7

Misdirection/Visual Narration

The Hourglass Sanatorium, Before the Rain, Ajami, Under Fire, The Conversation, Rising Sun, Psycho, The Truman Show

What is "misdirection"? When we sit down to watch a movie, a few questions are implicit. Who is the main character? What is the story? When and where does it take place? And why should we be watching it? Traditional motion pictures begin with an establishing shot that indicates the place, time, and identity of the protagonist. This kind of narrative clarity is appropriate in delineating focus, from *The Best Years of Our Lives* to *On the Waterfront.* But I am even more likely to practice sympathetic scholarship on the films that tweak our assumptions, replacing an establishing shot with a mobile gaze that keeps redefining focus. Motion pictures like *Under Fire*, *The Conversation*, *Rising Sun*, and *Psycho* undermine our complacency as moviegoers. They keep us actively engaged in the unfolding of the tale. Their openings make us aware not only of what is being revealed but also what

remains concealed. Exploiting the resources of camera narration, they include zoom shots that draw us ineluctably into a mystery.

One of the most deftly unsettling openings can be found in *The Hourglass Sanatorium* (Poland, 1973).[1] Wojciech Has begins his adaptation of Bruno Schulz's stories with a raven's silhouette flying left in slow motion, while the camera tracks right. The camera slowly pulls back to reveal that our perspective has been through a train window framing the sky. It moves further back into an extreme low-angle perspective of the compartment's decaying decor: religious Jews are seated in a kind of mobile limbo—perhaps sleeping, perhaps dead—in the landscape of Poland between the world wars. A blind conductor awakens Josef (Jan Nowicki) to announce that the next station is his destination, the sanatorium where his father is in treatment. This opening introduces visual refrains that will be developed throughout the film. The wide-angle lens prepares for Josef's regression to a child's perspective. It is also a self-conscious reminder that we are looking up at the screen and subject to the feeling of entrapment that comes from watching the ceilings bear down on characters. The distorting lens invokes a subterranean, hellish perspective appropriate to the story (and the film ends symmetrically with a low-angle shot of a vast graveyard). The logic of dreams pervades *The Hourglass Sanatorium*, which is less a linear narrative than a composition of internal rhymes. Enhanced by dissonant sound design, meaning emerges through surreal visual and aural juxtapositions. As in his other masterpieces—including *The Noose* and *The Saragossa Manuscript*—Wojciech Has allows content to determine form: a circular structure expresses how characters are stuck in time or doomed to repetition. Later in *The Hourglass Sanatorium*, the blind conductor tells Josef, "Plain facts are chronological, lined

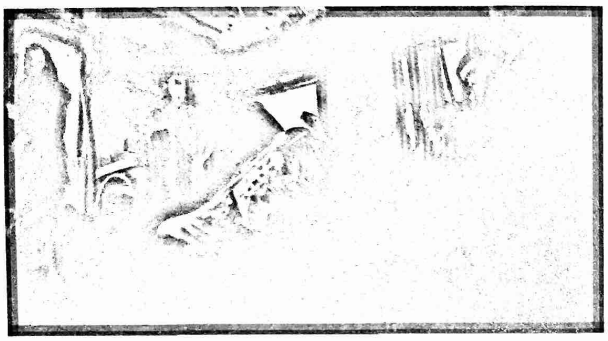

FIGURE 7.1 From *The Hourglass Sanatorium*

up on a thread. . . . There are sidetracks of time," invoking the possibility of temporal loops or parallel universes. At the end of the film Josef undercuts the notion of linear progress when he says about the sanatorium, "It's regurgitated time, second-hand time"—a line taken directly from Schulz's story.

Before the Rain and *Ajami* are among the most powerful films from war-ravaged countries, offering a poignant vision of characters trapped in cycles of repetition, whether determined by history or personal circumstance. Like *The Hourglass Sanatorium*, they manifest a fruitful tension between a story moving forward on a horizontal axis and a vision that spirals backward in time. (As Jean-Luc Godard famously said, a film should have a beginning, middle, and end, but not necessarily in that order.)[2] The repetition of images provides not only aesthetic coherence but also a philosophical awareness: perhaps history is not simply progress but recurrence, as still-raging wars rhyme with previous violent escalations while human needs and fears change little over centuries or national borders.

Before the Rain was the first entry from Macedonia to the Academy Awards and won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1994 Venice Film Festival. Although comparisons were made to *Pulp Fiction* (which Quentin Tarantino directed at approximately the same time), this Balkan triptych uses a fractured narrative structure in a more philosophically organic way. Writer-director Milcho Manchevski divided his first feature into three parts, "Words," "Faces," "Pictures"—also the elements of film language—manifesting a sensibility that is simultaneously literary, spiritual, and photographic. The film takes place against the backdrop of ethnic tensions between Orthodox Christian Macedonians and Muslim Albanians. In the first part, Kiril (Grégoire Colin)—a young priest who has taken a vow of silence—finds a young Albanian girl, Zamira (Labina Mitevska), hiding in his room. Zamira is being pursued by vengeful Macedonians who believe she killed one of their shepherds. Part 2 jumps to contemporary London, where photo editor Anna (Katrin Cartlidge) works with the images of war victims (which include Zamira's corpse). She is having an affair with Aleksander (Rade Šerbedžija), a Macedonian photographer who urges her to leave London with him. While she is trying to speak honestly with her husband at a restaurant, a menacing man from the Balkans opens fire, killing many patrons. Part 3 returns with Aleksander to Macedonia, where after an absence of sixteen years he learns that the Albanians are now considered enemies. He still loves Hana, the Albanian mother of Zamira. When he visits Hana at the home of her father, the stories come together. Understanding that she needs his help in protecting Zamira, he takes the girl from her captors, who are part of his own family. Just as Zamira was shot at the end of the first section by her own brother when she tried to leave with Kiril, Aleksander is shot by his cousin Zdrave when he walks away with her. She flees

to the monastery, where we see Kiril in the same shot as the film's beginning: *Before the Rain* thus seems to close in a loop. Only on a second viewing do we realize that Aleksander's funeral took place in part 1, where the woman crying from a distance was Anna.

Before the action begins, an epigraph is printed against a dark sky and spoken by a male off-screen voice: "With a shriek birds flee across the black sky, people are silent, my blood aches from waiting." The quotation comes from Yugoslav writer Meša Selimović's novel *Death and the Dervish* and sets the film's tone of impending violence. The opening sequence is a rich introduction to Manchevski's internal rhymes. The hands picking tomatoes from the grounds of a monastery in the mountains turn out to belong to Kiril. After he slaps his neck, killing a fly, an older priest predicts, "It's going to rain. The flies are biting." As they leave with the ripe tomatoes, a group of children play with a ring of twigs, which they set on fire around a live turtle; then they throw bullets into the circle, setting off the sounds of warfare. Even though the priest says, "Time never dies, the circle is not round," the children's game introduces a sense of violent and implacable entrapment. As Roger Ebert wrote, "The construction of Manchevski's story is intended, then, to demonstrate the futility of its ancient hatreds. There are two or three moments in the film . . . in which hatred of others is greater than love of one's own. Imagine a culture where a man would rather kill his daughter than allow her to love a man from another culture, and you will have an idea of the depth of bitterness in this film, the insane lengths to which men can be driven by belief and prejudice."[3]

Internal rhymes heighten the sense of cyclical bloodshed. *Before the Rain* begins with fingers picking tomatoes, and later a close-up of the doctor's hands delivering baby goats in part 3

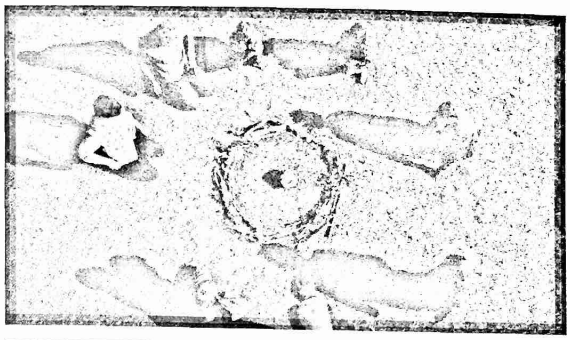

FIGURE 7.2 From *Before the Rain*

accompanies his quote from *Macbeth* about hands never being cleansed of blood. An allusion to Shakespeare surfaces in each of the film's sections: *Romeo and Juliet* is the apt source for the line in the first segment, "Deny thy father's home." In part 2 Aleksander quotes from *Hamlet* in the back of a taxi, "Thus does conscience make cowards of us all." And while the priest says, "It's about time," at the beginning, Aleksander repeats these words in the last section. Zamira's first gesture—and her last before dying—is one of silence, putting her finger to her lips. Just as she appears to Kiril in his sleep, her mother Hana later seems to visit Aleksander as he sleeps. A barred shadow on his dormant face evokes Kiril's visage, which was marked in the same way in part 1.

Embodying the film's intense physicality, a character vomits in each section—Kiril, Anna, and Aleksander. The children burn a turtle in the opening sequence, and the tank of the London restaurant traps another turtle. Imprisonment is indeed expressed through circular patterns, including shots of the moon

above the monastery, Anna's shower drain as well as her magnifying glass, and the two bullet holes on Aleksander's shirt that leave circles of blood at the end. Each section closes with a dead body horizontal under a tree (even the London restaurant has a bonsai plant). Manchevski's internal rhymes inform the film's structure, as the first section turns out to be a continuation of the third. (The chronological sequence is part 2, part 3, and part 1.) This enclosed universe presents a loop with minor variations, corresponding to a line spoken by Aleksander's cousin Mitre when they pursue Zamira, "It's time to collect five centuries of blood." As the director acknowledged in interviews, Balkan culture manifests the historical grip of repetition more than the Western idea of progress. *Before the Rain* offers a tragic vision of characters more likely to be killed by their own family than by the enemy. Even children seem locked into the pattern, as evidenced by the little boy (with a naked bottom) holding a gun and those who torture the turtle. Is innocence even possible? Not in a world where Zamira is presumed guilty only because the children said they saw her with the shepherd. She hardly seems capable of the murder by pitchfork that the Macedonians claim.

The graffiti on a London wall reads, "Time never dies. The circle is not round," the same words spoken by the priest in the opening. But his words at the end—"Time does not wait, and the circle is not round"—diverge just enough to suggest the possibility of an opening, a way out of the vicious cycle. In this regard, when I asked Manchevski who could logistically have taken the photos of Kiril and Zamira that end up on Anne's desk in London, he replied (in an e-mail on April 24, 2016), "They were taken by the police. There are a few policemen in some of the photos. Of course, these photos—and Kiril's (unidentified) phone call to Anne's office, looking for Aleksandar—are the two

kinks in the plot. They mislead us into thinking that the story is circular, but they are also the kinks that make it impossible—like an Escher drawing."

The music is an integral component of the film's tone, which is both archaic and modern. The syncopated, percussive minor key score by "Anastasia"—three Macedonian archivists—seems to either foreshadow fatal actions in all three sections or mourn them. At other moments, diegetic music functions in a lighter fashion, as when Aleksander whistles "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" while riding a bicycle. The song from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* provides an allusion to the western genre, which extends the opening sequence's homage to *The Wild Bunch*. Moreover, a shot from inside the barn as Aleksander approaches it in part 3 brings to mind *The Searchers*, which—like *Before the Rain*—is a western about honor as well as racial hatred. Manchevski confirmed in his e-mail, "Yes, the shot towards the end of the film is an homage to [John] Ford. There is something in the old west ethos (at least as seen in the mid-century westerns) that the character of Aleksander relates to. He is like the cowboy coming into the small town to dish out justice and sacrifices himself in the process."

Aleksander's final words are, "It's raining." The landscape of *Before the Rain* is indeed expressive throughout, beginning with the rumble of thunder in the opening scene and culminating in the downpour at the end. A metaphor for bloodshed, the rain descends on the Macedonians' avengers while the sky is still sunny at the monastery. But this calm is only a temporary pause before the storm.

Ajami shares with *Before the Rain* a misleading circular narrative (as well as a collective protagonist). And because the fractured chronology shows a few of the same events from different vantage points, both films lead the viewer to acknowledge the

partiality of our perception. While it is impossible to generalize about the richness of recent Israeli cinema, films like *Ajami*, *Disengagement*, *Jellyfish*, *Policeman*, and *Lebanon* embody the search for a cinematic language appropriate to the dynamic struggles of Israeli identity in the twenty-first century. As of 2009, when *Ajami* was made, there were more than one million Arab citizens living in Israel. The film is cowritten and codirected by Scandar Copti—an Israeli Arab, who also plays the extroverted cook Binj—and Yaron Shani, who is Jewish. The setting is a neighborhood in Jaffa, a multiethnic area of Tel Aviv that has high crime and unemployment rates. In Hebrew and Arabic, the film interweaves volatile relationships between Israeli Arabs and Jews, Arab Christians and Muslims, and West Bank Palestinians and Bedouin. Unfolding in five chapters, with unannounced flashbacks, this drama makes us realize in the last two sections how little we might have understood in the first three. Five plotlines revolve around a drug deal in a garage; when the scene is presented a second time, the apparent villains—including Dando, a Jewish policeman—are humanized. And the handheld camerawork throughout the film has a nervously realistic quality, appropriate to the present tense of Israel.

Ajami opens with a hand sketching in pencil on paper. It belongs to thirteen-year-old Nasri, an Arab boy whose drawings will later chronicle the violence around him. He becomes our guide visually as well as aurally: his introductory voice-over invokes "two weeks ago," with flashbacks of revenge. He will turn out to be an unreliable narrator: like all the other characters—and the audience—he sees only one perspective. Chapter 1 focuses on his older brother, Omar, who works in the restaurant of Abu Elias. Because a rival Bedouin gang shot a neighbor—mistaking him for Omar—he seeks the help of Christian Arab

Abu Elias, who is able to broker a cease-fire, culminating in a Bedouin judge adjudicating a settlement sum of $57,000.

Nasri is not the only chronicler, as we see recorded footage of a woman in a hospital bed. This videotape is presented to Malek—a Palestinian who secretly works in Abu Elias's restaurant—as a sixteenth-birthday gift, so that he can see his mother, the woman on the tape. Her needed surgery will cost $75,000, of which the Palestinian Authority will pay one-third. In gratitude Malek plans to give a pocket watch to Abu Elias: we do not know the provenance of the watch in his plastic bag, and we learn at the very end that it belonged to a man kidnapped and murdered by Palestinian militants. He was the brother of Dando, who—upon seeing the watch in Malek's possession—assumes the worst and aims his gun at the boy in the climactic shoot-out.

In chapter 3 Arab neighbors initially spar in a friendly way with Jewish neighbor Aryeh, who complains about the noise of their sheep. But passions escalate, and he is fatally stabbed by one of the young men. As Aryeh's daughter screams, Dando gives CPR to Aryeh in vain. Earlier we see Nasri bathing his paralyzed grandfather, and Dando later gives a bath to his little daughter. One of the ways that this five-part tale retains its coherence is through such internal rhymes, especially related to brothers. (Aryeh was stabbed by the brother of Abu Elias's engaging cook, Binj. Nasri and Omar try to protect each other.)

It seems at midpoint that Dando shoots Malek—which we perceive as a heinous act—before his own story unfolds in the fourth chapter. At the very end of *Ajami* we learn that the gunshot came from thirteen-year-old Nasri, who was aiming at Dando. And Malek is clearly not the assassin of Dando's brother: from the film's beginning, violence is enacted on the wrong person (is there ever a right person?) because of misperception or mistaken

identity. Similarly, we hear that cops murdered Binj, presumably because they searched his place for drugs. But when we see the actual events later, it turns out that Binj died of a drug overdose. The conclusion of Binj's story reflects how *Ajami*'s tragic events stem from misunderstanding or miscommunication.

The film's interweaving of relationships between brothers has a biblical resonance, especially given the Israeli setting of *Ajami*. In the religious history of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, the "original" brothers are the sons of Abraham—Isaac (by his wife, Sarah) and his firstborn, Ishmael (birthed by a surrogate, Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar). While Isaac is the ancestor of the Jews, Ishmael is considered the patriarch of Muslim people. Israel's contemporary tensions concerning contested territory and rights can be traced back to the schism between these siblings: Hagar and Ishmael were exiled after Sarah—who miraculously gave birth to Isaac—assumed her child would be Abraham's sole inheritor.[4]

Ajami was a first feature for both directors, who developed the screenplay over a seven-year period. They cast nonprofessional actors—for example, a Bedouin judge as his fictional counterpart—and held workshops for almost a year, allowing actors to improvise their reactions to specific dramatic situations. The film was shot in sequence without using a traditional script. (Although the directors had a screenplay, the actors did not.) Yaron Shani recalled in an interview, "After we shot the movie, we came to the editing room with over 80 hours of footage; because the actors were improvising for the most part, we spent 14 months just editing this film."[5] As in *Before the Rain*, the vision is cyclical and despairing, focusing on how violence begets violence. Whatever their ethnicity, the characters die or lose brothers, dramatizing a waste of human potential on either side of the conflict. *Ajami* is ultimately a bracing cautionary tale. Kenneth Turan wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, "The last thing you see in *Ajami* should be the first thing on your mind about this compelling new film from Israel. That would be the closing credits, written in both Hebrew and Arabic, separate but equal, side by side, mirroring the creative process behind this potent work and the story it has to tell."[6] Moreover, as Columbia University student Samuel Rimland proposed in an unpublished paper, "By making the tragedy of partial perspective manifest at the level of form, the filmmakers highlight the prime role played by limited knowledge in perpetuating conflict in Israel-Palestine."[7] The last line of *Ajami* is instructive: Nasri's voice-over says, "Open your eyes."

%%%

If Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) remains the most famous cinematic exploration of how to manipulate point of view, subsequent American films—notably *Under Fire*, directed by Roger Spottiswoode, and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*—reference and embellish it, reflecting their own volatile times. "I don't take sides, I take pictures," declares the photojournalist in *Under Fire* (1983), a drama about the power of images. To what extent such objective professionalism might be possible—especially amid the turbulence of 1979 Nicaragua—is one of the many questions posed in this taut political movie. Written by Clay Frohman and Ron Shelton, it uses the background of the populist uprising against Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza to explore intervention—whether of the American government in Latin America or of a camera that can transform what it records. Nick Nolte plays Russell Price,