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**The Beauties of Imposture and Usurpation:  
from Poetics to Politics**

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## The Beauties of Imposture and Usurpation: from Poetics to Politics

Alain Brossat

I will progress, in this course, from figures, characters, scenes, cases where imposture and usurpation are at issue and explore the abysses that open up here: how does imposture take shape — a matter of circumstances, a matter of character — a combination of both? Does something like pleasure or a delight of imposture and even usurpation exist? How is imposture related to pathological lie, mythomania? To power? How is usurpation related to sovereignty? Why and how does some imposture end up in a burst of laughter and others in a bloodbath? How are imposture and usurpation shaped by cultural conditions — are the impostor and the usurper trans-cultural figures invariant throughout history? Imposture and usurpation are a golden thread that can help us orient ourselves in the labyrinth of cultural diversity and the heterogeneity of historical times. Imposters always are, in a way or another, wonderful “storytellers”— the narrative stakes of imposture and usurpation are one of the main issues of this course.

Let me first draw up the distinction between the two main notions we will work on in this course — *imposture* and *usurpation*. An imposture is an action that is intended to deceive by making up stories, lying, cheating and pretending, in order to derive benefits and advantages of any kind from this action. As we will see from the different examples I will take, *the spectrum of this notion is very broad*. It encompasses a lot of behaviors, claims, tactics, designs, etc. *Usurpation is more specific*: it consists of a human subject in passing for what he or she is not, and, very often in passing for somebody else, another person, this in order, the same way, to derive advantages from this fraud. One can usurp from another person’s identity or, as well from a title, or rights, from a position. *In sum, usurpation is a form or a particular case of imposture*. An usurper is always an impostor, to some extent. But an impostor is not an usurper. There exist, in the English vocabulary, many words that are related to this general topic — I don’t know all of them. Let’s mention by passing: “to impersonate” means to pass for; “Impersonation” — the action of doing that by borrowing somebody’s identity, “impersonator” for impostor; “to encroach on or upon” means to usurp — someone’s rights, for example. Or, as well, very common terms like “fake”, “phony”, etc. We will bump into a few more in the course of our investigation into the subject.

Why did I choose this topic? First, I would dare say, because it’s funny — not always, it can also lead to abysses of sorrow and tragedy, madness, violence, war, etc. But very often, it’s funny because imposture, in general, is related to imagination. If you want to be a credible,

convincing impostor, you have to make-up a cast-iron scenario or screenplay of your imposture, you have to become a character, to become a good actor, to exert great self-control, to learn how to face unexpected challenges — when people begin to suspect that there is something wrong in the way you “impersonate” or pass for what you are not, when your story begins to “leak”, etc. You will see, as we will make talented, outstanding impostors and usurpers acquaintance, that some of them are real artists, performers, magicians. But this is only the gateway to the subject. For, as soon as we have entered into it, we discover that it leads to many crucial issues of all kinds: identity, what is identity, actually? — what imposture deals with is, primarily *identity trouble*; but, as well: *passing* — a notion that has its titles of nobility in anthropology and sociology, in the US; imposture and usurpation also can be tackled from the angle of *art* — as I said, it always has something in common with a “performance” and, besides, fake, usurpation are issues that surface again and again in the realm of arts — painting, ghostwriters, imitations, plagiarism, etc.; and, of course, *politics, power* — see on that Modest Mussorgsky’s famous opera *Boris Godunov*: what makes a sovereign be legitimate is, from another angle, what can make him or her an usurper or an impostor. Sovereignty is secretly, sometimes explicitly, undermined by the suspicion of imposture. Usurpers are very familiar characters in ancient history — this is the West as, for example, in China. And finally, imposture is a fascinating issue from the angle of narration — *an impostor makes up “stories”, in that sense, he-she is a storyteller, a narrator*. If they want his-her what he-she has masterminded to work, the “story” they have imagined has to be *good*, even if grim, sinister. We will see that some of the characters we encounter during our travel through imposture are fantastic and very imaginative storytellers.

Now, since we are where we are, in Taiwan and since I’m a Frenchman, let me begin with the story where the main character is a French impostor whose imposture is directly related to Taiwan. Even his name is fake and his real name remains unknown: it’s the story of George Psalmanazar, born around 1680 and died in England in 1763. *Psalmanazar claimed to be the first native of Formosa (today Taiwan) to visit Europe*. He made his career as an impostor in Britain where he convinced many people, notably in intellectual circles that he was a Formosan native and later, having been exposed and his story has been proved fake, he became a theological essayist and a friend of the writer and essayist Samuel Johnson and other renowned figures in the 18<sup>th</sup> century literary London. This is in brief the story of this famous impostor — his story has drawn the attention of many commentators in academic circles notably, his writings have been republished recently, you can find links to articles and essays on his dubious career in the Wikipedia article on him. Where he came from, we don’t really know — probably southern France. In a posthumously published autobiography, he writes that he was educated in a religious school, Franciscan and then a Jesuit academy — that is a rather solid level of education. He adds that his teachers noticed that he had a gift for languages — and this matters

for what will follow. He was good at school, fluent in Latin as a child already — but he left school at the age of fifteen or sixteen — too boring for him, probably. This is where his career as a storyteller/impostor begins. In order to travel safely and affordably in France, the Wikipedia article reports, he decided to “be” an *Irish pilgrim* on his way to Rome (imagination...). For doing this, he had to learn English, forge a passport and steal a pilgrim’s cloak, steal a few things from a local church (this is how things move and are linked up when you set up an imposture, this is how you are driven to cross a few points of non-return). But he soon found out that many of the people he met were familiar with Ireland and thus able to discern that he was a fraud. This convinced him that he had to imagine a more exotic disguise and this is why, relying on reports by missionaries in East Asia he had heard from his Jesuit tutors, he decided to impersonate a Japanese convert. At some point (I quote the Wikipedia article again), he further embellished this new *persona* (character — Latin: mask) by pretending to be a “Japanese Heathen” and exhibiting an array of appropriately bizarre customs (such as eating raw meat spiced with cardamon and sleeping while sitting upright in a chair). You see distinctly how the “dynamics” of imposture as some sort of a narrative unroll or expand: the storyteller goes from A to B and then, under the pressures of circumstances, has to pass from B to C, etc. Let me make a brief stop on this passage. First, it is easy to imagine that some sort of exultation, I mean intense pleasure, amusement, enjoyment is associated here with the ability to pass for (as) what you are not (and, in the present case, *not at all*) — to impersonate the Irish pilgrim, the Japanese pagan, etc. This pleasure itself is related to power: you feel powerful, omnipotent, even, when you check that it “works” — that people believe you and take for granted that you are a Japanese convert or heathen in spite of your look — a fellow from Southern France. It’s some sort of a vertigo, an intoxication brought by success — if you can do that, you can do everything or almost everything. It’s the amazing power of semblance, pretense — or the *simulacrum* — or, in the terms of Gilles Deleuze, *the power of the false*. I will come again and again on this motif.

Second, Psalmanazar’s debut as an impostor has to be contextualized: it’s a time when people are greedy with travel accounts, for Europe, it’s a time of “opening” and projection to exotic countries and cultures, remote areas, East Asia, the Pacific among others. Sailors, merchants, explorers often bring with them to Europe “natives” from all continents and regions of the planet — Chinese, natives from northern American or from the Pacific islands, etc. In other terms, Psalmanazar’s imposture prospers on a cultural soil that is fertile, there is among the educated public of that time, in countries like France or Britain, a horizon of expectation(s) for that kind of narrative — true or fake. “Enlightenment” and the broadening of the European spectrum (vision of the world) is the backdrop of all that. Then, Psalmanazar’s travel goes on: he wandered through Germany for two to three years, then appeared in the Netherlands where he served as an occasional mercenary and soldier (we will see from other case studies that

imposture is more than often related to travel, *displacement, nomadic* condition). He also made at that time a decisive move: shifting his supposed motherland from Japan to the more remote Formosa. He also developed and elaborated his alleged imported native customs like following a foreign calendar (his invention), worshipping the Sun and the Moon with complex propitiatory rites (his invention again), and speaking a “local” Formosan language (his invention again). We will see that language issues play a central role in his imposture. In 1702, he met a Scottish priest who, later, claimed that he had converted the heathen (Psalmanazar) to Christianity. In 1703, they left together for London. In London, he rapidly became famous as an alleged exotic foreigner and because of his bizarre habits. He became involved in the row between the Anglican Church and the Catholic Church (Rome), the Jesuits in particular, a dispute that was very animated at the beginning of the XVIIIth century. In effect, he very astutely claimed to have been abducted from Formosa by ill-intended Jesuits and then taken to France against his will where he had steadfastly refused to become a Catholic (a good impostor has to be in a way or another an opportunist, that is to know how to adapt very promptly to new circumstances). He added that he had become a convinced Anglican (member of the Church of England) and thus became a favorite of the Bishop of London and other important members of London (good) society. Having earned a reputation by using this witty subterfuge, Psalmanazar embarked on a literary career. He published a book called *An Historical and Geographical Description of Formosa, an Island subject to the Emperor of Japan* where he did his best to describe the Formosan customs, geography and political economy — a complete invention from the first to the last line. The “facts” he presented in the book, the descriptions he made were a collection of *various borrowings* from travel reports, in particular accounts of the Aztec and Inca civilizations, not to mention Thomas More’s *Utopia*’s influence. This part of the story confirms that it *needs talent* and various qualities and qualifications to be a good impostor: Psalmanazar’s command of English was good enough for writing a book, he had read many travel accounts and he managed to make a credible arrangement with all that. His book is a hoax, but well done — In this regard, one can consider the good impostor as somebody who has a very special gift. He makes something “exist” out of nothing. He is very much aware of *what the power of narratives is*. In his description, Formosa is a prosperous country with a capital city called Xternetsa. Men walk naked, except for a gold or silver plate to cover their genitals. Their main food is a serpent which they hunt with branches. Formosans are polygamous, and husbands have a right to eat their wives for infidelity. They execute murderers by hanging them upside down and shooting them with arrows. Every year they sacrifice the hearts of 18000 young boys to gods, and their priests eat the bodies. They use horses and camels for transport and live underground in circular houses and caves. Here, we take notice of another feature of imposture — an inclination not only to imitation but *parody*. For, very evidently, all this “description” of the current mores in Formosa is a parody of the many travel accounts the educated milieus of all Europe are very busy with and fond of, at that time. In his book,

Psalmanzar also displays great qualities as a pseudo-lexicographer. He gives an all-encompassing description of the Formosan language — his invention, again, from a to z. He “translated” into that made up language passages from the Holy Scriptures, and his forgery was used as an example of exotic languages by German grammarians until the XIXth century, that is a long time even after his imposture had been exposed.

*Psalmanazar's book was a hit.* It went through two English editions and was then translated into German and French. He was invited to give lectures on Formosan culture and language before several learned societies, like the Royal Society where he was challenged by a scholar called Edmund Halley. He was often challenged by skeptics who had serious doubts about his story and who questioned its inconsistencies — but he always managed to deflect these objections. For example, he explained that his light skin was due to the fact that the upper class in Formosa live underground. Still, as time passed, his claims became increasingly less credible, since more and more other sources began to contradict his story. He defended his imposture stubbornly for a long time, but as it became untenable, he confessed to friends and then to the public, this in 1706. He had become in between for London society “the Formosan craze”. This also is typical for impostors: they usually resist objections and defend their story till the bitter end, till it completely collapses. Then, the outcome can be tragic, dramatic — a matter of life and death. In Pslamanazar's case, *it was not*. After having confessed, he worked for some time as a clerk for the army, and then some clergymen gave him some money to study theology. He learned Hebrew, co-authored books, doing odd jobs in the literary milieu. He even contributed to *A Complete System of Geography* where he wrote on the real conditions in Formosa and criticized the hoax he had himself perpetrated! He became increasingly religious, a pious man, disowning his youthful impostures. At the end of his life, he interacted with the famous Samuel Johnson and other literary figures of London society. In his old age, he survived with a meager annual pension of 30 pounds and in his last years, he wrote his *Memoirs of \*\*\**, *Commonly Known by the Name of George Psalmanazar, a Reputed Native of Formosa*, withholding till the end his real name. This book was published posthumously.

What makes Psalmanazar's hoax and strange life interesting of us, apart from its obvious *poetic dimension* — its narrative and imaginative qualities? How can it merge with some of our concerns, in our present — three centuries later? One of the issues could be the relation of Europe to East Asia, that is East Asia as a stake in terms of representation and narratives for Europeans, West Europeans in particular. Traditionally, East Asia, mostly China and Japan always were for West Europeans associated with a notion of *radical otherness*. But not only that. Since East Asian societies and cultures are not only remote, far away (we say Far East or, in French, Extrême-Orient), but so distinctly different, since our knowledge (I speak here as a West European) of these societies always remained more or less incomplete, since imaginary

representations very often took the upper hand on real knowledge, concerning these cultures, *something like a paradigm of the 《white page》 has always existed in Western Europe* — I mean East Asia, China, Japan, as 《white pages》 on which we Europeans felt or feel free to project our fantasies, our dreams, our nightmares, all sorts of imaginary narratives — this motto crisscrosses Edward Said’s Orientalism, of course, but in a more extensive sense. *This is exactly what Psalmanazar did*: he could use Formosa as a “white page” and fill it in with what his brimming imagination inspired him because it was so far away, a *terra incognita* in East Asia. He chose Formosa because Japan and China were already “occupied” — in terms of circulation of information and knowledge — by the missionaries, Catholic, mostly. And this is why and how his hoax could work so well. But the success of his imposture draws our attention to a wider problem: for Westerners, not only West Europeans, the temptation of the “white page”, East Asia, Japan or China, as a white page on which we project our fantasies is *permanent*. To take only one example: why and how could Maoism prosper as it did among the radical youth of Western countries, in particular in Western Europe, in the 60s’ and 70s’ of last century, in general conditions where China appeared as some sort of “Radical Other”, in political and cultural terms? How could the Cultural Revolution become so popular for these young folks? One of the explanations would be that China, in this context, was the perfect “other space” (Foucault), that is the heterotopia on which imaginary projections could be performed. For these young radicals, real China didn’t matter much — what really mattered was the China they were dreaming about, an *imagined China*, in the sense of “imagined communities” (Benedict Anderson). It is basically, in very different conditions of course, the same operation as what Psalmanazar did — I don’t mean by that that all Western Maoists of the 60s’ and 70s’ were impostors of course. The only thing I mean is that they were “dreaming” on China and Chairman Mao the same way Psalmanazar dreamed about Formosa. The dreamlike matrix is the same. This is why Psalmanazar is a “model” and his impersonation a classic and a masterpiece: he is the perfect “storyteller” or narrator in this sense.

I began with this story because it ends up peacefully, almost serenely — nobody has been harmed, not even the impostor, it’s a farce, a good joke by a talented impersonator, a first quality hoax. But we will see pretty soon that things can take a very different turn and end up in tragedy, affliction, disaster, bloodbaths.

## **END OF FIRST PART**

The second scene, then: *General della Rovere* — is both a novel by the Italian author Indro Montanelli, and a film by Roberto Rossellini. The book was published and the film was released the same year, 1959. I will rely mostly on the film, a famous Italian post-war movie

by a famous director and protagonist of Italian post-war Neo-Realism. The story is located in Genoa, 1943, during the war. This part of Italy is then under the rule of the so-called *Social Republic*, fascists, subdued to the Nazis who occupy the Northern part of the country. It's the story of a crook, a petty thief, Emanuele Bardone, who pretends to be a colonel of the Italian Army and who actually is involved in the black market with a German officer. He also extorts money from the families of Italian prisoners, freedom fighters notably, by making them believe that he can have them released, since he has good connections with the local German command. His scam is finally exposed by a woman he has cheated — she has discovered that her husband had already been executed by the Germans as Bardone, a very unsavory character as you can see — extorted her money by letting hope that he could save him. She denounces him to the Germans who arrest him. Since it appears that he risks a very harsh punishment, he accepts to collaborate with the Nazis. He is put in the wing of the local prison San Vittore where Italian political prisoners are interned and are assigned to a rather tricky mission: to impersonate General della Rovere, a high leader of the Resistance movement who, actually, has been recently killed by the Germans — but the inmates don't know it. More precisely, the task the Germans entrust him consists in identifying a leader of the Resistance, a certain Fabrizio, whom they have good reasons to think that he is one among of the prisoners, but they don't know which of them.

Mixing with the political prisoners, freedom fighters, Bardone discovers their dignity, their courage, stamina and heroism. He is so impressed by this experience that he progressively changes and behaves as if he were the real general — a leader of the Resistance movement. Then, a fascist leader is murdered in Milan, and the fascists decided to strike back by executing imprisoned political militants. He lets himself be shot with them rather than giving away who the real Fabrizio is. A glorious redemption and a heroic sacrifice. This is the story, a very dramatic one. The film won the Gold Lion at the Venice Festival — la Mostra. Bardone, the fake General della Rovere is played by a famous Italian actor and filmmaker, Vittorio De Sica. As you can see, the approach of the figure of the impostor in this work is completely different from what we saw previously with Pasalmanazar. The general atmosphere, the context of the story are dramatic — war, resistance to tyranny, moral abjectness, treason, redemption, sacrifice. The milieu where this story makes sense is not only politics — freedom fighters, communists and democrats involved in a fight to death against local fascists and foreign Nazis — by *History*, with capital: in the face of History, of the Nation's destiny, summoned by his duty, as an Italian, the sinister crook and poor cheat “wakes up” and, in a sudden burst of patriotic energy, becomes a hero. The Resistance movement appears here as a community whose moral and spiritual quality is so high and so strong that it can work a miracle — the villain's conversion into a martyr and a hero. It is a tale that's *Christian* from a to z, even if any of the readers of the book or viewers of the film who is familiar with the context can pretty

well imagine that most of the freedom fighters involved in the plot were *communists* rather than churchgoers. But this is Italy: a story of redemption, salvation, atonement — against the backdrop of a political history where most of the characters are assumed to be “reds”. It’s a beautiful story where the impostor becomes a saint, but a secular saint, and this is why it (the novel and the film) became so popular in Italy and is still a classic. Two vital features of Italy as people and community merge in this somehow edifying story — Catholicism as a realm where the worst sinner always has a chance to be redeemed, and communism as the rising political and social utopia in the context of post-war great expectations.

There is a very obvious difference between the two stories, the two figures of imposture, this beyond their disparities in terms of historical and cultural context: what Psalmanazar is seeking for is, let’s say, glory, attention, recognition. His wishes and aspirations take shape in the realm of the Ancien Regime — he wants to attract everybody’s attention by being not only interesting as an exotic figure, but *the only one*, unique – the only (imaginary) Formosan native in Europe. This, of course, for “tactical”, that is practical reasons – he could not have acted the Chinese or the Siamese in a context where he would have had to coexist with a few natives from these countries, brought back to Europe by missionaries or travelers and where he would have been rapidly exposed as an impostor for this reason. But this is not the only reason why he decided to “pose” as a Formosan — he wanted London’s society to focus on him, he wanted to be at the center, to attract everybody’s attention — *a matter of visibility*. In these historical and cultural conditions, be “at the center”, be looked at and taken into consideration as unique, the only one — it’s like being a king, *the king*. This is Psalmanazar’s somehow childish fantasy. It’s a matter of prestige, brilliance, splendor. He does not make a lot of money out of his fabrication — he is a fibber, a storyteller, maybe a poet, more than a crook, a swindler, properly speaking. He lives in a world where “glory”, fame matter more than wealth, money, profits in economic terms.

By contrast, Bardone is, at the beginning of the story, a very repulsive character because he takes advantage of the conditions of war and occupation to make money in the most infamous way — by cheating on people whose dear ones are in jail and by trafficking on the black market. He lives in a world that is corrupted by the lust for money, profits, where people have become unscrupulous, cynical, immoral – this in particular in the conditions of war where morality, common decency have declined. These are the perfect conditions for petty thieves and swindlers like him, Bardone, to prosper. Economy, money have replaced “glory”, prestige. Meanwhile, a “detail” should attract our attention: this swindler and parvenu in the conditions of war and occupation is not only busy with his dark business, he also wants to “shine”— *to pass for a colonel in the Italian army*. This means that he is not completely alien to prestige matters. It’s not only because it benefits his business that he impersonates this character. It’s

also because he “keeps in touch” with the traditional realm and world of representations Psalmanazar is an exemplary protagonist of. He also wants to be acknowledged as a person of quality — a high ranking officer — a matter of *recognition*. It is actually where the Germans trap him, after he has been exposed, as they invite him to take it or leave it: ( Since you are so fond of uniforms and military distinctions, you will now serve our purposes by impersonating a general who is a leader of the Resistance movement! You have no choice, if you don’t play the game, we will kill you! ). A typical Nazi black humor. But, by doing that, they offer him a chance to “resuscitate” as a patriot and a moral subject, that is to transfigure his abjectness. From venality to sublime sacrifice.

We have to note that in the perspective of the novel and of the film, imposture is *ethically neutral*: in the first part of the story, it is inseparable from a design that is vile and despicable. But in the second part, it completely changes side — it becomes through tortuous paths, the support of the most unexpected and glorious conduct. Imposture or even usurpation, as we will see in the next course, is not determinable in moral or ethical terms — they can be associated with the worst as with the best, or, as well with laughter, comedy as with tears and tragedy or drama. It swings and sways from an extreme to another. This is why there are so many films belonging to so many different genres that deal with that topic or motif — the thread that runs from one to another or even that runs from the comic to the tragic within a film is very sinuous. It’s like a labyrinth. As you saw from the clips we watched, *Billy Liar* ( a British film by John Schlesinger, 1963) is a comedy, these scenes where Billy sees himself as the liberator of the imaginary Ambrosia are funny and witty. But this is a narrative choice. Deep down, what is at the heart of the film is not so funny – the great expectations of a young man that are constantly frustrated and great designs, projects that shrink into pure stray impulses or stray desires. His daydreams where he transforms himself into a great hero or a rather dubious dictator are just a poor solace, comfort and compensation for a very limited present and future — very obviously, his life will not be so different from his parent’s — this is what sociologists call “reproduction” (Pierre Bourdieu). This film is a good example of this very particular status of imposture: it all depends on the angle of view, on your perspective on imposture as a gesture, a situation or an action. It’s a prism: depending on the angle of view, it can be hilarious or sinister. But finally, it’s before all a matter of regime of narration — the same story can be made comic or tragic, except maybe a few of them that end up in a very dramatic way.

But with all that, what remains is this: any impostor, a clown, a buffoon or a madman and exceptional criminal has to be, before all, a comedian — comedian here in the sense of actor, not related to comedy. In one of his books, *The Twilight of the Idols*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes this: ( One is comedian when one has an advantage over the rest of mankind: having become aware of the fact that what has to make an impression of truth (pass for truth) has *not* to be true

(should not be true)). This is the matrix or the core of imposture, the secret inspiration of the impostor — he-she knows that what has to pass for truth doesn't need to be true or even *should not* be true. This is again what can be called call the power of the false, of illusion.

## END OF PART TWO

The third case or figure I would like to present is from *Kagemusha*, or, in English, *Shadow Warrior*, a film by Akira Kurosawa, released in 1980 — it won the Palme d'or at the Cannes Festival the same year. *Kagemusha* is a term used in Japanese to denote a political decoy. The film is about a small thief who is taught to impersonate the dying leader of a powerful clan, the Takeda clan, at the time clans were relentlessly fighting against each other in Japan — end of the XVIth century. The petty thief whose real name is not even mentioned in the film, is saved from crucifixion because he is the perfect *double* of the leader of the clan who has been fatally wounded as he besieged an enemy fortress. He is used as a political decoy, for Takeda, the leader of the clan, has asked his generals to keep his death secret for three years — this for political and military reasons — that is in order not to let the rival clans know that the Takedas have lost their commander who was a great warrior and strategist. It's a war ruse or trick in order to gain time until a new leader is able to take over. As you see, the petty thief's imposture is not his choice, it is a role that is imposed on him — but, for him, the only alternative to an infamous death — and this is why he accepts to impersonate the dead *daimyo* — head of the clan.

The very striking thing here is how close the plot of this wonderful film is to the Italian novel and film we saw last time. The narrative matrix of the two stories is exactly the same – this in spite of the huge differences in terms of time, culture, location: a petty thief, that is the scum of the earth, a contemptible and despised social character is swept away by the stream of politics and History and is given a part (a role) that stands higher than him — a challenge he takes up with panache, contrary to all expectations. (*Kagemusha*), like Bertone, is progressively driven to “inhabit” the character he is supposed to be a substitute to — just a “front”, a decoy. He begins with mimicking, imitating the postures, gestures, ways of talking of the *daimyo* he impersonates, but as time passes, he identifies himself with him. In other terms, he takes himself for the man he is the double of. During a very indecisive battle, he stays calm, imperial as the skirmishes are raging around him and make that way a great contribution to the clan's victory. He impresses the generals with his ability to extricate himself from very tricky situations where he is put at risk to be exposed. It's only at the end, after years of successful impersonation, that his imposture is unveiled: in a fit of overconfidence, the *kagemusha* tries to ride Shingen's (the *daimyo*) spirited horse and falls off: the servants and concubines who rush to rescue him see that he doesn't bear their lord's battle scars and this is

how he is revealed as an impostor and kicked away unceremoniously from the clan's palace. He wanders about on the clan's territory as a beggar. Finally, when the Takeda army attacks its rival clan's position, which results in the fatal battle of Nagashino, he follows secretly the Takeda army and, as it appears that the confrontation turns into a disaster for the Takeda clan, he takes up a spear and charges hopeless against the enemy's lines. Mortally wounded, he tries to retrieve a banner that has fallen into a river in a final gesture of loyalty. Till the last end, he holds to the cause of the clan (and dies as a hero) in spite of the very infamous way he had been rejected after so many years of good and faithful service. In a cultural context that is not related to Christianity at all, we hear the same motive as in Rossellini's film — redemption, transfiguration, metamorphosis of the contemptible into sublime, this when an insignificant human subject appears to be summoned by special circumstances where he has to face challenges that drive him to surpass himself, and this again to such an extent that he becomes the opposite of what he was originally — some sort of a hero, a martyr, a saint — but most of this terms only make sense in a Western perspective.

Now, by way of transition, I would like to pinpoint one of the dimensions of imposture — to show how it is very often related to this: *combination and development of circumstances*. What do I mean by that? Psalmanazar's imposture results from a choice, a decision — he really wanted to make a career as an impostor, from the very beginning of his life as an adult. It was his vocation to be an impostor. But, his first impersonation, as an Irish pilgrim, was not very successful, for this reason, he had to pass to another “character” — the Japanese pagan and then, finally, since it didn't work too well, either, the Formosan native. We see how the circumstances lead him from a move to another and then to another again, etc. Each time, he had to make up, to invent something new in order to bounce back and continue his career as an impostor. In his case, the life line is rather straight, continuous. But if you take Bardone or Kagemusha, it's different — the bifurcations that make them pass from a condition, a role, a character to another are abrupt and sudden: Kagemusha, the petty thief who has been caught red-handed is about to be executed in the most infamous and painful way — crucifixion. And suddenly, just by chance, the *daimyo*'s brother crosses his way and notices that he is the perfect double of the head of the clan, and he decides to spare his life just in case the clan might use him. And then the *daimyo* is fatally wounded — second curt turn, etc. Same with Bardone — it's just by chance that his shabby fraud is exposed, then that the Nazis need him for their own purposes, then that circumstances make that he is driven to identify himself with the General he impersonates and, finally to die as a hero, instead of the general. In sum, the careers as impostors of both of them are made of a succession of abrupt turns, it's very sinuous, as circumstances change — this, of course, in a context peopled with discontinuities and unexpected events — war.

What we see here is that the impostor and the imposture are often made of what the circumstances make them — changing conditions show the direction. In some configurations, even, the impostor is purely and simply *the hostage* of circumstances. Let's go back to the example I mentioned last week, that of a bloody criminal story which has become famous in the news, in France, in the 1990s — a novel and two films have been inspired by it. A man in his thirties called Jean-Claude Romand made his family, that is his wife, children, parents, friends, believe that he was a medical doctor, a specialist in epidemiology, *this for eighteen years*, until his imposture came to an end in the most dramatic way. He lived with his family in the eastern part of France, near Switzerland, and pretended to work for WHO based in Geneva. He acted as if he would go to work and spent his days daydreaming or reading in his car, on countryside roads or in village coffee shops. Sometimes, he would say that he was on business travel for a conference of a workshop abroad and spend a few days in a hotel at the airport of Geneva. He lived on his wife's wealth, on bank credits, money he borrowed from his parents, his friends, a mistress he had for some time. Since he was supposed to make a brilliant career, as an expert and a scholar, everybody around him was happy and proud of him — he acted in a very convincing matter as what he was supposed to be — and this is how his double life could extend to such an extraordinary length — eighteen years. But progressively, of course, cracks appeared in his imaginary success story and one dire day of January 1993, as his wife was about to see through his game, he killed her (with a rolling pin), then shot their two children (aged of 7 and 5). After the killing, he tidied up the house, went and check the mailbox, took a ride into town to buy newspapers, watched television. The same day, he paid a visit to his parents who lived in the vicinity, has lunch with them and shot them, with the same air gun he had used for killing his children, killing their dog, too. Then, he drove to Paris in order to meet his former mistress, a dentist. He took her to Fontainebleau, saying that they would pay a visit to Bernard Kouchner, a famous medical doctor and a politician, a friend of him, he said. He made a stop in an isolated place, in the forest, near Fontainebleau, pretending that he had lost his way and tried to strangle the woman. He failed in doing it and finally spared her life, took her back to her home, making her promise not to say anything — he suffered from a heavy nervous disorder, had very hard times in his profession and family life, he said, as an excuse. The same evening, he went back home, poured gasoline in the bedrooms where his wife's and the children's bodies still were lying, put his pajamas, swallowed a dozen sleeping pills and started the fire. But the firefighters were alerted promptly, they stopped the fire, found the bodies and the killer — asleep, in a deep coma. Brought in an emergency to the hospital in Geneva, he survived. The local police found after that in his car, a BMW, this brief message: “a simple accident and an injustice can cause madness. Sorry.”

Three years later, Romand was sentenced to life imprisonment, with what is called in French law a “safety penalty” of 22 years. This because real perpetuity or life sentence doesn't exist

in French penal law — if they have exemplary conduct in prison, convicts always have a chance to be set free — after many years of imprisonment. This is what happened with (to) Romand — he was released (under many conditions) in 2019.

What this dramatic story drives our attention at is an issue we have already raised, with *Billy Liar*: the relation between imposture and lie, or, more precisely, in the present case, compulsive and pathological lie — that is mythomania. Romand is a mythomaniac, his entire life became a lie, starting from the first lie, dictated by immediate circumstances – his failed second-year exam. The mythomania made his vital lie expand, inflate, become big and glorious — Romand invented for his relatives and friends a brilliant career in brilliant institutions, high-level scientific events where he read a paper, a circle of friends who were important personalities, prestigious executive travels, etc. He would read a lot, specialized medical books on epidemiology or other subjects, and became expert enough to be able to have a serious discussion on these topics with a local doctor, on the occasion of a dinner and impress him a lot. In order to keep his lifestyle as a high ranking servant in a prestigious international institution, he resorted to risky financial operations, borrowing and refunding money like on an assembly line, selling fake medicine against cancer, etc. In brief, mythomania as the shadow or double of imposture consists in making a parallel world exist, a perfect illusion that is, of course, doomed to burst into pieces one day or another — the very impressive fact being here that it did last or “held” eighteen years. But when it collapses and dissolves, it hurts a lot and may cause the kind of *amok conduct* or spree we have witnessed here. During the process, the medical experts called it a *raptus crisis*, that is, I quote from a medical dictionary: a pathological paroxysm of activity giving vent to an impulse or tension (like an act of violence) . It’s not just by chance that three films have been shot in France, inspired by this *true story*. Let’s see some clips from one of them *L’adversaire (The Adversary)*, by Nicole Garcia, 2002.

### END OF PART THREE

What all the stories we have gone through till now have in common, beyond all their differences, is this: at a given moment, the impostor is caught by a feeling of omnipotence — he feels all-powerful since his imposture works, he has recreated out of nothing a whole world that is entirely fake but that appears to be more solid than reality, that is convincing, for the others, all those who are the dupes of his impersonation. This feeling is very rewarding, it causes some sort of euphoria, the impostor’s lie is like a drug, a stimulant that makes him feel high. The harder the collapse, when the imposture falls into pieces. In other terms, what the impostor discovers, what each impostor reinvents is “the powers of the false” or of falsehood (*les puissances du faux*), how pictures, narratives don’t just “represent”, “copy”, “imitate” — they harbor creation or have a creative potential — they can make a world appear and exist. In that

sense, they blur the distinction between reality and illusion — the impostor is a magician: he makes an illusion (a lie, a scheme) become more convincing, credible ( true ) than reality.

Let us move now to a topic that is a bit marginal, on the fringe of our subject, but very stimulating — *passing*, a notion that now has its credentials in sociology, in particular in the US. This notion is, at the origin, related to racial identity, but it can have a wider extension. *Racial passing* occurs when a person classified as a member of a racial group succeeds in being accepted as a member of another racial group — in the history of the US, mostly a person of color or multiracial ancestry who is assimilated to the white majority by passing as white. This in times when legal and social conventions were strictly based on the color line (segregation). Very distinctly, the “operation” which consists of a human subject in passing as different of what he or she is, in terms of racial identity, in a society where racial distinctions and hierarchies are so rigid, where discriminations of all kinds against allegedly inferior races are so harsh, this “operation” has something in common with imposture. But we immediately see that a displacement has occurred in this new context. Terms like imposture, impostor and all those that are associated with them (impersonate, usurpation) are pejoratively connoted. But, when you are a slave with light skin and blue eyes because you are a mulatto, that is the descendant of a white master and a black female slave he has raped, and you take a chance to escape by passing as white, “imposture” looks very different from what it looked like in the configurations we have gone through till now. You do your best to pass as white, that is as free man in order to save your... skin, in a situation where Blacks are the damned of the earth. A decisive displacement of imposture and its stake has taken place in this new context. So-called *antimiscegenation laws* have been enforced in the US from the very beginning, in the aftermath of Independence. These laws forbade any interracial marriage or cohabitation, in particular of white and black persons. This, centuries before the Nazis coined the term “racial shame” and criminalized marriage and sexual intercourse between so-called Aryans and Jews. But, on the other hand, the rape of black slaves by Whites was never punished, so that many mixed-blood or mulattos came to life — some of them or of their descendants having the possibility to use their racially ambiguous appearance to pass as white and, by the same token, evade the restrictions imposed on them as Blacks, seek better lives, etc. Passing, in that sense, always is a strictly individual move, like imposture in general. The horizon of passing is, in this context, emancipation from the racial/racist/segregationist system.

This is how this issue, “passing” has progressively become very topical and sometimes burning in the US, with changing stakes as time passed and the chapters of US history followed each other. In Antebellum America (before the Civil War), passing for white was intended for escaping slavery, flee to the North, pass as free, become free. In the Post-Emancipation era, after slavery was abolished but interracial unions were still forbidden, it could make it possible

for a mulatto woman looking white, to marry a White man in the hope of a better life. In the time of Reconstruction (Jim Crow), it was for those who could pass as white, crossing the color line was a chance to escape segregation, discrimination, go to school, get a job, travel freely. In all these circumstances, vital, crucial stakes were related to *passing*. Then, progressively, things have become more complicated. I mean passing become a more complicated issue, a “game”, sometimes. Walter Francis White (sic) was in the first half of the XXth century a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a civil rights leader in the US — he was a member of the African American community in the US but he could easily pass as white — this made it possible for him to go to the Deep South and make investigations on cases of lynching by making himself pass as white. Anatole Broyard (1920-1990) made a career as an American writer, in Greenwich Village, passing all his public life as white – after his death, it appeared that, born in New Orleans, he was in fact mixed blood but had chosen to pass as white and living as such, thinking that it would favor his career as a writer. Some African American activists called his attitude treason, insisting on the fact that he had deserted his community, at a time as the African American minority was fighting for its civil rights. Other people raised their voices saying that, on the contrary, his choice and attitude were exemplary — indifference to racial identity being a condition for individual self-determination in modern democratic societies. In the XXIth century, passing as white, for an African American in the US, is more controversial: it is often seen as a rejection of blackness as culture and community. Then, you have dozens of stories that have been on the news since the last decades of last century, in the US — Rachel Dolezal, a white woman who was for years an activist for African American rights by passing as Black, which she was not and who, after having been exposed (as white) by her own mother, began a new “career” as a “passer”, if I may use this term, by pretending to be a Native American, that is a descendant of the First Nations people (“Indians”). From the 1960s’, 70s’ on, hippies, cultural dissidents, avant-garde artists “became” Native Americans, adopting new names like “Grey Owl”, typical Indian’s names, like in Westerns. More than often, the associations of Native Peoples protested against these gestures of appropriation of their own culture, seeing them as a disguised continuation of the destruction of their civilization by the White colonizers. Let’s see how Hollywood made this issue its own, in the aftermath of WWII I will focus on a very brilliant and ambiguous film — *Pinky* by Elia Kazan (1949).

As you see, it’s not by chance that this notion — passing — has been put into circulation by American (US) sociology. But it is liable to be transposed and made use of in many other contexts — historical, geographical, cultural. As most of Europe was occupied by the Nazis during WWII, it could be a matter of life or death for a Jew to be in a condition to pass as a Gentile — non-Jew. A matter of a family name, way of speaking, appearance, behavior — depending on local, national conditions, on circumstances. At the time of the genocide in

Rwanda, people were systematically killed if they had the “Tutsi” look — tall, thin, slender; conversely, if you could pass as non-Tutsi, it might save your life. In a world where racial discriminations based on phenotypes are widespread, time and again, the ability to pass as different from what you are in terms of racial or community identity remains a vital escape line, as it can be, as well, in a completely different context, a fantastic playground.

## END OF PART FOUR

A playground for modern and contemporary art in particular, the history of the avant-gardes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is inseparable from this issue — imposture. Take an example, the artwork that is commonly considered as the most influential of last century, *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp, a ready-made which consists in a urinal put upside down on a base, a pedestal — a pure and simple imposture (where is the work of the artist, his talent, his inspiration, his genius, his taste, etc.?) — staged as a gesture intended for deposing and dismissing the traditional forms of art. Throughout the golden age of the avant-gardes, in the first half or decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those who stood up for the traditional forms of art, critics, opinion-makers, journalists, academics, *have denounced avant-garde artists as impostors*, and their works as fraud, farce, cheat, absolute rubbish and nonsense. But the avant-garde artists themselves, like in the Dada or the surrealist movement, cultivate provocative and farcical gestures and collective initiatives that thicken this association between modern art and imposture. Let me give you another example of how avant-garde artists step into the impostor’s (as a practical joker) shoes. On July 1936 1<sup>st</sup>, Salvador Dali who appeared then as the ambassador of the Surrealist movement, gave a lecture/performance at the New Burlington Galleries in London. He was supposed to expound on this occasion the principles of the so-called “critic paranoiac method” he was the inventor and promoter of. In order to create a sensation, he appeared for his speech in a complete diver suit. A car’s engine ventilator (fan) had been set up upon the helmet so that he could breathe. He had in his right hand a billiards cue and also two big dogs with him. A microphone had been set in front of him but, of course, as he began to speak, nobody could hear a word of what he said — meanwhile, as he mentions in the Self-portrait he wrote later (*How I became Dali*): “the audience was fascinated by my expression,” very quickly he began to suffocate through lack of air. His friends had to release the helmet urgently in order to let him breathe and the lecture/performance ended before it had begun in general confusion and chaos. In this event and in the way it was purposely staged as a practical joke, a farce, in a completely absurdist style, you can see pretty well how an avant-garde artist (who has made himself famous through his provocations and his megalomaniac extravagance) embraces a posture that consists in playing the fool, the idiot, in order to deconstruct the prestige of the artist and the fine arts. *He has to appear in the face of the public as an idiot and an impostor*. He is in search of gibes,

insults and shouts, heckling — “you are not an artist, you are a fake, a cheat — this is not art, a pure hoax, a deception. We want our money back!”

Modern and contemporary art are haunted by the specter of imposture, of fake. But at the same time, the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a time of tremendous expansion of culture, not only as an industry (cinema, fashion, gastronomy, tourism, etc.), but as a market. The market of art — painting, sculpture, plastic works of all kinds has surged up, avant-garde painting has reached astronomical prices in some cases (Picasso), modern and contemporary plastic arts have been taken hostage by financial speculation and it has not changed after the collapse of the avant-gardes — just the opposite. This is why so many masterpieces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, paintings in particular, are shut up in safes, in Swiss banks or others. Since artists from new countries, China among others, artists like Ai Weiwei have joined this process, this economic or financial trend of contemporary art has just sped up. Art has become magic money, more than ever. But, at the same time, the question of *authenticity*, what the authenticity of a piece of art is made of, what are the proofs of it, has become more complicated than ever. This for various reasons, technical reproducibility, ready-made, etc. Duchamp has re-made several times his *Fountain* and many imitations have proliferated all around the planet. Authenticity and uniqueness have become two different issues. Some artists remake the same work with or without variations for many reasons. Signature is not enough, far from that, for making a work authentic. It can be authentic in the absence of a signature and fake with it — Picasso, again. There have been dozens of trials revolving around this issue. For all these reasons, *counterfeiting*, forgery has become crucial stakes in the realm of modern and contemporary art. The forger is a fascinating character, he leaves a mark on our present. This is why a great filmmaker like Orson Welles always was attracted by this figure and why he shot a docudrama called *F for Fake* or, in French, since the production of the film is French, *Vérités et mensonges*, “Truths and lies”. This film, released in 1974, focuses on Elmyr de Hory, a renowned professional art forger. De Hory’s story “serves as the backdrop for a fast-paced meandering investigation of the natures of authorship and authenticity, as well as the basis of the value of art” (Wikipedia). Welles always was fascinated by forgeries, hoaxes, magic — working as a young radio producer in 1938, in the US, he set up a radio drama called *War of the Worlds*, simulating a newscast about a Martian invasion and that was so convincing and realistic that it sparked panic among some listeners — which was the cause for serious trouble for Welles — he almost lost his job at the radio.

*F for Fake* is a labyrinthine film, starting from de Hory’s biography. It develops itself in bends and meanders with the appearance of new characters like Clifford Irving, Hory’s biographer who appears to be a forger himself, having published a so-called “authorized biography” of the millionaire Howard Hughes that was a complete fabrication. Other characters interfere in the “plot” of the film, like the beautiful Oja Kodar, Welles companion, François Reichenbach, the

film's producer, and himself a documentary filmmaker and some others, which make the film look like a maze. It is, in Welles' mind, a meditation on the relation between art and illusion, truth and deception, the ambiguities of authorship, the complexities of authenticity, etc. It's very ironical, cynical to some degree, like a painting within a painting, an abyss whose depth we fail in sounding. Welles thinks that a genuine artist always is to some extent a forger — a mixture of a magician and a forger. In other terms, imposture is part and parcel of artistic creation. This is, in brief, what the "message" this film conveys, in a rather provocative and counter-intuitive way. For him, de Hory, the brilliant forger, isn't a delinquent but a genuine artist who deserves respect and admiration. *Good hoaxes are like works of art*. This is what we see at the end of the film with a story Kodar tells us, a gripping story about her, her grandfather and Picasso — and that is revealed at the last minute as pure invention. What we bump into again here is the intimate affinity between storytelling, the art of telling stories, good stories, captivating stories and imposture, forgery, counterfeit. Since artistic creation consists in making an illusion look real and even more real than reality, in terms of expressivity, then we can infer that *art has much in common with imposture*, which is very different from *reproduction* — for basically, the impostor's operation consists in making an illusion pass as real.

This is how Welles sees the relation between art and "fake", imposture, forgery. He reverses or inverts the common approach of modern/avant-garde/non-figurative art that consists of disparaging it by saying that it is bullshit, crap, pure deception. He discloses the secrets of modern art — since it has emancipated itself from representation and imitation (*mimesis*), it redeploys itself as a system of signs by signifying rather than representing. The loss of "reality" as the referent, the object-to-be-represented makes art a realm invested by intensities and oriented towards expression, expressivity. This is where the borders (the divide) between the real and the fake are blurred. Placed under the sign of this new regime (signification, expressivity, intensification rather than representation and imitation), artistic creation or the practice of art(s) emancipates from traditional formal constraints — in terms of genres, canons, rules, etc. If we put it in terms of narration (art as narration), the bifurcation (turn) that occurs here (that is enacted) is distinct: what matters before all in this new context is not that the narrative should be *true* — an exact and authentic copy of reality — but that it should be *good*. It's a decisive turn for it gives imagination, the artist's imagination a free hand.

From Orson Welles' meditation on the beauties of the fake, we can deduct that many things can have an artistic dimension beyond the creation of an object endowed with the status of a work of art. This is where the stake of *performance* appears. Performing something, by staging, behaving, acting, making, simulating, etc. — this can be "art" in the sense of "performative" art — what matters before all is not, in this context, the peculiarity of an object but *recognition* — if the performer says that his-her performance is art and if his-her claim is accepted, ratified

by any authority that is in a position to do it, or just a public, an audience — then it is art. We see that if we go this direction, the sphere of art can expand almost endless. And this is exactly what we witness when we watch how various and diverse new forms of artistic performance(s) can be — almost anything can be or become “a performance” and be entitled, as such, to claim for an artistic status.

## END OF PART FIVE

Or, in another direction, it can lead to motives like what Michel Foucault has tried to revive (by borrowing from the Ancient Greek tradition) — *making of one's life a work (or piece) of art* by endowing it with an aesthetic dimension, narrowly intertwined with an ethic value. I would like to talk a bit about a novel by Graham Greene in this perspective. It is called *Our Man in Havana*, published in 1958 — some sort of a very ironic fable on how to make of one's existence a “piece of art” by playing the fool. It's a parody of a spy novel, located in Cuba by the end of the Battista corrupt and brutal regime supported by the US. It appears as some sort of anticipation of the Cuba Missile Crisis of 1962, as the Soviet's attempt to set nuclear missiles on the island of Cuba caused a major diplomatic crisis and military tension with the US. The novel was adapted into a film of the same name in 1959, directed by Carol Reid and starring, among others, the famous Alec Guinness. The background of the novel is made of Greene's experience as a British counter-espionage (MI6) agent, during WWII in Spain and Portugal. It was inspired by a story he heard as he was appointed there — that of German agents in Portugal who sent the Nazi counter-espionage services *fictitious reports* on alleged rings of agents they were supposed to control, on vented armed forces movements, all sorts of fake news and information — this in order to get bonuses they added to their basic salary. As he began to make a novel out of this anecdote, Greene decided to transpose it to Cuba, and to the context of Cold War, for he had visited the island several times in the early 1950s. It's the story of James Wormold, a British retailer who lives in Havana with his 16 years old daughter – his wife has left them. He sells vacuum cleaners, his life is dull, banal, he is constantly broke because of his daughter's many extravagances he has to pay for. He is approached by a certain Hawthorne, who wants to recruit him for the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6). Since he needs the money that is offered to him, he accepts — a well-paid side job. But, of course, he has no valuable information to send to London, as a consequence, he fabricates fanciful reports, invents a fictitious network of agents at his service, some of the names he mentions being real people and some invented. He only tells about his new spy work to his friend, a German emigrant and WWI veteran, Dr Hasselbacher, hiding the truth even from his daughter Milly. Since I cannot go into the details of the plot, I will content myself with focusing on the fable Greene works out: Wormold increasingly becomes the hostage of his lies and fabrications, he is driven by the logic of his imposture to push up the biddings and increase the stakes by

fabricating more and more sensational phony information — like a secret military installation in the mountains, a base for rockets — and, as a consequence of this constant overbid, he becomes for his superiors in London a “class A” agent, then a secretary, Beatrice, an energetic young woman, and a radio assistant are allotted to him and sent from London to Havana as a backup.

As you can imagine, Wormold’s imposture is doomed to fail miserably, this passing through many dramatic developments, violent deaths, suspense. But since it’s not an ordinary spy novel or thriller but rather *a mockery, a parody and a satire* of the “little world” of spying, espionage, a story where nothing should be taken at face value, it has to end up in a burst of laughter.

This is what makes it possible for Wormold’s imposture to be like an imaginary travel, a joyful unhoped — for flight out of the greyness of his shabby life as a vacuum cleaner retailer and indebted shopkeeper. He knows that his imposture will not “hold” forever, but as long as it lasts, he is happy, for he can finally come up his whimsical and beloved daughter’s expectations — like having a horse of her own, taking expensive riding lessons, etc. Besides, he discovers, as his imposture takes new proportions, how jubilant it makes him to have the prestigious and powerful British Intelligence Service wrapped around his little finger, to have become the omnipotent storyteller whose fabrications and lies are like solid gold. He knows that it will not last forever, that it will end up dramatically for him, but as long as it lasts, he is happy. It’s like a resurrection for him and a revenge over his previous rather sinister life. The only thing he is worried about is his daughter — he hates the idea that she might be harmed as his imposture will be exposed. As for the rest, he doesn’t think that his dull life as a broke shopkeeper was something so precious that he should be worried about losing it — what matters in the end is the excitement, the intensity his new life as an impostor has brought him, whatever the price might be he has to pay for it. This is, in short, the fable conveyed by the novel, *some sort of an anarchist fable* — the fantasy, the imagination of the individual as opposed to the seriousness and the dull solemnity of the *Raison d’Etat*. Through imposture, Wormold has transformed his poor life into a work of art, a performance, this by thumbing his nose at the *Raison d’Etat*. Once again, we see how imposture can be reversed from a negative, immoral, disastrous attitude into *an act of creation*, that is of recreation of life, a vital bifurcation. This is the acceptance of imposture Graham Greene is advocating, promoting in this beautiful novel. What Graham Greene’s novel draws our attention to is this: at the origin of most of impostures, you have a human subject who makes a calculation, set into motion by motives that most of the time are quite trivial — making money, improving his-her social position, gaining prestige from their imposture. But as time passes, they happen to be overwhelmed by their “game”, something like a desubjectivation-resubjectivation process takes place: they are “swallowed”,

absorbed, “eaten up” by the character they have made up. They become like automatons, having lost sight of what the practical aim and goal of the imposture was.

This hallucinatory process is beautifully described in a French film called *A l'origine (In the Beginning)*, Xavier Gianolli, 2009), from the real story of a small crook who went to a small town in France, succeeded in passing as a civil engineer and making the local authorities believe that he had been commissioned by the government to build a highway in the region. At the beginning, it's just a fraud, a swindle, he is a loser who intends to embezzle, but as his fraud takes substance, he begins to believe in it, he becomes a real megalomaniac who loves “his” highway and wants to build it at any cost – a few kilometers asphalt leading to nowhere. The little crook and impostor has been captured by his imposture, his dishonest calculation has become a “dream” and at the end he has become an actor, a protagonist of his dream having become real. This is the magic, the “power” of imposture. Imposture is like a ball of wool you begin to unroll – it never stops, you just have to follow the thread, you always see new scenes, landscapes, topics and questions appear. Among those we have not tackled till now: *scientific imposture* which is in itself a continent as such but which I will not deal with since it is not very “cinematic”— although I'm sure that there are films that have explored it. Or, in a broader context, intellectual or academic imposture(s). There is a famous book on that, which was a bestseller in many languages at the time it was published, it's called *Intellectual Impostures (Fashionable Nonsense)* by Alain Sokal and Jean Bricmont, a British physicist and a Belgian physicist and philosopher (1997). It has provoked an impassionate debate, in Britain, the US as well as in France. It is a vehement attack against the so-called French post-modernists — Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Jean Baudrillard, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Paul Virilio, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari — an attack that aims at exposing their alleged abuse of science: the thesis of the book is that all these people (very different people, from the directions of their respective researches, in terms of disciplines, ideological and political orientations, but all of them *put in one basket* — “French post-moderns”, a portmanteau category that also has its credentials on the campuses in the US) constantly refer to modern or contemporary scientific knowledge, authors, theories in mathematics, physics, astronomy, etc. and do it in a spirit of ornamentation, to “decorate” their own books, enhance and enliven their reflections, but without really understanding what they “mobilize” that way, being not trained enough for that. It's a “fashionable” and “chic”, smart way of giving the impression that their books have a solid scientific background — but it's just a show, a pretense — and, put bluntly, an imposture — this is in brief *the very harsh and expeditious thesis* of Sokal's and Bricmont's book and it is easy to understand why and how it raised such an infuriating discussion, most of the people they summon in the book being, in the French intellectual and academic realm, sacred cows. But I have no time to expand on it and, besides, I think that it's a rather silly book whose success was overdimensioned — for cultural and ideological reasons — deliberately or not, it was part

and parcel of the competition between the old and the new — Europe and its traditional hegemony in the Western world in terms of intellectual and academic life and the Anglo-Saxon world, the US in particular, where intellectual and academic life responds to a very different model — this new model being in expansion and the European declining. Sokal and Bricmont's book as a symptom, a benchmark — a somehow and in some regard pathetic way of downgrading European (continental) knowledge by disparaging the French “postmoderns” as dazzling illusionists — things shouldn't maybe be put in such simplistic terms — I hope.

Imposture is liable to be found in the most unexpected places or circumstances. Two years ago, a controversy arose in France about the “case” of a French woman who has become famous at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by becoming *the oldest human on the planet* – she has died in 1997 at the age of 122 years and 164 days. Her name was Jeanne Calment, she lived in a small city, Arles, in South France. She was not only the oldest human for a few years, she was supposed to hold the world record of longevity. Two decades after she passed away, two Russian scholars published a detailed study on her case. They argued that Jeanne Calment's “career” as a champion in longevity was a fake, a forgery and an imposture: the real Jeanne Calment, they claimed, passed away as early as 1934 and her daughter, called Yvonne, had surreptitiously taken her place and died, in her place too, in 1997, at the (real) age of 99 years. Her goal, as she imagined this usurpation was, the Russian scholars argue, very trivial – to avoid to pay the death duties for her mother. I won't go into the details of the arguments brought about by the Russian scholars, but, as you can imagine, their paper aroused strong emotions in the French public since Jeanne Calment had become for them some sort of a monument, part and parcel of the national biological and genetic patrimony! Counter-investigations were lead whose outcome was that the Russian scholar's paper remained unconvincing. Such are the beauties of imposture and usurpation: in many famous cases, a mystery remains, long after the protagonists of the “story” have passed away. When the story is about the eldest woman on earth at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it remains somehow anecdotal, and it's not such a big issue. But when it's about dynastic stakes, when it's related to power or, in the realm of art, to authorship — who is the real author of such or such famous literary work or painting? It's different. This is what I would like to finish this course on — some reflections on the relationship between imposture, usurpation and sovereignty.

In his famous book *Against Grain*, the anthropologist James C. Scott writes this (I re-translate from the French edition, it's not an exact quote but this is what he means) : I think, Scott says, that the state is at its origin *a racket* intended for protecting a gang of thieves that has taken the upper hand on the others (gangs of thieves). This is, as you maybe know, the spirit of the radical deconstruction of the civilizing mission of the state, as inspired by the anarchist inclination of this scholar. What Scott says here can be connected with a famous saying: The Chinese

Emperor is nothing but a warlord who has won over all his competitors (other warlords). What these statements stress is this: at the origin of sovereignty, you have a decision that is made by pure violence, a pure matter of war, a competition of power(s). He who appears to be the strongest, crushes his competitors and subdues them becomes the sovereign. But what comes next? It is always a new sovereign's interest and ambition to be the founder of a *dynasty*, that is to make sure that continuity exists in terms of power and legitimacy. Dynastic order is the classic form of this continuity — power and sovereignty remain in the hands of the same clan, family. But for securing that, new sovereigns have to make up, promote, spread among the populations that are subjected to them — and also in the face of other sovereigns — *narratives* intended for legitimizing their rule and reign, the position of power. They have to invent a narrative that deals with destiny — the sovereign and his lineage (descendants) as destined to or for ruling over this space, country, land, territory. And destiny, in that sense necessarily invokes something like God's blessing or any transcendent principle of power of that kind. This is why and how dynastic continuity and legitimacy, in a country like France, and, finally, absolute monarchy are inseparable from the “manufacturing” of a narrative that deals with “kingship by divine right”. This is how the person of the king becomes sacred, with all the emblems of his sacredness, his supernatural powers (his ability to cure the *écrouelles* — king's evil, scrofula — just by touching the sick person's skin).

A French historian, Suzanne Citron, has written a wonderful book on that issue, called *The National Myth — French history revisited*. She shows how, at the origin, from the end of the Middle Ages to the Classical Age, a constant and fierce fight has raged among different lineages, “families” for power and sovereignty over what was progressively taking shape as “the Kingdom of France” and how each new winner in this competition had to try hard to find arguments and subterfuges intended for justifying his aspiration to legitimacy and to grant it with a dynastic base. It's not that easy to pass from the status of a “warlord”, a local lord, or even a prince, to that of a king invested with royal authority and prestige. Starting from this general picture, it is easy to understand how important and vital the motto of usurpation is doomed to become in such a configuration. For finally, all things considered, legitimacy (the legitimacy of a sovereign) is *a matter of recognition* — he is a real sovereign only provided other sovereigns recognize him as such and his subjects also acknowledge his condition as their sovereign (king). But conversely, it opens the door to all possible disputes: competitors, defeated pretenders, angry or frustrated subjects can pretty well object and reject him: no, this is not the real sovereign, *he is just an impostor!* This is something we can be sure Asia and Europe have in common — imposture, usurpation as the shadow of royal or imperial sovereignty — this from Hamlet, Richard Lionheart to the advent of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty (if you see it from the angle of Taiwan, it's of special interest — Koxinga, the “liberator”

of the island, never pledged his allegiance to the new sovereigns, dynasty — the Manchus. They were purely and simply *usurpers* for him).

What I have to insist on here is that sovereignty never exists as a close sphere, self-sufficient, above society, independent from incidentals of any kind. Sovereignty, in particular in its classical form — as it coincides with the body of a sovereign, a king, a leader in the totalitarian style, a dictator etc. — cannot rely on pure violence. It also depends on recognition networks and processes, it has to rest on legitimacy. This is where Christian Andersen's famous tale on the child and the king, the child who says: "But the king is naked!" is a deep-going and far-reaching political allegory: as soon as this sentence has been uttered — the king is naked — the king is like enthroned, royal sovereignty has collapsed. This tale reminds us of the fact that sovereignty always is a matter of staging and gaze, a matter of belief — when people do not see the king as a sovereign, when sovereignty loses its *aura*, its majesty, when other sovereigns deny his status as a legitimate sovereign, when, as it happens at the decisive stage of the French Revolution, the phase where the king is depicted in lampoons and satirical pamphlets as a pig ("*le roi cochon*") — then the delegitimization process of royal or monarchic sovereignty has become unstoppable. This is where the impostor, the usurper appears to be the shadow of the monarch, his double or doppelgänger. This is the danger sovereignty, in its monarchic form in particular, constantly faces: *be exposed in the course of variable circumstances, as pure imposture*. This is exactly what happens in the course of the French Revolution: in the country that was par excellence the crucible or the seat, the home of absolute monarchy (by contrast with Britain's parliamentary monarchy), the king is stripped of his name as a sovereign — Louis XVI — he has to face his judges as an impostor called Louis Capet — the name of the dynasty he belongs to. But as soon as he has been deprived of his royal name and title (*King of France* and not *King of the French*, which is the very mark of absolute monarchy), he is lost, that is dead by anticipation. This is how usurpation always "mounts guard" behind royal sovereignty.

If we pass now to modern forms of power, one figure we insistently have to deal with is *the dictator*, this in particular in the context of the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Europe, but elsewhere too. What is strikingly recurrent in the figure of the modern dictator (that is completely different from the Roman dictator of the time of the Roman Republic) is that this character who is inseparable from absolute power, extreme and massive violence, tyranny, terror (etc.) also has a double — *the buffoon, the clown*. This is where you see that cinema, sometimes, really can do a good job – for nobody has as brilliantly given prominence to that idea (the buffoon as the double of the dictator) as Chaplin did in *The Great Dictator*, Ernst Lubitsch in *To be or not to be* and some other anthological films. Exposed as a clown, the bloody dictator is, of course, an impostor and usurper par excellence. It is not only that it

appears that, more than often, he has seized power in a dubious or violent, illegitimate way, it is, more importantly maybe, that he unveils *the grotesque dimension of sovereignty* as “solitary” exercise of power — the sovereign as the “only one”.

*Grotesque sovereignty* is a very important motto, topic, and it makes sense in the West as well as in the East — I mean here, Asia, East Asia, Japan, China, etc. It’s a thread you can follow from Shakespeare’s plays to the Romantic drama (Victor Hugo), from Foucault (in his genealogy of psychology) to *butho* theater in post-war Japan. Grotesque as the reverse side of the majesty and brilliance of sovereignty — what becomes obvious when the sovereign, the king, becomes insane, mad, lost in sovereignty — this from King Lear to his Japanese modernized version — Akira Kurosawa’s superb *Ran*. It is not just by chance that so many films deal with this issue — defeated or disheveled sovereignty, unveiling its grotesque traits, or, in other terms, films that exhibit and deconstruct the illusions of sovereignty — let me mention a few of them — *The Death of Louis XIV* by Albert Serra (the last days and the agony of Louis XIV, the French absolute monarch), *The Sun* by Alexander Sokhurov (Hiro Hito at the hour of the capitulation of Japan), *Ludwig* by Luchino Visconti (on the madness of Louis II of Bavaria, end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), *Der Untergang (Downfall)* by Oliver Hirschbiegel (on the last days of Hitler), *The Last King of Scotland* by Kevin Mac Donald (on the bloody dictatorship of Idi Amin in Uganda), *Farewell to the King* by John Milius (how an American deserter becomes the king of a head-hunter’s tribe in the mountains of Borneo during WWII), *El Presidente* by Santiago Mitre (how the authority and legitimacy of a contemporary democracy’s president collapses — Argentina), etc. All these films present, from various angles and perspectives, the reverse side of sovereignty — its collapse, its pretense, its black holes, lies, impasses, abysses.

Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* is not only a brilliant and merciless fable on fascism and its leaders. It claims that modernity as the time of democracy unmasks “the leader”, the great man, the savior, the providential man (etc.) as a born impostor — the hero of modern times actually is the ordinary man, the man in the street, the kind and naive Jewish barber who happens to be the double of the megalomaniac fascist dictator. But what the film shows is that the *real character* of the film is this humble John Doe — not the Big Boss of the fascist regime for the figure of sovereignty the latter embodies is a pathetic caricature of the past grandeur and majesty of imperial or monarchic figures. The real human is the barber and Hynkel is a fake.