

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Becca Volcker, 'Cinema of Intimacy: Steve McQueen at Espace Louis Vuitton, Tokyo',
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In *The Evidence of Film* (2001), Jean-Luc Nancy celebrates Abbas Kiarostami's filmmaking for its measured compassion. Filming in the aftermath of Iran's 1990 earthquake, Kiarostami uses non-professional actors, natural sound and light, and minimal, practically un-scripted dialogues that interweave spontaneous and choreographed reality. The result is a sense that the film has regard for the life—and losses—of the place and its people. Kiarostami's films leave many things undisclosed, and certainly bear little resemblance to the choreographed world of heroes and villains in mainstream cinema. His camera bears witness to everyday life, the timing of shots coinciding with the pace of people, animals, traffic or weather. In this way, the audience can develop an attentive way of looking, which Nancy calls (playing on both senses of the word) *regard*. To regard is to look with sensitivity, Nancy suggests—be it at something on screen or beyond the cinema.

In *God, Justice, Love, Beauty: Four Little Dialogues* (2011), Nancy introduces the topic of love and intimacy through etymology. He explains that 'caress' and 'cherish' stem from the same Latin root — *carus* (dear). If we relate this back to film, Kiarostami's timing and framing (of a man searching for phone signal, a girl milking a cow) can be seen as gestures of intimate regard too: regard for everyday moments that often go unnoticed but now come to our attention and seem, suddenly, rather dear.

Films such as Kiarostami's address their audiences with regard too: *Dear Viewer*, you can make up your own mind, there is no plot to be dragged through. Here is some evidence (evidence, from *videre*: to see), here is something intimated and made familiar through film—a moving testament.—

I was reminded of Nancy's writing about Kiarostami when visiting Steve McQueen's latest film installation, *Ashes* (2014). Sensuous and spare, it celebrates the life of a young Grenadian fisherman, Ashes (in whose memory the film is named). Commissioned by Espace Louis Vuitton Tokyo, *Ashes* premiered in the clothing store's 7th floor art gallery this summer. The 8-metre-

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high glass-walled space is cocooned in aperture-like darkness; the film is projected on a loop, and we find ourselves at sea in Caribbean sunlight.

McQueen met Ashes by chance while filming another project in Grenada. The two sailed in Ashes' boat, McQueen witnessing with his camera moments of flirtation, beauty and vitality. He had not intended the footage for a film. However, returning to Grenada some two years later, McQueen discovered Ashes had been shot dead in a dispute involving drugs. In response, McQueen decided to make the film. Lasting barely ten minutes, it is exquisitely simple: Ashes is filmed standing on the prow of his boat.

Ashes' simplicity stems in part from a brevity and unplanned nature harder to achieve given the constraints of making feature films—*12 Years a Slave* (2013) McQueen's latest case in point. Experimental elements are never far from McQueen's feature films, and the two strands of filmmaking are doubtless symbiotic. But installation commissions like this are important in facilitating a more experimental, small-scale output.

Grenada, in the wake of Ashes' death: friends recount his fate, and their strongly accented voices form the film's soundtrack along with crashing waves. In this way, as if on the ocean's swell, the film's chronology of loss emerges in snatches of audibility. (The friends' spoken memories of Ashes, perhaps especially difficult for Japanese audiences to follow, are available to take home on English and Japanese posters).

Ashes is not a film about death. Though its title might evoke cremation, ultimately it celebrates life. We enter the installation, and Ashes' life, *in medias res*, with no context to his earlier life or subsequent misfortune: only his buoyancy. Filming from the bottom of the boat, the camera looks up at Ashes and meets his smile. Though this could be interpreted as an eroticising gaze on the part of McQueen, the low camera position creates the sense that Ashes is directing not only the boat but also the film. At one point, he jumps out of the frame, off the boat. This leap enacts one Nancy celebrates as a move towards an open kind of filmmaking, where pace and framing derive more from subjects than pre-conceived plots, and where indeterminacy is celebrated: what is not in the frame, what exceeds or frustrates our expectations, what is left unscripted.

Though McQueen's films share a sensory approach (*Hunger*, 2008, *Shame*, 2011) *Ashes* feels particularly vivid. The small format of Super-8 requires shooting at an intimate range, while its granular quality evokes the texture of that sundrenched sea-salty day. The large scale at which the film is projected, eight speakers bathing us in the ocean roar, enhances this physicality.

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We can almost feel the sun and sea, and are touched by the contrast between Ashes' vivacious image and the voiceover that recounts his fate. But we cannot hold Ashes or his story comprehensively, as one might grasp the plot and hero of a more conventional narrative film. Let's consider another etymology. 'Representation' derives from *re-* (expressing intensive force) and *praesent* (being at hand). The film offers an intense proximity to a subject, yet that subject is *at hand*, not held. Indeed, when McQueen holds a shot of Ashes' body a little too long, Ashes realises, and jumps into the sea like a fish between his fingers. Though not mentioned in Nancy's book, Kiarostami's *ABC Africa* (2001), like *Ashes*, was not originally intended to be a film. Visiting an AIDS clinic in Uganda, Kiarostami used his camera as a means of witnessing—much like McQueen at sea. Kiarostami intended to return with a scheduled film crew, but when he viewed the preliminary footage, its vivid quality moved him to work with what he had. Like *Ashes*, many of the subjects in *ABC Africa* died before the film was released. As viewers, we occupy a sensitive place with regard to the subjects' lives and losses. *ABC Africa* and *Ashes* are evidence of subject-filmmaker interaction, operating by observation and intimation rather than explicit disclosure. They are testimonies of life, *in medias res*.

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