
Film-Performance, Lecture-Performance

By Uriel Orlow

Unmade Film: The Proposal is a lecture performance that presents the journey of a film that is impossible to make. It takes as its starting point the mental hospital Kfar Sha'ul in Jerusalem. Initially specialising in the treatment of Holocaust survivors – including my great aunt – it was established in 1951 using the remains of the Palestinian village Deir Yassin that had been depopulated in a massacre by Zionist paramilitaries in April 1948. Trying to make a film I was faced with two aporias: Although the place forces us to think of the Holocaust and the Nakba together, it seemed problematic to make a single work that could lead to comparisons which implicitly equate one trauma with the other. Secondly, the problem of catharsis; as there is no closure (the occupation is not over), the work itself would need to remain open and unresolved too. So I ended up making *Unmade Film*, a series of audio-visual works that point to the structure of a film but never fully become one. This includes, *The Storyboard*, *The Staging*, *The Score*, *The Closing Credits* etc. The lecture performance *The Proposal* is the last work of *Unmade Film* but it takes up an anti-linear position and returns to the beginning. In it I am telling the story behind the story; namely that of my great-aunt, who survived Auschwitz, ended up in Jerusalem after the war and finally had a breakdown and was interned in the mental hospital Kfar Sha'ul for over 30 years until her death in the 1980s. I didn't want to 'record' this story but instead tell it live and, in so doing, explore the impossibility of this narration and the way that it is caught up in the history of the village Deir Yassin. So, in *The Proposal*, I am returning to the very beginning of the project, looking backward and forward at the same time, trying to reconstruct a narrative of time and space and explore questions around cinematic structures and the eventual impossibility of making the proposed film. In the scripted live format I combine story telling, autobiography, and interrogation with the act of witnessing on the part of the audience.

I consider *Unmade Film: The Proposal* as both a performative film and a performative lecture. On the most simple and obvious level, to add the epithet *performative* to *film* or indeed *lecture* draws attention to the performative aspect of either. This does not mean that other films or lectures are *not* performative; of course they are. But their performativity is not necessarily self-consciously acknowledged or foregrounded. It might be useful not to use the adjective form but instead consider the status of the *film performance* or indeed *lecture performance* i.e. a performance that consists of or amounts to a film or a lecture. Turning the film into a performance – or simply calling it that – removes it from celluloid or digital medium specificity and allows it to connect with one side of its genealogy: the live (the other being photography). This allows us to reconsider in the here and now the structure and construction of a film and its narrative. Turning a lecture into a performance provides a dimension of artistic freedom to the assumed academic format of the lecture and allows specific questions to be explored, for example, how is information conveyed?

If the lecture performance and the film performance coincide, further questions arise: What kind of speech act does a spoken film consist of and what kind of relationship is set up between the speaker and the audience? And how does this relationship affect language itself? In the first chapter of his *On Interpretation*, Aristotle writes: « Every sentence is significant [...], but not every sentence is a statement-making sentence, but only those in which there is truth or falsity. There is not truth or falsity in all sentences: a prayer is a sentence but is neither true nor false. The present investigation deals with the statement-making sentence; the others we can dismiss, since consideration of them belongs rather to the study of rhetoric or poetry. (350BCE) ». Lecture performances of course allow statements, rhetoric and poetry to be mixed. Aristotle's linguistic 'snobbery' (or descriptive fallacy as it is called) remained largely unchallenged for over two thousand years. Amongst the first to oppose the Aristotelian prejudice against non-judgemental language was Thomas Reid who began considering other types of sentence in addition to judgments. Reid's technical term for prayers,

promisings, warnings, forgivings, etc., is «social operations». Sometimes he also calls them «social acts», and opposes them to «solitary acts» such as judgments, intendings, deliberatings and desirings, which are characterized by the fact that it is not essential to them that they be expressed and by the fact that their performance does not presuppose another «intelligent being in the universe» in addition to the person who performs them (1894). Social speech acts are significant for two reasons: not only are they independent from notions of truth and falsity, they actually dismiss these as irrelevant categories or classifications altogether. In addition, they introduce a vis-à-vis into the equation, an addressee; the audience. The ear of the other, the act of listening is the condition, the *raison d'être* of this kind of speech. For me, lecture performances operate in this mode of address, and I'm interested in how this in turn prompts an ethics of listening.

The fact that lecture performances and film performances are live is an essential aspect; I personally make a conscious choice never to record/document them. I make and exhibit work in different media, most of them reproducible; photography, video, sound. In today's age of near-instant transmission that makes the work highly mobile; it can potentially be exhibited simultaneously in different parts of the world, without the need for my presence. Walter Benjamin has famously and prophetically analysed the loss of what he calls *aura* of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproducibility (1936); namely the unique conjunction of time and place in a non-reproducible work. What is at stake in the format of the lecture/film performance and my choice not to record or document it, is not so much a restoration of *aura*, i.e. that it takes place in a unique time and place – although this is important; but this can easily be misunderstood as a kind of liveness fetishism or performance essentialism. Rather, what interests me is an experience that is bound to ephemerality and memory instead of being inscribed on a recording medium. So it goes against the very grain of films reproducibility.

Superficially, the film-performance shares the 'captive audience' in the dark auditorium of classical cinema. However, the physical, spatio-temporal contract is somewhat different; it is not just the audience who agrees to watch a film for a specific amount of time in a specific place, but this commitment is shared with me as well and not just towards the film itself. I'm interested in the ethics of this encounter between me and the audience. What does it mean to become a witness of this particular situation, performance, film-as-a speech act? What does it mean for someone's voice to command to be listened to? How does it address the audience and make them into witnesses of its utterance; and as a consequence make the audience answerable. What does it mean to be irrevocably drawn into the responsibility of having been addressed? Since J. L. Austin's influential *How To Do Things with Words* (1955), speech acts that address a listener and demarcate a social operation have been conceived of *performatively*. What is performed first and foremost is a commitment, namely to one's words. Austin poignantly refers to the common saying "our word is our bond". So beyond what is being said, the mode of address itself is already marked by the performance of an illocution of committing ourselves to our words and offering this bond to another. This 'offer' forms the basis of the ethical or moral contract whose sphere of influence can reach both into the personal and the political. And it is precisely this conjunction that I am interested in when it comes to the content of my film performance: I mix facts and personal stories, switch between verbal registers, combine information and meta-discourse, weaving together an associative narrative that is always accompanied or punctuated by different kinds of visuals and sound: projected video, still images, text as slide-projection, music or soundscapes... I guess it is also the choreography of this multiplicity of sensory and intellectual stimuli that can be called the performative and only works in a live setting, where the audience in turn needs to bring these multiple streams of input together. My film/lecture performance keeps changing from one to the next presentation, the script

evolves and associations branch out; there is no fixed meaning (which is again a reason not to record any one of the lecture performances and commit them to 'eternity'). Nevertheless I offer a commitment to my words, and invite others to listen, to understand, to connect; this also means taking the risk of being misunderstood, making myself vulnerable to the judgements of others. And ultimately it is perhaps this vulnerability that opens up the ethical dimension of this moment and marks it as performative.

However, for me the ethics of the film performance goes beyond the commitment on my part and the act of witnessing on the part of the audience. The film performance asks more of the audience than simply being present, witnessing a speech act or 'consuming' a performed film. Even though it keeps changing, my film performance is highly scripted. Indeed, I consider it as a performed (and commented) film script. As such it (performatively) points to a film, elicits a film, constructs a film but is of course not a film as such. Pasolini pointed out in his inspirational essay, *The Screenplay as a "Structure that wants to be another Structure"* (1965), the script is not simply a text either. Crucially, its operation, that of producing an imaginary film in the mind of the reader –or if performed, in the mind of the audience–relies on the collaboration of the audience. For me, this complicity, this imagining a potential film together lies at the heart of the performative film understood in close relation to the screenplay. This collaborative agency produced by the film performance understood as performative script that produces a temporality that is different from film, where something that has been recorded in the past unravels in the present of the projection. In contrast, the film performance produces a potentiality that points to the future: the future of a film to come, the future of a film that might be made. And of course this is a future that begins now, as we imagine the film together.

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