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Volume 30, Number 2, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111033ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111033ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hodgson, N. (2023). Happiness Is Not Always Fun: An Unsuspicious Reading of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 30(2), 130–139.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1111033ar>

Article abstract

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Happiness Is Not Always Fun: An Unsuspicious Reading of Ali: Fear Eats the Soul

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The film-philosophy of Stanley Cavell has had a clear and ongoing influence on the recent focus on film in educational philosophy. Here, Cavell's film-philosophy is brought into conversation with the work of the anthropologist Veena Das and the literary theorist Toril Moi to further articulate the educational force of film. The practice of responding to film in terms of its specificity as film and its educational potential is discussed in relation to R. W. Fassbinder's film Ali: Fear Eats the Soul. Cavell, Das, and Moi are drawn upon to articulate, in a post-critical vein, the invitation to self-examination brought about by the film's presentation of the ordinary and the violence of the everyday. This reading contrasts, though perhaps sometimes complements, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" seen to characterize critical textual analysis, and recasts, uncomfortably sometimes, the political, from something to be uncovered to something of which we are constitutive.

Introduction

The film-philosophy of Stanley Cavell has had a clear and ongoing influence on the recent focus on film in educational philosophy. For some, this is because of the particular educational relevance of his analyses, for example in *Cities of Words* (2005) or in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1985), in which the perfectionist register and the education of grown-ups is articulated through a close reading of the narrative and character arcs of the films (see, e.g. Fulford, 2017; Standish, 2007). For others, in addition to these interests, it is Cavell's Wittgensteinian influence and the specific concerns of ordinary language philosophy, indeed the ordinary more generally, that invite engagement with his philosophical work with film (see, e.g., Gibbs, 2019). More recently, Cavell's work has been used to try to articulate the potential educational force of film in its specificity as film. Cavell's film-philosophy, as presented in *The World Viewed* (1979), discusses the ontological specificity of film, and indicates how what is particular to the way in which film can present the world to us – as distinct from photography, paintings, or literature – is constitutive of its educational potential (Cavell, 1979; Hodgson & Ramaekers, 2019). Educational here refers not to its potential to impart learning in a formal context (though this is not ruled out) but to its potential for self-examination or transformation. It is not only that (some) films present forms of education on screen but also that they are potentially educational in the form this presentation takes.

Here, I bring Cavell's film-philosophy into conversation with authors whose work also draws on Wittgenstein, and Cavell himself, to articulate their practices of thinking and analysis – the anthropologist Veena Das and the literary theorist Toril Moi – to further develop an account of the potential educational force of film, specifically in relation to R. W. Fassbinder's 1974 film *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. The reading offered is undertaken in a post-critical vein; that is, it resists the critical impulse to reveal what is going

on beneath what we see on screen, or to see through or break into the film (cf. Giroux, 2001). Instead, the reading involves a specific exercise of focusing on what we see and hear on screen and the way in which the particular affordances of film present this to us. Following Cavell, this entails in part identifying the specific devices used in the film. In Fassbinder's film, I suggest, the devices – the stare, theatricality, and thresholds – present a picture of the violence of the everyday, the ways in which our daily practices are constitutive of the social order, including its hierarchies and prejudices, and the pursuit of happiness, of a sort, in the face of this. Such a reading contrasts both with a critical reading that assumes that a text's meaning lies beneath the surface, and with a philosophical reading that assesses what is presented according to philosophical concepts similarly divorced from what we see and hear.

Rather, such writing on film is an instantiation of philosophy as responsiveness (cf. Cavell) and of that response deriving precisely from the limits (of ourselves) we experience when confronted by a text, or indeed by everyday events, in this case a film. In what follows I set out how the work of Cavell, Moi, and Das informs such a response, and a response to this film in particular. I then discuss the specific devices used in the film as presenting events to us in a particular way and how this reading differs from a cultural-critical reading. I then consider how the educational force of film, and of this film in particular, lies in its invitation to self-examination in the face of our limits.

The Critical, the Post-critical, the Text

The notion of the post-critical has been most prominently developed in the field of literary and cultural studies, as the merits of critique, characterized by “interrogating, defamiliarizing, and demystifying” (Anker and Felski, 2017, p. 1), were no longer so self-evident and to be taken for granted as we entered the new millennium. Moi's *Revolution of the Ordinary* (2017) takes a particularly Wittgensteinian approach to this move away from the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1970; Felski, 2012), and makes clear her concern with critique as reading suspiciously:

To read the text suspiciously is to see it as a symptom of something else. That “something else” usually turns out to be a theoretical or political insight possessed by the critic in advance of the reading. Instead of responding to the text's concerns, the critic forces it to submit to his or her own political schemes. The result is often entirely predictable readings. (Moi, 2017, p. 175)

Moi's concerns echo those of proponents of post-critical pedagogy: both question the critical pedagogical attitude, in which the educator reveals to the less educated “other” the conditions of their oppression, in what often amounts to a restating of the workings of power (cf. Hodgson et al., 2017, 2020). To read without forcing the text to submit to existing political themes is not to imply an objectivity or an apoliticism. It is a turn from a suspicious “why?” to an affirmative “why?” in responding to the questions texts raise for us. It is to look at what we see – and in audio-visual texts, what we hear – rather than assuming the text to always already (only) represent or reinstate the operation of power, understood in terms of oppression and domination, or to hide an underlying ideology.

There is a sense in Moi's account that the predictability of critical or suspicious readings renders them uneducational. She draws on Wittgenstein and Cavell to remind us that our critical attention is piqued by that which we don't understand, that “a certain sense of the question ‘Why this?’ is essential to criticism. We can't ask it unless we have noticed something, seen something that surprises or strikes us” (Cavell, 1969, p. 227, cited in Moi, 2017, p. 181). Moi contrasts this with the presupposition that a text is hiding something, that its deeper ideology is beneath the surface, to be revealed. Whereas the latter implies that what the text is really saying is there to be found beneath the surface, and thus there are no problems to address or questions to raise, the former invokes the sense that a problem or a question does exist, worthy of serious attention, and that this, the unknown, lies in us, the readers or viewers.

Such concerns echo Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein's "uncovering of philosophy's defenses, say, against the everyday, against, finitude" (Cavell, 2007, p. xi); that is, philosophy's characteristic tendency to reach for ultimate explanations and turn away from the unfamiliarity, the strangeness, of our own language. Rather, for Cavell, as also for Moi and Das, following Wittgenstein, philosophy begins with an acknowledgement of "lostness" and of not knowing one's way about. It does not pre-exist the everyday but is constituted in the questions that the everyday raises for us. Das's anthropology resonates with criticisms by Wittgenstein, and later Cavell, of the philosopher's concern with reaching the essence of concepts, something behind or deeper than the ordinary everydayness of our words, and who in doing so extracts words from their ordinary use (cf. Hodgson & Ramaekers, 2019; Cavell, 1979; Wittgenstein, 1953). Moi (2017) expresses this distinction in terms of describing the act of reading as being not "an excavation but a self-examination" (p. 182). The confrontation, or invitation, of the text is not taken here as an indication that it is hiding something, nor as a conceptual problem to be solved, but rather as an instantiation of what Das (2007) refers to as a limit. She takes Wittgenstein's statement that "the subject does not belong to the world; rather it is the limit of the world" (Wittgenstein, 1932, #5.61, #5.62, cited in Das, 2007, p. 4) to suggest that "the experience of being a subject is the experience of a limit" (2007, p. 4). Thus here the response to the text – the film – is an expression of turning not away from its surface to dig beneath it, or away from the actuality of what we see and hear and toward a metaphysical philosophical rendering, but towards the questions it raises of our relationship to the matter at hand.

Das is drawn to Cavell's philosophy for its "intimacy with the anthropological closeness to the concrete" (p. 10), and her anthropological rendering of Wittgenstein's and Cavell's philosophy brings a dual sense of the ordinary and the everyday that traverses both the methodological – the manner in which we attend to what we see and hear – and the existential – our very constitution in and by the everyday and the disruption of it. This enables an articulation of the educational in terms of both what we see and hear on screen and our response to the limits it exposes in us. This is not, however, to imply any universal response to what is presented. Das's anthropological concerns are particularly pertinent, too, in terms of her focus on violence and how this both disrupts and is part of the everyday. Das distinguishes between two forms of the "return to the ordinary." The first is the return to the ordinary that follows a dramatic event, a getting back to normal after a crisis. The second refers to "the kind of destruction that consists of small, recurring, repetitive crises almost woven into everyday life itself. What is catastrophic is not a spectacular event but that which is happening repeatedly, undramatically, uneventfully" (Das, 2020, p. 7). The question of the presence of the violence in and of the everyday is also expressed by Cavell in his foreword to Das's *Life and Words* (2007), when he asks whether it is "a pervasive fact of the social fabric that may hide itself, or one might also say, may express itself, in everyday encounters" (Cavell, 2007, p. xiii).

The Fassbinder film *Ali: Fear Eats The Soul* provides a presentation of this pervasive fact but one that might be overlooked if viewed (only) in terms of a pre-existing account of the political, understood only in negative or oppressive terms, or if we seek to understand or theorize it in terms that overlay meaning onto the film, as if what we see and hear is not itself sufficient. The expression of everyday violence and a post-critical, or at least unsuspicious, attitude to the use of film come together in the reading of *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* that follows. The film is read in order not to reach an explanation of it as such or to use it as an illustration of existing social issues. Rather, the reading is a response to what the film – in its specificity as a film – shows, and to the invitation to think that is brought about by the devices it uses.

Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (1974)

The film, set in Munich in the early to mid-1970s, presents the development of a relationship between Emmi, a widow in her 50s or 60s, who lives alone in an apartment and works part-time as a cleaner, and

Ali, a Moroccan migrant worker, perhaps in his 30s, who works as a mechanic. They first meet when Emmi steps into a bar to shelter from the rain. When she enters, the woman behind the bar (who, we will learn, owns the bar) and the small group of customers gathered near the bar turn to look at Emmi. Emmi takes a seat. The bar owner comes to take her order. The other customers joke that Ali should ask her to dance. Ali does so, maybe ignoring or not sensing their joke. He asks Emmi to dance, which they do. When they sit back down and Emmi decides to leave, Ali offers to walk her home. Initially he intends to wait in the hall until the rain passes, but after their conversation continues, Emmi invites him up to her apartment for a drink. Eventually, he is invited to stay the night, as he has a long journey home, and an early start. Unable to sleep, Ali enters Emmi's bedroom, where she is reading in bed. At first startled, Emmi invites him to sit on the bed when he says he cannot sleep and wants to talk more with her. He reaches out and touches her arm. As the scene fades we assume they will have sex.

They wake up together the next day, have breakfast, and leave for work. It is ambiguous as to whether they will, or wish to, see each other again. Later that day, Emmi returns to the bar, apparently hoping Ali will be there. After a short time, she leaves. As she returns home, she sees Ali waiting outside the apartment. She is clearly overjoyed to see him. They embrace and Emmi asks, "Yes?" Ali replies, "Yes," and they enter the apartment.

Their relationship quickly moves from cohabitation – a suggestion made by Emmi ostensibly because she finds it inhumane that in his current accommodation Ali shares a room with five other men – to marriage – prompted by the building superintendent visiting Emmi, having heard reports that she is sub-letting. When Emmi explains to Ali what she has told the building superintendent regarding plans for marriage, which neither of them has discussed, she doubts the sanity of what she has done. But Ali calmly affirms that marriage is a good idea and it is agreed that they will marry.

The meeting of Emmi and Ali, and their subsequent cohabitation and marriage, are met variously with doubt, disapproval, disgust, and exclusion: from other women in the bar; from Emmi's neighbours, who watch their coming and going and decide that Emmi is now responsible for cleaning the communal areas of the building, which they perceive as being dirtier now that a foreigner has moved in; from Emmi's colleagues who announce that anyone even considering a relationship with an immigrant must be a whore; from the shopkeeper who pretends not to understand what Ali is asking for when he goes to the shop to buy a particular brand of butter; and from Emmi's adult children, whose views largely echo the day-to-day racism and sexism that, as we see and hear, are widely held and largely uncontested.

These instances are in plain view; the prejudices and hierarchies of the time are clear to see. Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* presents us with this undramatic, everyday violence in a way that resists the application of pre-existing theoretical understandings. While the film does lend itself to being conceptualized according to such explanations, for example of racial, gender, and class disparities, and the historical and political themes are by no means unimportant, interpreting the film in terms of our pre-existing, overarching notions of these themes can turn our attention away from seeing and hearing what is being presented. Clearly, our interests in watching the film will shape how – or whether – it affects us and the questions it raises. In what follows, a post-critical pedagogical reading will be offered alongside Anca Parvulescu's cultural-critical reading to illustrate this point.

Parvulescu (2012) reads the film as being relevant to understanding the present European political context. She sees the film's presentation of immigrant labour – Ali and his Moroccan colleagues, as well as the Herzegovinian cleaner who replaces a German colleague of Emmi's who was found to have been stealing – as a way into the discussion of the contemporary context, in which "the international division of labour" is seen as "the contemporary avatar of colonial history" (p. 728). The representation of migrant labour, gender, and racialization is seen to take on new meaning when viewed in the contemporary context, in part because it shows that "Europe retains some of its 1970s attributes" (p. 729). Using the film as a means to draw attention to current inequalities and prejudices, as Parvulescu does through a focus on Yolanda the Herzegovinian cleaner as much as on Emmi and Ali, offers a rich line of cultural critique by way of film, but is less focused on what we see in the film and the specificity of the film's presentation, perhaps to the extent that the analysis could just as easily proceed without reference to the

specificities of what the film shows, or indeed to film at all. Below I discuss aspects of the film that Parvulescu also draws on in her analysis, in order to contrast the cultural-critical approach in which the film's contents are a means to discuss wider political issues, and a reading that is more restricted to what we see and hear on screen, and so to the specifics of the film's devices that remind us of, perhaps confront us with, the constitution of the political in the everyday (cf. Hodgson & Ramaekers, 2019): namely, the stare, theatricality, and thresholds.

The Stare

Parvulescu writes: "*Ali* was extraordinarily insightful in its diagnosis of the culture of everyday fascism and its racializing practices in 1970s Germany," expressed in "habitual gestures of exclusion that are difficult to exorcise" (2012, p. 733). The film is quite explicit in its presentation of everyday racism (migrant workers are frequently referred to as "dirty" and "pigs") and the role it plays in economic relations, but also of the apparent everyday resistance to this racism (by Emmi, and by the White bar owner whose main clientele are Moroccan migrant workers). It is Fassbinder's use of the tableau – his framing of posed end-of-scene images that capture an individual or a group – that fixes our attention, held for a time that starts to feel uncomfortable. Parvulescu refers to this as "the stare" (p. 733). At times it is expressed by the camera's fixation on a character as they look elsewhere, perhaps also being watched by other characters off screen; at other times, the character or characters stare back at the camera, at us. Parvulescu focuses primarily on the first. The camera "freezes it into a tableau, allowing the viewer to study it. The viewer thus comes to occupy a difficult position: staring alongside the characters in the film and at the same time noting and studying the stare he or she is forced to perform" (p. 733). The stare – whether performed by the viewer, characters, or camera – takes on a symbolic role on Parvulescu's reading, taken to represent the judgement and surveillance that is at once individual and collective, and that leads to an interpretation of power relations along lines of class, race, and gender.

The device also disrupts any smooth narrative flow and our ability to settle into a detachment from the historical period or the film's broad-scale political themes: our expectations of the length of a shot or of emotional cues from music or facial expression are not met. We are forced to look, and be looked at. The film opens with two such shots. In the first, Emmi enters the bar. At first it seems empty. We look at her at the far end by the door, from the other end of three dining tables that stretch the length of the room, as she stops just inside the door, looking into the bar. We then see what she sees: in the second shot, the barmaid and the bar's customers are all staring at her. Eventually Emmi breaks the stare and turns to sit at the nearest table. She looks back towards the bar; we see the customers and barmaid still staring. Eventually the barmaid breaks her stare to leave the bar and walk towards Emmi. "Yes?" the barmaid asks. Emmi explains, apologetically, that it is raining so hard, that she passes the bar each night and wonders what the music is. The barmaid states that it is Arabic: "We have German stuff in the jukebox, too. Nearly half. But of course they prefer the stuff from back home." "Of course," Emmi replies. Their tones are downbeat, indifferent maybe, or in resigned toleration, lending an ambiguity to the invocation of the nationality of the music and the non-German customers' preference for it. The camera shows that, throughout, the customers have continued to stare.

In a later use of the device, Emmi and Ali are sitting at an outdoor cafe. They are the only customers there – except they don't seem to have been served. The camera turns to show the staff of the cafe, a group of about eight, all standing on the steps of the building, staring at the couple. It is at this point that Emmi reaches the limit of what she can tolerate, and makes the decision that they will go on holiday.

Thresholds

When Emmi enters the bar in that first scene, she is framed by the doorway, her outsider status clear from the way she is greeted, as indicated above. Ali's status as a migrant worker also clearly places him in a liminal position – between productive citizen, working full time and contributing to the economy, and *Ausländer* (foreigner), whose skin colour and way of speaking German marks him out as “other,” “dirty,” a threat. But it is not the status of these characters as proxies for a wider social stratification that draws our attention as such, but rather the way in which they are presented to us – literally, through a frequent use of framing the characters in doorways and entrances – and the series of events that we see, that show how such threshold positions and experiences are constitutive of the everyday and of the economy that makes a community – a community understood not as a homogenous, cohesive, stable entity but as something always in the making through our everyday practices, and events and actions that disrupt its fragile equilibrium.

At various points in the film, characters take decisions that change or challenge their position in the order of things: Ali passing from the hallway to Emmi's apartment, then from guest to lover, from lover to fiancé to husband, transgresses what is socially accepted. Emmi, too, has placed herself outside of her acceptable position, being seen as a “whore,” losing respectability, dating not only an immigrant but a younger man.

Ali, too, transgresses what is expected, but affirms his equality in the order of things when he asks Emmi to dance, and insists on paying his way in the home, working full time and taking on overtime. Yet, Ali is also accepting of – even resigned to – his status. In his first conversation with Emmi, Ali acknowledges his anonymity when he tells her his full name, El Hedi ben Salem M'Barek Mohammed Mustapha. But “all foreigners are called Ali,” he explains. He is at once rendered generic and more visible to the community by his foreignness. When they first meet, Ali tells Emmi that he spends the evenings in the bar because the music is good and his Arab colleagues also go there.

A: Don't know other places. Germans with Arabs not good.

E: Why?

A: Don't know. Germans not same people as Arabs.

E: But at work surely...

A: Not the same. German master. Arab dog.

E: But that...

A: Who cares. Better not think too much. Think much, cry much.

At a certain point Emmi reaches the limit of what she finds tolerable; she has been ostracized by her children, her neighbours, her colleagues, and her local shopkeeper. She breaks down while talking to Ali at the outdoor cafe, shouting “Pigs!” at the staring group of waiters. At this point she decides she and Ali will go away on holiday, and states: “When we get back it will all be different.” The trip away itself marks a threshold, a turning point in the constitution of the community.

When they return, the shopkeeper follows his wife's advice to make up with Emmi, not least because she has always been a good customer. His reasoning for doing this in spite of his earlier animosity to Ali, and by association Emmi, is that, “In business you have to hide your aversions.” We see this hiding of aversions not only by the shopkeeper but also by Emmi, her neighbours, and her children as they seek to reinstate the economy of living that Emmi's relationship with Ali had disrupted. The neighbours become overly friendly, glad to see Emmi back, as they need to use her larger storage space for some belongings, and they need Ali's strength to move them; one of Emmi's sons comes to apologize for his reaction to the marriage, and quickly moves on to the topic of needing childcare, as his wife is returning to work. As well as retaking her place in the social economy, Emmi also affirms Ali's place: she orders him to help the neighbours, states that he will have to get used to how things are done in Germany when he asks her – and she refuses – to make couscous, and when her friends come over for coffee she

encourages their objectification of Ali for his muscular physique, as she invites her friends to feel his muscles, and they remark with surprise how clean he is. When Ali reacts with a calm yet palpable anger to such treatment, Emmi remarks on his “foreign temperament.” Ali crosses the threshold of the apartment and leaves, refusing, silently, to accept this treatment.

Theatricality

Parvulescu refers to Fassbinder’s film as theatrical, due to his borrowing of “distanciation techniques from Brechtian theatre” (2012, p. 744). This is achieved through the fairly undramatic and mundane presentation of events and the relatively inexpressive performances, which do not encourage an emotional or psychological familiarity with the characters. In Cavellian terms, however, the characters and events on screen are precisely *not* made theatrical, in Cavell’s (1979) sense of the term. Whereas Parvulescu in this sense reads the film in terms of the influences on – and of – the director, this distanciation in terms of what we see and what we hear can be precisely what invites, even compels, the viewer to look.

Cavell (1979) refers to theatricalization as the effect of the “mechanical intensification of the known quantities of filming” (p. 61). In the latter half of the twentieth century, he writes, films began to be “dressed up, with fancier cutting and dreamier color and extremier angles and more explicit dialogue” (p. 61). Such devices, familiar in many or most of the mainstream films we see, draw our attention in particular ways; for example, through the use of music to indicate the emotional tone of a scene or to pre-empt an event, and the use of close-ups on the facial expressions of characters to indicate their psychological or emotional state or intention. The use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) and so on furthers such intensifications. Cavell contrasts these developments with the capacity of film as such, from which its educational-philosophical capacity arguably derives (cf. Hodgson & Ramaekers, 2019). Cavell (1979) writes:

Early in its history the cinema discovered the possibility of calling attention to persons and parts of persons and objects; but it is equally a possibility of the medium not to call attention to them but, rather, to let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight. This possibility is less explored than its opposite. (p. 25)

Fassbinder’s distanciation can be seen as an example of not calling attention in this theatricalized sense, but rather as precisely that which invites us to look. The gendered and racialized division of labour is evident; racist and misogynistic attitudes are made explicit; Germany’s Nazi history is referred to. The ways in which these are evident, made explicit, and referred to, however, are specific to the devices used in the film, such as “the stare” that the camera facilitates and the form the dialogue takes, which do not tell us how we should feel about them – or about those whose sayings and doings constitute them. It seems to present us with ambiguity: the sullen expressions are not hostile, necessarily, though neither are they deferential. They do perhaps convey fear, a wariness of difference and disruption, manifested in the everyday violence that is seen, eventually, to reinstate the order of things, a form of happiness. But this distanciation and minimal use of non-verbal cues at the same time is part of what invites us to look, as well as what is so disarming when we are looked back at, as we saw in relation to “the stare.”

Happiness Is Not Always Fun

Happiness is first invoked in Fassbinder’s film in the phrase that appears on screen in the opening credits: “Happiness is not always fun.” It barely registers, appears as a wry aside, perhaps, particularly when reflected on in hindsight. But what we see in the presentation of Emmi and Ali is the pursuit of what, broadly, culturally, we agree to be part of what it means to live well – partnership, maybe marriage, a

family, socializing, financial independence, neighbourliness, community – but the pursuit of which is characterized by doubt, disruption, discrimination: it is indeed not always fun.

Together the devices achieve not just an emotional distancing but a political discomfort – yet one that is not totalizing or absolute, as time and again Ali affirms his place within that order, compromised though that may be, in the name of a form of happiness. This is not an idealized happiness but one that is founded day by day in the life he and Emmi make. A reading of the film that seeks meaning beneath what we see or that takes Emmi, Ali, and the other characters as proxies for aspects of social and political issues and hierarchies might overlook the more mundane details of how Emmi and Ali act and react to their conditions. This is not to deny the relevance of the social, political, and historical context to the constitution of these conditions, but the film presents us with the how of particular forms of power that maintain a status quo while also showing us that it is not totalizing. Community is in the making through our daily sayings and doings, and in the film a political economy is reinstated but reconstituted slightly, as both Emmi and Ali seek to affirm something of what they wish life to be, for better or for worse. This is by no means a resolution of all that has gone before, nor a denial of it.

Ali is matter of fact, resigned to the status quo, when he says of his workplace, “German master. Arab dog.” When he says, “Who cares. Better not think too much. Think much, cry much,” it does not seem to be a statement of passivity in the face of discrimination, but rather a form of self-preservation that enables him to continue to invest himself in a life that enables him to earn a living. We do not see a radical resistance to the prejudice he experiences every day, but a quiet affirmation of his right to count. What we see in the film echoes Das’s reflections on her own ethnographic experience of the violence of the everyday. She describes her task as follows:

to describe how feelings of skepticism come to be embedded within a frayed everyday life so that guarantees of belonging to larger entities such as communities or state are not capable of erasing the hurts or providing means of repairing this sense of being betrayed by the everyday. (Das, 2007, p. 9)

For Das, like Cavell, community is not understood “as something already given or primordial” but rather “constituted through agreements and hence can also be torn apart by the refusal to acknowledge some part of the community (e.g., women or minorities) as an integral part of it” (p. 9).

When the couple return from their holiday, and Emmi, the neighbours, and the shopkeeper reinstate the economy of living of which Ali is now a visible part, Ali reacts by resuming a sexual relationship with the bar owner, drinking more heavily, and gambling away his wages. Emmi enters the bar. There is no loud emotional confrontation or accusation. She asks for their song to be played, stands and waits, until Ali stands and they walk together to the dance floor, and they dance again. As at the beginning of the film, they speak openly and honestly as they dance together, and reaffirm their respect for and commitment to one another in spite of the compromises this might entail. This is not a scene of overt emotion. Their narrative arc is not a standard one of romance, marriage, crisis, and passionate reconciliation, but rather a refounding of their happiness whereby the development of a relationship is one of day-to-day challenge and compromise. Das expresses such refounding in terms of the building of a shared language, “with no assurance that there were secure conventions on which such a language, in fact, could be founded” (p. 8).

Das speaks of “politics as that which accompanies the domestic – or one might say that encompasses the work that women do to repair the everyday, to open routes for return to the everyday” (Das, 2020, p. 12). We see this repair first in the way in which Emmi repairs the social economy after the couple returns from their holiday, but second in the way that she – and Ali – find their common ground and mutual commitment once again when they return to the dance floor. In *Ali*, however, it is not only the women – Emmi, the neighbours, the bar owner – who open such routes but also Ali himself in his continued investment in ordinary practices that constitute the everyday.

The film's opening invocation of happiness could be dismissed as satire: there is no happiness to be seen here. But attention to what we see and hear on screen and the founding of an economy of living together by Emmi and Ali invites us to ask what happiness is for us, in the everyday, and how it is constituted in part through relationships that require "repeated attention to the most ordinary of objects and events" (Das, 2007, p. 8), and it is through both the ordinary and the eventful that we learn "what kind of object something like grief, or love" (Das, 2007, p. 8) or indeed happiness, is. The educational force of film in part consists in our response to the presentation of our limits, which serve as reminders that such things remain in question.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Stefan Ramaekers and Joris Vlieghe and students of the MSc Educational Studies program at KU Leuven for discussions that helped to shape this article.

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