A killer's glance – some reckless notes on the history of cinema

Davide Ferrario

As everybody knows the English verb "to shoot" refers both to the act of firing a bullet from a gun and to that of filming or photographing something. There is a profound historical relationship between military technology and cinema: since Marey's "chronophotographic gun" to the most recent steadycam inventions of the late 70s and the widespread use of drones nowadays. Not everybody knows that the steadycam comes from the hydraulic shock absorbers used to improve the efficiency of heavy machine guns on moving vehicles. And drones, which are now mounting extremely light digital cameras for even more spectacular shots than the ones obtained from helicopters, have earned a sad reputation having been used to kill people without risking pilots' lives. On the other hand, Marey's research to transform fixed images into moving ones was all financed by The French War ministry.

But there's something else, something more intimate and disturbing which links cinema and war. The Lumière brothers (and others) were able to achieve the famous impression of movement by juxtaposing a certain number of frames every second (24 today), and this could happen because of the so-called "Maltese cross", a mechanism that translates a continuous rotation into an intermittent rotary motion. The Maltese cross is a lineal descendant of the 1861 Gatling gun, the famous American *machine gun* that was based on a mechanism of rotating barrels.

It could seem a merely technical issue, but the twentieth century was the century of both cinema and World Wars (meaning mass slaughter). There's something in the way of watching and in the way of killing, which is specific to the twentieth century and curiously obeys the same principle: they both use machinery that applies a mechanism enabling them to work while keeping a *safe distance*. A machine-gunner and a soldier on the battlefield find themselves in a completely different position. The machine-gunner kills through a mere exercise of mechanics, far from the materiality of the enemy's body, and safe from his blows and from the inevitable effect that killing another human being has. And cinema too allows the audience to do the same: people can experience breathtaking adventures (including the virtual killing of a great many characters) in the sheltered darkness of the cinema. The emotion of an adventurous fact is standardized in a gesture producing no practical or moral consequences.

I am neither a philosopher nor a scholar: but I can't help but think that this way of seeing jerkily, from afar, shared by mass killers and mass audiences, must have had some consequences for those of us born in the twentieth century, and our perception of the world and our way of relating to it. A way of seeing whose implications elude me but which I perceive as part of my physiology and my ethics. Both of which, as a matter of fact, feel wrong-footed now, in this digital twenty-first century. A century that has changed both the way of conceiving cinema (starting from the desertion of film and consequently of the Maltese cross) and the way of thinking about war, be it the western war which has defined itself as "surgical strike" or the war spread by so-called terrorists. I can't look at a computer screen as I used to look at a cinema screen. And I can't consider the condition of modern soldiers (and I know some of them) with the same clarity I derived from seeing *Paths of Glory*.