# Toeing/Crossing the Line: Elia Kazan's *Man on a Tightrope*

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In the unpublished book on directing that Elia Kazan wrote in his final years, we find a confession which can also read as a profession of faith: "I am a mediocre director except when a play or film touches a part of my life's experience."[1] This remark is especially relevant when we focus on the three films Kazan directed immediately before and after his testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in April 1952: *Viva Zapata!* (1952), *Man on a Tightrope* (1953), and *On the Waterfront* (1954). Of these three, *Man on a Tightrope* has received the least critical acknowledgment: in one of the rare essays written about the film, Michel Ciment notes that it remains "unrecognized, if not unknown".[2] In *Kazan on Directing*, Robert Cornfield writes: "When in 1952 Kazan went to Hollywood to oversee the final cut of *Man on a Tightrope*, which he had filmed in Europe, he found that he had lost his privileged place on the Twentieth Century-Fox lot. Darryl Zanuck, believing *Tightrope* a flop, had severely edited the film without consulting him, and Kazan was shunted to a temporary office on the backlot".[3] In fact, as Michel Ciment reminds us, Kazan himself denigrates the film in many of his interviews. However, in *An American Odyssey*, the collection of writings by Kazan which Michel Ciment edited in 1988, Kazan writes of *Man on a Tightrope*: "This film was my liberation […]. I became, with this film, the man who made *On the Waterfront*".[4] Even more tellingly, in his autobiography, *A Life*,[5] the six pages devoted to *Tightrope* conclude what is probably the key chapter of the book, the one in which Kazan tries to come to terms with his decision to testify.[6] It must have cost him a lot, for, as he later remembers, he ended up with a bad attack of shingles after writing it.[7]

*Man on a Tightrope* seems to have been made specifically as material for the theme of this journal issue on cinema and the crossing of frontiers, for reasons both obvious and less obvious. It follows the tribulations of a Czechoslovakian circus which refuses to conform to the rules imposed by the Communist regime and eventually succeeds in crossing the West German frontier. The manager of

[1] Robert Cornfield (ed.), *Kazan on Directing*, New York: Vintage, 2009, 253.
[2] Michel Ciment, 'Saltimbanques et bureaucrates : *Man on a Tightrope*', *Positif*, no. 587, janvier 2010, 91.
[3] Cornfield, *Kazan,* 94.
[4] Elia Kazan, Michel Ciment (ed.), *An American Odyssey*, London: Bloomsbury, 1988, 233.
[5] Elia Kazan, *A Life*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1997 [1988].
[6] Ibid., 456-485.
[7] Ibid., 486.

the circus, Karel Cernik (who was its owner before its nationalization in 1948), thus succeeds in what is described as an escape from bondage to freedom; but he is fatally wounded by a member of his team who turns out to be a Communist spy, and dies just after the circus makes it to Bavaria. The German border is thus first a haunting presence, then a seemingly impossible goal, and finally, the prize for a hard-fought, liberating, and – for Cernik – deadly struggle.

So much for the obvious. The frontier is also a rich and complex metaphor which a close look at Kazan's autobiography allows us to see as Kazan's objective correlative. In this article, I shall attempt to establish a dialogue between the autobiography and the film. Kazan himself describes the making of *Man on a Tightrope* as the watershed of his career: a turning of the tables which could also be seen as a rebirth. But the chapter which describes the making of *Man on a Tightrope* is full of episodes, details, half-confessions which negate such an embarrassingly ideological reading, even though its basic motif (Kazan would say its "spine") *is* the impassable frontier between bureaucrats and showmen. As we shall see, this apparently simple opposition is open to a number of often contradictory interpretations.

## The Commissar and the Artist

Kazan starts his chapter with a humorous memory which turns out to be deadly serious. His mother, he remembers, had a hearing aid that she turned off surreptitiously when the person who was speaking to her became boring or malicious. Kazan envied her, until he realized that he too had such a device, which worked until 1952, whenever he heard "certain opinions to which Party members were not supposed to pay respectful attention". But at this point, the device ceased to work, and "memories I'd pushed aside […] thrust themselves for attention".[8] Interestingly, the two memories he singles out are first a remembrance from 1936, which Michel Ciment aptly calls the primal scene (it was obviously a deep trauma, and he refers to it obsessively in his autobiography): the Party meeting during which he was invited by "the man from Detroit" (an apparatchik) to mend his ways as a member of the radical theatrical company, The Group; his refusal to do so; the vote of 16 to 1 (his vote) that condemned him; and his resignation from the Communist Party the next day. Secondly, his recollection of another meeting, in Mexico, in 1950, during the pre-production of *Viva Zapata!* : that of Steinbeck and himself with another anonymous commissar who asked them to rewrite their Zapata screenplay. He thus emphasizes his independence for aesthetic, not political reasons: "The reason I'd resigned from the Party was not their politics but their determination to control artists by working behind the scenes."[9]

One of the most impressive sequences of *Man on a Tightrope* is Cernik's interrogation by three people: the interrogator himself, the Party commissar who sits behind him silently and controls the process (he will later accuse him of "making a botch" of the job) and a representative of the Ministry of Propaganda, Fesker, who, incidentally, is played by Adolphe Menjou, one of the most vocal supporters of HUAC in Hollywood. Kazan says in his autobiography that this choice was his "private joke". The "joke" becomes even more spicy when we know that Fredric March, who plays Cernik, was soon to be blacklisted for his membership in the Communist Party. When Fesker, the propaganda man, has left, the commissar says to the interrogator that he and his kind have one goal: "making fools of us", and he immediately makes a phone call arranging to have Fesker watched (he will later be arrested and sent to a *gulag*). Two years earlier, Cernik had been asked to make changes in his act (he is a clown). This act consists of being kicked twenty-seven times by his cousin Jaromir, who fails to make him kick him back

[8] Ibid., 456.
[9] Ibid., 457.

and becomes too tired to lift his leg, whereupon Cernik kisses him. The Ministry of Propaganda asked him to be dressed up to represent Wall Street capitalism, while the other clown should be an African American worker. He was also to eliminate the final kiss. He explains that they tried and tried, worked on it for days, but the audience did not laugh. The opposition here – ideology versus art – is remarkably similar to that which led Kazan to choose the latter and brave the former in 1936 and 1950. Furthermore, the words later used by Cernik to defend his crossing of the frontier are very similar to those Kazan uses to explain his position. Cernik: "I told the police… I was not political, and that's the truth; but when they try to force their politics on my circus, on my show, then I must fight. If I'm not able to fight, I must escape." Kazan: "The simple fact was that I wasn't political; not then, not now".[10]

So, everything seems to click for a perfectly consistent, convincing self-justification – except that the statement just quoted does not belong to the self-justifying chapter, but to a much later one: it follows the account of a dream which he had years after his testimony – a dream in which a friend he had named in 1952 forgave him (while, in fact, the man had accused him of sacrificing his friends to save his career). Kazan does not refer to the Communist Party when he speaks of politics, but to HUAC: "I felt that no political cause was worth hurting any other human for. What good deeds were stimulated by what I had done? What villains exposed? How is the world better for what I did? It had just been a game of power and influence, and I'd been taken in and twisted from my true self".[11] This confession allows us to see the scene of the interrogation in a very different light: Cernik has the courage that Kazan did not have, including that of leaving his country – the courage displayed by Chaplin, Losey, and others. Thus, a scene which was obviously meant to placate the anti-communists is open to a more personal, and consequently more ambiguous reading.

**The Ambivalent Frontier**

Kazan's account of the way he came to direct the film gives the awkward impression that, to paraphrase Coppola, *Tightrope* was an offer he could not refuse. Zanuck, he tells us ironically, "had been trying to help" him by advising him to make a film which would protect him from the attacks of all those who doubted the sincerity of his testimony. Whereupon Zanuck gave him the script written by Robert Sherwood, the screenwriter of William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), about the supposedly true story of a circus that had managed to flee to the West. Kazan disliked the script and denounced it as "typical propaganda stuff" which he was asked to condone "to satisfy a pack of red-baiters who want my ass." He concluded (significantly): "I've done all the crawling I'm going to do."[12] Well, he had not. On the face of it, the whole film works to uphold the black-and-white map of the cold-war world; yet, even the most blatantly ideological characters display contradictions and ambiguities. The most obvious case is the story of Joe Vosdek, a Czech whom Cernik suspects at first, for very little is known about him. When he tells Cernik's daughter, who loves him passionately, about his past, it turns out that he is a Czech who was sent to the USA by his father at the time of the Munich Agreement. Joe Vosdek (whose first name sums up his Americanness) says proudly: "When I was in America, I learned to think like an American, to be an American. But I was still a Czech, and I always thought the day might come when I would do something to liberate my country." Naturally, he joined the American army, and when he reached Czechoslovakia, he asked for leave to go to his birthplace and find his father; but it was now behind Russian lines, so that he had to put on civilian clothes, until he learned his father had died in a concentration camp. It was then too late to re-join the American army, for he had become a

[10] Ibid., 685.
[11] Ibid., 685.
[12] Ibid., 476.

deserter, and the Americans had left, "but the Russians didn't leave", and before he found the circus, Joe had to work for the Russian army.

Vosdek's course is obviously consistent with the film's ideological "message"; but it allows Kazan to suggest how elusive the word "frontier" could be in Europe in 1945. Furthermore, the desertion theme is both a convenient gimmick to justify his position and a perfect instance of Kazan's autobiographical, or confessional bent: he too was a defender of the free world who could not fight the suppressed feeling of being a deserter, and whose position after his testimony was the inverted picture of his character. Vosdek, a defender of the "free world", had to work for the Russian army; Kazan, an ex-communist and "fellow-traveller", had to pander to the radical right and receive the encouragements of those he loathed. No wonder then that in this film, Kazan's attempt to simplify leads to an ambiguous, sometimes opaque picture. As he puts it, when he compares his statement in the *New York Times* (which was published on the front page) and his real feelings: "This statement didn't represent my true feelings, which were not that clear but confused and contradictory." He then quotes a piece from his diary, written on the day after the publication: "I know I've done something wrong […] I spend every minute making rationalizations for my act."[13]

*Tightrope* was conceived as such a rationalization. This is how he justifies his decision to accept the script: "I had to make this film to convince myself – not others – that I was not afraid to say true things about the Communists or anyone else." However, the attempt deserves our attention not because it succeeded, but because it failed. The same can be said of *Viva Zapata!* and its unconvincing defence of political dis-involvement, or of *On the Waterfront* and its rather desperate defence of informing. The three films offer a fascinating case of imperfect repression – of the re-emergence of guilt in the very process of its denial. No one describes this better than Kazan himself: "There was something indecent […] in what I had done and something murky in my motivations. What I'd done was correct, but was it right?"[14] The central metaphor of the film, which gives it its title, is sufficiently polysemic to allow ambivalence: the man on a tightrope is the clown who risks his life to make people laugh, the artist who is forced to play cat and mouse with Communist authorities, but he can also be the director that must play cat and mouse with producers who must play cat and mouse with the radical right; and, most of all, he embodies the experience of a "friendly witness" whose testimony has alienated his friends, who is constantly harrowed by phone calls, anonymous letters, and snubs from actors, directors, screenwriters, whose every moment is fraught with anxiety and guilt: "When I began to move among people again, I found I was notorious, an 'informer', a 'squealer', a 'rat'. I'd become the star villain for 'progressives'".[15] In other words, there is no easy choice of sides for some consciences, who seem condemned to straddle forever the moral frontier between righteous clarity and shameful opacity.

Kazan's account of the making of *Tightrope* in his autobiography clearly singles out this film, however unsatisfactory it was to him, as a catalyst of his rebirth. This seems to contradict what I have just said, for this rebirth was fed by a passionate rejection of his position as "squealer". When he went to Munich to meet the Cirkus Brumbach and find out whether Sherwood's script was factually accurate, he was "for three days at the bottom, a demoralized man in a ruined city".[16] Then he met the circus people, with whom he could not communicate (he spoke no German) and who "looked as if they'd just got out of Hitler's Wehrmacht". But he soon found them "endearing", and developed a special

[13] Ibid., 466.
[14] Ibid., 465.
[15] Ibid., 468.
[16] Ibid., 477.

relationship with the dwarf: "He came up to my belt buckle, but he was broad of girth and fearless, a survivor who could dodge and hide but also, when cornered, fight like a badger."[17] Interestingly, the dwarf in the film plays an apparently self-serving, amoral character who leaves Cernik to join his competitor, Bratislav Barovik, who, in the words of the interrogator, "has had the intelligence to follow the Party line". Worse still: he spies on Cernik and informs Barovik of his decision to cross the frontier. Yet he later decides to come back and, eventually, kills the Communist spy who has wounded Cernik. One more instance of the film's ambivalence: at first, the character seems to fit Kazan's description of the man who plays him ("a fearless […] survivor"), but he then changes to embody his creator's repressed guilt.

## From Border to Borderline

Is it over-interpreting the film to see this character as representative of Kazan's ambivalence? The autobiography seems to show it is, for what it emphasizes rather heavily is, on the contrary, Kazan's return to sanity, based on his recognition that all these people had been through a trauma and survived; he thus reports how a technician had lived "close to the border" (i.e., the iron curtain) and heard the mines go off at night, wondering: "Rabbits? Humans?"[18] Most of those who worked for him had chosen to risk their lives, and sometimes the lives of those they left behind, and did not let him down, despite the threats of the Communist regime they heard on the radio: "They'd accepted the loss; it had become every man for himself." Living with these tough people helped him "become unburdened of self-pity […] I determined to accept what they had accepted, that one part of my life was over, and not to look for support or friendship where I'd once had it. I determined to look everyone in the eye when I got back home and tough it out, as my crew was toughing it out."[19] If we follow him, *Tightrope* enabled him to come back to the States with new energy: "I'd been defeated, yes, but only so I could come back stronger. Just as my circus had, I'd survived all threats, spoken and implied, and was going on." Thus, the autobiography makes use of the theme of the frontier to turn it into a weapon against adversity. Kazan notes that all his great movies were shot after 1952 and sees this as his answer to all those who wanted him dead as a filmmaker. When an actor asked him what kept him looking so young, he answered: "My enemies."[20] The chapter concludes on a note of defiance, as if the martyr had turned into a warrior, as if the tragedy had become an epic struggle.

It is difficult to counter such massive barrage fire. Nevertheless, I shall venture to do so, to conclude by focusing on both the film and the book. The film's ending is far less triumphant than Kazan's memoirs lead us to expect. Cernik, the very soul of the circus, who has been shown throughout to devote his life to his art, and whose desperate plan to cross the border is his "last chance to live again" (his words), is obviously an alter ego for Kazan, who keeps crossing the frontier between the life of the circus and the making of the film – like Bergman in *Sawdust and Tinsel*, or Fellini in *La Strada*, both of which were released in 1953. The fact that his character dies at the end does not tally with the conclusion of the autobiography: Cernik reaches the West not as an invincible warrior, but as a sacrificial figure, and the only positive lesson of the ending is the supreme Hollywood rule: "The show must go on." Furthermore, the autobiography has its sub-plot, its hidden message, which echoes

[17] Ibid., 478.
[18] Ibid., 481.
[19] Ibid., 482.
[20] Ibid., 485.

Cernik's remark during his interrogation: "You see sir, circus people are not like other people. The only nationality we have, the only religion we have is the circus. We have no politics; we have no home but the circus." What brought together all the contributors to the film, Kazan tells us, circus people and technicians, director and actors, Americans and Germans, is the fact that they were all "freaks", like the dwarf: "Through him I came to see that circus people were outsiders in any society – freaks in fact – and since we were so compatible, I must be the same […]. Alone with me in a strange land, they made me their father."[21]

Such confessions open vistas which would justify another reading of *Man on a Tightrope*, but which would exceed the scope of this paper, and which, furthermore, point less to the film as it is than to what it would have become, had Kazan's creativity not been hampered by Zanuck's demands, and by Kazan's doubts, contradictions, and guilt. Thus, some scenes – the most obvious one being the incredible fight between Cernik and Barovik – negate its openly conformist message by shifting from the border to the borderline, with the eruption of unbridled energy, the craving for Dionysiac exuberance, which suddenly disturb the "realistic" surface of the film to plunge the spectator into the uncanny. Kazan's interest in the circus was only one form of this. Interestingly, Kazan himself made a similar point in an address he gave at Wesleyan University in 1973, "On What Makes a Director": "Just as Fellini adored the clowns, music-hall performers, and the circuses of his country and paid them homage again and again in his work, our filmmaker would do well to study magic […]. Think, too, of Bergman, how often he uses magicians and sleight-of-hand."[22] More fundamentally, this fascination with the circus as the world of "freaks" should be closely related to the most disturbing confessions of the autobiography, those of a conformist who longed for chaos: "I was in revolt against my way of life, my respectability and that of the wife I loved. Against our orderly and proper way of living. I longed for what I can only call chaos."[23] Too bad the roadmap imposed by Zanuck was a return to order: such confessions as the above show it to have been mission impossible.

[21] Ibid., 478.
[22] Cornfield, *Kazan*, 239.
[23] Kazan, *A Life*, 7.