work that resists easy classification. It belongs neither to a realist cinema marked by a strong ideological character nor to the sphere of formalist or poetic experimentation. According to Toubiana, it is an “allegory about the wind, about waiting for the wind: movement, time, noise, culture, myths. As many elements as the wind encompasses and transports” (Toubiana 1989, p. 35). In this sense, while the film remains a “last battle”, its testimonial character is tempered by a “grace” and a “sweet poetic irony” (Toubiana 1989, p. 34) that are not found—at least in these terms—in Ivens’s previous films.

The opening scenes portray, in an autobiographical tone, an enthusiastic Dutch boy who dreams of flying to China and who, from an early age, is captivated by the power of the wind, the urge for discovery, and the freedom of imagination. The rest of the film, while retaining this autobiographical tone, unfolds almost entirely in China and is guided by an asthmatic ninety-year-old man whose enthusiasm is now directed toward new tasks. Immediately before the sequence with the Dutch boy, the film opens with the words:

The Old Man, the hero of this tale, was born at the end of the last century, in a country where man has always striven to tame the sea and harness the wind. Camera in hand, he has traversed the 20th century in the midst of the stormy history of our time. In the evening of his life, at age 90, having survived the various wars and struggles that he filmed, the old filmmaker sets off for China. He has embarked on a mad project: to capture the invisible image of the wind.²

This can be understood as a way of coming to terms with the cultural richness and complexity of China, a country Ivens had portrayed several times before, mainly from a social and political perspective. At the same time, it offers an opportunity to explore certain aspects of Chinese culture and mythology associated with the wind. The choice is hardly accidental, given that Chinese culture attaches considerable importance to the wind, in some cases even associating it with the very breath of the universe (Watson 2019, p. 328).

As we shall see in more detail, the wind assumes a profound cosmogonic and metaphysical dimension in the film.

In the interview, Joris explains that he and his wife sought to discover something new in the middle ground between Lumière and Méliès—between the realistic, documentary impulse and more poetic, imaginative approaches to cinema. This search is not only about finding a new theme or revisiting earlier ones from a different perspective; it is also about understanding the potential of cinema and its capacity to reveal the materiality of things, as well as the natural and human elements that seem to elude the camera. In another sense, it is a search for those invisible elements that, through the camera, give the world life and meaning. According to Toubiana (1989, p. 35), the two vocations that emerged with the origins of cinema (Lumière and Méliès) are united by Joris and Marceline's view of cinema as a "machine for exploration, a springboard into the unknown, a form of collective transport [*un transport en commun*]". *A Tale of the Wind* is just such a machine.

Filmed by Marceline in many scenes, and in a way that suggests the film is also animated by love, the old man played by Joris becomes the central character in a transitional space of cinematic reflection, poised somewhere between documentary and fiction. "How can the invisible be filmed?" the film asks at the outset—a question that becomes an interrogation of cinema itself, guided by the search and preparation for the wind. It is precisely this self-reflexive dimension of the film, coupled with its essayistic style, that renders it a powerful philosophical work.

Against this background, the present article analyses Ivens's swan song and its relevance for a philosophical approach to cinema, focusing in particular on self-reflexivity, the cinematic portrayal of old age, and the relation between life and death. To this end, it first examines the notion of self-reflexivity, drawing primarily on Stanley Cavell's ontological understanding of cinema, before considering how this self-reflexivity unfolds in *A Tale of the Wind*. In this context, it analyses the relationship between technique and magic, the search for a "theory of cinema", and the particular form of self-portraiture that summons the forces of imagination and childhood.

Many swan songs bear the mark of their authors' old age and proximity to death, aspects that are likewise explored in this film, albeit in different guises. Drawing also on a Deleuzian framework—particularly the relation between face and landscape and the notion of "any space whatever"—the article examines old age not so much as a direct testimony to history and lived experience as through its marks and gestures: wrinkles, laughter, waiting, and searching. These elements punctuate several scenes and contribute decisively to the film's self-reflexive character.

2. The Unfolding of Self-Reflexivity

In general terms, artistic *self-reflexivity* refers to an artwork's capacity to foster reflection on its own processes and objectives within a composition that shows signs of a meta-narrative and/or self-interpretation. Although this definition can be applied to various artistic phenomena and, in cinema, to many different genres and examples, the particularities of *A Tale of the Wind* suggest a rich unfolding of self-reflexivity that contributes both to its essayistic approach and to its searching character. The film not only places the director's career into perspective but also functions as a performative self-portrait. Hence, from the outset, it emerges from a twofold kind of self-reflexivity. Added to this, Ivens's ageing physical presence contributes not only to a thorough exploration of the mutual permeability of documentary and fiction but also to a bodily cinematic experience, from which arise his slow movements and, as we will see in more detail below, the affective function of his face.³

When exploring the implications of this approach, it is important to begin with a broader understanding of cinematic self-reflexivity. For Stanley Cavell, self-reflexivity possesses an ontological dimension anchored in the technical materiality of the medium. By attending to the smallest choices in filming and editing, Cavell's understanding transcends the commonplace definition of self-reflexivity as an intellectual exercise in meta-commentary on the medium itself. In this sense, films inherently reveal an awareness of their own constitutive processes. In other words, they manifest forms of reflection that support the idea that film "thinks"—a process that can, of course, be furthered by the viewer, critic or philosopher. In an interview with Andrew Klevan, Cavell describes self-reflexivity in terms that allow us to expand our understanding of the expression "filming the invisible":

What I wanted to capture by saying that film is inherently self-reflexive is simply the significance of the fact that what you're given in film is a view of a place or a person or an object that is from one place rather than any other, at this time and not another, for this interval rather than another, in this light and with this texture and not others, and so on. Choice—thought, reflection—is on the surface. Obviously there are homologous choices in the other arts, but with film the alternatives (of angle, distance, lighting, interval, etc.) are in principle so obvious as to be imponderable. The reason for emphasising this, even so brusquely, is that it is just the thing that is invisible about film. It's on the surface, you can't miss it, but you inveterately miss it. Film trades on this, on missing it; it is part of film's emotionality. Call it the false transparency of film. If we say that this transparency is achieved through film's power to induce trance-like states, then our next task is to uncover the sources of this power. Should we relate false transparency to a resistance to the recognition of reality's independence of us?"

(Cavell and Klevan 2005, p. 189)

Grounded in technique, this tension between what is visible and what remains imponderable in film is capable of producing a magical effect—or, in Cavell's words, an effect that plays with the choices made and with the false transparency of the image. Indeed, as one of the conditions of the possibility of cinema, this "invisibility" manifests itself on a surface that at some level will always go unnoticed.

Turning to ideas developed in *The World Viewed*, we might add that this process of choice and reflection is fundamental to the expansion of the medium's aesthetic possibilities. As with other art forms, these possibilities are not given in advance; rather, they are constructed as films themselves invent ways of doing or saying something in a certain way, in an ongoing process of discovery: "To discover ways of making sense is always a matter of the relation of an artist to his art, each discovering the other" (Cavell 1979, p. 32). This process also presupposes cinema's capacity—through its creators and their works—to reflect on itself, in a kind of circular, global relationship that each work establishes with the medium in which it is produced (Cavell 2005, pp. 118–19).

This conceptual framework reveals a further self-reflective, circular layer in *A Tale of the Wind*. In addition to being composed of choices and reflections, in addition to revisiting Ivens's own body of work through a series of connections to (and departures from) his earlier films, it explicitly addresses the medium of cinema and the discovery of its aesthetic possibilities. The metaphysical question of how to film the invisible—in this case, the wind—also points, in a more allegorical sense, to a questioning of cinema as such. This becomes particularly clear in the film's references to the director's creative power and the technical capacities of cinema, most strikingly in two scenes that incorporate a distinctly magical dimension.⁴

In the first, after a failed attempt to film Emperor Qin Shi Huang's army of terracotta warriors—due to restrictions imposed by the archaeological site's management, which Ivens felt would greatly limit his freedom—the project is transformed. Instead, Ivens builds his own army from replicas purchased in local shops. In the following scene we see “General” Ivens at the head of this army; suddenly, after tapping his cane on the floor, the statues come to life and begin marching before him. Here, the old man becomes a director who breathes life into the statues and incorporates the material obstacles of reality—such as the bureaucracy and absurdity of Chinese institutions—using them to reveal the magical effects of the cinematic apparatus.

The second scene occurs near the end of the film. After a long wait for the wind in the desert, Ivens accepts the intervention of a Chinese woman's magic. With the help of two fans provided by the crew, and after tracing a diagram in the sand, she summons a windstorm. Parallel to this ritual, Ivens's own imprecations seem to appropriate the sorceress's magical powers in the face of a nature that remains inaccessible and indifferent to human beings. Once again, magic and technique operate dialectically in this act of “giving life” through wind.

An aspect already present in the terracotta warriors scene becomes even more incisive here: the emphatic words and gestures of the elderly, asthmatic director reveal the tense coexistence of his physical fragility (his awareness of it, his equanimity in the face of death) and the omnipotence of art that is rehearsed throughout the film, a reminder of the invisible and vital forces that leave their traces on the surface of images. Moreover, given Ivens's evident health problems (difficulties that led to changes to the production plan), the themes of death and the struggle between life and death permeate the film—though often indirectly, under the guise of grace and playfulness.

3. A Self-Portrait That Summons the Forces of Imagination and Childhood

To further elaborate on the various meanings of self-reflexivity, it is important to consider the essayistic nature of *A Tale of the Wind* and the distinctive self-portrait it provides.

Montaigne's *Essays* offer a canonical example of reflections turned inward, undertaking an autonomous inquiry into a human being's relationship with himself. Yet each instance of self-scrutiny resists reduction to a unified totality. As Adorno observes, “the essay allows for the consciousness of non-identity, without expressing it directly” (Adorno 1991, p. 17). In this sense, fragmentary and partial introspection strengthens the process of searching and discovery that lies at the heart of the essay form. The metaphors of painting and self-portraiture that Montaigne employs in his opening words (de Montaigne 1965, p. 2) and revisits repeatedly throughout the *Essays* are particularly apt here: each brushstroke captures a particular trait, though not necessarily a definitive one.

This revisiting of Montaigne's and Adorno's thoughts on the essay is not meant to argue for their direct influence on Ivens's film, but rather to stress how the latter expands upon the essayistic tradition. Cinematic self-reflexivity—and in particular the way it is handled in *A Tale of the Wind*—is a way of working through the relationship between detail and totality, between individual sequences and the film as a whole. If the film is a search, this is because its fragments return to its guiding questions with the awareness that a definitive answer is impossible. This process has a certain circularity, but also a clear beginning and end. In this sense, and recovering Cavell's framework outlined above, one can add that the film expands the essay form, both within the cinematic medium and philosophically. Furthermore, it can be classified as an essay film due to its affinity with the brushstrokes of a self-portrait: despite its use of fictional devices, the relationship between parts and the whole reflect Ivens's life and the totality of his films.

These different layers form a picture that invites reflection on the meaning of filmic objectivity and the subjectivity of points of view. As Rose-Marie Godier observes:

The self-portrait is a recapitulation that, at the same time, completes the series of metamorphoses in the filmmaker's work. It could be that Ivens has placed in the background of the film—just as Poussin did in the allegory that opens his painting—the hidden figure of a “Theory of Cinema”: through the particular conditions of his own representation, Ivens also reveals the particular conditions of his work. (Godier 2005, p. 2)

What gives coherence to the recapitulation is a filmic search that eschews any pretence of completeness and allows itself to be guided, among many other things, by imagination, childhood, and the wanderings of an old man. Let us briefly consider these aspects.

Imagination is often linked to an initial impulse connected to childhood and, therefore, to the very first scenes of our lives, which leave an indelible and unconscious mark on who we are and what we do in adulthood. The materials, elements and technical instruments that surrounded us in childhood shape our lives and gestures, participating in the processes through which we deform, recreate, and imagine worlds. In *A Tale of the Wind*, we are never explicitly told that the young boy who wishes to fly a plane to China is Ivens himself, or even a poetic recollection of him. Yet the brushstroke of this sequence lends a unique tone to the rest of the film, centring on the power of cinema to explore and create worlds.

A series of striking, more abstract shots at the beginning of the flying Dutch boy sequence present several views of a windmill. The first is of a blue sky interspersed with the blades of the windmill. The blades' rhythmic movement and sound give the film an impetus that is immediately absorbed and echoed by the overlapping music. The rhythmic and melodic variations of Michel Portal's jazz score play an important role, not only accompanying the many moments of waiting and Ivens's wanderings in search of the wind but also creating a breezy continuity between them. The blades of the windmill also recall the functioning of a camera shutter—an invisible operation essential to capturing images on film. Yet this equivalence does not suggest that cinema is merely illusion. Rather, as Thomas (2016, pp. 24–25) observes, it provides a way of connecting cinematic images with the flow of life and reality, emphasising the underlying continuity of discontinuity.

Also establishing an important correlation with childhood is the scene depicting the journey to the moon. After sitting for a long time in the desert waiting for the wind, Ivens is shown in a close-up, his eyes closed. The ambiguity and calmness of his expression suggest that he might be sleeping—or, at the limit, that he has died. This latter hypothesis gains strength when he suddenly falls from the chair, completely helpless. During his convalescence, as if in a dream, the old man walks alongside the Dutch boy. Meanwhile, in hospital, he receives a visit from the trickster Monkey, a key figure in the film inspired by the mythical legend of Sun Wukong (the Monkey King). As a humorous guardian angel of sorts, this “rebel and playful spirit [...] brings movement where rigidity rules, creates space for life where death is imminent” (De Bleeckere 1999, p. 220). In the hospital room, he covers Ivens with a piece of fabric depicting a dragon, a mythical figure in Chinese culture. Sun Wukong's gestures make the fabric resemble a shroud; yet rather than affirming death, these oneiric and ritual preparations give rise to a poetic and imaginative journey to the moon inspired by Méliès, including excerpts from *Le voyage dans la lune*. This journey is interwoven with the Chinese myth of Hou Yi, the archer who, after shooting down nine of the ten suns that once threatened the Earth, was rewarded with the elixir of life. Hou Yi's wife Chang'e, who flew to the moon after drinking the elixir, complains to Ivens about the monotony of her days and the absence of wind. She then invites him to observe the Earth through a telescope and to experiment with a new point of view. This leads him back to

Earth, to a scene set in a Chinese village built in the studio, whose theatrical artificiality makes possible a take that is both playful and political.

Together with the terracotta warrior sequence, these scenes of everyday life filmed in the studio—in particular the Monkey’s prank on a party member addressing an indifferent audience—are emblematic of Joris and Marceline’s tender yet ironic approach to contemporary Chinese society. The reactivation of childhood energies, together with the help of the light-hearted Monkey, contributes decisively to the film’s ironic distance.

While avoiding a nostalgic relation to the past, Walter Benjamin’s work explores the power of childhood in multiple, fertile ways, examining its implications for human development and its connections to the philosophy of history, aesthetics and politics. A remark from *The Arcades Project* on the relationship between childhood, technology and mythology offers an interesting angle from which to approach the moon sequence:

Only a thoughtless observer can deny that correspondences come into play between the world of modern technology and the archaic symbol-world of mythology. Of course, initially the technologically new seems nothing more than that. But in the very next childhood memory, its traits are already altered. Every childhood achieves something great and irreplaceable for humanity. By the interest it takes in technological phenomena, by the curiosity it displays before any sort of invention or machinery, every childhood binds the accomplishments of technology to the old worlds of symbol. (Benjamin 1999b, p. 461)

The ability to bind “the accomplishments of technology to the old worlds of symbol” presupposes recognition of the imaginative power inherent in childhood—a power that, one might say, can be remembered and exercised throughout life through different technical devices. Transversal to human experience, the power of childhood finds a privileged domain of action in art. It is therefore possible to argue that the “theory of cinema” presented in *A Tale of the Wind* stems largely from the connection between childhood, imagination, mythology, and technology. While Ivens’s biography may be important for interpreting the self-portrait at the heart of the film, perhaps even more important is the way the film reflects on the enduring powers of childhood—even if, or precisely because, it is an essay made by an old man.

4. Wrinkles and Laughter

Wrinkles are visible marks of the passage of time, becoming affective matter in the many close-ups of Ivens’s face. Throughout the film, however, they find an intriguing counterpoint in the folds of windblown desert sand and the eroded surfaces of rocks. These traces left by natural elements evoke different temporal strata: sand points to the transience of a material whose form is constantly changing, while the erosion of rocks points to geological processes unfolding on an incomparably larger temporal scale. Set against these different orders of temporality, the human element—whether the face, the anthropocentric point of view, or the human body as an organism—is challenged, or at least drawn into another stratum of meaning.

In this sense, compared with *The Mistral*, *A Tale of the Wind* pursues more deeply the aspiration to capture and understand the wind, with evident repercussions for the film’s style and structure. Much of this approach derives from the work that Joris and Marceline carried out with Chinese and French sinologists between 1980 and 1984. In the interview mentioned above, Marceline describes this as a more metaphysical vision, closer to Chinese civilization and thought, in which the omnipresence of wind is reflected in such diverse domains as medicine, the importance of breathing, and mythology (Ivens et al. 1989, p. 38). This perspective also presupposes a symbolic dimension and a continuously flowing relationship between the intimate and the infinitely large. Just as the

movements of Tai Chi cannot be conceived of or practiced without breathing and wind, so Ivens's wrinkled face cannot be conceived of or perceived apart from the forces of the elements and the cosmos. This constant shift of scale is fundamental to the process of searching and discovery developed in the film, which is thus imbued with a cosmogonic dimension.⁵

The correlation between face and landscape has a long history in both cinema and film theory and has been explored by authors as diverse as Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze in their interpretations of the potential of montage. Benjamin refers to this correlation when considering Russian films in the context of a broader reflection on the human figure, the anonymity of faces, and the political significance of cinema (Benjamin 1999a, p. 519). Deleuze, for his part, emphasises aspects such as the deterritorialization of the body and the white wall/black hole process associated with the abstract machine of facialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 167–91). Although I cannot examine Deleuze's conceptual framework in detail here, it is important to emphasise that the deterritorializing function of the face operates first and foremost at the level of the head, which is thus extracted by an abstract machine from the stratum of the organism and thereby acquires new possibilities of signification and subjectivation. Just as architecture works with elements that function as faces capable of altering the landscape, and just as painting, conversely, composes landscapes as faces, cinema likewise operates this correlation in a distinctive way:

The close-up in film treats the face primarily as a landscape; that is the definition of film, black hole and white wall, screen and camera. But the same goes for the earlier arts, architecture, painting, even the novel: close-ups animate and invent all of their correlations. So, is your mother a landscape or a face? A face or a factory? (Godard.) All faces envelop an unknown, unexplored landscape; all landscapes are populated by a loved or dreamed-of face, develop a face to come or already past. What face has not called upon the landscapes it amalgamated, sea and hill; what landscape has not evoked the face that would have completed it, providing an unexpected complement for its lines and traits?

(Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 172–73)

In *A Tale of the Wind*, it is as if the old man's face had finally found its landscape, hitherto unknown, in the desert and eroded rocks, joining with them through the invisible force of the wind. The complementarity between the lines and traits of the face and those of the landscape becomes even more striking given the fundamental role of the desert. Although the counterpoint sequences often evoke the power of nature through mountains, rocks, rivers, and the sea, the waiting for the wind takes place primarily in the desert that runs through the film in its placidity. Far from being a place of death, the desert appears as a space where forms—and thus the face—are in constant transformation.

Ivens's close-ups take three principal forms. The first is that of waiting, his gaze fixed on infinity; the second is that of sleep, the moment when he passes out; the third, to which we will return below, occurs in the final sequence, when, after the arrival of the wind, he bursts into unbridled laughter. It is symptomatic that, after many days of waiting, the film ends with Ivens disappearing behind a dune—and thus from the frame—with his back turned to the camera. The magic is over; what remains is the invisible and its traces.

According to Deleuze's definition of affection-image in *Cinema 1: Image-movement*, a key reason for the equivalence of the face and the close-up lies in the abstraction of spatial and temporal coordinates common to both. Within the broader economy of Deleuze's thought, this abstraction facilitates the transition from movement to expression and helps to explain the notion of "any space whatever" (Deleuze 1986, pp. 111–22). It is in this context that Deleuze refers to two of Ivens's earliest films (*Rain* and *Bridge*) in order to show how "fragmentation" (a concept borrowed from Epstein) creates a space that does not aim to represent a specific instance of rain or a specific bridge in space and time. This does

not mean that identification and recognition cannot occur; rather, this cinematographic procedure opens the film to other modes of expression. Nor does fragmentation necessarily become “anti-historical”. Instead, it engages the power of historical inscription in a more abstract way.

In this sense, Ivens’s treatment of the mistral wind in the 1966 film recovers some of these methods, featuring beautiful and poetic scenes in which the wind—any wind whatever—becomes the material and formal “director” of the images, intensifying their expressive force while never losing sight of their social and anthropological dimensions. The mistral is characteristic of a particular region of France, leaving its marks not only on the natural elements but also on human life and, therefore, on historical experience. This correlation is amplified and further developed in *A Tale of the Wind*. Specific, geographically identifiable winds are named, yet this naming ultimately serves to reflect on the metaphysical dimension and the “any space whatever” character of the wind itself. This later film also introduces additional elements: on the one hand, it incorporates (quotes?) images of windblown vegetation that closely recall those of *The Mistral*; on the other, it integrates several features already discussed in previous sections: Chinese symbolism and mythology, breathing and its relation to life, reflection on the medium of film, and the possibility of filming the invisible.

In the part of the film in which Ivens, the film crew, and the porters climb the mountain, there is a sequence in which several voices name and briefly evoke the symbolism of winds in different cultures. The final voice refers to the Book of Genesis: “I am the breadth of the first day of creation which floated on the waters.” The breath of the universe is thus every singular wind and all winds together. In scenes where faces, landscapes, and the materiality of nature take centre stage, one can speak of a kind of abstraction—though one different from that found in the experiments with rain and the Rotterdam bridge in the 1920s, at least in terms of its consequences and modes of expression. The wind, affectively inscribed on faces and in the landscape, opens onto a cosmological plane and a relationship between the singular and the whole that summons the earth and creation. It is precisely at this point that the unfolding of the film’s self-reflexivity reaches a further layer. The essayistic search does not solely concern the subject, in the modern sense of the term that Montaigne helped to formulate, or its internal turmoil; it also concerns what transcends human agency and indelibly shapes it. Expressions and affects are woven into the cinematic movement as elements that erupt through the surface of the image, yet they also retreat into a latency the effects of which extend throughout the rest of the film.

The old man is both face and landscape, self-reflection and affect; his wrinkles and flowing white hair can be understood in terms of the Deleuzian conceptual framework outlined above. Yet he is also Ivens staging his own self-portrait. This becomes evident through the presence of masks: in one instance, he shows great interest in the wind mask by the sculptor Guangzhong, which accentuates the element of magic; in another, in a very brief shot of Ivens leaving the Chinese village studio set, his face has been painted to resemble the Monkey King. In a certain sense, the Monkey resembles a Greek *daimon* in the way it mediates between heaven and earth, between the singular and the whole. By embodying the Monkey, Ivens appropriates both the power of connection and its playful spirit, placing both in the service of artistic and political freedom. At the heart of the film’s self-reflexivity, the expressiveness of the face and the landscape finds its principal dialectical counterpoint in the mask.

Yet there is a moment when the two counterpoints converge and carry the film to another level: the laughter in the final scenes. It is no coincidence that, at the beginning of *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze refers to this scene when reflecting on the gifts and the grace of old age: “Cinema too sometimes offers us its gifts of the third age, as when

Ivens, for example, blends his laughter with the witch's laughter in the howling wind" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 2). The laughter in these final scenes can be seen as a gesture of sovereign freedom that bursts forth between life and death, playing with both. In fact, the film already begins to laugh at its own solemnity in its opening scenes: while the Tai Chi sage is teaching Ivens profound lessons about the relationship between breathing, life and death, he slips on a banana peel left by the Monkey King and falls. It is as if the film, and Ivens as part of it, were saying: let us reflect on life and death, but let us not take them too seriously.

5. Waiting and Exploring: Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have sought to show that the various layers of *A Tale of the Wind's* self-reflexivity arise from its different "ways of making sense" (Cavell 1979, p. 32), some foregrounded, such as the dialectic between face and landscape, others merely suggested, such as the search for a "theory" capable of reconciling Lumière and Méliès. Returning to the Cavellian framework analysed in the second section, we have seen that the film unfolds its self-reflexivity by positioning itself as a singular work within a tradition that it both invokes and expands. The manner in which it does so, however, resists any attempt to reduce it to a clear-cut unifying concept. Moreover, if it is indeed crucial "to let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it" (Cavell 1981, p. 10), then *A Tale of the Wind's* poetic dimension invites a mode of writing to which this article has attempted to respond, one that engages philosophical concepts without sacrificing the film's sensibility and particularities. In this regard, I would like to conclude with an analysis of the tension the film creates between waiting and searching, for in a sense it is this tension that nourishes the various layers examined thus far.

After the flying Dutch boy sequence, we see for the first time the old man seated on a chair in the desert. Despite the unusual setting, he assumes the characteristic posture of waiting. In fact, the many variations of waiting, and the inner movements associated with them, provide this multilayered film with an important framework. Sylvain De Bleekere identifies three film-symphonic movements of the waiting attitude: "In the *first* movement, the image of the waiting itself under a burning sun is the dominant image. In the *second* movement, the old man is still waiting patiently through day and night. Finally, exhausted, he collapses into unconsciousness. The *third* movement and the final movement reveals the revived old man, awaiting the arrival of the wind in a tent" (De Bleekere 1999, pp. 211–12). However, within the mosaic of scenes with which Joris and Marceline enrich the spaces between these three symphonic movements, the attitude is far from passive.

In the 1920s, Kracauer became interested in the power of waiting as a liminal category related to the individual experience of lived time, but above all as a category stemming from the connection between that experience and its historical context. It was also in this sense that he developed thoughtful analyses of everyday in-between spaces, such as the hotel lobby (Kracauer 1995b). These were conceived at the heart of the uncertainty and loss of meaning that marked the early decades of the twentieth century, in relation to both divine transcendence and history. Waiting, in particular, has a double-edged nature: negatively, it can lead to a state of constant dissatisfaction among those who await only the absolute; in its positive sense, it is an openness that implies a constant attunement to reality, "a reality that is filled with incarnate things and people and that therefore demands to be seen concretely" (Kracauer 1995a, p. 140). In this sense, waiting "must not in any way be confused with a relaxation of the forces of the soul directed toward ultimate things; rather, quite the contrary, it consists of tense activity and engaged self-preparation" (Kracauer 1995a, p. 139). Such preparation concerns a transformation that cannot be achieved by force or purely rational knowledge but which, through experience, gradually

brings us closer to what is to come while still preserving traces of invisibility and uncertainty. Ivens's film—which can be said to revive Kracauer's account of the relationship between the individual and his or her historical context through the power of waiting—is thus the culmination of his lifelong journey through a reality of “incarnate things”. What ultimately comes along to transform and bring this journey to a close is the wind.

A comparison with two films by other directors, in which the wind plays either a redemptive or a fatal role, may be instructive here. As Dyer (2009) observes in his study of the wind in the work of Federico Fellini, there is a moment in the final sequence of *The Nights of Cabiria* when the hopeful prostitute, upon exiting the car of a good man, is met by gusts of wind that herald something new and liberating. On the other hand, in Béla Tarr's *Turin Horse*, the wind is a constant, relentless element which, rather than evoking redemption, points to human suffering and the end of time. These two examples show how the wind, whether through its constant presence or its subtle appearance in a scene, can convey very distinct meanings and affects. In the case of *A Tale of the Wind*, it is a matter neither of redemption nor of pessimism, but rather the culmination of a process and an opening onto a horizon of possibilities.

Although at times the film seems to establish an opposition between wind (life) and stillness (death), the desert ultimately proves to be the most suitable place for waiting. From a conceptual perspective, both the stillness of the desert and the attitude of waiting point to an in-between zone where passivity and activity are intertwined and where the acceptance of human finitude becomes a way of life. A space of potency, of latent differences, the desert is also, as we saw earlier, a landscape whose features, traces, and wrinkles are constantly being transformed. The film's montage interweaves the old man's waiting in the desert with his journeys through various places in China in search of traces left by the wind, such that the waiting itself becomes the creation of an expectation and a form of (self-)preparation for the wind that is to come. Between the sequences in which he is seated, he moves—or is carried—from place to place, taking with him his machine for exploration, his theory and experience of cinema.

This self-portrait of old age has its own specific characteristics. In this case, given that *A Tale of the Wind* functions as a swan song, it forms an important part of the film's self-reflexivity. Moreover, as a portrait of someone who lived through the upheavals of the twentieth century, Ivens's wandering is striking in its liveliness, as if he were physically and metaphysically searching for his place in the world, leaving us a vision of China that serves as a poetic reminder of the need to look at reality from different perspectives. While Joris and Marceline had plans for another film, this one ultimately became their last. In it, waiting coexists with the restlessness of a man who is unafraid to integrate his disenchantments into his testament, turning them into a new opportunity for experimentation.

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Notes

¹ Here and in the following translations from the French, the translation is mine.

² I am here using Rosenbaum's (1992) translation.

- ³ Although she does not mention *A Tale of the Wind*, Schefer (2008) sheds interesting light on the reflective function of self-portraiture in documentary filmmaking and the resulting opening up of cinematic spaces of experimentation.
- ⁴ On cinema's "originary" relationship with magic, see (Cavell 1979, pp. 37–41).
- ⁵ Ivens's two films about the wind would make an interesting subject for approaches focused on examining how cinema can challenge anthropocentric conceptions, such as eco-cinema and "elemental cinema" (de Luca and Mroz 2025).

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