



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Epic Cinema: Defining our Terms*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/151979/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Koutsourakis, A orcid.org/0000-0001-6090-4798 (2021) *Epic Cinema: Defining our Terms*. *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 61 (Fall 2021). pp. 51-74. ISSN 2578-4900

<https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2021.0074>

This article is protected by copyright. This is a pre-copyedited version of an article accepted for publication in *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version is available through the University of Texas Press. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Epic Cinema: Defining our Terms

For George Kouvaros and Julian Murphet

Abstract:

Studies in epic cinema have flourished in the past decade, but one senses that scholars take the term to be self-explanatory, without considering its literary origins and the variety of films that can be placed under the rubric of the epic. Furthermore, the question of epic style has received less scholarly attention. In this article, I propose that in order to define epic cinema we need to look at literary, philosophical, and film theoretical discussions of the epic. In doing so, we will be able to appreciate that epic cinema is an exceptionally expansive umbrella term which covers many and diverse film practices.

Introduction: Contemporary Scholarship on Epic Cinema

The aim of this article is to show that we need to challenge the canonical understanding of epic cinema according to which the term describes films that deploy extravagant settings and *mises-en-scène* to reproduce historical themes and myths from the repertoire of classical and late antiquity. At the heart of my argument is that despite the plethora of studies in epic cinema, scholars have paid little attention to past theorizations of the term “epic” and to questions of epic style. The implication of my study is that a film can have epic style but not necessarily epic subject-matter, and vice versa. In what follows, I proceed to nuance the term epic cinema by bringing together literary and philosophical debates on epic poetry and film theoretical discussions of the epic film. I conclude by laying out some tentative categories of epic films.

If we consult contemporary scholarship on epic cinema, we get to realize that for the most part, commentators understand the epic as a shorthand term for films whose iconography reproduces the visual surfaces (settings, costumes) of bygone eras. Constantine Santas, for example, argues that the key characteristics of an epic film are its length and spectacle. For Santas, the term epic is equivalent to “all of these endeavors associated with

size, length, complexity, and heroic action.”¹ As he suggests the formal qualities of the epic are “1. Length, 2. Unified action, 3. Multiple plots 4. Hero, 5. Pity and fear. 6. Happy Resolutions and 7. Spectacle.”² One already notices that at least three of the formal elements he discusses such as unified action, definitive narrative closure and the production of pity and fear are more linked with a dramatic rather than an epic aesthetic if we accept Aristotelian categories (of which more below). Santas does not consult film theoretical approaches to epic cinema, while with the exception of a few comments on Aristotle, there are almost no references to theorizations of epic poetry and literature in his study. At the same time, he tends to misread some key Aristotelian concepts. For instance, drawing on Aristotle’s distinction between tragic and epic poetry, he suggests that epic cinema shares formal similarities with tragedy such as unity of plot and character. A close look at Aristotle’s writings may challenge the validity of this argument. Aristotle explains that an epic poem consists of a plethora of episodic actions that can provide the source for many tragedies. Furthermore, the epic poem’s length tends to produce a “loss of unity” given that its storyline contains numerous episodes, each of which is characterized by a certain degree of autonomy.³

Similarly, another key scholar of epic cinema, Robert Burgoyne understands the epic dimension of a film to be related to its capacity to simulate historical settings and events offering the audience a sense of being part of a bygone historical epoch. For Burgoyne, the chief characteristics of epic films are spectacle, excessive mises-en-scène, and large-scale stories and production values. He suggests that contemporary epic cinema needs to be seen as part of a transnational cinematic practice. The global popularity of contemporary epics such as *The Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006) invites us to reconsider “the link between the epic and the imagined community of nation.”⁴ These films cannot be understood under the neat categories of national cinema even when their starting points are myths associated with specific nations e.g. ancient Greece or Rome. A study of their modes

of production, distribution and reception reveals a tension between the epic films' transnational film production and their roots in national mythologies. Furthermore, Burgoyne proposes a thought-provoking symptomatic reading of contemporary epics, which defy the presentation of a coherent and unified community asking us instead to consider identities that are normally suppressed in epic narratives, e.g. the refugee and the slave.⁵ He draws on the work of Vivian Sobchack, who praises Hollywood historical epics because they offer the viewer an embodied experience of history. For Sobchack, the iconography of Hollywood epics connotes a sense of audiovisual verisimilitude in the manner it duplicates convincingly surfaces associated with a historical or mythical setting. As she says,

Through these means, the genre allegorically and carnally inscribes on the model spectator a sense and meaning of being in time and human events in a manner and at a magnitude exceeding any individual temporal construction or appropriation-and, most importantly, in a manner and at a magnitude that is intelligible as excess to lived-body subjects in a historically specific consumer culture.⁶

Burgoyne accepts Sobchack's terms arguing that this physical experience of history privileges a form of affective involvement and engagement that has a utopian dimension. Yet one could interject that in this embodied experience of the past advocated by Sobchack and endorsed by Burgoyne, history is relegated to an unprocessed commodity and simulation. Historical reconstruction and experience become a matter of copying surfaces, because such an approach makes a tautological equation between iconic verisimilitude and bygone historical eras. Years ago, Roland Barthes derided this Hollywood strategy in his review of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953). Barthes drew attention to Hollywood's tendency to equate signs—in the specific film wigs associated with Roman identity—with a specific historical period. As he says ironically, “Romans are Romans thanks to the most legible of signs: hair on the forehead.”⁷ Barthes's comment cautions us to be wary of a simplistic tendency to equate a historical period with some specific visual signs. The problem is not the spectacular elements in the *mise-en-scène* per se, but the inability to understand

history, namely the specific historical relationships and conditions of an era, beyond the fetishization of visual surfaces. Barthes' argument can put pressure on Sobchack's and Burgoyne's suggestion that the iconography of Hollywood blockbusters provides the audience with a physical experience of history. Furthermore, what is absent in Burgoyne's and Sobchack's stimulating works is an engagement with past theoretical articulations of the epic and the ways in which epic cinema can be considered in light of the style of epic poetry and literature.

Similarly, Andrew B. R. Elliott understands epic cinema as "a body of films loosely based around historical—usually ancient or classical, but also medieval—periods." These films have recently returned to the big screen partly due to a combination of technological advancement following the shift from the analogue to the digital, and successful industrial and marketing strategies.⁸ This strictly political economic reading is certainly productive in explaining the popularity of certain contemporary films concerned with the spectacularization of history, namely the audiovisual duplication of period details; one of the drawbacks of this approach is that it seems to ignore past theorizations of the term while it does not really clarify the distinction between epic and dramatic cinema. Furthermore, in his 2013 edited collection, *The Return of the Epic Film*, the understanding of the term seems to be uniform among the contributors, whose case studies are mainly film adaptations of ancient Greek, Roman, and medieval myths or postclassical blockbusters.

A similar approach holds sway in the work of other scholars such as Sylvie Magerstädt and Derek Elley. Magerstädt defines epic cinema as large-scale period films which can present past epochs in more convincing ways thanks to the digital turn. The limit of her approach is that there is hardly any definition of the epic in her study, and aside from spectacular magnitude she does not really discuss the key qualities of a film characterized as epic. Additionally, she skips any discussion of epic cinema with reference to its prehistory in

epic poetry/literature suggesting that the possibilities of audiovisual verisimilitude offered by new media technologies have liberated the cinematic epic from its literary predecessors.⁹ Such an approach does not take into account that the term epic cinema is so remarkably expansive that to understand the different variants of it, one needs to identify connections with past and present epic literary movements.

Unlike the above-mentioned scholars, Derek Elley attempts to connect the past with the present identifying a sense of continuity between the Western tradition of epic poetry and contemporary epic cinema. In these terms, epic cinema is to be understood as a film genre that re-appropriates myths and histories from the past to address current concerns and anxieties. As he says, “sources range from literary epics (most of which have been filmed), to historical events which have remained uncelebrated in epic literature, to present-day novels based on history, to vague *mélanges* of mythological shavings (the majority of the Italian peplum cycle).”¹⁰ Like other contemporary scholars, he understands scale and magnitude to be the defining characteristics of epic cinema.

Classics scholars, on the other hand, such as Barbara Graziosi, Emily Greenwood, Simon Goldhill, and Martin M. Winkler adopt a narrower definition; they label as epics those films which adapt stories from the classical antiquity or even make references to it in a modern context. This is evidenced by two edited collections dedicated to adaptations of Homeric myths on screen.¹¹ This approach leads at times to unjustifiable and contrived arguments. For instance, Goldhill contends that Mike Leigh’s *Naked* (1993) and the Coen Brothers’ *O Brother where art thou* (2000) are epic films due to their indirect references to the *Odyssey*.¹²

The Epic: Literary and Philosophical Approaches

All the above-cited definitions have merit, but one senses that epic cinema is taken to be a self-explanatory category, while one rarely encounters discussions of epic style in these

studies. The very term epic has literary associations and one is astonished to see this lack of scholarly engagement with the term's origins, something that is not necessarily the case with studies on the epic's counterpart, namely the dramatic. From the perspective of film studies, engaging with literary and philosophical articulations of the epic, can be a fruitful way of expanding the parameters of the epic cinema as a category of analysis, as well as of acknowledging film theory's debt to these definitions. What connects past and diverse studies of the epic from Aristotle, to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, György Lukács, Alfred Döblin, and Franco Moretti is an understanding of it as a style that takes liberties in the representation of space and time, avoids unified plots, privileges the simultaneous presentation of multiple episodes or adopts a more fragmented/episodic style, and clearly connects the dramatic hero with a collective reality.

Aristotle for instance, famously suggested that epic poetry has an "advantage, and one that conduces to grandeur of effect, to diverting the mind of the hearer, and relieving the story with varying episodes."¹³ As he explains, epic poetry's key plotlines are simple. He sets as an example the story of the *Odyssey* which can be summarized in a few sentences. A man absent from his homeland for ten years, faces hardships upon his endeavor to return because of Poseidon's resentment. After a series of adventures, he returns home and realizes that a group of suitors have an eye on his fortune and his wife and are scheming against his son. Thus, he decides to take revenge. Aristotle concludes that "this is the essence of the plot; the rest is episode."¹⁴ The key precept in Aristotle's discussion here is the autonomy of the episodes. An epic poem develops a plot and shares many similarities with dramatic poetry, such as recognitions, reversals of situations and moments of intense suffering. The difference, however, is that its central formal element is narrative rather than the imitation of actions and

this renders its storyline loose. The episodes of the epic poem have a life of their own independent of the broader story.

Similarly, for Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang Goethe, the independence of the episodes is a key characteristic of epic poetry, which does not strive for dramatic concreteness but adopts a more fragmented/episodic narrative style. As Franco Moretti explains, Schiller and Goethe accept Aristotle's argument that the epic poem is episodic. In a passage that merits to be quoted in full, Moretti says:

“The autonomy of the parts, Schiller writes to Goethe in April 1797, ‘is a fundamental characteristic of epic poetry.’ This is a judgement that Goethe, and later Hegel, accept almost as given (and that recurs as such in Eckermann's words). In the previous century, however, the matter had been far from obvious.”¹⁵

Schiller and Goethe departed from the dominant seventeenth century tendency to understand epic poetry as one that follows the dramatic principle of unity of action. Although both German poets were proponents of Weimar classicism, their understanding of the epic was at the antipodes with the neoclassical penchant for harmony, symmetry and coherence.¹⁶ This is also made clear in their discussion of the epic hero. In a co-written essay titled “On Epic and Dramatic Poetry,” they suggest that the distinguishing feature of epic poetry is that it “gives us man working outside of and beyond himself.”¹⁷ Thus, unlike dramatic poetry, which urges us to understand the storyline by resorting to the inner lives of the characters, epic poetry places the life of the individual into a group reality.

Along these lines, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, suggests that in epic poetry character does not occupy a central role; epic poetry is not based upon dramatic action, but on external “events” and circumstances that reveal something about the reality of the nation and not about the characters. For Hegel, epic poetry is a national art form dealing with the history of a nation and this is the reason why its narrative has a collective dimension. As he says:

For, in epic, character and external necessity stand alongside one another with equal strength, and for this reason the epic individual can seem to yield to external circumstances without detriment to his poetic individuality. His action may seem to be the result of circumstances and these therefore appear as dominant, whereas in drama it is exclusively the individual character who produces results.¹⁸

Another noteworthy aspect of Hegel's definition is that he understands the genre as one that puts pressure on ideas of artistic individuality. For as he says, "on account of the objectivity of the whole epic, the poet as subject must retire in face of his object and lose himself in it."¹⁹ Hegel concludes that the fact that the author vanishes is the highest praise for epic poetry. His points resonate with modernist re-appropriations of the epic both in literature, theater and cinema, where the complexity of the material refutes authorial omniscience. The post-Brechtian playwright/director Heiner Müller, for example, famously suggested that epic dramaturgy is structured upon the principle of art as "blind practice;"²⁰ it brings together a series of materials that challenge authorial sovereignty. In Müller's epic theater, the idea of art as blind practice challenges the canonical character-based dramaturgy. Although many of his plays are titled after key protagonists e.g. *Philoktet* (*Philoctetes*, 1968), *Prometheus* (1969), *Macbeth* (1971), and *Die Hamletmaschine* (*Hamletmachine*, 1977), there is no space for heroic individuals in his work. Characters are conduits for the articulation of the collective nightmare of history and references to classic works from the past are used to comment on the historical contradictions of the twentieth century. In this context, collective situations and dramaturgy are privileged over character-centered action.

Similarly, Alexander Kluge, who describes his film work as epic rooted in the Brechtian tradition, suggests that collective dramaturgy and authorial uncertainty are important aspects of his filmmaking. The best moments in a film are those that can expose the audience to something invisible not predetermined by the filmmaker.

Homer was blind, and therefore he was a very good poet. He had invisible pictures in his mind, and he was able to write about them. I wrote a story on Fritz Lang, who had

very bad eyes. This, again, is the work of invisibility, which has to do with visible things. Both you need—you need the dialectic between both.²¹

Blindness in these terms becomes a metaphor for a film practice that does not accept artistic intentionality as a hermeneutic approach, since the complexity of the material presented by the filmmaker cannot be clarified by resorting to her or his explanations.

This Hegelian understanding of the epic infuses the work of György Lukács in his *Theory of the Novel*. Lukács pushes further Hegel's argument and suggests that the epic work gives us access to a broader totality rather than a trivial dramatic cosmos. Lukács identifies epic elements in the nineteenth century novel and suggests that one of the key characteristics of the epic is that its characters are not self-determined individuals, but can be understood as part of a broader group reality. The epic provides a better understanding of the individual's relation to *Gesamtheit* (totality), a key critical concept in Lukács' oeuvre. Totality for Lukács usefully designates a methodology that uncovers the interconnection between isolated incidents/phenomena and the broader social and historical reality. The historical novel provides access to totality, because it de-individualizes the material by revealing the dialectic between the characters and the socially produced circumstances. The quality of the historical novel relies on its refusal to take totality for granted. In making use of formal elements that focus on external events instead of character interiority, the novel seeks to make the invisible visible. As he says, "the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality."²² As I explain in the next section there are echoes of Lukács' thought in André Bazin's discussion of neorealism as a modern epic.

The modernist author Alfred Döblin has also discussed questions of epic style in literature and his writings have been influential on numerous filmmakers including Alexander Kluge. Döblin understands the epic not as a fixed but as a constantly evolving genre that

adapts to the changing historical circumstances. The key characteristics of the modern epic are the polyphonic narrative and collage, which aim at exploring reality as a possibility instead of creating a unified dramatic cosmos. This method involves engaging with all the details of urban environment and not simply imitating dramatic actions. The author collects a multiplicity of voices and images from the environment in which the narrative takes place, while she or he rejects psychological characterization. This technique of writing renders reality chaotic rather than concrete and unified. Unlike Lukács, Döblin's view of the epic rejects ideas of totality; he argues instead for an aesthetic of sensory contingency and narrative openness/incompleteness. As he says, "all epic works have to do with becoming and happening, and so, I would say, it is also in the order that the epic report is not finished and gets complicated, shot out of the gun, but the reader experiences it in statu nascendi."²³

According to Döblin, the epic formal principle departs from the dramatic causal one in the sense that each fragment is independent while at the same time every situation gives birth to the next one that follows. For Döblin, the epic style is inextricably linked with a type of literature that manipulates cinematic techniques such as montage and relies on the power of associations of heterogeneous elements rather than on smooth narrative continuity and character agency. As he says, "Individual persons and their so-called destinies are unsuitable for the epic. Here they are the voice of the masses, which is the real and natural, and hence epic person."²⁴ Döblin's specific innovative technique is also linked with his repudiation of authorial omniscience and his understanding of the author as someone who captures the historical experience of his/her time. Not unlike Hegel, he sees the epic author as someone responding to a collective reality, rather than a gifted individual who produces subjective artworks.

Finally, Franco Moretti, a key literary scholar of our times, understands the modern epic as a term that can help us better comprehend the innovations of modernist literature.

Moretti sees modernism as a response to the world system, namely capitalism, and the radical reformulation of experience that this shift has brought about. Modernist literature's penchant for digressions—its emphasis on dailiness by means of its employment of polyphony and stream of consciousness—has numerous “structural similarities” to epic forms that have been inherited from the past.²⁵ The modern epic's strategies of narrative multiplicity and openness are indicative of a desire to explore and negotiate the boundaries between the public and the private, the individual and the collective. Capitalism has radically reformulated historical experience by creating a conflict between the core and peripheral economies across the world. “The world becomes one, and unequal, one, because capitalism constrains production everywhere on the planet; and unequal, because its network of exchanges requires, and reinforces, a marked unevenness between the three areas.”²⁶ Consequently, world literature responds to the pressures of the world system and cannot be understood through categories of the national. This is the reason why many modern epics coming from different parts of the globe employ a paratactic style to reflect on the overabundance of stimuli in capitalist modernity and their effects on the individual and the collective psyche.

Epic externality becomes a means of responding to this crisis of experience in modernity. For instance, in Joyce's *Ulysses*, urban cacophony and polyphony become the modernist epic digressions that problematize narrative agency and focalization. The novel does not communicate a character-based story but “the polyphony of the metropolis and its division of labour.”²⁷ Moretti views the epic as a form that is subject to change and not as a genre that has necessarily to do with heroic, large-scale subject-matter. Many modern epics, eg. *Ulysses* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, question the standardized principles of character and plot construction by focusing on the banality of everyday experience in capitalism. The great ambition of the modernist epics is to assume a mythical global status like the epic poems of the past. “They are world texts, whose ideal reader is no longer the individual, but an entire

society.”²⁸ In a belated Hegelian fashion, the modernist epic captures collective rather than individual experiences.

The Epic in Film Theory

From the abovementioned definitions, we can see that the term epic is far from being self-evident and this might enable us to understand the variety of films that fall under the epic rubric. The complexity of the term has also been acknowledged in film theory. Sergei Eisenstein, for example, understands “the epic principle” to be the product of the accumulation of autonomous shots. Interestingly, Eisenstein did not categorize his own work as epic. As he says,

According to this definition, shared even by Pudovkin as a theoretician, montage is the means of unrolling an idea, with the help of single shots: the “epic” principle. In my opinion, however, montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots—shots even opposite to one another: the “dramatic” principle.²⁹

What Eisenstein does not clarify here is how the independent episodes serve the dramatic rather than the epic principle and this has to do with the inconsistencies in the terminology he uses to describe his dramaturgical approach (inconsistencies that any committed reader of his theoretical writings will confirm). For instance in an essay written in 1939, he suggests that his work merges the epic in the manner in which the content is revealed, the dramatic in the handling of the story, and the lyrical in the manner it connects the individual experience to a wider whole.³⁰ In another essay written in 1935, he calls himself “the most devoted partisan of the mass-epical style in cinema.”³¹ Perhaps this can enable us to clarify things further. The epic aspect of the Eisensteinian dramaturgy was its emphasis on the mass hero, the repudiation of the individual character, and the dramaturgical principle of joining independent episodes through constructive montage. Yet all these elements are always in service of the drama in the sense that the independent parts serve the whole. At the same time, the episodes themselves have a sense of autonomy and are not entirely in service of the

story. This aspect of Eisenstein's epic dramaturgy has been acknowledged by Roland Barthes, who suggests that each segment in Eisenstein's cinema is complete on its own, while it simultaneously contributes to the wider story. "The primary force of Eisenstein is due to the fact that no image is boring, you are not obliged to wait for the next in order to understand and be delighted."³² Instead, Eisenstein's epic dramaturgy is based upon the principle of the "summation of perfect instants."³³ We can now see how this form of collective and episodic dramaturgy, which downplays character-based narration in favor of the presentation of external events, and deploys an episodic style, connects with Goethe's, Schiller's and Hegel's above-mentioned theorizations of the epic. The Eisensteinian understanding of the epic was very influential on Bertolt Brecht's formulation of epic dramaturgy in theatre; As Brecht mentions in a journal entry in 1945, Eisenstein's films "had a colossal effect on me."³⁴

In 1934, Rudolf Arnheim published an important essay titled "Epic and Dramatic Film". Arnheim takes as his starting point Goethe's and Schiller's foregoing distinction between epic and dramatic poetry and applies it to film. The chief difference between epic and dramatic cinema is that the latter constructs a dynamic and coherent sequence of events leading to a dramaturgical resolution. The dramatic film constructs a clear-cut conflict and resolves it. Plots that are secondary to the main conflict are kept in the background. The epic film, on the other hand, aims towards more generalized representations, while its style tends to be episodic. Epic cinema, thus, consists of autonomous episodes which are "mutually exchangeable." Cinema's capacity to capture the minutiae of reality allows it to adopt the epic style. For instance, Arnheim briefly suggests that documentary films are epic due to their capacity to register reality in its details and also because they are not bound by temporal and spatial unity. But the fundamental feature of the epic film for Arnheim is that it does not aim for resolutions but remains open-ended. Arnheim's understanding of epic cinema as a genre

that relies on episodic dramaturgy, narrative aperture and generalized representations chimes neatly with theorizations of the modernist epic as mentioned in the previous section.

This connection between epic cinema and modernism, albeit vernacular modernism—to invoke Miriam Bratu Hansen—becomes clear in his suggestion that Charlie Chaplin's and Buster Keaton's films are exemplars of an epic style which is reliant on independent episodes.

The films of Chaplin and Buster Keaton are prototypes of the epic form. These films have been accused of lacking structure, of being episodes patched together. Of course, even an epic work needs unity and structure, but the basic shape of these films merely applies the ancient principle of epic narration. To some extent, the episodes that constitute them are mutually exchangeable, and even the famous endings (Chaplin walks away and disappears on the horizon without having married the pretty girl) are not only a personal expression of resignation but first of all a necessary feature of the epic style, which is not concerned with change and solution but with the presentation of invariable existence.³⁵

Although Brecht would disagree with Arnheim's argument that the "epic film is static" and is not concerned with visualizing change, there are points of convergence between them in their understanding of early film comedies as exemplars of epic cinema. Like Arnheim, Brecht also thought of comic actors such as Chaplin, and the Bavarian comedian Karl Valentin as epic ones, due to their capacity to depict the individual as a changeable character whose *gestic* attitudes are generated from his or her dialogue with the social environment. For Brecht, a key feature of the epic actor is that his or her behavior does not rely on fixed characteristics that have been established from the start. On the contrary, the epic actor's behavior is always subject to change and his or her postural attitudes connect the inner world of the individual with the social reality. Writing in 1931, he concludes that "Charlie Chaplin, incidentally, would in many ways be more suited to the demands of epic theatre than those of dramatic theatre!"³⁶ It is noteworthy here that the epic is associated with an aesthetics of performative discontinuity; this association of the epic with a fragmentary style is in keeping

with abovementioned theorizations according to which the autonomy of the parts is a constitutive aspect of epic poetry, literature and cinema.

Coming from a different direction, Todd Berliner has made a comparable argument about Chaplin in his analysis of *City Lights* (1931). Commenting on the film's ending, Berliner suggests that it looks unusually open and perplexing and violates the expectations of heterosexual closure cultivated by the storyline. This is also heightened by the fact that the film's formal and stylistic devices are not in service of narrative closure as would be expected by the comedies of the time. The end of the film refuses to present a clear resolution to the heterosexual subplot and the final shot of the Tramp further complicates the narrative, because it is a very brief climactic shot. As Berliner says, this shot looks more like a transitional one that foregrounds expectations for further narrative action.³⁷ The narrative ends although the film's stylistic devices make the audience expect the storyline to continue. Although Berliner sees this film as an exception to Chaplin's career, his insights can be usefully compared with Arnheim's and Brecht's understanding of his films as epic. The lack of narrative closure in Chaplin's Tramp films might be read as a signal that the adventures of this archetypal modern figure will be further explored in subsequent films.

Another influential definition of epic cinema has been offered by Lotte H. Eisner who has aptly shown the influence of the epic/agit-prop theater director, Erwin Piscator, on cinema. Piscator's political theater aimed for elaborate theatrical productions that emphasized external historical/social events, collective dramaturgy, and character types. Piscator used giant screens and blackboards as a means of reportage. The technique of reportage aspired to link the stage reality with the extra-diegetic social one and to foreground a materialist understanding of social phenomena. Piscator's collective dramaturgy had a major influence on numerous German filmmakers in the beginning of the twentieth century, who fashioned an epic aesthetic of collective dramaturgy that highlighted external events instead of character-

based dramas. Eisner explains that the Piscatorian aesthetic of the *Sprechöre* (the mass choruses) was influential on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, (1927) especially in its representation of the group of workers as a unified, alienated collective. Eisner draws particular attention to the stylized performances of the actors impersonating the workers and argues that this highly formalized style of acting could be read as a commentary on the colonization of the workers' bodies by the alienating capitalist mode of production. In particular, the representation of the underground workers as "automatons" poses the question of the merging of the individual with the machine, a topic that has become even more pertinent in the present as the flourishing studies on posthumanism show.³⁸ Piscator's major innovation, manipulated by Fritz Lang in *Metropolis*, was the transformation of "the extras into architectural elements, which he then projected forward again in swift, preferably wedge-shaped movements, either singly or in groups."³⁹ The Piscatorian *Ballung* (grouping of the human figures) and the *Sprechchöre* (speaking choruses) that make the mass appear as a solid collective subject were extremely influential not just on *Metropolis* but on other German filmmakers of the time and obviously on the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic.

For Piscator, the epic aesthetic was the product of a desire to make a connection between the dramatic universe and the active forces of history located in the extra-diegetic reality. Commenting on his production of Alfons Paquet's *Flags*, he clarifies his understanding of the epic aesthetic:

I was now able to develop a type of direction which years later, was proclaimed by others to be the "epic theater." What was it at all about? Briefly, it was about the extension of the action and the clarification of the background to the action, that is to say it involved a continuation of the play beyond the dramatic framework... This automatically led to the use of stage techniques from areas which had never been seen in the theater before... I had broad projection screens on either side of the stage. During the prologue at the beginning, in which the play was introduced with character sketches of the figures who were to appear, photographs of the persons in question were projected on the screen. Throughout the play I used the screens to connect the separate scenes by projecting linking texts.⁴⁰

Importantly, Piscator's use of new technologies on theater was not in service of portraying grand historical personas, but everyday events. Epic style was a means of de-romanticizing art and capturing the everyday in its complexity, which as I explain below is also a key feature of literary and cinematic modernism.

The theater critic Leo Lania identified affinities between the work of Döblin and Piscator. In his review of *Flags*, Lania says that Döblin was impressed by Piscator's production and his desire to bridge art with social reality. He then cites Döblin's argument that epic literature needs to do something similar and be liberated from the aesthete book culture: "The book is the death of real language... 'Down with books has been my slogan, but I see no clear path for the present-day writer of epics to follow, unless it be the path to a—New Stage."⁴¹ A parenthesis here: It is important to note the intermedial quality of the term epic, since many of the artists mentioned already such as Eisenstein, Brecht, Piscator and Döblin were part of what Julian Murphet terms "multimedia modernism."⁴² Eisenstein came to the cinema from the theater and applied Meyerhold's biomechanical theatrical aesthetic to his films, while Brecht's theater was heavily influenced by early cinema's fast editing; similarly, Piscator merged theater with cinema in his own stage productions using giant screens and blackboards with filmed material. Finally, Döblin's novels manipulated cinematic strategies of montage. Once we accept the intermedial quality of the term epic, it becomes possible to think of epic cinema as a more complex category and not as a self-evident one.

Another influential film-theorist, who has written on epic cinema is André Bazin. Bazin discusses the epic qualities of Italian neorealism and the Hollywood Western. He identifies epic elements in neorealism's stress on communal destiny put forward through its emphasis on public spaces, as well as the collective. In his 1948 essay on Neorealism, he praises the Italian filmmakers of the time for filming actions in such a way that the individual is shown as part of a group reality. This is the reason why neorealist filmmakers are the most

adept directors in filming in public spaces. In doing so, they manage to depict actions “without separating them from their material context.”⁴³ Bazin’s argument that neorealist characters are not the carriers of an individualist drama, but representatives of a community resonates with Lukács’ argument in the *Theory of the Novel* that “the epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual,” but someone whose actions are connected with a broader community.⁴⁴ The epic is a poetic mode that aspires to give form to a broader totality and Lukács identifies epic elements in the historical novel. The novel uses epic elements of narrative digressions to uncover a capitalist totality not empirically visible, a point that corresponds with Marx’s objection to empiricism. For Lukács, the novelistic characters are epic individuals. They retain their key characteristics but they are also a product of their time and environment, so the emphasis is more on situations rather than their individualities. Bazin voices a similar point when suggesting that neorealism is predominantly concerned with capturing social conditions rather than dramatic actions. As he says in his discussion of *Ladri di biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thieves*, De Sica, 1948), De Sica manages to connect the reality of the spectacle with the reality of the event, that is, the reality of the drama with the extra-diegetic historical reality in which the drama takes place.

Crucially, Bazin, like Lukács, is also attentive to issues of epic style. According to Lukács, epic style has a sense of dramatic incoherence, since stories start in *media res* and offer inconclusive endings, while each independent part has “a life of its own.”⁴⁵ Bazin evokes this argument in his discussion of *The Bicycle Thieves* when he states that the action is organized less in terms of plot development and resembles more a summation of independent episodes. As such, “the events are not necessarily sign of something, of a truth of which we are to be convinced, they all carry their own weight, their complete uniqueness, that ambiguity that characterizes any fact.”⁴⁶ He makes a similar point in his discussion of Rossellini’s *Paisà* (1946):

The unit of cinematic narrative in *Paisà* is not the “shot,” an abstract view of a reality which is being analyzed, but the “fact.” A fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity, whose meaning emerges only after the fact, thanks to other imposed facts between which the mind establishes certain relationships.⁴⁷

This dramaturgical looseness enables one to get access to a broader totality, since the summation of fragments allows us to identify and establish certain relationships between the semi-independent episodes. Again, aside from the Lukácsian echoes in Bazin’s arguments, one also recognizes an acknowledgement of modernist dailiness and banality. It is not accidental that he draws attention to the quotidian incidents that motivate the storyline in many neorealist films. For example, the story of *Bicycle Thieves* is “truly an insignificant, even a banal incident: a workman spends a whole day looking in vain in the streets of Rome for the bicycle someone has stolen from him.”⁴⁸

It also bears noting that Bazin clearly links neorealism’s emphasis on mundane, everyday reality with the modern epic novel.⁴⁹ As he says, “*La Terra Trema* and *Cielo sulla Palude* are films without action in the unfolding of which, somewhat after the style of the epic novel, no concession is made to dramatic tension”.⁵⁰ This emphasis on the mundane aspects of everyday reality is consistent with what David Trotter calls the modernist “commitment to the ordinary,” which aspired to take issue with the everyday and the banal so as to question its ordinariness. As he says, in emphasizing the quotidian, modernist writers and filmmakers “put in doubt the very idea of existence as such.”⁵¹ Trotter explains how the media revolution in nineteenth and twentieth century exercised a huge influence on the international culture of modernism. Literature, like cinema, adopted a form of technical writing and strategies of visual automatism that were associated with the film medium. Similarly, early modernist filmmakers manipulated the dialectics of recording and representing reality offered by cinema’s reliance on mechanical apparatuses. This preoccupation with the banal and the everyday is a key feature of the modern epic as seen in

novels from the canon of literature such as *Ulysses* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, but also in contemporary authors, who are heirs of the epic modernist aesthetic such as Roberto Bolaño, José Saramago and László Krasznahorkai. Bazin's placing of neorealism within an epic tradition is indicative of his understanding of the epic as something associated with the modernist tradition of the time and particularly with early perceptions of the medium as an apparatus that could capture material not predetermined by the director. This is the reason why the director's voice and dramaturgy vanish in neorealism, as he idiosyncratically suggests in his analysis of *The Bicycle Thieves*. Thus, the merit of Bazin's intervention is that he invites us to think of the epic in terms of style and not just subject matter.

Importantly, Bazin addresses questions of style in his analysis of the Hollywood Western too. This genre constructs the myth of the conquest of the West by manipulating what he calls "the great epic Manicheism which sets the forces of evil over against the knights of the true cause."⁵² The Hollywood Western as a genre is preoccupied with the construction of a mythical space, the taming of nature by the colonial forces and the veneration of those individuals who survived the perils of an unknown environment. Underpinning Bazin's argument is that the construction of the myth of the nation goes hand in hand with the construction of morality and this justifies the magnitude of the genre's characters. The Western in this respect is a historical film not on account of its capacity to simulate the past convincingly or to duplicate historical figures, but because of its engagement with collective concepts of morality, individual initiative, and loyalty to the law, which are relevant to America's historical past and present. The genre merges the ethics of the epic with the ethics of tragedy especially in its treatment of the heroic individual. Bazin's point on the ethics of the tragedy recalls Robert Warshaw's argument that the ethics of the Western is grounded in an idealization of the virtues of the heroic individual. The Western hero is a narrative agent with a "moral clarity" and his struggles and actions become a vehicle

for the propagation of American myths, such as individualism, that are still widespread in the capitalist present. As he says, it is not accidental that the “the true “civilization” of the Western movie is always embodied in an individual.”⁵³ At the same time, Bazin is right to suggest that the genre also has features associated with the ethics of the epic, because the heroic character— as per Hegel—has epic/extra-individual qualities; he (because he is male) acts as the conduit for the propagation of a Christian moral code and for the exaltation of the heroic virtues of the first settlers.

The preference for travelling shots that focus on “the vast horizons” of nature and the avoidance of close-ups and medium shots are indicators of a desire to mythicize the struggle between the individual and nature and the settlers’ will to impose their law in newly discovered land of opportunity. “The western has virtually no use for the closeup, even for the medium shot, preferring by contrast the traveling shot and the pan which refuse to be limited by the frameline and which restore to space its fullness.”⁵⁴ Bazin’s point that the Western’s penchant for the travelling shot rather than the stock-in-trades of Hollywood cinema, that is the close-up and the *plan américain*, is an index of the consistency of his thinking of the epic as style too, since these are also features that can be identified in neorealism and post-war modernist cinema too. Bazin ends up suggesting that the migration to the West as portrayed in the genre is the contemporary Odyssey.

Epic Cinema: Four Tentative Categories

All the above-mentioned remarks on the epic are a powerful indicator of the complexity of the term. One can legitimately suggest that epic subject-matter does not necessarily equal epic style. For instance, as Bazin’s discussion of neorealism demonstrates, a film can have epic style but a banal subject-matter. Laleen Jayamanne usefully reminds us that most of the contemporary films marketed and promoted as epics are in fact “dramatic in conception (true to the three dramatic unities of time, place, and action, well honed in the late nineteenth-

century commercial genre of the “well-made play”), not epic.”⁵⁵ Inversely, one can validly suggest that a film can have epic style without epic subject-matter. Extending these arguments, I would like to outline some tentative categories of epic films. These categories are far from being definite; I hope, however, that they can urge us to rethink epic cinema as a far more complex and polyvalent term than what has been hitherto discussed.

The first category refers to films that have epic subject matter but not epic style. In this category belong films which are widely accepted as epics such as *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), *Quo Vadis* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951), *The 300 Spartans* (Rudolph Maté, 1962), *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995), *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006). In these films, while the pretext for the action is a broader historical myth or event, they tend to follow a clear-cut, linear dramatic structure, and communicate coherent spatial and temporal transitions. Furthermore, the narrative is framed through the lens of the individual dramatic hero and a secondary heterosexual romance or a personal feud provide the drive of the action. For instance, in the case of *Braveheart* and *Gladiator* it is the chief characters’ desire for revenge for their beloved ones that provides the narrative impetus for the unfolding of the plot. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that *Braveheart* is more a dramatization of Wallace’s life rather than of the First War of Scottish Independence, and the *Gladiator* is about Maximus Decimus Meridius rather than about the Roman culture of the gladiatorial fights. The historical myths or facts operate as a mere backdrop for the dramatization of a character-focused narrative. As such, the films’ *modus operandi* is dramatic rather than epic. Similarly in *Ben-Hur*, the wider religious drama provides a mere backdrop to produce a typical dramatic conflict between Ben-Hur and Messala. In *Braveheart*, in particular, the film includes all the characteristic dramatic elements starting with the coming of age drama of William Wallace (Mel Gibson). The execution of Murrin (Catherine McCormack) by the English serves the central dramatic impetus for the film’s

storyline, which presents the Scottish rebellion against the English as an act motivated by a personal vendetta. Meanwhile, Wallace's subsequent affair with Princess Isabella (Sophie Marceau) follows the emblematic traits of the classical Hollywood narrative. This is also the case in contemporary epics such as *Alexander* (Oliver Stone, 2004) and *300*. These contemporary examples confirm David Bordwell's argument that recent Hollywood films that emphasize spectacle over narrative still "depend on storytelling principles established in the studio era."⁵⁶

The second category refers to films that have an epic subject-matter and epic style. In this category we can place films such as D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Конец Санкт-Петербурга* (*The End of St. Petersburg*, 1927), Eisenstein's *Броненосец «Потёмкин»* (*Battleship Potemkin*, 1925), Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927), Sergio Leone's Westerns, Masaki Kobayashi's *人間の條件* (*The Human Condition*, 1959-61), Sergei Parajanov's *Цвет граната* (*The Color of Pomegranates*, 1969), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Il Decameron* (*The Decameron*, 1971), and Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975). *Intolerance*, for instance, deploys standard epic principles by interweaving storylines from different historical periods, and taking liberties in the representation of time and space. But the most important element in Griffith's film is the manipulation of principles of non-continuity not as a means of resisting narration, but as a narrative technique and this is in keeping with the epic principle of telling a story in semi-autonomous sequences. At the same time, there is tension in Griffith's films in the sense that there is a dialectical conflict between formal principles of narrative continuity and non-continuity, which has been acknowledged by Jacques Aumont. Even formal elements such as the close-up do not simply advance the causal progression of the story. As Aumont says,

Griffith uses the close-up as an excess of writing; the close-up, like the juxtaposition within the frame of which we have already spoken, is a rhetorical figure of montage, making sense outside the causal and naturalizing chain (however much one tries to re-attach it). It is of the order of an almost caricature hyper-articulated writing, in a sense

the grimace of the filmic text (grimace: alteration to the continuity and homogeneity of the most quietly expressive text, the face).⁵⁷

Aumont's refusal to consider Griffith as a precursor of the classical Hollywood style, as per the scholarly consensus, opens a pathway to consider the epic quality of his films. For as Aumont explains, there is an excess in Griffith's films that cannot be contained by the action. Form develops the plotline, but it simultaneously fragments it: this is the dialectical consequence of the conflict between narrative continuity and non-continuity.⁵⁸

This is also the case in many Soviet cinema classics, as well as in *Barry Lyndon* and *Napoléon*, in which the use of intertitles and voice-over narration decenters the characters placing emphasis on external events, which are not necessarily to be understood as the product of individual agency. The past and the present dialectically interact with each other and as Maria Pramaggiore says, "Kubrick explores the haunting of a nonlinear time, a durational temporality that cannot guarantee succession."⁵⁹ This problematization of temporality challenges individual agency and emphasizes the historical context of the time, while the narrative episodes have a loose connection with each other.

Such an emphasis on external events is also the case in *Napoléon*, where there is a somehow reactionary celebration of individualism. However, Gance draws much attention to the circumstances that made Napoleon's rise to power possible. Emblematic in this respect is the sequence that juxtaposes Napoleon's escape from Corsica with the National Assembly in Paris, where we witness the Montagnards denouncing the Girondists of treason. Gance manipulates strategies of parallel editing juxtaposing visuals of Napoleon battling the waves on his raft with the commotion in the National Assembly. The combination of rapid and expressive camera movements, intertitles and parallel editing operates within the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, which merges the story with a meta-commentary on it.

The third category refers to films with epic style but not epic subject matter. In this group, we can place farces and comedies including films by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy and selected films by Jerry Lewis such as *The Bellboy* (1960) and *The Nutty Professor* (1963). These films prioritize situations over dramatic continuity and causality, or when they deploy causality it is very much reliant on accidents, misunderstandings, and coincidences. The gag in Chaplin, Keaton Laurel and Hardy and the abovementioned films by Lewis acts as a form of resistance to continuity. Theorizations of film comedy have cogently established that the comic privileges an aesthetics of fragmentation instead of compositional unity. In many films by the great comedians mentioned above, certain sequences assume an independent function. They certainly promote the narrative, but the linkage between the scenes is lax. Gags are inconsequential and repetitive often producing laughter out of the most ordinary experiences in modernity making the routine aspects of everyday life appear extraordinary, and conversely. Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale rightly suggest that the comic and the illogical are dialectically interrelated to the effect that the subversion of causality is a fundamental feature of comedy.⁶⁰

Years ago, Sergei Eisenstein made a similar point commenting that the critique of rationality is a constitutive element of the comic and this aspect of it may render the narrative unpredictable and disorganized giving rise to anarchic situations loosely connected with each other.⁶¹ Consider, for instance, how an aimless afternoon walk and a fallen red flag obtained by the Tramp (Charlie Chaplin) immediately lead to him being mistaken for the union leader by the striking workers and the policemen in *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936). The narrative unpredictability makes the character appear in various public and social spaces, where he experiences different adventures and trials. It is not accidental that Chaplin and Keaton were the darlings of many modernist artists including T.S. Eliott, Virginia Wolf, Eisenstein, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Robert Bresson and many

more, who valorized formal abstraction rather than compositional coherence. Chaplin's work, in particular, has generated much discussion apropos its fragmented quality. Meyerhold was one of the first to compare Chaplin with Eisenstein. As he says: "What is there in common between Eisenstein and Chaplin? The reason I ask this is not to throw light on Eisenstein, who is familiar enough to use, but rather to reveal certain aspects of Chaplin: his remarkable lapidary style, his laconicism, his invariable division of the film into episodes or, as Eisenstein would say, 'attractions'."⁶² Eisenstein, himself, one of the central figures of an epic dramaturgy, has also maintained that there is an episodic and "attractional quality" in Chaplin's film style.⁶³ Similarly, Viktor Shklovsky has noted that Chaplin's acting "can be divided into a series of passages, each passage usually ending with a full stop, a pose."⁶⁴ One notes here that fragmentation is not just an element of the narrative, but of the performance too and this is certainly applicable to varying degrees to Keaton, and Laurel and Hardy. The epic here is not a matter of grandiose spectacle and historical/mythical subject-matter, but something associated with style, namely the autonomy of the episodes. As already mentioned, Rudolf Arnheim considered Chaplin's and Keaton's films to be prototypical of the epic form because they proceed by means of loose, autonomous sequences, while they hardly ever offer a narrative resolution.

The fourth category is the modernist epic. The modernist epic can be divided into three subgroups. In the first one we can place films that try to "epicize" the modern reality of their times, or which use epic style to reveal something about their particular historical time. In this category we can place City-symphonies such as *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, Walter Ruttmann, 1927), *Человек с кино-аппаратом* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov, 1929), *Rien que les heures* (*Nothing But Time*, Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926) and propaganda films such as *падение династии романовых* (*The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, Esfir Shub, 1927), *Шагай, совет!* (*Stride*, Vertov, 1926), and

Triumph des Willens (Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will* (1935)). In these films urban cacophony and polyphony replace authorial omniscience and character agency. In the city symphonies there is a preoccupation with the everyday life which recalls the literary modernist epics of Joyce and Döblin, which are concerned with the registration of dailiness rather than dramatic conflict. Like some of the books from the canon of literary modernism, symphony films rely on the associations generated by the clash of heterogeneous elements. This is the reason why Ruttmann's name figured importantly for a potential film adaptation of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

But there is also a Hegelian dimension in these films; Hegel suggested that the epic style is synonymous with an aesthetic that foregrounds an "objective way of looking at things" at the expense of authorial creativity.⁶⁵ Vertov thought something analogous to that when he argued that the Kino-eye is superior to the human one, and that mass authorship can provide a more objective understanding of social phenomena. The Kinoks, as he suggested, aimed to abolish art and replace it with a type of cinema that organizes "the footage of everyday life".⁶⁶ Vertov's critique of dramaturgy is predicated upon a preference for a film style that does not separate the recorded objects by the very process of recording itself and this is a technique that has its origins in epic poetry, where the narrated actions cannot be separated by the self-conscious process of narrating. The difference is that for the filmmakers of the city-symphonies the mundane and the everyday are elevated at the expense of the heroic. We encounter once again an emphasis on modernist dailiness. Laura Marcus' discussion of the city symphony film is especially apt here. As she says,

The 'city symphonies' of Sheeler and Strand, Ruttmann, Cavalcanti and Vertov follow the course of a day in the life of the city. Like the one-day novels of the period, they open up the question of 'modernist dailiness'; the preoccupation with everyday life is combined with the intimation that much greater spans of time and culture are condensed within the diurnal round. Space and time relations—and duration and the passing of time—are some of the central preoccupations of the films, frequently underlain by the perception that 'plot' and 'story' must be excluded for time and space to become apparent.⁶⁷

Yet this emphasis on the everyday communicates a fascination with the transformation of experience in modernity: the city becomes the central character. Something similar takes place in propaganda films, which are also part of this subgroup. In these films, epic externality is the means through which the myth of a nation or a new society is constructed. For instance, in Esfir Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, the dramaturgy follows the logic of the gap, the autonomous fragment in the Barthean sense, to provide a historical context and explanation for the October revolution. Images, found-footage and intertitles succeed frantically one another, while revolutionary pamphlets and decrees are also visualized on screen. The common element between propaganda and symphony films is the desire to epicize the present and represent contemporaneity as an event of epic scale. The key difference between left and right-wing propaganda films is that the former present modernity and change as something to be celebrated; the latter also celebrate change (e.g. Hitler's Third Reich in *The Triumph of the Will*), but this change is somehow linked with an ostentatious return to a mythical past that has been corrupted by modernity.

The second subgroup is the neorealist epic, which is now acknowledged as the key movement in post-war cinematic modernism. Italian neorealism manipulates an epic fragmentary style to reveal something concrete about the historical reality of the post-war Italy. The landscape occupies a key role in the drama, at times at the expense of the characters. There is an element of epic externality in these films concerned with making visible processes not captured in our everyday interactions. One needs to recall Bazin's comment that dramaturgy and the author disappear in neorealist films. Again, the storyline acts as a pretext for the registration of social reality. Neorealism's epic externality is the product of the dialectical tension produced by the camera's capturing of the dramatic universe and the extra-diegetic historical one. Unlike the city symphonies, neorealism's epic style is not reliant on fast editing and montage sequences, but on long-takes and continuity

editing. Crucially, neorealism is a wide-ranging category and films heavily inspired by the post-war Italian filmmakers may well be understood as expansions of this generic tradition. For example, Kumar Shahani's *Maya Darpan* (1972) can also be seen as a neorealist epic. In these terms, the neorealist epic is not bound by geography but is rather a formal response to structures of underdevelopment in different countries across the globe.

From this perspective, we can also place to this category contemporary films named as "neo-neorealist" by James Naremore. Naremore deploys this neologism to refer to a body of global films that still manipulate cinema's "visual realism" instead of its "visual magic."⁶⁸ Contemporary Asian filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke, Diao Yinan, and Lee Chang-dong are some important exemplars. Consider Jia Zhangke's *三峡好人* (*Still Life*, 2006) where the emphasis on the landscape change in the village Fengjie brought about by the building of the Three Gorges Dam downplays the two characters' individual narrative. The individual storylines are in dialectical interaction with the changing historical environment and this is at times foregrounded by placing their stories within a group reality. Jia reanimates the modernist preference for the quotidian and this aesthetic attitude privileges the registration of collective/social phenomena rather than character-based drama. Neferti Xina M. Tadiar rightly posits that in Jia's films the individual character's narrative provides access to a collective reality of a surplus population marred by dispossession, precarity and rootlessness, which is in service of neoliberal capitalist reforms.

The aesthetics of this cinematic attention to the vanishing, the immobile, and the silent offers a particular temporal structure for grasping the life-times of disposability as embodied in the lives of all the workers portrayed in the film, whom Jia describes as "more or less unemployed . . . more or less homeless, perpetually moving from one place to another with a sense of permanently being in exile."⁶⁹

As in Italian neorealism, the registration of the extra-diegetic environment produces a sense of episodic discontinuity that assumes an epic quality. This discontinuity is the outcome of the extra-diegetic reality's presence within the narrative universe that destabilizes the film's

compositional coherence. Here we may recall Moretti's argument mentioned in the second section of the essay, according to which the modern epic can be seen as a response to the dialectic of development and underdevelopment. Jia's cinema provides a powerful example of the pertinence of the modernist epic mode as a response to forced conditions of underdevelopment in modern China, which aim to fuel productivity in the developed regions of the country.

The third category of the modernist epic is the Piscatorian/Brechtian epic. I do not imply the Brechtian essay film that was heavily discussed in the 1970s, but films narrative in scope, which rely on the presentation of episodic/tableaux sequences that privilege collective dramaturgy rather than individual characters. Some of the films that belong to this category are *Kuhle Wampe* (Brecht, Dudow, Ottwalt, 1932) Piscator's only film *Восстание рыбаков* (*The Revolt of the Fishermen*, 1934), Miklós Jancsó's *Fényes szelek* (*The Confrontation*, 1969), Theo Angelopoulos's *Ο Θίασος* (*The Travelling Players*, 1975), and Ousmane Sembène's *Moolaadé* (2004). In these films, even when there is a central character, she or he functions more as a representative of a broader collective. For instance, in Jancsó's *The Confrontation* the narrative registers the student unrest following the establishment of Communism in 1947 Hungary. The film proceeds through songs that have a somehow pedagogical character. Arguments and counter-arguments are debated through folk, revolutionary songs and dances so as to capture the tensions between the representatives of the pre-revolutionary society and the student rebels. The social divisions are foregrounded through corporeal group formations and camera movements that visualize the conflicts between the old and the new order, but also the frictions within the student movement. Something analogous occurs in Angelopoulos' *The Travelling Players*; the film makes use of semi-autonomous tableaux sequences to narrate the problematic history of post-World War II Greece. Group choruses, collective dramaturgy, and a Brechtian separation of elements are

the central formal means through which Angelopoulos captures the tensions between conflicting social and political forces. As such, in the Piscatorian/Brechtian epic, the narrative is de-individuated with the view to foregrounding a Marxist/materialist view of history. I name this category as Piscatorian/Brechtian partly because Brecht was influenced by Piscator in his formulation of the epic theater, but also because typical Piscatorian elements such as the *Ballung*, and the *Sprechchöre* figure importantly in these films. Essentially, all modernist epics from city symphonies, propaganda, neorealist, and Piscatorian/Brechtian films are Hegelian in the sense that they give precedence to external events, rely on polyphonic narrative strategies, and focus on collective over individual characterization.

It is vital to emphasize that these categories I have proposed are elastic rather than fixed ones. For instance, films belonging to category two, such as Eisenstein's and Pudovkin's epics, *The Color of Pomegranates*, and *Barry Lyndon* are also modernist ones and the same also applies to films from category three e.g. Chaplin's and Keaton's comedies, which are exemplars of a vernacular modernist tradition as per Hansen's well-known formulation. In conclusion, I have argued in this article that a careful investigation of the epic, its literary origins, and its theorization in film theory may enable us to appreciate the manifoldness and diversity of epic cinema as a category of analysis. The term epic cinema is much more nuanced than what film scholarship has taken it to be and it is about time that we problematize it and do not reduce it to the production of films that merely adapt stories from the mythical or historical repertoire of a nation. In acknowledging the intricacy of the term, we might be able to reevaluate film as a medium whose specificity is ideally geared to adopt not just the dramatic but also the epic style of narration. In doing so, we may be able to rethink and appreciate Bazin's point that "cinema is the specifically epic art."⁷⁰

Acknowledgements: *A draft of this article was presented at the Screen conference July 1, 2018. I am also grateful to John David Rhodes who invited me to present a draft of this essay at the Centre for Film and Screen, University of Cambridge, in November 2018.*

¹ Constantine Santas, *The Epic in Film: From Myth to Blockbuster* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 1.

² Santas, 29.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics* chapter XXVI, trans. S. H. Butcher (Adelaide: The University of Adelaide Library, 2001), accessed July 25, 2019,

<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/poetics/complete.html>.

One of the leading scholars on the *Poetics*, Stephen Halliwell, acknowledges that, “According to Aristotle, well constructed tragic plots possess a peculiarly tightknit form of narrative unity.” Stephen Halliwell, “Unity of Art without Unity of Life? A Question about Aristotle’s Theory of Tragedy,” *Atti Accademia Pontaniana, Napoli - Supplemento N.S.*, LXI (2012): 26.

⁴ Robert Burgoyne, “Introduction,” in *The Epic Film in World Culture*, ed. Robert Burgoyne (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.

⁵ See, Robert Burgoyne, “Bare Life and Sovereignty in *Gladiator*,” in *The Epic Film in World Culture*, ed. Robert Burgoyne (New York: Routledge, 2011), 83, 92, 93.

⁶ Vivian Sobchack, ““Surge and Splendor”: A Phenomenology of the Hollywood Historical Epic”, *Representations*, no. 29 (1990): 29.

⁷ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991), 24.

⁸ Andrew B. R. Elliott, “Introduction: The Return of the Epic” in *The Return of the Epic Film Genre, Aesthetics and History in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Andrew B.R. Elliott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 7.

⁹ See, Sylvie Magerstädt, *Philosophy, Myth and Epic Cinema: Beyond Mere Illusions* (London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 73.

¹⁰ Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 13.

¹¹ See, *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon* ed. Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

See also, *Troy From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic*, ed. Martin Winkler (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

¹² See Simon Goldhill, "Naked and O Brother, Where Art Thou? The Politics and Poetics of Epic Cinema", in *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon* ed. Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 245-267.

¹³ Aristotle, Chapter XXIV.

¹⁴ Aristotle, Chapter XVII.

¹⁵ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Marquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1996), 45-46.

¹⁶ Moretti's study brilliantly shows how narrative digressions and autonomous episodes are a staple of the European epics, from ancient Greece to the modernist epic poetry of Ezra Pound. *Modern Epic*, 46

¹⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Epic and dramatic poetry," in *European Theories of the Drama*, ed. B. H. Clark (Cincinnati, OH: Stewart Kidd Company: 1918), 338.

This essay is co-written by Goethe and Schiller, although the source from which I cite it attributes it solely to Goethe. Similarly, Rudolf Arnheim in his essay on epic and dramatic cinema credits the essay to Goethe.

¹⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art Vol. 2*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1081.

¹⁹ Hegel, 1048.

²⁰ Heiner Müller, *Material: Texte und Kommntare*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 1989), 28.

²¹ Candace Wirt, Notebook Interview “I am a patriot of the 20s”: An Interview with Alexander Kluge”, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/i-am-a-patriot-of-the-20s-an-interview-with-alexander-kluge>

²² György Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971), 56.

²³ Alfred Döblin, *Der Bau des epischen Werks* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 2013), Kindle.

²⁴ Cited in, Wolfgang Beutin, Klaus Ehlert, Wolfgang Emmerich, Helmut Hoffacker, Bernd Lutz, Volker Meid, Ralf Schnell, Peter Stein, Inge Stephan, *A History of German Literature: From the Beginnings to the Present Day* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 398.

²⁵ *Modern Epic*, 2.

²⁶ Franco Moretti, “Evolution, World-Systems, *Weltliteratur*,” in *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture*, ed. David Palumbo-Liu, Bruce Robbins, Nirvana Tanoukh (Durham: Duke University Press), 114.

²⁷ *Modern Epic*, 211.

²⁸ *Modern Epic*, 22.

²⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda, (New York, London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1977), 49.

³⁰ See Eisenstein, 190.

³¹ Eisenstein, 124.

³² Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana, 1977), 72.

³³ Barthes, 73.

³⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht Journals/1934–1955*, ed. John Willett, trans. Hugh Rorrison, (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

Brecht coined the term “non-Aristotelian drama” by developing the Greek philosopher’s point that epic poetry has a looser structure compared to tragedy. He argued for a loose dramaturgy that valorizes the autonomy of the episodes. His rationale was that this modernist aesthetic activates the audience and enables them to make dialectical connections between the independent parts and the story’s *Fabel* as a whole.

³⁵ Rudolf Arnheim, *Film Essays and Criticism*, trans. Brenda Benthien (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 80.

³⁶ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, Tom Kuhn (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 85.

³⁷ See Todd Berliner, *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24.

³⁸ See, Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 229. For some good studies on posthumanism see Sarah Kember, Joanna Zylinska, *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process*, (Cambridge, MA, London: MIT Press, 2015). See also Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

³⁹ Eisner, 230.

⁴⁰ Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, trans. Hugh Rorrison (London: Methuen, 1980), 75-6.

⁴¹ Cited in Leo Lania, “Flags”, in Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, trans. Hugh Rorrison (London: Methuen, 1980), 75.

⁴² See Julian Murphet, *Multimedia Modernism: Literature and the Anglo-American Avant-Garde*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴³ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, vol. II, trans. Hugh Gray, (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 38.

⁴⁴ Lukács, 67.

⁴⁵ Lukács, 68.

⁴⁶ Bazin, 52.

⁴⁷ Bazin, 37.

⁴⁸ Bazin, 50.

⁴⁹ Recent scholarship has challenged the modernism realism binary. Fredric Jameson has reread the modernism realism debate suggesting that modernism made use of canonical tropes associated with realism, such as typicality, the problematization of individual protagonicity and the emphasis on mundane/undramatic details of everyday life. See Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013). Furthermore, Ian Aitken has aptly shown that Lukács admired certain modernist filmmakers (even Eisenstein). See Ian Aitken, *Lukácsian Film Theory and Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

⁵⁰ Bazin, 59.

⁵¹ David Trotter, "Hitchcock's Modernism", *Modernist Cultures*, 5, no 1 (2010): 110.

⁵² Bazin, 145.

⁵³ Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th ed., ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 455, 461.

⁵⁴ Bazin, 147.

⁵⁵ Laleen Jayamanne, *The Epic Cinema of Kumar Shahani* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2015), 12.

⁵⁶ David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006), 21.

⁵⁷ Jacques Aumont, “Griffith—The Frame, the Figure,” trans. Judith Ayling and Thomas Elsaesser in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser, Adam Barker (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 356.

⁵⁸ For more on Griffith as modernist see David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (London: Blackwell, 2007).

⁵⁹ Maria Pramaggiore, *Making Time in Stanley Kubrick's Barry Lyndon Art, History, and Empire* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 86.

⁶⁰ See, Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London, New York: Routledge, 1990), 31-32.

⁶¹ See, Sergei Eisenstein, *Mise en jeu and mise en geste*, trans. Sergey Levchin, (Montreal: Caboose, 2014), 31.

⁶² Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, trans. and ed. Edward Braun, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 399.

⁶³ Sergei Eisenstein, “The Montage of Attractions,” in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (eds.), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939* (London: Routledge, 1988), 88.

⁶⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, “Literature and cinema (extracts),” in Ian Christie, Richard Taylor (eds), *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939*, (London: Routledge, 1988), 98.

⁶⁵ Hegel, 1049.

⁶⁶ Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1984), 73.

⁶⁷ Laura Marcus, “‘A Hymn to Movement’: The ‘City Symphony’ of the 1920s and 1930s”, *Modernist Cultures* 5, no. 1 (2010): 30.

⁶⁸ James Naremore, *An Invention Without a Future: Essays on Cinema* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2014), 7.

⁶⁹ Neferti X. M. Tadiar, “Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism,” *Social Text* 31, no 2 (2013): 31.

⁷⁰ Bazin, 148.