

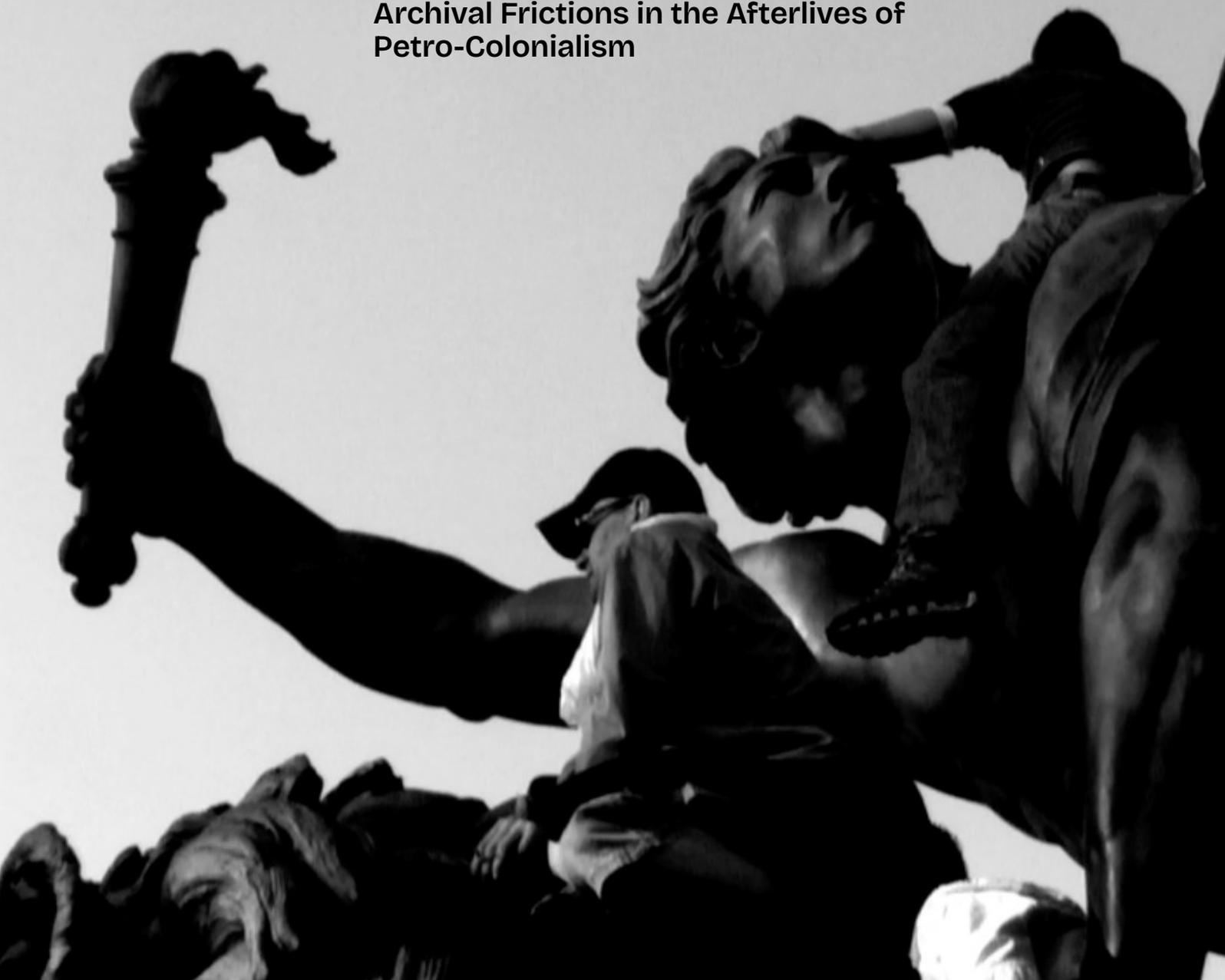
L'ATALANTE

REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS CINEMATOGRAFICOS

DISPLACED IMAGES, ICONOGRAPHIC SURVIVALS: CINEMA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

**Dialogue Filming to Profane the Border:
Cinema as Counter-Power. A Conversation with
Sylvain George**

**(Dis)agreements Counter-Visualities of Extraction:
Archival Frictions in the Afterlives of
Petro-Colonialism**



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ONE TIME BECOMING ANOTHER: AFTERLIVES OF THE SEEN, FIGURES OF THE YET-TO-COME*

IVAN PINTOR IRANZO

GLÒRIA SALVADÓ-CORRETGER

These are troubled and troubling times. So writes Georges Didi-Huberman in his book *Les anges de l'histoire. Images des temps inquiets* (2025). We are living in a time of change and transformation, with the emergence of a new visual paradigm shaped by the current geopolitical crisis and the consolidation of the alliance between technology, economics and warfare, informed by an ideology of radical accelerationism of events (Boucheron, 2024) and their representations.

We are watching one time become another, and we are witnessing it in real time. But it is not just something changing; there is also something unexpectedly returning, in the form of the unresolved afterlives and moods (Didi-Huberman, 2025) of authoritarian political leaders and techno-oligarchs who adopt the words and gestures of dictators, emperors or even the super-villains of fantasy and science fiction films.

The 21st century has been characterised by a flood of apocalyptic images that blend different cinematic codes, "image spam" (Steyerl, 2014) going

viral on social media and an increasingly frenetic collision of public and private spheres. With the war in Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza and Donald Trump's second term, a new visual regime is being forged, based on neuro-excitation, cognitive colonisation of the attention and the erasure of any discourse inconsistent with the purposes of a post-liberal "finitude capitalism" (Orain, 2025) aimed at the systematic hoarding of resources, from Venezuelan oil to rare earth minerals to Greenlandic ice. The fact that other world leaders and major conflicts (such as the war in Sudan) have been effectively rendered invisible reflects a progressive loss of nuance in our visual conception of the world.

As the philosopher Éric Sadin (2024) and the artist and researcher Hito Steyerl (2025) have pointed out in relation to the anthropological rupture brought about by AI, in addition to being exposed to an endless stream of "phantom images" (Sadin, 2025) or random, stochastic "poor images" (Steyerl, 2025), we are entering an "age of indis-

tion” that makes it increasingly difficult to determine the origins of images and texts, while the great repository of the web, whose energy consumption continues to increase exponentially, is effectively a “dead internet” that has delegated the creation of images to large-scale production by computers.

One aim of this issue of *L’Atalante* is to affirm the vital importance of the cinematic image as a refuge, as an active tool for analysing the images flooding the public sphere and as a way of laying claim to a future denied by extractivist politics. The “Gaza Riviera” reel posted by Donald Trump on his social media platform, Truth Social, in February 2025 constituted what was not only an exercise in cynicism and colonial violence but also the imposition of a seemingly inexorable present. In this context, only the reassembly of other images through an exercise in editing, repolarising and recontextualising can offer a different way of thinking by directing our gaze to places where the interminable social media feeds seem to prevent us from looking.

In addition to contributing, as Harun Farocki (2013) might have suggested, to the “destruction of the world”, the “Gaza Riviera” video clip represents a radical change to the “civil contract of images” (Azoulay, 2008), adhering to a model for presenting a business project and an “omnipresent militarised gaze”, to borrow a term used by

the filmmaker Sanaz Sohrabi in this issue’s “Discussion” section, which breaks with any notion of politics as relationality (Arendt, 1950). In its historical plurality, cinema has had the function of “showing” and staging modes of relating between individuals, communities and spectators, who can also potentially become protagonists. How can we “show” these modes and redirect the gaze in the age of AI? How can cinema be used to contravene the geographical and cognitive hyper-colonialism that permeates every aspect of civil and political life?

“[I]t is not enough to ‘show what is hidden” argues the filmmaker Sylvain George in the “Dialogue” section of this issue of *L’Atalante*. “Such a conception continues to assume that cinema is a mirror of reality, a simple device for revelation or restitution. [...] It is important, then, to shift the coordinates of this approach. Because what is at stake today is not just the absence of representation of certain existences but their very production as mutilated representations. The act of filming, consequently, cannot content itself with a reparative or illustrative function. It supposes an active disarticulation of dominant regimes of visibility.”

For this reason, hacking the system of cultural extractivism imposed by the technology that sustains generative AI is a task that falls not only upon the technology itself or upon the use of social media, but also—crucially—upon cinema and

Imagen 1. The shadow of a post-democratic future



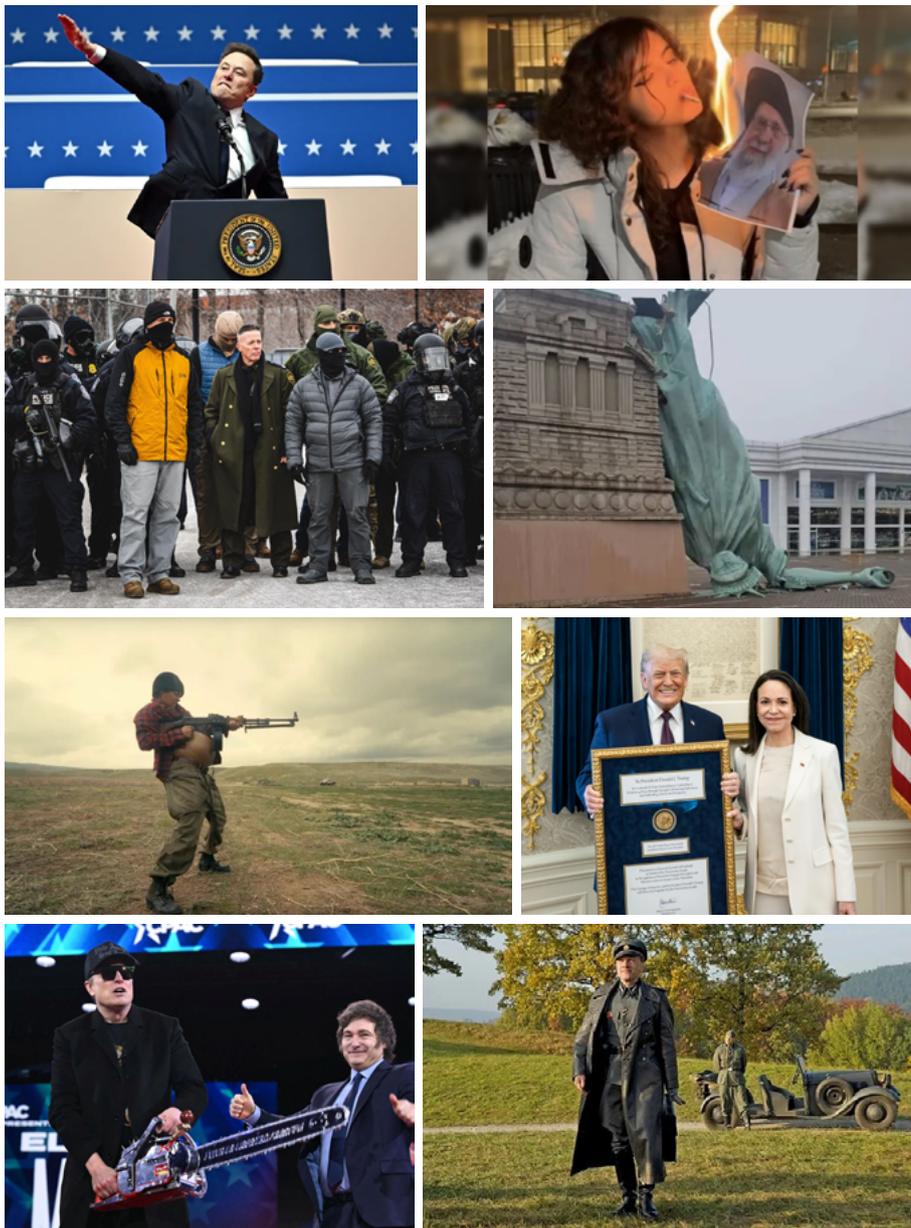


Image 2. Afterlives of a different time

its ability to expose these mutilations that exacerbate the phenomenon of invisibilisation. “It is not about illustrating a cause, nor denouncing a state of affairs,” Sylvain George continues, “but about instituting a zone of undecidability: there where faces are no longer assigned to a function, there where bodies are no longer obliged to signify. There where, perhaps, something still holds itself up in the night, not as darkening, but as reserve of meaning, as irreducible opacity.”

Exploring opacity without preconceptions while integrating contexts and genealogies is also the basis of an iconographic and iconological approach (Panofsky, 1982; Warburg, 2010) that can be used to reconfigure the political self-representation of contemporary populist leaders in a genealogy that can be traced back to Silvio Berlusconi, as Daniele Comberlati argues in the first article of this special issue. It can also serve to study the post-colonial framework of films by Mati Diop, Alice Diop, Bernadette Vivuya, Kagoma Twahirgwa, Théo Court and Felipe Gálvez, among others, as some authors do in this issue, based on the contemporary experience of a hyper-colonialism that can expose the tensions in the regime of visibility as an omnipresent border and authentic hypodermic biopolitics of moving bodies.

Cinema’s power to support, defuse and trigger different contexts is evident in recent films such as *One Battle after Another* (2025), Paul Thomas Anderson’s adaptation of the Thomas Pynchon novel *Vinland* (1990), which highlights the effects of allowing a militarised body to act with impunity in a democratic country mere months before ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement), initially under the direction of Gregory Bovino, began wreaking havoc and murdering civilians in Minnesota. By transposing the original story (set in California in the year of Ronald Reagan’s re-election in 1984) to the present, Anderson is able to use the anachronisms to outline

a dissection of the visual forms and motifs that shape the contemporary regime of visibility.

David Simon carried out a similar exercise in his TV adaptation (HBO, 2020) of Philip Roth's novel *The Plot against America* (2004), which posits an alternate history where Charles Lindbergh becomes president of the United States in 1940, giving rise to a climate of racism and violence that poses a threat to American democracy. The anachronism here is present in the clash between the historical context of the story (1940), the historical context that inspired the novel (the possibility of George W. Bush seeking a third term) and the historical context that drove Simon to warn Americans of what could happen if Donald Trump were to win a second term (which in fact happened in the following presidential election).

The essential feature of Trump's second term, an assemblage of technology, the military industrial complex, the debt crisis, hyper-surveillance, techno-masculinity and the hubris of power recognisable in characters that caricature it, such as Colonel Steven J. Lockjaw (Sean Penn), effectively defines *One Battle after Another*, which even includes a transliteration of the quasi-theological foundations of corporations such as Palantir and Praxis in the white supremacist group known as the "Christmas Adventurers". The film thus performs a dissection as accurate as it is parodic of a present that cinema is destined to rewrite for the future, vindicating its status, as Sylvain George describes it, as a tool that occasionally allows us to glimpse what the language of power cannot name.

NOTES

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ONE TIME BECOMING ANOTHER: AFTERLIVES OF THE SEEN, FIGURES OF THE YET-TO-COME

Abstract

This article examines the configuration of a new visual regime in the context of today's "troubled times", characterised by geopolitical acceleration, the consolidation of alliances between technology, economics and warfare, and the radical transformation of the public sphere. Drawing on the work of Georges Didi-Huberman, Hito Steyerl, and Éric Sadin, it analyses how the proliferation of images produced and circulated with the help of artificial intelligence and social media gives rise to processes of cognitive saturation, neuro-excitation, and loss of traceability, ushering in an "age of indistinction" that facilitates the invisibilisation of conflicts and subjectivities that fall outside the interests of post-liberal extractivist capitalism. Particular attention is paid to the appropriation of the visual logics of cinema and fantasy by populist leaders and techno-oligarchs, as well as the rupture of the "civil contract of images", exemplified by the "Gaza Riviera" reel. This article thus affirms the vital importance of cinema as a forum for critical resistance and for reclaiming the future, with the ability to dismantle dominant regimes of visibility through editing, anachronism, and the creation of zones of opacity and undecidability that restore a politics of the gaze and of relationality.

Key words

Visual Motif; Visual Regimes; Artificial Intelligence and Images; Attention Economy; Political Iconography; Cinema as Critical Resistance; Extractivist Capitalism.

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UN TIEMPO QUE SE TRANSFORMA EN OTRO: SUPERVIVENCIAS DE LO VISTO, FIGURAS DEL PORVENIR

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la configuración de un nuevo régimen visual en el contexto de los actuales "tiempos inquietos," caracterizados por la aceleración geopolítica, la alianza entre tecnología, economía y guerra y la transformación radical de la esfera pública. Partiendo de las aportaciones de Georges Didi-Huberman, Hito Steyerl y Éric Sadin, se examina cómo la proliferación de imágenes producidas y difundidas mediante inteligencia artificial y redes sociales da lugar a procesos de saturación cognitiva, neuroexcitación y pérdida de trazabilidad, instaurando una "era de la indistinción" que favorece la invisibilización de conflictos y subjetividades ajenas a los intereses del capitalismo post-liberal extractivista. El texto presta especial atención a la reapropiación de lógicas cinematográficas y fantásticas por parte de líderes populistas y tecno-oligarcas, así como al quiebre del "contrato civil de las imágenes", ejemplificado por el reel de la "Riviera de Gaza". Frente a este escenario, el artículo reivindica la centralidad del cine como espacio de resistencia crítica y de reapropiación del futuro, capaz de desarticular los regímenes dominantes de visibilidad mediante el montaje, el anacronismo y la producción de zonas de opacidad e indecidibilidad que restituyan una política de la mirada y de la relacionalidad.

Palabras clave

Motivo visual; Regímenes visuales; Inteligencia artificial e imágenes; Economía de la atención; Iconografía política; Cine como resistencia crítica; Capitalismo extractivista.

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INTRODUCTION

This article will analyse two iconic visual elements from Silvio Berlusconi's first programmatic political speech (1994). Through the reflections of Carolina Martínez-López (2023) and Àngel Quintana (2023), the visual motifs of the office and the family photograph will be highlighted, reflecting on the elements that make this speech both traditional and innovative. To understand this specific dichotomy, certain elements of Berlusconi's speech will be related to a speech by the protagonist Gian Maria Volonté in the film *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto, Elio Petri, 1970).

Berlusconi's ability to resort to visual imagery so different from, and even opposed to, his own, probably lies in one of the main reasons for his political victory in 1994, as Mario Perniola (2011) and Alessandro Bertante (2007), whose theories will be used in this analysis, have excellently seen.

Before delving into the visual analysis of the discourse, a brief historical introduction is necessary, as the Italian context of the first half of the 1990s was extremely complex and constantly evolving. Next, we will analyze the visual motifs of the office and the family's photograph, and then compare them with the aforementioned film scene. Finally, through a comparative analysis with some images from Elio Petri's film, we

will examine the seemingly opposing visual and conceptual elements that Berlusconi manages to incorporate into his narrative, thereby reaching a broader audience, diverse in generations and political orientations.

THE SILVIO BERLUSCONI'S DISCESA IN CAMPO

January 26, 1994, marked a crucial date in recent Italian history: Silvio Berlusconi officially announced, in a nine-minute, twenty-five-second televised speech, his “discesa in campo”¹, as he himself described his intention to found a political party (Forza Italia) and run in the elections scheduled for the following April. In the spring of the previous year, a referendum had approved abandoning the proportional electoral system in place since 1948 in favor of a first-past-the-post (FPTP) system.

The opening lines are etched in the collective memory: “Italy is the country I love. Here are my roots, my hopes, my horizons...”². The significance of the ongoing shift is already evident in the speech’s presence on television programming: the day before, Berlusconi had personally phoned Paolo Garimberti (Bresolin-Corbi-Feltri, 2014), then director of the news program on the second national channel (Rai2), to ask him to broadcast the full speech during the 8:00 p.m. news, simultaneously with the other two national channels (Rai1 and Rai3). This was a broadcast format reserved exclusively for the President of the Republic’s ritual New Year’s Eve speech on December 31st or for exceptional events. When Garimberti refused, demanding a summary of approximately two minutes for broadcast, Berlusconi responded with a strategy that would become commonplace in the following years: duplicating public communication in the private sector, to the point of rendering it uncompetitive and ineffective. The speech was broadcast at 6:30 p.m. as a preview on Rete Quattro—the second

channel of the Mediaset group owned by Berlusconi—presented by Emilio Fede, director of the TG4 news program and one of the closest advisors to the future prime minister. In this way, the private channel achieved a very high audience, well above usual standards, and paradoxically positioned itself as a “free” and independent source, broadcasting content that public channels sought to censor or limit. It is important not to overlook the issue of the “freedom” of private news channels—although using the term in this instance may seem instrumental, if not entirely inappropriate—as it will be one of the theoretical foundations of the debate.

While the text has been exhaustively analyzed, both linguistically and in terms of content (Deni-Marsciani, 1995; Campus, 2004; Viggen, 2018), examining some visual motifs related to the staging of the speech can help us reflect on what Berlusconi represented for the Italian electorate at that precise historical moment and what kind of references he brought with him. In fact, we must reflect, first and foremost, on the period Italy was experiencing, immersed in one of the deepest political and cultural crises since the Second World War. The political scandal known as *Tangentopoli* (“Clean Hands”) had annihilated the ruling class that had governed the country for more than thirty years: due to bribery and illicit party financing, influential politicians from the main parties had been arrested—Renato Polini of the Communist Party, Maurizio Prada of the Christian Democrats, Mario Chiesa of the Socialist Party—; several industrial businessmen had been investigated or arrested; some of them the best known being Raul Gardini and Gabriele Cagliari, former president of the National Hydrocarbons Agency—committed suicide, while other political figures—Bettino Craxi, former socialist prime minister—fled abroad. This process was particularly rapid and seemed irreversible: Italians began to learn of the exploits of magistrate Antonio Di Pietro and his “Mani Pulite” team

fighting corruption, while television broadcast daily news of new investigations and arrests, with increasingly high-profile names and official statements from prominent political figures that were quickly contradicted the following day, at the start of new arrests (Della Porta, 1992).

But the political and financial scandal was not the only major problem Italy faced in those years: on May 23 and July 19, 1992, judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, prominent members of the anti-mafia group formed in the 1980s and whose most notable achievement was the 1986 trial of the Cosa Nostra criminal organization, were assassinated in mafia-related attacks. Their deaths revealed the weakness of the state apparatus in the fight against the mafia, as well as the likely infiltration of some “Mafiosi” into the structures of the Republic. What made those years even more disturbing was the nature of the mafia attacks: on May 27, 1993, in Florence, near the Uffizi Gallery, a car bomb killed five people and injured forty; just days before Berlusconi’s speech, on January 23, 1994, a bomb was about to explode at the Stadio Olimpico in Rome during the football match between Roma and Udinese, which was attended by tens of thousands of people. It would likely have been the biggest massacre in the history of the Italian Republic, but the bomb failed to detonate, theoretically due to a malfunction in the device (Padellaro, 2020).

To these internal tensions must be added the international context, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, which had radically changed Italy’s role on the international stage and led to the dissolution or reorganization of many of the historic parties of the First Republic, particularly the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Christian Democrats. It is in this context that Silvio Berlusconi’s official public history begins, with a discourse that would mark a turning point in Italian politics and communication strategy.

SEEDS AND SPORES, ORIGINS AND REWRITINGS

Berlusconi’s speech has been reinterpreted and rewritten numerous times in film, some literal, others more imaginative. In his film *The Caiman* (Il Caimano, Nanni Moretti, 2008), Moretti presents four different “Berlusconis”: the real Berlusconi with archival footage; scenes interpreted by the actor Elio De Capitani, a well-known Berlusconi impersonator in Milanese cabarets; Michele Placido, who is supposed to be impersonating Berlusconi in the meta-fictional film; and Moretti himself, who impersonates him in the symbolic final scene. The speech is quoted several times in another biographical film, *Loro* (Loro: International Cut, Paolo Sorrentino, 2018). But these are only the most well-known examples, as the discourse is reiterated in other films: in the second episode of *The Bad Copy* (La Brutta Copia, Massimo Ceccherini, 2013), two characters obsessively repeat phrases from the *discesa in campo*, while in *Nirvana* (1997), Gabriele Salvatores’ science fiction film, the president of the company “Cibo Italia” stages an advertising speech very similar to Berlusconi’s.

These are just a few examples from a sea of cinematic references, quotations, recreations, and rewritings of this discourse. Moreover, this process of parodic emulation seems inevitable from the very construction of the discourse: an advertising maneuver more than an electoral one, conceived by executives of Publitalia, Berlusconi’s advertising agency, who, employing the techniques of cinematic fiction, staged a largely fictional story. Thus, the narrative method that is, “making the public believe” in the quality of the proposed product—was more important than its adherence to reality. It was a visual fiction that, given its impact on the Italian political and cultural landscape, could only generate other narratives, generally critical or parodic.

It is equally useful to consider the visual iconography that Berlusconi's speech offered his audience. While presenting himself as a novelty on the national political scene, the future Italian prime minister emphasized his already established public persona as a media mogul and sportsman, thus projecting a reassuring image. Although his "discesa in campo" speech was, in fact, his first "explicit" political intervention, Berlusconi had already expressed his views on political issues on several occasions, confirming his privileged relationship with the then-secretary of the PSI, Bettino Craxi—in the latter half of the 1980s—, criticizing the Minister of Telecommunications before the 1990 "Mammì Law" granted him the legal right to broadcast nationwide, and endorsing the Rome mayoral candidate Gianfranco Fini—a member of the right-wing Alleanza Nazionale party—in 1993. However, these were always opportune judgments, born of contingent circumstances and linked to his own business activities. But his speech on January 26, 1994, was intended to be something different, a programmatic text with an immediate impact: therefore, both elements linked to political tradition and those of novelty had to be present and recognizable.

While the innovative aspects are entirely questionable in terms of content, the same cannot be said of the form: Berlusconi, at that moment, forever changed Italian political communication, drawing inspiration not only from his own activity as a media entrepreneur, but also from a very specific collective visual imaginary. In this article, I will connect the visual forms of the January 1994 speech with a scene from Elio Petri's film, *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto, Elio Petri, 1970), starring Gian Maria Volonté. This film is ideologically far removed from the ideas presented in the speech, but perhaps it is precisely by delving into this fracture—a seemingly irreconcilable contradiction—that we can highlight some less obvious, yet crucial, elements

of Berlusconi's success and his appeal to Italians. As we have seen, the seeds of this discourse were predictable. However, searching for the root causes can lead to unexpected results.

VISUAL ICONS: THE OFFICE AND THE FAMILY PHOTO

Within a fairly classic visual structure—a politician speaking from a desk while reading from a script—two elements stand out for their novelty in the landscape of Italian political communication at the time: the location where the speech is filmed and recorded, and a detail that appears behind Berlusconi: two family photographs. This detail, though seemingly irrelevant, lends the scene a completely different meaning. Until then, in fact, the locations where politicians filmed their official speeches were not private: the President of the Republic, in his New Year's address to the nation, spoke from the Quirinal Palace, the seat of power that was by no means his property. It was a place with a certain sacredness, even from an iconographic perspective: behind the President of the Republic, one could see the national flag—now accompanied by the European flag—and sometimes a Christmas tree, a perfect synthesis of the complex relationship between secularism and religion in Italian politics. That place, in any case, was not theirs: the following year—or in the more distant future—, another President would record a different speech for December 31, but the tree and the flag would always be there, motionless, reminding us that, although politicians change, the symbols of power never belong to them entirely.

Berlusconi, however, revolutionizes this concept: the setting is his office, as evidenced by the family photo on the bookshelf in the background and the fact that the books appear to have been recently consulted, some hastily arranged and others still open. It is, therefore, an office where the politician worked until shortly before record-

BERLUSCONI'S MESSAGE COMMUNICATES AND IS, AT THE SAME TIME. IT OFFERS CONVENTIONAL THEMATIC CONTENT—FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DISCOURSE STRUCTURE, IT'S A FAIRLY CLASSIC MESSAGE BY THE STANDARDS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AT THE TIME—BUT AT THE SAME TIME, IT POSSESSES AN INTRINSIC MEANING THAT WOULD PROVE DECISIVE FOR THE CONTINUITY OF HIS PUBLIC CAREER: A DISTANCING FROM TRADITIONAL COLLECTIVE POLITICAL STRUCTURES—WHETHER INSTITUTIONAL, STATE, OR SIMPLY PARTY-BASED—TO MOVE TOWARD AN INDIVIDUALISTIC REPRESENTATION, BASED ON A CULT OF PERSONALITY THAT SEEMINGLY OBSCURES—BUT OBVIOUSLY DOES NOT ERASE—POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

ing his speech, an element perfectly in keeping with the image Berlusconi wants to project: that of an active and tireless entrepreneur who, unlike other politicians, doesn't have time to prepare his speech because his real work lies elsewhere. Panofsky had already pointed out how every object created by humankind is a tool or vehicle of communication (Panofsky, 1982): Berlusconi's message communicates and is, at the same time. It offers conventional thematic content—from the perspective of discourse structure, it's a fairly classic message by the standards of political communication at the time—but at the same time, it possesses an intrinsic meaning that would prove decisive for the continuity of his public career: a distancing from traditional collective political structures—whether institutional, state, or simply party-based—to move toward an individualistic representation, based on a cult of personality that seemingly obscures—but obviously does not erase—political ideology.

The scene in *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* in which Gian Maria Volonté—the character's name is never revealed in the film; he is simply referred to as “the doctor”—a public security official, addresses the press after a murder, presents some similarities and just as many differences with Berlusconi's speech. The context, obviously, is completely different: it is a press conference in which “the doctor” intends to reassure the public, shaken by the gruesome murder of a woman (Augusta Terzi, played by Florinda Bolkan). Volonté's speech is particularly emotive—much more so than Berlusconi's—describing an almost apocalyptic scenario of chaos and violence, which only decisive police action can quell. Of course, the setting for his speech is anything but personal: there's no private office or family photo behind him prioritizing the individual over the collective. However, his delivery—Volonté holds a sheet of paper, which he glances at alternately, constantly balancing reading and improvisation—is strongly reminiscent of the way Berlusconi delivered his speech during his “discesa in campo” (a political inauguration speech). Berlusconi's speech is a political investiture, so the written tone is less emotionally charged, but the constant alternation between reading and improvisation—what in Italian is called “andare a braccio”, or “to speak off the cuff”—leads us to the threshold of a new political era. Reading a speech, in fact, means first and foremost writing it, and therefore preparing it in advance. It is assumed that a politician or public figure, especially a member of an institution or party, does not write their speech themselves or, at least, has it reviewed to obtain the approval—or at least a positive opinion—of the institutions to which they belong. Speaking without reading, on the other hand, leaves more room for improvisation and, therefore, in a process toward the individualization of politics, emphasizes the individual's oratory skills, which also become strategically more important than compliance with group directives.

Italian politics of the time was still characterized by a very classical form of political communication (Cosenza, 2012; Mazzoleni, 1998), with some notable exceptions: within the Communist Party, Enrico Berlinguer's communication was particularly innovative thanks to his ability to generate empathy with his listeners; Bettino Craxi, secretary of the Socialist Party, was especially appreciated for his oratorical skills. However, even in their most famous speeches, a type of vertical communication emerges, in which the politician addresses their audience from a hierarchically superior position and in which greater attention is paid to the method of communication. Volonté in *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* and Berlusconi in his "discesa in campo" experience the same fears and anxieties as their listeners. The public security officer's speech is so emotive because he, too, fears the growing violence in Italian cities; Berlusconi is "descending" into politics—thus abandoning a superior and theoretically privileged position—because he fears the direction Italy is taking. They are two people like us, moving among us, but better. Following their logic, we should be grateful and relieved: once again, in Italian history, a strongman will bring order to chaos.

This is, incidentally, a scene that Italian audiences had already begun to see, but one that would be repeated more frequently in "poliziotteschi" films—the Italian version of crime films—which, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, offered a unique perspective on the institutional violence and terrorist groups prevalent in the country at that time (Lupi, 2001; Tentoni-Cozzi, 2010). The police officer who explains and presents his plan to restore order—as if he were a politician—before an audience of journalists is a classic element of Italian police films, borrowed from the American genre, but with some differences: the Italian police officer does not belong to a higher organization that can legitimize or delegitimize him—as might be the case with the FBI—nor is he a private detective

fighting against the world. The Italian policeman is an integral member of the state, and the violence he advocates is not only, according to his criteria, necessary to restore order, but also, in the particular historical period the country is experiencing—the "Years of Lead"—the only way to halt the advance of communist terrorism. To achieve this objective, all means are permitted. In this sense, we can see the film *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958) among the models of *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*: as in Petri's film, in this case too the protagonist is a corrupt policeman who alters reality to make his own actions visible. Petri's policeman goes even further: he presents himself as a defender of the law to restore order, but he himself killed the woman whose murderer he is searching for; he knowingly created chaos to legitimize his own violence, but in doing so he finds himself facing an irresolvable enigma—which the script, in fact, leaves unanswered—because if he truly wanted to respect the law, he would have to arrest himself. It is clear that the character carries a moral dilemma not far removed from what Berlusconi hints at in his speech: "What are we willing to sacrifice for our security? What violence is ethically justified? And which of the two generated the other?" Even Berlusconi, if we think about it carefully, contributed to the chaos in which the country finds itself: he was very close to the party and the politician most targeted by judges for corruption—the PSI and Bettino Craxi—thanks to which he obtained enormous advantages for his companies; he made deals with criminal organizations for contracts and construction projects at a time when the mafia was openly fighting against the State (Ignazi, 2014); he was a recognized and successful public figure of that "first republic" which he now claims to repudiate. Like Gian Maria Volonté, he anticipates journalists' questions with a prefabricated speech in which, from being guilty, he positions himself as a defender of the victims.

It is useful for a moment to consider Berlusconi's office. This space, too, is ultimately an artificial creation, staged as if it were real. Based on the reflections of Àngel Quintana (2023), we observe how the office is, above all, the place where decisions are made, therefore the true seat of power. But, as we have seen, Berlusconi, unlike previous politicians, transfers this to a completely private context, thus giving the impression that power itself is a personal matter for him. Furthermore, it should not be underestimated that the Italian public had already had the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between public and private space and Silvio Berlusconi's activities: in a famous interview broadcast in 1986, in response to a question from journalist Enzo Biagi, Berlusconi replied that he used to work even with a fever, making important decisions in bed and moving his office to his private bedroom. It was a kind of public introduction of the future prime minister, who, after acquiring the AC Milan football club, aspired to become a national icon—it is no coincidence that the interview was broadcast on Canale 5, the channel he owned. Therefore, the overlap between public and private workspaces had already occurred, and in a way, his speech about leaving the country in 1994 underscored this, contributing to the delicate dynamic of novelty and tradition that Berlusconi sought: Italians saw the same businessman as before, ready to merge the public and private spheres; at the same time, however, Berlusconi was speaking from an office, a more appropriate setting than a bedroom for a speech of political commitment, an unmistakable sign of his ability to institutionalize himself without losing his identity.

An additional element contributes to making this space even more personal. I'm referring to the two photographs in his library: the first shows his children from his first marriage (top right), while the second portrays him with his younger children, born from his relationship with Veronica Lario, his wife at the time. The symbol-

ic space occupied by both images is also unique: from right to left, they form a diagonal line with Berlusconi himself in the center, a link between two different families, capable, therefore, of being simultaneously a man of tradition—his children, now adults, who can discover the world without him—and of innovation—his young children, with whom he still plays and accompanies through life. Susan Sontag writes that photography is always an absence or a pseudo-presence (Sontag, 1979: 9): in this case, it is impossible not to notice the absence of his two wives, a Derrida's specter whose disappearance makes his contours even clearer and more evident. The embrace in the photograph on the left—the one showing the children from his second marriage—according to Carolina Martínez-López's reflections (2023), could not only convey a reassuring idea of playful and modern fatherhood, but also accentuate Berlusconi's position in the image. Only he is capable of keeping the two families together—which, in fact, are depicted as divided and at two different stages of life—just as only he can create the synthesis between tradition and innovation that Italy needs.

Berlusconi was not yet a politician in the traditional sense of the term, nor did he have an ideology that precisely defined his position: he was cer-

BERLUSCONI'S OFFICE, TOO, IS ULTIMATELY AN ARTIFICIAL CREATION, STAGED AS IF IT WERE REAL. BASED ON THE REFLECTIONS OF ÀNGEL QUINTANA (2023), WE OBSERVE HOW THE OFFICE IS, ABOVE ALL, THE PLACE WHERE DECISIONS ARE MADE, THEREFORE THE TRUE SEAT OF POWER. BUT, AS WE HAVE SEEN, BERLUSCONI, UNLIKE PREVIOUS POLITICIANS, TRANSFERS THIS TO A COMPLETELY PRIVATE CONTEXT, THUS GIVING THE IMPRESSION THAT POWER ITSELF IS A PERSONAL MATTER FOR HIM

tainly anti-communist and liberal, but his political trajectory, traceable through his friendships and public statements, was rather chaotic before 1994. He maintained a close relationship with Bettino Craxi's PSI, which followed a very specific political line: less public interference in business, programmatic anti-communism, and adherence to the Atlantic Pact and the alliance with the United States. Even before that, his name was already among the members of P2, a right-wing and reactionary Masonic lodge created for anti-communist purposes. As previously reported, in 1993 he expressed his support for the mayoral candidacy of Gianfranco Fini, secretary of the National Alliance, a right-wing party that emerged from the ashes of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), itself born after the dissolution of the National Fascist Party (PNF) in 1946. As can be seen, these are distant, if not downright contradictory, positions, within which it is difficult to find a coherent narrative. Lacking an ideologically recognizable past, Berlusconi turns this deficiency into an advantage: Italians will not vote for him because of what he represents, but because of who he is. Therefore, he prioritizes his private life—his personal office, family photos—to convince the electorate: if trust in politicians is at rock bottom after the *Tangentopoli* scandal, no one could doubt the authenticity of his private affections.

A DIFFERENT PLACE FOR A DIFFERENT NARRATIVE

The image is static, the speech is rehearsed, the camera is motionless, allowing at most a few close-ups to highlight the speaker's face at moments of greatest emphasis. I'm describing the Berlusconi video, but the same words could be used—with a slight difference, given that at one point the camera opts for a wide shot that also shows the "doctor's" colleagues—for the aforementioned scene with Gian Maria Volonté. A rather classic visual device: fixed camera, medium shot, focus on the

speaker, attention to detail at the edges of the frame, and close-ups at specific moments. Therefore, we can ask ourselves what the reasons are not only for the success of this video—a success with concrete consequences, since it continues to be widely viewed on YouTube and social media, but also marked the beginning of a then-unexpected electoral victory and Forza Italia's consistent presence in parliament—but also for its undeniable originality. Here, too, we delve into the delicate dynamic of the tension between tradition and innovation conveyed by the staging of the "discesa in campo". This video, ultimately, is classic, or at least recognizable—and therefore familiar—and highlights a moment of rupture, a hinge between the First and Second Republic. As previously noted, Berlusconi's political language has already been analyzed, both in relation to this speech and the evolution of his career. This is certainly not the place to reiterate what has already been written elsewhere; the only elements I wish to emphasize are two: the constant use of the football metaphor, which at that time had not yet entered Italian political discourse with such regularity (Amadori, 2002); and the use of litotes, before concluding the discussion with much more explicit and direct language. Litotes, primarily used to describe political opponents, thus become a kind of false mitigation of their supposed flaws, only to then give way to more colloquial jargon in the conclusion of the speech, further highlighting the negative aspects. In Berlusconi's speech, the "communists" are those who "have never found full citizenship" in democracy, "are not prepared" to govern the country, "have not changed", ultimately transforming, much more explicitly, into propagators of class hatred and social envy. This is a stratagem also employed by Gian Maria Volonté in *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*: his speech does not, in fact, focus on the murder he has just committed—of which he himself is the perpetrator—but on the role of the alleged perpetrators, the anarchists and members of the stu-

dent movement, who “do not respect the law” and, therefore, must be annihilated “by any means”.

Through this familiar and partly innovative approach, Berlusconi creates the conditions for inserting the most delicate piece of his mosaic: the artificial construction of a completely imagined world to be presented as true to the public. Gian Maria Volonté, in his address to the press, had an undeniable advantage over his audience, as he was the only one who knew exactly how events had unfolded. The policeman was in the same position that, according to Hitchcock (Truffaut, Scott, 1966), could create suspense rather than surprise, as highlighted in the famous scene from *The Battle of Algiers* (La battaglia di Algeri, Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), where an Algerian woman, a member of the FLN, enters a bar frequented by French military personnel with a bomb hidden in her handbag: the audience and the protagonist know the facts, while the rest of the characters on stage do not. The tension of the sequence is built precisely on this disparity of knowledge: while we listen to Volonté reconstruct a completely fabricated version of events, we expect him to be unmasked sooner or later, that a colleague will intuit the truth, or that a journalist will pressure him with uncomfortable questions that lead him to reveal himself.

BERLUSCONI CAN CONSTRUCT AN ALTERNATIVE TIMELINE WITH A CAPTIVATING EASE THAT HIS LISTENERS MIGHT NOT RECOGNIZE AT THE TIME, BUT WHICH WILL SOON BECOME ONE OF HIS MOST EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES: TO EVADE THE FACTS (AND, THEREFORE, THE TRUTH), TO DELVE EXCLUSIVELY INTO THE WORLD OF NARRATIVE. IT IS NOT IMPORTANT THAT POLITICIANS ACTUALLY DO SOMETHING, BUT IT IS CRUCIAL THAT THEY SAY SOMETHING

This state of suspended reality brings us both relief—the protagonist has not been unmasked and the process of identification can continue—and anguish—the truth could come to light sooner or later. This suspense constitutes a narrative mechanism, undoubtedly, but above all a device that can change the context. Berlusconi’s task, however, is more delicate: the future prime minister is addressing an audience that, in theory, knows how things have unfolded in Italy in recent years, and the level of knowledge between him and his audience is equal. Under these conditions, it is more difficult to construct a completely fictitious reality, so he first needs to create a familiar environment, in both senses: linked to his family, with the previously analyzed photographs; familiar to the public, with a reassuring stage setting.

From this context, Berlusconi can construct an alternative timeline with a captivating ease that his listeners might not recognize at the time, but which will soon become one of his most effective communication strategies: to evade the facts (and, therefore, the truth), to delve exclusively into the world of narrative. It is not important that politicians actually do something, but it is crucial that they say something. To tell it—and tell it well—the narrator must be credible: Berlusconi, who, unlike the police chief in Petri’s film, cannot yet count on the legitimacy of his role—after all, he is not a politician—legitimizes himself through his own private history, “borrowed” and displayed to the public. His character as a man of personal resolve is evident in his economic and business successes, but in his private life, his persona is enriched with family photographs (Susca, 2004: 41-56).

Carlo Ginzburg, citing Warburg, speaks of the Pathosformel as an archetypal image that is repeated, generating emotions (Ginzburg, 2015). In this case, the pathos is essentially composed of personal and private elements, but precisely for that reason, in a moment of despair and distrust of traditional politics, it becomes more credible and convincing. Furthermore, Berlusconi claims

that he has just resigned from top positions in all his companies to enter politics: in a historical period in which leading politicians were accused of bribery and corruption—and, therefore, ultimately, of obtaining illegal benefits at the expense of citizens—he presents himself as the only one willing to lose money for the good of the country.

In this way, he acquires the legitimacy that lends verisimilitude to the historical reconstruction described in his speech, a history that never existed and which, upon closer examination, would appear to be the result of an alternate history narrative. Berlusconi's Italy is a country where communists have governed for decades, although it's perhaps worth remembering that the Italian Communist Party (PCI) has never been part of any government since 1948, the first democratic elections. This is the same Communist Party that, according to the Forza Italia leader, always supported the Soviet Union and aspired to join the Warsaw Pact, while the stance of Italian communist leaders—especially Enrico Berlinguer, but at least since Khrushchev's 1956 speech and particularly since Palmiro Togliatti's death in 1964—was highly critical of the USSR. In reality, since the postwar period, Italy has always been governed by center, center-right, or, more rarely, center-left coalitions, led by the Christian Democrats, who, uniquely in a democratic country, remained in power uninterrupted for 45 years. Berlusconi also speaks of justice and the fight against crime, but at that time he was already under investigation for links to mafia organizations. He addresses the shortcomings of the old political class, but it was precisely thanks to his close ties with this political class that he was able to benefit from laws and special concessions that proved crucial in building his media and financial empire.

Like any well-crafted advertising message, the narrative of the “discesa in campo” would not have the same impact if it focused solely on the alleged misdeeds of the “enemies” and failed to consider the positive aspects that a vote for Forza

Italia would bring to Italians. If the party is a product—ideological no longer in the 20th-century sense, but certainly in the contemporary capitalist sense—the audience that listens to it, that might buy into it, must be aware of its advantages (Donofrio, 2015). Using a formulation by Mattioni (2022), Berlusconi seeks to convince Italians that voting for him would return the country to the right present timeline. It is no longer the era of corruption and *Tangentopoli*, of economic crisis and mafia massacres, of communists in power and the absence of freedom, but rather the era of a new course of history, born after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. A new phase of peace and prosperity—the *Pax Americana*—whose fruits only economic liberalism can reap. A new phase that, in fact, is already underway: Berlusconi does not hesitate to speak of progress, innovation, and Western democracies recovering after decades of darkness: it is necessary to vote for him as soon as possible so that Italy, too, can enjoy all the ineffable benefits of neoliberalism.

And it matters little that this *Pax Americana* in January 1994 is no longer, even formally, a peace: from August 2, 1990 to February 28, 1991, we witnessed the Gulf War in Iraq and Kuwait; in the former Yugoslavia an extremely violent civil war is still underway, which has led, among other things, to the siege of Sarajevo since April 5, 1992, and which is still ongoing; A few months later, we would learn of the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda, part of a conflict that had become extremely violent since at least 1990. These are just a few examples among many, but they serve to demonstrate the absolute artificiality of the chronology described by Berlusconi: an ideal world in which Italy can aspire to a new Italian miracle—an expression inspired by the “economic miracle” of 1958-1963, but also by the sporting “miracle” of the national football team that won the World Cup in 1982—in which the communists who had led the country to economic and moral decline will be definitively defeated, and moder-

nity will finally arrive in Rome as well. A world of peace, prosperity, and opportunities for all—especially for “the weakest”, Berlusconi declared in his speech—that is within reach, with only one condition: entrusting the government to Forza Italia and its coalition.

Herein lies perhaps one of the most striking differences between Volonté’s discourse to journalists and Berlusconi’s to the Italian people: the former, amidst the ideological clash of the 1970s, proposes order and discipline in a chaotic world, assuring the bourgeoisie of its capacity to prevent revolution by any means; if they follow him, security will be guaranteed by the restoration of the status quo. The latter, in a world already partially post-ideological—at least by 20th-century standards—also proposes a *pars construens*: in the battle to see who will manage to appropriate the advantages of the Cold War victors—the United States, but more generally the capitalist world—he simply presents himself as the easiest path to obtaining them. On the other hand, he encounters political adversaries who are trying by all means to rid themselves of a past in which, as we have seen, they were not even entirely convinced, so it is easy for Berlusconi to unmask them and present himself as the true gateway to the future. A future, as he himself emphasizes in his speech, of collaboration and harmony, seemingly free of conflict. This, in his opinion, was the neoliberal utopia, previously unrealized only by contingent circumstances—the Cold War against the Soviets. Now that the war is won, all that remains is to vote for him and enjoy the advantages granted to the victors.

CONCLUSION. 1968 COME TRUE? OR, BETTER SAID: “A” 1968 COME TRUE?

One particularly important question remains: how is it possible that a series of iconic images from a cult film of the Italian left from the 1970s—*Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* is consid-

ered a perfect metaphor for institutional violence during the “Years of Lead” (Minuz, 2007: 135)—are reused, even indirectly or unintentionally, in the staging of an ultra-liberal political discourse? Or, better said, to be more concise and use contemporary terminology and definitions: how a politician like Berlusconi can ideologically appropriate radical and alternative cultural demands?

To answer this question, we must discard the image of Berlusconi that had developed during his three governments in office: that of an inefficient and incompetent politician, lacking the respect for the rules that a head of state, regardless of political affiliation, should always possess, and, above all, a kind of comical figure who had become unrepresentable. The perception of Berlusconi between 1993 and 1994 was very different: he was not only a businessman who could rely on his economic empire to demonstrate his honesty, but he also represented, for a certain segment of his future electorate and for some of his allies, a possibility for innovation, if not radical reform, in Italian politics. Consider, for example, his chief political advisor, Giuliano Ferrara, who also became Minister for Relations with Parliament in his first government (1994-1995). Ferrara, the son of a former partisan and a left-wing activist who also served as editor of *L’Unità* the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party (PCI)—had been a prominent leader of the Italian Communist Party, a staunch advocate of a radical workers’ ideology—he was responsible for the provincial coordination of FIAT in Turin. In the second half of the 1980s, he shifted towards PSI politics and was the one who advised Berlusconi to enter politics directly, subsequently proving to be decisive, albeit from a less visible position, in all the political developments of Forza Italia. Paolo Liguori, then a prominent television journalist at Berlusconi’s station, followed a similar path: Liguori came from the extra-parliamentary left, having played a central role in organizing Lotta Continua. A slightly different trajectory, more

closely linked to the battles for civil rights, was that of Marco Pannella, secretary of the Radical Party, who proposed himself as an ally of Berlusconi in the center-right coalition that won the April 1994 elections—he did not participate because the Radical Party did not surpass the 4% threshold and was left out of Parliament. Pannella, who described himself as further to the left of the Italian Communist Party (Pannella, 2007), now envisioned a role in a political formation that also included La Lega, then a secessionist party, and the right-wing party Alleanza Nazionale.

The aforementioned are just some of the more unexpected names in Berlusconi's orbit during the first half of the 1990s. However, even in three such distinct experiences, we find a common thread: Pannella, Liguori, and Ferrara had all participated in the 1968 demonstrations; they were among the protagonists of that political and cultural era that would radically transform Italy. This fact should give us a reflection: the young people of '68 are now adults in 1994, having lived through diverse experiences, ready to definitively seize power. We could consider their adherence to Berlusconi's legacy simply as one of many examples of political opportunism: they would be neither the first nor the last. And we could even question the sincerity of their past political actions. But that would be like seeing only one side of the coin. The generation of '68 that joined Berlusconi's party—I take Liguori, Ferrara, and Pannella as paradigmatic examples—indicates above all that Forza Italia can present itself to Italians not only as the reassuring party that will restore order after chaos—as was the case with the character of Volonté in the film—but also as a young and innovative force, ready to bring about a revolution—in this case, a liberal one—that has often been feared. It was Pannella himself who stated this in an interview (Pannella, 2016: 79): the liberal revolution may not have been the one dreamed of in '68, but it was still a revolution, the only possible one. This seems to

THE PERCEPTION OF BERLUSCONI BETWEEN 1993 AND 1994 WAS VERY DIFFERENT: HE WAS NOT ONLY A BUSINESSMAN WHO COULD RELY ON HIS ECONOMIC EMPIRE TO DEMONSTRATE HIS HONESTY, BUT HE ALSO REPRESENTED, FOR A CERTAIN SEGMENT OF HIS FUTURE ELECTORATE AND FOR SOME OF HIS ALLIES, A POSSIBILITY FOR INNOVATION, IF NOT RADICAL REFORM, IN ITALIAN POLITICS

fit within the Italian version of the famous acronym TINA (There Is No Alternative), uttered by Margaret Thatcher after her victory against the Yorkshire miners, as cited by Mark Fisher (2018). There is no alternative: if there is to be a revolution, it will be Berlusconi's.

In an essay from a few years ago, significantly titled *Contro il '68* (2007) [*Against '68*], Alessandro Bertante shows how some of the values championed by the 1968 movements were, in reality, perfectly functional for contemporary capitalism: individualism, individual freedom at the expense of collective rights, and moral freedom, which seemed to be a prerequisite for consumer freedom. This provocative book analyzes several paths taken by former activists of the '68 movement who later ended up in Berlusconi's orbit, highlighting not so much their unexpected and exceptional turns, but rather the coherence and obviousness of their evolutions. Meanwhile, in Italy, Pier Paolo Pasolini, one of the most provocative intellectuals of his time, wrote a famous poem: *Il PCI ai giovani!* [The Communist Party to the youth!], following the clashes between students and police at the Valle Giulia architecture faculty on March 1, 1968, in Rome (Bazzocchi, 2017: 33-34). Verses 16-19, in particular, highlight some of the movement's contradictions: "When yesterday at Valle Giulia you/ and

the policemen were throwing blows,/ I symphatized with the policemen!/ Because policemen are sons of the poor”³. It would be a mistake to read and interpret Pasolini literally and not grasp the significance, even political, that the provocation had for him, but the truth is that the Italian writer perfectly intuited some of the movement’s idiosyncrasies. In his essay *Berlusconi or ‘68 Made Real* (*Berlusconi o il ‘68 realizzato*, 2011), Mario Perniola draws on the provocations of Pasolini and Bertante to create an analytical list of all the ideals of ‘68 that materialized during the Berlusconi era, transforming Italy not into a freer country more open to civil rights, but simply into a gigantic experiment in the most sinister form of neoliberal consumer capitalism.

Far be it from me to offer a radical critique of ‘68’s contribution to Italian society, which generated far more benefits than problems. The simple access, for the first time in Italian history, of a marginalized social class to secondary and university education was crucial in leading the country to a new perspective, and the struggles for civil and social rights—from divorce to abortion and labor rights—remain ethical and political pillars that we must not forget. It is equally true, on the other hand, that the culture of the 1980s and early 1990s contributed to a focus on the individual at the expense of the collective: here too, we witnessed a translation of Thatcher’s thought—according to which society does not exist, only individuals—and, more generally, a media and cultural transformation—Gramsci would have called it super-structural—of capitalism. It is this type of discourse that has proven successful.

Therefore, while it is inaccurate to claim that Berlusconi made ‘68 a reality—or that he could be perceived as having made it so—the constant presence in his party’s ranks of key figures and former activists of ‘68 invites reflection: some of the demands of ‘68—those most closely linked to personal fulfillment and, ultimately, the most su-

perficial—lacking political significance, were presented at the beginning of his career as symbols of cultural openness and innovation. Only to later reveal themselves for what they truly were: publicity stunts to attract as many voters as possible and bring a reactionary government to power.

For this reason, his discourse of dissent in the field can even be compared to a pioneering 1970s film like *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*. Stripped of its context and political meaning, Gian Maria Volonté’s speech becomes simply literal, echoing a classic dynamic of Italian history: instead of thinking about movements of collective reflection, in times of crisis we turn to a strong man—today a woman, but the meaning is the same—, delegating the resolution of problems to authority. ■

WHILE IT IS INACCURATE TO CLAIM THAT BERLUSCONI MADE ‘68 A REALITY—OR THAT HE COULD BE PERCEIVED AS HAVING MADE IT SO—THE CONSTANT PRESENCE IN HIS PARTY’S RANKS OF KEY FIGURES AND FORMER ACTIVISTS OF ‘68 INVITES REFLECTION: SOME OF THE DEMANDS OF ‘68—THOSE MOST CLOSELY LINKED TO PERSONAL FULFILLMENT AND, ULTIMATELY, THE MOST SUPERFICIAL—LACKING POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE, WERE PRESENTED AT THE BEGINNING OF HIS CAREER AS SYMBOLS OF CULTURAL OPENNESS AND INNOVATION. ONLY TO LATER REVEAL THEMSELVES FOR WHAT THEY TRULY WERE: PUBLICITY STUNTS TO ATTRACT AS MANY VOTERS AS POSSIBLE AND BRING A REACTIONARY GOVERNMENT TO POWER

NOTES

- 1 The equivalent in English would be “to take the field” or “to enter in the arena”, but I prefer to keep the original Italian “discesa in campo” [literally “descent to the field”], because that way the football metaphor so important to Berlusconi is maintained.
- 2 “L’Italia è il paese che amo. Qui ho le mie radici, le mie speranze, i miei orizzonti...”.
- 3 “Quando ieri a Valle Giulia avete fatto a botte/ coi poliziotti,/ io simpatizzavo coi poliziotti!/ Perché i poliziotti sono figli di poveri”.

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ORDER AND CHAOS. SILVIO BERLUSCONI'S SPEECH ON HIS "DISCESA IN CAMPO" IN RELATION TO INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION

Abstract

January 26, 1994, Silvio Berlusconi announced his entry into politics with a speech on one of his private networks. This speech marks a clear turning point in Italian political communication, shifting from 20th-century ideology (the politician as spokesperson for a party or, in any case, for an ideology or community) to contemporary individualism, as evidenced by the family photos that appear behind him and the private office where the scene unfolds. The article compares Berlusconi's speech to one given by the actor Gian Maria Volonté in the film *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion* (1970). Beyond the similarities and differences, what is striking is Berlusconi's ability to appropriate ideologically opposed communicative and visual elements, rewrite them, and create (and narrate) a completely fabricated reality to convince citizens to vote for him.

Key words

Silvio Berlusconi; Elio Petri; Political Communication; Neoliberalism; Family Photographs.

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ORDEN Y CAOS. EL DISCURSO DE SILVIO BERLUSCONI SOBRE SU "DISCESA IN CAMPO" EN RELACIÓN CON INVESTIGACIÓN SOBRE UN CIUDADANO LIBRE DE TODA SOSPECHA

Resumen

El 26 de enero de 1994, Silvio Berlusconi anunció su *discesa in campo* política con un discurso transmitido por una de sus redes privadas. Este discurso marca una clara línea divisoria en la comunicación política italiana, pasando de la ideología del siglo XX (el político como portavoz de un partido o, en cualquier caso, de una ideología o comunidad) al individualismo contemporáneo, como lo demuestran las fotos familiares que aparecen detrás de él y el despacho privado donde se desarrolla la escena. En el artículo, se compara el discurso de Berlusconi con uno de Gian Maria Volonté en la película *Investigación sobre un ciudadano libre de toda sospecha* (1970). Más allá de las similitudes y diferencias, lo sorprendente es la capacidad de Berlusconi para apropiarse de elementos comunicativos y visuales ideológicamente opuestos, reescribirlos y crear (y narrar) una realidad completamente inventada para convencer a los ciudadanos de que voten por él.

Palabras clave

Silvio Berlusconi; Elio Petri; comunicación política; neoliberalismo; fotos familiares.

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ICONOGRAPHIES OF MEDIA POWER IN *SLAP THE MONSTER ON PAGE ONE*: VISUAL AFTERLIVES BETWEEN ITALIAN POLITICAL CINEMA AND THE CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPHERE

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the turbulent period of Italy's "Years of Lead" (*anni di piombo*), marked by political tensions and profound social upheavals, Marco Bellocchio released *Slap the Monster on Page One* (*Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina*, 1972), a film that dissects the mechanisms of media manipulation with an iconography of power that remains relevant today. Set during a wave of violence in Milan, the film tells the story of a newspaper editor, Bizanti, who decides to blame a young far-left activist for the murder of a young woman in an effort to influence the upcoming elections. This story was inspired by real events of the time—particularly the case of Pietro Valpreda, an anarchist falsely accused of a terrorist attack—and the fiction

sequences are interspersed with documentary images, such as footage of demonstrations in Milan. Starring Gian Maria Volonté, the film not only dramatises a case of scapegoating to sway an election but also introduces visual codes—the newsroom as a site of domination, the sensationalist construction of news stories, the creation of the *media monster*—that transcend its historical context. Bellocchio's work is notable for its incisive critique of structures of domination, particularly in relation to the media. *Slap the Monster on Page One* is no exception, as it forms part of a filmography marked by social commitment—from his first films in the 1960s such as *Fists in the Pocket* (*I pugni in tasca*, 1965) right up to *The Traitor* (*Il traditore*, 2019)—and an ethical approach to cinema as a tool for exposing reality.



News Item 01. Opening scene of the film, which appropriates archival footage of a far-right demonstration led by the then-president of the Italian Senate. Does Bellocchio suggest that there is a real monster on the front page?

The analysis proposed here is articulated along two conceptual lines. On one hand, Aby Warburg’s notion of *Nachleben*—“the survival of gesture through time”—makes it possible to trace how certain visual motifs in the film, such as the claustrophobic dramatisation of the newsroom, reappear in contemporary journalistic practices. On the other, the notion of the “political-procedural film” (Mancino, 2008)—i.e. a film that interrogates official truths and requires an investigative gaze from the spectator—frames Bellocchio’s strategy, which involves not just denouncing manipulation but also exposing its visual mechanics to foster critical scepticism of the media.

The relevance of these codes is amplified in the digital age. Contemporary news reporting and phenomena involving the viral dissemination of sensitive content replicate (often unconsciously) the sensory saturation exposed by Bellocchio: when witness accounts of violent or traumatic events are presented on social media, conflict is rendered visible, but there is also the risk of turning it into spectacle and trivial-

ising it. For all their democratising potential, platforms such as Twitter (now X) reproduce visual hierarchies analogous to those in the editorial office of *Il Giornale*: algorithms prioritise shocking images (sensationalist headlines, deepfakes), thus replicating an economy of attention that Bellocchio foreshadowed back in 1972. This paradox suggests that although formats change, media logics based on sensationalism and dehumanisation persist.

Interweaving film analysis, critical theory and digital studies, this study not only reinterprets Bellocchio’s filmography but also interrogates the ethics of visual representation in a context where social networks and fact-checkers wage battles for nar-

rative control. This introduction thus lays the foundation for an urgently needed transdisciplinary dialogue. How can the banalisation of violence be resisted without rendering it invisible? Can cinema, as Godard suggested, continue to be a political tool in the age of algorithms? Such questions, latent in Bellocchio’s film, acquire renewed significance at a time when the codes he dissected have mutated into memes, trending topics and disinformation wars.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Aby Warburg’s Concept of *Nachleben* Applied to Film Analysis

The concept of *Nachleben der Antike* formulated by Aby Warburg refers to the “survival” or “afterlife” of images and gestures of the past in subsequent historical contexts. Warburg argued that certain visual and expressive patterns—especially those charged with intense emotional energy—persist across centuries, resurfacing with new meanings in different forms of cultural

expression, ranging from the visual arts to modern mass media (Warburg, 2010). Applied to film analysis, this perspective facilitates an investigation into how specific visual forms not only endure but are reactivated in modern contexts, updating historical conflicts and latent tensions. Marco Bellocchio's *Slap the Monster on Page One* offers fertile ground for this approach, as it preserves iconographies of power—such as the rhetorical use of framing in the depiction of judges, police officers and journalists—and visual motifs associated with the stigmatisation of the public enemy, whose genealogy extends back beyond 1970s Italy. In this way, the film not only engages with the political-media context of its time but also reactivates a broader visual repertoire connected to historical struggles over the control of the image, the manipulation of the body and the construction of truth. A Warburgian reading views the film as a constellation of archetypal gestures and images that reappear in the present with new forms and meanings.

2.2. Mancino's Notion of Political-Procedural Cinema

One of the most frequent criticisms of Marco Bellocchio by the extra-parliamentary leftist press was not so much about the content of his films as about how they were received and disseminated on official circuits. As Della Casa and Manera point out, "Bellocchio was not attacked for the content of his films themselves, but for the way his work was received in a film distribution and promotion system deemed bourgeois and conformist" (2012). This criticism reveals a fundamental contradiction: the figure of the committed auteur who nonetheless ends up being validated by the cultural structures of the very capitalist system he seeks to question.

In contrast to pamphleteering or explicitly militant political films, Anton Giulio Mancino proposes the category of the *political-procedural film* to refer to works that instead of offering un-

THE FILM NOT ONLY DRAMATISES A CASE OF SCAPEGOATING TO SWAY AN ELECTION BUT ALSO INTRODUCES VISUAL CODES—THE NEWSROOM AS A SITE OF DOMINATION, THE SENSATIONALIST CONSTRUCTION OF NEWS STORIES—THAT TRANSCEND ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

equivocal answers raise questions and encourage the spectator to adopt a critical, investigative approach. Like the *giallo* or police procedural, films of this kind are articulated through ambiguous signs, fragmentary clues and divergent versions of events, charging the spectator with the task of deciphering the strategies of concealment and manipulation at work in the public sphere (Mancino, 2008).

Slap the Monster on Page One fits perfectly into this framework as a film that not only denounces the spectacularisation of crime and the instrumentalisation of fear by the media but also proposes a radical interrogation of the very nature of the image and its power to construct reality. Bellocchio deconstructs the codes of sensationalist journalism and exposes the symbolic operations that depict certain bodies—especially those that are marginalised, subaltern, or presumed guilty—as objects of public repulsion. This political-procedural logic, converging with the *Nachleben* approach, reveals not only the mechanisms of media power but also the visual genealogy of its representational devices. The film thus becomes a sounding board where a critique of the present is intertwined with the persistent memory of images. The following sections (3 and 4) will apply these two converging approaches to analyse how the visual motifs of the newsroom (*Nachleben*) force the spectator to engage in a task of critical (political-procedural) decoding that sheds light on the genealogy of media manipulation.

3. ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS SLAP THE MONSTER ON PAGE ONE

The film *Slap the Monster on Page One* is set in the midst of the turbulent period of Italy's *anni di piombo*, marked by political tensions that the film dissects with its dramatic depiction of a scapegoating intended to influence some upcoming elections. It is essential to understand that Bellocchio's film starring Gian Maria Volonté interprets and combines various real events of the time, the most notable being the case of Pietro Valpreda, the anarchist who was falsely accused of orchestrating a terrorist attack. The director himself, who had belonged to the leftist group behind the newspaper *Lotta Continua* (mentioned in the film as a contrast to the journalism of *Il Giornale*), uses cinema as a tool for exposing reality. In fact, Bellocchio was already demonstrating his critical consistency in 1972 with the insertion of documentary footage (such as scenes of demonstrations in Milan), thus mixing elements of fiction and non-fiction. This approach establishes a political-procedural framework that compels us to analyse the newspaper's manipulation as a symptom of the instrumentalisation of fear in the public sphere.

3.1. The Site of Domination: The Newsroom as a Stage of Power

In *Slap the Monster on Page One*, the *Il Giornale* newsroom is presented as a microcosm of media power, where every visual element is carefully designed to communicate political meanings. It is crucial to note that the film immediately frames this site of domination as a target of attack. The opening sequence appropriates archival footage of a far-right demonstration, followed by riots culminating in the newspaper headquarters being bombed with Molotov cocktails. This *mise-en-scène* presents the newsroom as a vulnerable space. Far from contradicting its role as a centre of domination, this beginning highlights the profound political polarisation of the *anni di piombo*

and justifies the need for its editor, Bizanti, to assume total editorial control. The manipulation of the facts by *Il Giornale* as it fabricates a scapegoat to influence the elections is presented as a defensive response and restoration of order amidst a perception of chaos. The newspaper editor's presence is imposed both physically and discursively: the framing systematically places him in positions of authority, reinforcing his role as the epicentre of the apparatus of control.

Bellocchio then explores the internal functioning of power through key sequences that operate as clues to the manipulation. The first meeting of the editorial board, who discuss and decide on the headline and editorial direction the paper will take on the story, is a crucial power scene. The camera transitions from journalist to journalist, emphasising the chain of complicity and hierarchical pressure, where "truth" is fabricated by consensus before being investigated. This visual dynamic operates as a visual afterlife (*Nachleben*) of the iconography of historical meetings of the powerful, where collective decision-making masks the will of the individual (Bizanti). At the same time, the film presents this as a political-procedural clue that compels the spectator to question the institutional origins of the sensationalist message.

This visual logic of surveillance and the scene of power—analysed by Jordi Balló (2000) in his study on the iconographies of social control and expanded on in the volume edited by Salvadó and Balló (2023) examining the visibility of institutional power—is expressed in an interior architecture designed for supervision. The hierarchical arrangement of the *Il Giornale* headquarters exemplifies motifs discussed in the volume cited above, such as the "executive office" (where decisions are made) analysed by Àngel Quintana (2023), and the "control room" (perpetual evaluation) studied by Iván Pintor and Ana Aitana Fernández (2023), demonstrating how interior architecture reproduces ideological control in the media space. The layout of the desks, lined up in

an open, exposed space, contrasts with the inaccessibility of the executive office where key decisions are made. The panoptic arrangement of the newsroom, watched over by Bizanti, is not a mere staging device but a visual afterlife (*Nachleben*) of historical schemes of control and social stratification, whose expression in *Il Giornale* requires the spectator to adopt a political-procedural gaze to decipher the ideological architecture behind the medium. Typewriters, present in nearly every shot, transcend their instrumental function to become emblems of an ideological machinery and act as an ambiguous (political-procedural) clue revealing that sensationalist discourse is produced through the mechanical repetition of pre-designed messages, in a gesture that exposes the afterlife of an ideological apparatus. A particularly revealing scene shows Bizanti intervening directly in the drafting of a headline; the framing of his hands on the typewriter underscores his role as the architect of a manipulated reality. The lighting reinforces this critical reading: the desks are bathed in cold light while the rest of the space is shrouded in shadow, creating an oppressive atmosphere evocative of a prison environment. The rhythm of the actors' movements—marked by nervous shifts and hurried gestures—conveys the constant pressure weighing on the workers. The combination of these elements—hierarchical stratification, structural surveillance, technological symbolism and expressionist lighting—constructs an incisive critique of the journalistic space as a site of social manipulation. As Micciché (1989) observes, the film is fully inscribed in the tradition of Italian political cinema of the 1970s, when cinematic form became a vehicle for protest through a *mise-en-scène* charged with meaning.



News Item 02. Meeting of the editorial board of the newspaper *Il Giornale*: the compositional hierarchy suggests a panoptic control by the editor-in-chief, Bizanti (foreground, on the left) within the organisational structure

3.2. The Construction of the Manipulated News Story and the Iconographic Fabrication of the Media Monster

Not only is Bellocchio's visual treatment of this space central to the political-procedural genre—which investigates the fragmentary clues of reality—but also, through framing, it reveals the afterlife of the forensic gesture or the *punctum* (Barthes, 1980) that turns the scene into a medium of consumption.

This sequence is crucial because it shows how the mechanisms of power—in this case, para-policing or institutional power—align with the media narrative. The dehumanisation of the subject—the suspect, filmed in shadows and from high angles—is not merely a media strategy but a physical act of coercion, reinforcing Bellocchio's critique of the structure of domination.

This physical violence, which dehumanises the subject and turns him into a medium of consumption, is immediately replicated and amplified in the symbolic realm of the newspaper. One of the most significant aspects of *Slap the Monster on Page One* is its representation of the process of turning a real event—a young woman's murder—

into a manipulated, sensationalist news story. The filmmaker does not limit himself to denouncing this media distortion; he goes further by exposing the visual mechanisms that construct an official truth, inviting the spectator to distrust the images and adopt a critical approach to media messages.

Bellocchio reveals this process in a key sequence: the editorial meeting where the decision is made to blame the young anarchist. The camera alternates between wide shots of the chaotic, paper-strewn newsroom and close-ups of photographs of the suspect. The editors' selection of the anarchist's photograph, which reduces the individual to a threatening icon (Benjamin, 1936), again evokes the afterlife (*Nachleben*) of visual repertoires associated with the stigmatisation of the public enemy. The explicit presentation of this process invites the spectator to exercise a critical-procedural gaze, distrusting the image as unequivocal truth. As Susan Sontag (2003) points out, images of violence can be instrumentalised to instil fear and justify social exclusion.

Parallel to this visual manipulation, language is distorted as a converging mechanism, as illustrated in a scene where an editor, pressured by his superiors, rewrites an article. The camera focus-

es on his trembling hands as he crosses out the word "alleged" and replaces it with "confirmed", while Bizanti repeats in a voice-over: "We need certainties, not doubts." This action, captured in a sequence shot, reveals how language is perverted to fuel sensationalism, in line with Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's theory of manufacturing consent (1988). The lexical choice not only pre-emptively sentences the suspect but also imposes a binary narrative that eliminates all moral ambiguity.

The staging of information culminates in a press conference where Bizanti, illuminated by television spotlights, stands before a crowd of journalists. The cameras film him from low angles, exalting his figure as an unquestionable authority—a strategy that evokes the cult of the leader described by Roland Barthes (1980). This framing contrasts with subsequent shots of the suspect, filmed in shadows and from high angles, reduced to a body stripped of agency. Pierre Bourdieu (1996) analyses this dynamic as part of a parallel media reality in which truth is diluted with spectacle and disinformation.

The visual construction of the news in the film is a complex and sophisticated process that combines the selection of images, the manipulation of language and the *mise-en-scène* to create a sensationalist narrative. By showing this process explicitly, Bellocchio invites the spectator to adopt a critical gaze, as Mancino (2008) suggests for the political-procedural film. Far from being vestiges of the 1970s, these strategies continue to be used in journalism today, where the saturation of deepfakes and algorithm-generated headlines reinforce the need to question how the media shape—and distort—our perception of reality.

News Item 03. Editor-in-chief Bizanti instructs young editor Roveda on how to deconstruct and reconstruct headlines to give them a clear propagandistic connotation



The construction of the media monster emerges as a central strategy employed by *Il Giornale* to manipulate public opinion and reinforce its own narrative. Bellocchio deconstructs this process by showing how the suspect is transformed into a public enemy through the decontextualisation of images, the association of the subject with negative symbols, and the constant repetition of incriminating messages. This stigmatisation process, which involves an afterlife of the iconography of the scapegoat, is articulated on several levels.

The newspaper *Il Giornale* selects photographs of the young man in which his expression and posture, extracted from their original context, are presented as clues to his guilt. This strategy culminates in a sequence where his image is projected onto a wall of the newsroom, surrounded by newspaper clippings and graffiti with slogans such as “*Justicia Ya*” (“Justice Now”). The camera slowly zooms in on his face, distorted by the projection, while a voice-over enumerates a false list of criminal records. The decontextualisation of the suspect’s projected image, surrounded by incriminating slogans, underscores the transformation of the individual into a threatening spectre. This rhetorical device, which Didi-Huberman associates with the afterlife of decontextualised images, simultaneously serves as the clue that Bellocchio offers the audience to decipher the mechanism of media dehumanisation. The decontextualisation not only isolates gestures but recycles them in a new visual framework charged with political meanings. As Walter Benjamin (1936) points out, the *aestheticisation of politics* turns the image into an instrument of social control, sacrificing context for sensationalism.

The newspaper links the young man to symbols of violence and subversion, associating him with images of protests and radical banners. This technique reinforces public prejudices towards certain political and social sectors. According to Roland Barthes (1980), the selection of these im-

ages functions as a *punctum*: apparently neutral details—a piercing gaze, a raised fist—acquire meanings charged with connotations that criminalise the individual when they are inserted into a biased media narrative.

Once the narrative has been established through these negative symbols, the newspaper progresses toward the definitive confirmation of the public enemy. This strategy is expressed in headlines and articles that reinforce the young man’s guilt, consolidating a singular narrative. This approach, making use of the ideological filters described by Chomsky and Herman (1988), is exemplified by the systematic omission of his voice. In the only scene where the young man speaks directly—a dimly lit medium shot in his cell—the film cuts abruptly to an *Il Giornale* headline: “The Monster Has No Voice.” This saturation of manipulated images, together with the silencing of his perspective, shows how the media erase subjectivity to manufacture consensus. As Judith Butler (2009) notes with her notion of *schemas of intelligibility*, certain lives are excluded from the social contract by being reduced to voiceless bodies, serving as mere resources to fuel collective fear. In this way, the construction of the *media monster* in the film is a multifaceted process involving the corruption of the image, emotional manipulation, and public complicity. Bellocchio not only denounces these practices but also exposes their visual genealogy, inviting a critical reflection on how the media—then and now—create enemies in order to legitimise social control.

3.3. Dehumanisation and Schemas of Intelligibility: The Biopolitical Logic of Media Consensus

In this context of iconographic fabrication that reduces the suspect to a voiceless body stripped of agency, the dehumanisation of the young man is not merely a rhetorical strategy but a biopolitical mechanism (Foucault, 1976) that reduces his

body to a disposable object within the media-judicial machinery. According to Foucault, biopolitics regulates life through devices that classify which bodies deserve protection and which may be sacrificed in the name of *public order*. In the film, the newspaper *Il Giornale* activates this device by presenting the suspect as an existential threat, thereby justifying his exclusion from the social contract. The repetition of sensationalist headlines and their association with symbols of violence not only criminalise the young man but place him in a condition of precariousness (Butler, 2009), whereby his life loses ethical value and becomes merely a resource for consolidating narratives of power.

Butler extends this idea by pointing out that *schemas of intelligibility* determine which lives are considered grievable and which can be stigmatised. By decontextualising images of the young man and associating him with street violence, the media construct a body without a narrative, a precarious existence that can be persecuted without remorse. This dynamic reflects how biopolitics (Foucault) and precariousness (Butler) converge in the public sphere: the suspect is judged not for his actions but for his condition as a body outside the frame of the human, a monster fabricated to fuel fear and legitimise social control. The iconographic creation of the *media monster* in *Slap the Monster on Page One* is a complex and multifaceted process involving the manipulation of messages and images, the regulation of emotions, scapegoating and the corruption of justice. A detailed analysis of this process may better explain how the media can be used to manipulate public opinion and undermine democratic principles.



News Item 04. Front page of *Il Giornale*, presenting a dangerous far-left militant as guilty

4. CONTRAST WITH OTHER BELLOCCHIO FILMS: CONTINUITIES AND RUPTURES IN THE CRITIQUE OF MEDIA POWER

Marco Bellocchio's filmography provides a privileged vantage point to examine tensions between image, power and truth. Over six decades, the filmmaker has constantly criticised mechanisms of manipulation, especially those of the media, adapting his critical gaze to historical, technological and cultural changes. The contrast between *Slap the Monster on Page One* and more recent films such as *The Traitor* reveals not only the consistency of his critical perspective but also his capacity to update it for profoundly different contexts. *The Traitor* tells the story of Tommaso Buscetta, the Mafia's first *pentito*, to explore how the court system and the media turn his testimony into a spectacle. Far from the image of restorative justice, the media process transforms the trial into a stage where sensationalist headlines and television interviews reduce the ethical complexity of the character to a simplistic dichotomy: hero or traitor. This closely resembles the logic operating in *Slap the Monster on Page One*, where the *Il Giornale* newsroom constructs a manipulative narra-

tive by turning the suspect into the monster the public needed. The continuities between the two films are noteworthy. Both deal with the strategy of constructing the media monster: in the cases of both the marginalised youth wrongfully accused in the 1970s and the repentant mafioso in the 21st century, the key issue is how the media erase all moral ambiguity through selected images and simplified narratives. Furthermore, in both cases, Bellocchio highlights the intrinsic connection between the media apparatus and the centre of political/judicial power, which uses spectacularisation as a control strategy. This visual afterlife of the iconography of stigmatisation requires the spectator to adopt a political-procedural gaze in order to decipher the theatrical depiction of the trial underpinning the media “truth”.

Moreover, the spaces where power is exercised—the *Il Giornale* newsroom in one case, the courtroom in the other—are presented as theatrical stages, places where truth is performed more than sought, always under the gaze of cameras, judges or journalists. This use of an enclosed space as a metaphor for control is a clear afterlife of the architectural expression of surveillance, now applied to the public sphere.

However, significant ruptures also emerge. *The Traitor* introduces formal and thematic elements that reflect the transition to a new media age. The use of archival footage, the inclusion of television formats and narrative fragmentation respond to a postmodern digital ecosystem in which truth is diluted in fragmented formats that appeal to the spectator’s morbid curiosity. While *Slap the Monster on Page One* engages in a frontal attack on the media as an ideological apparatus at the service of power (print journalism), the discursive development of *The Traitor* targets post-modern spectacularisation, with a critique enriched by constant questioning: the theatrical depiction of the trial is questioned as mere entertainment, reflecting a subtler critique of the dissolution of truth in the hyperconnected world.

Bellocchio films Buscetta with a mixture of empathy and scepticism, suggesting that the media not only manipulate but also reveal, albeit ambiguously, aspects of a reality that justice cannot resolve on its own. This development is part of a broader evolution in the director’s work. In *Good Morning, Night* (Buongiorno, notte, 2003), the media appear not as active manipulators but as silent accomplices of institutional power. Conversely, *The Traitor* shifts the focus to a critique of post-modern spectacularisation, where truth dissolves into fragmented formats and narratives appealing more to morbid fascination than to analysis. Despite these shifts, certain iconographies remain: closed spaces as metaphors for control, the dehumanisation of subjects through the framing and editing, and the theatrical depiction of power all persist, although they are updated with new technical and discursive forms. Bellocchio’s camera continues to be a tool for critical deconstruction, now reinforced with contemporary strategies such as the use of archival footage, multiple screens and digital textures that broaden the scope of his critique in the era of hyperconnectivity.

In short, the contrast between *Slap the Monster on Page One* and *The Traitor* not only enhances the interpretation of both films but also highlights the filmmaker’s enduring relevance as a discomfiting witness to the transformations of media power. His filmography offers no definitive answers but raises the questions necessary to interrogate how, in any era, the media shape and distort our perception of reality.

5. CONTEMPORARY AFTERLIVES

5.1. From Paper to Digital Screen: the Persistence of Iconographic Patterns

The analysis of *Slap the Monster on Page One* reveals that the visual codes established in the film have not vanished over time. On the contrary, they have found new ways to manifest and per-

petuate themselves in the public sphere today, adapting to the dynamics and formats of digital journalism. Strategies such as the selection of images, the manipulation of language and the decontextualisation of information so central to the film continue to be common tools used to influence public opinion.

In digital journalism, the selection of images acquires even greater importance than it had in print journalism. Digital media compete to capture the user's attention in an oversaturated environment, using shocking images as a key resource for attracting clicks and generating engagement. However, this quest for visual impact often involves a biased selection that reinforces predetermined narratives, much like the choices made by the staff of *Il Giornale* in the film. Lev Manovich (2001) observed years ago that the digital image has a unique capacity to be manipulated and recombined, facilitating the creation of persuasive visual narratives.

In this context, recommendation algorithms are not neutral, as they are designed to prioritise content that generates engagement, often reinforcing sensationalist or stereotypical narratives. Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) analyses how searches on platforms such as Google yield biased results and how these platforms autocomplete phrases such as "why are black women so..." with harmful stereotypes, a phenomenon that updates the logic of sensationalist headlines in *Il Giornale*. Both cases illustrate how the logic of repetition and prejudice dissected by Bellocchio in 1972 is amplified today in the algorithmic repetition of prejudiced content, where digital technology distorts reality.

The decontextualisation of information has become a common practice in digital journalism, where news is fragmented and disseminated without the context necessary for comprehension. This fragmentation facilitates manipulation by isolating facts or statements to present them misleadingly.

LIKE BIZANTI DOES IN THE FILM, THOSE WHO SPREAD SUCH CONTENT SEEK TO FABRICATE AN ALTERNATIVE REALITY, NOW WITH TOOLS CAPABLE OF ERASING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION

This mechanism, which in the film is expressed in the strategic selection of photographs to construct the suspect's guilt, finds a parallel and a technological update in deepfakes, involving the generation of hyperrealistic images or videos that show people performing actions or making statements that never actually occurred. This results in the decontextualisation not just of isolated gestures—as in the film—but of a whole body and identity. Like Bizanti (Gian Maria Volonté) does in the film, those who spread such content seek to fabricate an alternative reality, now with tools capable of erasing the boundaries between fact and fiction.

Recommendation algorithms also often reinforce this decontextualisation by providing users solely with information that confirms their prejudices, creating information bubbles that drastically reduce the diversity of opinions—a phenomenon analysed by Eli Pariser (2011). This dynamic amplifies the effects of visual strategies criticised by Bellocchio: while in 1972 the repetition of distorted headlines and photographs consolidated the *media monster*, today algorithms prioritise deepfakes and sensationalist viral content, reactivating the logic of stigmatisation on a global scale.

Beyond these specific strategies, the persistence of iconographic patterns is observable in the creation of contemporary media monsters. On social media platforms, any individual can become the target of smear campaigns and harassment through the spreading of defamatory rumours and images to destroy their reputation. The digital public sphere can be transformed into the site of a virtual lynching, breaching the pre-

sumption of innocence and the right to privacy, as Zizi Papacharissi (2010) demonstrates. The film's visual codes are adapted to new digital formats, acquiring new meanings. The visual hierarchy, previously expressed spatially in the layout of the newsroom, is now reflected in web design and algorithmic prioritisation.

5.2. Visual Unmasking Strategies: From Cinema to the Contemporary Public Sphere

Just as the film engages in a sharp critique of media manipulation, numerous contemporary collectives and activists use visual strategies to unmask fake news, propaganda and disinformation. This visual counter-discourse aims not only to expose manipulation tactics but also to foster a critical and aware approach to images circulating in the media.

The tools employed include fact-checking, image verification and the creation of alternative narratives. Fact-checking claims circulating online is one of the most widespread strategies; organisations such as *Snopes*,¹ *PolitiFact*² and *Maldita.es*³ analyse news and viral content, which often entails visual analysis as many fake news stories employ manipulated or decontextualised images to generate emotional impact.

Another key tool is image verification. Groups such as *Bellingcat*⁴ and *Forensic Architecture*⁵ employ digital forensic analysis techniques to confirm authenticity, identify manipulations and reconstruct the original context of images. Following Barthes (1980), this verification aims to recover the original *studium* of the photograph, thus preventing it from being used misleadingly.

Beyond reactive practices, the creation of alternative narratives constitutes a proactive strategy to counter disinformation. It involves generating and disseminating content that provides different perspectives on events, thereby challenging narratives imposed by major media outlets. Initiatives such as *Democracy Now!*⁶ or *The Intercept* produce this type of independent investigative journalism.

Other ethical responses include slow journalism—which prioritises depth and context over sensationalist immediacy—and collaborative narratives—where marginalised communities construct their own media representations. For example, slow journalism platforms such as *Delayed Gratification* and *The Correspondent* reclaim journalism's social function as a counterweight to sensationalism.

These practices, which Foucault (1976) would describe as *counter-conducts*, subvert the visual hierarchies of media power. Like contemporary counter-hegemonic strategies, Bellocchio's filmography can be understood as a laboratory of political imagination, where the critique of power is combined with the formulation of alternatives. These forms of visual resistance challenge the political economy of information based on extraction and control (Zuboff, 2019), turning the image into symbolically and materially disputed territory.

In short, visual unmasking strategies constitute active forms of resistance against manipulation. Like Bellocchio in his 1972 film, these collectives and activists use the image as a critical tool to challenge dominant narratives and promote a more conscious worldview.

6. CONCLUSIONS: AN ICONOGRAPHY FOR THE PRESENT, A CINEMA FOR THE FUTURE

Slap the Monster on Page One offers a powerful lesson on the need to cultivate a critical approach to the images that surround us, while affirming cinema's potential as a tool for social transformation. The visual codes examined in the film—spatial hierarchies, the construction of the *media monster* and emotional manipulation—are not relics of the past; they are reactivated today in phenomena such as sensationalist coverage of migration and, analogously, in certain dynamics of virtual lynching.

The depiction of migrants as invaders by some European media outlets—through decontextual-

ised images of crowds at borders accompanied by alarmist headlines—reproduces the dehumanisation strategy that Bellocchio exposes in his film. As Lilie Chouliaraki (2020) points out, these visual frames turn migrants into precarious bodies (Butler, 2010) excluded from public empathy.

Similarly, certain dynamics of online cancel culture, while often arising as mechanisms to denounce abuses by those in power, can lead to virtual lynchings. In such cases, the dynamic reproduces the narrative simplification exposed by Bellocchio: individuals are reduced to “monsters” through decontextualised screenshots, viral hashtags and simplified narratives. The afterlife of the iconographic gesture lies in the fact that in both cases—the institutional manipulation in the 1972 film and online scrutiny today—decontextualisation and visual stigmatisation erase the subject’s ethical complexity.

These examples reveal that media manipulation is not confined to the 1970s but is a structural logic adapted to the technologies and sensibilities of each era. Bellocchio’s film, far from being a mere historical record, serves as a critical lens for interpreting contemporary phenomena such as deep-fakes and algorithmic disinformation.

As Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020) argues, the struggle for media justice in the 21st century requires not only the deconstruction of dominant narratives but also the generation of counter-images capable of restoring human complexity. In this context, cinema preserves its role as a site of resistance. Bellocchio’s films, together with the work of directors such as Agnès Varda and Ai Weiwei, have used the cinematic image to humanise people and challenge stereotypes imposed by major media outlets. His work serves as evidence of Godard’s (2008) suggestion that making political films means subverting the visual codes of power and expanding the schemas of intelligibility of the present.

In this way, *Slap the Monster on Page One* not only alerts us to the dangers of media manipula-

tion but inspires us to reimagine cinema—and the media—as an instrument for building a more ethical, plural and socially committed public sphere. ■

NOTES

- 1 *Snopes* (<https://www.snopes.com/>) is one of the oldest and most respected fact-checking websites on the internet. It is dedicated to verifying the truthfulness of urban legends, rumours, fake news and other information circulating online.
- 2 *PolitiFact* (<https://www.politifact.com/>) is a project of the *Tampa Bay Times* that verifies the accuracy of statements made by politicians and public figures in the United States.
- 3 *Maldita.es* (<https://maldita.es/>) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to fact-checking and combating disinformation in Spain. Its work focuses on verifying the truthfulness of claims circulating in conventional media, social media and political discourse, using rigorous and transparent methodologies.
- 4 *Bellingcat* (<https://www.bellingcat.com/>) is an international collective of researchers, investigators and journalists who use open-source methods and data analysis to investigate a wide range of issues, from armed conflicts and war crimes to disinformation and extremism.
- 5 *Forensic Architecture* (<https://forensic-architecture.org/>) is a research agency that conducts spatial and architectural investigations on behalf of civil society organisations, human rights groups and international organisations.
- 6 *Democracy Now!* (<https://www.democracynow.org/>) is an independent news program broadcast daily on radio, television and the internet. It offers a progressive perspective on world events, often giving a voice to people and groups ignored or marginalised by mainstream media.

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ICONOGRAPHIES OF MEDIA POWER IN SLAP THE MONSTER ON PAGE ONE: VISUAL AFTERLIVES BETWEEN ITALIAN POLITICAL CINEMA AND THE CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPHERE

Abstract

This article analyses the film *Slap the Monster on Page One* (Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina, Marco Bellocchio, 1972) as a paradigmatic example of Italian political cinema capable of establishing visual codes to represent media manipulation and power relations. Drawing on Aby Warburg's (2010) concept of *Nachleben* (afterlife) and Anton Giulio Mancino's (2008) notion of the political-procedural film, this study examines recurring visual motifs in the film, such as the representation of the newsroom as a stage of power, the visual construction of the news story and the iconographic fabrication of the *media monster*. It analyses the afterlives of these visual codes in the contemporary public sphere, in forms ranging from digital journalism to strategies of visual activism. The article concludes by reflecting on the relevance of the Italian filmmaker's work for understanding the relationship between cinema, the media and power in the current context.

Key words

Italian political cinema; Marco Bellocchio; Iconography; Visual motifs; *Nachleben*; Public sphere; Media manipulation.

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ICONOGRAFÍAS DEL PODER MEDIÁTICO EN NOTICIA DE UNA VIOLACIÓN EN PRIMERA PÁGINA: SUPERVIVENCIAS VISUALES ENTRE EL CINE POLÍTICO ITALIANO Y LA ESFERA PÚBLICA CONTEMPORÁNEA

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza el film *Noticia de una violación en primera página* (Bellocchio, 1972) como un ejemplo paradigmático del cine político italiano capaz de establecer códigos visuales para representar la manipulación mediática y las relaciones de poder. A partir del concepto de *Nachleben* (supervivencia) de Aby Warburg (2010) y la noción de película político-indiciaria de Anton Giulio Mancino (2008), se examinan los motivos visuales recurrentes en la película, como la representación de la redacción como escenario del poder, la construcción visual de la noticia y la fabricación iconográfica del *monstruo mediático*. Se analizan las supervivencias de estos códigos visuales en la esfera pública contemporánea, desde el periodismo digital hasta las estrategias de activismo visual. El artículo concluye reflexionando sobre la vigencia de la obra del cineasta italiano para comprender la relación entre cine, medios y poder en el contexto actual.

Palabras clave

Cine político italiano; Marco Bellocchio; Iconografía; Motivos visuales; *Nachleben*; Esfera pública; Manipulación mediática.

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IN THE PRESENCE OF THE RACIALISED BODY: (POST-)COLONIAL ICONOGRAPHIES IN DAHOMEY, SAINT OMER AND STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN*

ANA AITANA FERNÁNDEZ MORENO

BRUNELLA TEDESCO BARLOCCO

After the screening of *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022) at the New York Film Festival, Alice Diop described its protagonist as “a woman who is not just confined to her *Négritude*, who is more than a Black woman, who is a complex woman” (Film at Lincoln Center, 2022). For the filmmaker, this assertion constitutes a “political statement” (Film at Lincoln Center, 2022) precisely because of the use of the term *Négritude*—defined by Aimé Césaire as the “consciousness of difference” but also as an instrument of the revolution “against European reductionism”¹ (Césaire, 2006: 86)—and because it is this complexity that breaks with the stereotype of the Black woman historically constructed from the perspective of the Global North. This imaginary, which can also be traced back to Orientalist discourses (Said, 2002), persists today in media

images and narratives of migration flows from the Global South. The tropes of transgression or savagery associated with male corporealities and of motherhood and care attributed to their female counterparts, along with the image of the white saviour, thus feed a colonialist iconography that is exposed and challenged in the work of filmmakers of African descent such as Mati Diop and Alice Diop, both born in France to Senegalese parents. In their respective oeuvres, both these filmmakers (who share a surname but are not related) have explored the contradictions arising from a colonialist heritage that has left them split between two identities: African and European. As Alice Diop explained in an interview: “Essentially, I am French. All my culture is French, but I discovered Ousmane Sembène too late. I come to films in

Wolof as an outsider” (Latif, 2023, n.p.). This is an issue that both directors raise again in their most recent films, each one of which has been awarded at a major European festival: *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024) receiving the Golden Bear at the Berlinale; and *Saint Omer* winning the Grand Jury Prize and the Lion of the Future Award at the Venice Film Festival.

Along the same lines as the two films mentioned above, the Congolese documentary *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* (Bernadette Vivuya, Kagoma Ya Twahirwa, 2022), which has been screened at various specialised festivals (Berlin Human Rights Film Festival; the Human Rights Watch Film Festival), serves as a response to the documentary *Stop Filming Us* (2020) by the Dutch filmmaker Joris Postema, who initiates a debate in his film about whether “talking about someone” is in reality “talking for someone”, questioning the neo-colonial practices reproduced in films and photographs of Africa. The two Congolese filmmakers use footage from Postema’s film to add two essential questions to this debate, related to the degree of agency they have over their own representation, and to how colonialist stereotypes can be effectively destroyed.

In light of these questions, this article analyses the three films mentioned above to examine how they challenge this inherited iconography and uncover new forms of post-colonial representation. These constructive exercises are

THESE CONSTRUCTIVE EXERCISES ARE PURSUED EITHER BY ACTIVE QUESTIONING OF COLONIALIST DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTATION (STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN; DAHOMEY), OR BY EXPLORING AMBIGUITIES AND COMPLEXITIES THAT POINT BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CATEGORIES OF TRUTH IN THE GLOBAL NORTH (SAINT OMER)

pursued either by active questioning of colonialist discourse and representation (*Stop Filming Us, but Listen*; *Dahomey*), or by exploring ambiguities and complexities that point beyond the boundaries of the categories of truth in the Global North (*Saint Omer*). And in all three films, the racialised body focuses the debate as it bears the historical scars of European colonialism (Ahmed, 2002).

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON POST-COLONIAL ICONOGRAPHY

Post-colonial perspectives on cinema expose the Eurocentrism of media representations (Shohat and Stam, 2014) and the persistence of an “imperial gaze” capable of creating images and modes of viewing predicated on the absence of the colonised subject or on the portrayal of that subject as a figure outside modernity: wild, primitive, pre-rational, exotic and eroticised. “[C]inema invented a geographically incoherent Orient, where a simulacrum of coherence was produced through the repetition of visual leitmotifs” (Shohat, 2006: 47).

For Sandra Ponzanesi, post-colonial cinema is defined by its concern with hegemony and patterns of oppression and resistance, and with problematising filmmaking as a language, a technology and an industry. In this sense, Ponzanesi explains, post-colonial cinema “opens occluded frames and proposes a new engagement with the visual that is decolonized and de-orientalized, [...] breaking down the *grands récits* and opening the space for specificities that refract larger, often repressed, omitted or deleted, unofficial histories of nations, communities, genders and subaltern groups” (2017: 30).

At this point, it is important to acknowledge certain controversies surrounding the concept of the post-colonial identified by Ella Shohat (2008), who observes that the “post-colonial” lends itself to “ahistorical and universalizing de-

ployments [with] potentially depoliticizing implications”, used as a substitute for the dubious qualifier “third world” and aligned, thanks to the prefix “post-”, with another set of concepts that “underline a passage into a new period and a closure of a certain historical event or age” (1992: 101). The connotations of universalism (which implies an erasure of the specific sociohistorical dynamics of colonisation characteristic of each colonised territory) and periodisation (which suggests a clear chronology of “before” and “after”) seem to betray the very objectives of this theoretical approach. Shohat, however, argues for a “flexible yet critical” use of the term that can “address the politics of location”, which is important “not only for pointing out historical and geographical contradictions and differences, but also for reaffirming historical and geographical links, structural analogies, and openings for agency and resistance” (Shohat, 1992: 112). The notion of rupture contained in the prefix “post-”, the possibility of a “beyond” (in contrast to the neo-colonial, which merely emphasises “the new modes and forms of the old colonialist practices” [Shohat, 1992: 106]), allows for discontinuity, for the destructuring of discourses and imaginaries as a foundation for the emergence of new registers.

The films analysed in this study call into question the different forms of epistemological violence derived from the European colonial narrative and attempt to deconstruct them in the interests of constructing subjectivities, discourses and representations of their own. In the analysis of these procedures of representation that “speak *for*” subjects instead of allowing them to speak *for/about* themselves (as called out by Spivak, 2009), epistemological violence is exposed as a form of violence

perpetrated against or through knowledge, [...] one of the key elements in any process of domination. This is achieved not only through the construction of economic ties of exploitation or through the con-

trol of the political-military apparatus, but also [...] through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimise and exalt these practices of domination (Galván-Álvarez, 2010: 12).

The analysis presented in this article focuses on how these films mobilise discourse and the gaze as acts of resistance, and on how they speak to the scars of colonisation and the notion of historical restitution or reparation. In their configuration of their own language and images, each of these films becomes a vehicle for the mutation of visual motifs (Balló, 2000; Balló and Bergala, 2016), a process of resignification that connects with the general idea of deconstructing and challenging the discourses and visual regimes constructed by the “colonial gaze” on the colonised subjects. The motifs identified in these films move beyond the imaginary of migration flows and former colonies promoted by the Global North to embrace others related to the place of the spectator, the artwork, court proceedings and motherhood, which, although they may not appear to be, are equally encoded by the dynamics of racialisation.

As forms of an “iconographic model of cultural representation that is transmitted and reinterpreted through the history of images to foster narrative and emotional recognition” (Balló, Salvadó and Cairol, 2020: 60), visual motifs reflect cinema’s ability to revive “images that seemed to have been established in the motionlessness of pictorial representation” (Balló, 2000: 11). However, in this case, the model of representation is articulated mainly by means of media images. As visual motifs are established through repetition, narrative economy and the persistence of iconographic imaginaries, the analysis of their mutation, deconstruction or resignification will reveal their status as the product of hegemonic discourses that themselves are capable of reproducing power dynamics and forms of epistemological violence.

RECONSIDERING THE INHERITED GAZE: STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN (BERNADETTE VIVUYA, KAGOMA YA TWAHIRWA, 2022)

In the opening sequence of *Stop Filming Us, but Listen*, the camera enters Yole!Africa, a cultural and educational centre that was also behind the production of the film. A close-up shows the beam of light from a projector, followed by a reverse shot of the screen, being viewed by a Congolese audience. On the screen, a documentary about the history of Lake Kivu, the natural border separating Rwanda from the Democratic Republic of Congo, is being shown. The sound of the projector continues in the background while the camera focuses on different faces in the audience. Rather than identifying the spectator with the screen—“the spectator’s gaze takes the position of the divine, omniscient and omnipresent eye, while being immersed in the acts and/or feelings of the characters” (Gómez Tarín, 2002: 22)—or depicting a supposedly passive audience (Morin, 1972), the camera clearly shows their annoyed reactions to what they are watching (Image 1).

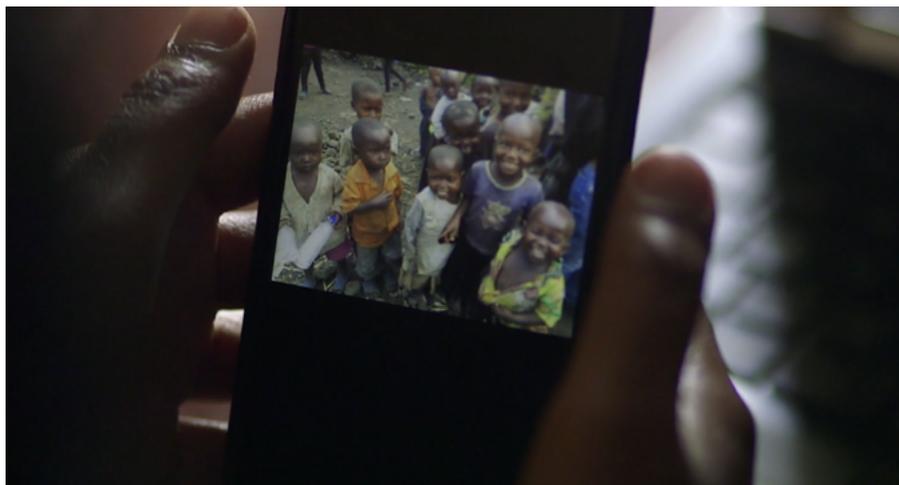
The visual motif of the spectator viewing the spectacle or sitting in a cinema (Balló, 2000) acquires a different dimension here, as later we



Image 1. *Stop filming us, but listen* (Bernadette Vivuya, Kagoma Ya Twahirwa, 2022)

hear the audience members’ criticisms of what they have seen: “When the colonisers arrived, they tried to show that their point of view was better.” This will be repeated several times in the film, both with the screening of other titles produced by the colonialist states, in which the gaze reflects the power imbalance between colonisers and natives, and with the analysis of images of inhabitants of rural areas taken by the photographer Ley Uwera for an NGO in accordance with the instructions given to him by the organisation (Image 2). This debate about the need for reflection on the African imaginary was already present in *Stop Filming Us*, which also criticises the humanitarian aesthetic underpinning motifs such as the “white saviour” (Fernández-Moreno, Tedesco-Barlocco, 2024), reinforced by the testi-

Image 2. *Stop filming us, but listen* (Bernadette Vivuya, Kagoma Ya Twahirwa, 2022)



monies of Congolese artists who claim the right to produce their own images, although they acknowledge the possibility that those images may also be infected by the colonising gaze.

What is interesting about Vivuya and Twahirwa's film is the destabilisation of the point of view imposed by the assimilation of the spectator's omniscient eye with a colonial (and European white supremacist) perspective, which is displaced here by a post-colonial gaze. This new gaze is introduced firstly through the Congolese viewers and their constant expressions of incredulity, and secondly through the didactic role of Chérie Ndaliko, Director of Research and Education at Yole!Africa, who explains in detail how audiovisual language—the high-angle shot, for example, as a way of placing the viewer above the filmed subject—is used to support the construction of a persuasive colonial narrative. As Gómez Tarín argues, the spectator's power lies in the hermeneutic exercise, but the spectator will only be able to engage in that exercise through critical attention, “which is prevented by the very structure of the films and the acceptance of their codes after so many years of repetition” (2002: 31). Jacques Rancière alludes to this critical attention in his description of the emancipated spectator, a key idea for understanding the power dynamics in the image and how active interpretation can be achieved (Rancière, 2021: 12): “Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; [...] when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions.”

Vivuya and Twahirwa constantly seek to reconstruct a critical gaze through the editing: the classical shot-reverse shot between the audience and the screen is disrupted here by placing the camera in the middle of the cinema, creating a *mise en abyme* in combination with Ndaliko's voice-over, which acts as the voice of the spectator. In this way, the film constructs the “oppositional gaze” described by bell hooks, recognising

the interrogation of the outsider's gaze as a site of agency for the racialised audience: “the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes ‘looking’ relations: one learns to look a certain way in order to resist” (hooks, 1992: 116). The gaze as a site of opposition and confrontation emerges in the context of a breakdown or rupture, “when the spectator ‘resists’ complete identification with the film's discourse” (Hooks, 1992: 117). While hooks focuses mostly on Black women spectators, she recognises both the absence of images and the stereotypical, dehumanising representations as triggers for a distance that facilitates “the pleasure of interrogation” rather than the pleasure of identification.

In the “outside-inside” dynamics described by Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Stop Filming Us* can be understood as “giving voice” to the colonised Other, whose testimonies function as “devices of legitimation” to compensate for a “filmic Lack” (Minh-Ha, 1991: 67). *Stop Filming Us, but Listen*, on the other hand, does not just give voice to the Other; it makes the Other *the* voice that defines the discourse, that speaks in first person, creating sites of resistance. This is why Vivuya includes the same images of Goma filmed by Postema, replacing the Dutch filmmaker's voice with her own and displacing the Other with a Self who questions the colonising gaze: “Goma, the city that has seen me grow. Like a spider in a web I have woven my memories near the Nyiragongo volcano.”

In this sense, the dialogue between the two films is constant. Thus, the question raised in *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* about whether the two white filmmakers who want to make a film about Africa should stay and keep filming or go home comes up again in the middle of the film. This time, the answer comes in the form of an assembly, a visual motif associated mainly with civic power as it is a symbol of community dialogue and collective participation. The camera moves around the group, stopping on the one speaking, and shaking in the hands of the camera operator. In the circle of dia-

logue, the camera functions as a podium or microphone. In this way, the *mise-en-scène* is shaped by a circular approach constructed around a montage of close-ups that allow us to see and hear each speaker, who acts as a kind of public spokesperson. All the speakers are framed on the same level and filmed from the same location. In fact, in the end the camera operator even hands over the camera to someone else so that he can give his own opinion as well.

Another strategy that deconstructs the “imperial gaze” is related to the visual motif of the white saviour, constructed as a “heroic and virtuous” colonising force responsible for civilising “a non-white, indigenous, and exotic savage” (Hughey, 2014: 8-10). Although the white saviour complex is mentioned in the first film when Postema gives some biscuits to children who have not asked for anything and is reprimanded by the Congolese members of his crew, *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* takes up the association of this motif with the classroom, one of the settings that appears most in the photographs of the Jesuit missions, which show the white teacher standing, sometimes beside a blackboard, surrounded by sitting African children and adults who are watching him attentively. This image is a reflection of the white saviour syndrome, based on the notion that racialised people “supposedly lack the capacity to seek change and thus become perceived as dispossessed of historical agency. Any progress or success tends to result from the succor of the white individual, which suggests that escaping poverty or ignorance happens only through the savior’s intelligence” (Cammarota, 2011: 244).

The composition in the classroom scene in *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* is similar, except that the teacher is not white and the scene is filmed quite differently. The camera moves around among the students, including Postema, and the teacher, the filmmaker Petna Ndaliko Katondolo. While in the photographs of the missions the only active figure is the white teacher, in this scene everyone takes

part in the class dynamic, and the teacher is a Black man who, as shown throughout the documentary, is reflecting on who holds the power and privileges of foreign Caucasians in the production of images of Africa. Here, the blackboard plays a key role and the horizontal filming evokes another motif: that of the teacher or student at the blackboard who, as Valérie Vignaux suggests, “materialises educational projects”, a strategy “that interrogates the role that figurative representation can play in the transmission of knowledge” (Vignaux, 2016: 392).

The deconstruction of the colonial gaze in *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* not only requires the spectator to listen to what the Congolese have to say about it, but also (and especially) involves the filming of everyday scenes that do not appear in the traditional imaginary of Africa, or the visual tropes or motifs that so many organisations and ethnographic documentaries deploy to depict the African reality. Young people playing sports, crowds at concerts, photography classes, art exhibitions, the celebration of the Congo International Film Festival and film screenings and conferences show different actions and reflect their agency over their own representation, proposing alternative tropes to those of traditional ethnographic documentaries and the humanitarian discourse of NGOs.

THE ARTWORK AS CURRENCY OF HISTORICAL RESTITUTION: DAHOMEY (MATI DIOP, 2024)

The form and register of *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024) transcend binaries and stale categories of enunciation, while at the same time identifying an artwork as a visual motif that can function in terms of aesthetic appreciation or as an object of economic exchange (Berger, 1972). On the one hand, the film follows a linear trajectory, tracing the journey of 26 statues from the Kingdom of Dahomey (1600-1904) that the French had looted in the colonial period and that were subsequently exhibited at the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques



Image 3. *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024)

Chirac, in 1989, as African artworks. Thanks to a repatriation campaign, these 26 statues—which formed part of a collection of 7,000 looted objects—were returned to Benin. The film documents the different stages of their journey: the dismantling of the works and their packing for shipping, the preparations for their exhibition in Benin, their reception by the Beninese people, the critical debate over their repatriation, and finally their exhibition.

The second half of the film, mainly covering the debate over the repatriation at the University of Abomey-Calavi, integrates different critical perspectives on the restitution of the artworks and explores the capacity to construct discourse, the power of “speaking” (Image 3). According to the director, “[t]he only purpose of the film is for this debate to happen. It’s not one amongst many ideas, it’s the film itself, the gesture and meaning of this film. It’s a counter point of view, a radical shift of paradigm, to switch the point of view to the space from where this story of dispossession should be told; from the view of the dispossessed” (Choudhury, 2024).

The young men and women who speak express points of view that not only cover a wide range of topics but sometimes involve opposing or conflicting positions. In this way, the film conveys the difficulty of achieving a united vision and the resistance against the homogenisation of a

single discourse that could be identified as the consistent voice of the former colony, depicting the Other as a monolithic figure: these discordant voices reveal the conflicting emotions triggered by the complex processes of cultural, psychological, political and religious obliteration experienced in the former colonies, and the persistence of these processes in the post-colonial period, when the quest for healing and restitution has not followed a simple pattern. These discursive clashes also expose the fragility of understanding the concept of historical “reparations” as an effective erasure of both the tangible and intangible scars of colonisation.

The diversity of the testimonies is also evident in the conception of the artwork as a multifarious entity that can be understood as an artistic, ritualistic object, a political expression, a symbol or an element of cultural and social identity. Originally created for the performance of sacred rituals, the statues were extracted from their natural context and resignified in the French museum. This act (com-)modifies the object, turning it into an item of exchange, while at the same time transforming it from an artefact for use in spiritual rituals into a work valued for its aesthetic and economic value, and for its interpretation as a “primitive” or “exotic” object. It is in this ontological questioning—is it a *work of art* or not?—that one of the great ruptures with the visual motif of the artwork occurs: its status as an artwork is not inherent in the object, which was created for a different purpose, but constructed through a series of processes of resignification and exhibition initiated by the white colonist, the white gaze, and the exoticisation of the Other.

The idea of diversity and disagreement is not only reflected in the different opinions expressed, but also in the form of the film itself. Despite the apparently linear journey of the statues and the distanced, anthropological perspective with which their return is portrayed, Diop goes beyond



Image 4. *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024)

the limits of the documentary form by including the voice of one of the statues as a recourse to magic that disrupts the film narrative and the object itself. Through this imaginary voice, with its own emotions and memory, Diop bestows a *discourse* upon an inanimate object that had until then been a mere *image*. The statue's name, "Number 26", reinforces this idea, as the statue, a portrait of King Ghezo, continues to bear the name given to it by the European colonists, a name that categorises and erases its historical origins and its meaning.

This strategy of vesting an object with a voice should be examined first and foremost for the change of register it involves. While the film can still be categorised as a documentary, the "animation" of the statue as an imaginative and generative act that only the audience is able to witness shifts it in generic terms towards the realm of the fantastic. According to Tzvetan Todorov's definition of this genre (1975), the statue's voice constitutes a supernatural event that appears to violate the laws of our natural world, and that elicits an affective response of doubt and hesitation from us, although in this case it is presented not as a narrative event (i.e. experienced by other subjects in the world of the film) but as a purely cinematic event, aimed at challenging our understanding of what we are viewing.

The animation entails a sound effect, a positioning of the camera and an editing construction. In these last two aspects, moreover, Diop's film reinforces the idea of a liberation through the discourse itself. At the beginning, still in the Musée du Quai Branly, the statue's voice is heard over a black image representing its physical confinement and its limitation to the parameters of the colonial gaze. Once transported to Benin, a POV shot shows the inside of a box that is opened by Beninese anthropologists who initiate a new stage of "awakening" in the life of the object (Image 4). Finally, at nightfall, the voice re-emerges and seems to be liberated by an open door, and the camera then wanders around the Benin museum, showing—and distorting—the natural setting around it, and endowing the static object with a suggested mobility.

The idea of giving the object a voice ties in with Jane Bennett's concept of "thing-power", which is aimed at transcending the anthropocentrism of Western thought centred on the supremacy of the human subject by means of a gaze oriented towards the material agency of objects. For Bennett, one of the objectives of taking the object's perspective is to "dissipate the onto-theological

binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic" (2010: X), a goal that can be aligned with the deconstruction of discourse and form carried out in *Dahomey* on other levels. Bennett suggests that *thing-power* "gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience" (2010: xvi); the voice of the statue, with its own memories and experiences, functions as an animation of an inanimate object, as a historical discourse and as the restitution of a mystical potency that transcends the binaries and rationalism of the Western culture that had assimilated it as an exotic object stripped of power.

The fact that the statue's voice is able to experience history is also important; the statue of King Ghezo, an artefact that has travelled through space and has witnessed the passage of time, is portrayed as a kind of ghost² from the past that observes its surroundings but cannot interact directly with them. The eradication of clear boundaries between the binaries of subject-object and past-present is part of the procedure of giving a voice to the statue, which is sometimes positioned in a sort of imaginary physical or verbal interaction with human subjects.

Bliss Cua Lim (2009) suggests that fantastic narratives can constitute sites of resistance by introducing spectral and supernatural elements that contradict the perception of time imposed by modernity. As Lim points out, "imperialist discourse depended on a temporal strategy in which the radical cultural differences brought to light by colonial contact were framed as primitive or anachronistic" (2009: 13). The notion of teleological progress, she argues, "served as a temporal justification for imperialist expansion" (2009: 12) that proposed a "disenchanted" time bound to temporal exclusions "of the primitive, of anachronistic, 'superstitious' folk" (2009: 12).

The replacement of a heterogeneous temporality with a homogeneous one meant that "[w]orlds that contained spirits and other enchanted beings remained untranslatable to colonial discourse and modern time consciousness" (2009: 16). Any kind of supernatural agency is depicted as a threat to the epistemic order and must be reduced or contained within the discourse of primitivism and superstition. For Lin, by allowing the emergence and persistence of the supernatural, and of ghosts whose appearance breaks with the order of calendar time, the fantastic can facilitate a critique of colonial temporalities and reductions, a resistance against the domestication and homogenisation of the Other. In relation to this idea of the Other as a colonialist construct, it is interesting to consider Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi's gendered reading of the Other as a "residual and unspecified category" used by the colonialist apparatus to refer to African women, who are the bottom rung on the human ladder, below European men and women and African men (2017: 209).

THE BLACK WOMAN'S BODY: SAINT OMER (ALICE DIOP, 2022)

Language is also a key element in *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022). This film requires the spectator to listen carefully to the defendant, Laurence Coly, a woman of African descent who provides the opportunity for Diop to trace the neo-colonial forms existing in French society. Indeed, the filmmaker's identification with her two protagonists reflects her own dual identity, which is why it is inevitable for her to focus on the "Black body" (Diop, 2022). In the body of a Black woman put on trial for the crime she committed but also for her appearance, Diop proposes a reading of her film from a perspective that evokes the work of Marguerite Duras. At the beginning of the film, Rama, the director's alter ego, reads a line from Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour* that asserts that the author "uses the power of her narrative to sublimate reality."

Saint Omer fictionalises a true story and constructs a courtroom drama that breaks with the codes of a genre whose structure is based on a country's democratic values and principles: "A trial is a closed narrative unit with a set-up (exposition), a confrontation (investigation) and a resolution (verdict), in which the character arcs are simply drawn and the moral or political parable is almost inevitable" (Vallín, 2023: 328). However, *Saint Omer* eschews all these conventions and their recurring visual motifs: we learn nothing about the prosecution, defence counsel or judges participating in the case; neither the verdict nor the reaction to it will not be presented; and the *mise-en-scène* eschews all the usual depictions of the courtroom drama too.

The film is based on the case of Fabienne Kabou, a woman of Senegalese origin who in 2013 abandoned her baby on a beach in a French town before the tide came in. Diop, fascinated by this woman, attended the trial as a public observer. Unable to turn it into a documentary (her usual language), Diop fictionalised the whole experience, turning Fabienne into Laurence Coly and herself into Rama, an academic and writer expecting her first child. The crime provided an opportunity to explore colonialist issues inherent in the case that had gone unnoticed due to their abject nature. Zina Giannopoulou (2024: n.p.) asks the question: "Can fictional narration turn such crimes into emblems of larger social problems at the cost of attenuating, if not eclipsing, their singularity?" For Giannopoulou, *Saint Omer* forges a "relational Black subjectivity" that creates a "multidirectional narrative out of an array of 'third spaces', which are hybrid

areas of ambiguity (e.g. the objectivity/performativity of the law, the courtroom/symbolic father, and the roaring sea/mother) which evoke and renounce the legacies of imperial violence connecting Europe and Africa" (Giannopoulou, 2024: n.p.). What tropes emerge, then, from this encounter between reality and fiction inscribed with the codes of the courtroom drama?

One of the focal points of this genre that constantly appears in *Saint Omer* is the symbiotic relationship between Rama and Laurence. The storyline in films of this kind is often structured around the development of the trial until the verdict is handed down, with the different agents involved in the proceedings serving as characters, while the presentation of the evidence advances the plot. In this film, the evidence is placed in the middle of the courtroom but is not central to the process: a wide shot shows the architecture of the chamber, with three white women presiding as judges, and in front of them, the material evidence of the case displayed under glass, suitably wrapped and labelled. However, what is inside these packages is never shown, nor is their content ever discussed (Image 5), conveying a sense of theatricality, or suggesting a *fait accompli*.

Image 5. *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022)



As noted above, orality is one of the pillars of the film. In this regard, Diop also breaks with the narrative action of the courtroom drama by locating the attention on the testimonies, mainly Laurence's, aimed at shedding light on the events. While in the first scenes the defendant's testimony is filmed with long static shots, as the film progresses it is increasingly interspersed with shots of Rama sitting in the gallery. This shot-reverse shot strategy serves to establish connections between the two characters in terms of identity (both are of Senegalese origin) and on an emotional level (in relation to motherhood) (Image 6). A key moment in these connections occurs in the middle of the film, when Laurence is questioned about her severe state of depression after conceiving her daughter, which she alleges was caused by witchcraft, "the only logical explanation"; this has been her main defence since the beginning of the trial, as she claims to be the victim of an evil eye directed at her by her family back in Senegal. In the reverse shot of Rama, her worried and distressed reaction to Laurence's claims becomes increasingly clear, mainly in the deliberate concealment of her pregnancy (the spectator will not be aware of it until the next sequence, and Rama will not share the news of her pregnancy with her partner or

family until later). Diop herself has confessed to the magnetic pull she felt in response to the "psychoanalytic and mythical dimension underlying the way she explained her actions" (2023). A bond is established between these two women with supernatural beliefs that form part of their African cultural identity, but those beliefs are dismissed outright in the trial because, as Lim argues, the colonialist discourse has confined the supernatural to the horror and tabloid genres, deriding it as "a state of cultural provincialism" (Lim, 2009: 25). Thus, towards the end of the film, Rama watches Laurence attentively in a POV shot, and Laurence, in the reverse shot, returns her gaze with a complicit smile. "One of Diop's narrative strategies for distancing or 'decolonising' Coly is the use of Rama as Coly's inverted image" (Giannopoulou, 2024: n.p.).

This symbiotic relationship reaches its expressive and symbolic culmination when Rama re-watches the ending to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* (Image 6). In the dimly lit room, her face is illuminated by the light from her laptop screen, where we see Maria Callas at the moment when her Medea commits infanticide (Image 6). For Balló, this visual motif of the female spectator in front of the screen synthesises an epiphany, "an emotion-

Image 6. *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022)



al transfer and a revelation” that enters “the terrain of intimate emotion and the confrontation of faces” (2000: 172). A pregnant writer interested in the myth of Medea attends the trial of a woman accused of murdering her baby. Identity and identification blur together in the bond between the two women. As this Medea is of African descent, the original meaning of the myth is displaced by a post-colonial perspective: “In order to highlight the ideological clash between two irreducible cultures, modern ‘Medeas’ come from sociocultural locations far from the Western context: Africa, Asia and Latin America” (Mimoso-Ruiz in Bournot, 2019: 58). Magdalena Bournot argues that

“the infanticide, the distinctive feature of the myth, [...] acquires a different meaning through the renewed problematisation of the concept of foreigner or the ‘other’. An ‘other’ who will take on a different origin, colour and social status depending on the country and the moment in which each playwright approaches the myth. An ‘other’ who speaks, as in the Greek myth, of the clash of two cultures represented in a romantic relationship” (2019: 58).

In this way, the racialised character bears “the sociohistorical condemnation of mixed colours, cultures and blood” (Bournot, 2019: 67).

There is no revenge in the crime in *Saint Omer*, but the colonial and racial question seeps from every pore of this story. “A woman who has killed her baby cannot expect to inspire compassion. I share their horror,” Laurence says during the trial. How can the horror of such an act be understood? The serenity of her behaviour and the neutrality of her gestures shape the portrayal of a woman who has accepted her fate, who exhibits none of the wild body language expected of a racialised woman, and who in this way, as Diop herself points out, evades *Négritude*. “The press says she speaks like a sophisticated Frenchwoman,” Rama’s partner (a white man) remarks to her with a kind of morbid fascination when he asks her what the defendant is like, evoking a discourse that also underscores the European colonialist notion of the

African woman as an Other constructed through a twofold process of “racial inferiorization and gender subordination” (Oyèwùmi, 2017: 210). Because Laurence does not seem to fit the stereotypes of African women in France, their way of dressing or speaking or their level of education, she is constantly judged for it, despite having achieved what her family wanted for her. This incongruity reflects the liminal condition of a racialised woman who was raised in a European neo-colonial order and has to survive in it; Laurence, caught between two orders of existence, is a displaced subject living in an environment that was designed for her subjugation and construction as an Other, yet she comes from a place that does not claim her entirely as its own either. This conflict is expressed in her (unfinished) search for a job, focused on a masculinised white European philosophy, and on her assertion “I am Cartesian”, which clashes radically with her insistence on witchcraft and the act of maternal brutality she has committed.

This clash reflects what Chela Sandoval calls a “semiotic technology of the oppressed” drawing on Frantz Fanon’s idea that “the black soul is a white man’s artifact”: “in order to determine how, where, and when to construct and insert an identity that will facilitate continued existence of self and/or community” (Sandoval, 2000: 86). Laurence performs an identity that destabilises the colonial categories established to read the Black body, but in doing so she also exposes herself to new forms of judgement. This *technology*, as Sandoval explains, “permitted Fanon to recognize the values, morals, and ideologies of dominant Euro-American cultures—from the ‘soul’ through language, love, sex, work, violence, or knowledge—as ‘artifacts’” (Sandoval, 2000: 86). In this sense, *Saint Omer* posits a form of decolonisation in the body of the Black woman that matches certain imposed ideological artefacts while at the same time deconstructing them by embodying a contemporary Medea who claims witchcraft to avoid punishment for her crime.

CONCLUSIONS

The three films analysed in this article—*Stop Filming Us, but Listen*; *Dahomey* and *Saint Omer*—expose the persistence of a Eurocentric imaginary of African identity responsible for a neo-colonial narrative in both Europe and Africa, in order to point to new sites and forms of resistance. Their visual approach effectively questions these inherited truths and interprets them as a form of epistemological violence perpetrated by the colonists, which needs to be destroyed through the creation of a genuinely post-colonial iconography.

Through formal strategies that range from the use of a documentary register to the evocation of the supernatural and the recreation/dramatisation of real events, these films present *mises en abyme* or hybrid forms that reject the binaries characteristic of colonial representation (civilised/savage, spectator/object, reason/emotion). Despite their differences, all these films recognise the need to deconstruct discourses actively and reflectively, pointing to the power of speaking in different contexts and circumstances. In all cases, either because of the multiplicity of voices or because of the complexity of what they say, the discourse is not presented as something that can be contained, and often the possibility of an explanation is challenged by the ambiguity of reality.

The deconstruction of these narratives results in the mutation of certain visual motifs associated with the colonial narrative—the classroom, the white saviour, debate, the artwork and the trial—and this mutation enacts a reconciliation with their true identity. Thus, the teacher as white saviour is transformed into the embodiment of an educational project between equals with a critical gaze intrinsic to such a process; the artwork is stripped of its primitivism and its economic value to become a speaking object that reconnects with its history; and the trial is dispossessed of its democratic value in order to explore the systemic racism of society through the depiction of a defendant who is also being tried for her status as a Black woman.

The transformative power of these films lies in the displacement of the Other and the enunciation of the Self, inscribed in the identification between filmmaker and protagonists, the corporealisation of the work of art, or a critical reflection on colonial or contemporary cinematic representations, constructing a post-colonial iconography that reinforces their capacity for agency.

NOTES

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¹ All translations of quotes not in English are ours.

² One of Mati Diop's previous films, *Atlantics* (Atlantique, 2019), similarly departs from traditional forms by introducing fantastic elements (phantasmagoria and possessions) in a romantic drama whose turning point is the sinking of a boat full of young migrants on its way from Dakar to Spain.

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IN THE PRESENCE OF THE RACIALIZED BODY: (POST-)COLONIAL ICONOGRAPHIES IN DAHOMEY, SAINT OMER AND STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN

Abstract

This article analyses the aesthetic, discursive and formal strategies employed in *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* (Vivuya and Twahirwa, 2022), *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024) and *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022) to expose the persistence of colonial imaginaries in the representation of racialised bodies and propose an iconographic renewal as a way of reclaiming their identity and agency. Using a theoretical approach that articulates key concepts such as post-colonialism, epistemological violence and visual motifs, it examines how these films displace the colonial gaze and mobilise a critical iconography that destabilises inherited binaries (civilised/savage, reason/emotion, object/subject). The analysis is organised around the mutation of key visual motifs (the classroom, the work of art, the trial, the spectator, the white saviour) and focuses on the political dimension of these formal shifts. Through abstractions, generic ruptures and hybridisations between documentary, fiction and the fantastic, these films construct sites of enunciation where the racialised self produces meaning, reclaims memory and transforms the material and imaginary conditions of its representation.

Key words

Visual motif; Post-colonial Cinema; Colonial gaze; Racialised body; Documentary Cinema; Hybridisation; Post-colonial Iconography.

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ANTE EL CUERPO RACIALIZADO: ICONOGRAFÍAS (POST)COLONIALES EN DAHOMEY, SAINT OMER Y STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las estrategias estéticas, discursivas y formales a través de las cuales *Stop filming us, but listen* (Vivuya y Twahirwa, 2022), *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024) y *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022) confrontan la persistencia de imaginarios coloniales en la representación del cuerpo racializado y proponen una renovación de la iconografía como vía de recuperación de su identidad y agencia. Desde un enfoque teórico que articula conceptos clave como lo postcolonial, la violencia epistemológica o los motivos visuales, se examina cómo estos films desplazan la mirada colonial y movilizan una iconografía crítica que desestabiliza los binarismos heredados –civilizado/salvaje, razón/emoción, objeto/sujeto-. El análisis se organiza en torno a la mutación de motivos visuales clave (el aula, la obra de arte, el juicio, el espectador, el salvador blanco), y se detiene en la inscripción política de esos desplazamientos formales. A través de puestas en abismo, rupturas genéricas e hibridaciones entre lo documental, lo ficcional y lo fantástico, estas películas construyen espacios de enuncianción donde el Yo racializado produce sentido, reclama memoria y transforma las condiciones materiales e imaginarias de su representación.

Palabras clave

Motivo Visual; Cine Postcolonial; Mirada colonial; Cuerpo racializado; Cine documental; Hibridación; Iconografía postcolonial

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WHEN MIGRATION IS A MATTER OF SCIENCE FICTION: EL MAR LA MAR

JAVIER MORAL

BEATRIZ DEL CAZ PÉREZ

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main difficulties associated with representing a contemporary phenomenon as complex as forced migration lies in finding the right distance from “the pain of others” (Sontag, 2004). The questions explored by Susan Sontag in her discussion of images of war are also worth asking when considering representations of the migration crisis. How can we accurately depict the tragedy of so many millions of human beings who decide to leave their homes to flee a life with no future or to escape death? What moral demands do these images impose? What capacity do they have to engage us and compel us to take a side in response to the horror they expose? These questions are of crucial importance in the contemporary context, when numerous media sources promoting exclusionary nationalist narratives, which are having an increasingly active influence on the political powers, are proving highly effective in creating

and circulating discourses that depict migrants as a threat to social stability (Nyers, 1999; King and Wood, 2001; Moore, Gross and Threadgold, 2012; Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; Wilmott, 2017).

Exacerbating this discouraging geopolitical situation, despite the counter-discourses of individuals, groups and institutions that seek to foster positive attitudes towards migrants, is the current oversaturation of public attention with images that result in widespread compassion fatigue among distant observers of the crisis, as various authors have pointed out (Lodge, 1996; Moeller, 1999; Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; 2008; 2012; 2013; Dahya, 2017; Yalouri, 2019). The exhaustion resulting from being repetitively subjected to images that are difficult to digest leads to a perceptual desensitisation. An endless succession of images of bodies huddled together as they try to cross all kinds of visible and invisible borders (the sea, the desert, the mountains), of the faces of children whose expressions seem to plead

for our mercy, and of the ruins of cities devastated by relentless bombing end up numbing the gaze of viewers who are exposed to these realities by the media.

Navigating these troubled waters through the medium of the non-fiction film—a political space that is the focus of this article—are a number of documentaries that operate as counterweights to the discourses of anger and hate filling the public sphere today while at the same time offering approaches that avoid provoking the demotivating phenomenon of compassion fatigue. In analysing these films, it is important to remember first of all that the notion that the film screen offers the spectator a kind of raw reality is in fact a myth, as all representations are mediated, informed by specific cultural and institutional practices that determine the conditions that render the phenomenon represented intelligible. Although they have received more scholarly attention in the field of fiction films (Balló and Bergala, 2016), certain visual approaches and iconographic patterns also operate as the dominant frameworks in documentary depictions (Balló and Salvadó, 2023). Various authors have been reflecting on these patterns in recent decades. Towards the end of the last century, for example, Liisa Malkki pointed to the “tendency to universalize the ‘the refugee’ as a special ‘kind’ of person not only in the textual representation, but also in their photographic representation” (1995: 9). In a subsequent study, the same author identified two main modes of presenting migrants and refugees in the media: “(1) masses of people positioned to look like a ‘sea of humanity’; and/or (2) close-up photographs of women and children” (1997: 235). Similarly, Terence Wright observed the lack of attention given to images in research on migrants and posited the existence of certain images or “historical archetypes that are used to portray the subject of forced migration” (Wright, 2000: 2) that draw upon models anchored in Christian iconography, which he la-

belled an “iconography of predicament” (Wright, 2000: 13). The traditional depiction of the Virgin and Child, which Wright identified in updated form in Dorothea Lange’s famous photograph *Migrant Mother* (1936), or the recurring allusion to the expulsion from Paradise in fictional stories about migration, which he suggests bear many features of the “Road Movie” genre, point to a productive line of research on the role of the image in discourses of reality that has yet to be fully explored, although there have been some interesting contributions (Fregoso, 2003; Manik, 2012; Wright, 2014; Chouliaraki and Stolic, 2017; Robinson, 2019; Franceschelli and Galipò, 2021; Beiruty, 2020; Eklsa, 2022; Balló and Salvadó, 2023; Moghimi, 2024).

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In any case, the persistent repetition of these visual strategies—exemplified in this century by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei’s award-winning documentary on global migration, *Human Flow* (2018)—have established an inventory of images that seem to be contributing actively to the de-politicising of “migrant cinema” (Rings, 2016; Yalouri, 2019; Cerdán and Fernández, 2022). This is the hypothesis underpinning this study: that the perceptual desensitisation resulting from this “ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image” (Sontag, 2003: 21) defining migrants is related to a large extent to the redundant and stereotypical nature of their audiovisual representations. This means that compassion fatigue can only be reversed by *re-sensitising* the gaze and nudging the distant observer towards a more empathetic and proactive position.

To this end, the estrangement strategies analysed in Russian formalism, which are rooted in the poetic function of language, seem a useful frame of reference for rethinking migrant cinema. These are discursive strategies that generally offer a different perspective on the object represented, as the Russian literary theorist Victor Shklovsky argued in his landmark essay “Art as Technique” (1917). In contrast to any individual’s habitual experience, the prolonged perception expected of a viewer of an artwork produces a “sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” that effectively defamiliarises the mundane, rational gaze (Shklovsky, 2017: 16). This is the artist’s ultimate aim: to hold the viewer’s gaze on the object, to keep it in its intransitive condition in order to prevent it from disappearing behind a meaning that would be the ultimate objective of the utilitarian gaze.

If aesthetics and ethics are combined, this defamiliarisation can operate as a precondition for a potential politicisation of the gaze, as Laura Marks (2000) suggests in relation to the “intercultural cinema” created by filmmakers who are part of a diaspora, a migrant community or a cultural minority. Citing the classical distinction proposed by Alois Riegl (1985) between optic and haptic perception, the former being associated strictly with the visual and rational and the latter with the tactile and sensory (and therefore similar to that prolonged perception described by Shklovsky), Marks highlights the experimental filmmaking practices that lean towards the latter, effectively evoking “a response that is simultaneously intellectual, emotional, and visceral” (Marks, 2000: xvi). It is thanks to its capacity for pushing beyond the cognitive frame of the conventions governing mainstream cinema through its attention to the materiality and the sensory values of the image that intercultural cinema is able to create a context where “politics and poetics are inextricable” (2000: xvi).

This article focuses on a notable example that seems to bring the two conditions together: eth-

ics and aesthetics are inextricably combined in *El Mar La Mar* (Joshua Bonnetta and J. P. Sniadecki, 2017), which explores the issue of migrants crossing the southern US border. It is a film that draws on the phenomenological and sensory power of contemporary documentary and address its topic through two complementary movements that pivot around defamiliarisation and haptic perception, leaning towards the poetic digression characterised, for example, by Andrei Tarkovsky’s science fiction films. It is particularly reminiscent of *Stalker* (1979), a film that similarly describes a human journey across a vast open space where nature acquires a menacing quality much like the Sonoran Desert in *El Mar la Mar*. The “prevalence of atmosphere over space, story or image” which, according to Robert Bird (2008: 14), gives the Russian filmmaker’s work something in common with poetic cinema, is of similar intensity to that displayed by the two filmmakers in their approach to the Mexico-US border: in both cases, the *mise-en-scène*, the framing and the sequencing are constructed in a way that prevents us from fully comprehending the world depicted, keeping our attention on the sensory surface of the image, as will be explored below. Rather than conveying what is happening on screen by means of a series of narrative events, much of *El Mar la Mar* can be described as aiming to “affect viewers ‘emotionally and sensuously’” (Bird, 2008: 153), as Bird suggests in relation to Tarkovsky’s films. But just as in the case of Tarkovsky’s work, poetic distancing does not preclude political reflection. Bonnetta and Sniadecki’s film ends with a formal ethical reflection on what lay hidden beneath the surface of the Sonoran Desert: the thousands and thousands of bodies of people who perished trying to navigate its deadly sands. The comparison with Tarkovsky’s universe shifts here to *Solaris* (1972), in which the unsettling vastness of the alien planet whose inscrutable surface conceals the same death impulse as the desert in *El Mar La Mar*.

2. EL MAR LA MAR: PHENOMENOLOGY, SENSORIALITY AND NON-FICTION CINEMA

El Mar La Mar is the product of a collaboration between a sound artist (Joshua Bonnetta) and a highly experienced filmmaker with a background in ethnography (J. P. Sniadecki). It is a film that offers an unsettling view of the journey of migrants into the United States via one of its deadliest points of entry: the Sonoran Desert. Shot in analogue format on 16mm film stock, it is divided into three sections, clearly separated by intertitles that break up the story: “Rio” (“River”), “Costas” (“Edges”) and “Tormenta” (“Storm”). The film had a significant international impact, receiving several awards and nominations at prestigious international competitions such as the Berlin International Film Festival and the IndieLisboa International Independent Film Festival.

El Mar La Mar has been described as an important example of the new sensory ethnographic cinema emblematically represented by the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University (Ginsburg, 2018), although its two creators do not seem to be comfortable with this label (Mulligan, 2017), mainly because the film transcends the limits of this movement, as will be argued here. The SEL was established at the beginning of the 21st century under the direction of Lucien Castaing-Taylor, a visual anthropologist who throughout the 1990s combined his work as a filmmaker with the publication of various essays that interrogate the use of audiovisual media in anthropology. According to its website, one of the SEL’s objectives is to promote “innovative combinations of aesthetics and ethnography” (Harvard University, n.d.). The SEL gained recognition on the contemporary film scene for *Sweetgrass* (Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009), which follows a group of livestock farmers over the mountains of Montana, and *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Verena Paravel, 2012), a dizzying audiovisual experience that immerses the spec-

tator in the world of a fishing boat at sea. Since then, the screening of sensory documentaries at prestigious international festivals, including Locarno, Venice and Berlin, has given visibility to productions such as *Manakamana* (Spray and Velez, 2013), Sniadecki’s films *The Yellow Bank* (Sniadecki, 2010) and *Foreign Parts* (Paravel and Sniadecki, 2010), which bear the unmistakable mark of the SEL, and films by Spanish directors such as Mauro Herce’s *Dead Slow Ahead* (2015) and Lois Patiño’s recent *Samsara* (2024), which seems to be an explicit showcase of sensory strategies.

The growing interest in these documentaries is rooted in the so-called “sensory turn” that took place in the field of social sciences in the final decades of the 20th century (Howes, 2003). In contrast to the traditional ethnographic approach, which attempts to offer an audiovisual translation of an intelligible reality using semiotic structures, a number of ethnographers and filmmakers began proposing new ways of understanding the Other. At the heart of these practices was the concept of experience, as Castaing-Taylor notes: “film not only constitutes *discourse about* the world, but also (re)presents an *experience of it*” (1996: 86). The similarity of this idea to the guiding principle of phenomenology is revealing. As Merleau-Ponty concisely explains, the phenomenological movement “tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is” (2005: vii). This notion has a radical impact on the process of interrogating the Other in cinematic representation. Rather than trying to explain the world as ethnographic films have traditionally done, a sensory documentary offers an experience of it through an attitude of reduction that eschews the preconceived evaluation of the world that it seeks to interrogate. In the strictest sense, it involves the “bracketing” the world described by Edmund Husserl (1962) in his concept of *epoché*, which served as a starting point for his new philosophical approach. Such is the phenomenological imprint on which most of sensory documentaries are founded: the camera, plunged

RATHER THAN TRYING TO EXPLAIN THE WORLD AS ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMS HAVE TRADITIONALLY DONE, A SENSORY DOCUMENTARY OFFERS AN EXPERIENCE OF IT THROUGH AN ATTITUDE OF REDUCTION THAT ESCHEWS THE PRECONCEIVED EVALUATION OF THE WORLD THAT IT SEEKS TO INTERROGATE

into an unfamiliar environment, can only capture fragments, impressions and loose scraps of a world in the process of forming rather than a world completed. Far from offering an audiovisual experience of a closed, intelligible world, they offer a perceptual experience full of “colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: xi).

2.1 From “Costas” to *Stalker*: Estrangement and Nomadic Space

In a reflection of its phenomenological foundations, *El Mar La Mar* begins first with the suspension of all knowledge about the world in which we are to be immersed, including the visual tropes that have traditionally governed the social imaginary of undocumented migrants from Mexico to the United States. In other words, before we can experience what it means to cross the deadly desert, we must abandon any idea of the existence of a reality outside our own consciousness and all a priori judgements of what the Sonoran Desert means. That is the *epoché* proposed by the filmmakers in the “Rio” section.

Thus, as Snadiecki himself explains, the sole purpose of the overture at the beginning of the documentary is “to defamiliarize and disorient you, so that you can reorient yourself through your perceptual apparatus, and through your sensorium” (quoted in Mulligan, 2017). In this way, you will be more receptive to the sensory experience you are about to be immersed in. “Rio”

unsettles our viewing experience by confronting us with a screen that offers us almost nothing on which to anchor our vision for almost three minutes. We are located at the fence that separates the two countries, but there is nothing to confirm this: no caption or voice-over to name the place, indicate the time or specify any details that would make it recognisable; just an endless succession of vertical strips superimposed vertiginously over the view, in a scene in which texture and abstraction trump content. It is impossible to overlook the resemblances to the long tracking shot that follows the explorer, the writer and the scientist into the Forbidden Zone in *Stalker*, despite the obvious differences between the two scenes: the extreme camera speed in Snadiecki and Bonnetta’s film contrasts with the formal slowness of the scene in Tarkovsky’s film, while the series of black vertical strips in *El Mar La Mar* differs from the positioning of the characters’ heads between the camera and the landscape in *Stalker*. But these differences cannot obscure the similarities: the sideways camera movement, the mobility of the gaze, and the indiscernible nature of the landscape. In both cases, the movement fulfils a similar function: to cleanse our gaze, offering a blurred, undefinable image that undermines our ability to recognise the location; in short, shaking off any visual prejudices that we may have in relation to the border.

Only then, once the narrative expectations for any documentary on this subject have been suspended, can the spectator be plunged directly into the ambiguous universe that defines “Costas”. Throughout this segment, analogies with *Stalker* can also be identified. Robert Bird’s reflection on the relationship between the spectator’s experience and the material world in Tarkovsky’s universe, “blocking our desire for continuity with a sensorial resistance that foregrounds the material intervention of the medium itself” (2008: 223), finds an echo in Bonnetta’s assertion that *El Mar La Mar* “is about a physical world: a place, its ma-

terials, its elements” (quoted in MacDonald, 2019: 490). In short, in both films, the expression of the sensory takes precedence over abstraction and the conception of space. In the Forbidden Zone in *Stalker*, rust corrodes manufactured objects exposed to the elements (cars, tanks and unrecognisable objects), and the abandoned, half-demolished buildings encountered by the characters on their journey are depicted as ruins of a recognisable past. The lushness of nature that seems to stop for nothing and no-one, the black coal with red burning embers still flickering and the wind stirring up the sand all focus our gaze on the physicality of the Zone. Similarly, the Sonoran Desert in *El Mar La Mar* is constructed with an emphasis on its materiality. The fire that sweeps across the mountain slope in the dark of night (darkening the image is of course one of Tarkovsky’s main defamiliarisation strategies), the entrails of an animal barely distinguishable from the fingers that are skinning it, the plants and shrubs scattered across the terrain that are beaten by the wind or rescued from the darkness by the blinding flashes of the border police’s spotlights, the clusters of clouds of all shapes and sizes that sail over the mountains and huddle around their peaks, and the distant points of light crossing the screen whose origins are never revealed; all these elements combine to offer a high level of sensory resistance to the conceptualisation of the setting depicted.

The insistent fixation on the concrete and the material aspects of both settings has an impact on the spectator’s overall conception of the space: neither *Stalker* nor *El Mar La Mar* offer the slightest possibility of conceiving of the location in terms of unity. Constructed instead as an instance of Deleuze’s (1986) “any-space-whatever” (a characteristic feature of modern cinema), both films eliminate any possibility of establishing contiguous or complementary relationships between the fragments that might at least allow the development of a plausible hypothesis about the limits and dimensions of the setting. This way

of understanding the space becomes a powerful phenomenological feature: the places represented are established by juxtaposing scattered pieces with no strong connection; they are a mere set of impressions with no clear relationship between them and that offer no glimpse of their topography. Both are spaces that are felt rather than comprehended.

Indeed, as the guide stresses, nobody has any conception of the Zone in *Stalker*. Moreover, it is a territory where nothing remains constant, a place that is made and unmade with every new foray into it—traps appear and disappear or change location—and where the only way the travellers have of orienting themselves is by randomly throwing metal nuts. Instead of following a predetermined route guided by regular signs, the travellers chart an extraordinarily irregular path, more circular and labyrinthine than linear, seemingly random and incomprehensible to the new visitors, which rather than marking the territory actually undermines any possibility of defining it. Each foray into the Zone therefore entails a new path and a new orientation, because there is no map and no possibility of establishing points of reference.

This same confusion, absence of references and lack of connection between fragments also characterises *El Mar La Mar*. In Snadieki and Bonnetta’s film, the spectator is plunged directly “into a space that you’re not able to decipher right away” (Mulligan, 2017). This is precisely what is striking about the Sonoran Desert: not so much the possibility of mapping where the film was shot, as Janet Walker (2024) proposes to do, as the sheer impossibility of conceiving of a map of Sonora, as Sniadecki himself suggests: “like the sea in the sense that it’s an amorphous entity; you can’t really know its volume or contain and reduce it to something easily understood, and its coasts and edges are constantly shifting” (quoted in MacDonald, 2019: 491). Vagueness and fuzziness are superimposed over clarity and demarcation in the depiction of the Sonoran Desert.

The night-time shots that barely distinguish the shapes and contours of the objects and characters filmed (soldiers, migrants, horses, barely discernible outlines of forms), the use of decontextualised close-ups that often fail even to capture a recognisable figure, sequencing governed by compositional and rhythmic rather than spatial criteria—in accordance with Tarkovsky, for whom rhythm “is the main formative element of cinema” (2002: 145)—all inform the construction of this inscrutable world for the spectator.

A good way of understanding the spatial approach of both projects is by considering their confrontation with the sedentary space/nomad space binary analysed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987). While sedentary space, whose quintessential graphic representation is the map, is recognised as being “striated by walls, enclosures, and roads between enclosures” (1987: 381), nomad space is defined as a smooth location “marked only by ‘traits’ that are effaced and displaced with the trajectory” (1987: 381). In opposition to the subjects of sedentary space, these authors explain, the wandering subjects of nomad space are first and foremost “vectors of deterritorialization. They add desert to desert, steppe to steppe, by a series of local operations whose orientation and direction endlessly vary” (1987: 382). The condition of travellers venturing into the Forbidden Zone, both in *Stalker* and *El Mar la Mar*, thus seems obvious: like nomads, they do not know the territory and can only wander around it blindly, making and unmaking their way, crossing the territory with no clear destination and without even the certainty that they will really be able to cross it.

The idea of the journey through the Sonoran Desert, in the words of one of its inhabitants, is a kind of “trippy little world” is reminiscent of Žižek’s reflection on the estrangement provoked by Tarkovsky’s vision: “Could we not perhaps draw the Brechtian conclusion that the typical Tarkovskyan landscape—the human environ-

ment in the process of deterioration and invasion by nature—represents a vision of our universe from the imaginary point of view of an alien?” (2006: 135). This is also essentially the spectator’s position in relation to the images and sounds perceived: a subject as bewildered and disoriented as an alien faced with the disturbing and threatening experience of travelling through a place with no connecting points and no known boundaries.

2.2 From “Storm” to *Solaris*: the lieu de mémoire and the originary world

While the elaborate reassessment of the sensory in “Edges” is necessary for the activation of a critical gaze on the migration crisis, it alone is not enough. The estrangement resulting from the attention to formal and expressive values—the defamiliarisation of the aesthetic object as an end in itself, according to Shklovsky (1978)—hinders or may even prevent reflection on the content represented. Stuart Robinson points this out in relation to a particular form of migrant cinema that adopts strategies typical of contemporary non-fiction, such as hybridisation and indifference to the symbolic values of the story, thereby avoiding the “potentially dehumanising pitfalls of more didactic approaches”, but risking the “phenomenological disconnection on the part of the potentially interested spectator” (Robinson, 2019: 118). As they are unable to establish connections that allow the spectator to identify with the characters’ experiences, such films run the risk of demotivating the distant observer.

Conversely, *El Mar La Mar* is significant precisely for its manifest intention to transcend the sensory and reintegrate the perceptions into a broader experience that can mobilise the spectator politically. This is why the film’s directors balk at the idea of including the film in the conceptual framework of the SEL, as unlike the productions made at the Harvard lab, Sniadecki and Bonnetta’s film does not hold back on commenting on the world it tries to depict. Instead, the phenomeno-

WHILE “EDGES” IS ORGANISED AROUND THE CONCEPT OF THE “ANY-SPACE-WHATEVER”, “STORM” ADHERES INSTEAD TO THE NOTION OF THE ORIGINARY WORLD

logical and sensory experience in “Edges” is complemented with another experience that requires the spectator to adopt a cognitive approach.

To this end, the film includes a final segment that contrasts with the ones before it in terms of both content and form. In “Storm”, we shift from the strange and disconcerting universe of the Sonoran Desert to the depiction of a *lieu de memoire* in the strictest sense: a place where collective memory is crystallised in the manner described by Pierre Nora (2008). This mutation of the space appears subtly throughout “Edges”. Little clues dropped into the narrative (the testimonies, although too disconnected to construct a cohesive story, provide information about what it means to inhabit the Sonoran Desert) have been preparing the spectator to confront what the desert means in symbolic terms. It is no mere coincidence that the final sequence focuses on showing what Slavoj Žižek describes in relation to *Stalker* as “human vestiges in the process of being reclaimed by nature” (2006: 135). Thus, the ground-level long shots in *Stalker* showing the remnants of untold stories while the characters lie down to rest—metal containers, a mirror, scraps of a calendar, coins and a religious icon, all lying under the water—have a grim echo in the detailed attention to the vestiges of loss at the end of “Edges”: half-buried rags and water bottles, footprints made by the bodies that passed through there at some point, a backpack, some cards, a religious image and the electronic parts of a phone overwhelm the material representation of the place, encouraging a reflection that points to another level of meaning easily associable with the humanitarian crisis.

This progressive inscription of meaning culminates in the construction of the desert presented in “Storm”. Here, the screen acquires a significant value that it has lacked until now, condensing a symbolic function revealed firstly in a shift of visual register. The array of oppositions to the previous segments is obvious: in contrast to the chromatic variety and richness of the first segments, the sombre quality of the black and white produces a greyscale image with practically no shades or contrasts. After the predominance of fragmentation in “Edges”, with its build-up of elements, objects and frame types characterised by oblique angles, comes the extreme flatness of “Storm”, with its succession of frontal wide shots that barely establishes any figurative difference between them. The frames, rather than being connected sequentially in sound narrative logic, focus the spectator’s gaze inside their boundaries, to images that are closed in on themselves.

The monumental nature of the screen then becomes overwhelming, with a completely empty set displayed as a kind of grand stage that seems to be awaiting the arrival of actors who never appear. In formal terms, it could be described as a kind of scenic layout, a mere backdrop with no shape or outline of a landscape, defined only by its minimal elements: little more than a line of horizon separating the earth from the sky, the material from the ethereal. The ceremoniousness and distance so typical of a *lieu de memoire* is conveyed entirely by the image, which is transformed into a global image of the whole desert. In short, while “Edges” is organised around the concept of the “any-space-whatever”, “Storm” adheres instead to the notion of the originary world, a world that “is recognisable by its formless character. It is a pure background, or rather a without-background composed of unformed matter, sketches or fragments” (Deleuze, 1986: 123). Unlike the fragmentary nature and spatial disconnection of the “any-space-whatever”, the originary world forms a whole that unites all its parts; however, rather than organising these elements, the aim is

to “gather up the scraps, form the great rubbish dump and bring everything together in a single and identical death impulse” (1986: 130). The space is thus charged with a gloomy potential that seems also to be the principle governing the Sonoran Desert in “Storm”, as Sniadecki himself has hinted by describing the desert in the film’s final segment as “cleansing and terrifying, biblical and primordial” (quoted in MacDonald, 2019: 494).

Deleuze points out two major differences between the concepts of the “any-space-whatever” and the originary space. First, while the former is related to the affectivity or emotion of the gaze, the latter is associated with its primordial condition, with impulses and visceral responses. And second, while the “any-space-whatever” can be constituted as an autonomous, fully fictional—or alien—space, the originary world is necessarily related to the “geographical and historical milieu which serves as its medium” (Deleuze, 1986: 124). In this way, the world represented aims to expose the violence and cruelty that characterises the real world. The desert in “Storm” inevitably establishes a cycle of reciprocity between what it shows and what it does not show, between the poetic nature of the image and the harsh reality of what it alludes to.

What can be taken from Deleuze’s bleak reflection and Sniadecki’s description is best understood by a less perceptible yet more substantial shift that occurs between the two segments: while the desert in “Edges” has been crossed, albeit only phantasmally, by nomadic bodies (of migrants, collaborators and inhabitants, but also spectators), the desert in “Storm” has no corporeal presence at all. The voice-over accompanies the image without explaining or describing it (instead, the poem “*Primero Sueño*” [“First Dream”], by the 17th-century Mexican poet Sor Juana de la Cruz, is recited). The voice-over’s autonomy from the image reinforces the radical absence of bodies on screen. But the fact they are not visible does not mean they are not imagined. There is no need to show the corpses or skeletons of migrants killed by the

brutal weather, roving robbers or border police. Nor is it necessary to resort to the iconographic inventory of migrant cinema with gratuitous images of men, women and children hiding in train cars or behind the shrubs and bushes scattered across the region. With its sparseness, the screen in “Storm” outlines an archaeological, stratigraphic image which, according to Deleuze (1987), combines perception with imagination, what we see and what we imagine. And just as Deleuze argues that “the earth stands for what is buried in it” (Deleuze, 1989: 244) in the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, the Sonoran Desert is transformed in the final segment of *El Mar La Mar* into the desolate tombstone beneath which are buried the bodies of all those who did not survive the journey and whose memory is now placed in the power of the spectator, who must imagine the unimaginable.

Ultimately, the rhetorical shift effectuated from “Edges” to “Storm” can be compared with the shift from the concrete nature of the Zone in *Stalker* to the abstract quality of the sentient ocean in *Solaris*, a homogeneous, liquid entity that resists all human attempts to penetrate its surface. The meticulous attention to the visible in “Edges” and *Stalker* stands in opposition to the attention given in *Solaris* and “Storm” to the invisible, to what lies deep below. Thus, just as the surface of the alien planet affects the deepest psychic layers of the scientists on the Solaris space station, the desert in “Storm” penetrates our subconscious, compelling us to wonder what lies beneath the ground, the meaning concealed in its inaccessible subterranean layers. There is one difference, however, because the sentient ocean in Tarkovsky’s film is turned into an ocean of memory in *El Mar La Mar*, an overwhelmingly isolated space for the spectator, who must imagine what the landscape hides. As a primordial image, the wide shot of the desert reveals in its visual simplicity the death impulse that this lethal place represents. Death is, in short, what awaits all those who confront Solaris or Sonora.

3. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

This article has sought to clarify the distance between Bonetta and Sniadecki's vision and the principles of the sensory documentary. In a preliminary exercise to defamiliarise the gaze that eschews the typical didactic register and iconography of migrant cinema, "Edges" immerses the spectator in a sensory experience of the Sonoran Desert that is ultimately transformed into a commemorative reflection in "Storm". The productive dialogue this film establishes with Andrei Tarkovsky's science fiction filmography reveals the emphasis they place on the physical, material aspects of the universe depicted, and the fact that this focus is the aesthetic starting point that leads to an essentially ethical end point. While in the first part of *El Mar La Mar* the setting resembles that ambiguous, unsettling region through which the protagonists wander in *Stalker*, nomadic subjects stumbling across an amorphous terrain that is reconfigured with each foray into it, the documentary's conclusion has more in common with the inscrutable surface of the planet Solaris, where any search for meaning is ultimately fruitless and inevitably leads to death.

Notably, however, Bonetta and Sniadecki's project converges with Tarkovsky's from the opposite direction: while the Russian filmmaker uses generic codes to explore moral questions about what it means to be human,¹ the two contemporary directors begin with a moral issue—a human crisis—to push the audiovisual experience into the realm of horror and the fantastic. It is thanks to these two complementary movements, combining poetic and political distancing, that *El Mar La Mar* sidesteps the problem of passion fatigue and proposes new ways of talking about migration, which, as Laura Marks (2000) has suggested, may be able to offer answers that are at once intellectual, emotional and visceral. ■

NOTES

- 1 "Science fiction in *Stalker* was nothing more than a tactical starting point, useful to help us highlight the moral conflict even more starkly, which was essential for us" (Tarkovsky, 2002: 222).

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WHEN MIGRATION BECOMES A MATTER OF SCIENCE FICTION: EL MAR LA MAR

Abstract

This paper analyses *El Mar La Mar* (Joshua Bonnetta and J. P. Sniadecki, 2017), a documentary about the migration crisis at the southern US border that aims to overcome the perceptual desensitisation caused by “ultra-familiar” images. To this end, it eschews the iconographic regimes of migrant cinema and resorts instead to the poetic estrangement that characterises Andrei Tarkovsky’s science fiction films. Through the use of defamiliarising strategies throughout much of its length, the film immerses the spectator in a sensory experience of the Sonoran Desert akin to that of *Stalker* (1979) with its detailed focus on the physical and material world of the Forbidden Zone. However, this focus is merely an aesthetic starting point that is ultimately complemented with a strictly ethical conclusion. The final segment of the documentary adopts the qualities of the sentient ocean in *Solaris* (1972), with a world that draws the spectator’s attention to what lies beneath the desert’s surface: the thousands of migrants who died while trying to cross its expanse. It is through this combination of aesthetic and ethical movements that *El Mar La Mar* elicits a response from the spectator that is at once sensory, emotional, and intellectual.

Key words

Documentary; Migration; Science fiction; Sensoriality; Joshua Bonnetta and J. P. Sniadecki; Andrei Tarkovsky.

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CUANDO LA MIGRACIÓN ES ASUNTO DE CIENCIA FICCIÓN: EL MAR LA MAR

Resumen

El siguiente trabajo analiza *El Mar La Mar* (Joshua Bonnetta y J. P. Sniadecki, 2017), un documental sobre el drama migratorio en la frontera sur de los Estados Unidos que busca superar el entumecimiento perceptivo de las imágenes «ultra-conocidas». Para ello, se aleja de los regímenes iconográficos del *migrant cinema* y recurre al extrañamiento poético que singulariza el cine de ciencia ficción de Andrei Tarkovski. A través de estrategias de desautomatización de la mirada en gran parte de su metraje, el documental confronta al espectador con una experiencia sensorial del desierto de Sonora, que es del mismo orden que en *Stalker* (1979) y su detallada atención al mundo físico y material de la zona prohibida. Pero dicha revalorización es el punto de partida estético que se complementa con un punto de llegada que es estrictamente ético. El último segmento del documental asume los rasgos del océano pensante de *Solaris* (1972), mundo que dirige la atención del espectador hacia aquello que esconde bajo su superficie: los miles de muertos de migrantes que perecieron intentando atravesar su territorio. Es gracias a ese doble movimiento complementario, estético y ético, que *El Mar La Mar* logra concitar en el espectador una repuesta que es tanto sensorial como emocional e intelectual.

Palabras clave

Documental; Migración; Ciencia ficción; Sensorialidad; Joshua Bonnetta y J. P. Sniadecki; Andrei Tarkovski.

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BECOMING-ANIMAL: NON-HUMAN PERCEPTUAL FORMS AND *DISPOSITIFS* IN CONTEMPORARY IBERO-AMERICAN CINEMA*

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ANNA MUNDET

SANTIAGO FILLOL

INTRODUCTION

In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, when Gregor Samsa wakes up to find he has turned into a beetle, his first worry is how to put on a shirt with two sleeves when he has so many legs, as he needs to get dressed and go to work. He has the sensibility of a human, but the motor skills of an insect. In his celebrated course in European literature, Nabokov suggested that perhaps Samsa's metamorphosis had somehow been interrupted, that he had ended up stuck in a limbo between human and non-human states. This intermediate space is precisely what Deleuze and Guattari draw on in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005) with their concept of "becoming-animal", a concept that refers not to a human turning into an animal (or vice versa), but to the power of becoming itself, as a space and time for a hybridisation that can open up our perception. Kafka himself posited an in-

verted version of becoming-animal in his short story "A Report to an Academy" (1983), in which an ape tries to convince a group of scientists that he belongs to the human species. In the story, Red Peter describes the hardships of his captivity, and how his acquisition of human language and culture was not a liberation or an achievement but a forced and unnatural learning process to which he submitted only to avoid being condemned to a cage in a zoo. His report aims to remind the scientists that we all share a similar origin, a similar evolutionary condition marked by painful learning experiences. The menacing shadow looming over our perception of this shared limbo—intuitively by Kafka from a sinisterly existential human angle—is a psychological drive that has been taken up and radicalised in recent years by various authors, from J. M. Coetzee to Donna Haraway and from John Berger to Octavia Butler. While in Kafka's work the identification of this fuzzy state

of interspecies becoming generated an existential unease in humans, today this apprehension has been transformed, as humans who immerse themselves in this space will expand their sensibility and open their perception up to other creatures, and this contagious condition seems to give rise to a liberating symbiosis.

The concept of becoming-animal proposed by Deleuze and Guattari is echoed in the human being's way of approaching animals through the cinematic apparatus. "No art is imitative", the authors assert in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2005: 304). "The painter and musician do not imitate the animal, they become-animal at the same time as the animal becomes what they willed, at the deepest level of their concord with Nature" (2005: 305): pure line, pure colour, sound, speed. To characterise the originality of their concept, Deleuze and Guattari describe the idea of becoming in opposition to imitation:

As we have seen, imitation can be conceived either as a resemblance of terms culminating in an archetype (series), or as a correspondence of relations constituting a symbolic order (structure); but becoming is not reducible to either of these. The concept of mimesis is not only inadequate, it is radically false (2005: 546).

In their emphatic assertion that "becoming is never imitating" (2005: 305), Deleuze and Guattari point to processes of affective transformation that bind species together, such as wasps and orchids connected in a process of becoming that does not involve evolution, filiation, identification or progress. "Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree" (2005: 239) they explain, thereby associating the becoming process with the concept of the rhizomatic condition, a notion that runs throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, which

has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it over-spills [...]. Unlike the tree, the rhizome is not the object of reproduction [...]. The rhizome pertains to

a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight (2005: 21).

For this reason, they argue that "[t]he orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp", but rather "forms a map" with the wasp in a rhizomatic connection (2005: 12). This particular connection posited by Deleuze and Guattari with their concept of "becoming-animal" is thus closer to an alliance or somatic sensory conjunction (2005: 243). In this respect, the notion of becoming-animal is understood here as an alliance between human artists and non-human animals, who establish an affective conjunction that is realised and expressed in various film scenes. Deleuze and Guattari describe becoming as a "zone of indiscernibility" (2005: 280) where a double deterritorialisation takes place: a zone where the two participants in the encounter mutually change and modify each other. This principle can be identified in certain Ibero-American films released in recent years that focus on the process of becoming-animal. This article analyses different strategies for documenting these *becomings*, with special attention to the issues that these strategies bring to light in productions that attempt to imagine and express this interspecies phenomenon in cinematic language.

This study is positioned at the intersection between these philosophical intuitions and contemporary audiovisual strategies to offer a reading of recent Ibero-American films as spac-

DELEUZE AND GUATTARI DESCRIBE BECOMING AS A "ZONE OF INDISCERNIBILITY" WHERE A DOUBLE DETERRITORIALISATION TAKES PLACE: A ZONE WHERE THE TWO PARTICIPANTS IN THE ENCOUNTER MUTUALLY CHANGE AND MODIFY EACH OTHER

THESE FILMS ARE EXPLORED NOT MERELY AS REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ANIMAL, BUT AS EXPERIENCES THAT BRING INTO PLAY A PERCEPTION BEYOND THE HUMAN

es for exploring the notion of becoming-animal. These films form part of a globalised trend, based on lines of research on films made in other regions. It is also important to acknowledge studies that have been conducted on the historical representation of animals, which have taken different approaches depending on the region concerned: wildlife films (Bousé, 2000), the avant-garde and surrealist explorations of scientific images of animals by Jean Painlevé (Leo Cahill, 2019), and in the case of Spain, Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente's nature documentaries (Ares-López, 2019). Although this article examines a number of aesthetic trends identifiable in contemporary Ibero-American cinema, it also has the aim of highlighting the urgent need to chart the genealogy of this approach, to which end a preliminary outline is offered here. Of particular interest for this study is how certain cinematic *dispositifs* (ways of framing, viewing, narrating or distributing the presence of animal bodies) create "zones of indiscernibility" where humans and non-humans mutually affect each other. Rather than resolving the tensions of interspecies contact, these zones actually exacerbate them, opening up new possibilities of perception that are disconcerting to the human ego.

As Deleuze and Guattari point out, the objective of becoming-animal is not to imitate the animal but to become with it. This involves a double deterritorialisation that transforms both the human subject and the animal represented. In this article, it is argued that cinema, as a sensory *dispositif*, offers a visual grammar that can capture these overflows. The films analysed here—which deal with a range of Ibero-American contexts—

experiment with ways of depicting the animal that go beyond mere representation to evoke, interrogate and reconfigure it. In particular, this analysis focuses on three key aspects around which the study is organised: non-human filming technologies and visual regimes; the perspectives and overflows of the animal camera; and the use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphic realism. These aspects can shed some light on how the dreams of hybridisation—understood as human attempts to understand and often to dominate the other animal—are reproduced or disrupted in contemporary cinema (Segarra, 2025). But they can also reveal the creation of non-domesticating connections in certain films, shifting the logic of control towards other forms of cohabitation, care or de-identification. These films are thus explored not merely as representations of the animal, but as experiences that bring into play a perception beyond the human.

I. NON-HUMAN FILMING TECHNOLOGIES AND VISUAL REGIMES

The films *Salvaxe, salvaxe* [Wild, Wild] (Emilio Fonseca, 2024), *Reserve* (Gerard Ortin, 2020) and *592 metroz goiti* [Above 592 Metres] (Maddi Barber, 2019) explore different ecosystems of the Iberian Peninsula and its animal wildlife. In some cases they make use of camera trap images or infrared footage to represent forestry research or management work involving species such as wolves and vultures.

Filmmaker Gerard Ortin's short film *Reserve* deals with the disappearance of the Iberian wolf from the Cuadrilla de Añana region of the Basque Country. This species, which once played an essential role as a predator—leaving remains that other animals such as vultures could later feed on—and thus helped maintain a regulated ecosystem, has not been seen in this region for many years. The filmmaker becomes involved in research and management in the area, making



Image 1

and filming a phone call to an American company that produces urine essences to attract wolf packs. This short film also tracks the process of providing food for the vultures in the region, which includes hunting wild boars and distributing carrion.

The opening sequences focus on hunters on the reserve who are getting shooting practice on a hunting ground. The wide shots of the forest use a slow-motion movement to simulate an ethereal presence, which sometimes reveals humans camouflaged among the trees, and which is enhanced by a low-frequency sound design with specific non-human noises. The short film constructs the space of the forest with a night sequence filmed using an infrared camera to show the process of stalking a wild boar. The red-tinted image of the forest at night appears gradually, and in one of the trees is a camouflaged hunter, moving stealthily and aiming a gun. Filmed using infrared technology, the footage of a boar eating off the ground next to an animal-shaped hunting target has the estranging effect of an artificial image (Image 1). Such approaches destabilise animals and technologies, with the aim of “incorporating other non-human entities and positioning them on the same level” (Veloso, 2018: para. 3).

Another example of camera trap images can be found in Maddy Barber’s short film *592 metroz goiti*, which shows a park ranger working with vultures in the vicinity of the Itoiz dam, a devastating construction that has altered the eco-social conditions of the Navarre region to which the filmmaker has dedicated part of her filmography (Cordal, 2024). The film begins by introducing this species living in the mountains and flying over the dam, with the mediation of technology by means of a vignetting technique that replicates the view through the park ranger’s binoculars, suggesting an embodied camera that is never disassociated from its human position. Another scene shows a vulture being captured in a construction zone, offering a reflection on extraction zones and interspecies contact that necessitate the biopolitical management of animals’ bodies in order to avoid interruptions to economic activity. The park ranger has to relocate the animal, leaving food for its survival and some surveillance cameras in the forest. This technology provides the material for a sequence of still images that represent the behaviour of vultures in an area where they go to feed, observed from a distance through an analytical mechanical lens. However, the montage concludes with one last photograph in which the vultures seem to subvert this logic of observation, glaring at the camera with their wings outstretched as if defending themselves.

Complementing the explorations of human actions related to the hunting and management of Iberian fauna in these short films, Emilio Fonseca’s *Salvaxe, Salvaxe* (2024) follows a group of biologists through the forests of Galicia and Portugal as they track down the region’s last surviving wolves, displaced from their habitat by the

human presence in the region. Camera trap images reveal their behaviour, as we observe the intermittent activity of humans by day alternating with fleeting forays into the area by wolves, foxes and boars by night. We see the scientists analysing the night images, comparing what they record with archival footage and examining animal droppings, and gradually we begin to discern that the film's aim is to construct a non-invasive gaze.



Image 2

The fact that the wolves are never followed by the camera marks an invisible ethical boundary for the human presence, which both the team of scientists and the film crew have agreed not to cross. This filmmaking approach implements the defence of animal privacy proposed by Anat Pick (2015) in an essay based on ideas previously posited by Brett Mills (2010), who points out that while invading the privacy of humans must always be justified, the success of footage of animals shown in BBC wildlife documentaries depends on the difficulty of access to those animals: the harder it is to capture them, the better. Inverting this logic, the distance maintained to ensure the wolf's privacy in *Salvaxe, salvaxe* constitutes an act of "resistance" (Pick, 2015: 116). This form of mediated observation points to a new way of looking in the age of the Anthropocene, a term proposed by Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) to designate the geological epoch in which human activity has become a force capable of irreversibly altering our planet's ecosystems. The adoption of this perspective entails an acknowledgement of the ethical weight of the human gaze on the natural world and the need to reassess its impact, similar perhaps to Randy Malamud's suggestion that we should be seeking out "less harmful ways of looking at animals", or even considering the possibility of not looking at other animals

at all (2012: 89). This perspective is also in keeping with the notion of "implied contemplation" that some authors have used to describe the films and filmmaking practice of Trinh T. Minh-Ha (Ramos, 2021: 4), who rejects both the supposed objectivity of the classical documentary and the authoritarian forms of intervention in the subjects filmed.

Salvaxe, salvaxe brings into play a *negative* aesthetic apparatus that effectuates an estrangement of our human gaze: we feel the remoteness of the object of study, its absence and even its imminent disappearance. In one scene, two reflective pupils captured on the nocturnal surveillance camera seem to return our gaze, in a phantasmagorical voyeurism between a species being forced to cede its territory and another known to be an invader (Image 2). At another moment, the camera trap image freezes and we contemplate the silhouette of the wolf, which has become a constellation of luminous points. *Salvaxe, salvaxe* "covers" our eyes and teaches us to view the "wild" from a distance, in keeping with theories that dismantle the binaries of nature/culture and animality/humanity (Morizot, 2021). At the same time, the film aims to teach our ears to listen differently: at dusk, the biologists focus their attention on the noises of the valley and point out the multiple layers of sound:

beneath the murmur of the road and the hissing of electric cables, we can discern some distant howls. As the scene ends, we continue to hear them, but the screen has now turned to black. This long shot functions as a sort of auditory relic, a black box of lingering sounds.

2. FROM THE EYES OF THE OTHER: PERSPECTIVES AND OVERSPILLS OF THE ANIMAL CAMERA

Another contemporary cinematographic strategy that can be identified is the positioning of the camera from the point of view of the non-human animal, in an effort to break with the traditional anthropocentric perspective. In recent films by some Ibero-American filmmakers, there are clear strategies to reproduce the position, height, size or movement of animals, or to construct visual and auditory perceptions similar to what those animals might experience. In this context, Jonathan Burt (2002) has been a pioneer in research on the breadth of semiotic and semantic meanings contained in film images of non-human animals. In addition to rhetorical animals constructed specifically to allude to metaphors or allegories in films, representations focusing on the relationships between humans and animals have also been developed, giving agency to the animals (Burt, 2002), sometimes adopting their point of view and revealing the fluid boundaries between the two categories.

While such approaches offer more ethical forms of scopic interaction with animals, it is important to recognise, as John Berger points out, that all representation is still a mediated, second-hand experience (Berger, 1980, quoted by Creed and Reesink, 2015), inevitably constrained by the framing of the shot. However, although they are still characterised by this conditioning inherent to the film medium, the films of Silvia Zayas and Carlos Casas display a deliberate effort to expand the human vision and offer experienc-

es closer to the perception of non-human animals. These are filmmakers who question not only why we look at animals, but also how they and the physical world they inhabit look at us, exploring the construction of our image and existence in their visual world (Creed and Reesink, 2015). This is an idea considered in Thomas Nagel's famous essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1974), in which the author uses the example of the use of echolocation by bats to identify an epistemological and phenomenological boundary between human and non-human experience. Nagel argues that consciousness has an inevitably subjective character, and therefore any attempt to imagine how another animal perceives the world is necessarily mediated by our own human subjectivity; in short, when we try to imagine the experience of another creature, we can only represent what it would be like for us to behave like that creature.

This cinematic strategy of placing the camera in the position of the non-human animal and working—or experimenting—with the medium's sensory perceptual potential in relation to otherness is also employed in Silvia Zayas's *Ruido ê* (the film) (2023), a research-production project that observes the *Torpedo* electric ray from a remote underwater perspective¹ and explores the impact of anthropogenic noise on these sea creatures. Zayas describes the project as a somatic journey based on the idea of "speaking nearby", adopting Trinh T. Minh-Ha's expression to name a type of filmmaking that eschews "speaking about" (quoted by Zayas, 2025: para. 7-8) and proposes an eth-

[ZAYAS] PROPOSES AN ETHICAL AND AESTHETIC ALTERNATIVE THAT DOES NOT APPROPRIATE THE VOICE OR THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHERS, BUT RECOGNISES AND RESPECTS THE DISTANCE AND DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FILMMAKER AND FILMED SUBJECT

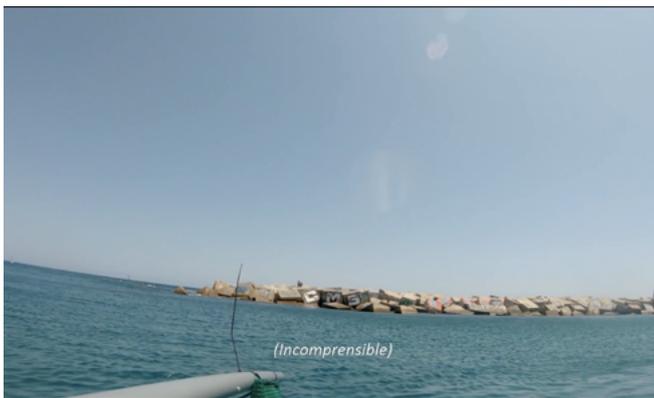


Image 3 (above)
Image 4 (below)

ical and aesthetic alternative that does not appropriate the voice or the experience of others, but recognises and respects the distance and difference between filmmaker and filmed subject. This is an approach that can be brought into dialogue with the notion of the embodied experience in cinema proposed by Vivian Sobchack (2004) to define filmmaking as an exchange of perception and knowledge between two sentient bodies: the body of the spectator and of the film itself, which also *feels and perceives*.

This approach is evident in the film's sound design, which not only focuses on acoustic impact but also explores noise as an inability to read or interpret the unknown, as well as the fuzzy yet intelligible images of the sea floor (Image 3). For these images, no attempt is made to facilitate human decoding; instead, the film encourages a somatic immersion in an alien perceptual universe. Especially significant in this respect is the

beginning of the film, where the breakwaters off the coast of Barcelona are framed in a shot showing the surface of the ocean from the perspective of a human floating in the water. At this moment, some subtitled human voices, which are initially intelligible, become increasingly muffled (Image 4) as the camera descends into the water, marking the beginning of a journey of becoming-animal in which the human presence gradually dissolves.

The camera plunges into a chaotic maelstrom of particles floating and shooting in different directions, while the perspective is deterritorialised and expanded towards the haptic sense: wandering, swaying at the mercy of the currents and suddenly varying the intensity of our hearing and reaction. This presence, through whose senses we explore the underwater world, intones a vague nasal melody. As Zayas explains, “ê’ is a nasal sound made when you cover your nose [...] underwater” (Zayas, 2021:3). This kind of “trans-mental lullaby” induces a dreamlike state, in a “becoming-aquatic” that elicits memories and associations from our subconscious.

According to Dziga Vertov, upon being freed from the motor limitations of the human eye, the camera's eye discovers a whole new perception of reality (2011). In the Deleuzian universe, the cinematic apparatus becomes a “body without organs”, a sensibility “with no connections to an external unifying principle, soul, or unity of an organism; positioned at the level of matter itself, hyletic flow, an as-yet uninformed material plane of ‘intense and unformed, unstratified matter’” (Deleuze, quoted in Sauvagnargues, 2006: 101). In Zayas's work, the becoming-animal is attained through this body without organs, which is able to disappear and dissolve into a cinematographic-aquatic plasticity. The camera that facilitates access to the sensory universe of the torpedo ray is deterritorialised, located not in the eye but in the torso of the filmmaker. The animal barely appears in the film, but the camera attempts to encounter its becom-

ing by roaming, abandoning all coordinates and opening up to all kinds of stimuli. In this way, the camera emerges as an indispensable agent in the transition from the vertical-ocular-anthropocentric sensibility of the human to the perception of a nocturnal cartilaginous species which, for reasons unknown, has learnt to survive in a hostile environment. It is thus worth considering whether somatisation and the attempted approximation of animal vision might invoke a more environmentally conscious interaction between humans and animals, in line with the rejection of Cartesian dualisms by other artists (Malamud, 2012).

There is also an element of becoming-animal in the fades-to-black and phantasmagorical images in *Cemetery* (Carlos Casas, 2019). These strategies serve to suspend human perception and open up a liminal sensory space: an altered, fragmentary and indeterminate reality. In a sense, Casas'

film acknowledges the problem that Nagel (1974) points out, that it is impossible to faithfully represent how animals see, and so instead of attempting an unachievable mimesis, the filmmaker chooses to suggest their otherness through suspension, the void and the evocation of the unfathomable.

Cemetery follows the journey of an old Asian elephant and his keeper through the Sri Lankan jungle.

Weather alerts are broadcast on the radio, the first few drops of what looks like a mighty deluge begin to fall, and we glimpse the unsettling presence of ivory hunters. Meanwhile, the man and the elephant silently prepare to leave their habitat forever. Before their departure, the keeper burns his family records, and among the photographs consumed by the flames we see one of him as a young man, posing next to his elephant, at what appears to be a circus. This brief shot signals that

Image 5



the mysterious interspecies connection between the two characters has its origins in forced adaptation to the colonial, extractivist presence in Southeast Asia. A key scene in the film reveals the heart of the “becoming-animal” of both characters: the enormous animal is lying in a pond, and the keeper begins washing him, scrubbing every fold of his skin, adjusting the intensity of his touch as the progresses from the beast’s feet to his thin ears (Image 5). The animal’s relaxed attitude suggests that this is an exchange that the two have engaged in for decades.² The scene ends with a close-up of the elephant’s eye, which blinks as the creature dozes off: the bath has the appearance of a rite of initiation, in which the keeper lulls the animal to sleep. The elephant seems to exist in an ambiguous zone between rational knowledge and Rilke’s notion of “the Open”: “you can take the elephant out of the jungle, but you can’t take the jungle out of the elephant. And the elephant will take you into the jungle” (Casas, 2021: 157). Between the two figures there seems to be a transmission of the knowledge they will take with them on their journey through catastrophe, and finally, extinction.

The protagonists’ long journey to the mythical cemetery at the end of the film constitutes a transformation that involves a process of “becoming-animal” for both. In the hypnotic sequence of the journey through the jungle, the characters’ figures are replaced with POV shots that shift between the keeper and the elephant in a delicate hybridisation. We learn to sway with the rhythm of their steps and enter the world foreshadowed by the elephant’s drowsy gaze in the bath scene. As we enter the darkness of the jungle, we begin to adopt a single, fused gaze upon the pre-linguistic mystery that unites the species. Through the estranging sounds of the jungle—bird and insect noises merge into a dense network of encrypted messages—we are faced with the abstraction of form; pure shadows that recall the elephants’ ancestors in prehistoric caves.

3. THE USE OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND ZOOMORPHIC REALISM

The films *Pepe* (Nelson Carlo de los Santos Arias, 2024) and *Monólogo colectivo* [Collective Monologue] (Jessica Sarah Rinland, 2024) offer representative cases of processes of becoming-animal that border on anthropomorphism. These two films expose the historical issue of anthropocentrism in moving image culture and question the centrality of the human in the capacity of cinema to identify anthropomorphically with animals (Smaill, 2016).

Pepe tells the story of a generation of hippos transported to the Hacienda Nápoles, a 3,000-hectare estate of the Colombian drug baron Pablo Escobar. The film thus explores a process of extractivism that replicates the logic of colonialism (presented at the beginning of the story in Africa) and its latent effects on Colombian society. It is organised into three parts: the extraction of three hippos from their natural habitat in Namibia; their arrival at the Hacienda Nápoles in Colombia, where they adapt as an *invasive* species; and the encounter with and subsequent hunting of the hippo Pepe, who wandered from his herd towards the fishing communities along the Magdalena River. Film critics have pointed out how the film repositions the hippo as the narrator of his own story, thereby proposing a rhizomatic interconnection between history, animals and humans (Díaz de la Vega, 2025). This is an idea that the director himself has also emphasised, pointing to the crisis in humankind’s sense of belonging to nature (Martín and Álvarez López, 2024).

Pepe uses animation, archival images, fiction and documentary footage of hippos in pursuit of a strategy to give the animal an anthropomorphic voice, while laying bare the process of ethnographic documentation of the territory carried out by the director (De Los Santos Arias, 2024). The film includes a distorted and dramatised voice, bordering on comical caricature, which begins



Image 6

by identifying itself with the animal who proposes to tell his story, adopting the register of fable. Throughout the film, the voice alternates between different languages (Mbukushu, Afrikaans and Colombian Spanish), evoking hybrid cultures and colonial power flows. With this mechanism, as Mónica Delgado points out, “Pepe speaks because there is a need not only to articulate an ‘animal’ mode of thinking but also to transfer the analogy to a whole colonial apparatus that creates subjugated beings within hegemonic discourses” (2024: para. 4). Moreover, incorporating the *dispositif* of surveillance, the filmmaker also mixes images from camera traps located in the hippo’s habitats to capture how it moves, how it sleeps and how birds perch on its body. In one scene, the camera simulates a helicopter, descending and plunging into the water to film underwater images of hippos escaping (Image 6). Later, a succession of aerial shots and wide shots of the landscapes mark the

journey of the helicopters illegally transporting the hippos to Colombia in large cargo boxes.

In contrast to the excessive editing of wildlife documentaries, where a narrative of animal behaviour is manufactured using a voice-over that reduces the images of the animals to only one possible meaning,³ here their behaviour is filmed while the voice-over of the hippo Pepe invents his own story of his banishment from the Hacienda Naples. This approach effectively dismantles the dynamics of human domination over animals and the predominance of the anthropocentric paradigm that Smaill identifies in wildlife films (2016). The strategy of turning the story of the hippo into an anthropomorphic narrative, which contributes to the construction of an interconnected history between humans and animals, invites critical reflection on the possibilities of these mechanisms, as James Leo Cahill (2013) points out. Not all anthropomorphism is constructed from an anthro-

pocentric perspective (2013), and in the case of *Pepe*, the strategy serves as a critical exercise that facilitates access to a form of knowledge in which nature and animals constitute historical agents.

Monólogo colectivo documents the work of a wild animal rescue centre in La Plata, Argentina, showing how a group of caregivers monitors them, feeds them, conditions their environments, and above all, provides them with affection and cares for their emotional well-being. Every scene depicting the caregivers' attention and caresses hints at the violent past of these animals due to colonial practices (circuses, zoos, poaching, etc.). The title of the film alludes to a term coined by Jean Piaget to designate the phase of childhood development when children believe that the natural world has been created for them and that they can influence it at will. The film portrays the consequences of extractivist practices and shows us how a new relationship of mutual understanding can be cultivated in the Anthropocene era.

In a key scene in *Monólogo colectivo*, the caregivers take part in a training session, divided into pairs, one in the role of "trainer" and the other in the role of "animal". They are given a set of objects as brainteasers, and the "trainer" guides the "animal" while the latter experiments with them. The scene shows how preconceived logics are dismantled and how the intuitive apparatus needs to be engaged in order to step into the skin of the animal. We quickly realise that the caregivers are communicating using codes similar to animal training or domestication techniques because the animals in their care have been affected by a forced *becom-*

ing-anthropocenic, irremediably altered by human influence. After the experiment, participants share their difficulties and frustrations and discuss the need to maintain a channel of communication. As Smaill notes, the role of the people who appear in these encounters with animals is crucial for mediating the subject-object relationship (2016). We thus see the rescue centre workers draw on codes from the context of exploitation, but with the aim of developing new connections.

While *Red Peter* addresses humans after having undertaken an irreversible transformation,

Rinland's film explores the creation of a language halfway between the human and the animal that is able to overcome the collective monologue phase. The heart of this language is tactile. The multiple shots of caresses, gazes and physical contact orchestrate a code shared with the various species kept

at the centre, from the gorilla to the elephant to the anteater (Image 7). Through such contact, the film itself becomes a field of experimentation with this new haptic language. "This term comes from the Greek (*haptomai*), which means 'to come into contact with', 'to touch' or 'to grasp', and this term's status as a deponent verb presupposes another meaning, as to touch means to be touched" (Maurette, 2017: 56). In contrast to the use of the eye (the quintessential organ of modernity, facilitating a scopic drive through the hunter's sighting device), this film—in line with phenomenology and the affective turn—portrays humans who seek to be transformed by the animal, providing a close-up view of the contact between the rough textures of the primate's hand



Image 7

and the thin fingers of the caregiver, revealing a new recognition between the two on screen. In *The Expression of Hands*, Harun Farocki (1997) discusses the dramatic importance of the close-up on hands, which becomes a sort of *stage*. In this sense, *Monólogo colectivo* constructs a stage for the most essential issues raised in this article: a new universal interspecies contract, a historic restitution confirmed by hands coming together over both sides of the fence.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Ibero-American context, the films discussed here cannot be dissociated from a shared history of colonisation, extraction and violence against bodies (human and non-human) that has shaped the political ecologies of these territories. In this respect, the different forms of becoming-animal portrayed in these films not only share a questioning of anthropocentric hierarchies but also explore a specific region (Ibero-America) that has historically been strained by conflicts related to hunting, conservation and agro-industry. Film-making practices such as these can be interpreted in relation to the concept of “creaturely poetics” posited by Anat Pick (2011), who proposes an animal ethics based not on subjectivity or personality, but on a recognition of the vulnerability that all living bodies share. The strategies adopted by these filmmakers thus do not merely imitate the gaze of non-human animals; rather, they seek to recognise their otherness and their agency, while avoiding anthropomorphic simplifications. The different examples analysed in this article reveal how the practice of opening up the space of representation (and refraining from speaking on behalf of or over anyone) can facilitate an audiovisual exercise that deliberately suspends meaning, allowing other perceptions, other (non-human) ways of looking to enter and inhabit the image. These zones of indeterminacy halfway between the animal and the human gaze, between sensory

IN THIS SENSE, MONÓLOGO COLECTIVO CONSTRUCTS A STAGE FOR THE MOST ESSENTIAL ISSUES RAISED IN THIS ARTICLE: A NEW UNIVERSAL INTERSPECIES CONTRACT, A HISTORIC RESTITUTION CONFIRMED BY HANDS COMING TOGETHER OVER BOTH SIDES OF THE FENCE

engagement and the cinematic image, establish an interspecies sensibility that challenges traditional ways of talking about the natural world. And they do this through a transformative power which, as Kafka suggests, reveals both the challenge and the promise of a shared perception. ■

NOTES

- * This article is the product of the research project titled “Mutations of Visual Motifs in the Public Sphere – Representations of Power in Spain 2017-2021: Pandemic, Climate Change, Gender Identities and Racial Conflicts” (PID2021-126930-I00), developed at Universitat Pompeu Fabra and funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by ERDF, EU.
1. To develop a methodology for the non-invasive observation of these beings, Zayas, in collaboration with marine biologists, has developed a prototype for a low-tech underwater recording device (Baited Remote Underwater Video, or BRUV) that can film marine life without the presence of humans.
 2. Each elephant keeper (*mahout*, in Hindi) is assigned an elephant when it is still a calf, and over time they forge a unique working relationship.
 3. On this question, in addition to the aforementioned criticisms made by Smaill (2016) and Mills (2010), it is worth noting the studies of wildlife documentaries by Mitman (2009), Bousé (2000) and Chris (2006).

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BECOMING-ANIMAL: NON-HUMAN PERCEPTUAL FORMS AND DISPOSITIFS IN CONTEMPORARY IBERO-AMERICAN CINEMA

Abstract

This article addresses the concept of becoming-animal, proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, as a «zone of indiscernibility» where the human and the animal mutually modify each other, in order to analyze from this prism the cinematographic strategies of contemporary films of Ibero-American cinema, such as: *Salvaxe, salvaxe* (Emilio Fonseca, 2024), *Reserve* (Gerard Ortin, 2020), *592 metroz goiti* (Maddi Barber, 2019), *Ruido è* (Silvia Zayas, 2023), *Cemetery* (Carlos Casas, 2019), *Pepe* (Nelson Carlo de los Santos Arias, 2024) and *Monólogo colectivo* (Jessica Sarah Rinland, 2024). The research is organized around three axes: 1) Capture technologies and visual regimes of the non-human, 2) Perspectives and overflows of the animal camera and 3) Anthropomorphization and zoomorphic realism. Through an iconographic analysis of the works, the article finds that new forms of interspecies perception are generated, allowing other -non-human- sensibilities to emerge and inhabit the imagery of these films.

Key words

Iberoamerican Cinema; Becoming-Animal; Deleuze; Guattari; Interspecies; Cinematic Devices.

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DEVENIR ANIMAL: DISPOSITIVOS Y FORMAS PERCEPTIVAS DE LO NO-HUMANO EN EL CINE IBEROAMERICANO CONTEMPORÁNEO

Resumen

El presente artículo aborda el concepto de «devenir animal», propuesto por Deleuze y Guattari, como una «zona de indiscernibilidad» donde el humano y el animal se modifican mutuamente, para analizar desde este prisma las estrategias cinematográficas de obras contemporáneas del cine iberoamericano, como: *Salvaxe, salvaxe* (Emilio Fonseca, 2024), *Reserve* (Gerard Ortin, 2020), *592 metroz goiti* (Maddi Barber, 2019), *Ruido è* (Silvia Zayas, 2023), *Cemetery* (Carlos Casas, 2019), *Pepe* (Nelson Carlo de los Santos Arias, 2024) y *Monólogo colectivo* (Jessica Sarah Rinland, 2024). La investigación se organiza en torno a tres ejes: 1) Tecnologías de captura y regímenes visuales del no-humano, 2) Perspectivas y desbordes de la cámara animal y 3) Antropomorfización y realismo zoomorfo. A través de un análisis iconográfico de las obras, el artículo constata que se generan nuevas formas de percepción inter-especie, permitiendo que otras sensibilidades –no humanas– puedan emerger y habitar entre las imágenes de estas obras.

Palabras clave

Cine iberoamericano; Devenir animal; Deleuze; Guattari; Inter-especie; Dispositivo cinematográfico.

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HISTORY, VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL ACTIVATION: ANTES DEL FUEGO AS A CINEMATIC SITE FOR RECONFIGURING THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN COLOMBIA

JUAN-PABLO OSMAN

DELFINA M. CHACÓN CORENA

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary mass media, characterised by constant expansion and the accelerated circulation of images, cinema constitutes a privileged space for the revision and reconstruction of collective memory. In contexts such as Colombia, where narratives of the past have been fragmented by decades of conflict and polarisation, cinematic depictions take on a crucial ethical and political significance. The film image is not limited to reproducing history; it has the capacity to intervene in it, interpret it and resignify it. This ties in with the work of Gómez-Barris (2017) on the role played by cultural industries in the reconfiguration of memory in societies pursuing truth and reconciliation processes. In this way, images dispute political and historical interpretations in the public sphere.

Positioned at this intersection of art, archive and memory is *Antes del fuego* [Before the Fire] (Laura Mora, 2015), a film that revisits the siege of

Colombia's Palace of Justice in 1985, and the army operation to retake the building, by incorporating it into a fictional narrative that challenges official versions of the past. The objective of this article is to analyse *Antes del fuego* from aesthetic, political and historical perspectives, in an effort to answer the following research questions:

What are the aesthetic, political and historical implications of *Antes del fuego*, particularly in relation to its insertion of archival footage into a fiction narrative?

Can the use of this archival material in the film operate as a *dispositif* of political resistance capable of activating the spectator's perception of history?

This analysis focuses on three key concepts: the archive as a site of symbolic dispute; *pseudomorphosis* as the displacement of forms across historical periods; and sensory realism as a strategy that combines documentary and affective forms in order to trigger our perception of history. As Didi-Huber-

man (2008) points out, images of the past survive in the present as anachronisms that interrupt temporal linearity. In *Antes del fuego*, these lingering images remind us that the conflict does not belong to the past alone; it persists in bodies, in institutions and in the collective gaze. Mora's film combines elements of the political thriller and romantic drama genres to explore the boundaries between documented history and cinematic imagination.

This article considers certain formal decisions in the film (shot composition, editing, sound design, mise-en-scène and the use of the archive) to examine how it engages historical memory and political narrative. The objective is not merely to analyse a film but to situate it in the critical tradition of Latin American memory films, which use excerpts of archival footage and the reconstruction of trauma to construct a poetics and an ethics of remembrance.

An underlying assumption of this study is that the relationship between fiction and archive is not merely complementary but essential to an audiovisual epistemology constructed through the tension between showing and concealing, between what the camera allows us to see and what we are required to reconstruct. In *Antes del fuego*, this epistemology takes the form of an economy of signs: excerpts from television and radio reports, voice-overs announcing news headlines and archival images of the event that disrupt the story to produce a cognitive dissonance aimed at activating historical memory as a problem rather than an established list of facts. Latin American memory films are thus assumed to operate with aesthetic *dispositifs* that exceed the logic of verification of the documentary genre without giving up their truthfulness by doing so. Their authenticity relies not on the accuracy of the information but on the ethical consistency of their perspective, and on their capacity to create a mise-en-scène capable of opening up a space for unresolved grief, erased individuals and latent conflicts that continue to shape Colombian public life.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT: THE POLITICISATION OF MEMORY IN COLOMBIA

The Colombian armed conflict, one of the longest-running in the Americas, has left more than eight million victims of death, displacement or disappearance in its wake. The complexity of the conflict is due to the multiplicity of actors involved, including guerrilla movements, paramilitary groups, drug cartels and government forces. As Martín-Barbero (2002) suggests, the Colombian media have served as vehicles both for exposing and for oversimplifying the conflict, consolidating polarising narratives in relation to the violence.

One of the most painful episodes in this prolonged conflict occurred on 6 and 7 November 1985. Over the course of twenty-eight hours, a battle unfolded between the Colombian armed forces and the M-19 guerrilla group, after the guerrillas stormed the Palace of Justice (the seat of the Colombian judiciary) and took control of the building. More than ninety people died in the siege and retaking of the building—including twelve Supreme Court justices—and eleven disappeared. Media coverage, consisting mainly of exterior shots of the building in flames, produced a partial audiovisual archive of vast symbolic power, reinforced for decades in news reports and documentaries. Narratives related to this event continue to be politicised and polarised: for some, the military action constituted a legitimate response; for others, it was a state crime that was subsequently covered up (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2018). Jiménez Pallares (2025) highlights the fractured nature of such memories, where personal testimonies, news archives and official versions are brought into tension amid the efforts to construct a single unifying account of these historical events.

This polarisation in relation to historical memory persists in Colombia. Following the Peace Ac-



Image 1. Arturo and Milena, protagonists of the film. *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015)

cords signed with the FARC in 2016, the Truth Commission confirmed that the manipulation of information had hindered the reconciliation process (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2022). Uribe de Hincapié (2020) notes that when the elite make pacts of silence and self-amnesty, public memory is distorted, depriving the community of their right to grieve. Similarly, Orozco (2022) observes that power struggles determine which voices enter the national narrative. As Campo and Rival (2007) argue, the issue is not just factual but regulatory as well: who authorises the narrative of the past, and according to what regime of visibility. The persistence of competing official and unofficial versions of the past has resulted in a polarisation in which public memory has become an artefact of negotiation. In this respect, the archives of television coverage of the 1985 siege ultimately consolidated an iconography of fire: the façade of the Palace of Justice enveloped in flames and smoke. This iconography, however, encapsulates a blind spot, as it includes neither the handling of the corpses nor the bureaucratic administration of the damage afterwards. The problem lies not only in the partial nature of the

record, but in its performative capacity to establish exactly what the events are deemed to be.

This performativity helps explain why, despite institutional advances, collective closure in relation to the tragedy has yet to be achieved. The regime of the visible has been insufficient to convey the agency of victims and witnesses within the public sphere. From this perspective, *Antes del fuego* serves as a mechanism for appropriating the archive. By inserting excerpts from the footage into a fictional fabric, the film re-politicises the gaze and contests the hegemonic reading of the event. Fiction does not replace documentation; it makes it speak in a different way, revealing interstitial spaces—elements unfilmed, swept aside or half-spoken—that constitute the traumatic heart of the event.

In this context, *Antes del fuego* constitutes an aesthetic and political response to the need to rearticulate a shared narrative and revisit questions about the responsibility of the government and the silencing of discussion about the case. Set in Bogotá nineteen days before the attack, it tells the story of Arturo, a lawyer who has taken up journalism, and Milena, a student intern, as they

investigate a death linked to networks of political and media power.

The story unfolds on the margins of recorded history, in the moments leading up to a tragic event. The choice to situate the narrative in a nineteen-day time window is significant, as it turns time itself into dramatic material and facilitates a historical representation of the eve of an inescapable disaster. This approach shifts the interest from the event itself to the circumstances that led to it, while reassessing a critical perspective that lays the foundations for a counter-narrative. At the same time, the dynamic between Arturo and Milena symbolises a generational transmission of the task of memory construction: the journalistic method, the ethical doubts and the personal costs of investigating the truth in a politically hostile environment.

Orcasitas Pacheco et al. (2024) argue that recent Colombian films articulate historical uncertainty and hope, challenging institutional versions of violent episodes. In this sense, Mora's film functions as a fiction narrative that defies institutional efforts to silence the truth. By integrating archival footage from 1985 into its story, the film reactivates a visual imaginary shared between the public and private realms. As Gil Pulgarín and López Carmona (2023) point out, cinema has the power to transform historical events into shared sensory and emotional experiences; in *Antes del fuego*, the archive does not merely document the events; it triggers public reflection on violence and impunity.

The affective and critical reactivation of the archive does not constitute an idealising of the historical image. On the contrary, the film exposes the insufficiency of the footage: the smoke, the cropped framing and the low definition operate as symptoms of a partialised history. The political statement lies in presenting the archive as it is without restoring or enhancing it, laying bare its unstable nature as a mark of the era. This ethics of intermittence, of seeing and not seeing, is consistent with a nation in which omissions and

silences have been as central to the social order as documented history.

THE ARCHIVE: A SITE OF SYMBOLIC DISPUTE

From Foucault (1970) to Derrida (1997), the archive has been defined as a *dispositif* of power that regulates what is to be remembered and what is to be forgotten. In cinema, the film archive preserves traces of the past and reactivates them with each narrative reinscription. Didi-Huberman (2008) proposes a conception of images as anachronisms that survive and return, breaking the linear nature of progress, while Elsaesser (2019) describes a materialised time in the memory film, composed of multiple layers.

In *Antes del fuego*, archive images constitute an anachronism that reminds us of the persistence of trauma. Their insertion into the film superimposes one time over another and activates a stratified memory. Catelli (1991) and Carri and Salamanca (2021) point to the return of traumatic images from Latin American history into the public sphere as signs of unresolved grief. Amaral de Aguiar (2017) stresses that such images are resignified through their circulation and use in contemporary contexts, operating more as active records than as static repositories of information, while Campo and Rival (2007) show that the regimes of visibility of the archive can contribute to the organisation of what can be viewed and remembered.

Mora transforms the archive into a form of contemporary resistance against the official discourses that attempt to shut down the meaning of the siege of 1985. According to Abril (2022), cinema can operate as an affective archive that resists disappearance and silencing. In *Antes del fuego*, this idea is expressed in images that return as traces in tension, activating a bodily and emotional memory. Ortega (2007) argues that archival work in Latin American memory cinema has been conceptualised as a space for processing collective grief and testing out forms of symbolic justice, while Vásquez (2015) ex-

plores artistic practices of mourning as procedures for giving a place to memory. In *Antes del fuego*, the archive is aesthetic matter that generates narrative, empathy and critical thought.

Numerous contemporary Latin American fiction and documentary films explore the power of the archive to render visible what has been erased, as pointed out by critics such as Durán Castro and Salamanca (2016) and Campo and Rival (2007). This trend can be observed in *The Blonds* (Los rubios, Albertina Carri, 2003), *Papá Iván* (María Inés Roqué, 2004), *The Tiniest Place* (El lugar más pequeño, Tatiana Huezo, 2011), *The Echo* (El eco, Tatiana Huezo, 2023) and *I'm Still Here* (Ainda estou aqui, Walter Salles, 2024). However, *Antes del fuego* takes a unique approach in this respect, as rather than being external to the narrative, the archive serves as its internal engine and its horizon of meaning. The real images of 1985 interrupt the fiction to remind us that what is represented is not merely a metaphor but lived history, establishing cinema as a space for symbolic reparation. If the archive is a *dispositif*, its integration into a new film is curatorial. Selecting, cutting, decontextualising and recontextualising are actions that define a political grammar of editing. In *Antes del fuego*, the selection criteria are not merely informational but ethical and aesthetic: each excerpt from 1985 footage appears as a kind of wounded object. The wound must not be closed, as its function is to maintain the conflict of interpretation, where truth is found not in the narrative continuity but in the tension produced within it. Mora's film is thus in line with Elsaesser's (2019) notion of materialised time, in which the sedimentation of temporal layers produces knowledge through friction rather than transparency.

PSEUDOMORPHOSIS: INHERITED FORMS, TRANSFORMED MEANINGS

The notion of *pseudomorphosis* (Panofsky, 1982) refers to the survival of past forms that acquire different meanings in new contexts without losing

their formal configuration. Applied to cinema, *pseudomorphosis* explains how genres and narrative structures can be reactivated as vehicles for other discourses. In *Antes del fuego*, Mora appropriates the political thriller and romantic drama genres but subverts their objectives, as the ultimate aim of the tension is not to resolve the conflict but to expose a permanent instability that reflects the impossible nature of healing historical wounds. The film's ambiguous ending reaffirms this critical perspective.

Pseudomorphosis also involves an economy of expectations. The spectator recognises different genre markers—investigation, crime, chases, thwarted romance—and thus activates a horizon of anticipation that the film deliberately frustrates. The culmination of the suspense is not a spectacular revelation, punishment or reparation, but narrative ambiguity. This deviation functions as a semantic shift, as the genre ceases to be a vehicle of entertainment and instead becomes a problematising mechanism that exposes the limits of knowledge. The film reproduces pre-existing codes in order to alter them, in an aesthetic *pseudomorphosis* that produces hermeneutic instability, consistent with the persistence of trauma.

Lapera (2018) suggests that aesthetics of contemporary Latin American cinema engages in dialogue with earlier visual traditions, vesting them with new meaning in contemporary contexts. This argument is reflected in the *pseudomorphic* approach in Mora's film, which questions the logics of representation by means of an aesthetic *pseudomorphosis*, apparently reproducing forms of classical cinema but subverting them with a contemporary sensibility. Aguilar (2006) and De los Ríos and Donoso (2016) have shown how the reactivation of genres can be used to critique power; Mora reinterprets these codes through an affective sensibility that connects memory and intimacy as resistance strategies.

Restrained performances and the use of natural lighting reinforce the defamiliarisation of the genre. The actors' faces are shown in sustained

medium shots, and the expressiveness of their bodies is restrained. The settings are designed to contain rather than enhance the action, a *mise-en-scène* that encourages reflection. As Aguilar (2006) and De los Ríos and Donoso (2016) suggest, the recycling of genres in Latin American cinema takes on political meaning when it vests these forms with historicity, i.e., when the code is transformed from a template into a mechanism for critiquing a specific time and place.

SENSORY REALISM

Sensory realism (Marsh, 2015) combines documentary, fiction and perceptual experience to produce an affective memory. Venkatesh and Jiménez (2016) have expanded this notion by pointing out the inscription of an aesthetic dimension on the bodies and the emotions. *Antes del fuego* elicits a critical empathy from its audience, conveying the protagonists' emotional tension through ambient sound, silences, slow pacing and a formalism that prioritises sensory elements over exposition.

In *Antes del fuego*, sensory realism operates through a choreography of micro-perceptions: breathing, the hum of a television or radio, echoing footsteps. This low-frequency soundscape generates a tactile attentiveness similar to a sonic haptics, so that the spectator *feels* the sound. The use of a handheld camera introduces shaking movements that emulate the trembling of someone witnessing an event up close, the memory of which is inscribed on the body.

Suárez (2010) identifies a cinema of feeling in Colombian filmmaking whereby memory is activated by the body rather than by the discourse. In this sense, Mora's approach engages in a dialogue with films such as *Nuestra voz de tierra, memoria y futuro* [Our Voice of Earth, Memory and Future] (Marta Rodríguez and Jorge Silva, 1981), *L'étreinte du fleuve* [The Embrace of the River] (Nicolás Rincón Gille, 2010), *Señorita María: la falda de la*

montaña [Miss Maria: Skirting the Mountain] (Rubén Mendoza, 2017), *Valley of Souls* (Tantas almas, Nicolás Rincón Gille, 2019) and *Malta* (Natalia Santa, 2024), which articulate an affective realism at the intersection of corporeality, identity, territory and grief. *Antes del fuego* aligns with these narrative quests, embodying what Kishore (2013) refers to as an aesthetic and material intervention, a form of sensory truth that anchors a historical question in a space that precedes the conceptual.

The ethical consequence of this approach is that sentimental identification is replaced with critical empathy as a dominant mechanism in the film. The audience accompanies the characters without becoming engrossed in them, maintaining a sensitive distance that allows the spectator to think while feeling. Angelucci (2019) describes this as an illusion of presence: not a replica of reality, but a condition of access to it through aesthetic and sensory intensification.

TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION

Archive, pseudomorphosis and sensory realism all support the premise that cinema can act as a *dispositif* of resistance that activates historical perception. *Antes del fuego* proposes an aesthetics of survival and resonance: images of the past as agents in the present; inherited forms reactivated to expose the persistence of trauma; sensory perception as a mode of historical knowledge. Rather than adopting fragmented approaches, the film articulates theory and experience, archive and emotion, opening up possibilities for symbolic justice and collective reparation through its aesthetics.

This theoretical convergence helps explain why the film proposes *dispositifs* rather than theses. The archive introduces a wounding temporality; pseudomorphosis reorganises the economy of expectations; and sensory realism shifts cognition towards the body. Political resistance thus be-

comes perceptual resistance, obstructing comfortable interpretations in order to force the gaze to work actively. It is in this work that the reparative potential of the aesthetic experience in *Antes del fuego* lies. Rather than presenting the truth, the film offers a way of searching for it.

THE ARCHIVE AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE AND HISTORICAL FORESHADOWING

The narrative of *Antes del fuego* is structured around the idea of foreshadowing: the spectator knows more than the characters and reads each scene as a countdown to the tragedy of the siege. Mora eschews suspense in order to construct a gloomy sense of expectancy, in which everyday events are charged with historical gravity. The focus of the story alternates between the journalistic investigation and the development of the emotional bond between Arturo and Milena, interspersed with timely insertions of archival footage that establish the tragic horizon from the outset.

The cinematography prioritises stifling indoor settings, tight framings and handheld camera work; Bogotá is depicted as an oppressive organism made up of dimly lit corridors, offices and apartments, intensifying the sense of impending doom. On the other hand, the approach to time is in keeping with Deleuze's notion of the time-image (Deleuze, 1987): prolonged shots and silences disrupt the linear causality, as our cognitive activity focuses not on anticipating what will happen but on experiencing the prelude to what we already know will occur. Small diegetic cues—headlines, background voices, incidental remarks—anchor the action on the eve of the tragedy, transforming the anticipation into a form of historical knowledge.

A recurring strategy in the film is the counterpoint established between routine actions—drinking coffee, driv-

ing, talking briefly on the phone—and archival excerpts that signal an atmosphere of pervasive insecurity. This montage of habitual activities underscores the idea that violence does not burst in from the outside but seeps into ordinary life until it becomes naturalised. The dramatic progression is marked by successive tweaks of perception, as the film teaches the spectator to view the historical event in a different way.

THE CLIMACTIC SEQUENCE: MILENA AND THE PALACE OF JUSTICE

The climax, when Milena tries to flee the burning Palace of Justice, encapsulates the poetics of the film. A medium shot with a handheld camera follows her through the building amidst clouds of smoke and subtle vibrations; gunfire and screams mingle with barely perceptible extradiegetic music that heightens the anxiety.

The sequence alternates between the action of the fictional story and television archive footage from 1985. Pixelated and saturated images disrupt the visual continuity and force the spectator to

Image 2. The protagonist Milena fleeing from the Palace of Justice. *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015)



recognise the reality on which the fiction is based. Mora emphasises the textural fracture rather than trying to smooth it down. The roughness of the archival footage contrasts with the digital clarity of the newly filmed scenes, generating a dialectic between past and present.

At a decisive moment, when a close-up shows Milena's face framed by smoke, she glances for a second at the camera, destabilising the fictional pact. In line with Nichols's (2013) reflections on the reciprocal relationship in film archives between viewer and viewed, the sequence ethically addresses the spectator and shifts the focus from compassion to the responsibility of memory. This idea also engages with Veiga's (2010) description of critical aesthetics in the work of Latin American women filmmakers who challenge hegemonic representations of the female body, transformed in this case into a memory-body.

The sound design fosters disorientation: the gunfire becomes almost abstract, creating a soundscape that eliminates all points of reference. As Chion (1993) explains, sound does not merely accompany the image; it transforms it. Echoes, off-screen noises and diegetic variations suspend perceptual time and turn the climax into a spasm of memory. When the camera pans upwards to show the burning building, Mora reframes the television coverage of 1985; it is not spectacle, but mourning; not closure, but resistance. The spectator sees more yet knows less; the image shows but does not explain. Here, the lack of explanation constitutes an ethical stance.

EDITING AS THINKING

The editing in this film serves an epistemological function. In keeping with the essay-film approach, Mora edits in order to think; cuts and transitions do not seek transparency but rather expose fissures. Velloso and Berenstain (2023) call this "dissensual editing", which does not pursue any kind of unity or consensus and is realised through the arrangement of sometimes contradictory or anachronistic



Image 3. Archive image inserted into the film. A Colombian army tank tries to enter the Palace of Justice during the siege. *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015)

fragments. The alternation between archive and fiction, between diegetic sound and extradiegetic layers, creates a rhythm that renews Walter Benjamin's dialectic of the "now of knowability" (Benjamin, 2009); the past bursts into the present as a demand for the redemption of silenced memories.

Mora eschews classical Hollywood editing in favour of memory practices in other Latin American films, such as *The Headless Woman* (*La mujer sin cabeza*, Lucrecia Martel, 2008), *Nostalgia for the Light* (*Nostalgia de la luz*, Patricio Guzmán, 2010) and *Portraits of a Search* (*Retratos de una búsqueda*, Alicia Calderón, 2014), which use fragmentation and dramatic distancing to resist a moralising conclusion. *Antes del fuego* opts for suggestion over explanation, and its ethical force lies in this economy of meaning.

The film activates what Velloso and Berenstain (2023) refer to as rhythmic dissent, with changes in tempo, silences and unnoticeable yet unsettling micro-cuts. The result is a process of thinking at intervals: the historical question, rather than being found in the shots, is present between them, in the tension that connects them. It is in this interstice—rather than in any verbal lesson—that the spectator experiences history and the historical event.

THE SPATIALITY OF TRAUMA

The emotional geography of Bogotá functions as an extension of the collective grief: grey architecture, squalid streets and dimly lit interiors serve as an affective cartography. Arturo's home and office reflect enclosure and informational saturation, while Milena offers a vital counterpoint that embodies the possibility of intergenerational transmission of memory—a possibility cut short in the end with the suggestion of her forced disappearance.

The film also explores the spatiality of the archive, as every intrusion of archival footage reminds the spectator of the mediation of the narrative, while signalling, through the *dispositif* itself, the power offered by visibility. The documentary images function as intermittent signs of a past that refuses to be laid to rest.

Similarly, Plaza de Bolívar, the main square in Bogotá where the Palace of Justice is located, operates as a scenic palimpsest during the siege, with a republican layer (the country's institutions), a mod-

ern layer (media coverage) and a contemporary layer (chaos, gunshots, fire, tragedy). This demystification of Colombia's political centre emphasises that memory depends not on official narratives but on how it is used and circulated. The space of Plaza de Bolívar ceases to be a postcard and instead becomes a *dispositif* that reorganises practices and discourses.

ARCHIVE, BODY AND SPECTATOR

In contrast to documentary, which identifies the archive as external material, Mora inscribes it into the physical texture of her film. The graininess, the noise and the uneven resolution operate as physical traces of the trauma. As Steyerl (2009) suggests, the "poor image" acquires political power; its fragility testifies to the violence of disappearance and the unequal circulation of memory. The editing transforms these contrasts in the resolution into a source of meaning: in the leap between one texture and another, viewers become aware of their own work in interpreting the film.

In this way, the film viewing experience demands active sensory participation. Each insertion of archival footage requires a recalibration of the gaze and the adoption of an ethical stance towards what we see. The final montage, which weaves archive and fiction together, condenses this dialectic and allows us to view the tragedy without having it turned into spectacle; it is an ethics of viewing for unresolved grief.

HISTORICAL FORESHADOWING AND SYMBOLIC JUSTICE

Historical foreshadowing is the essence of the film's aesthet-

Image 4. Plaza de Bolívar in Bogotá. In the background, the Palace of Justice today.
Source: Wikimedia Commons



ic approach. Set just days before the events of the siege, the film is shrouded in its looming shadow. The loop of anticipations reflects how memory operates in Colombia: not as a straight line towards reconciliation, but as a traumatic repetition. This design not only structures the plot but also acts as a form of symbolic justice. By reconstructing the days leading up to the attack, Mora restores agency and a face to anonymous individuals reduced to collateral damage by the official history. The film engages with Jelin's (2002) claim regarding fiction as a vehicle for a form of truth. *Antes del fuego* intervenes in the dispute between memory and silence through the imagination, transcending mere representation of trauma to become an exercise in audiovisual thinking; no moral to the story, no closure is offered—only lingering images that call on us to revisit them. The film belongs to the testimonial tradition but expands it into a sensory realm that fuses aesthetics and the politics of memory.

Not only does this foreshadowing organise intrigue; it also defines an affective regime in which the present is inhabited by the future. In terms of memory, this means that history operates in the present as an anticipatory force: we know the “fuego” of the siege is imminent, but we do not know how it will affect the protagonists. This indeterminacy politicises our sensibility, compelling us to pay close attention to what would normally go unnoticed. Symbolic justice is thus expressed not so much in messages as in forms: in the cadence of a prolonged shot, a faltering breath or an incomplete image.

CONCLUSIONS

From the perspective of film studies and memory studies, the case of *Antes del fuego* has three methodological implications. First, it invites us to read the archive not as a source to be consulted but as an agent acting upon the diegesis and the viewer, which means that any analysis of the archive must consider its method of insertion into the film. Second, it suggests a need to evaluate genres

as flexible heuristic frameworks that reveal local conditions of historicity through the implementation of pseudomorphosis, and that therefore, our interpretation should compare both generic similarities and changes in function. And third, it points to the importance of incorporating sensory indicators into any critical analysis, avoiding the reduction of the aesthetic to mere decoration of the political, as here, the political is present precisely in the modulation of perception.

This article has examined the aesthetic, political, and historical dimensions of *Antes del fuego*, addressing two key issues: the implications of using archival footage in fiction, and its power as a *dispositif* of resistance that can activate the spectator's historical perception. Aesthetically, the film articulates a regime of perception that combines restrained suspense, affective realism and dissensual editing. The film shifts the logic of political thrillers and romantic dramas towards a bodily experience of memory; the silences, the texture of the smoke, the shaking camera and the sound design constitute a sensory truth that precedes any conceptual explanation.

On the political level, the archive is turned into an act of resistance against official narratives. By recontextualising the 1985 television footage, Mora exposes its unstable residue and reignites the debate over historical truth, calling upon the spectator to take an active ethical stance. In historical terms, the film demonstrates that the siege of the Palace of Justice continues to operate in the present as an unresolved trauma in the circular temporality of the Colombian conflict.

This analysis reveals that the archive transcends referential illustration in *Antes del fuego* to become a narrative operator that disrupts the fiction, dislocates our temporal perception, and calls upon us to engage in a critical reading of the violence. The film proposes symbolic justice and audiovisual thinking, in line with research by Longmate (2024), who identifies projects of “moral imagination” in Mora's filmography that challenge superficial narratives of reconciliation.

Formally, the film constructs a visual language of absence, eschewing the spectacularisation of the horror and prioritising consequences over explosions, slowing time down in an accelerated media ecosystem and showing us that remembering is an act of resistance. In the film's climax, archive and fiction are intertwined by means of an editing technique which, instead of reconstructing memory, symbolically restores it as a political and affective experience in each viewing. *Antes del fuego* is thus offered as a form of cinematic thought, rendering visible the tension between testimony-image and simulation-image, between the need to remember and the risk of trivialising violence. In this ambiguity lies its critical power. The film engages in a dialogue with the Latin American tradition of archive and memory while offering a unique contribution to Colombian cinema that integrates the archive as an internal engine of the fictional narrative.

In terms of its contribution to the field, this article proposes an analytical model for exploring fiction films that engage with historical traumas using archival materials. This model is useful for examining how cinema challenges the frameworks of intelligibility of the past and enables counter-narratives against institutional versions of history. In short, it provides tools for exploring cinema as an agent of collective memory and symbolic justice in societies scarred by structural violence.

Mora's film demonstrates that the defence of memory is a matter not only of form but also of content. In its articulation of archive, pseudomorphosis and sensory realism, *Antes del fuego* offers a model of intervention in the public sphere that cannot substitute the work that must be done by institutions and the judiciary, but that can complement their work with a pedagogy of perception: looking from other angles, embracing the fragility of images, and upholding within that fragility the possibility of an ethics of memory that does not relinquish its complexity. ■

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HISTORY, VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL ACTIVATION: ANTES DEL FUEGO AS A CINEMATOGRAPHIC SITE OF RECONFIGURATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN COLOMBIA

Abstract

This article analyses *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015) as a film that problematises the collective memory of conflict in Colombia through an articulation of film archive and fiction. The film revisits the siege and retaking of the Palace of Justice in Colombia in 1985, not to reconstruct the events, but to interrogate their political, aesthetic and historical meaning. The film's narrative functions as a foreshadowing: set just days before the attack, it emphasises the imminence of the tragedy and exposes how violence seeps into everyday life. This analysis develops three theoretical concepts: the archive, understood as a site of symbolic dispute capable of resisting official versions of the past and activating a critical memory; pseudomorphosis, which explains the reconfiguration of genres, particularly the political thriller and the romantic drama—which, instead of offering narrative closure, produce a hermeneutic instability in keeping with the unresolved grief surrounding the event; and sensory realism, which articulates sound, camera and temporality to offer a perceptual experience where the body becomes an operator of historical knowledge. Mora proposes an ethics of the gaze that eschews the spectacularisation of the horror and prioritises traces, silences and signs. In this way, the film stands as a *dispositif* of aesthetic resistance, capable of challenging regimes of visibility of the past and contributing to processes of symbolic justice and collective memory.

Key words

Historical memory; Public sphere; Audiovisual archive; Siege and retaking of the Palace of Justice; Cinema and Colombian armed conflict; Pseudomorphosis; *Antes del fuego*; Laura Mora.

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HISTORIA, VIOLENCIA Y ACTIVACIÓN POLÍTICA: ANTES DEL FUEGO COMO LUGAR CINEMATOGRÁFICO DE RECONFIGURACIÓN DE LA ESFERA PÚBLICA Y LA MEMORIA COLECTIVA EN COLOMBIA

Resumen

El artículo analiza *Antes del fuego* (Laura Mora, 2015) como una obra que problematiza la memoria colectiva del conflicto colombiano mediante la articulación entre archivo audiovisual y ficción. La película reactiva la toma y retoma del Palacio de Justicia de 1985, no para reconstruir los hechos, sino para interrogar su sentido político, estético e histórico. Su narrativa funciona como premonición: situada días antes del ataque, enfatiza la inminencia del trauma y evidencia cómo la violencia se infiltra en la vida cotidiana. El texto desarrolla tres núcleos teóricos. Primero, el archivo es entendido como un campo de disputa simbólica, capaz de resistir versiones oficiales y activar una memoria crítica. Segundo, la *pseudomorfosis* explica la reconfiguración de géneros, particularmente del thriller político y el drama romántico, que, en lugar de ofrecer cierre narrativo, producen inestabilidad hermenéutica acorde al duelo inconcluso. Tercero, el realismo sensorial articula sonido, cámara y temporalidad para generar una experiencia perceptiva donde el cuerpo deviene operador de conocimiento histórico. Mora propone una ética de la mirada que evita la espectacularización del horror y privilegia huellas, silencios e indicios. Así, el film se afirma como dispositivo de resistencia estética, capaz de disputar los regímenes de visibilidad del pasado y aportar a procesos de justicia simbólica y memoria colectiva.

Palabras clave

Memoria histórica; Esfera pública; Archivo audiovisual; Toma y retoma del Palacio de Justicia; Cine y conflicto armado colombiano; *Pseudomorfosis*; *Antes del fuego*; Laura Mora.

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COLONIALISM, EXTRACTIVISM AND VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHILEAN CINEMA: THE SELK'NAM GENOCIDE IN *WHITE ON WHITE* AND *THE SETTLERS**

ANTONIO LUCO BUSTO

CAROLINA URRUTIA NENO

INTRODUCTION

Until the last few decades, the colonisation of southern Patagonia and its integration into global production systems at the end of the 19th century had been framed in a heroic, developmentalist narrative of the European settler in the region. This perspective, which can be found in the work of the award-winning Chilean historian Mateo Martinić, has promoted a narrative in which the expansion of *civilisation* is presented as a productive human achievement, in consonance with the spirit of progress of the time. In recent years, however, studies by scholars such as the Spanish historian José Luis Marchante have challenged this view, proposing a critical revision that foregrounds the violence, dispossession and genocide suffered by Indigenous peoples. The difference between these two historians lies not merely in the inclusion or omission of

certain facts, but in the narrative each one adopts to interpret those facts.

This article examines two recent Chilean films: *White on White* (*Blanco en blanco*, Théo Court, 2019) and *The Settlers* (*Los colonos*, Felipe Gálvez, 2023), which constitute practically the first attempts to recount the history of the extermination of the Selk'nam people from both an aesthetic and a political perspective, positing clear hypotheses about the period of colonisation and the persistence of colonial practices today.

Hayden White conceives of narrativity as a way of making sense of historical facts. He describes the chronicle as a series of events arranged in chronological order, each of which can be independently verified statement by statement. This differs from the effort of representation and signification involved in *bending* those facts into a story. This exercise always entails a degree of

contortion, but it also provides access to a second truth: not merely the truth of each statement in isolation, but a truth in which connections and interrelations construct an interpretation and vest the events with meaning. As White explains, history takes on narrative form “for purposes of representing not only the truth about the past but also the possible meanings of this truth” (White, 2005: 151).

On the question of how the meanings in narrativised history are constructed, Robert Rosenstone suggests that “all our historical works look simultaneously to the past and to the present” (Rosenstone, 2013: 26). Faithful documentation of the events addressed constitutes only one component of the historical truth articulated in narratives. The present from which we observe and interrogate the past in light of historical developments shapes history in ethical and aesthetic terms. This reflection is already present in the work of Walter Benjamin, when he describes the historian as the Angelus Novus, who “has his back turned on his own epoch; his seer’s gaze is kindled by the peaks of past events,

THIS IS THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT EXPLORED IN *WHITE ON WHITE* AND *THE SETTLERS*, BOTH OF WHICH TAKE A POSITION ON THE MODERNITY/ COLONIALITY DEBATE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF BORDER THINKING (MIGNOLO, 2005), WHILE AT THE SAME TIME DEPICTING VIOLENCE SO SHOCKING THAT IT RISKS BEING DEEMED UNSHOWABLE, IN AN EXERCISE THAT ALLOWS THE SILENCED VOICE OF HISTORY TO SPEAK

which pile up before him” (Benjamin, 2008: 78). In this way, historical research unfolds in the tension between the past and the possibilities of the future.

While *White on White* is set in the years leading up to the 20th century, the events in *The Settlers* take place in 1901. Both films have the same setting: the main island of Tierra del Fuego. Over this period, the region experienced a boom

Image 1. *White on White* (2019), courtesy of Théo Court



in wool production, for which historian Alberto Harambour has coined the term “ovine sovereignty” (Harambour, 2018: 59). In the late 19th century, this production was established as an extractivist project for the colonisation of southern Patagonia. In the first years after its foundation in 1848, the growth of the port of Punta Arenas was largely due to the presence of a military base and a penal colony. The limited success of this model of colonisation prompted successive governments to create incentives to move to the region, primarily through land concessions to European settlers arriving from impoverished parts of Spain, Britain and Portugal in search of a better life. With these new arrivals, the sheep population grew exponentially. From the outset, land ownership was highly concentrated: the Portuguese settler José Nogueira received concessions of over one million hectares in Tierra del Fuego, while the Asturian merchant José Menéndez initially acquired 90,000 hectares, “making use of a strategy common in auctions, known in Chile as *palos blancos* [white sticks]” (Marchante, 2014: 100), a ploy that historian José Luis Marchante explains in detail. Sociedad Explotadora de Tierra del Fuego, a company in which Menéndez and Mauricio Braun (Nogueira’s heir) became partners, would eventually hold three million hectares.

This is the historical context explored in *White on White* and *The Settlers*, both of which take a position on the modernity/coloniality debate from the perspective of *border thinking* (Mignolo, 2005), while at the same time depicting violence so shocking that it risks being deemed unshowable, in an exercise that allows the silenced voice of history to speak. These films adhere to the logic of post-colonial cinema which, according to Juan Guardiola, “investigates the colonial past, denounces its injustice”, and “offers a reflection on the cinematic apparatus itself, as a ‘filmic machine’ and as a ‘cognitive instrument’” (Guardiola, 2016: 157), associated with modernity and colonisation.

THE POST-COLONIAL GAZE: CINEMA BETWEEN HISTORY, AESTHETICS AND ETHICS

In his essay “The Unforgettable”, French philosopher Jacques Rancière muses: “What can history do, what can the cinematographic image do, what can they do together in the face of the revisionist will to deny what was, to pretend it never happened?” (Rancière, 2014: 45). This will to deny exists as a counterpart to history, silencing all those who are not history makers. Moreover, as will be shown below, the will to deny forms an integral part of the processes of colonisation. Rancière’s reflection is therefore particularly pertinent when considering the genocide of the peoples of the global South, for example, or the colonial process and its relationship with modernity. This selective denial operates insidiously and sometimes subtly because, as Rancière points out, to deny what has been “you don’t even need to suppress many of the facts; you only need to remove the link that connects them and constitutes them as a story” (Rancière, 2014: 18).

This is the approach to history taken in the writings of Mateo Martinic, who constructs a narrative about a group of European men of humble origins who come to a no-man’s land and bring development, jobs and technology. From Rancière’s perspective, this is a narrative of “the history makers” (Rancière, 2014: 22). Martinic tells us very little about the Selk’nam “extinction” (2001: 135), beyond a cursory acknowledgement spanning only a few pages of his extensive bibliography.

Walter Mignolo describes the complementary nature of modernity and coloniality, which provide a basis for interpreting the work of historians such as Martinic and Marchante. The first is the imperial or hegemonic paradigm, which “imposes and maintains the dominant view (which all students learn from elementary to high school and which is disseminated in popular culture and

the media)” (Mignolo, 2005: 33). The second is the decolonial paradigm, which “brings forward, on the one hand, a silenced view of the event and, on the other, shows the limits of imperial ideology disguised as the true (and total) interpretation of the events” (2005: 33).

Modernity—with its theological roots, its distinctly male humanism, its economic prosperity, intellectual rationalism and technology—is inseparable from coloniality and its logic of control, domination and exploitation (Grosfoguel, 2006). Coloniality constitutes the “darker side” of modernity’s discourse of salvation and progress (Mignolo, 2005: xiii), rendering the suppression of history important once again. Modernity as a hegemonic paradigm involves the suppression of coloniality as its dark underbelly. To heal the colonial wound, the widespread misconception that modernity is an attainable state for Latin America or any colonial territory needs to be abandoned. Modernity, initially dominated by the European empires and subsequently, after the Second World War, by the United States—requires colonial relationships with subaltern states, and the illusion that they may achieve development, which always appears imminent yet remains unattainable. The proliferation of post-colonial and decolonial theories across the Global South reflects the consequences of colonial processes that continue to wreak havoc today.

An alternative to modernity is offered in the concept of *transmodernity* developed by Enrique Dussel, who “argues for a multiplicity of critical decolonising responses to Eurocentric modernity from peripheral cultures and the epistemic location of colonised peoples worldwide” (quoted in Grosfoguel, 2006: 40). New forms of knowledge production must thus be situated outside coloniality, offering approaches that blur the disciplinary boundaries between history, aesthetics and ethics, for example.

With reference to post-colonial Britain, Stuart Hall describes a process of amnesia in relation to the nation’s imperial past (Hall, 2017: 17). Similar-

ly, Leela Gandhi refers to a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. For Gandhi, post-colonial theory is a disciplinary project involving the scholarly task of revising, remembering and above all questioning the colonial past (Gandhi, 2019: 4). This amnesia, which she considers characteristic of a feeling of rebirth in the wake of the formal emancipation of colonial states as independent nations, is both cause and effect of a continuity between the colonial and post-colonial periods. Although geopolitical events—for example, Chile’s independence from Spain or the liberation of African states from European powers—indicate a chronological division, they conceal the ongoing nature of the colonial process. In her exploration of this phenomenon of selective amnesia or omission, Gandhi identifies connections with psychoanalytic theory that shed light on Martinic’s work as an exercise in repressing a past that is difficult to confront and instead focusing on the perceived benefits of colonial integration. Chilean historian Alberto Harambour refers to this phenomenon precisely as a “historiography of omission” (Harambour, 2018: 61).

On this question, Rancière argues for the importance of including the representation of appalling violence, noting that:

the conclusion is sometimes too easily drawn that the extermination is “unrepresentable” or “unshowable”, notions in which various heterogeneous arguments conveniently merge: the joint incapacity of real documents and fictional imitations to reflect the horror experienced; the ethical indecency of representing that horror. (2014: 45)

In various essays, the French philosopher repeatedly returns to the problem of representation, and the question of justice in representation: who represents and who is represented. Showing the past—this particular “unshowable” past of the Selk’nam extermination—using the resources of audiovisual fiction endows the image with a certain “pensiveness” (2009: 107), to paraphrase an-

other of Rancière's texts, allowing us to look once more where we had not looked before.

Rosenstone argues that there is a certain kind of historical cinema that offers an important means of making sense of history, understood as a relationship between the present and the past (Rosenstone, 2013: 37). The radical distinction made by historians between written or academic historiography and cinema is unfounded, as written history also narrativises, condenses, selects and articulates a view of events shaped by the present; historians are also concerned with making the past available to the masses, who need to feel connected to their history. Cinema is thus called upon to become "a new kind of history for an age in which images would become more important to society than words" (Rosenstone, 2013: 32). *White* goes further, coining the term *historiophoty* to posit visual media as a tool for historical research, and even extolling cinematic aesthetics—editing, music, visuality—for having a more profound evocative power than written language (White, 1988). This view is in line with the work of other authors such as Cathy Caruth, who, in her analysis of traumatic events that resist representation or comprehension, argues for an expanded conception of history that goes beyond the idea of a strictly referential discipline (Caruth, 1996: 11).

The key feature of this kind of historical cinema is the relationship it establishes with a particular set of data, debates and perspectives. This analysis of *White on White* and *The Settlers* in relation to the historiographic work of Marchante and Martinic reveals that both films reflect a detailed knowledge of the politics, economics and other specific aspects of the colonisation of Tierra del Fuego, and that both subscribe to a view aligned with the ethical considerations of contemporary historiography. These films revise, challenge and interrogate the past, exposing the gaps and distortions in the history as it has been told, while also being open to the subjectivity offered by fictional narratives that explore the past.

TERRITORIAL INTRUSIONS: LAND AND OCCUPATION

White on White tells the story of Pedro (Alfredo Castro), a photographer who travels to the remote region of Tierra del Fuego to photograph the future wife of a wealthy English landowner named Mr Porter. The bride turns out to be a teenage girl, with whom Pedro becomes obsessed. The landowner never appears, the wedding Pedro has come to document never takes place, and he ends up trapped in a hostile, inhospitable and extremely violent environment.

The Settlers, released a few years later, features two characters inspired by real historical figures known for their participation in the Selk'nam genocide: *El Chancho Colorado* ("the Red Pig"), the nickname given to a Scottish soldier named Alexander MacLennan (Mark Stanley); and José Menéndez (Alfredo Castro), a local landowner who hires him to lead a hunting expedition. MacLennan is joined on the mission by Bill (Benjamín Westfall), an Indian hunter from the United States, and Segundo (Camilo Arancibia), the film's real protagonist, a fisherman from Chiloé who becomes a passive accomplice as he witnesses the horrors of the genocide without daring to oppose them.

It is worth analysing the common ground shared by the two films, which deal with the same historical period and event, while also considering their obvious differences in relation to the perspectives they offer: specifically, *the place from which* the massacre is observed, and the protagonist's proximity to the perpetrators. In *White on White*, the protagonist's profession as a photographer appears to mark the film's style: the composition, lighting and a colour palette dominated by the white winter snow all seem to reflect a photographic aesthetic. Conversely, *The Settlers*—or at least the first two thirds of the film—possesses a quality evocative of Tarantino's post-modern style, with the pacing of a *Twilight* Western and the constant presence of senseless

violence in a ceaseless journey across Tierra del Fuego.

While *White on White* is filled with minimalist indoor scenes where characters take refuge in their decadence, *The Settlers* takes place almost entirely out in the open. In *White on White*, the landowner is never shown; in *The Settlers*, he appears at both the beginning and the end of the film. Leaving these differences aside, this article focuses on the numerous features shared by the two films, both of which offer a reconsideration of the past, proposing fairer (documented, affective and responsible) ways of viewing and depicting it.

The settlers' occupation of Tierra del Fuego constitutes an intrusion that is not just territorial, but also cultural, religious and linguistic. These films represent the coexistence of multiple languages: alongside Spanish is the English of the settlers and the mysterious language of the Selk'nam. The plurality of tongues emphasises the liminal status of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago at that time. In this context, the political and territorial divisions are fuzzy. MacLennan's English in *The Settlers* is the native tongue of the managers brought in by local landowners to take care of their sheep. British wealth is mythologised in the character of Mr Porter, whose name is repeated obsessively in *White on White* despite the fact he never appears on screen. Both MacLennan in Gálvez's film and the character played by Lars Rudolph in Court's film speak with accents that place them on the fringes of the empire, distinguishing them from the eminence of Colonel Martin (Sam Spruell). The sheep managers brought to these far-flung reaches of the world are tough outcasts fleeing their pasts and seeking to reinvent themselves, driven by money and personal gain. The borders between the different cultures, nations and ranches are openly contested.

The motif of the barbed-wire fence serves to transform this territory into property, into sheep ranches that can be exploited by global capitalism. The image of building fences possesses an

ominous and a visually powerful quality. In *The Settlers*, this image forms part of the film's opening sequence, as a fence is being built in the very same scene that introduces the two protagonists. The shot in question speaks volumes: a slow pan across an expansive empty landscape falls upon a wire fence stretching onto the horizon, before finally settling on the group of men building it. The rhythmic, mechanical sounds of the spade, pickaxe, hammer and pulley tightening the wire serve as an unsettling foreshadowing of the violence to come, although they also evoke the notion of the assembly line, the repetitive action of work with tools. In this vast, wild place, the dividing line the men are constructing marks the arrival of modernity.

There are similar percussive sounds in a fence-building scene in *White on White*, made by men working rhythmically as they stretch out the wire. In this case, the hostility of the environment is even more extreme, as the men are shown working in the bitter snow and wind. The visibility is low, and the extreme cold is evident in the coats they wear, their visible breath when they speak and the hollow sound of the blowing snow. In another long pan, the camera moves from one group of workers to where coils of barbed wire lay on the ground ready for use, and then moves onto another group erecting an adjacent fence, stressing the importance of fence-building and its ubiquitous nature at this time and place.

These dividing lines spread all over the region. Both films frame them as absurd, as they cover a vast empty territory, dividing a space that in reality is indivisible, breaking up a landscape formerly inhabited by guanacos and Selk'nam nomads who, as far as the landowners are concerned, form part of the empty void. Once the barbed wire fences are raised, as small and fragile they may seem in such vastness, the land is no longer the same; what once was wild has now become something else. At the turn of the 20th century, extractivism took over the region.

ONCE THE BARBED WIRE FENCES ARE RAISED, AS SMALL AND FRAGILE THEY MAY SEEM IN SUCH VASTNESS, THE LAND IS NO LONGER THE SAME; WHAT ONCE WAS WILD HAS NOW BECOME SOMETHING ELSE. AT THE TURN OF THE 20TH CENTURY, EXTRACTIVISM TOOK OVER THE REGION

Wool production in Tierra del Fuego is referred to here as extractivism following Gudynas's definition (2015: 13): the high-volume, high-intensity extraction of a natural resource for mass export. Maristella Svampa expands on this definition, describing it as "a model tending towards mono-production that destroys biodiversity, involving land seizure and territorial destruction" (Svampa, 2019: 17), all of which are features of sheep farming in Tierra del Fuego. This model had its origins in the birth of modernity/coloniality in the early 16th century, as Indigenous thinkers and activists throughout Latin America have pointed out. Extractivism is intrinsic to the transformation of capital into capitalism and to the historical line running from the Christian "discovery" of the Americas to contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Mignolo argues that this transformation from capital to capitalism occurred by means of "land appropriation, labor exploitation, and massive commodity production" facilitated by the availability of "'new' discovered lands" that the European invaders had the right to "take possession" of (Mignolo, 2005: 30-31). This notion of legitimate possession, based on a civilisational locus of enunciation that was initially Christian and later liberal, appears explicitly in papal messages to King Afonso V of Portugal declaring the Americas to be *terra nullius* open for appropriation, despite the presence of inhabitants whom the Europeans viewed as quasi-human (Mignolo, 2005: 30).

The material wealth obtained from sheep farming is represented materially in *The Settlers*, and more mythically in *White on White*. It can be seen of course in the landowners' homes. The mansion shown at the end of *The Settlers* in Punta Arenas is particularly notable in this sense: European furnishings, a piano in the middle of a huge living room, thick curtains drawn shut to keep out the cold. Similarly, in *White on White* we see Mr Porter's manor house, which is largely unused as the landowner has multiple residences. The expensive whim of bringing a photographer to such a remote place to take pictures of his future wife is itself a luxury that signals his elevated status.

THE BARBARITY OF THE CIVILISED MAN

Genocidal violence is required to satisfy the economic interests of the extractivist model. The Selk'nam posed a threat to the riches sought by the colonisers and therefore had to be eliminated. This is made explicit in both films. In *The Settlers*, Menéndez states flatly: "The Indians are the problem. In Porvenir they cut the fences and ate all my animals, all my sheep. Like beasts. Like the beasts they are. I want you to find a route to the Atlantic for my sheep; a safe and quick route, Lieutenant. For this, you will have to clean this island." This connection between genocidal violence and the rise of extractivist capitalism is one of the most significant elements of the Marchante's historical revision, distinguishing it from earlier accounts of Patagonian colonisation, such as Martinic's. Indigenous peoples must be wiped out to make way for a model of large-scale mono-production of raw materials for exporting, chiefly dependent on foreign capital. Racism, dehumanisation and the civilising mission are also important factors behind the genocide, but they are secondary compared to the priority to establish a system that would enrich the settlers' families for generations.

TIME APPEARS TO STOP AROUND THE MEN AIMING THEIR WEAPONS, IN COMPLEX SHOTS THAT COMBINE THE IMMEASURABLE EXPANSE OF THE LANDSCAPE, THE VULNERABILITY OF THE INDIGENOUS FIGURES, AND THE CRUEL DETERMINATION OF THE SETTLERS. IT IS A MOMENT OF UNILATERAL VIOLENCE PERPETRATED WITHOUT REMORSE

Although Pedro in *White on White* is not a settler, he seems to lose no time in absorbing the logic of possession described by Mignolo. His obsession with Mr Porter's young wife develops progressively in the first half of the film. Vania Baraza links the mise-en-scène of their photography sessions to Laura Mulvey's concept of scopophilia, identifying a psychoanalytic dimension that is central to Court's film. Pedro's sexual obsession is connected to death both through the camera and through the masculinity that serves to express such drives.

While in *White on White* the massacre concludes the film, in *The Settlers* it is followed by the rape of a Selk'nam woman. In this scene, Bill emerges from the bushes declaring dissatisfaction, and MacLennan indicates to Segundo that it is his turn. When Segundo refuses, MacLennan loses control, threatening him and ordering him to rape the almost unconscious woman. Manliness here is pushed to absurd extremes: in a close-up that distorts his face, saliva spraying as he spits in rage, MacLennan feels judged by Segundo and wants to assert his dominance. He even grabs Segundo's genitals and kisses him while threatening to kill him, to "extinguish [his] fucking flame". In one of the film's most disturbing moments, Segundo goes to the badly injured woman and suffocates her with his bare hands. It is an intimate scene, composed of close-ups of their faces and hands. In Segundo's actions there is a hint of pity, but also a

symmetry with the rapists: he is a man who takes control of a woman's body, deciding her fate for her.

In the context of colonisation, the female body—especially the body of an Indigenous woman—becomes something that can be controlled. There is a direct, tangible connection between genocidal violence and sexual violence. The civilised men who have come to settle in this no-man's land embody a savage masculinity. In his review of *The Settlers*, Iván Pinto points out that although the film explores the civilisation/barbarism binary through the language of the Western, it offers a kind of "inverse" reading of that binary. Mignolo articulates the same idea from a decolonial perspective: "the civilization that Creoles and Europeans had in mind has been genocidal and, therefore, barbarian" (Mignolo, 2005: xviii).

In both films, the protagonists are neither perpetrators nor victims in the strict sense, yet they do bear some responsibility for the events that unfold. They could thus be identified with Rothberg's concept of implicated subjects, who hold positions aligned with power and privilege without themselves being direct agents of harm, contributing to, inhabiting, inheriting or benefiting from regimes of domination that they neither create nor control (Rothberg, 2019).

GHOSTLY VISIONS

Considerable dramatic weight is given in both films to the massacres of groups of Selk'nam people by organised death squads. Both depict what is unmistakably a hunt: mobs of men with rifles raised, pursuing human beings who flee from them into the background of the frame. Time appears to stop around the men aiming their weapons, in complex shots that combine the immeasurable expanse of the landscape, the vulnerability of the Indigenous figures, and the cruel determination of the settlers. It is a moment of unilateral violence perpetrated without remorse. Only the

IT IS PEDRO'S CAMERA THAT CAPTURES THE WAY THE PHOTOGRAPHER MANIPULATES HISTORY, MOVING THE BODIES, PLACING THE KILLERS IN POSES, AND ENDOWING A COWARDLY, VILE AND HEINOUS ACT WITH THE GRANDEUR OF A BATTLE

films' respective protagonists, Pedro and Segundo, display any kind of restraint and are not direct participants in the killing, enabling us to distinguish them from the others. Parts of the visual composition of these scenes recall the legendary photographs of the explorer Julius Popper, a Romanian engineer who embarked on "one of the most famous expeditions to Tierra del Fuego" in 1886 (Marchante, 2009: 99) and, following a skirmish with the Selk'nam, took a number of pictures that were widely disseminated even at the time. In the scene of the massacre in *White on White*, echoes of Popper's photographs are perceptible in the specific way the killers hold their rifles, in their triumphant stances and in the static coldness of the poses. This is the shot that ends the film. The screen encapsulates what Pedro's camera captures in an image recorded without judgement by a machine that frames the photographer as he manipulates history, moving the bodies, placing the killers in poses and endowing a cowardly, vile and heinous act with the grandeur of a battle.

These men take possession not only of the territory of the Selk'nam but also of their bodies: to receive payment for their work as "Indian hunters", they must cut off their victims' ears and provide them as proof of the killing—a system that is depicted explicitly. In *The Settlers*, Bill is shown mutilating a row of bloodied corpses, which he carries out with a ceremonious calm, while MacLennan forces Segundo to move the last of the bodies. A close-up of the ear being severed provides a glimpse of the knife tearing the flesh and

dark blood streaming out of the fresh body, underscoring the tangible brutality of the act. Cutting off ears is part of the job, as they serve as a form of currency that reflects the organised system of ethnic cleansing of the island implemented by the landowners and their foremen. This system, attested to by travellers, priests and ranch workers in various records from the period, is extensively documented in Marchante's work.

In these films, Selk'nam culture is depicted in mystical terms, behind a veil of mystery that renders it difficult even for the camera to capture, with a humanity and cosmology inaccessible to the cinematic apparatus. Only in a handful of images do dimensions beyond the genocide itself emerge. Their everyday activities are barely outlined, presented statically like a museum diorama: clothing, objects, a particular way of gathering around the fire. This museological quality recalls Alberto Harambour's reflections on the use of Selk'nam iconography in Tierra del Fuego today, which he describes as an "empty presence" (Harambour, 2018: 62). This perspective incorporates the Selk'nam into a *Magellanic* identity but strips them of all content beyond these iconic figures, reinforcing the idea of their supposedly prehistorical status. The real history of the region is thus understood to begin with European colonisation. Harambour argues that this relegation of the Selk'nam to prehistory creates a discontinuity between their presence in the territory and its subsequent colonisation, as if no relationship existed between the two:

The notion of a differentiated historicity based on stages that structures the definition of territorial histories is part of its "historical context", elaborated by Mateo Martinic, who understands the island's settlement in terms of "aboriginal occupation", which "extended until the end of the 19th century, when foreign colonising infiltration began [... which] continues to the present day". These two "stages" do not overlap. (Harambour, 2018: 65)

This discontinuity is extremely common in the histories of modernity/coloniality. From the



Image 2 (left). *White on White* (2019), courtesy of Théo Court
 Image 3 (right). *The Settlers* (2023), courtesy of Felipe Gálvez

16th century onwards, Mignolo notes, “the histories and languages of Indian communities ‘became historical’ at the point where they lost their own history. They became, in other words, museum cultures as they ceased to be human history” (Mignolo, 2005: 26).

These films propose a break with this stratified historicity by marking out clear, direct relationships between the arrival of one culture and the disappearance of another. In a manner that could be described as logical, or at least sensible, they locate the point of view in witness-characters who are either Chilean or *Mestizo*, and only in a few scenes, such as when Kiejja (Mishell Guaña) invites Segundo to escape with her, do they adopt an Indigenous perspective. This deliberate distance is reinforced by a similar scene in each film.

The Settlers and *White on White* feature strikingly similar depictions of encounters between the protagonists and Selk’nam figures wearing their distinctive ritual attire. In both cases, the encounters occur in semi-darkness. The figures are viewed from a distance, in full-body shots displaying the iconic imagery discussed above. The rhythm, sound and atmosphere of the scene mark the appearance of something ineffable, an apparition of the utmost solemnity. In *The Settlers*, the moment begins with a troubled horse that Segundo tries to calm down. Then, the moonlight shines on Segundo’s face as he lifts his gaze in fright. The

sound of the wind and the intermittent screeching of a bird heighten his trepidation. The appearance of the Selk’nam figure is accompanied by slow, deep and ominous breathing. When the film cuts to a close-up of this near-supernatural being, its face is dark, almost invisible. The sensation conveyed is that we are gazing into an abyss, or at a creature who is more than human.

In *White on White*, Pedro’s encounter occurs near dawn. He is accompanying a hunting party and moves away from them to view a Selk’nam camp with his camera. Hidden behind a bush, close to the ground, he is shown from a slightly elevated camera angle as he raises his gaze to see the figure. It appears motionless at first, and the camera zooms in on it slowly to underscore its solemn power. The shot becomes immersive and unsettling, reinforcing a supernatural feeling that disturbs and transports us into the realm of the unknown.

These figures evoke a sense of something unattainable, a tragic cosmopolitical loss of the possibility of seeing the world through the eyes of a Selk’nam. The term “cosmopolitical” is used here in the sense given to it by Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, as a relationship between radically different cultural alterities that even include divergent conceptions of what is (and what is not) human. This sense of cultural loss is consonant with Harambour’s conception of

PHOTOGRAPHY BECAME ANOTHER TOOL OF DOMINATION, SO THAT EVERYTHING CAPTURED BY THE CAMERA SERVES FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE OFFICIAL HISTORY OF THE VICTORS. IT IS A TECHNOLOGY USED BY THOSE BEHIND THE CAMERA TO SUBJUGATE THOSE POSITIONED IN FRONT OF IT

discontinuity discussed above, and with the historiographic tendency (exemplified in Martinic's work) to describe what happened to the Selk'nam as an *extinction*. However, it is important to distinguish between the preservation of an ethnic identity through direct biological descent—i.e. through survivors—and the preservation of a way of living and seeing the world. In *The Settlers*, this painful distinction is reflected at the end of the film in the character of Kiepja, who is now married to Segundo, living on Chiloé Island and dressing as a Chilean woman. When Vicuña, a representative of the Chilean State, asks her for her name, she replies that it is Rosa. This name change encapsulates one of the genocide's irreparable consequences.

Image 4. *White on White* (2019), courtesy of Théo Court



Survivors, in order to go on living, have to give up their former identity: in a sense, to forget who they were. Yet in the final sequence, Kiepja does not forget. Directing an inscrutable look at the camera, she questions, accuses and defies the “official history” the Chilean government official seeks to construct.

These encounters conclude with the ceremonious disappearance of the Selk'nam figure, a farewell to a bygone world. Although these are brief moments in the film, their importance is central. The sublime impression they leave underscores a separation between worlds: an unknowable spirituality and characters who have been sacrificed to Western modernity. It is telling that these moments occur in the context of the imposition of an extractivist economic system that concentrates the land into a few hands. This is an inherent feature of the integration of a territory into the global capitalist system. In his discussion of capitalist realism, Mark Fisher stresses that it entails the loss of all beliefs outside capitalism. This loss of alternative cosmologies is a definitive aspect of capitalism, which “is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics” (Fisher, 2022: 4). This moment when a particular form of ritual or symbolic elaboration is forever banished by capital is precisely what both films attempt to depict, recognising colonialism as a direct antecedent of capitalism, or as the way of integrating territories into an economic system even before their political domination.

It is impossible to analyse post-coloniality—a state of affairs in which global capitalism is a major force—without considering its images. These films reflect on those images as a way of understanding and narrating the world, taking us back to the historical moment when the tech-

nical reproduction of images first became intertwined with the broader project of modernity.

Photography became another tool of domination, so that everything captured by the camera serves for the construction of the official history of the victors. It is a technology used by those behind the camera to subjugate those positioned in front of it. Photographs function as evidence, yet their truth is always relative; it is a half-truth that includes both the perspective of the photographer and the image of the subaltern subjects with no control over the history their own portraits come to represent. There is always a process of construction at work. In *White on White*, Pedro meticulously directs his subjects in order to stage an epic mise-en-scène of the recent massacre. This directly recalls Julius Popper's photo album, as Vania Barraza observes:

The de/montage of Pedro's photograph in Court's film helps explain the montage of Popper's history and, by extension, the historical montage involved in the narrative of colonisation in Tierra del Fuego. (Barraza, 2022)

In a sense, *The Settlers* reaffirms Barraza's observations regarding *White on White*. At the end of the film, Vicuña, explicitly acting in the name of justice and the Chilean state, stages an institutionalised version of Segundo and Kiepja's lives, adopting a tone of compassion towards them yet subjecting them to his will. The result is another historical montage, this time of a new version: the Chilean one. In front of the camera, Kiepja's gaze disobeys the civilised man's instructions, opening a tiny crack of resistance in the film's conclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

The Settlers and *White on White* engage in a critical dialogue with the past, particularly with the gaps in a history that has only been partially told.



Image 5. *The Settlers* (2023), courtesy of Felipe Gálvez

White on White offers an audiovisual exploration of post-colonial theory's psychoanalytic dimension—the amnesic repression of modernity's dark side—while also engaging in direct dialogue with historical reconstruction and Julius Popper's photo album. *The Settlers* meticulously stages what may be the most significant connection obscured by the historiography of omission: the establishment of a model of extractivist colonisation as the primary cause of the Selk'nam genocide.

The purpose behind Court's and Gálvez's approaches to the Selk'nam genocide is more than just to challenge the interpretation of past events in the present; it is also to propose an ethical way of looking at the past, in dialogue with history and evidence, through an aesthetic construction in keeping with the violence contained in their stories, including murder, rape, the eradication of a worldview and the imposition of another.

Perhaps Kiepja (or Rosa) in *The Settlers* is the boldest character in either of these films, a survivor of a cosmopolitical loss. In the final scene, she refuses to drink tea, to be constructed as an image, to participate in the official history. Hers is the obstinacy of one who is forced to be quiet but will not forget. Through a small act of resistance, the ending to the film marks the distinction

between genocide and extinction. The genocide occurred, and it is turned into a macabre image in the films, its reasons and methods exposed. Extinction, meanwhile, is a myth at the service of the civilising narrative, reaffirming the “no-man’s land” justification for the extractivist present. The doctrine of *res nullius*, applied by the colonial powers to seize land in the 18th century, has been discredited for erasing the Indigenous presence on that land (Zusman, 1999). The final scene of *The Settlers* underscores this erasure while stressing the partial nature of images and of foundational historical narratives. ■

NOTES

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COLONIALISM, EXTRACTIVISM AND VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHILEAN CINEMA: THE SELK'NAM GENOCIDE IN *WHITE ON WHITE* AND *THE SETTLERS*

Abstract

This article examines the Chilean films *White on White* (Blanco en blanco, Théo Court, 2019) and *The Settlers* (Los colonos, Felipe Gálvez 2023) as aesthetic and political interventions that revise the history of the Selk'nam genocide in Tierra del Fuego. In a dialogue with the contrasting historiographical perspectives of Mateo Martinic and José Luis Marchante, this analysis suggests that both films destabilise the heroic settler narrative and expose the structural violence of the modernising, extractivist project that underpinned the colonisation of southern Patagonia. These films are part of what Hayden White calls a post-colonial *historiophoty* that confronts the historical amnesia and proposes ethical ways of depicting colonialist violence. Both films reveal the intersecting nature of colonialism, extractivism and barbarism, which established peripheral capitalism in the Southern Cone through control over territory and over bodies. In these examples, contemporary Chilean cinema emerges as a space for a critical revision of the national imaginary and its foundational silences, positioning fiction as a critical, reflective and scientifically rigorous device for engaging with contemporary debates and historical documents.

Key words

Film; history; colonialism; violence; Selk'nam.

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COLONIALISMO, EXTRACTIVISMO Y VIOLENCA EN EL CINE CHILENO CONTEMPORÁNEO. EL GENOCIDIO SELKNAM EN BLANCO EN BLANCO Y LOS COLONOS

Resumen

Este artículo examina las películas chilenas *Blanco en blanco* (Théo Court, 2019) y *Los colonos* (Felipe Gálvez, 2023) como intervenciones estéticas y políticas que reescriben la historia del genocidio selknam en Tierra del Fuego. En diálogo con las visiones historiográficas contrastadas de Mateo Martinic y José Luis Marchante, se propone que ambos filmes desestabilizan el relato heroico del colono y revelan la violencia estructural del proyecto modernizador y extractivista que acompañó la colonización de la Patagonia austral. Estos filmes se inscriben en aquello que Hayden White llama una «historiofotía» de carácter poscolonial, que confronta la amnesia histórica y propone modos éticos de figuración de la violencia. Ambas películas revelan el entrelazamiento entre colonialismo, extractivismo y barbarie, donde la ocupación del territorio y de los cuerpos funda el capitalismo periférico del cono sur. En estos ejemplos, el cine chileno contemporáneo emerge como un espacio de revisión crítica de los imaginarios nacionales y de sus silencios fundacionales, situando la ficción como un dispositivo crítico, reflexivo y riguroso con los debates contemporáneos y los documentos históricos.

Palabras clave

Cine; historia; colonialismo; violencia; selknam.

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“CAMERAS! CAMERAS! CAMERAS!” WOMEN, ARCHIVES AND STRUGGLE IN CONTEMPORARY GALICIAN CINEMA

MARTA PÉREZ PEREIRO

CIBRÁN TENREIRO UZAL

Over the course of history, forms of resistance to power such as revolts, insurrections, uprisings and rebellions have invariably been relegated to the margins both of official historiography and of visual representations of historical events, from the artworks depicting the battles of the Protestant Reformation to the media footage and photographs of recent decades. These political images of conflict have had to contend with the “visibility struggles” (Boidy, 2017: 1) established in the various systems for viewing history. As episodic, spontaneous expressions of marginalised cultures, they have generally lacked representation, and it is only recent methods such as oral history (Cabana, 2021) that have the power to bring them into the present in order to meet the demand to “activate the visible” (Mirzoeff, 2009: 3) made by political activists whose aims now more than ever require the “strengthening of a presence” (Boidy, 2017: 1).

These movements on the margins of public life form part of a political iconography that Balló and Pintor suggest is comprised of a set of motifs that “appeal to the spectator’s prior knowledge of these staging models and establish fertile ground for reflection on their ambiguity and their communicative and political efficacy” (2021: 201). Included among these motifs is the object of study of this article, which to date has received limited scholarly attention: archival images of women in popular uprisings in the Galicia region of Spain during the period 1970–1995 that have been included in Galician films made in the last two decades. The main aim of this research is to explore how these women have been portrayed in terms of the idea of gesture, as Didi-Huberman and Traverso define this concept. This article also analyses the (re)appearance of these women in images through processes of archival recovery and reuse in contemporary Galician documen-

taries, providing an opportunity to compare two historical periods characterised by different levels of access to narrative construction in peripheral cinema. To this end, the analysis focuses on the gestures of the women who appear in the films *Nación* [Nation] (Margarita Ledo, 2020) and *Os días afogados* [The Drowned Days] (Luis Avilés and César Souto, 2015). These two films are also brought into dialogue with sources contemporary both to the archival images they recover (such as newspaper photographs) and to their own production, through comparisons to other documentaries that also use archival images of these and other social struggles of the late 20th century.

Women have rarely been shown as active participants in revolutionary movements, or uprisings, in the sense that Didi-Huberman (2018) defines this term, constituting a clear case of underrepresentation in the political sphere. As will be explored below, their presence has been confined either to the abstract level of ideas in the form of allegories and idealisations, or positioned in a secondary, dependent relationship with their male comrades. The recovery of images of women in these contexts through operations of memory and archival work forms part of this project to activate the visible based on the gestures of the women who appear in them, which need to be analysed individually.

The idea of analysing the repertoire of gestures shown in these images is particularly fruitful because these gestures serve to give visibility to the uprising as “an ongoing movement” (Didi-Huberman, 2018: 13) that presents potentiality as the activation of desire in the face of power. In this sense, “uprisings emerge from the human psyche as gestures, corporeal forms. Undoubtedly, they are forces which rise up, but above all they are forms that make them anthropologically perceptible, convey them, orient them, put them into practice, render them plastic or resistant” (Didi-Huberman, 2018: 28). Didi-Huberman seems to identify the idea of uprisings with a masculine form, drawing on Bat-

aille’s reading of *Battleship Potemkin* (Bronenosets Potyomkin, Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) comparing man to a volcano—or an erection—that relaxes after it has ejected its lava. From a feminist perspective, the gesture in political protest, situated between an expression of desire and an act of resistance, is directly associated with the concept of *poner el cuerpo* (“to put the body on the line” or “to give the body”) identified by Sutton (2007) in protests such as those of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

GENDER REPRESENTATION, POLITICAL PROCESSES AND VIOLENCE

As a starting point for contemporary political struggles, the French Revolution established the parameters for the inclusion of the image of the Woman,¹ who is barely individualised in images of female revolutionaries. The inclusion itself was ambiguous, as the Woman was used either to represent abstract values such as Liberty or Equality or to identify the *ancien régime* as a female form in contrast to the manliness of the revolutionary process (Juneja, 1996). The Republic is thus represented with the icon of Marianne wearing a Phrygian cap, or as a nurturing mother with multiple breasts suckling citizens who, in France’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, effectively excluded women. The Russian Revolution, which adapted this iconography to its popular art tradition, quickly developed a repertoire of male heroic icons. Bolshevik revolutionary graphic art also developed allegorical figures, one of which in particular reveals the impossibility of a monosemous interpretation of the female image as a symbolic element: the rural woman, embodied in the *Baba*, symbolised the obstacles to agricultural production that the revolutionary project confronted in its early years (Bonnell, 1991). Conversely, images that portray women as representatives of revolutionary values use gender to depict themes related to domination and subordination, whereby “the

woman in the image replicates the man's appearance. Both exude physical prowess, but the roles are unmistakably gender-marked, indicating male domination" (Bonnell, 1991: 278).

Although these images belonged to propaganda programs (and are therefore very different from images documenting more modest uprisings and acts of insubordination), they established a model for representing such movements, contributing to the subordination of female participation. The lack of images showing women as agents of political change may be related to the model of representation of women in film, subordinated to a patriarchal framework in which women are presented as objects of violence (Haskell, 1974).

THE LACK OF IMAGES SHOWING WOMEN AS AGENTS OF POLITICAL CHANGE MAY BE RELATED TO THE MODEL OF REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN FILM

In relation to images of women as leaders of uprisings, Barreiro González argues that early cinema functioned as "yet another tool for demonising the involvement of women in political and public life" (2019: 153), portraying activists and suffragettes as objects of ridicule or as madwomen. One example of this is Emily Davidson, whose death while attempting to interrupt the Epsom Derby was filmed by Pathé News and openly criticised in the media. In fact, the trope of the mentally disturbed woman who disrupts public order already possessed a full repertoire of images, which were recorded at the École de la Salpêtrière at the end of the 19th century with the aim of identifying the symptoms of hysteria. To this end, Dr Charcot and his disciples developed a complete iconographic program based on photographs of patients at the sanatorium performing an act of "hysterical 'theatricalism'" in "an authentic prac-

tice of cruelty" (Didi-Huberman, 2007: 367). Some of the attitudes performed by the inmates for Albert Londe's camera came to form part of the social imaginary as gestures that would later be reproduced in acts of resistance by women, in a relative subversion of gender stereotypes: hysteria as a tool for instilling fear or breaking free of repression (Cabana, 2021).

The images that serve as this article's object of study depict actions that are not aimed at transforming the patriarchal order but that do make ambiguous use of it to articulate a collective struggle, often dominated by women committed to the preservation of their livelihood (Cabana, 2021). In the struggles of rural Galician women during the Franco regime analysed by Ana Cabana, the forms of uprising are based on the idea of "acting without appearing to be activists" (Cabana, 2021: 134), involving acts of protest where institutionalised mechanisms such as banners or posters are completely absent. Protests by women are characterised by the act of *poner el cuerpo*, putting the body on the frontline to obstruct, always in coordinated, collective actions:

The performative method of mobilisations led by women is evident in the three cases of conflict analysed: a crowd in front of houses and properties that were going to be expropriated; throngs of women who avoid being stopped and arrested for throwing stones by positioning themselves in front of Civil Guards; and masses of women obstructing the work of mechanical diggers (Cabana, 2021: 131).

Women as bodies on the frontline also appear in Khanna's (1998) analysis of the depiction of their participation in the emblematic film about an uprising, *The Battle of Algiers* (La battaglia di Algeri, Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966). Although women play an important role in the revolutionary process, none of the female characters in this film have a voice, problematising political cinema's relationship with gender, as women are rendered invisible and silent, just as they are in other representations of uprisings.

A METHOD FOR THE POLITICAL GESTURE

Any reading of the political representation of the subjugated comes up against the inability of visual analysis to deal with modes of political representation, as Boidy argues in his proposal of a “political iconology” to analyse representations of political movements that suffer from “visibility struggles” (Boidy, 2017: 9). For the purposes of this research, the construction of a “cultural history” (Didi-Huberman, 2018), whereby images from the past are interrogated from the perspective of the present when they are recovered, is a particularly interesting notion. In this sense, what is needed is the establishment of “a genealogy arising from bodies in movement, which is revealed in an unpredictable way; a genealogy of gestures of emancipation” (Didi-Huberman and Traverso, 2023: 26). With the aim of developing this cultural history of bodies in movement, drawing on Aby Warburg’s conception of “cultural science” (2010: 3) in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Didi-Huberman proposes a methodology that requires us to “look at an image dialectically: if there is one figure, we must seek out the others that it addresses and that respond to it; we must see the background from which it stands out, in the dual sense of ‘differing from’ and ‘deriving from’; we must dialectically temporalise a cultural history” (Didi-Huberman and Traverso, 2023: 39). This relational element—between bodies, and between images—and its temporal dimension are present in the way contemporary films recover archival images, in an apparent effort to answer the question posed again by Didi-Huberman in the case of images of uprising:

Should a political anthropology of images not also be based on the simple fact that our desires need the force of our memories, on the condition that we give them a form that does not forget where it comes from and that is therefore capable of reinventing all possible forms? (Didi-Huberman, 2018: 15)

These images of the struggles of the subjugated also respond to the need to preserve an iconographic program of the working class, as Georges Sorel had already recognised in the early 20th twentieth century when he argued that language was insufficient and called for “collections of images which, taken together and through intuition alone, before any considered analyses are made, are capable of evoking the mass of sentiments” necessary for the triumph of socialism (Sorel, 2004: 113). As Hesmondhalgh suggests, the working class has often been stigmatised or demonised, but in other cases there has simply been a lack of media attention to the lives, attitudes and values of working-class people, resulting in a “failure of underrepresentation” (2017: 21). Cinema can be an ideal medium for representing these gestures because, as Agamben argues, “a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss” (Agamben, 1993: 137).

In view of the above, and adopting the “pragmatic thinking” proposed by Balló and Bergala when approaching cinema’s visual motifs by moving “from objects to ideas” (2016: 11), this exploration is founded on a correspondence identified between three images in *Nación* and *Os días afogados*. Film analysis is thus used here as a surgical tool (Castro de Paz, 2002) that facilitates the dissection of the different layers of meaning in the images based on the concept of political iconology proposed by Boidy (2017), as well as the analysis of composition and editing of the shots, comparing how gestures are presented in the archival images in order to discern their political meaning and potency.

The first of the images analysed here is from *Nación*, in which Margarita Ledo recovers archival material that includes footage filmed by Galicia’s regional public television broadcaster of police officers forcibly dispersing a protest by former workers at the Regojo/Telanosa textile company in the municipality of Redondela in the mid-



Image 1

1980s. Amid the chaos of moving bodies created when the officers attempt to take over the space, one specific confrontation is visible: a woman who, instead of fleeing from the violence, confronts a police officer who is armed with a baton (Image 1).

As part of an anti-patriarchal discourse aimed at reconstructing an alternative history to the hegemonic narrative, throughout her film Ledo uses other archival images that transport us to different conflicts notable for the presence of women: most significantly, the workers' protests at the Pontesa ceramic factory (also in Redondela) in the early 1990s, but also the demonstrations at the Odoxa cannery on A Illa de Arousa in 1989, and the protest in the mid-1970s by the villagers of As Encrobas (in the municipality of Cerceda) in opposition to the expropriation of their land by the energy giant Unión Fenosa for a lignite mining project. For this last case, the filmmaker recovers a photograph taken by the reporter Xosé Castro that shows another confrontation

between women and law enforcement agents, where the women form a human barrier in an effort to block the entry of soldiers of the Civil Guard, who are armed with rifles (Image 2).

A similar gesture can be found in another significant recent Galician film, *Os días afogados*: a group of people, including a significant number of women, trying to block the passage of the Civil Guard. As in the case of the protest in As Encrobas, the context is an eco-social conflict: the film deals with the flooding of the villages of Acredo, Buscalque and O Vao (in the municipality of Lobios) and Reloeira (in Entrimo) due to the construction of the Lindoso Dam on the Galician border with Portugal. Shortly before the evacuation of the villagers in 1992, amid hunger strikes and demonstrations, another similar image was captured, with the added force of speech in this case, showing a woman shouting: "Cameras! Cameras! Cameras!" (Image 3).

In this repeated gesture conveying the dispute over a space, along with the reference to the presence of film devices to document what is happening, we find a reflection of the visibility struggles mentioned above, as well as a possible correction to the apparent absence of women in such contexts. However, to achieve Didi-Huberman's idea

Image 2



IN THIS REPEATED GESTURE CONVEYING THE DISPUTE OVER A SPACE, ALONG WITH THE REFERENCE TO THE PRESENCE OF FILM DEVICES TO DOCUMENT WHAT IS HAPPENING, WE FIND A REFLECTION OF THE VISIBILITY STRUGGLES MENTIONED ABOVE, AS WELL AS A POSSIBLE CORRECTION TO THE APPARENT ABSENCE OF WOMEN IN SUCH CONTEXTS

of constructing a cultural history, bodies and images of past and present must be placed in relation to each other. In doing so in this case, another, invisible gesture is revealed: the act of the filmmakers who recover archival records of other struggles and bring them to the attention of the public once more. This is a common practice in Galician cinema, found in earlier films that have used footage of the protests against the Regojo textile company in *O imperio téxtil* [The Textile Empire] (Cuchi Carrera, 2003), the fight to save the village of As Encrobas in *As Encrobas: a ceo aberto* [As Encrobas: In the Open Air] (Xosé Bocixa, 2007) and various eco-social or labour disputes. In Spanish cinema more broadly, gestures and conflicts of this kind

are documented in films such as *Land Underwater* (Urpean lurra, Maddi Barber, 2019) and *The Year of the Discovery* (El año del descubrimiento, Luis López Carrasco, 2020). Contemporary Galician cinema also includes explorations of the 1977 demonstrations against the opening of a nuclear power station in Xove in *CCCV – Cine Clube Carlos Varela* (Ramiro Ledo, 2005), the aforementioned Odoxa protest in *Doli, doli, doli... coas conserveiras. Rexistro de traballo* [Doli, Doli, Doli... With the Canning Factory Workers: A Work Record] (Uqui Permui, 2010) and the strike in the port city of Vigo in *Vigo 1972* (Roi Cagiao, 2017). Significantly, these films trace a timeline connecting the frictions of the final years of the Franco regime and the subsequent transition to democracy with others associated with the establishment of Spain's autonomous regions and the country's entry into the European Union, events marked by conflicts between different narratives.

The aims of this research are oriented towards identifying the implications of these political gestures (particularly in the productions cited, but also in other Galician films over the last two decades), which occurred in the context of social conflicts and disputes over the narratives constructed to explain them. To this end, a method

is needed that will allow us to examine the gestures being enacted both in front of and behind the camera. As Ingrid Guardiola points out, images “need to be considered in relation to the contexts in which they circulate and their uses—both those predetermined by the author and those activated by the viewer” (2019: 29). The use of archival material in these films gives it a creative reception and a new opportunity for circulation. In this way, in its new context the original image is affected by the “archive effect”, which Jaimie Baron (2020: 138–39) associates with our awareness of the disparity be-

Image 3



tween images identified as archival and those created for the new film; but it is also by the “archive affect” produced by this temporal disparity at an emotional level: “not only do we invest archival documents with the authority of the ‘real’ past, but also with the feeling of loss” (Baron, 2013: 37).

With this in mind, and with the aim of examining these images dialectically and exploring the visibility struggles identifiable in the bodies and the films, the films studied here are analysed on two levels. The first involves studying physical gestures and their presence in the images. What do these women’s bodies do? How are they contextualised in the image? What do they tell us about the history of social struggles in Galicia? The second requires a consideration of the images in their new context, comparing their contemporary use with their original context. Who originally recorded the images? What uses did they have? How do these new films use the archival material? The objective is thus to understand what images such as these can tell us about the role of women in Galicia’s recent history and the dispute over their narrative (and their visibility) today.

THE VISIBLE GESTURE: THE WOMAN-AS-BARRIER

The images appropriated in *Nación* and *Os días afogados* are similar to others captured by photojournalists such as Delmi Álvarez or Anna Turbau. Margarita Ledo herself has a close association with Turbau, as in her recent film *Prefiro condenarme* [I’d Rather Be Condemned] (2024) she uses Turbau’s photographs of the Conxo psychiatric hospital. Turbau was present at the As Encrobas demonstrations and at the protests against the construction of the *Autoestrada do Atlántico* motorway, and in the aforementioned Regojo/Telanosa confrontation both she and Álvarez documented women forming a human barrier to hold back the security forces. Once again, these images

show the dispute over space and the unequal use of violent force, as the police are usually protected by helmets and armed with batons or rifles while the women wield sticks or umbrellas.

These are recurring images because they record actions that occurred often. They document the phenomenon of *poner el cuerpo* that contradicts any hypothetical notion of the passive condition of women in such contexts. Cabana (2021: 120) suggests that rural Galician women were valued by their communities for demonstrating “disposition”, a capacity for agency in contrast to the passivity and timidity that characterised the woman’s role in other societies. This would mean that the participation of women in collective action during the Franco regime was understood not as a break with traditional gender roles but as the expression of a specific repertoire of protest actions based on “physical presence and public visibility” (Cabana, 2021: 131).

The images reveal that these forms of protest were still common in Galicia in later years—there is a fifteen-year gap between the As Encrobas protests and the Lindoso Dam demonstrations—and were used in industrial labour disputes as well. The threatening agent is the police, who were usually responsible for expelling people from a location, whether public (a road, a railway station) or private (such as properties subject to an expropriation order). Women’s bodies occupy the space and remain there, visible, until the dispute over that space is resolved. This comes close to the visual motif of police violence in public spaces, but here the emphasis is placed more on resistance than on the exercise of force.

In aesthetic terms, this often translates into a simple yet eloquent device for depicting the visibility struggle: prior to the images that document the clash in a single space, the film footage of these confrontations often shows a kind of shot/reverse shot alternating between the people (with a significant proportion of women) and the law enforcement agents approaching the location. It

is usually the police (or Civil Guard) who arrive second. In their efforts to prevent all those bodies from gathering together, they also try to fill the

Images 4, 5 and 6



frame. Power is expressed through control over the visible space, as is made clear in *Nación*: six minutes into the film, Ledo shows us the women of Pontesa gathered at a train station; after one of them looks off-screen (Image 4), two police vans enter the frame (Image 5), followed by images that now show both sides within the contested space (Image 6).

Significantly, the end of this confrontation is left out of the film, as the women are still forming a barrier when we cut to some shots of Nieves Lusquiños, one of the film's protagonists, in footage filmed in the present. In the subsequent scene, from which the first image discussed in this article is taken, there is no shot/reverse shot technique; instead, the film moves directly from a shot of the people (the community) to the conflict shot, with two guards unable to keep the crowd out of a railway station. Once the space has been occupied, the security forces react, bringing in reinforcements to reassert control over the shot.

The shot/reverse shot technique used in the context of the workers' protest also appears in eco-social protests like the one in *Os días afogados*. In this case, the protest takes place outside a barracks, in a scene showing the arrival of significant reinforcements of Civil Guards. Confronting them, the local residents establish an axis of action that leads to a slow, tense advance by the guards against the human barrier, documented in the conflict shot by the cameras that the woman had shouted for, which continues for three minutes (although with a cut betraying a slight change in camera position), until the scene cuts to a woman who has collapsed to the ground in what appears to be a panic attack, in an echo of the hysterical behaviour captured on film by Londe.

These elements point to a visual arrangement in the editing to represent the same gesture in another eco-social dispute (although the presence of women cannot be discerned in this case due to the distance of the camera): the protest against sand extraction at Baldaio beach included in *CCCV*.

The woman-as-barrier thus emerges as a gesture in the protests conveyed in the film footage of such events, distinct from other repertoires of protest actions visible in the films cited above, such as throwing rocks or hunger strikes.

THE INVISIBLE GESTURE: POTENTIALITY AND POWERLESSNESS

In line with Didi-Huberman and Guardiola, it was argued above that images needed to be considered in relation to their uses and the contexts in which they circulate. In this sense, the presence in the films analysed here of militant film footage—such as footage of the nationalist activist Carlos Varela Veiga in *CCCV* and *Nación*, and of the Salnés Workers' Union (OTTS) in *Nación* and *Doli, doli, doli*—reveals two objectives common in images of this kind: to document something that is not being documented or is normally documented from other perspectives; and to incite action in response to it. These objectives were pursued by screening the films “in exhibition spaces outside commercial cinema circuits, such as film clubs, union chapters, parish churches or support organisations” (Gómez Viñas, 2016: 76).

The objective of documenting points to the absence of an autonomous point of view. This factor has shaped the development of filmmaking in Galicia, where professional film production only really began in 1989 and an industrial sector was not consolidated until decades later. For this reason, militant, amateur and homemade films played a key role in telling the story of contemporary Galicia, resulting in biased narratives, particularly in terms of political action—as Grandío (2017: 36) notes in relation to the absence of public demonstrations in the media during the Spanish transition to democracy—and the participation of women in that action: “with very few exceptions, we have a press that either denies conflict or presents it as genderless” (Cabana, 2021: 121). Recovery and recycling practices in

Galician cinema circulate old footage in regular cinema circuits and serve to correct, complement or contradict the biased or incomplete historical narratives. *Nación* and *Os días afogados* contribute to this movement with the variety of archival sources both films include.

Both films use TV footage, particularly from Galicia's public broadcaster (TVG), as can be seen in several of the scenes analysed. As noted above, historical researchers (much like militant activists) tend to criticise media coverage of social conflicts, and TVG has been subject to such criticism, perhaps even more so in recent years (Pontevedra, 2022). Significantly, both films use raw footage rather than the news reports as they were broadcast: *Nación* offers a glimpse of the artifice when it shows the reporter repeating her introduction in the midst of the conflict between the police and the Pontesa workers. Generally, the footage filmed is shown with ambient sound, without the narrative that a voice-over might impose on the visuals, suggesting a parallel with the inclusion of Xosé Castro's photographs outside their original context in the news reports on As Encrobas in the newspaper *La Voz de Galicia*. The parallel is made even more evident when Ledo includes images from *Navidades en Puentesampayo* (TVE, 1962), a television feature on the Pontesa factory that is clearly propaganda: in *Nación*, these images appear with music replacing the original soundtrack, thereby eliminating a narration that offers a didactic exposition on the factory's cutting-edge technology.

This strategy is in keeping with a tradition of feminist cinema identified by Elena Oroz in her discussion of contemporary Spanish independent documentaries: the “critical interrogation of the archive” (Oroz, 2018: 107–108). It also constitutes a kind of amendment to the narrative of the Franco regime, which can also be construed from the inclusion in *Nación* of an excerpt from *Far from the Trees* (*Lejos de los árboles*, 1972), a documentary by Jacinto Esteva that was censored at the time for its portrayal of Spain as a country marred by

religious extremism and backwardness. And Ledo also sources material from another documentary, as industrial labour in Galicia appears in a scene showing factory workers leaving for the day, filmed by the pioneering José Gil for his film *Talleres Alonarti. Sociedad La Artística Ltda.* (1928).

In the case of *Os días afogados*, the most significant source is home movies. At both the beginning and the end, the film shows a public screening of amateur footage documenting Aceredo's final days before the village is flooded. We see different houses, the village's last festival, and portraits of its inhabitants, all imbued with a nostalgia that is common when home movies are used, but which here becomes something bleaker: this is not a place that has merely changed, but a place that has disappeared.

Once we understand the origins, uses and contexts of circulation of these materials, the strategies used in the films become clearer. Germán Labrador describes the history of modern Galicia as "a history of the gaze" shaped by the triad of landscape-labour-capital. In this triad, given the extractivism imposed on the land and the battles to stop it, "what is viewed and what is withheld from view" are crucial (2025: para. 1). What *Nación*, *Os días afogados*, CCCV and *Doli, doli, doli* all share is an interest in recovering what was withheld from view, though this is achieved in different ways and leads to different results in each case.

In *Os días afogados*, although it uses strategies associated with feminist cinema, women are not the heart of this film: their presence is more prominent in the archival footage than in the present-day images, and their struggle is secondary to the wistfulness induced by the home movies, which is stressed to the point of becoming the film's focus. The film alternates between the past of a few former inhabitants of Aceredo and their lives two decades later. We see them looking at the expanse of water that now covers their village, performing everyday actions—often in silence, alone or in pairs—in a contrast to the ar-

chival footage that shows larger groups and more intense activity, such as farmwork. This structure foregrounds the archive effect and the archive affect: the alternation between present and past highlights the ageing of the faces and the presence/absence of spaces, constructing a sense of loss that is typical of films of this kind.

This feeling also inevitably appears in *Nación* and *Doli, doli, doli*, which similarly include the present-day lives of the women who fought those battles in the past. In this sense, these films reveal both a potentiality (in their efforts to make a social impact) and a powerlessness. The repeated images (and gestures) of uprising or resistance are often accompanied by present-day images of a very different nature: in contrast to the chaos of the past, the present often appears orderly, associated with slow and deliberate actions or seated interviews. The power of these memories serves to condemn a political paralysis, but it does not always succeed in symbolically distancing itself from it.

Elena Oroz points out how feminist gestures involve the use of "strategies of intervention in and critical opposition to dominant cultural narratives in which the male perspective continues to dominate" (Oroz, 2018: 108). In this respect, *Nación* seems to acquire a militant position through its editing—which, as shown above, constructs a critique of certain narratives present in the archival material—and also through what it films in the present: the police reappear in 2017, sharing the frame with the women who formerly worked at Pontesa, who are now gathered outside a courthouse dressed in yellow vests.

CONCLUSIONS

In the context of visibility struggles, these films work not only with presence but with the codes that mark that presence. In contrast to the collective images predominant in the archive and to the universal Woman in cinematic depictions, *Nación* also aims to individualise its characters, in a com-

plex system involving a distanced mise-en-scène that combines real workers and actresses. The film also highlights aspects of these women's lives that are usually overlooked and explicitly revives the call to action that characterises militant cinema. A typically overlooked aspect is the presence of the iconic Citroën Dyane 6, which Nieves Lusquiños was able to buy thanks to her job as an industrial worker, thus serving as a symbol of freedom. A call to action is made by Nieves herself: workers and actresses shown at the factory lockers are looking at the camera and talking about their experience, but Nieves chooses to use the moment to warn the audience: "Working without getting paid? Forget it. Don't even think about it, please; don't work for free. To hell with that."

The aim of this article has been to explore how women in the context and historical period studied were portrayed in the past and the significance of their reappearance through the recovery of archival material. In the films analysed—particularly in Lusquiños's look to camera in *Nación*—the relationship between visible and invisible gestures becomes evident. The visible gesture is the act of women who *poner el cuerpo*, putting their bodies on the line to protest worker exploitation or extractivist abuses, documented in footage that at the time was screened in restricted exhibition circuits (as is the case of militant cinema) or that formed part of narratives constructed from the perspectives of people unrelated to the protests (as in television coverage). The invisible gesture is the work of people such as Ledo, who return our attention to these struggles by bringing them back into the present, taking advantage of the democ-

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ratiation of filmmaking in Galicia to settle the dispute over the narrative (with varying degrees of nostalgia), relying on media channels and distribution circuits that are still far from hegemonic but nevertheless allow a level of visibility previously unavailable to projects like the ones analysed here. Nieves Lusquiños directly addresses the audience with her frontal gaze to camera, and through the archive affect, her presence in images taken decades apart evokes the iconology of protest present in the appropriated footage, possibly expressing potentiality, as described by Didi-Huberman (2018), which activates desire (for resistance, for change) in the face of power. Some gestures change, others are repeated, but the struggle is the same. ■

NOTES

- 1 The capital "W" is used deliberately here to refer to the use of the image of the female that authors such as De Lauretis (1990) have analysed in discussions of the dichotomy between the universal "Woman" in cinematic depictions and the gradual shift towards a plurality of women.

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“CAMERAS! CAMERAS! CAMERAS!”. WOMEN, ARCHIVES AND STRUGGLE IN CONTEMPORARY GALICIAN CINEMA

Abstract

Historically, political struggle has often been portrayed as a male domain. The traditional space for women has been associated with care, reproduction and the household, which explains their stereotypical representation and their limited presence in images of protest that are defined by a masculine iconography of uprising and violence. However, the study of certain contemporary Galician documentaries that make use of archival material reveals the recurrence of a different gesture: the woman-as-barrier, confronting the police as they try to forcibly disperse the protestors. The aim of this study is to define a method that facilitates the analysis of this gesture in the films *Nación* (Margarita Ledo, 2020) and *Os días afogados* (César Souto Vilanova and Luís Avilés Baquero, 2015), but also of the invisible gesture of the filmmakers' appropriation of archival footage of past struggles that brings it back into circulation.

Key words

Archive, social conflict, gender, cinema, documentary, Galicia.

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«¡CÁMARAS! ¡CÁMARAS! ¡CÁMARAS!». MUJERES, ARCHIVO Y LUCHA EN EL CINE GALLEGO CONTEMPORÁNEO

Resumen

Históricamente, la lucha política ha sido a menudo retratada como un campo masculino. El espacio tradicional para las mujeres se ha ligado a los cuidados, el trabajo reproductivo y la domesticidad, lo que explica su representación estereotipada o su escasa presencia en las imágenes de protesta, vinculadas a una iconografía machista de levantamiento y violencia. Sin embargo, el estudio de una serie de documentales gallegos contemporáneos apoyados en material de archivo muestra la repetición de un gesto diferente: la mujer como barrera, enfrentándose a una carga policial. En este trabajo pretendemos definir un método que nos permita estudiar este gesto en *Nación* (Margarita Ledo, 2020) y *Os días afogados* (César Souto Vilanova y Luís Avilés Baquero, 2015) pero también el gesto invisible por el que diferentes cineastas incorporan el archivo de luchas pasadas y lo ponen de nuevo en circulación.

Palabras clave

Archivo, conflicto social, género, cine, documental, Galicia.

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EXPRESSING EMOTIONS IN TIMES OF COVID-19: A MELODRAMATIC APPROACH TO THE DETERIORATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS BASED ON VISUAL MOTIFS IN THE NEWS PROGRAMS ON THE SPANISH NATIONAL BROADCASTER (RTVE)*

FEDERICA GOBBI

INTRODUCTION

This article continues a line of research pursued in recent studies (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2021; Qiuyi and Qian, 2025; Variano, 2022; Wasilewski et al., 2025) that explore the psychosocial impact of COVID-19—albeit with different methodologies—with the aim of analysing the predominant emotional states experienced during the early periods of the pandemic. The hypothesis tested in this study is that the reduction of affective expression to a narrow spectrum of negative emotions can be attributed to a breakdown in the culturally established ways of publicly communicating a whole range of feelings. One of this study's aims is to demonstrate that this breakdown is the product of an epistemic crisis affecting the language of gestures used to express, communicate and share emotions. Another is to show that this situation

resulted both from the physical restrictions that compromised the spontaneous use of commonly recognised expressive gestures, and from representational choices adopted by the media that undermined the foundations of empathetic interaction, instead promoting a state of apathy. In this sense, the abandonment or alteration of certain gestures may be interpreted both as the consequence of the restrictions on civil liberties and as a reflection of a consciously planned operation.

When culturally coded and shared by a particular community, gestures tend to elicit empathy and at the same time to induce imitative behaviour (Crescentini et al., 2011). Consequently, the absence or significant alteration of common gestures in television productions may be attributable to an attempt to encourage emotional and gestural restraint in order to foster compliance with temporary restrictions on physical movement. From

THE PHYSICAL RESTRICTIONS AND MEDIA DECISIONS RELATED TO THE STATE OF EMERGENCY IN THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO AN EMOTIONAL BLOCKAGE

this perspective, communicative strategies such as attempts to reduce emotional interaction by delegitimising this need would form part of the efforts of the media to place their power at the service of the safety imperative. This study thus analyses the reduction in expressive possibilities and emotional interaction by exposing these mechanisms and demonstrating the effectiveness of such media measures, while also identifying the physical impediments caused by the restrictions.

This article analyses the most significant motifs in affective terms that are used most often in coverage directly or indirectly related to the pandemic in the opening sequences of evening news broadcasts on RTVE's La 1 channel in 2020 and 2021. The aim of this analysis is to trace how the physical restrictions and media decisions in response to the state of emergency in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an emotional blockage. The findings give particular attention to the formal alteration of visual motifs that require physical proximity between individuals and that elicit empathy, as well as the development of a new gestural syntax for conveying feelings that could not be expressed through traditionally codified gestures at the time.

This research forms part of a larger project, titled MUMOVEP (Mutations of Visual Motifs in the Public Sphere—Representations of Power in Spain 2017–2021: Pandemic, Climate Change, Gender Identities and Racial Conflicts). The objective of this project is to interpret the visual motifs used in the public sphere, with particular attention to the formal mutations resulting from contemporary

circumstances that have the biggest influence on them. In this context, the inadequacy of the reformulation of emotional expression that engages with the other, or that is only fully realised when shared, forms part of an epistemic crisis that confirms the profound impact of the pandemic in altering forms of expression. Moreover, this study also confirms a hypothesis developed during the project, related to the lack of an iconography of the *Pietà* that could facilitate a catharsis to help heal the collective wound, an absence attributed to impaired capacities of empathy and creativity.

The visual motifs discussed in this study, which have been identified and analysed in previous research (Balló and Bergala, 2016), point to patterns of expression that are culturally recognised and used to communicate emotions (Balló, 2000: 13). The theoretical formulations and applicable possibilities of this category have been developed in studies conducted by members of the Audiovisual Media Aesthetics Research Collective (Colectivo de Investigación Estética de los Medios Audiovisuales, or CINEMA) in the Department of Communication at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, through funded projects such as OCEC (Observatory on Contemporary European Cinema) and MOVEP (Visual Motifs in the Public Sphere: Production and Circulation of Images of Power in Spain, 2011–2017), as well as the ongoing MUMOVEP project mentioned above. This body of published research is founded on Aby Warburg's approach to the historicity of images, which identifies the iconographic aftermath of certain pathos formulas (*Pathosformeln*) as evidence of their enduring capacity to affect observers emotionally in different historical, geographical and cultural contexts, cultivating transcendence as a result of an empathetic connection (Pintor, 2017: 2).

The continued need for an empathetic response, as reflected in the use and effectiveness of visual motifs, defines these motifs as meaningful ways of conveying affective experiences. At the same time, the iconographic method employed

here facilitates an interdisciplinary approach to the observation of how these patterns migrate from cinema to other audiovisual productions, such as footage and images of the public sphere (Balló and Salvadó, 2023: 12), thereby legitimising comparisons of these two media forms.

In line with the previous research project (MOVEP), which examined the appearance in the public sphere of iconographies that have inherited meanings originally acquired through their use and development in cinema (Pintor, 2017: 2), this study interprets the visual motifs that offer the clearest evidence of an emotional blockage by comparing them with the meanings they acquired through the prism of what José Javier Marzal classifies as “the melodramatic” (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 30), referring to a device that transcends the various paradigm shifts in cinema, from classical to modern to contemporary. Moreover, the centrality to this genre of a relationship with alterity based on sharing emotions vests it with a greater sensitivity to factors that foster or threaten such an interaction. This explains the special attention given in melodrama to mechanisms such as repression (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 67–68; 158; 160) and sublimation (Gledhill, 2002: 335), which are incorporated into its stories (through the attitudes of the characters and the obstacles they face) and expressed at the narratological level through aesthetic choices that elicit *primary cinematic identification* (Metz, 1975: 40) from the spectator. This means, first of all, that comparing these narrative strategies can help reveal and contextualise the rhetoric that underpins the media discourses in which the visual motifs identified are embedded; second, that melodrama can serve to expose and investigate the psychological and social repercussions of the physical and visual restrictions imposed during the period of the pandemic; and third, that applying the concern with feelings that characterises a genre founded on emotional engagement to images disseminated in news programs may help reveal the specific affective nuances that remain after the

emotional spectrum has been pared down. This approach can thus facilitate an analysis of the images of loneliness resulting from the emotional blockage to discern the prevalence of attitudes of resignation (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 58), feelings of impotence (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 93) and the predominance of nostalgia, the implications of which are analysed in the conclusion.

In addition to considering the work of authors who theorise about and apply the category of visual motif (Balló, 2000; Balló and Bergala, 2016; Balló and Salvadó, 2023), this study adopts the Warburgian method in line with recent applied studies by researchers such as Iván Pintor (2017) and Miriam De Rosa (2019), who revisit theories originally proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman (2002) and Giorgio Agamben (2000). On the question of melodrama, this study draws mainly on the work of Nuria Bou (2002), Roberto De Gaetano (2022), Pablo Pérez Rubio (2004) and Jesús González Requena (1986), while also taking into account theoretical contributions that explore questions of emotions from various perspectives.

EMOTIONAL REPRESSION

This section explores the image of the *Pietà*, an iconographic rarity in the corpus studied, in an effort to analyse its function and contextualise its use. This is the only case involving the use of the capacity of visual motifs to move spectators emotionally.

Broadcast on 8 September 2020, the short video titled *#EstoNoEsUnJuego* (“This Is Not a Game”) formed part of a campaign by Spain’s Ministry of Health aimed at promoting compliance with COVID-19 protective measures and encouraging responsible behaviour by raising viewer awareness. To this end, the editing establishes a direct correlation between unlawful gatherings and deaths caused by the virus by juxtaposing happy scenes of young people getting together with bleak images of people dying in hospital with grieving health-

care workers at their side. The use of this visual motif reflects an attempt to foster self-restraint in relation to the need to share happiness openly through celebratory gestures and rituals. By making viewers aware of the risks associated with failing to comply with the restrictions on human interaction, the video implicitly encourages them to contain their emotions. On the one hand, it aims to provoke guilt and instil a fear of being responsible for other people's deaths in order to prevent violations of emergency measures such as curfews, social distancing and bans on group gatherings. On the other, in its effort to elicit an emotional response from the spectator, it conveys a tragic tone to foster an aversion to behaviours identified as directly culpable for the death of innocent victims. In this way, the video awakens viewers' sense of civic duty in order to encourage them to regulate not only their own behaviour but also, implicitly, the behaviour of others.

Confirming the omnipresence of surveillance practices first theorised in the pioneering work of Michel Foucault (1975), the proliferation of coverage made possible by contemporary video technology has resulted in the widespread expansion of surveillance phenomena into the social and visual space (De Rosa, 2014). In keeping with this evolution, during the COVID-19 pandemic ordinary individuals assumed the role of judges, using their mobile phones as surveillance instruments to film other civilians violating the prohibitions imposed. The intrusive gaze of filming devices that captured people eating or drinking in public places thus gave rise to acts of visual humiliation often featured in the news coverage of this period. However, the resulting sensation of being monitored also created the conditions for self-imposed restraint and latent paranoia. Subjects who realised they had been caught in the act responded with gestures such as turning their heads to hide their faces, or acts with more troubling connotations, such as raising their hands like hostages trying to express their innocence.

The repression of emotions imposed by the social order (Gledhill, 2002: 117) is also the dominant theme of melodramas of passion (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 148), which focus on the contrast between the law and desire (Elsaesser, 1985: 165). In *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945), a lack of courage, coupled with guilt over an adulterous affair, brings the love story to an abrupt end, while in *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955), a sense of responsibility towards the community compels the protagonist to give up a requited love. Such social constraints, which act primarily on the narrative possibilities of melodrama, also appear in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (Fa yeung nin wa, 2000), this time in the form of meddling neighbours. In this film, bourgeois morality is replaced with a Confucian perspective (Bettinson, 2025: 106). As a holistic ideology, Confucianism makes no distinction between the public sphere as the political domain and the private sphere as the moral domain, and thus government intrusion into private life is deemed acceptable (Esteban Rodríguez and Martín Rodríguez, 2024: 22). This gives rise to everyday situations comparable to those experienced during healthcare emergencies in societies with philosophical traditions that grant greater autonomy to the individual. As a result, as the director himself suggests (Tobin, 2008: 25), the murmurs and prying looks of the neighbours the true protagonists of *In the Mood for Love*. While this curious environment might actually be understood to create the conditions for the romantic relationship by bringing the two protagonists together (Gliatta, 2004: 109), what occurs in the film—presented at Cannes with the title *Secrets* (Gliatta, 2004: 111)—remains completely concealed from the gaze of the outsider, including the spectator.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, concealment from the intrusive gazes of outsiders required the organisation of clandestine events or the confinement of personal interactions to secluded environments. At the same time, the restric-

tions on behaviour, reinforced by the prevalence of surveillance that extended even to the level of self-surveillance, may have resulted in the blocking of emotions before they could be expressed and shared. From this perspective, the following section analyses certain mutations to the visual motifs used to represent situations in the public sphere.

TOWARDS AN EMPATHETIC BLOCKAGE

In order to foster the self-restraint necessary to contain the need to share experiences with others, the media strategies adopted to report on and counteract the tragic events of the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have leaned towards compromising the capacity of the public to respond empathetically. The most common strategy involved the use of neutral images with minimal emotional impact yet capable of conveying an impression of control, with the aim of inducing similar attitudes of self-restraint in the spectator. In this way, the media contributed to the development of an aesthetic defined chromatically by cool colours and a syntax limited to a few visual motifs.

This tendency resulted in the still life becoming the dominant iconographic choice to represent the pandemic. The development of this genre in modern art reflects the emergence of a sensibility that originated with the *Wunderkammern*, in a transition away from the collector's inclination towards the criteria of scientific

THE RESTRICTIONS ON BEHAVIOUR, REINFORCED BY THE PREVALENCE OF SURVEILLANCE THAT EXTENDED EVEN TO THE LEVEL OF SELF-SURVEILLANCE, MAY HAVE RESULTED IN THE BLOCKING OF EMOTIONS BEFORE THEY COULD BE EXPRESSED AND SHARED

classification characteristic of the encyclopaedic mentality of the Enlightenment (De Benedictis, 1991). However, as the corpus analysed here does not involve static images, it should be noted that the footage that reflects the rationale of the still life most clearly belongs to the visual motif of the series (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 111-116). In the context of the pandemic, this motif appears in shots of ubiquitous medical supplies, initially used to accompany daily updates on the virus. In the beginning, this motif was often associated with the production, use and orderly collection of diagnostic tests in order to check for the presence of the virus in patients. Later, it would be employed to depict the mass production processes of the long-awaited vaccine, which at that time was still in the manufacturing phase.

This mode of representation, however, extends beyond subjects visually conceived of as “things” to include people as well. This transition is observable in a series of consecutive shots shown in the opening sequence of the evening news broadcast on 9 September 2020. Reporting on the final testing phases prior to its rollout, images of individuals receiving the vaccine are alternated with sequentially edited images of the industrial processes involved in pharmaceutical production (Image 1). Queues of people constitute another variant of this visual motif due to the orderly arrangement imposed by mandatory social distancing and because a queue with a large number of people transforms what might resemble a crowd into a spatially distributed set of evenly arranged elements, covering a surface to form a regular geometric pattern. An example of this can be seen in an overhead shot of queues of people lining up for virus testing (Image 2). Social distancing strategies convey a certain emotional rigidity and serve to attenuate the more human qualities of the individuals shown.

The aesthetic choices analysed are founded on the same logic adopted in physical containment measures aimed at preventing the virus from



Image 1 (above). Broadcast on 9 September 2020 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario 1* (RTVE, La 1), 0:50–0:55
 Image 2 (below). Broadcast on 14 November 2020 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario 1* (RTVE, La 1), 1:17

spreading, based on the idea that domination implies control. In this context, the most prominent element of physical containment is the face mask. This accessory disrupts numerous visual motifs by obstructing the spectator's view of the subject's face. It was also the most recurrent element in images captured during the pandemic, and its mandatory use inevitably compromised the expressiveness of the facial features. For example, any smiles that might be provoked by the rebellious and liberating hilarity of clandestine gatherings—swiftly condemned by the media gaze—are only faintly perceptible from the expression around the eyes. In any case, instances of relaxation interrupting the prevailing austere atmosphere are rare. In a period characterised by a behavioural regime dominated by restraint and fear, truly joyful smiles are relegated to memories of pre-pandemic times, portrayed in news reports with wistful nostalgia.

SUBVERSION OF THE GESTURE

The father of classical cinema, D. W. Griffith, created a flexible space (Bou, 2002: 39) subject to the laws of emotion. As a result, the depiction of passion—as explored in books such as *Passion and Society* (L'Amour et l'Occident, De Rougemont, 1939)—can be found at the very origins of the cinematic form. The longing for absolute contact with alterity translates into a tension between different elements that leads to a profound fusion. In line with this melodramatic logic, in the segment “The Hand” (Ai Shen, Wong Kar-wai, 2004) from the collective film *Eros* (Michelangelo Antonioni, Steven Soderbergh, Wong Kar-wai, 2004), the ubiquitous obstacles on the path towards complete affinity with the other only intensify the desire associated with romantic passion, exacerbating the feeling until it achieves its most refined state. This is a love capable of overcoming obstacles by surviving subversively in other ways, such as through sublimation.

The central role played the hand in the first sequence of encounters between the two protagonists unfolds with a cold and erotic professional distance that follows the *courtoise* imagery analysed by Denis de Rougemont (1939), elevating the courtesan to the status of a *domina*, with an authority based on her greater sexual experience. These roles are established through shots and staging positions evocative of the relationship between the formal, romantic Count and the uninhibited actress in *La Ronde* (Max Ophüls, 1950), where the actress occupies the bed like a throne and orders the Count, whom she receives like a subject, to surrender his weapon. As she passes her hand over it, wielding it like a sceptre, her caresses allude to a sexual relationship that the count's *bon ton* compels him to postpone until the more intimate moments of the night, after several hours of devoted courtship. The construction of gestures in Ophüls's film is echoed in the *mise-en-scène* created by Wong in “The Hand”, which represents a strange professional



Image 3. “The Hand” (Ai Shen, Wong Kar-wai), in *Eros* (2004)

pact in the form of the courtesan’s masturbation of an inexperienced novice (Image 3): a dressmaker’s apprentice chosen by his master from among his most talented pupils, whom the courtesan is happy to offer calculatedly sensual caresses that transform into a tactile sensibility capable of emulating the intensity of passion. The memory of this experience will lead the apprentice to desire her services again, and to reciprocate them through physical contact with her body.

This segment was filmed at the time of a SARS outbreak that reached epidemic proportions in Hong Kong, nearly forcing the city into a total lockdown in the first months of 2003. The absence of physical contact resulting from the safety measures influenced the director’s creative process, prompting him to reflect deeply on the possibility of love in the presence of disease, privileging the sense of touch (Hereadero, 2018: 443). Much like the importance given to hands in this segment (which was conceived in a context similarly affected by physical restrictions), during the COVID-19 pandemic it was the hands (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 364–370), or by extension the limbs, that assumed full responsibility for gestures of expression, communication and affective understanding normally entrusted to other parts of the body, such as the mouth, that were now effectively “censored”.

With the aim of ensuring while at the same time regulating the empathetic connection, a new non-verbal language was developed. The new syntax included the fist bump, which was extended even to formal contexts such as meetings between European political leaders, to avoid the prolonged physical contact required for the traditional handshake. Elbow greetings were also encouraged. Given that politicians, as public figures subjected to constant scrutiny, have the power to act as role models, such gestures became common in political contexts.

However, in order to promote this strict code of behaviour so that it might become part of everyday life, the new gestures were also promoted by institutions such as schools, through footage of typical children learning them in the classroom (Image 4).

These initiatives confirm the media’s commitment to promoting behaviour for the public to emulate—in this case not through aesthetic conditioning but as an instrument for disseminating a new gestural language. Nevertheless, this new repertoire could not match the expressive efficacy of traditional, more culturally embedded gestures. Moreover, its purely supplementary nature—conceived for sporadic use during periods of heightened restrictions—defined this language as ephemeral, while the potential of gestures to subvert established patterns and escape categorisation remained (De Rosa, 2019: 114–115). Consequently, the instability of these new gestural patterns, documented in media footage, contributed to the dismantling of the expressive syntax of emotions and triggered an epistemic crisis.

WITH THE AIM OF ENSURING WHILE AT THE SAME TIME REGULATING THE EMPATHETIC CONNECTION, A NEW NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE WAS DEVELOPED



Image 4. Broadcast on 7 September 2020 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario I* (RTVE, La 1), 0:58

INTERACTION BREAKDOWN

In opposition to the poietic capacity of classical cinema to tear reality apart, modern cinema offers a reality that resists the transcendence attained by intellectual and cultural means (Moure, 1997: 93). This impenetrability, resulting from the rupture of the episteme of modernity, change the nature of obstacles to relationships. In a cinematic approach associated with the most extreme conclusions of modernity, such as Antonioni's, "the drama is no longer psychological, but plastic," as Godard famously observed (Païni, 2015: 22). In line with this reading, Nuria Bou observes that doors, windows and other elements positioned between characters in Antonioni's films become impassable thresholds of separation (2002: 92). By marking blind spots for communication, they prevent the possibility of encountering the other.

During the pandemic, open doors were used to demarcate the spots where Christmas gifts could be delivered without risk of contagion. Architectural elements that once symbolised connection and passage thus became impermeable. This function of denying access is visually expressed through the recurrence of the motif of the fence (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 88–93), which appears in

particular at moments of higher risk and harsher restrictions, such as the closure of schools, shops or other venues that were previously sites of daily activities. In classical cinema, the fence might foreshadow obstacles threatening a relationship (Bou, 2002: 47), as in *Peter Ibbetson* (Henry Hathaway, 1935). Conversely, in modern cinema, it can represent the romantic couple's inability to be happily together, as it does in *L'Eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962) (Image 5).

Other architectural elements also communicate this idea. In *All That Heaven Allows*, a window (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 383–388) is used to express the protagonist's confinement in society (González Requena, 1986: 112), and it is also used to represent the isolation both of students in university residences and of a healthcare worker positioned at the edge of a desolate frame, recalling Goya's dog in his series of *Black Paintings* (1820–1823), symbolising solitude.

However, as a means of conveying the psychological impact of the breakdown in interaction, the motif of the kiss (Balló and Bergala, 2016: 64–70) is particularly revealing. This gesture is severely affected by the pandemic restrictions because it requires maximum physical proximity. In classical melodrama, a genre shaped by the



Image 5. *L'Eclisse* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1962)

notion of two becoming one, the kiss marked the expressive frontier (Bou, 2002: 63): the point of total fusion between two individuals. The face-mask, however, disrupts the flow of shared tension, precluding any possibility of a fully realised encounter (Image 6).

DISSIPATED EMOTIONS

In a public address, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez recommended refraining from physical contact as a way of expressing affection, showing love and concern for the other person's safety by preventing the virus from spreading to them. This suggestion fosters guilt and worry over the possibility of harming others, establishing fear as the foundation for a diminished range of

emotions. On the one hand, the loss of socially established rituals characterised by the codified gestures that vest hardships with meaning contributed to an impoverishment of symbolic expression, as reflected in cases of individuals who described difficulties in processing grief because the absence of the symbolic relegated many emotions to a vague status that made it hard even to identify them. On the other hand, emotional distancing became consolidated as a human response to measures that deprived individuals of physical and empathetic contact. Unfortunately, this psychological reaction only served to reinforce the recommended safety distances, making them seem unbreachable.

Various initiatives were launched to compensate for the physical isolation caused by the pandemic, such as getting schoolchildren to write letters to elderly care home residents. In cinema, however, the letter often symbolises the irreversible passage of time, underscoring the implicit distance between the sender of the message and its reader. In *A Time to Love and a Time to Die* (Douglas Sirk, 1958), for example, the letter serves as a metaphor for irrevocable separation (González Requena, 1986: 162).

The motif of the window, often serving in films as a point where women confined to the domestic space can observe the outside world, has been used in cinema to mark a state of exclusion

Image 6. Broadcast on 23 December 2021 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario I* (RTVE, La 1) 2:53





Images 7 and 8. *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937)

(Gledhill, 2002: 302) from active public life, becoming a metaphor for a conscious resignation to the passage of time that allows them only a vicarious existence. This is the feeling conveyed by the protagonist in *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) as she watches her daughter's wedding through a window (Images 7 and 8), knowing she will only ever be able to live fully through her child. Her resignation establishes a connection with the melancholy prince in *The Court Concert* (Das Hofkonzert, Douglas Sirk, 1936), who transfers his passion for his lost love to his daughter's dreams.

Thanks to its polysemous nature, the window, like other barriers, can thus acquire a temporal connotation, giving visual substance to the expression of attitudes and feelings that have grown fainter over time. In what probably reflects an acknowledgement of this connotation, the window was the motif chosen to represent the 2020 Christmas season in images showing people looking at street decorations from their homes. The allusion to passive, voyeuristic attitudes suggests a symbolic distance from an outside world from which people were feeling excluded. The repeated use of this iconography in news stories about lifestyle changes imposed by the pandemic (Image 9) seems to support this hypothesis. In such cases, the freedom to share emotions through public dis-

plays of affection may be portrayed nostalgically as a luxury characteristic of other perhaps happier and certainly more carefree times. Such examples offer a means of interpreting the subdued and gloomy emotions that defined the pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

Melodrama's bourgeois transformation of tragedy (Gledhill, 2002: 16) is marked by an inclination towards vicarious experience, as reflected in the success of numerous programs and works of fiction during the pandemic (Sigre-Leirós et al., 2022), framed in the nostalgia that constitutes a key feature of the genre (Pérez Rubio, 2004: 50). This represents one of the possible emotional responses to the sensation of powerlessness caused by the passive behaviour to which individuals may have felt confined during the periods of severest restrictions. However, the censorship imposed upon the active expression of emotions, so similar to the castrating repressive mechanisms that are central to this genre, may be understood in terms of melodrama's symptomatic response to drama, i.e., silence (Brooks, 1976). In this respect, it is worth noting that in Japanese melodrama, in contrast to the expressive saturation that characterises its Hollywood counterpart (Brooks, 1976:



Image 9. Broadcast on 14 September 2020 at 9:00 p.m., *Telediario I* (RTVE, La 1), 2:24

41), emotional excess transcends the level of representation (Dissanayake, 1993: 150–151). In the case of the pandemic, it would be hoped that the build-up of emotions that could not be externalised might find other avenues for release. This points to an opportunity to analyse practices that transcend representations of the public sphere, such as the initiative launched by the librarian Juan Sobrino to harness the evocative potential of language by offering book readings over the phone to library users. Beyond the limitations of such acts of therapeutic sublimation providing only a projective form of proximity to others, it would be inappropriate to pursue such questions through an analysis focusing on visual motifs of the public sphere.

One of the aims of the analysis offered here has been to show how the deterioration of social relations effectively reduces the individual's emotional range, based on the logic that the lack of interaction affects the expression of emotions that require alterity to be experienced fully. To this end, melodrama has facilitated an exploration of the mechanisms of repression and the possibilities of transcending them, revealing how social control measures condition how we express emotions. The structure of the study reflects this logic: the first section deals with the repression, while the final section examines resignation and nos-

talgia, and the two sections between them—"Subversion of the Gesture" and "Interaction Breakdown"—consider the ways in which the emotional obstacles may or may not be overcome. Moreover, given that visual motifs elicit an empathetic proximity and that some of these motifs require physical proximity for their formulation, the analysis of the changes to these forms of representation in the context of the pandemic has shed light on the serious disruptions to their shared dimension.

To explore the repression and the moral encoding of emotions, the first section ("Emotional Repression") analyses the specific use of the image of the *Pietà*, which constitutes an iconographic rarity in the corpus of motifs analysed, while the final section ("Dissipated Emotions") identifies the emotional allusions left in the wake of the debilitation of other feelings: the motifs of the letter and the window, which are interpreted in terms of the meanings they are given in melodrama. The three sections in between these offer overviews of the undermining of empathetic proximity ("Towards an Empathetic Blockage"), the destabilisation of gestural syntax ("Subversion of the Gesture"), and the physical obstacles to interpersonal contact ("Interaction Breakdown"). In "Towards an Empathetic Blockage", the deterioration of empathetic receptiveness is expressed in the motif of the series, which, as the most recurrent motif in rep-

representations related to the pandemic, is identified as part of a media strategy aligned with the moral rejection of emotions. Given that emotions were deemed a potential threat to compliance with the physical restrictions that required the adoption of an austere lifestyle, the media's contribution can be described as an aesthetic approach aimed at discouraging heightened emotional states. "Subversion of the Gesture" examines the promotion by the media of a new repertoire of gestures for empathetic communication, along with their expressive inadequacy and their role in destabilising the validity of culturally established gestures. While the preceding section explored the role of the facemask as an obstacle to empathetic receptiveness, this section focuses on the expressive role of the hand, and the "Interaction Breakdown" section centres on elements functioning as physical barriers, with the mask reappearing here due to its capacity to hinder physical contact, associated with other elements whose function and recurrence are comparable to the motif of the fence.

Given that visual motifs generally encapsulate physical and empathetic proximity and involve culturally recognised gestures, they offer an object of study that is particularly useful to make sense of the epistemic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analysis here has confirmed the significant role played by the pandemic in the transformation of repertoires of gestures and iconographic forms. The loss of the language that sustained the shared dimension resulted in a marked absence of an iconography of the *Pietà* capable of releasing collective pain, as that iconography depended on the stability of a formal repertoire that was now undermined, and on an empathetic understanding of alterity that was necessary for the cathartic process but difficult to achieve in times when the capacity for empathy appeared to have been compromised. ■

GIVEN THAT VISUAL MOTIFS GENERALLY ENCAPSULATE PHYSICAL AND EMPATHETIC PROXIMITY AND INVOLVE CULTURALLY RECOGNISED GESTURES, THEY OFFER AN OBJECT OF STUDY THAT IS PARTICULARLY USEFUL TO MAKE SENSE OF THE EPISTEMIC CRISIS TRIGGERED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

NOTES

- * The findings presented in this article form part of research conducted as part of the MUMOVEP project (Mutations of Visual Motifs in the Public Sphere: Representations of Power in Spain 2017-2021: Pandemic, Climate Change, Gender Identities and Racial Conflicts), ref. PID2021-126930OB-I00, funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by ERDF, EU. The stage to which these results refer relates to the coding and classification of visual motifs through which the pandemic and other events dominating the contemporary public sphere from 2017 to 2021 are presented or interfere with other news topics, with the aim of tracking visual motifs related to them more easily. This constitutes the first step towards creating a digital archive that can include the visual motifs related to these factors of primary importance whenever they appear in photographs published on the front pages of the Spanish newspapers *El País*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*, and in the images and recordings included in the introductions to the evening news on the first channel (La 1) of Spain's national public broadcaster.

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EXPRESSING EMOTIONS IN TIMES OF COVID-19: A MELODRAMATIC APPROACH TO THE DETERIORATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS BASED ON VISUAL MOTIFS IN THE NEWS PROGRAMS ON THE SPANISH NATIONAL BROADCASTER (RTVE)

Abstract

Based on the premise that the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a contraction in the range of emotions that could be expressed in social settings, this article examines the relationship between this reduction and the decline in culturally coded ways of communicating emotions in the public sphere. The analysis focuses on images accompanying news reports broadcast on the evening news on RTVE's La 1 channel in 2020 and 2021, taking an iconographic and iconological approach aimed at identifying the formal mutations of the most significant visual motifs (Balló, 2000) in affective terms that are used most often in coverage of the pandemic. The study also analyses iconographic variants found in images associated with other news stories whenever these can be understood as consequences of the pandemic's impact on other events in the news during this period. Identifying signs of a possible epistemic crisis evident in the manifest absence of the representation of certain emotions, this analysis interprets the affective implications of this absence through a comparison with examples from cinematic melodrama, a genre grounded in emotional interaction.

Key words

Visual motif, COVID-19, Pandemic, Emotion, Empathy, Iconography, Melodrama, Television.

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LA EXPRESIÓN DE LAS EMOCIONES EN TIEMPOS DEL COVID-19. UNA APROXIMACIÓN MELODRAMÁTICA AL DETERIORO DE LAS RELACIONES SOCIALES A PARTIR DE MOTIVOS VISUALES EN LOS INFORMATIVOS DE RTVE

Resumen

Partiendo de la premisa de que los periodos de restricciones impuestos durante la COVID-19 provocaron una contracción del abanico emocional socialmente expresable, este artículo examina la relación entre dicha reducción y el deterioro de las formas culturalmente codificadas para comunicar emociones en la esfera pública. El corpus de análisis se limita a las representaciones derivadas de las imágenes que acompañaron las noticias en los informativos vespertinos de RTVE en La 1 durante 2020 y 2021. La argumentación se desarrolla mediante un enfoque iconográfico e iconológico orientado a identificar las mutaciones formales de los motivos visuales (Balló, 2000) más significativos desde una perspectiva afectiva y de aquellos empleados con mayor frecuencia en la cobertura mediática de la pandemia. Asimismo, se analizan las variantes iconográficas que emergen en imágenes asociadas a otras noticias, cuando pueden considerarse consecuencia de las repercusiones de la pandemia sobre acontecimientos que compartieron la agenda informativa del periodo. Al identificar indicios de una posible crisis epistémica, rastreamos en la ausencia manifiesta de la representación de determinadas emociones, se interpretan sus implicaciones afectivas mediante una comparación con ejemplos cinematográficos del melodrama, género centrado en el intercambio emocional.

Palabras clave

Motivo visual., COVID-19., Pandemia., Emoción., Empatía., Iconografía., Melodrama., Televisión.

Autor/a

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DANCING ON THE EDGE OF A VOLCANO: A HINGE FILM BETWEEN CATASTROPHES

JOAN MIQUEL GUAL

Dancing on the Edge of a Volcano (Cyril Aris, 2023) is a creative non-fiction film that operates on multiple levels: as the chronicle of an explosion, the story of a film shoot focalised around the director, and a cinematic reflection on the historical memory of Lebanon. On the first level, it documents the various crises that afflicted Beirut in 2020 and 2021, including the explosion of a warehouse containing remnants of war and fertiliser that killed 218 people, injured 7,500 and devastated an area that left about 300,000 local residents homeless. This tragedy occurred at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was followed by a drastic devaluation of the Lebanese pound that aggravated the situation of impoverishment already being faced by most of the country's population, and rendered film production of any kind virtually unfeasible. On the second level, it serves as a "making-of" for *Costa Brava, Lebanon* (Mounia Akl, 2021), a fiction film inspired by the 2015 rubbish crisis that presents a dystopian image of the future that is

already far surpassed by the reality of Lebanon's present. And thirdly, Aris's film includes excerpts from *Whispers* (Hamzat, Maroun Bagdadi, 1980) with the aim of bringing the destruction resulting from the explosion into dialogue with the decimation caused by the country's civil war (1975-1990), while also exploring the impact of both events on Lebanese political affairs and everyday life. In this sense, the people shown on screen express their attachment to Beirut (an element highly characteristic of Lebanese films) and debate each other over whether to stay and keep fighting and creating art in a place that is virtually unliveable and on the brink of collapse, or to leave and join the Lebanese diaspora. All these elements make this a kind of "hinge" film, positioned between different historical periods in a country that has often been compared to the phoenix, with the ability to rise from its own ashes after burning up again and again in a continuous cycle. To analyse the visual motifs in Aris's documentary, it is essential to con-

sider the other two films named above, as it establishes an explicit dialogue with both of them. Considered together, the view they offer of both past and future evokes Walter Benjamin's criticism of progress, expressed in the allegory of *Angelus Novus*. In addition (and equally important), this analysis establishes a relationship between real historical landscapes and the dystopian settings foreshadowed in science fiction and disaster films.

I. DANCING IN THE RUBBLE OF A DEVASTATED BEIRUT

The image of the Lebanese capital in ruins has many familiar layers. One of the most talented filmmakers who pioneered its depiction was Maroun Bagdadi, who returned to the city in 1975 after finishing his studies in France, shortly before the beginning of the civil war that would last until 1990.¹ In 1982, he made a name for himself on the international scene with the award-winning film *Little Wars*. He went into exile in 1984, having completed a dozen fiction and non-fiction films that always addressed the same theme: the war in his homeland. One of these films, *Whispers*, follows the exiled poet Nadia Tueni (1935-1983) around the country as she visits the few safe-havens that remain in the war-torn country. In the process, the film reveals some inspiring cultural initiatives, presents interviews with important entrepreneurs involved in the country's reconstruction, and places special emphasis on the profound transformation of Beirut and the nation as a result of the conflict. Tueni's reflections hint at a nostalgia for a place and time of peace, as well as a hope for a future when coexistence will again be possible.

Whispers marked a turning point in Bagdadi's career in both aesthetic and political terms. Until then, his non-fiction films had reflected ideological connections to the work of the Arab filmmakers associated with the Third Cinema movement. Although he was not considered part

of this movement, his films bear a markedly national, working-class leftist quality and an interest in challenging Hollywood narrative conventions. Films such as *Greetings to Kamal Jumblatt* (Tahiya Kamal Jumblatt, 1977), *The Most Beautiful of All Mothers* (Ajmal al-ummahat, 1978) and *We Are All of the Fatherland* (Koulouna lil-watan, 1979) contain non-linear narratives and explicit references to the project of the Lebanese National Movement (LMN).² Featuring political leaders such as Jumblatt and Arafat, proletarian fighters, martyrs and their families, these films depict class inequality and the Israeli occupation as part of the same injustice (Randall, 2020), while suggesting that the war and violence are part of an impending revolution. In contrast, the slow pace created by the pensive shots of long duration in *Whispers*, combined with its message of peace and reconciliation, reflects Bagdadi's conviction that a war that has brought neither national unity nor the hoped-for changes needs to be brought to an end as soon as possible. The choice of Tueni as the film's protagonist and interviewer supports this idea, as she did not belong to any political party or organisation and has nothing in common with the military leaders featured in his previous films. After *Whispers*, Bagdadi would only shoot one more non-fiction film, whose title makes his pacifist turn explicit: *Harb Aala El Harb* (1983), which could be translated as "war on war".

Apart from celebrating a particular stage in Bagdadi's career, the inclusion of archive footage from Bagdadi's film in *Dancing on the Edge...* responds to a number of issues that can be conceptualised as an arrangement of mirror images. First of all, Tueni's reflections on exile and her wanderings around the country echo some of the thoughts and feelings of Mounia Akl, the director of *Costa Brava, Lebanon*: both women want to live and create art in a country that they love deeply, but that does not provide them with the conditions of stability necessary to pursue an artistic career. Even for the most privileged classes, it is

THE TITLE ARIS HAS CHOSEN FOR HIS FILM IS AN EXPLICIT STATEMENT OF INTENT: THE PEOPLE ARE DANCING ON THE EDGE OF A VOLCANO, WHICH IS THEIR OWN CITY, BURNING BEFORE THEIR EYES

almost impossible to live in the country without feeling constantly racked with panic. And yet despite the hardships, Beirut is a city that comes to life at night, where people meet, dance and enjoy themselves in order to endure the destruction all around them. “Everything is so beautiful. Every woman is a butterfly. Every man is a prince,” recites the poet, while images of the discotheques and nightclubs of the past alternate with those of the present. Dance and music offer a necessary erotic release for people who are living in the shadow of death. The title Aris has chosen for his film is thus an explicit statement of intent: the people are dancing on the edge of a volcano, which is their own city, burning before their eyes.

Secondly, the harsh conditions of the city are never presented as a spectacle. Tueni remarks to the camera that over time, “the ruins become beautiful [...] but I will never get used to them.” In both historical moments, the ruins are wounds that have not healed, symbols of collective pain. The act of wandering around the city, of becoming a *flâneuse*, reflects an attempt to escape the negative effects of the saturation of media images of war and catastrophe, which Susan Sontag critiques in *On Photography* (1977; 2008), notwithstanding her retraction of that criticism years later in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2013). Although it is not their only potential effect on the spectator, if images of Beirut in ruins are all we are shown, we run the risk of being numbed by the sight of them. This is why the situated, complex narrative with as slow a pacing as possible is so important to elicit empathy and invite reflection on what is happening there.

All of these considerations seem to suggest that these archival images are presented as a symptom of a malaise: Beirut is a city plagued with traumas. This raises a couple of political questions that are becoming topical once again: What role should poets (or filmmakers) play in the country’s reconstruction? And what can artists do to contribute to the improvement of community life in a context of destruction? The tentative response appears to lie in the approach chosen to represent the people. Neither Bagdadi nor Aris attempt to depict them merely as victims of the situation; instead, they are depicted as individuals actively engaged in the practice of hope, the search for solutions and the transformation of the status quo. The intention is to show Western audiences a side of the conflicts that avoids the usual sensationalism and victim narratives. In this respect, one of the tropes critiqued by Bagdadi, the so-called “godfather” of Lebanese cinema, is the perspective of the war journalist. Both *Little Wars* and even *Whispers* contain testimonies by reporters interested in filming or photographing a spectacle: striking images of explosions, armed clashes and deaths that will capture the attention of the Western spectator. This is why Bagdadi’s depiction of Beirut es-

Image 1. Nadia Tueni wandering around Beirut in 1980



chews what Edward Said (1990) describes as the Orientalist vision, which conceives of Lebanon as part of a primitive, irrational, violent and despotic world. In its place he offers a cultural critique on the persistence of the colonial past in the present, similar to Sontag's view on the question.

Generally the grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa. This journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic—that is, colonized—human beings: Africans and denizens of remote Asian countries were displayed like zoo animals in ethnological exhibitions mounted in London, Paris, and other European capitals from the sixteenth until the early twentieth century. (2013: 72)

Bagdadi's critical stance can be better understood in the context of Ignacio Ramonet's reflections in *La tiranía de la comunicación* (1998) on the images captured by a small group of news agencies (CBS, CNN, Visnews, WTN) that have "reporters located in the most remote 'hot spots' on the planet" (1998: 26) and offer "spectacle at all costs" (1998: 27) in coverage whose objective is to make a profit by being sold to the largest number of media outlets, with a clear bias towards the trivial surface of events, the thin layer of violence, blood and scandal that covers them, rather than the "ideas and explanations" that lie beneath the conflicts they portray (Ramonet, 1998: 27). Moreover, the fascination with these types of images of conflict and the focus on profit can be linked to a particular trend in Colombian *miserabilista* cinema condemned by Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo in their 1978 manifesto titled *¿Qué es la pornomiseria?* ("What Is Poverty Porn?"):

poverty became a shocking topic and therefore ultimately a commodity that could be sold, especially internationally, where poverty is the flip side of the consumer's opulence. While poverty once served independent cinema as an object to be denounced and analysed, the zeal of mercantilism turned it into an escape valve for the very system that generated it. (Hambre, 2015)

Yet the affinity of *Dancing on the Edge...* with Bagdadi's work goes much further. In 1982, the Beirut director was one of the fifteen filmmakers who participated in *Room 666* (*Chambre 666*, Wim Wenders), providing a significant response to the question of whether cinema is an artform on the brink of death, a language that is becoming extinct. In doing so, he affirmed the value of the art of making films that are born out of life itself. As Bagdadi himself put it, "the anguish of creation has to do with the fact that people who make films don't take the time they need to live [...]; cinema and life are so powerfully intertwined, the relationship between them is so strong that I don't know how much filmmakers and film lovers take the time they need to live." When he made this statement, Lebanese cinema had just emerged from the bubble that had characterised it since its origins, projecting an exotic daydream image utterly divorced from social concerns. The director formed part of a new generation of filmmakers who made auteur films in the years from 1975 to 1991, transforming and diversifying the aesthetic identity of Lebanese cinema. These were the years "of the appearance and consolidation of the documentary genre" (Hotait Salas, 2020: 107), along with a whole catalogue of low-budget films that broke away from the commercial film production of the time to depict the everyday reality of war and document the country's profound social and regional fragmentation, especially in Beirut, which had been transformed from a fantasy backdrop into a film topic.

By a totally unforeseeable twist of fate, Cyril Aris, one of the editors on *Costa Brava, Lebanon*, would work on a documentary decades later that took almost three years to complete. Asked in an interview about the intergenerational dialogue he had established with his predecessor, he replied: "[*Whispers*] quickly became a point of reference because I realised that for 40 years we have been making the same film over and over again, and that is very revealing in terms of the cyclical na-

ture not just of Lebanese cinema but also of Lebanon itself. The truth is it is constructed, destroyed, reconstructed and destroyed again endlessly” (Chen, 2023). Hovering over this succession of tragedies, through Aris’s filmmaking, is Walter Benjamin’s angel of history:

His face is turned towards the past. [...] The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 1969: 257-258)

The continuity between the images of yesterday and those of today attests to the failure to achieve peace and the promises of progress.

Nevertheless, there are also notable differences. The images from *Whispers* described above have little to do with certain meanings Aris seeks to convey in his film. The clearest of these is the fact that *Dancing on the Edge...* has no nostalgia for happier times, no Proustian search for a space-time that no longer exists; instead, it depicts a time that shines in the “moment of danger” of a present in which the devastation continues. The “suspended dialectic” of “anachronistic images” (Didi-Huberman, 2011: 21) is interrupted and can be updated and observed from a new perspective; not everything is identification and parallels. There are issues that emerge as a product of the passage

DANCING ON THE EDGE... HAS NO NOSTALGIA FOR HAPPIER TIMES, NO PROUSTIAN SEARCH FOR A SPACE-TIME THAT NO LONGER EXISTS; INSTEAD, IT DEPICTS A TIME THAT SHINES IN THE “MOMENT OF DANGER” OF A PRESENT IN WHICH THE DEVASTATION CONTINUES

of time in a socio-economic reality where people have become accustomed (although not resigned) to permanent conflict. Finding and explicitly showing the archival footage is not just a way of recognising their forebears, but an acknowledgement of the impossibility of forgetting, given the circumstances. In this sense, the *mise-en-scène* of *Dancing on the Edge...* could not be more explicit. First, it offers Tueni’s reflections on the ruins left by the civil war; then, a completely black image is the background chosen for the screams of horror and confusion of different anonymous victims of the explosion; and finally, a camera wanders unsteadily among the debris and wounded bodies. It is an image-testimony of the chaos that is associated with a memory-image before concluding with signs of blood and a voice crying out: “Mounia! Mounia!” At the time he was filming, the camera operator did not know whether the director of *Costa Brava, Lebanon* was still alive.

2. MAKING FILMS AND LOOKING TO THE HORIZON IN A CONTEXT OF COLLAPSE

Aesthetically, *Dancing on the Edge...* takes the approach of a filmed diary. It is edited as a linear narrative covering the period from the first days after the explosion to the protest demonstrations that took place shortly after the première of Akl’s film at the Venice Film Festival. Most sequences are constructed based on the observational style (Nichols, 1997: 72-77), although at certain moments they establish a dialogue with archival footage and excerpts from *Costa Brava, Lebanon*. The director provides minimal information about the event of the explosion itself, combining audio material of news reports with images of the debris, many of which are aerial shots filmed by drones, but there are no interviews with witnesses or examples of the kind of expository-argumentative format (Nichols, 1997: 68-71) used in the well-known Australian documentary *Shock Wave* (Adam Harvey, 2020).

If we leave aside the found footage, most of the images can be classified into two basic categories. The first includes a wide range of images that can be defined (using the terminology of Charles S. Peirce) as *indexical*, i.e. as signs of the explosion and the various crises that the country was suffering at that time. The second category is of images following the director, Mounia Akl, who also acts in the film, which create a close-up view resulting from a pact: neither she nor the rest of the film crew ever speak directly to the camera, but instead try to interact as if it were not there. Otherwise, the documentary also makes use of the performative format in a sequence of considerable narrative importance: the conversation between the director and her father about Lebanon's past and present, which contributes to a more historical and intergenerational reflection on political issues and ways of dealing with different circumstances.

Before analysing the film's visual motifs, it is worth noting that in narrative terms *Dancing in the Edge...* is reminiscent of two of the most legendary "making-of" documentaries in film history: *Lost in La Mancha* (Keith Fulton, Louis Pepe, 2002), documenting Terry Gilliam's impossible dream to make a film about Don Quixote, and *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmakers Apocalypse* (Eleanor Coppola, Fax Bahr, George Hickenlooper, 1991), about the tumultuous and controversial process of making *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). In fact, in a display of cinematic self-awareness, members of the film crew jokingly mention both these films at different moments. However, Akl's film bears two very clear differences from these works. The first is the incorporation of microhistorical elements that clearly transcend the limits of the "making-of" genre, as in addition to depicting the vicissitudes of a complicated film shoot, the film also proposes a dialogue with the history of cinema and of the country itself based on that depiction. The second difference relates to the difficulties faced by Mounia Akl, which are related

THIS MULTIDIMENSIONAL CRISIS RECALLS SOME OF THE VISUAL MOTIFS IMAGINED IN SCIENCE FICTION AND DISASTER FILMS. IN FACT, CYRIL ARIS EXPLAINED IN AN INTERVIEW THAT WHEN WALKING AROUND JUST AFTER THE EXPLOSION, HE FELT AS IF HE WERE ON THE SET OF CHILDREN OF MEN (ALFONSO CUARÓN, 2006)

to a very different situation from those that Coppola or Gilliam had to deal with: shooting a film in circumstances that could be described as a crisis on multiple levels (economic problems, environmental issues, energy shortages, the war and the sociopolitical context) in a country veering dangerously close to being deemed failed State.

On the economic level, Akl was making her film at a time when the Lebanese pound had been devalued and money could not be withdrawn from the bank without losing three quarters of its value, which posed an obvious obstacle to the continuation of the production. This situation echoes part of the plot to the series *Years and Years* (Simon Cellan Jones, 2019), as well as the *corralito* economic measures taken in Argentina during the economic crisis of 2001. In relation to the energy crisis, we see the complications arising from rendering the sound for *Costa Brava, Lebanon* as a result of the constant power outages in a city suffering from a shortage of fossil fuel to run its generators, where for decades they have had to do without electricity for many hours a day and put up with total darkness at night. On the environmental level, the city streets reflect the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the filmmaker first to delay filming and then to obtain special permits and finances to lock down the 35 people on her technical and artistic team. The impact of the war was felt when the lead actor, the Palestinian Saleh Bakri, was detained for

almost a whole day at Beirut airport because of his Israeli identity card. Finally, the socio-political turmoil included protest demonstrations, riots and massive clashes with law enforcement forces that resulted in injuries and images of chaos and violence.

This multidimensional crisis recalls some of the visual motifs imagined in science fiction and disaster films. In fact, Cyril Aris explained in an interview that when walking around just after the explosion, he felt as if he were on the set of *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), a film that also features hand-held camera shots moving through a devastated city and exterior images captured through windows with broken glass. The mise-en-scène, with panorama shots that document the destruction of buildings from which the smoke is still rising, is also reminiscent of scenes in *Elysium* (Neill Blomkamp, 2013), and the huge traffic jams in the city resemble the mass evacuations shown in *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) and *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996). Images of piled and charred cars also have precursors in fiction films such as *The Cars that Ate Paris* (Peter Weir, 1974). In this sense, it could be argued that part of the spectator's aesthetic experience involves



Image 2. Jocelyn Saab in 1982, filmed amongst the ruins of her destroyed home

consciously or unconsciously connecting the film to cinematic references such as those mentioned above, which clearly influences their reading and interpretation. At the same time, it is interesting to note the affinities between the dystopias depicted in hypothetical futures and the account of present-day life in a country in the Global South.

In this aesthetic context, beyond parallels and similarities, the documentary proposes an interesting and distinctive poetics of space: the skyline of the ruins seen from the apartment of Joe Saade, cinematographer for *Costa Brava, Lebanon*, who first appears filmed from behind in a room full of broken glass, taking in the damage. This image effectively evokes another very important and memorable sequence of Lebanese cinema: the opening to *Beirut, My City* (Jocelyn Saab, 1982), which shows its director standing in front of the camera with a microphone in hand, presenting the shattered remains of what had been her home before the civil war. Beyond this connection to the past, in the aforementioned sequence we

THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE, WITH PANORAMA SHOTS THAT DOCUMENT THE DESTRUCTION OF BUILDINGS FROM WHICH THE SMOKE IS STILL RISING, IS ALSO REMINISCENT OF SCENES IN ELYSIUM (NEILL BLOMKAMP, 2013)

know that Saade has been blinded in one eye, an injury he describes as “ironic for a cameraman”, in a humorous tone that reflects an idiosyncratically Lebanese way of dealing with life’s hardships that appears repeatedly throughout the narrative.

In another sequence, Mounia Akl is shown with her back to us in her father’s office, which has also been damaged by the explosion. This iconic shot is clearly a very pertinent visual translation of the question that drives the film, as discussed above: What can artists do to respond to the general sense of loss and tragedy caused by the explosion and the situation in the country? It is a question that ties in with the usual approaches of Lebanese cinema. As Laila Hotait Salas suggests,

The stories reveal that the combination of chaos and fear can fray an individual’s nerves, destroying our capacity for endurance and driving us to madness, or at least to the step before it. That is why the ultimate goal of all the protagonists of these stories is to survive and keep their sanity, maintaining both their individuality and their common sense. In all these films and in their different storylines, the characters seek refuge in physical spaces or in acts that respond to the chaos (2020: 128).

For Mounia Akl and her film crew, filming is a refuge. The film makes various allusions to the

dimension of dreaming and collective therapy that filming can have, as it allows a degree of temporary isolation from the critical reality of the moment. Carrying on with day-to-day life is the essence of Spinoza’s *conatus*, the innate need to persevere that is useful not only to move ahead and achieve previously established goals, but also to bring the crew on *Dancing on the Edge...* into contact with real people and characters of Lebanese cinema seeking shelter amidst the destruction.

The climax to the film is set in the area of the devastated port, where people gather in a protest and tribute to the dead exactly one year after the explosion, a demonstration in which the director herself takes part. The explicit tone of condemnation effectively places this sequence in what Mark R. Westmoreland defines as a “post-orientalist aesthetic” (2008: 63-68) of experimental documentaries on Lebanon since the civil war. This approach involves foregrounding not only the criticism of Western Orientalist attitudes (Said, 2003), but also the capacity for agency of Lebanese filmmakers to adopt a situated point of view to denounce the country’s political system as a source of oppression., thus also entailing the positioning of the images. On the one hand, without resorting to nihilism, it can produce

Image 3. Mounia Akl looking at the devastated port from her father’s office



something wonderful (as Akl's father suggests) out of the combination of catastrophes. On the other, it constitutes a political protest against the fact that one year after the event, there is still nobody who has been held accountable for the tragedy. Far from being rectified, the dire situation in the country continues unchanged, as pointed out by some street art paintings shown in the film, including the explicit image of the blindfolded goddess Iustitia.

3. LIVING AND BREATHING RUBBISH

The first image shown in *Costa Brava, Lebanon* was not planned. One of the effects of the explosion was the change it made to the skyline of Beirut; among the most noteworthy losses were the enormous silos characteristic of the city's port area. Their skeletal remains serve as the starting point for the story. This is the place chosen for the statue of the president to begin its journey around the city until it reaches its destination: the Costa Brava recycling plant, located right opposite the home of the Badri family (the film's protagonists), which will shortly be revealed to be an unregulated landfill.

This is a significant beginning for two reasons. Firstly, it employs a neorealist style, showing the ruins of the present standing for posterity as a visual testimony to a specific past event. Secondly, it is introduced with an ironic caption that reads: "Beirut, in the near future." The film was originally supposed to be set in the year 2030, but reality brought it forward. In other words, recent events led the director to place the story in a realist setting rather than to imagine a hypothetical future catastrophe. This relationship with reality is essential to understand the film beyond its surface appearance.

The explosion of 2,750 inadequately tonnes of poorly stored ammonium nitrate is a symptom of a broader issue, which serves as the film's main theme: over the past decade, the Lebanese capital

THE EXPLOSION OF 2,750 INADEQUATELY TONNES OF POORLY STORED AMMONIUM NITRATE IS A SYMPTOM OF A BROADER ISSUE, WHICH SERVES AS THE FILM'S MAIN THEME: OVER THE PAST DECADE, THE LEBANESE CAPITAL HAS BEEN TURNED INTO A LANDFILL

has been turned into a landfill. This fact became clear to the world with the 2015 rubbish crisis, with images of Beirut's streets filled with piles of waste, sprayed with poison to prevent the proliferation of rats. The crisis arose when the contract between the Lebanese government and the waste management company Sukleen ended on 17 July 2015, without having secured an alternative service provider due to power struggles between different political blocs over the choice of a replacement. Adding to the dire state of affairs were the road blockades by the people of Na'ameh, a coastal town where waste from Beirut and Mount Lebanon was being provisionally dumped (Ali Nayel, 2015). Since then, this issue has attracted extensive news coverage.

The visual motif of piles of rubbish is reminiscent of the dystopian landscapes shown in sci-fi films, which could be conceptualised as "landscapes of uncontrolled development" (López Brizuela, 2022: 31-36) that suggest future worlds resulting from contemporary ecosocial problems to serve as a vehicle for political, ideological and social criticism. A paradigmatic example of such landscapes can be found in the aforementioned blockbuster *Elysium*, which depicts an urban wasteland of inequality in the year 2154, where the upper classes live in a *Muskian* utopia, in luxury dwellings on a space station with avant-garde architecture and access to meticulously tended green spaces, while the impoverished masses struggle to survive in the filth of Los Angeles's underground neighbourhoods.

THE TITLE OF THE FILM IS TAKEN FROM REALITY. COSTA BRAVA IS A LANDFILL CREATED IN 2016 AS AN EMERGENCY SOLUTION AFTER THE CLOSURE OF NA'AMEH. IT IS ONE OF MANY ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS DOCUMENTED IN THE GLOBAL ATLAS OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE (2023)

Prior to *Costa Brava, Lebanon*, Mounia Akl had already dealt with the theme of Beirut's rubbish problem in her short film *Submarine* (2016), produced by Cyril Aris and starring Akl herself, with a screenplay co-written with Clara Roquet. In this film, Akl plays Hala, a woman who refuses to leave the city even when the waste begins flooding directly into her home, breaking through the glass windows that connect it to the outside world. Apart from an urban landscape steeped in filth, the story also presents images that reflect the poor air quality, such as three men wearing masks who watch in the background as Hala goes in search of a solution for her desperate housing situation.

The iconography of unbreathable air is extensive, but the mask is its most commonly used motif, encompassing a wide variety of types ranging from the masks used by doctors during the Black Death of 14th-century Europe to the gas masks of the First and Second World War, the air pollution masks worn in cities such as Beijing today, and the face-masks that became commonplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. The text *Aire* (Herrero, 2023) offers an insightful perspective on this issue, as it addresses various aspects of air pollution and the

health problems it has caused both in the workplace (for example, the foundry workers in Santa Lucía de Peñarroya in southern Spain who are interviewed in *The Year of the Discovery* [El año del descubrimiento, Luís López Carrasco, 2020]) and in society in general (the massive numbers of premature deaths in countries with pollution levels that exceed the limits established by the WHO).

We call the modification of the air's composition "air pollution". The increase in greenhouse gases that are raising global average temperatures and changing the rules of life on the planet, the dioxins emitted by incinerators, the heat waves putting ozone molecules in all the wrong places, the toxic particles from car exhaust pipes, the heavy metal dust, the radiation... a civilisation that has declared war on life is violently colonising the air, along with the plants, water, animals, people and words. We know that there are many ways human beings can exploit, subdue and humiliate others. I think forcing them to breathe filth is one of the most atrocious examples. Breathing makes us sick, and as we cannot stop breathing, we cannot help but get sick. (Herrero, 2023: 51-52)

In *Submarine*, people are fleeing the city just to be able to breathe. It is a matter of life and death, with no hint of explicit political motivations at any moment. Conversely, *Costa Brava, Lebanon*

Image 4. The film *Submarine* (Mounia Akl, 2016)



raises a different question: the two protagonists, a married couple who in the opening sequences are shown looking after chickens and tending the garden with their daughters, left Beirut after an explosion to escape the toxicity of the air and the many problems caused by the husband's activism. After eight years, however, the rubbish has caught up with them.

This situation causes a schism in the family (which serves as a microcosm of society), and gives rise to all kinds of everyday conflicts. The mother, grandmother and elder daughter all make it clear that they do not want to continue living in their secluded location; they believe it no longer makes sense now that they have lost the benefits of silence and clean air that such seclusion previously offered. However, the father wants to keep fighting and imposes his patriarchal will on the rest of the family, while the younger daughter, closer to her father, expresses some doubts about staying. The father is convinced that the proposed plant is nothing more than a show for the public that will never be carried out as planned; sooner or later, the project will be abandoned. This conviction reignites his activism and he takes a hand-held camera and starts filming the construction site and the incineration of rubbish to use as evidence in a hypothetical trial that a lawyer friend plans to file at his request. The trial will never make it to court, although the plant will end up being torn down due to mass protests.

The title of the film is taken from reality. Costa Brava is a landfill created in 2016 as an emergency solution after the closure of Na'ameh. It is one of many environmental conflicts documented in the *Global Atlas of Environmental Justice* (2023). As in the film, there were protests led by local residents and by the Lebanese environmentalist movement, which resulted in the closure of the facility in 2017, although the problem remained unsolved as the piles of waste were dumped in the sea. In the film, the closure of the landfill and the subsequent toppling of the statue of the

president who promoted it—an image that could be added to those categorised by Sorolla-Romero and Loriguillo-López (2023)—will not prevent the family from returning to Beirut. With this conclusion, the film seems to be attempting to convey a clear message, that it is not possible to escape from political corruption or rubbish, the latter being nothing more than a metaphor for the former. If there is a solution, it necessarily involves collective organisation.

In other fields, there are authors who define the current environmental situation in Lebanon as an ecocide or a Lebanicide (Elías, 2020); it is a country poisoned by decades of war and political mismanagement, where neither human rights nor the terms of international environmental law are respected. Outside the film industry, other artistic projects, such as the installation *The Land Remembers* in the Lebanese pavilion at the last Venice Architecture Biennale (2025), confirm the bleak diagnosis: the memory of the Earth's destruction and the magnitude of the ecocide are of such a scope that it is becoming increasingly urgent to work together to repair them.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Fictional accounts of contemporary disasters, such as *The Collapse* (L'Effondrement, Les Parasites, 2019), to give a significant example, offer stories that could be described as *Hobbesian*. When the system and the State collapse, the war of all against all ensues. However, Rebeca Solnit (2020) has convincingly documented the extraordinary communities that rise up in response to disasters. One of the most famous paintings depicting the days after the explosion, *Angels* (Tom Young, 2020), portrays volunteers cleaning up the debris after the catastrophe. While Lebanon was careening towards the abyss of failed statehood, it was being reconstructed first and foremost through acts of mutual aid, as is usually the case in such extreme situations.

Undoubtedly, *Dancing on the Edge...* is a historical document that has more in common with *Angels* than with *The Collapse*. It is a film portraying cultural workers from the city's privileged classes reacting to the situation in the terms described throughout this article. Cyril Aris has thus made an important contribution to the history of Lebanese auteur cinema, constructed through personal microhistories representative of broader contexts.

In a particularly poetic sequence, the real-life owner of the house where *Costa Brava, Lebanon* was filmed remarks that he would like to be a fisherman and watch the country's history from the sea. This observation serves as a segue to archive footage from *Whispers* that shows a fisherman looking at Beirut from the coast. This is followed by archival footage from Lebanese fiction films of the 1960s, reflecting times of peace and prosperity, along with excerpts from fiction and non-fiction films about the civil war. All this footage effectively offers the spectator an audiovisual overview that serves to interrogate a past of great relevance to the present. "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' [Ranke]. It means to seize hold of a memory, as it flashes up in a moment of danger" (Benjamin, 1969: 255).

Dystopia has been a reality for the people of Lebanon for the past fifty years. It is very difficult today to imagine a fictional account that could present a bleaker picture than a present in which catastrophe is a constant. Dystopian science fiction imaginaries have moved into the social reality. The worsening environmental situation and the persistence of war speak for themselves. Creation in this context thus means contributing to the aesthetic of "wounded art", the name given to a 2020 exhibition that featured many of the artworks that had been damaged by the explosion. It also constitutes an existential condition for which Joe Saade's loss of sight in one eye stands as documentary evidence.

Finally, in terms of the politics of representation, the refusal to give up hope or to be presented merely as victims are part of the endeavour to share the sensibility that defines Lebanese cinema, trying to make room in the aesthetic field for archetypes that offer something beyond the omnipresence of death and neo-colonial dynamics. Free of any idealism, with obvious limits and with human lives as their central focus, both *Dancing on the Edge...* and *Costa Brava, Lebanon* constitute exercises that pursue what Mahmoud Darwish sought for the Palestinian people: "Hope for a normal life where we shall be neither heroes nor victims" (2002). In the meantime, however, filmmaking stands as a powerful act of resistance and an effort at reconstruction. ■

NOTES

- 1 The country's religious diversity, a distribution of power inherited from the colonial era, the war between Israel and Palestine and the fight over its national identity ultimately plunged Lebanon into a war that lasted from 1975 to 1990, with more than a dozen factions and numerous foreign interventions. The 15 years of combat left more than 130,000 dead, 800,000 displaced and an aftermath that the country is still recovering from today. The event often cited as the moment that triggered the war is the massacre by Lebanese Phalangist militiamen of 27 Palestinian refugees on a bus in April 1975.
- 2 The LMN was a broad coalition of armed fighters, led at its peak by Kamal Jumblatt and comprised of different parties and organisations such as the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in Lebanon (SSNP) and the Organisation of Communist Action in Lebanon (OCAL). It was one of the most important political movements in the Lebanese Civil War. It supported the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and was an opponent of the Lebanese Front, which included the Lebanese Phalange and was supported by Israel.

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DANCING ON THE EDGE OF A VOLCANO: A HINGE FILM BETWEEN CATASTROPHES

Abstract

Dancing on the Edge of a Vulcano (Cyril Aris, 2023) is first and foremost a testimony to the various crises that ravaged Beirut in 2020 and 2021, beginning with a warehouse containing remnants of war and fertilizer exploded, killing 218 people, injuring 7,500 and devastated an area that left 300,000 without homes. It is also the “making-of” for *Costa Brava, Lebanon* (Mounia Akl, 2021), a fiction film inspired by the 2015 rubbish crisis. Moreover, Aris’s film includes excerpts from *Whispers* (Hamassat, Maroun Bagdadi, 1980) with the aim of bringing the ruins resulting from the explosion into dialogue with the decimation caused by the country’s civil war (1975-1990), while also exploring the impact of both events on Lebanese political affairs and everyday life. To analyse the visual motifs in Aris’s documentary, it is essential to consider the other two films named above, as it establishes an explicit dialogue with both of them. Considered together, the view they offer of both past and future evokes Walter Benjamin’s criticism of progress, expressed in the allegory of *Angelus Novus*. In addition, this analysis establishes a relationship between real historical landscapes and the dystopian settings foreshadowed in science fiction and disaster films.

Key words

Beirut; Documentary cinema; Visual motifs; Ruins; Catastrophes; Maroun Bagdadi; Mounia Akl; Cyril Aris.

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DANCING ON THE EDGE OF A VOLCANO: UNA PELÍCULA BISAGRA ENTRE CATÁSTROFES

Resumen

Dancing on the Edge of a Vulcano (Cyril Aris, 2023) es, en primer lugar, un testimonio de las diversas crisis que asolaron Beirut en los años 2020 y 2021, cuando detonó un almacén que contenía residuos bélicos y fertilizantes, dejando tras de sí un balance de 218 muertos, 7.500 heridos y un paisaje devastado con 300.000 personas sin hogar. También, es un *making of* de *Costa Brava Libano* (Costa Brava Lebanon, Mounia Akl, 2021), una ficción inspirada en la crisis de las basuras de 2015. En tercer lugar, incluye fragmentos de *Hamassat* (Maroun Bagdadi, 1980), con el objetivo de poner en diálogo las ruinas beirutíes posteriores al estallido con aquellas resultantes de la guerra civil del país (1975-1990), así como vincular los afectos políticos y vitales existentes en ambos momentos históricos. El análisis de los motivos visuales del documental es inseparable del de las otras películas, ya que establece un diálogo explícito con ambas. En conjunto, por su mirada hacia atrás y hacia delante, evidencian la crítica *benjaminiana* del progreso, formulada a través de la alegoría del *Angelus Novus*. También, dicho análisis pone en relación paisajes del mundo histórico con paisajes distópicos anticipados por el cine de ciencia ficción y de catástrofes.

Palabras clave

Beirut; cine documental; motivos visuales; ruinas; catástrofes; Maroun Bagdadi; Mounia Akl; Cyril Aris.

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DIALOGUE

**FILMING TO
PROFANE THE
BORDER: CINEMA AS
COUNTER-POWER**

A Conversation with
SYLVAIN GEORGE

FILMING TO PROFANE THE BORDER: CINEMA AS COUNTER-POWER

A CONVERSATION WITH
SYLVAIN GEORGE

CAROLINA SOURDIS

For over two decades, Sylvain George's cinema has confronted one of the most normalized expressions of state violence in Europe: the migration regime. His films traverse contested spaces such as Calais, Melilla, Paris and the frontier zone of Beni Enzar, where the border ceases to function merely as a geographic limit and instead reveals itself as a perverse logic that penetrates bodies, territories, affects and forms of life. In this world-order, mobility is criminalised by the state, repressed by the police, and managed through juridical and technopolitical apparatuses that are increasingly sophisticated and brutal.

Far from adhering to the logic of pure documentation or the victimization-heroization of migrant trajectories, George's cinema embraces a radical poetic and political gesture: it unveils the regimes of sensibility that render certain bodies illegible, disposable, and undesirable. Assuming the camera, the sound recording and the editing, George situates his practice within the dense texture of violence—in the cold, in waiting, in ges-

tures of care and camouflage—making visible the fissures within that global order. With close attention to duration and detail, his films interrogate the ways in which power governs perception and legitimizes, even sacralizes, violence as a fundamental mode of organization.

George's work thus exposes the colonial underside of the European humanist project: a sovereignty affirmed through the fiction of a protected community, sustained by hatred, exclusion, and the lethal administration of precarious lives. This conversation, conducted in writing, is grounded in particularly unsettling images from his filmography—such as that of asylum seekers burning off their fingerprints in the refugee camps of Calais. It seeks to reflect on the forms of representing power, the intensification of violence at the border, and that which exceeds it. And on the potential of cinema as counter-power: a practice that seeks to interrupt the mechanisms of assignment and to open spaces—however fragile and provisional—for the recognition of forms of life that endure against erasure. ■

Part of the current populist right wing discourses relies on the criminalisation of migration. A rhetoric institutionalised in Europe, anchored in its political and colonial imaginaries. Your cinema is positioned against these instituted imaginaries, especially through the political exercise of filming certain bodies, certain affects and existences as forms of resistance to structural violence. Do you conceive of cinema as a space where dominant visual regimes can be contested, precisely through the insistence on images and ways of life that have been historically disfigured by power and its logics of representation?

Certainly, current populist discourses, both in Europe and elsewhere, are based on the systematic criminalisation of migration, often disseminated by state apparatuses and amplified by image technologies. This criminalisation is not just a specific border management strategy: it is part of a long colonial tradition, a structuring racial imaginary, and a logic of differentiated assignment of bodies and affects. It is based on the production of recurring figures: the “clandestine”, the “criminal”, the “usurper of rights”, which fuel a politics of suspicion and fear, and justify, in advance, state violence.

But perhaps it is worth clarifying what these terms mean. “Colonial” here does not refer only to a past period or an external structure. It is a way of relating to alterity, always active in the foundations of institutions, representations and affects. The “figure of the migrant” reactivates the colonial architecture of the gaze, that which measures, classifies and hierarchises, while concealing its own premises. The contemporary “clandestine” is the direct heir of the “colonised”, the product of a regime of knowledge-power that combines economic extraction, moral suspicion and symbolic erasure. The historical debt, still unthought, is thus transformed into suspicion. The hospitality that is promised in discourse is always already revoked in practice. And the figure of the internal enemy is recomposed, not on the basis of a real

threat, but on the basis of an otherness perceived as excess, as a disturbance of the national narrative and the social order.

It seems to me that the criminalisation of migration operates, then, according to three overlapping regimes:

Politically, this responds to a contemporary mutation of law. The latter no longer guarantees protection, but carries out a selection. It distinguishes between admissible and disqualified lives. The border, in this context, is no longer a geographical boundary, but a mobile technology of exclusion. It crosses cities, camps, administrative counters, bodies. The foreigner is no longer a guest, or even a seeker, but a residual figure, always lacking legitimacy. There, the rule of law is silently suspended.

Philosophically, this logic is part of a differential biopolitics. Not only are bodies governed, but also the thresholds of their recognisability. The “migrant”, as understood by Judith Butler, is exposed to a radical precariousness, not only economic or social, but existential. The migrant person becomes a body without support, a life without a frame, a subject without status. What is taken away from him is the very possibility of appearing in the field of the common. Language crumbles, the name becomes suspect, and speech is exhausted before being heard.

But we must go even further. The criminalisation of migration engages an implicit metaphysics of the common world. It reveals an incapacity to think alterity otherwise than as disturbance. It designates not only a foreign body, but an existence that threatens the foundations of the Western subject: its self-narrative, its relationship with history, with the land, with temporality. The migrant person disturbs because he forces us to recognise what has been denied: all the foundational violences, the past spoliation, the colonial continuities. His mere presence questions the fiction of sovereignty. He is perceived as a remainder, but an active, speaking, moving remainder. Hence the

need, by the apparatus of power, to lock him into ontological illegitimacy.

Behind this construction, what is at stake is therefore a work of typification, of defiguration, of desubjectification. Migrant bodies are not simply made invisible, they are also produced as unstable figures, always suspicious, always in excess, too visible or not visible enough. What contemporary regimes of visibility impose is therefore not an absence of image, but an overabundance of directed, captured, staged, redoubled images that end up neutralising all remainders, all otherness, all density. This overabundance of images produces its blind spots, entire zones of unseeing: a whole part of reality is evacuated from the field of perception, precisely because it does not fit into the dominant schemes of legibility.

Confronting this, it is not enough to “show what is hidden”. Such a conception continues to assume that cinema is a mirror of reality, a simple device for revelation or restitution. This idea, deeply rooted in certain aesthetic traditions—from the realist theories of Siegfried Kracauer or André Bazin, to a certain contemporary documentary doxa, to say it quickly—postulates that the camera captures the world in its own truth and that the image can restore, through mimetic fidelity, absent or oppressed forms. But this conception, however seductive it may be, tends to forget that every gaze is situated, that every image is constructed, and that the visible, as Foucault conceived it, is always a question of power. A mirror, especially a one-way mirror, is also a disciplinary tool.

It is important, then, to shift the coordinates of this approach. Because what is at stake today is not only the absence of representation of certain existences, but their very production as mutilated representations. The act of filming, consequently, cannot content itself with a reparative or illustrative function. It supposes an active disarticulation of dominant regimes of visibility. It engages a politics of the sensible, as conceived by the philosopher

Jacques Rancière, that is to say, a reconfiguration of the forms of seeing, perceiving, feeling, saying.

From this perspective, insisting on historically disfigured forms of life does not mean reconstituting them in their supposed integrity, but rather restoring to them the possibility of an off-screen space, an outside of the gaze, a space where they are no longer immediately identifiable according to the categories of power. It is not so much about granting them an image as about enabling the appearance—in the strong sense of the term: making them come into being in the sensible—of existences that escape from capture, from imposed nomination, from the exhaustion by the visible.

These forms of life, often precarious, fleeting, fragmentary, are not figures of lack or privation. They carry with them powers of disadjustment that can simply be a walk in the night, a laugh on the verge of despair, a face that hesitates to appear, a silence in the din of discourse. They are not the rubble of a lost humanity, but the shards of a world that insists in another way, on the margins of recognised forms. In this sense, they are also figures of thought. They compel us to reinvent the very conditions of attention, to suspend the automatism of the gaze, to unlearn prefabricated grids of interpretation.

Cinema, then, does not aim at the reparation of a deficit of visibility, but at opening an experience in which the image no longer comes to confirm knowledge, nor to reassure the enunciator. It is not about illustrating a cause, nor denouncing a state of affairs, but about instituting a zone of undecidability: there where faces are no longer assigned to a function, there where bodies are no longer obliged to signify. There where, perhaps, something still holds itself up in the night, not as darkening, but as reserve of meaning, as irreducible opacity.

What such images bring to light are not edifying subjects, but dissident forms of existence, ways of inhabiting the world from its margins, its

interstices, its ruins. A word that was not expected. A gesture that does not align with any official narration. A name, at times, that traverses the film without prior archive.

In this sense, cinema can be conceived not as a reflection, but as an experience of disarticulation, a place where the order of the visible falters, where representations break down, where the power of naming decomposes. Not an aesthetic of the real in the sense of mimetic capture or transparency of the world, but a politics of the fragment, of the remainder, of the glint. A poetics that does not seek to repair the world, but rather reveals its fracture. Where, as Walter Benjamin suggests, something persists that the language of power cannot name and that cinema sometimes allows to be glimpsed.

You began your cinematographic work on migration in 2006, when Frontex was barely becoming institutionalized and the European border was not yet the transnational apparatus it is today. Over the past two decades, we have seen the European Union consolidate an increasingly violent, externalized, and automated regime: from the progressive closure of land routes to the externalization of border control to third countries, through the implementation of sophisticated surveillance systems based on technology. From your practice as a filmmaker, how would you describe the transformation of this border regime? Is it a mutation, an intensification, or a renewed form of administration of European institutional racism?

I do not believe it is simply a mutation. We must speak, I believe, and as you indicate, of an intensification—that is, a systemic deepening of a logic already present, but today carried to an unprecedented degree of density, technological intensity, and brutality. What is called the European border regime has not been transformed by substitution, but by proliferation. It has become more complex, extended, externalized, digitized, sanctified.

When I began filming in 2006, control mechanisms, although already violent, remained localizable: port areas like Ceuta or Melilla, informal camps in Calais, visible police stations. Today, the border is no longer only an identifiable place. It has become a function, a mobile operator, a diffuse fabric of technological obstacles, algorithmic procedures, securitarian delegations. It acts at a distance, in advance, by anticipation, and produces effects without appearing as such.

This transformation is inscribed in a historical continuum, not in a discontinuity. As early as the 1990s, with the Integrated System of External Surveillance (SIVE), the logics of surveillance by sensors, drones, cameras were being put in place in southern Spain. In 2004, Frontex was created, and with it a model of government of migratory flows was established, founded on militarization, externalization, concealment... It was no longer a matter of welcoming, but of repelling; no longer of processing, but of preventing; no longer of guaranteeing a right, but of impeding an arrival. As the figure of migrant persons was dehumanized, racially typified, and juridically delegitimized, borders became increasingly opaque, inaccessible, automated, while presenting themselves as neutral, objective, rational.

This intensification of control has been accompanied by a process of brutalization in the sense that George Mosse gave to this term—that is, a collective habituation to violence, an aestheticization of exclusion, a banalization of the spectacle of suffering. Images of corpses on beaches, of capsized boats, of starving bodies in the woods, no longer provoke either scandal or action. They become the elements of a tragic theater without memory, without consequence, without spectators. What George Mosse analyzed in the post-1918 context is actualized here in a postcolonial democratic regime, where brutality is no longer merely an effect of war, but a principle of organization of the world.

But the border does not content itself with controlling bodies. It sacralizes certain territories, certain orders of the world, certain belongings. It erects an outside whose unworthiness it declares, while elevating its own inside into a legitimate, defensible, quasi-religious space. This sacralization, although it presents itself in secularized forms—bureaucratic, juridical, police—manifests a logic of the sacred actualized: that of inviolability, of purification, of ritual exclusion.

This is not a metaphor. Barbed wire, the fence, the thermal camera become the material signs of a fetishized border, invested with a power of absolute preservation. The territory becomes sanctuary, and any crossing profanes a declared superior integrity. It is here that the bodies of migrants find themselves trapped in a paradoxical figure: at once denied in their humanity, and treated as carriers of a stain, of a quasi-ontological danger.

By this we must understand that these people are perceived, by powers, by security discourses, not as bearers of a history, of a situation, of a right, but as the very incarnation of an essentialized alterity, irreducible, threatening in itself. What this expression designates is less a real essence than an effect of naturalization, an imaginary construction in which the enemy is no longer defined by their acts, but by their mere presence. This is a fetishization of danger, an inverted sacralization of threat, in which the migrant body becomes a sign of an originary disturbance to be conjured away. These bodies become, to borrow an expression from Agamben (but without adhering to his ontological presuppositions nor to the onto-theology that undergirds his figure of “bare life”), *homo sacer*, excluded from the juridical order, abandoned to death, and yet defined in their very relation to a power that designates them as both untouchable and killable.

This border sacrality, although it does not speak its name, rests on a double operation. On the one hand, the invention of an inside that must be protected at all costs, and on the other, the desig-

nation of an outside radically other, non-assimilable, unforgivable, unshareable. There is here a perverse dialectic of the sacred and the profane, in the sense that Walter Benjamin conceived it: what is desacralized by modern law (the soil, the border, the blood) returns as armed, fetishized, violent sacrality. And the task of cinema, perhaps, is to interrupt this silent sacralization, to profane anew the forms of power, by showing not the horror, but the fabrication of its acceptability.

It must also be recalled that this configuration is not contingent but constitutes one of the faces of European institutional racism. As Étienne Balibar emphasizes, the border becomes an internal operator of racism. It does not separate exteriors; it sorts people within the territory itself, it differentiates the conditions of presence, of access, of visibility. Racism, here, does not speak itself: it is spatialized. It is not claimed, but delegated—to agencies, protocols, and numbers. It is no longer hatred, but management. No longer fear, nor explicit domination, but procedure and the hierarchization of vulnerabilities.

The contemporary border regime is therefore not only a technology of control. It institutes what one could call, in a critical sense, an *enacted political ontology*: that is to say, a mode of production of realities lived as natural, unquestionable, assigned, which fabricates belonging through exclusion, and security through abandonment. This is evidently not a claimed ontology, but an ontology operated by the dispositifs themselves, a way for power to pass off as necessary what is in reality constructed, situated, arbitrary. It is *enacted* in the strong sense: materialized in camps, biometric databases, walls, thresholds, waiting zones, bodies themselves. It acts in infrastructure, in affects, in procedures. It normalizes the intolerable. This logic of exclusionary belonging produces a hierarchization of lives, an unequal cartography of rights, a machine for producing undesirability.

And if something can be attempted from cinema, it is not so much to denounce frontally what

is already known, or partially visible, as to displace the regimes of appearance: not only to film borders, but to fissure them in their self-evidence, to show their “profane sacrality,” to render perceptible their pretension to invisibility. To profane the invisible, to render illegible the distribution, to forbid power from believing in the neutrality of its lines.

In *Qu'ils reposent en révolte (Des Figures de Guerre)* (2010), we encounter an unprecedented image of the migration regime: people cutting themselves and burning their fingerprints in order to avoid being rejected by the asylum system. It is a raw image, held within a reflexive structure that avoids the shock effect: the gesture appears as the response of a political subject attempting to extract themselves from a system that promises their annihilation. In *Les Éclats (Ma gueule, ma révolte, mon nom)* (2012), this violence persists in the voices of refugees, who describe their lived experience as that of people who are “burning” (“You just need to know that it's as if we're burning, that's it—that's all!”). This figure of the displaced person, the asylum seeker, the refugee—the human being stripped of rights and turned into a burning body—traverses your entire cinema. What does this figure, as it appears across your filmography, tell us about the contemporary European political moment?

What *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* (*Figures de Guerre*) makes visible, in the gestures of cutting, burning, mutilating fingerprints, is not an effect of misery nor a pulsional inscription of despair, but the expression of an extreme political rationality. These gestures, as unbearable as they are silent and meticulously executed, are acts of forced de-identification, the attempt to escape a system that makes of the body an archive turned against itself. For in the European regime of migratory control, of border governmentality, it is not only the individual who is administered, but the epidermis, the finger, the biological trace. The body

becomes database, security interface, police memory. It is reduced to a registration function, to an identifier through which law can be suspended, presence invalidated, asylum refused.

By voluntarily burning their fingers, exiles do not so much seek to disappear as to tear themselves away from an assignation. They attempt to neutralize the technology of capture, to short-circuit the automaticity of rejection. These are both desperate acts—in the sense of a raw lucidity faced with the absence of any way out from the imposed framework—and unshakeably affirmative: these are not empty gestures, but inscriptions of refusal. They do not stem from an auto-destructive drive, but from a somatic strategy of escape. A manner of tearing the body from its own inscription, of opposing to the surveillance regime a counter-writing on the skin itself. This figure of the burned body, mutilated, reduced to its most radical vulnerability, is not only an image of despair but also a political counter-signature. Destroying one's fingerprints, in a paradoxical gesture, amounts to erasing one's administrative identity to affirm, in and against this destruction, an inalienable humanity. Faced with a system that transforms the asylum seeker into corpus nullius—a body without rights, negated in its political existence—the carbonized flesh becomes a living archive of state violence, a form of writing whose subject is not erasure but irreducibility, a site of profanation through which the order of the world disavows itself.

This inverted marking, burning what was once burned by power, summons a long memory of colonial history. Impossible not to hear, in this image of charred fingers, the echo of the branding with red-hot iron of slaves, identified by pain, reduced to the state of inscribed thing. Fire reappears here, no longer as an instrument of property, but as tool of disappropriation. In refusing to be scanned, exiles refuse to be reinscribed in a neo-slavery logic of traceability, of profitability, of expulsability. They make appear the imperial and

capitalistic architecture of the migratory regime: a technopolitical assemblage where recognition is valid only on the condition of capture, where the human has value only as data. The burned fingers thus mark the moment when Europe—its humanist pretensions, its principles of hospitality, its liberal façade—reveals its reverse side: that of a necro-security order organized around selection, expulsion, slow killing.

These are not shock images. Cinema does not seek to stupefy. Rather, it seeks to hold, to accompany, to let appear without betraying. This is why these scenes are filmed without pathos, nor insistence. The camera does not dramatize. It persists. It envelops, without absorbing. What is at stake is not the exposure of suffering, but the apparition of a figure: that of a constrained subject, suspended, de-inscribed, who opposes to the power of recording an act of illimitation.

In *Les Éclats*, this same violence unfolds differently, in speech, in narratives torn out from silence, in the voice that speaks from a “burning” body. Here again, this is not a metaphor. It is a sensible truth, a way of saying what it means to be exposed to a life without recourse, without threshold, without promise. The fire is real. It consumes the flesh (cold, hunger, police violence), but also law, language, hope. To be “burning” means to be devoted to slow disappearance, methodical rejection, erasure as political horizon. But speech persists. And there is a naked dignity in this persistence, a fragile affirmation, irreducible, of being there.

In a ruined cabin, two young Afghan men, one Hazara, the other Pashtun, talk, sharing their food, their fatigue, their memory. Where history had opposed them, exile brings them together. Their conversation is a lesson in living geopolitics: analysis of relations of force, awareness of historical issues, lucidity about the repetition of violence. Then these wrenching sentences arise, seeking neither effect nor pity: “We are already dead. We are burning. We do not exist.” Sentences uttered not to alarm, but to ascertain a fact, to de-

scribe a modality of existence where the political no longer precedes the subject but traverses it in living flesh. The burning is not metaphorical. It is constitutive.

This figure of the burned body, which runs through all the films, from *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* to *Nuit Obscure*, passing through *Les Éclats* and *Paris est une fête*, is not a symbol. It does not refer to an abstraction. It is the direct materialization of structural violence. That of a system that transforms asylum seekers into flammable lives, always ready to be consumed, erased, neutralized. These bodies are not what remains after the catastrophe, but the very site where catastrophe thinks itself. They are remainders, not that which survives, but that which resists capture, that which exceeds the logic of elimination, that which endures where everything commands disappearance.

In this context, contempt is not a feeling, but a structure. It manifests in endless queues, in selection mechanisms that redouble humiliation, in closed counters, unanswered forms, gazes addressed to no one. It is not punctual, but systemic. It operates through exhaustion. In the Arab world, it is called *hogra*—this form of social contempt so deeply rooted it becomes condition. It wears down, it disintegrates, it desubjectivizes. It does not kill instantly: it turns time itself into an instrument of annihilation.

And yet, the burned bodies persist. They speak, walk, keep vigil... They burn so as not to vanish. This fire is not that of disappearance and extinction, but that of an intensity that power would want to extinguish, and which, in darkness, still lights. It is not the spectacular flame of a dazzling revolt, but the subterranean ember of an irreducible existence. One could say, paraphrasing Antonin Artaud who spoke of Van Gogh, *the man suicided by society*, that they are both the fires and the *burned by society*: not those who consume it, but those who reveal what it seeks to ignore, those in whom burns what society refuses to see of itself.

Their fire is both symptom and unveiling, consequence and critique. It does not destroy, it exposes. It reopens the fissures beneath the proclaimed foundations. It breaks the humanist fiction of a European project founded on dignity, by showing what this fiction concretely produces: bodies without place, without recourse, without language. Bodies rendered illegible so they can be more easily set aside. Bodies that, in tearing themselves away from the selection machine, do not simply demand a place, but interrogate the very foundations of the common. What remains of a community that rests on exclusion and erasure? They do not ask for reparation but disturbance. Their fire is a call not to integration, but to desecralization. They do not want to enter the order, but to make the order appear as “mythical violence”—what Walter Benjamin analyzed as law’s claim to found itself in force, to sacralize the exception in order to better conceal the continuity of domination. They burn so that another light may come, from the remainder, from what is unassimilated, from what is unrepresented.

To film this is not to bear witness from a distance, but to attempt to expose oneself resolutely to a trial of thought: what does it mean for a gesture to aim at erasing itself in order to continue to exist? What does it mean for a life to have to mutilate its own trace in order to survive? What does it mean for a cinema to receive this without betrayal, without explanation, without moralizing? Cinema then, perhaps, becomes a counter-archive—that is to say, not a place of official memory, but a space of fragile, discontinuous, opaque appearance. A place where forms of presence that escape dominant regimes of visibility are invented, where what the administration sought to erase is inscribed in light itself.

What this “figure” reveals, in all its wounded nakedness, is the contemporary face of European political violence: a violence without executioner, without confession, without explicit scene. A slow, dispersed, normalized violence that passes

through law, through waiting, through thresholds, through structures. A violence that deactivates subjects before even registering them. A violence that calls not for reparation, but for thought of the remainder, of the irreducible, of profanation.

The very term “figure” deserves to be interrogated, for it can reproduce a logic of assignment, of instrumentalization, even of political neutralization through formalization. It freezes what should remain open, excessive, conflictual. What appears here does not belong to a figure in the traditional sense—neither allegory nor symbolic incarnation—but to a mode of fragile, unstable, inappropriable appearance. To invoke the unrepresentable too often amounts to reproducing a logic of exception, whereby what cannot be represented is what must be subtracted, sacralized, held at a distance. Yet it is precisely this gesture of setting aside, of sacralizing preservation, that must be interrogated. It is, on the contrary, the representable that must be defended—understood not as closure, but as a profane effort of exposure, as an attempt to bring forth, within the order of the visible, what the dominant dispositifs strive to erase.

Your films trace a cartography of migration in Europe—from its internal borders (Calais), to its continental cities (Paris, Madrid), to enclaves such as Melilla. How does territory, with its different dynamics of exclusion and control, transform your way of working?

The territory is never a neutral backdrop, nor a simple setting onto which human figures are projected. On the contrary, it is an active matrix of visibility and invisibility, a material structure where contemporary regimes of control, ascription, and relegation take shape. It configures the thresholds of the perceptible and the sayable, distributes positions of speech and silence, and marks out the possible trajectories of bodies as well as the horizons of their possible futures. Each space traversed in the films – whether the industrial fringes of Cal-

ais, the militarized margins of Melilla, the grey zones of Paris or the interstices along Spanish roads – bears the imprint of historical, colonial, and securitizing forces that organize what Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible.”

These territories are first and foremost dynamic cartographies of contemporary biopower, combining surveillance, dispersion, and normalization. Calais, with its discontinuous forms and cycles of destruction and reconstruction, functions as an exploded panopticon, an archipelago of zones of exception where the law is suspended or displaced, where bodies become illegitimate by their mere presence. Melilla, a fortified enclave at the edge of the continent, embodies a politics of the threshold, where the border ceases to be a line and becomes a thick space, saturated with sensors, floodlights, barbed wire, and dispositifs of capture and selection. Paris, far from offering an outside to this logic, constitutes a diffuse intensification of it, where exclusion operates no longer through concentration but through methodical invisibilization, through silent dispersion in the interstices of the urban fabric.

Each territory, in this respect, can be read as a palimpsest: both sedimented by colonial histories that continue to inform European political imaginaries, and reconfigured in real time by technologies of power that articulate humanitarian administration, police violence, conditional asylum rights and neoliberal logistics. These are sacred spaces in the theological-political sense of the term, not because they are endowed with a higher value, but because they establish, through the combined interplay of militarization, separation, and legal exception, a perverse sacrality—one of foundational exclusion, of the untouchable, of those deemed illegitimate. The territory then becomes the scene of a deferred, repeated, banalized sacrifice: the sacrifice of rights, bodies, narratives.

However, it is precisely in the process of deterritorialization, whether it concerns the filmmaker or the subjects being filmed, that this architecture

of power becomes fully visible, both in its brutality and in its illusion of legitimacy. The more the gesture is displaced, the more the territorializing organization of the world – its spatial partitions, its cuts between the lawful and the unlawful, the instituted and the forbidden – reveals itself as a construction, as a historical and technical dispositif, and not as natural self-evidence. What seemed to belong to an immutable order – the distribution of bodies, the hierarchy of mobilities, the sovereignty of borders – is then revealed for what it is: the product of normative, policing, and logistical assemblages forged in colonial history and consolidated by contemporary violence.

This making visible is not the result of theoretical distance or a position of dominance. It is experienced from a shared uprooting, a common disturbance in reference points. The filmmaker, like those he films, finds himself wrenched from his usual perceptual, affective, and political coordinates, and it is in this uprooting, in this wavering, that the architecture of power ceases to be confused with the order of the world. Control, assignment, and exclusion become legible not as facts, but as forms, as active writings of the territory and bodies.

This displacement opens up a deciphering. And this is undoubtedly why the relationships forged in the field, between the filmmaker and those being filmed, take on such a particular intensity, because they are based neither on identification nor on imaginary projection, but on a co-presence in a zone of disorientation, where no status remains stable, where asymmetries must be recognized without ever freezing positions. The space of the film then becomes the very space of this movement, of this friction between power’s lines of force and wandering subjectivities, between the order of the territory and the *geopoetics of the profane*.

By this term, I refer to that which opposes this geography of domination. It is not a purely ideal counter-territory, but rather the recogni-

tion that, in the very fissures of these spatial regimes, in the breaches opened up by relegation, forms of presence that disrupt the established order emerge. The fires lit in the woods of Calais, the words exchanged on the sidewalks of Paris, the gestures of care shared in a besieged enclave are not simply forms of survival: they shift the coordinates of the visible, they produce lines of irregularity, sensory modulations, intensities that desacralize space and reconfigure it from an attention to the infra-ordinary, the ephemeral, the unassignable.

Filming these territories therefore involves experiencing a dual movement: on the one hand, the rigorous mapping of the dispositifs of power inscribed in space, such as architecture, urban planning, logistics, and differential circulations; and, on the other hand, the reception of another spatiality, founded not on mastery, but on crossing, on trembling, on echo. The territory affects the form of the film. It imposes durations, silences, angles; it works the light, saturates or suspends the sound track, modifies the very stability of the frame. It becomes an “actor,” not because it is endowed with its own subjectivity, but because it is the place of an unstable composition between antagonistic forces: repression and invention, fragmentation and recomposition, erasure and emergence.

In this sense, filming a territory is neither taking inventory of nor representing it, but rather experiencing its regimes of power and appearance, listening to its piercing sounds, receiving its jolts, accompanying its dissident gestures. It means refusing to close off the landscape in order to make visible the topology of exclusions and resistances. It means inscribing the act of filmmaking within a politics of the sensible that belongs neither to cartographic survey nor to illustration, but to a form of writing in motion, one that acknowledges the conflictuality inherent in space and seeks, without ever stabilizing it, the fragile form of passage between domination and profanation.

In your films, there is a persistent tension between police persecution, destruction, and the reconfiguration of spaces inhabited by migrants. Beyond violence, however, a sensitivity toward fragile forms of inhabiting is also present, we see the life created in places where humans are forced to improvise a shelter—spaces marked by flight, yet still able to inscribe a minimal logic of home. I am thinking, for instance, of the scene in *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* where a man, standing at the threshold of his tent, unfolds a family photo album: in that moment, the precarious space expands into an immense network of bonds and affections that accompany him, despite everything, as survivals of the world he left behind. Something similar occurs in the third part of *Nuit Obscure*, ‘Ain't I a chjld?’ (2025) in the scene where one of the boys, lying on a mattress in a crevice beneath a bridge, receives a wolf mask from another boy and puts it on. In such scenes, imagination transforms those precarious spaces into the possibility of another world. Are these fragile modes of inhabiting—and the relationship to objects that your cinema attends to with such care—forms of interruption or deviation from the institutional violence of dispossession? And what role do the affective and imaginative dimensions of those who inhabit these spaces play in that construction?

It is true that some scenes concentrate something essential. Such is the case in *Qu'ils reposent en révolte* (*Figures de guerre*), where a very young man scatters family photographs over an old blanket at the entrance of a tent set up in the attic of an abandoned factory (“surviving” photos drawn from a small backpack that made it through the crossings of the desert, the Mediterranean, and parts of Europe). Or in *Nuit Obscure* – ‘Ain't I a Child?’, the moment when little Mohamed puts on a wolf mask given to him by Hassan, as he prepares to lie down and sleep under the elevated metro bridge. Even the careful act of folding a blanket, hanging a lamp, drawing on the ground. These are not mo-

ments of “resilience”, nor an aesthetics of consolation, but a minimal, irreducible, and fragile form of inhabiting the world otherwise. Amid the ruins of law, in the interstices of dispossession.

These gestures are never neutral. They are not simply realistic details or moments of rest in the dramatic economy of migration. They are what we could call forms that interrupt the dominant logic of deprivation. They demonstrate an ability to inscribe space, however small, where everything is organized toward erasure, instability, and un-belonging. To inhabit, here, does not mean to possess or control, but to profane the violence of non-place. To transform the underside of a bridge, a patch of vacant land, a tent threatened with eviction into a temporary home is to interrupt, however briefly, the programme of errancy, dislocation and interchangeability; it is to oppose the organisation of inoperativity with a precarious, affective, inventive writing. A form of resistance that is not frontal but subterranean, not spectacular but minimal.

The mask scene offers a particularly eloquent example. In this exchange—Hassan hands Mohamed a wolf mask, in a kind of improvised, almost silent ritual—what circulates is not only an object, but a way of provisionally inhabiting space otherwise, away from police relations, in the midst of a decentered symbolic economy. The mask, here, is not a simple accessory: it is an *operator of inversion* and *metamorphosis*. To those whom society qualifies as ‘savages,’ whom it expels from the human order by assigning them to the order of nature, to a phantasmatic animality, to the inhuman, young people respond with critical irony and a figure of excess: a wolf mask, plastic, derisory, almost grotesque. This gesture, minimal, opens a carnivalesque breach. It does not respond to assignation through interiorization, but through derision. It reverses symbolic violence. It turns it into a game. And this game, while deflecting the logic of humiliation, sets up another scene: that of an irreducible form of subjectivation, of a way of

provisionally becoming other to oneself, of loosening the stranglehold of State categories.

It is also a privileged moment, a poetic and political intimacy, born in the very heart of extreme vulnerability, where the act of transmission—of an object, of a look, of a gesture—becomes an act of trust, of presence, of co-invention of the world. Nothing is repaired. Nothing is saved. But something insists, resists, overflows. Another scene opens, in a low murmur. These are *dissident forms of habitation* which, within and against the order of relegation, redeploy memory, imagination, relation. Through this tiny gesture, an entire space of reversibility emerges—a fragile theater where one no longer suffers the imposed image, but where one sketches, albeit briefly, a fiction to escape the State’s fiction and disarm assignations.

As for the family album, it does not constitute a simple memory. It is also an active gesture: opening the pages, showing them to the camera is both inscribing one’s history in a space of erasure and addressing something—a part of oneself, of one’s world, of one’s attachments—to another. The family photograph becomes a mobile site of anchoring, a territory without ground, but portable, transportable, activated in the very act of showing it.

These gestures are part of a politics of detail, of attention, of survivance. They are at the heart of a cinema that refuses to separate structural violence from sensible forms of existence, macro-violence from micro-presences. They manifest an ability to produce, within and against dispossession, zones of warmth, thresholds of address, provisional forms of world-making.

It is therefore not simply a matter of resisting. It is a matter of diverting the logic of dispossession; of making forms, intensities, bonds, imaginaries persist, despite everything. Here lies undoubtedly one of cinema’s major ethical challenges: not to record what is, but to welcome what insists. To capture not only violence, but what exceeds it. To observe not only destruction, but what, in its cracks, reinvents itself.

To conclude, your films leave us with a lingering concern: what has become of the people who appear in those images? It is not a need for narrative closure, but rather a disquiet that arises from the recognition that these lives are facing a deeply hostile system, where their survival depends on the bureaucracies of migration policies. After the final credits of the last part of *Nuit Obscure*, a sign recalls the deaths of Streka, Nahel, and Mustapha, three teenagers who died in different contexts under the action or custody of the State. This epilogue situates the poetic exercise within the concrete events that exceeds the film and limit its power as a device for affirming the lives that the necropolitical regime manages to eliminate. Can we think of cinema—of the act of holding one's gaze, of opening spaces for listening—as a place to weave a shared emotion that allows us to make memory and elaborate a collective mourning?

Cinema does not restore life. It does not replace it. It does not save it. But it can, I believe, under certain conditions, through certain gestures, in certain regimes of looking and listening, accompany these presences, insist on what has taken place, and support, even at the limit, what remains.

At the end of the last part of *Nuit Obscure*, three names appear: Streka, Mustapha, Nahel. Three young boys, three interrupted trajectories, three deaths inflicted under the direct or indirect responsibility of the State. This epilogue does not conclude the work. It does not give it a univocal meaning. It does not produce pathos. It recalls, in the strong sense of the term: it brings back into the present what the political apparatus seeks to dissolve into forgetfulness.

Streka, filmed in *Ain't I a Child?*, died electrocuted on the Paris metro tracks, not far from where little Mohamed (the boy with the wolf mask) was sleeping, believing that the police were chasing him. Mustapha was found hanged in his cell. He had already been in prison and had sworn never to return. Nahel, shot at point-blank range

by a police officer during a traffic stop (which amounts, quite simply, to a republican execution), does not appear in the trilogy, but his death has irrevocably traversed the gaze, the gestures, the editing—because he was of the same generation, because he bore the same signs of foreignness, because he embodied, like the others, a target.

These deaths are not anecdotes. They are not contingent. They express a regime of systemic elimination, a necropolitical logic that decides who can live and who must die (Foucault), according to criteria that are always hidden but always operative: race, class, age, spatial position, language.

These three figures do not belong to a commemorative pathos. They inscribe the work in a tissue of concrete political realities, denied, evacuated, but irreducibly present. They are not exceptions. They reveal a structured regime of slow or brutal elimination, a differential administration of life, a permanent selection between what deserves to be rescued and what can be exposed to death. Therefore, the film neither repairs nor justifies. It records, it gives a name, it inscribes a persistence where the State attempts to erase even memory. This gesture of montage is not offered as proof. It counts as a symbolic interruption, as a gesture of accompaniment, as an attempt to disobey erasure.

To try to film these lives is not only to show them. It is also to recognize them as irreplaceable. It is to grant them a place of appearance that is neither the record of their disappearance nor their compassionate recovery. Cinema here does not document death. It composes with absence. It exposes the unfinished, the interrupted, the suspense, not to fill, but to make last. The final card is not a sign of closure. It opens another temporality: that of deferred mourning, of mourning without ritual, of prevented mourning.

Under these conditions, can we speak of collective mourning? Certainly, perhaps, I don't know. Provided, of course, that we do not mean by this an appeased, integrated, digested mourning. What is proposed here is rather a joint elab-

oration of the irreparable, a pooling of the inadmissible, a shared emotion that does not close the wound. Memory, here, is not a cold archive. It is made up of silences, whispered names, trembling images. It is constantly threatened with erasure. And yet, it insists. Making memory, without closure: a cinema of interminable, shared mourning.

What cinema makes possible is not reparation, but the persistence of a gaze. A gaze that does not look away, a gaze that does not consume, a gaze that sustains without capturing. In a world saturated with flows, immediate images, indifferent scrolling, sustaining the gaze and prolonging listening, is already a poetic and political act. A way of not giving in. A way of holding with those who have fallen, *despite all*. ■

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FILMING TO PROFANE THE BORDER: CINEMA AS COUNTER-POWER. A CONVERSATION WITH SYLVAIN GEORGE

Abstract

This interview with French filmmaker Sylvain George examines two decades of cinematographic work dedicated to confronting the European migratory regime and its systematic violence. Through a dialogue that combines theoretical references with his practice as a filmmaker, George articulates his cinema as a form of counter-power that challenges dominant regimes of visibility, drawing on thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Rancière, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler. The conversation addresses the transformation of the European border apparatus since 2006—when George began filming—to the present, characterized by an intensification of violence, the externalization of control, and technological sophistication. George analyzes how the border regime operates as a perverse sacralization that produces bodies as “killable” and “illegitimate”, inscribing itself within a colonial continuity that structures contemporary migration policies. The filmmaker reflects on particularly powerful images from his filmography not as representations of suffering, but as political acts of forced dis-identification. Faced with criminalization and structural contempt, George proposes a cinema that profanes borders, that registers fragile forms of dwelling, and that sustains the gaze upon existences that power seeks to erase, thereby configuring a space to generate an inedit distribution of the sensible.

Key words

Documentary; Border; Sylvain George; Migration; Violence.

Author

Carolina Sourdis holds a PhD in Film Studies from Pompeu Fabra University (2018) with a dissertation on the essay film as dialectics of film creation (Cum Laude distinction). Her profile combines filmmaking and cultural management with academic research. She teaches at the Audiovisual Communication Degree in the Communication Department at UPF. Her main research interest includes montage and the visual essay, applied research methodologies in film studies, and archive and memory in Colombian cultural production. She has participated in various research projects with CINEMA Group and works on film pedagogy projects for young people. She has published several book chapters with leading publishers such as Routledge, and academic articles in indexed journals including *New Cinemas*, *Alphaville*, among others.

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FILMAR PARA PROFANAR LA FRONTERA. EL CINE COMO CONTRA-PODER. CONVERSACIÓN CON SYLVAIN GEORGE

Resumen

Esta entrevista con el cineasta francés Sylvain George examina dos décadas de trabajo cinematográfico dedicado a confrontar el régimen migratorio europeo y sus violencias sistemáticas. A través de un diálogo que combina referentes teóricos con su práctica como cineasta, George articula su cine como una forma de contra-poder que disputa los regímenes de visibilidad dominantes, apoyándose en pensadores como Walter Benjamin, Jacques Rancière, Michel Foucault y Judith Butler. La conversación aborda la transformación del dispositivo fronterizo europeo desde 2006—cuando George comenzó a filmar— hasta la actualidad, caracterizada por una intensificación de la violencia, la externalización del control y la sofisticación tecnológica. George analiza cómo el régimen fronterizo opera como una sacralización perversa que produce cuerpos como «matables» e «ilegítimos», inscribiéndose en una continuidad colonial que estructura las políticas migratorias contemporáneas. El cineasta reflexiona sobre imágenes particularmente potentes de su filmografía no como representaciones del sufrimiento, sino como actos políticos de desidentificación forzada. Frente a la criminalización y el desprecio estructural, George propone un cine que profana las fronteras, que registra formas frágiles de habitar y que sostiene la mirada sobre existencias que el poder desea borrar, configurando así un espacio para generar un reparto diferente de lo sensible.

Palabras clave

Cine documental; Frontera; Sylvain George; Migración; Violencia.

Autora

Carolina Sourdis es doctora de Comunicación por la Universidad Pompeu Fabra (2018) con una tesis sobre el ensayo cinematográfico como dialéctica de la creación fílmica (Mención Cum Laude). Su perfil combina la creación fílmica y la gestión cultural con la investigación académica. Es profesora asociada del grado en comunicación audiovisual en el departamento de comunicación de la UPF. Sus principales líneas de investigación son el montaje y el ensayo visual, metodologías de investigación aplicada en los estudios fílmicos y archivo y memoria en la producción cultural colombiana. Ha participado en diversos proyectos de investigación del Grup CINEMA, y colabora con proyectos de pedagogías del cine para jóvenes. Ha publicado diversos capítulos de libros en editoriales de impacto, como Routledge, y artículos académicos en revistas indexadas como *New Cinemas*, *Alphaville*, entre otros. Contacto: Carolina.sourdis@upf.edu.

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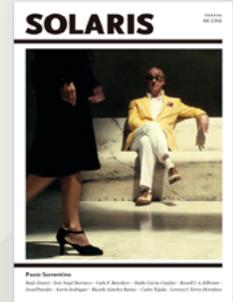
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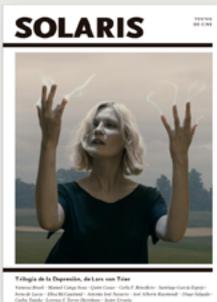
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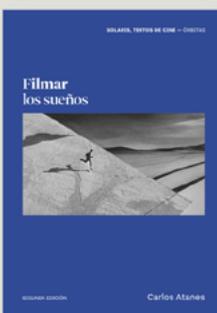
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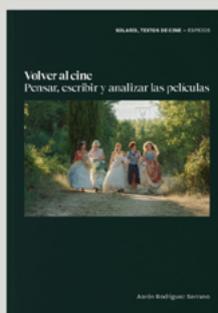
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**COUNTER-VISUALITIES OF
EXTRACTION: ARCHIVAL
FRICTIONS IN THE AFTERLIVES
OF PETRO-COLONIALISM**

introduction

Anna Mundet
Félix Maisel

discussion

Nariman Massoumi
Sanaz Sohrabi

conclusions

Anna Mundet
Félix Maisel

I introduction

ANNA MUNDET

FÈLIX MAISEL

Film and photography have long operated as technologies of colonialism, particularly in the context of oil exploration and corporate expansion in the Persian Gulf. Between the 1920s and 1960s, oil corporations like British Petroleum (BP) and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) or Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) strategically employed a variety of media, from films to postcards, to legitimize and naturalize their extraction activities and corporate presence. As Carola Hein and Mohamad Sedighi (2016: 351) write: “Petroleum actors’ investments go beyond the physical presence of industrial spaces: they are also active in the creation of narratives and representations of the petroleumscape.” These representations framed oil extraction as a marker of progress and, at the same time, they obscured the exploitative practices and socio-environmental consequences. These visual productions shaped perceptions of local landscapes, labor, and populations to align with corporate agendas. In doing so, cinema and photography became an instrument that both archived and produced a sanctioned version of history.

Recently, Iranian-born, research-based artists in the diaspora have begun to critically examine the legacies of corporate visuality. Nariman Massoumi (Teheran, 1980; based in Bristol) and Sanaz Sohrabi (Teheran 1988; based in Montréal) are filmmakers that consider the visual archives of

these oil companies as *instruments of governance*. For them, archives are dispositifs that not only store the content of the past but actively produce it, an understanding that has shaped archival scholarship since Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (1996), published at an early stage of the so-called “archival turn” of the 1990s, when processes of digitalization began making archives available. It is in this context that concepts like “an-archive” (Ernst, 2015), “counter-archive” (Amad, 2010) or “anti-archive” (Kashmere, 2018) become relevant, as they emphasize that archives contain both “conservational and destructive functions” (Kashmere, 2018: 15).

If Sohrabi and Massoumi treat archives as contested spaces it is because, following Renée Green’s (2014) notion of “archival lacunae,” they understand that these dispositifs are formed not only by its holdings but also by its absences. The hidden contents or alternative narratives that are embedded within the archive’s positivist conception of history are revealed through the disassembly and reassembly of moving-images, a filmic practice Marcia Landy (2015) terms “counter-historicizing.” Gestures, bodies, affects, and voices that defy official histories linger in the margins of colonial archives. The echoes of these *absent centers* can destabilize the dominant linear narratives of modernization. ■

discussion

I. Both of your works engage with visual archives to expose how film and photography were instrumental in legitimizing and naturalizing colonial oil economies. These narratives are embedded within their visual regimes, but you demonstrate that alternative histories exist within them, and that they can be filmically reconstructed. To create these counter-histories (or counter-visualities) you use different formal strategies. Both approaches pursue, however, the same goal: to foreground what colonial visibility conceals. Sanaz employs magnification-based techniques, from digital re-scaling to material enlargement, while Massoumi often works with text-visual juxtaposition. Why did you decide to use these specific strategies to intervene in or subvert the visual regimes of colonial archives?

Sanaz Sohrabi

It is about recreating the encounter and questioning how we arrive at images, and how images arrive at us. It is very important for me to think about expanding an image sonically, spatially, and materially. During fieldwork in an archive, I began using the magnifying glass to see whether I could find any bodies in the shadows of industrial buildings, camouflaged by large machinery and alienated by the external documentarian frame of the images. A search to encounter and magnify the eerie instances when flesh became one with infrastructure. This is why I am very invested in exploring and “scaling” images both in space ma-

terially (through enlarged prints or projections) but also in the digital format (by de- and re-resolving pixels).

There is a space in which still images can move and transplant the reader and become a portal to an elsewhere and an elsewhere. Collective fingerprints from oil workers on strike, letters written by labour activists from prison declaring their political demands with great awareness of their historical role in shaping the nationalization movement not only in Iran but the broader West Asia, secret anticolonial pamphlets to be distributed across the oil towns, all amount to acts of refusals and solidarity hiding in plain sight in the archives.

Nariman Massoumi

These strategies were driven by a sense of responsibility for problematic contexts in which these images were originally produced and acquired. In *Pouring Water on Troubled Soil* (2023), I employed photographic stills, mainly drawn from British Petroleum's archives, because I found that they offered an effective contradistinction to the vivid Technicolour of *Persian Story* (1951), a corporate film commissioned by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC)—to which Welsh poet Dylan Thomas was originally assigned as scriptwriter—to promote the company's operations in the city of Abadan, Iran, the centerpiece of British oil refining in the Middle East. The stills I found in the company's archive can be considered images that counter *Persian Story*'s acts of erasure. They were visual evidence of racial and social inequalities

and simultaneously addressed the gaps and silences in Dylan Thomas's account. Adopting a photo-roman style with archival photographs helped me evoke a proto-cinematic sensibility, which supported the notion of a "film-in-the-making" or one emerging in the poet's imagination (hence the inclusion of moving images in the middle of the film), while simultaneously referencing the ethnographic lecture-slide travelogue and its vexed history. My approach was a combination of historical immersion (through sound), aimed at reconstituting a hidden and excluded past through its fragments, while acknowledging this restricted access. I sought to retain the integrity of the archive photographs while using aesthetic strategies to remind us of their status as images—images produced within the context of coloniality and hierarchical structures of subordination.

2. In both *One Images, Two Acts* (2020) and *Scenes of Extraction* (2023), you work with historical documents that audiences are not usually used to seeing on screen, yet you bring them to the foreground and make them central to your cinematic language. How do you think this approach shapes the viewer's sense of historical proximity or distance? And how does this notion of cinematic time interact with other temporal scales, like geological time, which is referenced in *One Image, Two Acts*?

Sanaz Sohrabi

Since colonial temporal logics condemn their subjects to a pre-history, one that is rendered unrepresentable via the modern systems and logics of distribution of time, I deliberately avoid a seamless chronology. Instead, my editing process often mirrors the structure of the archive itself—it becomes a kind of archival viewing table, where I invite the viewer to walk with me, to explore and question. This process involves a layered temporality. On one hand, I'm engaging with what Allan Sekula called the "archival gaze"—a mode of seeing that carries both historical and material distance. On the other, I'm interested in how archival ab-

sences and presences shape our perception of historical time. In the BP archive, for example, labour strikes are rarely pictured, but they are made visible through the expansive volume of secret reports by company officials on the worker unions' political activities. These documents expose "an omnipresent militarized gaze," even as workers' images remain absent. This dynamic—between what is shown and what is withheld—is central to how I think about cinematic time. It is not just about historical reconstruction, but about making room for what Ariella Azoulay calls the "distribution of the sensible": the political space shaped by what does and does not make it into the frame.

3. The title *Pouring Water on Troubled Oil* alludes to a phrase written by Dylan Thomas to describe his work in Iran: “My job was to pour water on troubled oil.” This phrase captures the AIOC’s attempt to present its controversial presence in Abadan in a calming and benevolent light, despite rising tensions over oil nationalization. The film sought to depict Persia as an exotic and beautiful land while portraying the British company’s activities as gentle, stabilizing, and beneficial—a carefully curated narrative aimed at “soothing” political unrest through imagery cooperation and development. One might say that your film “returns” the trouble to the soil by surfacing the very tensions, contradictions that the original film sought to erase or suppress. Could you speak about your process of reworking archival material as an act of counter-narration?

Nariman Massoumi

What I would add here is that the counterpart to *Persian Story*’s (and BP’s films more generally) legitimization of colonial claims to territory and resources is its very monologic form, where the possibility for alternative meanings or autonomous voices is denied. Reconfiguring the archive as a space of resistance or remembrance is complex and hazardous particularly if one is working with corporate and colonial archives (like BP’s) because, as Antoinette Burton has pointed out, such collections are not simply neutral sources of information but historical actors in their own right that serve imperial power and hegemony. There is a danger that films like *Persian Story* give the impression that British Petroleum (BP) and other oil companies were in total control of their image-making and impervious to resistance. In this sense, the archive allows us to account for the historical contingency and contestation behind their construction of BP’s oil imaginary. Thus, I was immediately struck by how Dylan Thomas’s sardonic and unsettling account stood in direct opposition to the sanitized and civilizing narrative of oil and modernity in Iran he was assigned to write, and to the colourful prestige film *Persian Story* eventually produced. This raised the notion

of conceiving his letters (or extracts from them) as both a counter-history and as a set of notes for an unmade or unrealised film, a vision unrestrained by the company’s propagandist agenda. In other words, the film Thomas *might* have made.

Part of the task of creating a counter-history thus required a response that challenged this ideological perspective in form as well as content. Given the centrality and dominance of Thomas’s voice, it was important to create space for contradictions, conflicts and dialogical interactions between his account and the wider historical reality he was immersed in. This included subtle choices in the edit and soundscape as well as more disruptive ones—such as the interruption to Thomas’s voiceover narration (with the insertion of the oil worker’s voice), the shift from black and white photographs to colour moving images in the middle of the film, or the removal of sound altogether during the section on the shanty town. Beyond their narrative purposes, these interventions seek to operate as Brechtian alienation devices, to break our accustomization with the persistence of Thomas’s perspective, or to disrupt our suspension of disbelief and immersion in the film’s photographic world, thereby reminding us of its construction from still images and archives.

4. Sanaz’s works insist on the idea that the history of oil extraction is inseparable from the evolution of photographic and cinematic technologies. Visual technologies, such as early reflection seismography cameras, were initially developed to penetrate and visualize subterranean spaces. As described in her solo exhibition *Extraction Out of Frame* (2023), these technologies function as “apparatuses of seeing and destroying.” From this perspective, the archive itself can be seen as a tool of extraction, but also as a site of resistance and reconfiguration. How do you perceive the relationship between these different forms of extraction—archival, data-driven, or resource-based? What possibilities or limits do you see in using “extraction” as a shared metaphor for these practices?

Sanaz Sohrabi

There is a clear connection between the history of photography and the history of oil extraction. When photography becomes a more common technology, it is also when there is the transition from coal to oil, so we can see that shift in the imperial use of coal, the steam ships, and trains to oil and airplanes. This transformation in the energy needs has been uniquely documented by the oil companies. So, the political life of the oil company’s camera can reveal a lot about how that colonial encounter was and how it evolved. More so, there is a clear use of photography and what Harun Farocki has called “operational images” in using photography in seismographic tests and using images not as representation but as part of a scientific or military operation.

Nariman Massoumi

While my film does not explicitly draw on the kind of parallels you mention, I can see how its concerns or its construction may be considered relevant here. Mining metaphors are not uncommon to archival practices—the notion of searching and uncovering hidden or suppressed material seems to correspond productively and figuratively with the activity of extracting resources below the surface from subterranean depths, as Leo Goldsmith has discussed. These associations can be useful in considering the ways in which archival practices and image technologies can be implicated in the

cultural and ideological logic of extractive capitalism and environmental destruction. However, I would stop short at drawing direct equivalences between what I consider to be quite different forms of activity, even if they are sometimes unified under the name of “extractivism.” As Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel have argued, we should be cautious of metaphorical inflation or conceptual creep given extractivism has become shorthand for any form of capitalist value generation or accumulation—on the one hand naming the material, violent instrumentalisation of the natural environment and, on the other, an ideological and cultural logic. Similarly, I’m mindful of drawing too close a correspondence between the activities you name because I wish to retain their methodological and political distinctions. Each of those activities can mean very different forms of exploitative relations depending on their purpose, nature and context. Even the exploration and exploitation of oil under colonialism has a different economic relation to that under postcolonialism. So, while archival mining can in one context be extractive and exploitative, in my work I see it precisely operating against the extractivist logic of *Persian Story* and its historical legitimization of British colonial claims to Iranian oil, by recuperating and rewriting the lost or buried material left in its wake back into history. In that sense, mining the archive becomes an act of rectification and reparation rather than exploitative extraction.

5. Building on this idea of visual extraction, your films, Sanaz, often employ Computer-Generated Images (CGI) to expose the limits of technologies designed to render space fully visible and knowable. In one extended sequence of *Scenes of Extraction*, you used AI to generate spatial renderings from early geological aerial surveys photographs and panoramic films of the Iranian oil concession. Could you elaborate on how you use CGI and speculative digital methods to disrupt these extractive scopic regimes?

Sanaz Sohrabi

For the creation of the CGI elements, I used early photogrammetry photographs produced by BP and processed them through various software programs designed to generate spatial maps from still images. The outcome was a series of fragmented renderings—glitchy, low-resolution visual reconstructions that revealed the limitations of these tools. My intention was to highlight the discrepancy between lived experience and the CGI's attempt to produce a complete, totalizing representation of space—one that suggests

everything can be seen, mapped, and understood within its visual logic.

British Petroleum had long relied on visual technologies such as aerial photogrammetry and panoramic photography to construct an “all-seeing eye” that simultaneously documented and abstracted landscapes, labor, and infrastructural power. My use of CGI attempts to break that illusion—revealing the contradictions and failures within those scopic regimes and their desire to render space as fully knowable and controllable.

6. In *One Image, Two Acts* you investigate how oil companies in southwestern Iran reorganized the everyday lives of its workers via newly built towns. The “petro-modern” city of Abadan and other worker towns were instruments of social and economic regulation: housing, transportation, and public amenities were linked to labor schedules. Leisure spaces—parks, cinemas and other recreational facilities—were integrated to produce a controlled form of socialization, while essential services, like schools and hospitals, reinforced dependence on the industrial economy. These settlements are extensions of oil infrastructure. The film foregrounds the Gulf-coast oil metropolis as part of a “palimpsestic petroleumscape” (Hein and Sedighi, 2016)—a site in which colonial power projected modernity through built environments and media infrastructures. How do you understand the oil landscape as more than physical territory—how is it a media ecology shaped by intertwined regimes of labor, memory, and desire?

Sanaz Sohrabi

I referred to cinematic representations of landscape in the Iranian new wave—specifically Amir Naderi's 1984 film *The Runner* (*Davandeh*) and Ebrahim Golestan's 1961 documentary *A Fire* (*Yek Atash*)—to show how the cinematic language after the nationalization attempted to show that proximity and the ecological challenges of living and working close to the oil fields. For example, for those who grew up in Khuzestan or have rel-

atives from the southwestern province in Iran, oil stands for many things; it is always a placeholder for something intangible and beyond its material dimension. Oil is a story: childhood memories, the oil company's special school stationery for workers' children, familial migratory paths, or night picnics by the ‘gas flares’ popularly known as ‘At-isha’ in Ahvaz. In other words, oil has a residual effect on memory for those who have lived in proximity to it.

7. Your works interrogate the relationship between extractive infrastructures and modes of belonging or exclusion, whether through migration, displacement or fractured archives. How do you see your practice as contributing to a broader understanding of how extractive regimes shape postcolonial subjectivities—not just economically or environmentally, but also visually and affectively?

Sanaz Sohrabi

I approach the archive as a battleground wherein I have to construct through absences and retrieve the voices of its workers from the shadows of extraction. I aim to continue along the path that the oil workers began over a century ago, and to look beyond the nostalgic imagery of petro-utopias. Archive is a verb: it sees and it silences. Now more than ever, we need to start by weaving and reading through these silences in the archives.

Visual ethnography of archives of extraction is very important to think about how labour has always been central and integral to colonial archives—especially when we think about mono-commodities whether they are industrial or agricultural. Images are full-fledged historical actors and are parts and parcel of the imperial conditions of extraction from which they have been produced, and how we read them, sense them, unpack them and “listen” to them is an important element in interrogating the archives as the visual-discursive structure.

The archives of British Petroleum (BP), which started its operations in Iran in 1908 until the nationalization of the oil industry took place in 1951, never encompassed the full picture for me. If we think of the archives as the commons and not the past, as Ariella Azoulay argues, we are then able

to read through these shadows, absences, and shared struggles and not assume the archive as merely a source for historical facts. Images of oil in the BP Archives consist of a foreground and a background. Those inhabiting the shadow economy of extraction in the background were coded through racial difference and dispossessed of the wealth generated by the same machinery of oil.

I grew up listening to these stories from my uncles and relatives who had worked for the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), known before the nationalization of the oil industry took effect in 1951 as the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). I would often find objects with the NIOC logo on them in our household. The prevalent nostalgic image of oil is deeply troubled by a violent extractive logic whose past has been pushed to the margins of history by both the national and corporate narratives, rendering invisible the unequal social footprints and ecological devastations caused by the oil industry set against its colonial legacy. The story of oil's establishment in Iran sheds light on how corporate narratives of beginnings are colonial constructs used to marginalize other forms of historical storytelling that can reveal social experiences of oil from the perspectives of oil-producing countries in Western Asia and North Africa.

8. Throughout *Pouring Water on Troubled Oil*, a complex relationship is established between the archival photographs and the voice-over drawn from Dylan Thomas's letters to Caitlin Thomas and Pearl Kazin. Sometimes the images directly illustrate his text, but at other moments there's a deliberate tension or even contradiction. This text-visual dissonance occurs, for example, when juxtaposing photos of unveiled Iranian women marching on strike (not an uncommon image before the Islamic revolution) with Thomas's line about women always being "wrapped." How do you navigate this interplay between image and sound to build a multi-layered narrative? What guides you in deciding when to align or intentionally misalign text and image?

Nariman Massoumi

One of the central benefits of constructing the film principally from photographs is that photographic stillness allows Thomas's elaborate prose to be absorbed, the intricate language inviting their own virtual images that align or conflict with those on screen. As mentioned above, I built the film on the concept of Thomas's unmade film while trying to retain the integrity of his original epistolary form. This perspective required a close correspondence between voiceover and images, but I would like to think that even when aligned with the voice, the images have their own enunciations and contradictions open to interpretation, beyond the intentions of the photographer or my arrangement of them in the film. Hence, I placed great emphasis on silences and gaps in the voiceover to allow space for the viewer's own analysis of the images. The soundscape played a key role here in "unmuting" the oil encounter, adding offscreen space and a cinematic tempo-

rality. By imagining and reconstructing the profilmic scene through sound, each photograph we are viewing emerges as one instance captured in a broader set of possibilities. Of course, there were significant gaps in Thomas' own account. I chose not to decide on the precise reason for these gaps—whether they were a limitation of Thomas's own understanding or experience, or of the available archival evidence. His writing at times suffers from Orientalist tropes although not always conventionally so. In the case you cite, Thomas writes of women wrapping themselves to hide their poverty ("it is their only possession"). While this does not strictly follow the racialised perspective of veiled Iranian women as simply agentless victims of patriarchy, it felt appropriate to address the power dynamics by opening the film to the agency of veiled and unveiled women involved in the nationalisation movement and raising the question of what Dylan Thomas may or may have not known or encountered.

9. In addition to Dylan Thomas’s private letters, the film brings in two anonymously authored letters, one published in the political newspaper *Iran-e Ma* and the other in the women’s magazine *Ettelā’āt-e Bānuvān*. One reads: “The English believe that the people of Iran will forever remain in a backward state and never imagine that ten thousand workers in a remote desert will rise up and strike against them.” By foregrounding these epistles—whose authorship is deliberately obscured—the film problematizes conventional notions of testimony: the very invisibility of these oil workers becomes a form of resistance, suggesting that revolutionary potential often resides in those whom history has rendered faceless. How do you negotiate the dynamics between private correspondences (with a known authorial presence) and anonymously published missives (whose authors remain uncredited)?

Nariman Massoumi

That’s a fascinating and challenging question, which I am unsure if I have a completely satisfying answer to! Through the voice of an “oil worker” I sought to disrupt Thomas’s epistemic authority and introduce the idea of the subjects of the photographs “speaking back” - whether the addressee is the oil company, Dylan Thomas, the photographer producing the ethnographic representation or the audience. As you say, the voice does not function in the same way as conventional forms of testimony. I conceived it not as the voice of an individual but one representing a collective history of struggle, given the centrality of oil workers to the course of events in 1951 (and, of course, later in the revolution of 1979). This was partly inspired by the anonymity and sense of collectivity emerging from the main source, a letter from 1928 signed simply “Khuzestani”, meaning a person from Khuzestan (the Southwestern Province where oil operations were located). James C. Scott defines “hidden transcripts” as discourse that takes place “offstage” from the

public transcripts that take place between dominant and subordinate actors. Hidden transcripts of the dominated can reveal aspects of agency and resistance concealed from the public performance of deference to power. So, both Khuzestani and Thomas’s letters might be read as hidden transcripts of *Persian Story* and the oil company’s public discourse. Thomas’s correspondences were private, but his language had a public address, and he directly incorporated sections from his letters into his 1951 BBC radio broadcast *Persian Oil* (appearing at the end of my film). As Thomas occupies a position of dominance with respect to the oil workers, placing Khuzestani in the film can be read as also a hidden transcript or comment on Thomas’s account. It was therefore important for me that the oil worker’s voice had its own agenda and an authoritative delivery to match Thomas’s one, rather than taking the form of a response to a question or an interview with a localized accent. The film thus tries to reconfigure what counts as public and private and plays with the boundaries of what remains on and offstage.

10. Sanaz, in your forthcoming film, *An Incomplete Calendar* (2026), you explore how OPEC member states utilized visual culture, such as magazines, newsreels, and stamps, to construct narratives of resource nationalism and postcolonial identity. Do you perceive these postcolonial image policies as a rupture from the colonial petrovisuality of the past, or do they represent a reconfiguration that still bears traces of earlier visual regimes?

Sanaz Sohrabi

There is a clear tension between continuity and rupture in the visual strategies used by OPEC states after nationalization. In my research, I've explored how these image policies both challenged and inherited aspects of earlier scopic regimes. In this sense, it is crucial to understand that "scopic regimes of oil" are not merely styles of seeing, but that they are visually and culturally grounded, deeply tied to systems of knowledge and authority. The BP archive, for example, or-

ganized its visual and textual materials in ways that "disconnected, dispossessed, and displaced" bodies and spaces from their historical relations to land. Nowadays, even in postcolonial contexts, this legacy persists. The distribution of presences and absences in state-produced imagery still reflects the intertwined relationship of aesthetics and politics. My work seeks to navigate these continuities—not to resolve them, but to make them legible as part of a longer history of visual authority. ■

conclusions

ANNA MUNDET
FÈLIX MAISEL

As we have seen, Sohrabi and Massoumi's practices challenge the notion of the oil audiovisual archive as a mere repository of memory, working instead with it as a contested space that underscores the power of images in producing and legitimizing colonial narratives. Through a remarkable diversity of formal strategies and a complex, layered treatment of temporality, we witness a transformation of archival materials into a performative device of counter-historicization—one capable of dismantling the colonial visual regime and opening up the possibility of new genealogies and rewritings of the collective memories of the Persian Gulf. Both filmmakers approach their work through a critique of visual extractivism, finding in digital technologies of vision—traditionally associated with control and domination—tools that can be re-signified to make visible the zones of shadow: the bodies, gestures, and voices that were left outside the frame. ■

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COUNTER-VISUALITIES OF EXTRACTION: ARCHIVAL FRICTIONS IN THE AFTERLIVES OF PETRO-COLONIALISM

Abstract

This interview examines the film practices of Sanaz Sohrabi and Nariman Massoumi, two artists of Iranian origin whose works explore the visual legacies of petro-colonialism in the Persian Gulf. Through a critical analysis of corporate film and photographic archives, the filmmakers reveal how cinema and photography historically functioned as technologies that simultaneously legitimized narratives of modernization while concealing labor struggles, socio-environmental violence, and structural inequalities. The formal strategies employed by these artists approach the archive as a dispositif marked by absences, silences, and extractive logics. The conversation considers how their works destabilize dominant scopical regimes, reactivating buried histories of resistance. Through this interview, we see how contemporary film practices grounded in archival materials can open new genealogies of the Persian Gulf's visual history, transforming extractive visualities into sites of critical reinscription and ecological and political attunement.

Key words

Petro-colonialism, archival films, media technologies, extractivism, visual regimes, Iranian cinema, oil infrastructures, postcolonial studies, documentary practices, image politics.

CONTRAVISUALIDADES DE LA EXTRACCIÓN: FRICCIONES ARCHIVÍSTICAS MÁS ALLÁ DEL PETRO-COLONIALISMO

Resumen

Esta entrevista analiza las prácticas fílmicas de Sanaz Sohrabi y Nariman Massoumi, dos artistas de origen iraní cuyas obras examinan los legados visuales del petro-colonialismo en el Golfo Pérsico. A través de un análisis crítico de archivos fílmicos y fotográficos corporativos, los cineastas muestran cómo el cine y la fotografía actuaron históricamente como tecnologías que a la vez legitimaron discursos de modernización mientras ocultaban luchas laborales, violencias socioambientales y desigualdades estructurales. Las estrategias formales usadas por estos artistas abordan el archivo como un dispositivo marcado por ausencias, silencios y lógicas extractivas. La conversación examina cómo sus obras desestabilizan los regímenes escópicos dominantes, reactivando historias de resistencia enterradas. Con esta entrevista vemos cómo las prácticas fílmicas contemporáneas basadas en el trabajo con materiales de archivo pueden abrir nuevas genealogías de la historia visual del Golfo Pérsico, transformando visualidades extractivas en espacios de reinscripción crítica y sensibilidad ecológica y política.

Palabras clave

Petrocolonialismo, cine de archivo, tecnologías mediáticas, extractivismo, regímenes visuales, cine iraní, infraestructuras petroleras, estudios poscoloniales, prácticas documentales, política de la imagen.

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VANISHING POINTS

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AND FOR SAMA**

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DEMOCRACY**

Natalia Martínez Pérez

FROM VIDEO ACTIVISM TO COLLABORATIVE CREATIVE DOCUMENTARY: CO-AUTHORSHIP IN *5 BROKEN CAMERAS* AND *FOR SAMA*

FEDERICO PRITSCH

INTRODUCTION

With the technological transformations brought by digital video and new forms of online distribution, video activist experiences have increased markedly in the 21st century. Defined as “social practices on audiovisual media used as political intervention strategies by agents excluded from the dominant power structures—subjects of the counterpower—with a transformative objective achievable through different tactical aims” (Gaona and Mateos, 2015: 124), video activism has been an identifying tool of certain movements of the past decade, such as those of the Arab Spring, the 15M women’s movement in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the United States (Sierra and Montero, 2015).

Some of these experiences have involved long-term creative processes resulting in the development of films out of their video activist archives, adopting new aesthetic approaches and expanding the usual audiences for their productions.

This paper presents case studies of two documentaries made in the last decade that arose out of the video activism of their protagonists, who, after a few years of gathering footage, realised that what they had filmed could be used to make a documentary feature. The titles in question are *5 Broken Cameras* (Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, 2012) and *For Sama* (Waad Al-Kateab and Edward Watts, 2019), which deal with two extremely important contemporary social conflicts: the territorial dispute in the West Bank and the Syrian Civil War, respectively. In both cases, a co-director from outside the protagonist’s community with training and experience as a filmmaker became involved in the project to convert the footage accumulated over the years into a feature film.

5 Broken Cameras depicts the resistance of the people in the Palestinian village of B’ilin against the occupation of their land by Israeli settlers in an area historically used for farming by the community, which later becomes the site of a wall di-

viding the two nations. Emad Burnat, a villager who films videos of family and social events in his community as a hobby, bought his first video camera in 2005 and for the next eight years, he would film the demonstrations of his people and their repression by the Israeli army.

For Sama recounts the tumultuous life of its protagonist and director, Waad al-Kateab, during five years of war in the Syrian city of Aleppo. The film is presented as a letter to her daughter Sama, who was born during the war, and the dilemma faced by Waad and her family over whether to stay and fight or flee the country for their own safety. Waad works as a correspondent for British news media, filming footage at the hospital run by her husband, bearing witness to the brutal consequences of the war.

In both cases, the filming processes began as defensive responses to violence and repression, as expressions of resistance, producing footage that would be used by different international media outlets in their coverage of the conflicts (Kostrz, 2016; Hasday, 2019; POV, n.d.). These video activist practices were reconfigured when they were conceived of as potential footage for a documentary film, whereby much of the same material previously used in television reports would serve to construct a different type of language and aesthetic form in the editing and development process.

These films are studied here in relation to their processes of discursive production, the narrative and aesthetic elements involved in the transition from video activism to documentary film production. The research draws on elements of film analysis (Cassetti & Di Chio, 1991) and narratology (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995), as well as the analysis of news archives on the production process (articles, interviews and press releases about the films) in an effort to answer a series of questions: What strategies do these films adopt in the treatment of the footage filmed by their protagonists? How has that footage been edited to create a film? To what extent was it necessary for an individual

from outside the community with filmmaking experience and training to join the project to bring it to fruition and achieve international visibility? What kind of negotiations and tensions did this collaboration give rise to? How do these films construct processes of memory related to recent political and social conflicts experienced in the first person by their protagonists and directors?

The first section of this article focuses on analysing the enunciative perspectives of each documentary, examining the use of voice-over as a structuring device that combines the personal dimension with the historical/political dimension, its testimonial nature and its impact on the construction of memory. The second section presents an analysis of the co-direction process of each documentary and the aesthetic and narrative elements that transform the original video activist footage into a first-person documentary film.

SUBALTERN VOICES IN THE FIRST PERSON

Both *5 Broken Cameras* and *For Sama* were created out of footage filmed by their protagonists over the course of several years. Although editing is the key element in filmmaking for constructing a discourse that redefines each shot separately through its articulation with others, in these films the discourse is orchestrated based on footage that at the time it was taken was not yet conceived of as part of a film. In each case, this footage is used to construct a complex storyline that combines the personal experience of the protagonist/filmmaker with the political, social and historical dimensions of the conflict afflicting the community portrayed. The voice-over in both films plays a key role in articulating a heterogeneous materiality and constructing a discourse through its juxtaposition with the sounds and images of the film archive.

Far from trying to sustain a pretence of objectivity in its description of the events shown in the

film, the voice-over adopts a reflexive and emotional perspective. There is no attempt to assert absolute truths; instead, what is presented is the truth as experienced personally by each film's protagonist. This approach raises questions and doubts while weaving the personal and historical dimensions together and introducing universal themes such as memory, the struggle against oppression, parenthood and the world we are building for future generations.

5 Broken Cameras begins with a voice-over narration by the protagonist and co-director, Emad Burnat, who introduces us to a few central themes of the documentary, such as the importance of filming as an act of memory and as a contribution to the resistance. While we see dizzying images taken by a camera that seems to be rushing away, to the sounds of shouting, screaming and gunfire—combined with the gentle, enigmatic musical strains of a sitar—we hear his voice for the first time:

EMAD: I have lived through so many experiences. They burn in my head like a hot flame. Pain and joy, fears and hope are all mixed together. I'm losing track. The old wounds don't have time to heal. New wounds will cover them up. So I film to hold onto my memories. (00:00:45' - 00:01:22')

Image 1. Stillframe from *5 Broken Cameras*. Emad shows his five cameras



The chaotic shot cuts to a close-up of Emad standing at a table, showing the five cameras he used throughout the period covered by the documentary. He explains—still in a voice-over—how each of these cameras has captured different stages of the conflict that has affected his village and his own life.

While images of the village of B'ilin appear on screen, Emad talks about the connections that he and his community have with this land, and how when Israeli surveyors arrived in 2005 to prepare the construction of a barrier that would take much of that land away from them, an era of resistance began in his village. This was the same year as the birth of Gibreel, his fourth child, and the year that he bought his first video camera, initially with the intention of filming his family. The strategy of combining a personal/family time-frame with a historical, political and social time-frame is significant in this film. While we see typical home movie images of his children at a school event, Emad (in a voice-over) connects each child's birth to different stages of the local conflict. This provides contextual information on the background of the conflict at the beginning of the story, not with an expository or informative voice, but by foregrounding the emotional impact

that these historical events have had on the life of his family. In this way, the film articulates the political and personal dimensions of the film's story.

For Sama begins with archival photographs showing the protagonist and co-director Waad al-Kateab at the age of 18, while she introduces herself in a voice-over expressed as a testimony or letter to her daughter, a strategy that shapes the whole narrative. The image of the baby Sama in a close-up and the calm voice



Image 2. Waad al-Kateab filming the devastation of Aleppo. (Source: <https://ambulante.org>)

of her mother talking and singing to her contrasts with the faint sounds of explosions we hear coming from outside the frame. This counterpoint between caring for a small child and the war raging all around them runs throughout the film.

A cityscape of Aleppo is shown in a shot from a drone that rises above the buildings, followed by a 360-degree pan that reveals the devastation of the war-torn city, while a caption locates us in time: “July 2016.” Waad’s voice-over contextualises the situation in the city, which is under a siege imposed by the Syrian regime and its allies. She then explains her testimonial role as the film’s protagonist/director: “I keep filming. It gives me a reason to be here. It makes the nightmares feel worthwhile” (00:05:35’ – 00:05:50’). We see images of wounded, bleeding children being treated in a hospital under precarious conditions, many laid out on the floor, as Waad’s voice-over continues: “Sama, I’ve made this film for you. I need you to understand why your father and I made

the choices we did. What we were fighting for” (00:06:20’ – 00:06:50’).

Like *5 Broken Cameras*, the opening sequence of *For Sama* establishes the point of view from which the story is structured, with the voice-over of its protagonist/director piecing together the footage she has filmed, articulated around a socio-political conflict and a personal family story. Sama’s existence challenges Waad’s militant activism against the Syrian regime and poses the dilemma of whether to keep fighting or to flee the country to protect her child. The documentary is thus constructed as an audiovisual testimony addressed to her daughter, attempting to preserve a memory in the context of a process of extermination and destruction taking place in Syria.

As protagonists/directors guiding their respective stories, Emad and Waad constitute authoritative voices not in epistemic terms of objectivity about the conflicts depicted but in terms of truth as witnesses to the violence being perpetrated

against their communities. The first-person perspective in these documentaries establishes the enunciation from a position that provides a guarantee of truth about the injustices of war.

As Renato Prada Oropeza (1986) argues, the aim of the testimony-discourse is to “provide proof, justification or verification of the truth of a prior social fact, an interpretation guaranteed by the speaker when they declare themselves to be a participant in or (mediate or immediate) witness to the events narrated” (1986: 11).

As Bill Nichols suggests in relation to the *performative documentary mode* (2001: 233), in these types of documentaries the filmmakers not only participate actively in the world being portrayed but also directly play a leading role in it. They feel a strong need to tell of the suffering experienced in their respective communities, which is expressed in the narrative of their films as an agency that gives them strength to keep up the fight.

Emad occupies the role in his village of documenting the protests of the people and their repression by the army. In some cases, the footage he films is used to raise morale in the community and to recover their faith in their struggle, in addition to providing archival material for news media outlets covering the conflict in the region. As the documentary progresses, the sense of protection that the protagonist feels when he is behind his camera begins to fade, reflecting his own vulnerability to the violence around him. His third camera is broken when a bullet becomes lodged between the lens and the housing. Half-way through the film, the Israeli army storms his house in the middle of the night and arrests him on charges of throwing stones at soldiers during a demonstration. Emad does time in jail and is sentenced to house arrest for a while thereafter.

The voice-over serves a reflexive function here, as he ruminates on the dangers and the potential of the footage he has been filming, the risks it entails, but also its political role as testimony. While we see him alone in a house outside

B'ilin where he is serving his house arrest, juxtaposed with POV shots out the window of a flock of birds in the sky, Emad reflects on the trouble he has exposed himself to as a video activist. But far from dissuading him, it leads him to a greater awareness of the importance of his work and a re-affirmation of his identity as a witness. He is thus determined to go on: “Nature gives me new vitality. I know I have a purpose in life. The price may be high, but the path I’ve chosen is the one meant for me. It’s my destiny” (00:54:44’ – 00:55:00’).

This marks a point of no return for the protagonist, who is willing to risk his life rather than give up his video activism. Testimony is presented as a key feature of his work to construct his community’s memory, which at the same time it provides him with a personal way of dealing with the trauma caused by the violence.

The image of his son Gibreel, who was born at the same time he obtained his first video camera, is constructed in the story as a metonym for the children who have grown up surrounded by the violence of the conflict. In one of the final scenes, after a small victory for the people of B’ilin when an Israeli court orders the barrier to be dismantled, we return to the shots shown at the beginning, in which Emad displays his five broken cameras on a table. These cameras, the tools he has used to record and construct the memory of this conflict, also serve as evidence and as memory objects themselves, as proof of his existence. While playing a testimonial role of great significance, they also fulfil a metacinematic function as they

TESTIMONY IS PRESENTED AS A KEY FEATURE OF HIS WORK TO CONSTRUCT HIS COMMUNITY’S MEMORY, WHICH AT THE SAME TIME IT PROVIDES HIM WITH A PERSONAL WAY OF DEALING WITH THE TRAUMA CAUSED BY THE VIOLENCE

confront us with the very means of production of the images contained in the film.

In the final scenes of *For Sama*, Waad ponders the trauma that her daughter may one day have to grapple with and defends her decision to stay as long as they could in Aleppo to fight the oppression of the Syrian regime. She is pregnant again, and the new hospital they had managed to set up has been bombed; finally, they make the decision to leave the country, like many others who can no longer bear the imminent risk of death. Waad takes hundreds of hours of footage filmed over that period with her, hoping to be able to expose the terror perpetrated in her country, to raise awareness in the international community and to bring about some kind of change.

The film culminates with her flight into exile and the birth of her second daughter. While images of different moments of struggle, camaraderie and dignity recorded in those five years flash past on the screen, Waad's voice-over concludes her letter to Sama:

WAAD: If I could rewind the days, I would do exactly the same. Even if I never recover from the trauma, I don't regret anything. I can't wait for you to grow up, Sama, to tell me how you feel. I want you to know that we fought for the most important cause of all. So that you and all our children would not have to live as we lived. Everything we did was for you. (01:31:20' - 01:32:55')

The final scene, filmed with a drone over the rubble-filled streets of Aleppo, begins with a close-up rising from Waad's feet to a mid-frontal shot of Sama strapped to her mother's chest in a baby carrier. In her hand, Waad holds her camera. The scene then cuts to an overhead shot of Waad and Sama walking down the street, before panning upwards to show the city in ruins. These shots encapsulate the protagonist's combined role of mother and witness and reflect the dialogue the film establishes between the personal and the public, the individual or family story and the story of the Syrian Civil War.



Image 3. *For Sama* promotional poster. (Source: <https://www.imdb.com>)

The films analysed here construct historical discourses through individuals who are positioned as enunciating agents. They explore the construction of memory outside the totalising schemes characteristic of classical documentary cinema, based on an *open voice*, an enunciative perspective that proposes “a different conception of the world, one in which reality may be unknowable, characters ineffable, and events follow one another without resolution” (Plantinga, 1997: 108). Pablo Piedras (2014) suggests that the shift made in contemporary documentary filmmaking towards the first-person perspective has changed its ways of representing others, facilitating “a politics of identity based on dialogue

between minorities and their neighbours, establishing an ethics of inter-subjective contact over the certainties provided by the totalising explanatory systems of the world” (2014: 233-234). The status of Emad and Waad as protagonist-subjects vests each of their stories with a guarantee of truth, based not on epistemic certainty but on the subjectivity of their personal experience. As René Jara (1986) suggests in relation to testimonial literature:

The view of the vanquished and the voiceless, more than serving as testimony to a defeat or to some act of heroism, draws on the pain and noise of the battle to outline a project for the future. They know that the archives of humanity are always more complete than the compilations of the most ambitious historiographies. (1986: 2)

Moreover, this locus of enunciation eschews any possibility of a sensationalist tone that turns the pain of others into “a form of media spectacle” that “causes laughter and enjoyment rather than distress or outrage” (Ahmed, 2015: 66). Instead it locates the pain and oppression of the protagonists and their communities on terrain that interpellates us, inviting us to transform our outrage into a stimulus for hope through resistance. It uses words, but also—and above all—the bodies themselves, understanding cinematic narrative in terms of the affective power and performativity of the images (Soto Calderón, 2020).

Waad Al-Kateab has described her filming process as a way of getting involved as an activist, and that she trusts that her material could be used not only to raise public awareness, but also as support for future legal proceedings (Al-Kateab in Hasday, 2019). The film has won or been nominated for several awards, including Best Documentary at Cannes in 2019, several BAFTAs in the UK in 2020 and an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary Feature Film. It has also been broadcast on several TV networks and has been available for several years on the Netflix streaming platform.

In the case of *5 Broken Cameras*, the scope of its distribution was always based on a strategic objective to expose the human rights violations being committed in the West Bank and to challenge political assumptions in the public sphere in order to win new allies for the Palestinian cause (Robbins, 2012). The documentary received significant international attention, with screenings at numerous festivals and awards at the Amsterdam International Documentary Festival (IDFA), Cinéma du Réel, the Sundance Festival, and the Emmy Awards, as well as receiving an Oscar nomination for Best Documentary Feature Film. It was released in cinemas in several countries and has also been released on DVD and broadcast on television (IMDB, n.d.).

FROM VIDEO ACTIVIST FOOTAGE TO CINEMATIC CO-AUTHORSHIP

Emad Burnat did not consider the possibility of using his video footage for a film until 2009, when he contacted Guy Davidi—an Israeli activist and documentary maker whom he met at the demonstrations in B’ilin—to ask for help to make a documentary. Emad had no specific training in filmmaking or photography; he was a simple villager who used his various video cameras to record a first-person account of the conflict in his homeland and how it affected his community. Davidi, who had just finished a documentary about the water crisis in the West Bank, initially had doubts about whether it was worthwhile to embark on another documentary about a conflict that had already been the subject of several films and television reports. However, he realised that the personal perspective that could be constructed out of the archival material and Emad’s presence as co-director and protagonist offered the possibility of a powerfully different approach to the topic (Kostrz, 2016).

With the almost 800 hours of footage that Emad had gathered, they embarked on the ardu-

ous task of defining the film from among so many possibilities, in a process of editing and screenwriting that took several years. For the first stage, Davidi took the footage home to view, to test possibilities with the editing and to try out a few ideas for the film's structure, in a process that lasted two years. During this time, Emad continued to film new events in the conflict, which was becoming increasingly intense. They then worked together editing and defining the script, in a stage that included writing the voice-over narration. Finally, in a third stage of editing, they worked together for a month in Paris with French editor Véronique Lagoarde-Ségot (Robbins, 2012).

Initially, Emad was opposed to the idea of a first-person approach, as he was uncomfortable with placing so much focus on himself as the filmmaker: "The struggle of the Palestinian people is a collective struggle, and I was afraid that this decision would not be understood by the Palestinians, that it would be perceived as a desire to put myself first" (Burnat, quoted in Kostrz, 2016). But Davidi believed that the only way to create a different film about a conflict that had already received so much media attention was to approach it from the perspective of personal experience.

Similarly, Waad al-Kateab was not thinking about making a feature film when she began filming the footage that would later form part of *For Sama* (BFI, 2020). She was covering the battle of Aleppo as a citizen journalist for the British television network Channel 4,¹ and as a form of video activism. When she left Syria with her videos, Channel 4 put her in contact with the filmmaker Edward Watts, who joined the project as co-director. Watts says they engaged in long discussions to determine the selection of footage for the film. He points out that a strong focus of his contribution was the search for universal themes to define the story: the dilemma of whether to stay or leave, motherhood, etc.

It was a sort of intensely emotional experience, and it also came with a real feeling of responsibility [...]

to do it right, to make sure that these incredible lives that they'd led and the archives she'd gathered would reach people in the way that I felt certain that it could. (Watts, on *Hollywood First Look*, 2019).

Like Emad in *5 Broken Cameras*, Waad did not initially embrace the idea of a personal approach, as she wanted it to be about the people who were fighting, rather than focusing on her as an individual. But later she understood that the stories of her whole community could be told from a personal point of view (Watts, in *Cineuropa*, 2019).

The involvement of the co-director in each case resulted in the transformation of an archive compiled by an individual with no specific training in filmmaking into a film that could connect with a wider audience beyond the community portrayed in the footage. This transformation entailed an understanding of narrative and aesthetic strategies in terms of a testimonial materiality that directly involves the protagonists/directors. The archival footage thus fulfils a function of *monstration* that confronts us with the experience of the conflict through the bodies of the protagonists as witnesses, rather than using testimonial interviews or institutional archives to construct the memory of the events.

It is reasonable to assume that the co-authorship of *5 Broken Cameras* and *For Sama* involved a division of roles related to *monstration* (the production of the footage over the course of several years) and *narration* (editing the footage and defining the structure of the film).² While it is clear that there was more of a dynamic of dialogue and negotiation than a strict division of roles, the interviews analysed seem to suggest that the co-directors from outside the community focused particularly on the development of a dramatic structure and the use of editing to define the discourse and aesthetics of the films, while respecting the point of view of the protagonists.

Comments by Davidi suggest that the co-direction involved differentiated roles and func-

tions that constituted a collaboration, but where the task of editing and definition of the structure and script fell upon him, while the footage was taken by Emad, who is identified as the subject of enunciation in the documentary (Serrano, 2013).

An analysis of the dramatic structure of the films reveals that both adhere quite closely to the classical narrative design described for cinema by scholars and authors of screenwriting guides such as Syd Field (1995) and Robert McKee (2002).³ The graphs below present a breakdown of the structure of the two films analysed, con-

sidering the plot points in relation to the timeline of each film.

Although both documentaries experiment with a first-person archive with the immediacy of those directly experiencing the oppression, each film is constructed using a classical narrative structure with three clearly differentiated acts based on plot points, as well as a mid-point, a climax and a final sequence marking the return to calm. This is a highly significant element of each film, reflecting the transformation of a video activist's record into a work that uses cinematic language to create a new discursivity. As Javier Campo (2015) suggests in the distinction he draws between audiovisual documents and documentary cinema, in the latter the footage is reconfigured

according to cinematic aesthetic parameters that move beyond the level of recording reality. That is, initially images, and then also sounds, which function not only to record reality but also to organise it, modifying it temporally and spatially, fragmenting and altering the events; in short, constructing discourses. (2015: 5)

It is particularly revealing that the script for the voice-over narrated by Emad was written by Davidi (Robbins, 2012). This may raise questions about the extent to which this process serves to affirm the perspective and voice of the protagonist, and how much the external co-director ended up imposing his own point of view. But it also reflects a collective process of transculturation⁴ (Rama, 1982; Pritsch, 2021;2025), establishing a dialogue of subjectivities and knowledges. Determining the authorship of each element within the creative process is difficult when that process involved a collaboration lasting several years. Although it is clear that Emad Burnat was the documentary's principal photographer and that Guy Davidi helped structure and edit it, the film as a whole would not be what it

Image 4. Dramatic structure of 5 Broken Cameras (Source: Author)

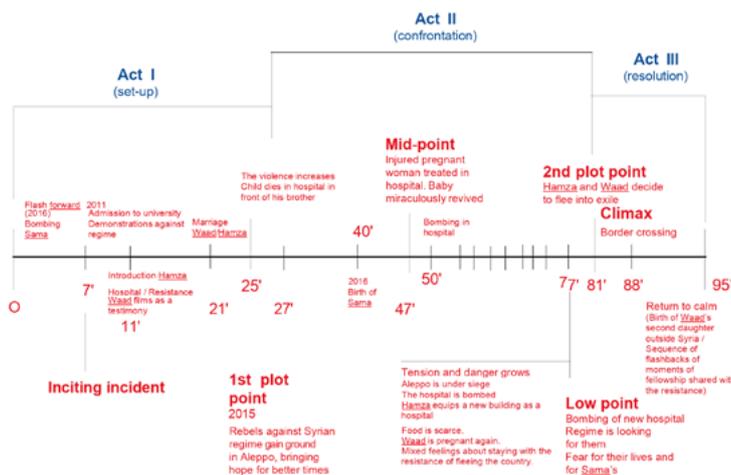
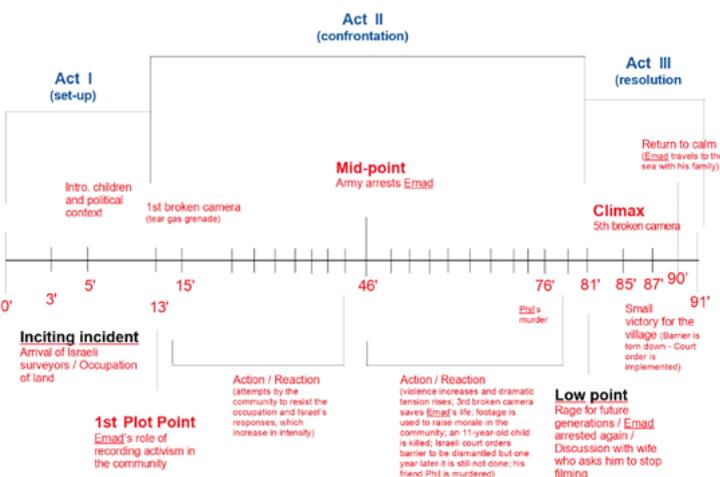


Image 5. Dramatic structure of For Sama (Source: Author)



is without its co-authorial essence, with each perspective complementing the other to create to a personal work that at the same time evokes universal themes that have facilitated its impact on international audiences.

If I say that I wrote the text, yes, it is true, but I was inspired by Emad. So there is kind of an atmosphere of doing it together, and that is important for us. [...] I wrote the text, but it is an interpretation of him [Emad]. [...] It was something we did together over several years. (Davidi, quoted in Robbins, 2012a).

In his essay on collaborative forms of documentary film, Jay Ruby (1991) suggests that although most documentary makers see filmmaking as a way of expressing their perspective on the world they live in, many have sought to convey the perspective of the social actors featured in their work, assuming the role of giving a voice to the voiceless, those excluded from the means of film production. Ruby argues that films made collaboratively or by the subjects themselves are significant because they represent a different approach to the dominant practice, whereby certain minorities traditionally excluded from the “control of the means for imaging the world” are given the chance to express their point of view (1991: 50). As the ability of those in dominant social positions to represent oppressed and marginalised minorities is being met with increased scepticism (in a shift associated with decolonial processes), some theorists and filmmakers have found a possible solution in autobiographies or personal films in which “the self and the other become intertwined” (1991: 52). Between the two extremes of representing communities from a hegemonic perspective and documentaries made by the communities themselves, Ruby posits the possibility of

a third voice: an amalgam of the maker’s voice and the voice of the subject, blended in such a manner as to make it impossible to discern which voice dominates the work. In other words, films where outsider and insider visions coalesce into a new perspective. (1991: 62)

The co-authorship process in the films analysed has also entailed a change to the mode of production, with the involvement of professional production studios that included working with editors, the composition of original music, audio-visual post-production, and—once the films were completed—worldwide distribution plans, with a focus on participation in festivals, international marketing and deals with streaming platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

Both *5 Broken Cameras* and *For Sama* were created out of footage filmed by their protagonists over several years, resulting in archives made as a form of video activism in response to the situation of oppression being experienced in their respective communities. This material was used on several occasions by different international media outlets in their coverage of these conflicts. When the creative process evolved into the production of a documentary film, the footage previously used for television reports or in community screenings was reconfigured as raw material for the creation of a different type of aesthetic form and language.

The use of a first-person testimonial approach is undoubtedly an identifying feature of both films analysed, distinguishing them from other documentaries made about the same conflicts. As viewers, the way we become immersed in the lives of Emad and Waad and their respective communities elicits a much more empathetic and heartfelt response, as in each case we connect to an intimate, first-person viewpoint. This approach in turn allows a deeper and more sensitive treatment of the problems experienced, quite distinct from the approaches of productions taking external perspectives. The collaborative creation of these films and the cinematic language they use grew out of video activism as a form of grassroots resistance and culminated in the production of creative documentaries that have had an exceptional international impact.

THE COLLABORATIVE CREATION OF THESE FILMS AND THE CINEMATIC LANGUAGE THEY USE GREW OUT OF VIDEO ACTIVISM AS A FORM OF GRASSROOTS RESISTANCE AND CULMINATED IN THE PRODUCTION OF CREATIVE DOCUMENTARIES

It is unlikely that these films would have enjoyed such success without the collaboration of co-directors from outside the communities they portray, whose background and training as filmmakers enabled them to combine the personal perspective of their protagonists with solid narrative structures and aesthetic treatments resulting in films that have gained worldwide attention.⁵

Although over the course of film history there have been different points of resistance against hegemonic representations, in the 21st century new forms of democratisation have arisen with the development of new technologies that have lowered costs and facilitated wider access to the means of film production. However, access to film equipment alone does not guarantee a successful film, much less the possibility of achieving a level of visibility that goes beyond the limits of the local community to bring the discourses the film constructs into the public sphere.

The more than 500 hours of raw footage taken over several years by the protagonists of these two films—with no specific training or experience in filmmaking—would never on their own constitute a documentary film capable of reaching audiences as large and diverse as they ultimately did. The possibility of subaltern⁶ subjects constructing cinematic discourses to convey their own perspectives on the oppression they suffer in their communities constitutes an original response to the numerous productions that have been made on the same geopolitical situations by filmmakers

looking in from the outside. The involvement of Guy Davidi and Edward Watts as co-directors had a substantial impact on the development of these films, using their knowledge of the resources and potentialities of cinematic language to articulate the personal perspective of their protagonists/directors.

The rawness, urgency and immediacy of their testimony is evident in the footage filmed and the events experienced by Emad and Waad. But that footage found its cinematic form in the editing process, in a space of dialogue and collaboration with individuals who do not belong to the protagonists' world, who acted as mediators to create films that could connect with audiences outside B'ilin and Aleppo, respectively. In this process, each external co-director has had to work with a meticulous respect for the point of view of his protagonist/director responsible for gathering several years' worth of material.

The external co-director thus played a mediating role between the subjective gaze of the protagonist/director and the possibility of connecting with a wider audience, enriching the film with his experience and knowledge of cinematic language, articulating the personal, subjective perspective of its protagonist with a structured narrative and universal themes.

The experience of co-authorship in the documentaries analysed here seems to offer an interesting mode in which the gazes and voices of subaltern subjects historically excluded from film production can be seen and heard in the public sphere and their symbolic, social and political meanings can be debated on a global level.

NOTES

1 In 2016, the British program *Channel 4 News* asked Waad to make a series of reports titled "Inside Aleppo". She would subsequently win an international Emmy Award for these videos, which have received more than 500 million views online (Lahalle, 2019).

- 2 André Gaudreault and Francois Jost (1995) posit that the process whereby a film establishes its discourse includes two basic layers of narrativity: *monstration*, the result of the joint work of staging and framing that articulates the various frames to form shots; and *narration*, resulting from the editing, which articulates the various shots to form sequences (1995: 63). The authors suggest that these two layers of narrativity presuppose and correspond to two different agents: the *film monstrator* and the *film narrator* (1995: 64). They argue that “on a higher level, the voice of these two agents would actually be modulated and regulated by the overarching agency of the *film mega-narrator*, responsible for the ‘mega-narrative’ that is the film” (idem.).
- 3 Field proposes the idea of the *paradigm*, a conceptual scheme for explaining the elements of classical narrative structure. The structure is comprised of three acts (set-up, confrontation and resolution) which are separated by “plot points”, events that radically change the direction of the action. The set-up (or first act) introduces the protagonist and ends with the event that serves as the plot point leading to the development of the conflict in the second act. The protagonist then faces a series of obstacles to the satisfaction of their dramatic needs. This second act ends with a crisis point or low point preceding a second plot point that will give rise to the resolution in the third act. On the other hand, McKee (2002) proposes the notion of the *archplot* to refer to the classical narrative design based on principles that can be recognised in the ancient epics, drawing on the Aristotelian three-act model. Other plot points discussed by these authors include the *inciting incident*, an event located in the first act that upsets the balance of the protagonist’s ordinary world, establishing the need to solve the main problem of the story; the *midpoint*, or point of no return, which connects the development of the conflict in the second act; and the *climax*, the moment of greatest dramatic tension, located in the third act, where the protagonist’s objectives clash with antagonistic forces to achieve a resolution.
- 4 Taking up the concept of *transculturation* proposed by Fernando Ortiz (1978), referring to a process that combines qualities of two cultures, abandoning features of the original culture and taking on elements of an external culture, Ángel Rama coins the term *narrative transculturators* to describe writers who engage in a process of selecting, discarding and combining to construct a culture that at the same time is based on and distinct from both their own culture and a foreign culture (Rama, 1982: 47). In previous studies, I have proposed the category of *transculturating cinema* to describe films which, although the filmmaker does not belong to the subaltern contexts represented in them, adopt an approach focusing on the points of view of these subjects, combined with the director’s own perspective (Pritsch, 2025: 134).
- 5 While this article was being written, the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature Film was awarded to *No Other Land* (Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal, Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, 2024), a film that also deals with the conflict in the West Bank, in this case in the occupied region of Masafer Yatta. Like *5 Broken Cameras*, it is a documentary identified as a collaboration between Palestinian and Israeli filmmakers, beginning as a video activist project that provided the material for a feature-length documentary. Its success at the Oscars has given this documentary a very significant level of worldwide visibility in the context of a conflict that has become increasingly violent in recent years, affecting the lives of tens of thousands of people and displacing entire communities.
- 6 *Subaltern* refers here to those excluded from the spaces of power in society, for reasons of class, race, gender or sexual identity, among others (Gramsci, 1981; Spivak, 1998; Guha, 2002).

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FROM VIDEO ACTIVISM TO COLLABORATIVE CREATIVE DOCUMENTARY: CO-AUTHORSHIP IN 5 BROKEN CAMERAS AND FOR SAMA

Abstract

This paper presents case studies of two documentaries made in the last decade that arose out of the video activism of their protagonists, who, after several years of gathering footage, sought out external co-directors from outside their communities to help them create a documentary feature film. The films in question are *5 Broken Cameras* (Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, 2012) and *For Sama* (Waad Al-Kateab and Edward Watts, 2019), which deal with two extremely important contemporary social conflicts: the territorial dispute in the West Bank and the Syrian Civil War. These films are analysed here in relation to their processes of discursive production, the narrative and aesthetic elements involved in the transition from video activism to documentary film production, their enunciative perspectives and their processes of collaborative creation.

Key words

Video Activism; Documentary Cinema; Collaborative Creation; Co-Authorship; Testimony; First-Person Documentary; 5 Broken Cameras; For Sama.

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DEL VIDEOACTIVISMO AL DOCUMENTAL DE CREACIÓN COLABORATIVO. CO-AUTORÍA EN 5 CÁMARAS ROTAS Y PARA SAMA

Resumen

En este trabajo propongo el estudio de caso de dos films documentales de la última década, surgidos a partir de una práctica videoactivista de sus protagonistas que en una etapa avanzada del rodaje sumaron a co-directores externos a la comunidad para construir un largometraje de cine documental. Se trata de *5 cámaras rotas* (Emad Burnat y Guy Davidi, 2012) y *Para Sama* (Waad Al-Kateab y Edward Watts, 2019), que abordan conflictos sociales de enorme actualidad como la disputa territorial en Cisjordania y la guerra civil en Siria. Me interesa analizar estos films en relación con sus procesos de producción social de sentido, los elementos narrativos y estéticos implicados en el pasaje del videoactivismo al cine documental de creación, sus perspectivas enunciativas y sus procesos de creación colaborativa.

Palabras clave

Videoactivismo; Cine Documental; Creación Colaborativa; Co-autoría; Testimonio; Documental en Primera Persona; *5 Cámaras Rotas*; *Para Sama*.

Autor

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THEATRICALITY AND ANTITHEATRICALITY IN ROBERT BRESSON'S *MOUCHETTE*

ALFONSO HOYOS MORALES

The human is indissolubly linked with imitation: a human being only becomes human at all by imitating other human beings.

Adorno, 1978: 154

INTRODUCTION

Robert Bresson's distinctive view of film performers—whom he famously referred to as “models”—is widely known.¹ The French filmmaker develops an entire theory around them in his *Notes on the Cinematographer* (2006), and he returns insistently to the subject in almost all his interviews. A matter of central importance to Bresson himself, it has likewise become a key theme for his commentators in the secondary literature.²

However, Robert Bresson's notion of the model cannot be reduced to what Colin Burnett has called a mere “market alternative” (2017: 175) to the classical film actor. What lies behind it is instead an anthropological conception of the human being grounded in a critique of theatricality as a “moral” condition of the individual. The anthro-

pological reality of the “theatrical” person is that of *seeming* rather than *being* (Bresson, 2006: 25). Nevertheless, the way Bresson explores this antitheatrical stance throughout his films is far from uniform. As is evident in *Mouchette* (Robert Bresson, 1967), he is able to reintroduce a certain sense of theatricality that does not contradict the moral and aesthetic principles of his antitheatricality. *Mouchette*, a character caught in a constant tension over the construction of her identity, is immersed in a network of imitation and representation that, paradoxically, defines her very nature.

This article demonstrates how film analysis and gesture analysis are inseparable from their philosophical interpretation, and how both can contribute to clarifying Bresson's notion of the model, as well as the cinematic and ethical dimensions of antitheatricality.

I. THEATRICALITY AND ANTITHEATRICALITY

I.1 The Actor and the Model

The distinction between the actor and the model is grounded in the dialectic of *seeming* and *being*. The actor inhabits the realm of *seeming* and can never fully *be* anything. “The actor: ‘It’s not me you are seeing and hearing, it’s the other man.’ But being unable to be wholly the other, he is not that other” (Bresson, 1977: 24). The actor is always double: on the one hand, he is himself—Humphrey Bogart, for instance (Shaviro, 1993: 245)—with all the accumulated aura of his stardom; on the other, he is the character he embodies in a given film—Rick Blaine, Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade—and yet he is never *fully* any of them. This is what Jefferson Kline calls the *inherent intertextuality* of the actor (Kline, 2011: 307; Sebbag, 1989: 5), which the semiotic virginity of Bresson’s *model* precludes from the outset.

One of Bresson’s cardinal rules was never to use the same model twice in his films.³ With this rule, Bresson sought on the one hand to avoid the actor’s inherent duplicity and representational nature derived from the theatre (Bresson, 2006: 23), and on the other to guard against the kind of “disenchantment” that afflicts anyone who imposes discipline upon his own actions (Bresson, 2006: 71). Actors, subjected to the discipline of both their own perception and the perception of others, exist only through projection; they are dependent on the spectator’s gaze. This dependence recalls one of the fundamental features of theatricality: “the quality that a gaze confers upon a person (or in exceptional cases upon an object or an animal) who exhibits himself while being aware of being seen, in the course of a game of deception or pretence” (Cornago, 2005: 3). In cinema, that gaze becomes the eye of the camera: “For an actor, the camera is the eye of the public” (Bresson, 1977: 48). Conversely, the model is closed, and as such “does not enter into communication

with the outside world except unawares” (Bresson, 1977: 51). What is distinctive about Bresson’s view here is that this “theatrical” component is not merely a matter of artistic form but extends into the moral dimension of the individual. The worst thing about actors is not just that they act in films, but that “even in life [they are] actors” (Bresson quoted in Godard & Delahaye, 1966: 34). The model, therefore, is not merely an artistic alternative to theatrical acting—as the “modernist” argument about the specificity of the medium suggests (Pipolo, 2010: 11)—but rather an anthropological alternative with an aesthetic dimension.

ACTORS, SUBJECTED TO THE DISCIPLINE OF BOTH THEIR OWN PERCEPTION AND THE PERCEPTION OF OTHERS, EXIST ONLY THROUGH PROJECTION; THEY ARE DEPENDENT ON THE SPECTATOR’S GAZE

The model is not defined merely by being a non-professional actor,⁴ but must completely avoid all the gestures and habits associated with performative mimesis: “It is not a matter of acting ‘simple’ or acting ‘inward’ but of not acting at all” (Bresson, 1977: 49); “To your models: ‘You must not play either somebody else or yourself. You must not play anyone’” (2006: 54). However, far from the improvisation or “naturalness” characteristic of documentary cinema, the model must repeat the same gestures and words dozens of times, in strict adherence to Bresson’s instructions, generally concerning rhythm or tone. The purpose of this repetition is to achieve the automatic execution of the gesture, stripped of any psychological connotation typical of classical acting (2006: 64), thereby turning each gesture and word into something purely mechanical and unconscious—an essential dimension repeatedly emphasised in *Notes on the Cinematographer* (2006: 24, 37, 48, 85).

This automatism and its consequent elimination of motivational intentionality completely preclude the “projection”, and with it the real or virtual gaze that constitutes theatricality. Models must not speak to anyone other than themselves: “To your models: ‘Speak as if you were speaking to yourself.’ Monologue instead of dialogue” (2006: 66). This performative dimension concerns not only the relationship between Bresson and his actors/models but also the very nature of his fictional characters, who for the most part are young, naïve individuals who act under the influence of forces that remain mysterious even to themselves (Hoyos, 2023).

1.2. The Model and the Antitheatrical Tradition

Although the antitheatrical dimension described by Bresson can be directly linked to modernist projects in Soviet cinema,¹ the *Bressonian* project becomes clearer when considered in light of the aesthetic sensibility that prevailed in what Michael Fried calls the antitheatrical tradition of 18th-century France, although it can actually be found throughout Europe and even in certain 19th-century authors. This tradition emerged as a reaction against Rococo art and was grounded in a particular notion of “truth” and “nature.” In this sense, its aesthetic orientation, as in Bresson’s case, carried an implicitly moralising tone. Thus, terms such as *naïveté* as described by Diderot (1959: 824), *ingenuity* in Schiller (1985: 78), the *grace* of the mindless marionettes in von Kleist (1988),⁵ or the shrewd innocence of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* (1996) appeal to both aesthetic and moral dimensions, and find their opposites in affectation, pomp, artificiality, or ultimately, theatricality. Bresson’s filmography can be understood not only as a clear heir to this aesthetic tradition but also as its modern continuation in a medium particularly suited to achieving its aspirations. The mechanical, automatic nature inherent in the ontology of film, together with its association with

automatism in human gestures, make cinema the ideal medium for fulfilling the desire of antitheatrical sensibility “to show the world without being seen” (Soto, 2010: 205).

Although Michael Fried focuses his notion of theatricality exclusively on the analysis of the work of art, his conception also carries moral connotations (Pippin, 2005; Gough, 2013). In a manner similar to Cornago’s definition outlined above (2005), Fried defines a work of art as theatrical when its very essence depends on the relationship it establishes with the spectator. The theatrical object possesses a constitutive dependence: to be complete, it requires the gaze of the other, just as the actor needs the audience’s gaze in order to exist. In this sense, Fried’s critique refers not to an ontological dimension of the object—since every work of art is made to be looked at—but to an aesthetic dimension: the object gives the impression of being made for the gaze of the other. In other words, theatricality is not a descriptive judgment but an evaluative one.

In opposition to this dependence on the spectator, Fried proposes *presentness*,⁶ which refers to an autonomy of the object that does not require the temporal unfolding of the spectator’s observation in order to stand as a work of art (Fried, 2004). Absorption, a term drawn from phenomenology, as developed in his text *Absorption and Theatricality* (1988), is a specific form of this “presentness”, which Fried defines as “the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or (as I prefer to say) absorbed in what he or she is doing, hearing, thinking, feeling” (1988: 10). This definition, which refers to a psychological state, points to a mode of representation in the physiognomic expression of such states that Fried suggests is common in 18th-century French painting, in artists such as Van Loo, Greuze, and especially Chardin (Images 1 and 2), for whom Bresson had great admiration.⁸

The figures depicted by these artists and the characters in Bresson’s films share this same ab-



Images 1, 2 and 3

sorption, which manifests itself in their intimate engagement in an action with their corresponding unawareness both of the immediate context and of the spectator who observes them (Image 3). Both kinds of figures seem to exist as if they were not being looked at, as if they did not need that gaze in order to exist, at least consciously. However, their unawareness should not be understood as a mere secret they are hiding from the spectator; rather, due to their ingenuousness, they themselves do not know the reason for their actions. They are ignorant of themselves, like the children in Chardin's paintings, Balthazar's donkey, or Dostoevsky's idiot.

The question of theatricality has various consequences that can be considered to help define the concept explored here. On the one hand, it possesses an aesthetic dimension that can be called *exhibitive*, referring to the fact that an object appears to need a third party—the observer—in order to exist. On the other hand, there is a second, specifically anthropological dimension that is crucial for understanding the development of Bresson's protagonist (Mouchette), which can be called her *performative* dimension. As Fischer-Lichte notes, theatricality is also an "instinct for metamorphosis and transformation" (2014: 11); in other words, it signals a creative drive to become something other than what one already is—something that, as other authors have

observed (Pickett, 2017: 5), forms part of a moral impulse inherent in the human being. This transformation of the self thus requires an outward movement and an awareness of one's own possibilities for action. The gaze of the "other", whether concrete or abstract, is in turn the potential that guides me toward becoming something different from what I already am. In this sense, the *performative* dimension aligns with the *exhibitive* one. The instinct for transformation depends on my awareness of being observed (even if only by myself), and on the recognition that I could be observed in different ways. The actor, by taking on a role, reproduces these two dimensions; similarly, Mouchette, in her attempt to "fit in", performs certain roles with the aim of being seen in a particular way.

THE FIGURES DEPICTED BY THESE ARTISTS AND THE CHARACTERS IN BRESSON'S FILMS SHARE THIS SAME ABSORPTION, WHICH MANIFESTS ITSELF IN THEIR INTIMATE ENGAGEMENT IN AN ACTION WITH THEIR CORRESPONDING UNAWARENESS BOTH OF THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND OF THE SPECTATOR WHO OBSERVES THEM

The authenticity, naturalness, or ingenuousness sought by both Bresson and the authors of the antitheatrical tradition is associated with a conception of human nature that is both anti-exhibitive and anti-performative. In other words, antitheatricality functions as both an aesthetic criterion and an anthropological approach. Absorption is at once an unawareness of the spectator or observer and an unawareness of one's own capacity to step outside oneself and thus to transform.

As will be shown below, this is a common and essential feature of all Bressonian characters. On the one hand, the model-person—the “actor” in the true sense—performs gestures and utters words without fully understanding why, guided only by the filmmaker's directions. On the other hand, the model-character also acts without fully understanding his or her reasons. Michel does not know exactly why he steals, even though he offers rationalisations that camouflage his true lack of awareness; Marie does not know what draws her to Gérard, just as we do not know why Yvon transforms from a family man into a murderer. The case of the donkey Balthazar is even more radical, since the fact he is an animal ontologically precludes any form of theatricality in either of the two senses discussed above.

The consequence of the antitheatrical philosophy is a certain anthropological stasis. Insofar as only what is done “automatically” is considered authentic or true, intention is dismissed as an unfaithful representative of what we are, deemed “theatrical” and therefore false. For Bresson, our true nature as human beings remains an enigma to us, and all attempts at self-transformation are nothing more than hopelessly false simulations. Our inner life cannot be exhibited and, consequently, it cannot be freely manipulated by the will.

Although Bresson often shows a preference for young characters, *Mouchette* is his only film in which the protagonist is a child. At first glance,

this choice might seem to fit perfectly with this moral archetype of antitheatricality. However, as will be shown below, many of this child's actions and attitudes can be classified as “theatrical”, as they involve modes of action that presuppose a projection towards the existence of a third party, at times even reaching the point of hyperbole, as Jean Semolué points out: “Some have been surprised that a Bressonian character should display so many intense and varied emotions; they have considered that, in this case, Bresson was highlighting a true actress's nature” (1993: 155).

The complexity of this character is inherent in the complexity of the anthropological development of the human being at this stage of life. While childhood may seem a particularly “authentic” or “genuine” age, education necessarily imposes a process of adaptation to a set of social norms, which in turn requires imitation and comparison with various roles (classmates, teachers, parents), and thus, theatricality. The tension in the construction of *Mouchette*, as will be shown below, lies in her inability to participate freely in this imitative network. The child's “authenticity” is inseparable from her “inauthenticity”, i.e., her constant desire to be something other than what she yet is. As Adorno notes: “insistence on the truth about oneself, that shows again and again, even in the first conscious experiences of childhood, that the impulses reflected upon are not quite ‘genuine’. They always contain an element of imitation, of play, wanting to be different” (1978: 153). The “absorption” we witness in *Mouchette* is the short circuit between the nature to which she wishes to belong and her inability to do so because of her social circumstances. There is theatricality in *Mouchette*, but it is always a failed attempt, precisely because her truth is still in the process of being realised. As will be explored below, *Mouchette*'s supposed theatricality fits perfectly with the antitheatrical ideal, since what Bresson portrays is a character utterly absorbed in her effort to step outside herself, yet unable to do so.



Image 4

2. THE ANTITHEATRICALITY OF THE THEATRICAL: THE CASE OF MOUCHETTE

2.1. Trapped in the Editing

Bresson described to perfection one of the defining traits of the main character: “Mouchette’s terror resembles the terror of a trapped animal” (Bresson, 2015: 246). This sense of entrapment can be perceived at every level of the film, including both narrative and formal levels. The first sequence after the credits establishes the analogy that will function as a portrait of Mouchette and her fate. An opening of Bresson’s own invention (absent from Bernanos’s novel on which the film is based), it does not introduce us directly to the protagonist like Bresson does in his previous films. Instead, she is presented between two long sequences that introduce the film’s two conflicts. The first is the conflict between Mathieu and Arsène, which itself is a twofold conflict: Mathieu, the village’s official gamekeeper, represents society and order, while Arsène, the poacher, lives in a cabin in the forest and embodies marginality; they also compete for the affection of Louisa, the barmaid, who is barely mentioned in Bernanos’s novel but is especially important to the film’s development of Mouchette’s character, as will be shown below. The second sequence introduces us to the illicit work of Mouchette’s father and brother, who smuggle alcohol into the village bar.

The character of Mouchette appears in between these two sequences, a gaunt figure walking to school at a slower pace than her classmates, her name revealed only when another girl shouts it (Image 4). Her image serves merely as a link between the sequences that introduce the film’s main conflicts because, as Tony Pipolo observes, she lacks the qualities required to drive the narrative forward (2010: 210). As Annette Michelson notes: “The first twenty minutes of *Mouchette* are composed [...] in such a way that seemingly disparate situations, dramatic lines, narrative potentials, and separate identities converge on a central destiny: that of a young girl” (1968: 411). This, then, is Mouchette’s reality: caught in the middle of stories that are not hers, her efforts to find a place in either of them thwarted.

2.2 Trapped between Childhood and Adulthood

Mouchette’s identity is suspended in a world that excludes her, where she can be neither fully a child nor fully an adult. Although she is still of school age, the second scene in which she appears shows her caring for her dying mother. When her father comes home, he lies down on the bed and begins to play with his cap, pretending it is a steering wheel (Image 5). In this way, play—which would be more appropriate to Mouchette given her age—that is taken from her and appropriated by her father, while

Image 5





Images 6 and 7

she is shown having to bear the responsibility of caring for both her mother and her baby brother.

And yet she cannot fully embrace the adulthood imposed upon her either. This ambiguity is made evident by means of a formal device in a subsequent scene in the bar. Up to this point, the only waitress shown in the film has been Louisa, the love interest of both Mathieu and Arsène. The sequence begins by focusing solely on a pair of hands at work (Image 6), leading the viewer to assume they are Louisa's. Only at the end, when the camera tilts upwards (Image 7), do we discover that it is Mouchette who has been washing the dishes. This task, clearly an adult's responsibility, is thus incomplete and even fictitious, as it is not associated with

a wage of her own or with the real responsibilities of working life. Upon leaving the bar, she hands the coins she has earned to her father, who in return offers her a small glass of liquor—a gesture that underscores the ambiguity of her position.

Shortly after the bar scene, Mouchette goes to a local fair, in a sequence that does not appear in the novel, where she rides the bumper cars. The scene unfolds to the sound of carnival music and the rhythmic clashing of the cars, marking the first and virtually the only moment in *Mouchette* that conveys a sense of genuine childish joy, including a playful flirtation with a boy with whom she exchanges various glances and smiles (Images 8 and 9).

Images 8 and 9



When the ride ends, Mouchette steps out of the car and shyly approaches the boy, her head lowered. She looks up and smiles, but at that very moment her father grabs her and slaps her twice. Commenting on this scene, Charles Barr suggests that “[i]f [...] there’s a dialectic in Bresson between involvement in the world and withdrawal from it, this section superbly dramatises the impulse to involvement and acceptance” (Ayfre et al., 1969: 120). Before this sequence, and throughout the film, we see another side of Mouchette’s agency beyond her caregiving role. We see her deliberately dirty her clogs in the mud before entering the church, only to be reprimanded by her father with a blow from behind; we see her refuse to sing in class; and later in the film we see her repeatedly throw mud balls at her female classmates who, unlike her, can afford expensive perfumes and flirt freely with the boys.⁹

Mouchette’s behaviour, as evidenced in the bumper car scene, does not stem from an isolation chosen out of an inner spiritual strength. She genuinely wishes to belong, to play and to participate in the erotic dynamics of her age and of her peers. Her rebelliousness is really just an expression of her frustration at being unable to attain what she longs for.

2.3. Isolation and Identification

The development of a character like Louisa, who is not featured in the novel and who is formally identified with the protagonist in the bar scene, serves to underscore the relational component that shapes the young girl’s psychology, as well as her aspirations and frustrated desires.¹⁰ Immediately after the bumper car scene in which Mouchette is slapped by her father, we witness one of the few moments where she is merely a spectator of a situation seemingly external to her. Mouchette is sitting in the bar, still with tears in her eyes after

her father’s blows. Mathieu, seated across from her, gets up and heads for the fair, where he sees Arsène and Louisa on a fairground ride together. He watches them for some time, and Louisa seems to notice his presence. He then returns to the bar and sits down again opposite Mouchette. “He’s making a fool of you,” another man at the bar tells him. “Who?” he asks. “Arsène,” responds the man. “I’ll get him,” Mathieu replies. The camera, however, focuses less on Mathieu’s face than on Mouchette’s attentive reaction, as she looks from side to side, fully absorbed in the conversation and the unfolding drama from which she has been excluded before even being able to take part (Image 10). As Paul Adams Sitney points out, Louisa “is able to enjoy the fair publicly with her lover, but Mouchette is brutally humiliated and stopped before even speaking to a boy who was attracted to her in the bumper cars” (2011: 146). Louisa, who never directly interacts with Mouchette at any point in the film (a fact that further accentuates the protagonist’s status as a pure spectator of her own desire), serves as a model to identify with and imitate. She embodies adulthood and the sexual world to which Mouchette cannot aspire. As Joseph Mai suggests, Bresson “has trapped Mouchette in a web of imitation in which she literally takes Louisa’s place” (2007: 38).

Image 10





Images 11 and 12

As Sitney argues, Mouchette's attraction to Arsène may indeed involve a kind of transference of sexual value stemming from his success with Louisa (2011). Yet this attraction also arises from her identification with Arsène's marginalised condition. When he confesses that he may have killed a man, instead of shocking her, it seems to elicit even greater sympathy from her; she urges him to tell her everything so that she can help: "I hate them. I'll stand up to them all." Later, after Arsène's epileptic fit and Mouchette's soothing lullaby, she even declares with hyperbolic intensity: "I'd rather die than hurt you." Arsène approaches her and asks: "Why are you so afraid of hurting me?" He moves closer to her; Mouchette looks at him with her mouth slightly open, her bag slipping from her hands. Arsène seizes her arm and begins to chase her around the small cabin. Mouchette hides under a table, like a small animal, but Arsène finds her and throws himself upon her.

What at first appear to be gestures of resistance soon turn into an intimate and forceful embrace (Images 11 and 12).

Much has been written about this ambiguous and controversial sequence. Rancière, for instance, describes Mouchette's surrender as "a very conventional means of representing the transition from pain to pleasure" (2012: 49). Conversely, Taylor interprets it as an act of resignation in the face of her powerlessness in the situation (Taylor, 2019). Miguel Gaggiotti (2023b), on the other hand, finds an operative dimension in Mouchette's gesture and, citing Elena del Río (2008: 38–39), conceives it as a device that reveals the power of performance to transform the meaning of a situation. What begins as a rape scene is, through the embrace, transformed into an encounter between two lovers.

This last interpretation of the scene seems to be reinforced later, when Mouchette declares to Mathieu and his wife: "Mr. Arsène's my lover." This assertion may seem absurd both to the spectator and to characters who hear it, yet it can also be understood as Mouchette's way of performatively confirming the genuine nature of her encounter. The initial attraction she felt toward someone as marginalised as herself leads her to interpret what happened as an act of love, in an attempt to draw a parallel with the relationships of the adult world or of those who "belong", like Louisa. When Mouchette calls Arsène her lover, she is speaking of something that is hers, and that possession gives her a place in the world, a sense of belonging to the public realm, with a role in the shared narrative of her village. She thus becomes someone worthy of being desired, worthy of having what others can have: a lover, and in turn, a name, "the lover". To possess a name is to be established in the world, to bring a place out of nothing into being. Children express this longing when they imitate firefighters, police officers, mothers, fathers, or even office workers. Play is, perhaps, longing without sorrow.



Image 13

The tragedy of the film lies precisely in the impossibility of fully enacting the imitative play characteristic of all children, as noted above with reference to Adorno. The inconsistency between Mouchette's mimetic desires and her reality is revealed in her tears after the rape scene. She has experienced something tragic, yet she does not fully grasp it (she lacks the language to name it), and she helplessly tries to give it a positive meaning that might grant her a place in the world. The breakdown between these two states of being—the *in-itself* and the *for-itself*, to use Hegelian terminology—produces the short circuit that afflicts her: the short circuit between adulthood and childhood, civilisation and the wild, communication and silence. The short circuit, ultimately, of her own identity. If Mouchette is someone (or rather, something), she is the very contradiction of the world made flesh through her.

2.4. The Hyperbolic Gesture as Resistance

In an interview with Bresson, Godard asked him about the possibility of redeeming an actor if to do so meant effectively representing him as an actor: “Just as you would take a blacksmith for what he can do, and not to play a notary or a policeman, you could, strictly speaking, choose an actor at least to play an actor” (Godard & Dela-

hay, 1966: 34). Barely a year after that interview, it seems that Bresson took Godard's suggestion into account when he conceived the character of Mouchette.

As noted above, if Mouchette is theatrical it is because her reality drives her to be so as a way of seizing hold of a world that escapes from her faster than she can move to reach it. At the same time, it is a form of resistance, a way of performing a stable identity that might shield her from her vulnerable reality. There are several examples throughout the film of a kind of acting that is much more expressive and even hyper-

bolic than it typical of Bresson's work. One of the first appears in an early scene where Mouchette encounters a couple of boys, probably from her school, who try to provoke her by pulling down their trousers. She glances sideways and turns her head away with a dignified, lofty air, as if attempting, through that gesture, to bestow upon herself a certain sophistication (Image 13).

Mouchette's relationship with Arsène alternates between moments of theatricality and others of childlike obedience. When they first meet in the forest, Arsène asks her what she is doing there, to which she replies: “*Perdu, je me suis perdu!*” in a grandiloquent tone similar to the one she later adopts when declaring that she would rather die than hurt him, as if imitating the histrionics of actresses in melodrama. This contrasts, for example, with her automatic way of obeying Arsène's instructions when she dries her hands by the fire. Her performative inflection of tone becomes even more explicit when she returns to Mathieu's house, ready to be interrogated and to defend Arsène. Her bowed head, timid posture, and downcast eyes immediately change as she assumes the role of witness (Images 14 and 15); she raises her chin and declares “*C'est vrai, oui, monsieur*” with feigned confidence.



Images 14 and 15

The entire scene is charged with an uneasy tension between Mouchette's apparent confidence in her statements and her insecure, uncomfortable body language, with her eyes lowered, as if searching for the right answers, like a child trying to recall a lesson for an exam (Images 1, 2, and 3). The contrived nature of her declarations becomes especially clear in her use of the word "cyclone"—a technical term that even Mathieu seems not to understand—taught to her by Arsène the previous day, which she repeats here mechanically. When questioned about the term, aware that she does not really understand it herself and has merely reproduced it automatically, she glances up and down several times before explaining it simply as "the rain". She is far less self-assured in front of Mathieu's wife, who notices the smell of alcohol on her and threatens to expose her secret. Theatricality here is, once again, a pitiful attempt at resistance in the face of the perpetual hostility of her surroundings.

3. CONCLUSION: BETWEEN PLAY AND DEATH

The film's ending persistently underscores Mouchette's ambivalent condition, suspended between the person she really is and the character she performs. None of this contradicts the under-

lying principles of the Bressonian model. Indeed, one of the essential traits of models is precisely the idea that what is most meaningful in them is "what they do not suspect is in them" (Bresson, 1977: 2). Mouchette, is incapable of fully grasping the contradiction expressed in her. What has been described here as her "theatricality" functions as an automatic self-defence mechanism to protect her against her hostile environment and give her the possibility of surviving it. Yet the protagonist herself never even suspects the true motive behind her actions. She performs naively, as all children do when they imitate.

This contradiction that defines her ultimately finds expression in the famous final sequence, which again operates through a series of contradictory gestures culminating in her death. At first, Mouchette lies down on the dress previously given to her by the so-called "sentinel of the dead" (Image 16). She then looks at the lake and rolls down the slope towards it. At this moment, a noise catches her attention; she rises and waves her hand at a passing tractor, in a gesture that hovers ambiguously between a call for help and a greeting (Images 17 and 18). She soon gives up without having given it much effort or even raised her voice. She then crouches back down and tries rolling down into the lake again, only to be stopped this time by a tangle of branches on the riverbank. Finally,



Images 16, 17 and 18

on the third attempt, she sinks beneath the water, and the film ends, to the sound of Monteverdi's music, with a strange visual loop that keeps the ripples moving on the surface of the lake.

Several authors, such as Barr (1969: 118) and Sitney (2011: 146), have pointed out the absence of any psychological foreshadowing in this scene. Its ambiguity lies in the convergence of two seemingly opposed elements—death and play—sharing the

same setting. The parallel between them resides in the same naivety: the innocence with which Mouchette rolls down the hillside is the same innocence with which she ultimately sinks into the water, and with which she half-heartedly waves to the man on the tractor. Yet this innocence does not suggest a lack of complexity; rather, it hints at her immediate awareness of her actions, which reveals her existential condition: the condition of a hostage caught in conflicts she never chose to be involved in.

This contradiction, which has been explored throughout this article, ultimately defines most of Bresson's characters¹¹ and lies at the heart of his commitment to antitheatricality. Mouchette imitates, she performs, but what we witness is not the performance itself but what lies concealed behind it. If her theatricality contains anything truthful, it is because through it she expresses her own truth as a contradiction not only of herself, but also of the world as it is expressed through her.

This analysis of *Mouchette* not only nuances Robert Bresson's seemingly rigid view of his models but also lays the foundations for a broader, transdisciplinary perspective, as it connects with contemporary debates on authenticity, performativity, and representation, which are key themes in cultural studies that transcend the purely cinematic.¹² What does Bresson teach us about these questions? What relevance do his ethical-aesthetic insights hold today, in an age when such concepts are being challenged or unsettlingly reformulated, as Lipovetsky (2024) suggests in his most recent work? What ethical implications do theatricality and antitheatricality carry for the construction of identity? Although these questions lie beyond the scope of this article, they are implicit in the enduring resonance of Robert Bresson's thought and films. ■

NOTES

- 1 Bresson would not adopt this notion until quite late in his filmmaking career, in 1967 (Mylène Bresson, 2015: 256). Before that, he referred to his performers in various ways, such as “actor–living creature” (in M. Bresson, 2015: 58) or “protagonists” (Weyergans, 1965). Lev Kuleshov (1990; 1994) was the first to develop the concept of the “model” later taken up by other Soviet authors such as Kazanski (1998). Also significant are the studies by Yampolsky (1991) and Albera (1990; 1994). However, although these authors identified the “model” as a concept specific to the cinematic medium, their understanding was itself inspired by theorists of theatre such as Delsarte, Dalcroze, and Meyerhold. As Yampolsky notes, “Kuleshov’s conception of the actor is not distinguished by any great originality, but it is borrowed almost entirely from theatre theory of the 1910s and the beginning of the 1920s” (1991: 31).
- 2 The studies on this question are too extensive to do justice to here; see the literature review by Colin Burnett for *Oxford Bibliographies* (2018).
- 3 There is only one exception to this rule: Arnold in *Au hasard Balthazar* and Arsène in *Mouchette* are both played by the same actor, Jean-Claude Guilbert.
- 4 For the complex range of discussions surrounding the notion of the so-called non-actor, see Miguel Gaggiotti’s *Nonprofessional Film Performance* (2023).
- 5 The text *On the Marionette Theatre*, which Bresson himself referenced and paraphrased as follows: “the more mechanical it is, the more grace takes hold of it” (All About Cinema, 2022)
- 6 The neologism “presentness” is used here to avoid confusion with the term “presence”, which is used as a counterpoint to the former.
- 7 See Gough (2013).
- 8 “A painter I admire greatly is Chardin. Chardin is, without a doubt, someone who seems to take things naturally. He gives no impression of composing. His tables are always placed before you. His objects possess an extraordinary fullness and naturalness” (Bresson quoted in Weyergans, 1965).

- 9 On these scenes, see Brian Price: “What matters is not the faces of the girls but their collective belonging to the social order, their collective identity as proper young girls, and the mud that both violates that identity and defines it by its obvious difference” (2011: 74–75).
- 10 This interpretation follows P. Adams Sitney: “The viewer naturally assumes that he [sic] is watching Louisa, because she is the only person we have seen behind the bar before this. [...] Now it seems to me that that complex and exciting shot embodies a subtle insight into Mouchette’s psychology” (2011: 145).
- 11 “I once said that I chose them for their moral resemblance, but that’s no longer true, because I believe that man—or woman, of course—is too strange, too contradictory, too... for me to know in advance what will come out of them. The more contradictory they seem inwardly, the more they interest me” (in *CITY-ofEGG*, 2021).
- 12 See Egginton (2003), Ackerman & Puchner (2006), Gough (2013), Fischer-Lichte & Arjomand (2014), Pickett (2017) and Quick & Rushton (2019; 2024).

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THEATRICALITY AND ANTITHEATRICALITY IN ROBERT BRESSON'S MOUCHETTE

Abstract

Bresson's concept of the "model" emerges as a reaction against the actor in classical theatre. In Bresson's work, this operates as both an aesthetic and an anthropological question. In his view, theatricality is defined by a person's imitative and projective nature in relation to an observing third party. However, in *Mouchette*, the protagonist engages in a constant game of imitation and projection, whereby her theatricality complements rather than contradicts the complex construction of her identity. This theatricality reflects the imitation characteristic of childhood, marked by the absence of a fully formed personality, while at the same time acting as a form of resistance against a hostile environment that constantly threatens her. Through this film, Bresson explores the tension between Mouchette's imitation and her frustration in a world that denies her the possibility of affirming her identity.

Key words

Robert Bresson; Mouchette; theatricality; antitheatricality; model; actor.

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TEATRALIDAD Y ANTITEATRICALIDAD EN MOUCHETTE DE ROBERT BRESSON

Resumen

El concepto de "modelo" se presenta en Bresson como una reacción al clásico actor teatral. Esto opera en Bresson no sólo como una cuestión estética, sino también antropológica. En su visión, lo teatral se define por el carácter imitativo y proyectivo de una persona en relación a un tercero que la observa. Sin embargo, en *Mouchette*, la protagonista habita un constante juego de imitación y proyección, donde su teatralidad no contradice, sino que complementa, la compleja construcción de su identidad. Esta teatralidad refleja, por un lado, la imitación propia de la infancia, marcada por la ausencia de una personalidad plenamente formada, y, por otro, se presenta como un acto de resistencia frente a un entorno hostil que constantemente la amenaza. A través de su film, Bresson explora la tensión entre esta imitación y la frustración de Mouchette en un mundo que le niega la posibilidad de afirmar su identidad.

Palabras clave

Robert Bresson; Mouchette; teatralidad; antiteatralidad; modelo; actor.

Autor

Alfonso Hoyos Morales (Sevilla, 1995) es doctor en filosofía por la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. Sus líneas de investigación se centran en la fenomenología, la estética y el cine. Ha impartido clases en la Universitat de Barcelona, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona y actualmente en la Universitat de Girona sobre Estética, Filosofía del cine Teoría crítica, etcétera. Es autor de diversos artículos publicados en revistas científicas como *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, *Enrahonar* y *ESPEs*. Próximamente (2026) publicará su tesis doctoral en la editorial Palgrave Macmillan que versa sobre la noción de modelo en Robert Bresson desde una perspectiva fenomenológica.

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INTERACTION, RESISTANCE AND COOPERATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILMED SUBJECT'S ROLE IN AND INFLUENCE ON THEIR FILM*

JUANJO BALAGUER

I. INTRODUCTION: DIALECTICS AND AUTHORSHIP

Studies of documentary films have tended to overlook the active role of the people filmed. The relationship between filmmaker and filmed subject has also rarely been addressed, despite the fact that the creative process of making a documentary involves a complex interaction between them. Brian Winston (2013) has pointed out that filmed subjects are sometimes exploited (whether intentionally or not) in the filmmaking process, while Bill Nichols (2010) has described the frictions that can occur between the two as a result of the imposition of the filmmaker's authorial vision. This can negatively affect the people portrayed and their perception of a story that usually involves a part of their own lives.

Kate Nash (2010) explores this relationship in her study of the documentary *Molly and Mobarak* (2003), noting that filmmaker and filmed subject

have a kind of mutual dependence, as their interaction is characterised by the need to cooperate and the expression of acts of resistance aimed at influencing each other. In this way, Nash identifies a more complex approach to the power relations in documentary creation that eschews visions that serve only the filmmaker's role. From this perspective, a film is understood as a discourse mediated by the different voices that participate in its articulation rather than merely the autonomous expression of the filmmaker's intention.

The notion of the *auteur* as the source of a film's meaning has been central to film criticism, particularly since François Truffaut and the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* began promoting the concept of the *politique des auteurs* in the 1950s. In reaction against this approach are numerous critical revisions that conceive of a film as a dynamic space in which different perspectives and discourses coexist, where the director's position should not be the sole focus

of the analysis (John Caughie, 1981). Similarly rejecting the idea of single authorship, in the 1960s numerous filmmakers began forming groups to work together on collective film productions (Monterrubio, 2016), generally in the field of militant cinema. The same decade was also marked by a number of collaborative filmmaking initiatives that challenged the notion of the *auteur* and the conventional creative process that locates the filmmaker outside the context being filmed in a way that precludes any meaningful interaction with the people on the other side of the camera. This cooperative method recognises the importance of including these people in the construction of the narrative.

Beyond these collective and collaborative perspectives, there are a number of cases in the history of documentary film where people have responded to their own portrayal in a film with an outrage, disappointment or simple indifference that has influenced or altered the filmmaker's vision. Jean-Louis Comolli, who also explores the relationship between filmmaker and filmed subject, proposes an approach that can shed some light on this tension, as he points out that the people portrayed in a documentary confront a duality: "their reality, which we came to film, and the other reality of the film that is being made" (2017: 140).

An emblematic example of the complex relationship between filmmaker and filmed subject can be found in the documentary *The Things I Cannot Change* (Tanya Ballantyne, 1967), produced by the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC). This film portrays the daily life of a Montreal family struggling to get by. Peter K. Wiesner (1992) explains that the exposure of the family's life in this documentary when it was broadcast on television led to their being ridiculed by their neighbours. He also suggests that this experience prompted people working on documentary films to reflect on the ethical consequences of filming and exposing people's private lives. Similarly, Marit Kathryn Corneil (2012) notes that:

In most historical accounts, the debate that arose after the screening of *The Things I Cannot Change* became the seedbed for some ideas concerning a more ethical use of documentary. The most pressing issue was the relationship of the filmmaker to his or her subject (Corneil, 2012: 22).

In an effort to define this problem, Brenda Longfellow (2010) argues that the observational documentary style of *The Things I Cannot Change* resulted in the portrayal of different everyday situations experienced by the family without offering any suggestions for how their condition might be improved. According to Longfellow, the family members "remain objects of a discourse rather than subjects, as recipients of middle-class sympathy (or aversion) and state largesse" (Longfellow, 2010: 163). As Wiesner (1992) points out, to avoid repeating the harm caused by this film in their subsequent initiatives the team behind the NFBC's Challenge for Change program tried to ensure the active participation of the people filmed in the creation process. Longfellow (2010) also makes reference to this shift in focus, describing the redefinition of the power relationship between film crews and communities in the interests of supporting the latter and prioritising their self-representation.

The work of Jorge Sanjinés and Grupo Ukamau demonstrates the relationship of mutual influence between filmmakers and their filmed subjects. As detailed in his book (1979), Sanjinés and this film collective developed an approach to filmmaking aimed at creation in collaboration with the community. This approach necessarily entailed a learning process, as Sanjinés points out in relation to one of Grupo Ukamau's first films, *Blood of the Condor* (Yawar Mallku, 1969). In an interview with Ignacio Ramonet in 1977 (included in the aforementioned book), Sanjinés describes an evolution that began with this film, which did not achieve the expected result and was not well received by the target audience, i.e. the rural Indigenous population. For Sanjinés, the problem was

cultural and reflected the need to find a language in consonance with the “collectivist culture” (1979: 155) of that community. Sanjinés contrasts the reception of *Blood of the Condor* with that of *The Principal Enemy* (Jatun auka, 1974), a subsequent film that benefited from substantial community participation. A few years earlier, the evolution of Grupo Ukamau had also led to the production of *The Night of San Juan* (El coraje del pueblo, 1971), a film in which the community had also participated directly.

In another interview (with Pedro Arellano Fernández and Graciela Yépez in 1977, also published in the book), Sanjinés discusses this evolution again, this time with reference to the film *Get Out of Here!* (¡Fuera de aquí!, 1977). This film’s positive reception contrasts with previous experiences in which the community had understood the narrative as a discourse “looking in from the outside or down from above” (Sanjinés, 1979: 144). For the Bolivian director, this evolution demonstrates that they had managed to develop “a language consistent with Andean culture” (Sanjinés, 1979: 144). This involved a change to Grupo Ukamau’s filmmaking approach, with significant implications for the cinematic language and expressive strategies used to articulate the film:

We believe that the way to make a film should be the result of very careful observation of the culture of a community. We thus also began to feel, for example, that close-ups were an obstacle to a clear understanding of our purpose. We noticed that formally the film removed them from reality, created an obstacle for them. That is why we now use long shots, wide shots (Sanjinés, 1979: 155).

Dennis Hanlon (2010) explores the shift in Grupo Ukamau’s cinematic aesthetics, suggesting that after the screening of *Blood of the Condor* (1969), Jorge Sanjinés probably recognised the use of the hegemonic cinematic language in the film, especially close-ups and elliptical narrative structures (Hanlon, 2010), techniques that he would therefore subsequently reject. According

to Hanlon, the filmmaker transformed his technical approach in an effort to adopt an Indigenous perspective and aesthetic. This meant avoiding certain elements that had been present in *Blood of the Condor* (1969), such as the focus on the individual, close-up shots and the narrative strategy of suspense. Instead, Grupo Ukamau adopted a new perspective that changed the individual focus to a collective one, while also including a narrator who eliminated the intrigue and replacing the close-ups with long shots or sequence shots (Hilari Sölle, 2019). This approach essentially entailed the adoption of “a series of aesthetic proposals that considered the worldview of Indigenous peoples” (Quiroga San Martín, 2014: 108).

Although Grupo Ukamau’s films are not documentaries, they were all made with the involvement of people and communities they filmed, who were not film industry professionals, and the narration focuses on their story, thereby establishing an interaction and a representation similar to those that can be found in documentary films. Both this example and the experience of the NFBC after the release of *The Things I Cannot Change* demonstrate that the use of certain aesthetic techniques has consequences affecting the depiction and the experience of the people filmed. They also reveal that the interaction of these people with the filmmakers can lay the foundations for a collective reflection and introduce changes to the narrative and the cinematic aesthetics, with effects on the authorial logic so prevalent in cinema. The result may be the application of new approaches and the expression of greater creative diversity in film production.

2. OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

This article offers an analysis of the role of the filmed subjects in filmmaking—mainly in the documentary genre—as a result of their interaction with the film crew. The relationship between these two groups has occasionally given rise to a

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THESE TWO GROUPS HAS OCCASIONALLY GIVEN RISE TO A REVISION OF THE NARRATIVE AND AESTHETIC APPROACHES THAT DEFINED THE FILMMAKERS' ORIGINAL VISION. IN SOME CASES, THIS HAS CULMINATED IN THE PRODUCTION OF NEW FILMS INTENDED TO INCLUDE THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PEOPLE FILMED, CHALLENGING THE IDEA OF THE FILM AS THE WORK OF A SINGLE AUTEUR

revision of the narrative and aesthetic approaches that defined the filmmakers' original vision. In some cases, this has culminated in the production of new films intended to include the perspective of the people filmed, challenging the idea of the film as the work of a single *auteur*. This analysis underscores the importance of these subjects and their active role in film creation, taking into account that their influence is often overlooked because all creative and discursive responsibility is generally attributed to the filmmaker.

The objective of this article is therefore to assess the potential influence of the people filmed in a cinematic production through their interaction with the filmmaker or creative team. More specifically, this influence is evaluated in relation to the aesthetic elements of the film and to the changes it can make to the depiction of the filmed subjects.

The research for this article thus involved a qualitative method based on case studies. The cases selected for analysis facilitate the evaluation of the filmed subject's influence as they consider multiple approaches to a community by the same director or creative team. This allows a comparative analysis between the first film, which is dominated by the filmmaker's vision, and the second, which includes the perspective of the group represented in the wake of their criticism of the first film, thereby reflecting the active role and in-

fluence of the people filmed. Although these case studies constitute a tentative form of research, given that the results depend on the unique nature of each filmmaking experience, they can nevertheless shed light on a question that has rarely been analysed. In this case, the research serves to identify certain specific ways in which the influence of the filmed subject is made evident.

The first case study focuses on the filmmaker Chris Marker, who directed the documentary *Be Seeing You* (*À bientôt j'espère*, 1967) with his SLON collective and with Mario Marret, documenting the workers' strike at the Rhodiaceta textile factory in Besançon, France. After screening the film, the negative criticism of its subjects led Marker and SLON to adopt a different approach in their next film, the documentary *Classe de lutte* [Class of Struggle] (1969), made together with the Medvedkin Group, which is credited with authorship of the film.

The second case study is more recent: director Pedro Costa's film *Ossos* [Bones] (1997), the first film in the trilogy about the Lisbon neighbourhood of Fontainhas. In contrast to Marker's documentary, *Ossos* did not receive negative criticism from its subjects, although they did ask Costa to portray them more directly and authentically (Neyrat, 2011). This request resulted in the documentary *In Vanda's Room* (*No quarto da Vanda*, 2000). This film has been chosen for analysis—rather than his subsequent film *Colossal Youth* (*Juventude em Marcha*, 2006)—because it was Costa's first attempt at a reinvention of his filmmaking approach after his first exploration of Fontainhas in *Ossos*. In this regard, Gonzalo de Lucas (2009) argues that the history of these three films constitutes a “self-critical process to which the filmmaker subjects his first film on Fontainhas with *Vanda*” (De Lucas, 2009: 17-18). For De Lucas, “*Ossos* is a very worthy film, but the other two reveal its more idealistic, romantic tendency, its reliance on a restrained *mise-en-scène* and a measured style” (De Lucas, 2009: 18).

To study the films, Francesco Casetti and Federico Di Chio's (1991) contributions to film analysis are taken as a reference. These authors propose a process of textual analysis that involves breaking down the object of study in order to examine its constituent parts, and then recomposing it in order to understand its overall construction. The films are analysed using this method, and then the first and second approaches are compared and contrasted to deduce the influence of the subject filmed based on the aesthetic and narrative changes identified.

The examination of two case studies further supports the objectives of this research because it allows for the comparison of Chris Marker's and Pedro Costa's respective experiences, providing evidence of the different effects that the filmed subject's interaction with and influence on the filmmaker may have on the film in question.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

3.1 Chris Marker and the SLON collective: *Be Seeing You* (1967) and *Classe de lutte* (1969)

Chris Marker's collective filmmaking experience began with the SLON (*Service de Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles*) collective in 1967. According to Trevor Stark (2012), the French filmmaker received a letter from Besançon while he was editing the film *Far from Vietnam* (*Loin du Vietnam*, 1967). The workers at the Rhodiaceta factory in the aforementioned French city had declared a strike and were occupying the factory. After receiving the news, Marker and his team travelled to Besançon on various occasions to work on a documentary. The result was *Be Seeing You* (1967), co-directed with Mario Marret and the SLON collective.

As Lupton (2005) and Stark (2012) both observe, the film received significant criticism from the factory workers, as the director was accused of interpreting the situation through a romantic prism; he was dismissed as incompetent and even

described as having exploited the people who had taken part in the film. Others complained that their demands had not been accurately portrayed and that women only appeared in the film as wives rather than as workers or activists. This experience made Marker aware of the difficulties associated with representing others: "we will always be at best well-intentioned explorers, more or less friendly, but from the outside; [...] the cinematic representation and expression of the working class will be its own work" (Stark, 2012: 126).

This experience informed the making of Chris Marker and SLON's second film in Besançon. The Medvedkin Group, which included some of the factory workers, was founded specifically to make the film, in keeping with Marker's realisation cited above. This second production was thus a collaboration between this group and the SLON collective. The Medvedkin Group was characterised by a de-professionalised approach and "a conception of cinema as a dialogic relation between the film and the filmed" (Stark, 2012: 133). The result, *Classe de lutte* (1969), was credited to dozens of individuals along with Chris Marker. One of its aims was to correct the limitations identified in *Be Seeing You* (Lupton, 2005). Chris Marker and SLON thus took a step back to cede authorship to the Medvedkin Group, which was founded specifically in response to the criticisms made by the members of the French collective in relation to the first film. This group continued to operate afterwards, and a second Medvedkin Group was founded at a Peugeot factory in Sochaux-Montbéliard (Stark, 2012), making films such as *Les trois-quarts de la vie* [Three Quarters of a Life] (1971).

In their first documentary on Rhodiaceta, Marker, Marret and the SLON collective explored the strike and the living conditions of the factory workers. The film is marked by a *cinéma vérité* aesthetic, including interviews that expose the involvement of the technical crew. However, some of the film is characterised by an observational approach, where the filmmaker is present in the

situations he films but does not intervene in them. At the same time, the documentary sometimes adopts an expository perspective, prioritising the voice-over of a narrator—whom we identify with the director. This approach is more evident at the end of the film, when the voice-over interprets the events and takes stock of what the strike achieved.

Notable among the characters featured is the activist Georges Maurivard, who is introduced by the voice-over at the beginning of the film. His prominence from the documentary's opening sequences, along with the close-up shots used to show him, frame him as a sort of protagonist, or at least as a symbolic representative of the movement. Maurivard is the first to be interviewed, and he talks about his history as an activist. This is followed by interviews with various workers (about ten in all) offering different details and perspectives on a range of topics, constructing a collective narrative that describes the material conditions of the factory workers: the strike, the union, the importance of culture, communism or working hours.

The representation of the role of women throughout the film warrants a separate discussion. As those critical of the film complained at the time it was screened, women are essentially relegated to the role of wives. In fact, the first woman to speak (Suzanne Zedet, who would later have a leading role in *Classe de lutte*) appears relatively late in the film. Moreover, women's contributions are always very brief and invariably made in the context of interviews with their husbands. They are occasionally framed in close-ups, in what seems an attempt to discern their opinions from their expressions, but ultimately what stands out about the women in the film is their silence, in contrast to their husbands' constant speaking. There is one sequence in which one of the women acquires greater importance, hinting at an interest in giving her more attention, but this fails to counteract the overall male-dominated perspective of the film. The sequence in ques-

tion ends with the woman's husband leaving the house to go to work, while she is shown again, left behind at home. The scene that follows is of the husband at a meeting, at which the woman's absence precludes any possibility of depicting her as a political subject.

Be Seeing You clearly adheres to the classic "I speak about them to you" formulation described by Bill Nichols (2010), while *Classe de lutte* marks a shift towards an "I (or we) speak about us to you" formulation. The first film always features the presence of someone external to the story being told, such as Chris Marker or his film crew. However, it is notable for one scene that shows everything from the perspective of one of the workers, Georges Lièvre-mont, who talks about the inequality between employers and workers while we see a POV shot of someone driving a car. He tells us he always walks to the factory, while his boss travels by car, which seems to suggest that it is the employer's point of view that we are seeing on screen; however, at one point Lièvre-mont remarks that he would like to be in the boss's position, suggesting that the point of view could be either the employer's (as seems to be the case initially, reflecting reality) or the worker's (representing a desire or hope). The camera moves on with the vehicle, which reaches a yard where the workers are looking on, seeming to indicate that we are in fact viewing the scene from Lièvre-mont's point of view.

Chris Marker and SLON's application of the "I (or we) speak about us to you" formulation in their second film on Besançon is reflected in the less important role played by the external narrator. While it is still used in a few moments in *Classe de lutte*, in *Be Seeing You* its use is consistent throughout the film. The narrator in *Classe de lutte* conveys an idea of the coexistence of multiple voices that give the film a kind of polyphony, in contrast to the dominance of the external narrator in *Be Seeing You*.

Moreover, in the second film Suzanne Zedet is given a leading role, with the narration articulat-

ed around her experience. In this sense, Zedet's prominence contrasts with Maurivard's presence in the first film, as while Maurivard is shown at a distance as a key character viewed by the narrator, who constructs a discourse around him, Zedet replaces the external narrator to some extent. In short, the narrative in *Be Seeing You* is plural but mediated by the point of view of an external subject, while in *Classe de lutte* the story is told from the perspective of the group of workers, and especially Suzanne Zedet.

The process of politicising the protagonist and her involvement in the strike as an activist constitutes the main theme of a film in which Zedet serves as a symbol for the other activists. In this way, the documentary addresses one of the most significant criticisms made against *Be Seeing You*: the relatively insignificant presence of women. The film thus begins with Zedet, in a close-up while "*La era está pariendo un corazón*" ("The Age Is Giving Birth to a Heart") by Cuban protest singer Silvio Rodríguez plays on the soundtrack. The camera then follows her through an editing room where she sees her own face on a screen, followed by a group shot of women walking. Thus begins a story with a perspective that is drastically different from the one taken in the previous film.

On the other hand, interviews are still a key feature of *Classe de lutte*, which can be divided into two blocks presenting moments during and after the strike, with March 1969 as a boundary marker between them. The first block focuses on Zedet as the character driving the narrative, showing her interest in activism, her speeches to the crowd, her everyday life and her family. The second block, on the other hand, focuses on Zedet's assessment of her activism, but always mediated by an interviewer's questions.

3.2. Pedro Costa: *Ossos* (1997) and *In Vanda's Room* (2000)

After making his second film, *Down to Earth* (Casa de Lava, 1994), on Cape Verde, the Portuguese

filmmaker Pedro Costa visited Lisbon's Fontainhas neighbourhood, home to some of the relatives of the people he had filmed on the archipelago (Salvador Corretger, 2009). His exploration of the Fontainhas neighbourhood resulted in *Ossos* (1997), a fiction film featuring both professional actors and local residents with no acting experience. Although *Ossos* was successful, for his second film in the same neighbourhood, *In Vanda's Room* (2000), Costa decided to dispense with the hassles of a normal filming schedule. This time, Costa would attempt not only to enter the social spaces where the people portrayed actually live, but also to interact more actively with them with the aim of integrating their ideas into the story being told.

Costa's change of perspective between the two films was inspired by his contact with the people of Fontainhas. The filmmaker's dissatisfaction after the première of *Ossos* and the influence of the Fontainhas locals (especially Vanda Duarte) on his subsequent film are reflected in statements he himself has made. In one interview, he expresses his discontent with *Ossos*, which in his opinion was "incomplete and quite cowardly, because it is protected by filmmaking, by the production team" (Neyrat, 2011: 31). He explains that Vanda, the star of the second film (who had also played an important role in *Ossos*), told him: "you are an artist and I don't understand any of this film" (Neyrat, 2011: 44). He describes his interaction with the people who lived in the neighbourhood as follows:

The people of Fontainhas asked me for more, in the political sense, in the sense of telling me: "You have to do things more directly, you have to show other things, you are hiding too much, you are hiding us" [...]. There are forces in the neighbourhoods, young people, there are sages who say to me: "In any case, you could show the hardships we have" (Neyrat, 2009: 44).

Pedro Costa stresses Vanda's influence on *In Vanda's Room*, even suggesting that she should have appeared in the credits as a co-producer (Desiere, 2021). He also explains that neither he nor

the people of Fontainhas were happy with the result of the film:

We talked about it and decided to do something else, to work differently. It was a very vague idea. One day I just appeared with a small video camera, a backpack, a tripod and some Mini-DV tapes. I started like that. Vanda considered it, permitted it and collaborated. I proposed to do something that was more like a documentary (Desiere, 2021).

The change was thus initially substantiated in the reduction of the film crew to a bare minimum and in the shift from fiction to documentary. In relation to the film crew, Costa describes how uncomfortable he was filming with such a large team and so much equipment that they seemed to invade the neighbourhood. By way of example, he explains the lighting problems while filming *Ossos*, as at night the beams of the spotlights shone into every corner of Fontainhas's narrow streets, disturbing the locals (Neyrat, 2011). With respect to the change to a documentary format, Jean-Louis Comolli argues that *In Vanda's Room* is characterised by the fact "that the presence of the person filmed [...] has the ability to alter a film's mise-en-scène and influence how it is written" (2017: 31), which is relevant to the evaluation of the Portuguese director's abandonment of fiction in this case.

While the filmed subjects' influence on the evolution of Costa's work is made clear in the filmmaker's own statements, an analysis of his films can shed more light on this change to his cinematic approach. As noted above, *Ossos* is characterised by a stylised technique that is largely absent from *In Vanda's Room*. Telling the fictional story of a couple in Fontainhas who have just had a baby, this film begins with a close-up on Zita Duarte, Vanda's sister, whose gaze engages in a dialogue with the audience or with the filmmaker. Zita Duarte's sole role in the film is that of a witness to the events that unfold in Fontainhas, a presence that guides Pedro Costa on his visit to the neighbourhood. The filmmaker himself is

thus inevitably relegated to the role of an outside observer. Like Zita, another local resident, Clotilde Montrón, appears occasionally as a spectator of the situation experienced by the young mother Tina (played by the actress Mariya Lipkina), her baby's father and her sister (played by Vanda Duarte). The combination of professional actors and local residents of Fontainhas reflects the hybrid nature of a film that mixes the reality of the neighbourhood with the enunciation and logic of a fiction film. This is evident in Zita Duarte's and Clotilde Montrón's perspective from outside the story, even though they are observing it from within the neighbourhood, thereby marking the boundaries of the diegetic world. Zita Duarte also appears in the last scene of the film (as does Montrón briefly) in a busy, noisy street in Fontainhas, while Tina watches from the threshold of a door that ends the film when she closes it.

With *In Vanda's Room*, Pedro Costa adopts a restrained aesthetic to document the daily life of the residents of Fontainhas. The moments in the room with the sisters, Vanda and Zita, alternate with the portrait of the everyday lives of other people and with images of the destruction of the neighbourhood, which was in the process of being demolished and would soon disappear. The documentary approach serves to correct one of the problems with *Ossos*, which the director himself described as its failure to "confront the reality" of the neighbourhood (Neyrat, 2011: 31). However, the film's observational documentary style does not reflect the dynamics of the filming. While part of the film was improvised, the filmmaker explains that many scenes were prepared to some extent, setting up certain interactions that had occurred previously off-camera. In any case, Costa asserts that "everything came from them [Vanda and Zita Duarte]; nothing was mine, there was nothing outside" (Neyrat, 2011: 72). The documentary nevertheless displays this observational approach, which aims for transparency in an effort to erase the artifice that certain visual decisions might

produce. The sole objective of *In Vanda's Room* is to show what happens in front of the camera, as an expression of life in the neighbourhood. Thus, while the first film is notable for the aforementioned scene showing Zita Duarte in a frontal shot where she seems to be looking at the camera or the person filming in a way that identifies Costa as an external presence, no such presence is suggested in the second film. In this sense, as Iván Villarrea Álvarez argues, in *Ossos* numerous staging decisions betray Costa's status as an outsider, "an omniscient gaze on the neighbourhood, more characteristic of a 'voyeur' than a 'traveller'" (Villarrea Álvarez, 2014: 3). However, this perspective is different in the case of *In Vanda's Room*.

4. POSSIBLE SYNTHESIS OF INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

This article has explored the influence on a film of the people or communities who appear in it. Although the active role played by these people is often overlooked, this study has considered some specific cases where their intervention in the creative process is clear, beginning with their interaction with the filmmaker or production team. The analysis of a film—particularly a documentary—should take into account the mediation of these subjects, rather than being limited solely to the film's apparent authorship. The *auteur's* perspective should thus be complemented with the perspectives of the people portrayed, in a dialectical relationship. In this sense, Comolli describes the filming of a documentary as "a learning experience shared by those filming and those filmed" (2017: 145).

The analysis of films by Chris Marker and the SLON collective on the one hand, and by Pedro Costa on the other, has demonstrated the visible results of this interaction, which lead to the adoption of different filmmaking approaches. This has an impact on both the representation of the subjects and the use of cinematic language.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE IS PRESENT IN BOTH CASE STUDIES [...] IN THE CASE OF THE FILMS OF CHRIS MARKER AND THE SLON COLLECTIVE, THE PRESENCE OF THE EXTERNAL NARRATOR IN THE FIRST FILM CONTRASTS WITH THE INSIDER'S VIEW OF THE ACTIVISTS' WORLD IN THE SECOND. IN PEDRO COSTA'S FIRST FILM, THE PRESENCE OF TWO LOCAL RESIDENTS WITNESSING THE FICTIONAL NARRATIVE—LOCATED OUTSIDE THE STORY BUT INSIDE THE NEIGHBOURHOOD—EXPOSES THE DIVISION BETWEEN THOSE WHO WALK THE STREETS OF FONTAINHAS EVERY DAY AND THOSE WHO ARE MERE VISITORS TO THE DISTRICT. IN HIS SECOND FILM, COSTA SEEKS TO REDUCE THIS EXTERNAL VIEW

On the one hand, in the transition from *Be Seeing You* (1967) to *Classe de lutte* (1969), a protagonist was chosen to drive the narrative, rejecting the approach of the first film, which focused on a group of activists viewed and interpreted from an outsider's perspective. This dispenses with the presence and evaluation of an external party, while also giving a woman a leading role in response to criticism about the representation of women activists in the first film. Moreover, interaction with the filmed community opens film production up to different people through the foundation of the Medvedkin Groups in Besançon and Sochaux.

On the other hand, the transition from *Ossos* (1997) to *In Vanda's Room* (2000) involved a kind of delegation of the narrative upon Vanda and Zita Duarte, offering the opportunity to abandon the outsider's depiction in favour of stepping more decisively into the setting filmed, reducing the mediated nature of their image and allowing the local residents to portray themselves more

directly. In this respect, Comolli suggests that the camera in the second film prompts Vanda to take “all the risks of representation” (2017: 29).

Moreover, as the relationship between *inside* and *outside* is present in both case studies, both are characterised by a clear shift in the perspective between the first and second films. In the case of the films of Chris Marker and the SLON collective, the presence of the external narrator in the first film contrasts with the insider’s view of the activists’ world in the second. In Pedro Costa’s first film, the presence of two local residents witnessing the fictional narrative—located outside the story but inside the neighbourhood—exposes the division between those who walk the streets of Fontainhas every day and those who are mere visitors to the district. In his second film, Costa seeks to reduce this external view by trying to ensure that everything is shown from the inside, from the point of view of the people of Fontainhas (especially Vanda and Zita Duarte), with minimal interference by external elements, including the film crew.

Along with these changes mainly affecting the representation of the filmed subjects, there is also a difference in the aesthetic approach in each case. In Pedro Costa’s case, a key change is the reduction of the film crew to avoid disrupting everyday life in the neighbourhood, as well as the abandonment of a stylised approach that is more evident in *Os sos* than *In Vanda’s Room*. This entails the adoption of a more transparent aesthetic, which, together with the choice of the observational documentary style, represent a limitation on the range of film techniques used, including visual codes such as shot types and camera angles. In the case of Chris Marker and the SLON collective, the most significant change is related to the representation of the subjects. However, there are also some formal alterations, such as the use of a more fragmented editing style, possibly resulting from the more collective creative process. In short, as hinted in the introductory discussion of the films of Jorge San-

jinés and the Ukamau Group above, the two case studies examined here reveal that the intervention of the filmed subjects creates a dialectic that can result in transformations to the filmmaking approach in subsequent works, affecting both formal aspects and the representation of the subjects.

Finally, this analysis also allows a comparison of the two case studies, which are understood here as two different situations reflecting the influence of filmed subjects on the films they appear in. While Chris Marker and the SLON collective take a decidedly collective approach, thereby eroding their status as *auteurs* and undermining the traditional hierarchical order of film production, Pedro Costa maintains the *auteurial* logic but introduces some collaborative dynamics, especially with the contributions of Vanda Duarte. ■

NOTES

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- 1 “In most historical accounts, the debate that arose after the screening of *The Things I Cannot Change* became the seedbed for some ideas regarding a more ethical use of documentary. The most pressing issue was the relationship of the filmmaker to his or her subject” (Corneil, 2012: 22).
 - 2 “Remain objects of a discourse rather than subjects, as recipients of middle-class sympathy (or aversion) and state largesse” (Longfellow, 2010: 163).
 - 3 “We will always be at best well-intentioned explorers, more or less friendly, but from the outside [...] the cinematic representation and expression of the working class will be its own work” (Stark, 2012: 126).

- 4 “We talked about it and decided to do something else, to work differently. It was a very vague idea. One day I just appeared with a small video camera, a backpack, a tripod and some Mini-DV tapes. I started like that. Vanda considered it, permitted it and collaborated. I proposed to do something that was more like a documentary” (Desiere, 2021).

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INTERACTION, RESISTANCE AND COOPERATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FILMED SUBJECT'S ROLE IN AND INFLUENCE ON THEIR FILM

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of filmed subjects and their role in and influence on the films they appear in, specifically in the case of documentaries. Two case studies are analysed to evaluate the extent and nature of this influence. The first case is Chris Marker and the SLON collective's documentary *Be Seeing You* (*À bientôt j'espère*, 1967), about a strike by workers at a French factory, whose criticism of the workers led Marker and SLON to take a different approach in a second film, *Classe de lutte* [Class of Struggle] (1969). The second case involves Pedro Costa's film *Ossos* [Bones] (1997), shot in the Lisbon neighbourhood of Fontainhas. The residents' reaction to the film, along with other factors, prompted the director to make another film also set in the neighbourhood, *In Vanda's Room* (*No quarto da Vanda*, 2000). A comparative analysis of the first and the second film in each case allows an evaluation of the influence of the people filmed on the filmmakers' approach. In both cases, substantial changes—both to the narration and to the use of cinematic language—suggest that the *auteur's* perspective as a component of film analysis should be complemented with the examination of the filmmaker's interaction with the filmed subjects and the influence they have on the film.

Key words

Participation; Authorship; Documentary; Chris Marker; Pedro Costa; Collective filmmaking; Representation.

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INTERACCIÓN, RESISTENCIA Y COOPERACIÓN: ANÁLISIS DEL ROL E INFLUENCIA DEL SUJETO FILMADO EN LA OBRA CINEMATOGRÁFICA

Resumen

Este artículo propone un análisis del rol e influencia de las personas o colectivos filmados en la obra cinematográfica, específicamente en el ámbito del cine documental. Se analizan dos casos de estudio con el objetivo de valorar el grado y las características de esa influencia. En el primer caso, Chris Marker y el colectivo SLON realizaron *À bientôt j'espère* (1967) sobre una huelga en una fábrica francesa. Las críticas propiciaron una segunda aproximación, que dio lugar a *Classe de lutte* (1969). El segundo caso es Pedro Costa y la película *Ossos* (1997), filmada en el barrio lisboeta de Fontainhas. La reacción de quienes residían en el barrio, además de otros motivos, provocaron una respuesta del director, materializada en *No quarto da Vanda* (2000). El análisis comparativo entre la primera y la segunda película en cada caso posibilita valorar la influencia de las personas filmadas sobre el enfoque cinematográfico de los respectivos autores. Los cambios sustanciales—tanto en la narración como en el uso del lenguaje cinematográfico—permiten concluir que la perspectiva autoral como componente para el estudio de la película debe complementarse con el análisis de la interacción con las personas filmadas y su influencia sobre la obra cinematográfica.

Palabras clave

Participación; Autoría; Documental; Chris Marker; Pedro Costa; Cine colectivo; Representación.

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NEW PROTAGONISTS FOR NEW TIMES: THE TELEVISION DRAMAS OF JOSEFINA MOLINA AND PILAR MIRÓ FEATURED ON NOVELA DURING THE SPANISH TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

NATALIA MARTÍNEZ PÉREZ
SONIA DUEÑAS MOHEDAS

I. INTRODUCTION

The Spanish transition was not only a process of political transformation through which Spain closed the chapter of Franco's dictatorship and embraced democracy, but also a moment marked by profound social and cultural change. Women were significantly affected by various legislative measures, such as the legalisation of divorce (Law 30/1981, 7 July) and, a few years later, abortion (Organic Law 9/1985, 5 July), which recognised their rights and improved their quality of life. However, the transition to democracy was characterised by improvisation and uncertainty (Quirosa-Cheyrouze, 2007). The various left-wing organisations that constituted most of the anti-Francoist movement played a key role during this period, as they mobilised the public to prevent the continuation of the dictatorship and the implementation of political projects aimed at preserving the regime after Franco's death by limiting democratic reforms

(Juliá, 2006). The new political system was created through negotiations between the more reformist sectors of the regime and the leaders of major anti-Francoist parties, in a climate dominated by the pursuit of consensus (Pinilla García, 2021).

This consensus has been described as the central concept underpinning the negotiations that enabled the establishment of the new political system, which was the product of agreements between different political groups that made significant concessions to secure a negotiated solution and lay the foundations for democratic government (Ortiz Heras, 2012). On the other hand, some contemporary historians argue that the political elite resorted to consensus only after they realised they could not impose their political agendas unilaterally (Field, 2011). The concessions and agreements made by the various actors involved in the negotiations were therefore pragmatic and strategic decisions, motivated in part by the desire to secure a prominent role in the new political or-

der. Moreover, the pacts that facilitated the consolidation of the democratic system were reached without the participation of significant segments of society or even the grassroots members of the parties involved in the agreements (Aróstegui Sánchez, 2007).

The media played a highly significant role during the transition to democracy, “[n]ot only through their editorial line and their focus on coverage of political action [...], but also by prioritising the visual documentation of that activity” (Tranche, 2016: 121). The media played an irreplaceable role in the process, as cinema and television journalism was crucial to “the canonisation of the transition” (Sánchez Biosca, 2016: 75). During these years, television pursued the task of educating the public about democratic principles. Although previous research (Siles Ojeda, 1998; Loma Muro, 2013; Martínez Pérez, 2016; Gómez Prada, 2019) has explored the filmographies of Josefina Molina and Pilar Miró (two of the first women to graduate from Spain’s official film school¹ and among the most important directors in Spanish film history), their work in television has received very little scholarly attention. The aim of this study is to fill that research gap with an analysis of the literary adaptations written and directed by Molina and Miró for the program *Novela* (TVE: 1962–1979) during the period of the transition (1974–1981): Miro’s *Los enemigos* [Enemies] (1974) and *Pequeño teatro* [Little Theatre] (1977); and Molina’s *Aire frío* [Cold Air] (1974) and *El camino* [The Path] (1978). The analysis examines the democratic and feminist discourses proposed by the two directors, which in turn reflected and contributed to the political and social transformations of the period. In addition, this study facilitates the recovery of forgotten visual documents, as these dramatic productions are thought-provoking and valuable not only in terms of their content but also from a formal perspective. The research method adopted for this study consists of a gender-based textual analysis. The produc-

tions were viewed at the RTVE Documentation Centre, the only location where this material is available, and thus the corpus is limited to the only adaptations that the two directors made for the program *Novela* during the period. The RTVE archives have played an important role in this research, as some of these container programs, which consisted of numerous episodes, have been de-catalogued or have disappeared.

2. TELEVISION DURING THE SPANISH TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

Television was especially significant during the historical period of the transition, as the small screen underwent major transformations starting in the mid-1970s. Specifically, TVE² implemented various initiatives that on the one hand sought to erode the values that Francoism had instilled in Spanish society, and on the other assigned symbolic prominence to the new system of freedoms in order to legitimise and consolidate it (Palacio, 2012). TVE attempted to confront the country’s most conservative sectors that feared their own political decline, for example, by adopting a serious approach to news coverage of the Antocha massacre in January 1977, underscoring the unacceptable nature of violence as a political tool. It also promoted the idea that elections were an occasion for celebration by broadcasting variety shows and entertainment programs on election nights. As Bustamante suggests, TVE was consolidated in the 1970s as the definitive media outlet in Spanish society (2006), as television became the most popular media format and the leading cultural industry in terms of investment, although even during the Franco regime the medium was not conceived of as “high culture or [...] a platform for revanchist propaganda” (Ibáñez, 2001: 67).

While in the 1950s the number of television sets in Spain is estimated to have been around 600 (Díaz, 2006), by the first general elections of 1977 the figure had already reached eight mil-

lion, of which only 10 percent were colour devices. In this regard, television in the 1970s “had a very established programming model resulting from the medium’s particular evolution, which, thanks to technical advances and the professionalisation of its employees, came to approximate audience preferences” (Antona, 2016: 9). However, technological innovations resulted in the incorporation of new dynamics that continuously reinvented the broadcaster into the 1980s (Berdón Prieto, 2024).

In 1976, on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary, TVE conducted a survey through Spain’s Public Opinion Institute to learn what the public thought of television content. Forty-two percent believed that the extra time they spent watching television came at the expense of the time they had previously dedicated to other media formats such as radio. In this respect, Martín Jiménez (2013) points out that both the press and television played an indisputable role in the country’s shift from dictatorship to democracy, although they acted as different agents with specific social influences, not only because of the different products they offered but also because of the audiences they targeted.

In relation to the pedagogical mission undertaken by TVE, Rafael Ansón³ acknowledged that the broadcaster facilitated political reform, although its development was also driven by its technological capacity for influencing Spanish society. Palacio argues that the reform to the public broadcaster took the form of an advertising campaign, with repercussions for the “types of political communication on television” (2001: 100), which conformed to the rules of advertising. Thus, during the transition to democracy, speeches by both reformist and conservative political parties were adapted to televised speech formats, which in turn were influenced by advertising techniques. Television played a key role in consolidating and structuring the nascent political system based on public freedoms, while at the same time defining the main features of political communication.

However, it is likely that neither Rafael Ansón nor the Spanish government had intended to employ other arguments to persuade Spaniards of the virtues of democracy, although the democratic opposition did not demand them (Palacio, 2001). Fictional content constitutes the key form of television programming for studying the characteristics of television of the past (Palacio, 2012). In this sense, the analysis of fictional content from this period is particularly interesting because the imaginary of the transition continues to be visible.⁴ This article focuses on fiction precisely because it can shed light on some of the discourses articulated during the transition, on the understanding that Spain’s move towards democracy cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of the television fiction content broadcast by its public broadcaster.

3. WOMEN AND TELEVISION CREATION: THE ENTRY OF WOMEN INTO PUBLIC BROADCASTING

During the Spanish transition to democracy, women experienced and called for the most significant changes, leaving the regime’s patriarchal system behind to become professionals with rights. Legal reforms—such as the decriminalisation of adultery and contraceptives in 1977, the proclamation of gender equality in the 1978 Constitution, the legalisation of divorce in 1981 and abortion in 1985—contributed to significant improvements to women’s quality of life. It was in this context that the country experienced a resurgence in the feminist movement.⁵ For this reason, another aim of this study is to identify connections between the democratic transition, the television industry and the increasing number of women in creative professions.

Television helped to make visible and accelerate the changes taking place in Spanish women’s lives, which meant that much of its content was led by women both on-screen and in production roles.

Notable figures include journalists such as Carmen Sarmiento, Sol Alameda, Ana Asensio, Rosa María Mateo and Rosa María Calaf, who produced reports for *Informe Semanal* (TVE, 1973-present); Elena Martí, who worked on *Informativo 24 horas* (TVE, 1970–1973); frequent writers such as Gloria Fuertes, and to a lesser extent Carmen Conde; as well as the actress Ana Diosdado, who scripted the series *Juan y Manuela* (TVE, 1974) and *Los comuneros* (TVE, 1978). Notable in the field of television direction is Mercè Vilaret, one of the first female directors at TVE in Catalonia and also a specialist in literary adaptations, whose “(dramatic and documentary) programs reveal the director’s personal writing style and the major themes of her imaginary” (Martí, 2003: 86). Also noteworthy is the presenter and director Paloma Chamorro, who in the 1970s hosted cultural programs such as *Encuentros con las Artes y las Letras* (TVE2, 1976–1977) and *Imágenes* (TVE2, 1978–1981). Two key features of Spanish television resulted from this reality: its importance for the representation of the new roles taken on by women in Spanish society during the transition; and its creation of a new female perspective through the work of these women creators.

As part of an institutional strategy, Televisión Española (TVE) launched various projects that had been in development for months, or even years, and scheduled three consecutive series with storylines that focused on women: *La señora García se confiesa* [Mrs. Garcia Confesses] (Adolfo Marsillach, TVE, 1976–1977), *Mujeres insólitas* [Exceptional Women] (Cayetano Luca de Tena, TVE, 1977) and *Las viudas* [Widows] (Alberto González Vergel, TVE, 1977). “From November 1976 to June 1977, every Tuesday night, TV viewers could watch productions in their homes that took the women’s world as its point of reference” (Palacio, 2012: 170). In container programs such as *Novela*, comprising half-hour episodes broadcast on weekdays, the content seemed to be targeting a female audience; this impression is reinforced by the no-

table number of women writers who worked on the adaptations, such as Carmen Martín Gaité, Dolores Medio, Elena Soriano, Mercè Rodoreda, Rosa Chacel and Ana María Matute. This trend of broadcasting productions written by women “would continue in subsequent years, so that female authors came to represent a significant proportion or even the majority [of writers]” (Ansón, 2010: 364).

It is important to note that these women writers already had a considerable or even predominant presence on television during the dictatorship, suggesting that the interest in attracting female audiences may have precursors in periods prior to the democratic transition. These adaptations were based on fictional works framed “in the most important genres of the period (television plays, dramas in instalments and dramatic series, the latter developed and produced with techniques specific to the small screen)” (Chicharro-Merayo & Gil-Gascón, 2022: 119).

Many of these programs were produced in the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s, and they were developed by young directors trained at Instituto de Investigaciones y Experiencias Cinematográficas (Spain’s official film school in Madrid) who found their place making fiction for TVE’s second channel (Segunda Cadena) that transformed the narrative and formal style of television (Palacio, 2001). This study focuses on the fictional productions of Pilar Miró and Josefina Molina because their work provides an opportunity to explore the ideas proposed by these directors. Miró, Molina and Cecilia Bartolomé are often mentioned in audiovisual studies focusing specifically on the film industry, as they were the first women to graduate from the country’s official film school (García López, 2021), although many other women also worked in television, such as Paloma Chamorro, Pilar Herrero, Milagros Valdés and Lolo Rico. Academic research on these directors has focused primarily on their film work, overlooking their time in television or viewing

THESE CREATORS DEMONSTRATED THE NEED TO LIBERATE WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION, FOLLOWING THE PERIOD OF REPRESSION AND INEQUALITY IMPOSED BY THE FRANCO REGIME

it as a formative stage prior to their filmmaking careers. These creators demonstrated the need to liberate women in the context of the democratic transition, following the period of repression and inequality imposed by the Franco regime. As Guichot-Reina points out, they thus offered viewers new female role models in television fiction that exposed issues such as “gender discrimination and the unjust realities they faced by virtue of their sex” (2024: 131), with the aim of breaking with perpetuated gender stereotypes and proposing changes in favour of equality both to Spanish law and to the very structure of Spanish society.

4. MIRÓ AND MOLINA’S ADAPTATIONS IN NOVELA

Novela was a “container program” on air from 1963 to 1978, consisting of 42 half-hour episodes. It was broadcast on weeknights, Monday through Friday, in keeping with the serialised continuity of its stories, which often extended over multiple episodes. The stories were based on widely popular literary works; Pilar Miró and Josefina Molina⁶ chose to adapt texts by renowned women authors such as Carmen Martín Gaité, Ana María Matute, Mercè Rodoreda or Rosa Chacel, thereby giving visibility to women’s literature (Ansón, 2010: 364) while at the same time appealing to female viewers with dramas featuring prominent or narratively significant women characters. From 1974 to 1978, Miró and Molina made four five-episode dramas between them. *Los enemigos* (Pilar Miró), broadcast from 18 to 22 February 1974, was an

adaptation of the Russian classic “The Duellist” (Bretior, Ivan Turgenev, 1847). Set in the 19th century, the story tells of a German nobleman (played by Antonio Canal) who becomes caught up in a confrontation with his best friend during his time in the army over his feelings for Masha (Emma Cohen), a character who introduces romantic elements into the narrative. Broadcast just a few weeks later, from 25 to 29 March 1974, Molina’s *Aire frío* was based on the play of the same name by Cuban writer Virgilio Piñera. In it, Lola Cardona plays Luz Marina, a woman of exceptional fortitude who manages her household and family, the Romagueras, throughout the decades of the 1940s and 1950s. Miró would not return to *Novela* until 1977, when her adaptation of Ana María Matute’s 1954 novel *Pequeño teatro* would be aired from 7 to 11 March. This story is set in a coastal town in the Basque Country, where a foreigner captures the attention of a young woman named Zazu (Fiorella Faltoyano). Finally, Molina’s *El camino* (1978) was broadcast from 17 to 21 April 1978. This big-budget adaptation of the popular novel of the same name by Miguel Delibes won the Award for Best Direction at the 15th Prague International Television Festival that same year. Set in the small village of Molledo in the Cantabria region during the period after the Spanish Civil War, it portrays the lives and customs of the villagers.

4.1. Visual Style and Narrative Features

The dramas analysed here are rife with distancing and metafiction elements, demonstrating a clear desire to play with the narrative rather than adhere strictly to classical staging. However, expressive editing is notable in sequences such as the duel between the protagonists in *Los enemigos*, Lutchkov and Kister, where Miró uses a panoramic crane shot to tilt down over the scene. The agile mobility of the camera in her productions based on tracking shots and numerous short close-ups constitutes a distinctive visual style that fluidly accelerates moments of heightened narrative ten-

sion. In *Pequeño teatro*, she uses zoom-ins to bring viewers closer to the characters, allowing the audience to invade their space, especially in the case of Zazu, who is given greater visual and narrative prominence through her voice-over, which is the only one we hear. With a greater number of introspective scenes, this production is notable for the use of symphonic music, which enhances the dramatic tone of the narration.

Bearing in mind that they were filmed in a studio, both these productions reveal the importance Miró places on the composition of shots and framing (particularly depth of field), replete with details and a *mise-en-scène* which, though simple, features opulent sets in keeping with their narrative contexts. The depiction of high society through rich, luxurious fabrics and furnishings that adorn the rooms of the houses is further magnified by the large number of extras on the set.

Molina's works, by contrast, reflect a more restrained and traditional approach to staging, avoiding formal experimentation in either the editing or the visual style. She uses a wide range of shot types to provide greater variety in her technical language, but particularly notable is her use of a handheld camera in the wedding banquet scene in *El camino*, projecting a documentary tone intended both to capture the rural customs and folk dances and to convey the poverty and misery of post-war Spain. Molina highlights the rare moments of joy to create a strong contrast with the clear discontent and repression suffered by the villagers. This classical technical approach, which is atypical of her work and may be related to the fact that the production was for TVE's La 1 channel rather than La 2⁷ where Molina worked more often, contrasts with the narrative complexity resulting from the integration of flashbacks, although these require viewers to identify the time-frame through the text itself. In *El camino*, however, this narrative device is indispensable for the effective adaptation of Delibes's novel (Zurián Hernández & Gómez Prada, 2015; Martínez Sánchez, 2022), as the narration of

the story is non-linear and full of analepses inserted to recount the memories of the character Daniel. In contrast to Miró's lavish sets, Molina opts for a natural *mise-en-scène*, filming on location with live sound. This is not the case in *Aire frío*, where the action unfolds entirely inside a family home and is presented in a theatrical style that respects the original text. Molina's visual style in both productions is unquestionably in line with her cinematic work. In her memoirs, she notes that she never differentiated between television and cinematic language: "I approached each of those programs as if it were the film of my life. I used the three or four simultaneous cameras with staging techniques that cinema had already been experimenting with for years" (Molina, 2000: 62-63).

ALL FOUR PRODUCTIONS OFFER AN INTIMATE AND CRITICAL VIEW OF WOMEN'S ACTIVITY INSIDE DOMESTIC SPACES

The fact that the action takes place in interior spaces connects the setting with the private sphere to which women have been relegated in a dichotomous system, while the public sphere is dominated by men (Pateman, 1995). In this regard, all four productions offer an intimate and critical view of women's activity inside domestic spaces, not only questioning the archetype of the "angel in the house", but also reflecting on the institution of marriage—or more specifically, on virginity and honour in the case of *El camino*.

4.2. Female Characters and Thematic Features

The works of Miró analysed here reflect her interest in stories set in the 19th century, whether through the militarism of *Los enemigos* or the drama of *Pequeño teatro*. Even more evident is the pedagogical aim of the former with its emphasis

on dialogue and tolerance over violence—a theme that allowed the director to participate indirectly in the debate of the period on the democratic transition through images and narratives that connected with the political and social concerns of the time and contributed to the construction of a democratic imaginary. *Pequeño teatro* also offers a critique of religious morality, which is also evident in *Aire frío*, functioning as an opportunity for reflection on the Franco regime. Anticlericalism is expressed in the figure of the priest, who is typically associated with worldly pleasures (a feature present in the films of both directors). The clearest example of this appears in *El camino* when the priest questions the very existence of miracles, revealing him to be the least devout of all the story's characters. For women, religious morality becomes a burden they are forced to bear (as it is for Luz Marina in *Aire frío*), or an inherent trait of the provincial mentality (in the case of Zazu in *Pequeño teatro*).

In *Los enemigos*, the character of Masha is the one who triggers the conflict between the two male protagonists, whose friendship contains a homoerotic subtext, but who also represent two opposing models of masculinity: patriarchal and hegemonic in Lutchkov; and understanding, sensitive and pacifistic in Kister. In response to this situation, Masha refuses to be treated as a mere object, yet she flirts with and tests both men, straining their friendship in a clear example of conscious rebellion whose nature becomes clear when it is revealed that she belongs to the Russian women's emancipation movement. Her mixed-race identity and her resistance to the duties imposed by her family and social class constitute an ironic critique of traditional portrayals of women in fiction through a male gaze.

The significance of an oppressive social and political context for women is also evident in *Pequeño teatro*. Miró gives greater narrative weight to Zazu, despite the fact she is not actually the protagonist of the story. Issues such as mother-

hood and religion shape and define this female character, whose psychological evolution is charted in the inner monologue included by Miró: "I've always been searching for something without knowing what, something that screams in my heart. [...] Child after child, walk after walk, some trip to the city, [...] all of it absurd. Until the circle of a dead and empty life is closed." Like Masha, Zazu refuses to accept her fate as dictated by a patriarchal society in which women are viewed as commodities to be exchanged between men. Marcos, a wandering foreigner, represents freedom for her, the possibility of escaping her village. Seeing him as a means of empowerment, she begins a romantic relationship with him. However, Miró's adaptation breaks with the concept of "romantic love", as Zazu is transformed into a sceptical, solitary, gloomy and pessimistic woman who conceives of love as a kind of poison. Her character thus follows a line of depictions of women in other works by Miró who stumble and fall when confronted with events that plunge them into pain and sorrow (Siles, 2006). In short, the female characters in both *Los enemigos* and *Pequeño teatro* are engaged in an internal struggle in patriarchal contexts that oppress them and drive them to loneliness and failure.

Molina, on the other hand, constructs characters who gradually break out of the ultraconservative constraints still ingrained in rural Spain when the country's democratic transition began. While its urban centres were being modernised, the villages of Spain remained trapped in a bleak reality defined by the patriarchal legacy of the regime. In *Aire frío*, Molina focuses on Luz Marina, a strong, hardworking woman who fights to support her family financially but is disparaged as a "spinster" by the men in her life. The family pressure makes her cynical about marriage, although in the end it becomes her means of escape from the family yoke that has held her down. Single by her own choosing, Luz Marina learns that marriage is really just "the same collar on a different

dog, because the collar is still the same and squeezes tighter than ever [...]. I've got married, but I still live in the same hovel, I still sew and I still see the same misery." In this context, as a character who must ultimately assume responsibility for both her parents and her husband, Luz Marina reveals the psychological impact on women of the "ethics of care" (Gilligan, 1985) and the guilt they suffer if they fail to live up to it. Molina presents a critique of the duties imposed on women by societal pressure and depicts their daily lives through domestic chores, while leisure and enjoyment are restricted to the radio serials that Luz Marina listens to on her own.

In *El camino*, Molina focuses much of the action on the women portrayed rather than on the actual protagonist of the story, Daniel. Once again, the figure of the "spinster" is present, this time in the form of the Guindilla sisters, two middle-aged women who run a small grocery shop in the village. The older sister, Lola, is a protector of Christian morality who spends her nights ensuring that the young people of the village do not commit any sins by limiting their recreational activities almost exclusively to religious ones. Meanwhile, the younger sister, Irene, suffering the consequences of being abandoned by her beloved, is doomed to dress in mourning attire for the rest of her life as a symbol of her disgrace. These and other female characters form a tableau of rural post-war Spanish women condemned to bitter lives with marriage and motherhood as their ultimate purpose. Molina's intention is not only to offer an open critique of Francoism, the institution of the family and the basic pillars of Catholic morality as forces determining women's fates, but also to present women metaphorically as a unified and uniform collective. All action involving women takes place inside homes and churches, further reducing the size of the private sphere to which they are confined. The scene of Germán's funeral is particularly revealing, as all the participants in the funeral procession are men except for a young

girl named Uca-Uca, a character symbolising hope among the new generations who would be growing up in a democratic country. Other characters given a place by Molina in the story include Josefa, who commits suicide when the man she loves marries another, throwing herself naked into the river and thus exposing her normally concealed body in an act of feminist liberation. The brief frontal shot of her body is remarkable given the political and social context of the production and the fact that it was broadcast during what is now classified as prime time on La 1.

5. CONCLUSIONS

From their beginnings working on television dramas to their final feature films and series, Pilar Miró and Josefina Molina developed themes that resonated with audiences, dealing with politics, youth, generational conflict and the emancipation of women, all of which were essential pieces in the construction of a democratic culture. In this context, a unifying theme that can be identified running throughout the work of these two creators is the feminist perspective or the rejection of an androcentric vision. However, the format of each program significantly influenced the treatment of these themes, and their reflections on gender-related issues varied depending on whether the production was the adaptation of a pre-existing literary text, as was the case with much of their work.

It has been argued here that both creators engage with a set of concerns linked to the living conditions of women, and particularly to the assertion of equal rights and the role of women in history. From a gender perspective, their fictional productions are characterised by their condemnation of sexism in Spanish society and by the complex and rich representations of female characters they offered. Nevertheless, it is worth asking whether the choice of these productions was based on personal preference or whether they

ALL FOUR PRODUCTIONS PRESENT STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS WITH CLEARLY DEFINED GOALS WHO DO NOT SHRINK AWAY FROM ADVERSITY AND WHO SEEK EMPOWERMENT

were simply assigned these projects because they were women. Indeed, many of these titles were imposed by network executives who assumed that women possessed a greater “sensitivity” or affinity for themes considered feminine. However, even when these titles were assigned by RTVE management, the approach taken by the creators granted them a degree of artistic freedom.

In the works analysed here, the female characters do not occupy secondary roles, nor do they submit to family or spousal constraints; instead, they pursue their dreams and explore their own life projects. They embrace ambitions and desires in opposition to social conventions, in line with Kaplan’s (1998) suggestion that feminist filmmakers seek to deconstruct classical texts and explore women’s narratives. The four fiction productions examined above all present strong female characters with clearly defined goals who do not shrink away from adversity and who seek empowerment, whether by attempting to escape a monotonous provincial existence, like Zazu in *Pequeño teatro*, or by becoming essential supports to those around them, as Luz Marina does in *Aire frío*. Molina herself affirms that she has always sought to portray women from a socially committed perspective: “in my films, series and plays there is always a female character who fights against oppression. I have waged my own battle and highlighted characters who defend their freedom” (Castañeda Ceballos, 1998: 45). From this perspective, Molina’s *Aire frío* takes the view of a woman who yearns for independence, who confronts her parents and brothers while supporting her family economically through her work as a seamstress and teacher.

Both creators deconstruct the traditional, passive image of female characters by seeking new ways to define their identities. This is significant given that motherhood, which is typically a central narrative of conventional femininity, is subverted in several of their dramas. In none of these titles is motherhood presented as a goal or a life project for the female protagonists. In fact, it is not even mentioned, as the protagonists prioritise other aspects of life, based on the need these central figures have to escape a patriarchal system and an oppressive environment dominated by male characters. The works of Miró and Molina during the Spanish transition to democracy thus not only offered audiences a cultural imaginary aligned with the pedagogical objective of television at the time, but also created a corpus of productions that reflect clearly female themes and concerns. The notable consistency observed across their stories may be attributed to the need for women to re-define and re-signify themselves as subjects within a new social framework. Although they were produced and broadcast in a wide range of programs with substantial differences in terms of the network, production context, and time slot, the motifs and imagery of these dramas and series exhibit a remarkable cohesion despite individual differences between the two creators, due to the fact that both Molina and Miró belonged to the same generation. ■

NOTES

- 1 Molina was the first woman to receive a degree in direction from Spain’s official film school (Escuela Oficial Cinematografía) in 1969, while Miró completed her studies in screenwriting in 1968. This marked the institutionalisation of film studies, giving women access to creative positions in the Spanish film and television sector.
- 2 TVE began regular broadcasting in Spain in 1956, in a climate marked by the Franco regime’s efforts to modernise and open up the nation. In this context,

the objective of the Spanish public broadcaster was to “offer citizens a new and fully developed model of integration and sociability” (Ibáñez, 2001: 67).

- 3 Rafael Ansón served as General Director of the Spanish national radio and television broadcaster, RTVE (Radiodifusión y Televisión Española), from July 1976 to November 1977 and is regarded as the driving force behind the cultural transformation and modernisation of the broadcaster’s television division (TVE).
- 4 See Magaldi Fernández (2023) on biopics about key figures in the Spanish transition to democracy.
- 5 According to Verdugo Martí (2010), the First Women’s Liberation Conferences, held in Madrid in December 1975 and in Barcelona in 1976, marked the rise of the feminist movement in Spain and became a forum for open debate on the issue of discrimination.
- 6 Like other graduates of Spain’s official film school, both directors had opportunities to direct thanks to these drama programs, which had become “veritable laboratories of innovation” (Palacio, 2001: 131).
- 7 TVE’s second channel (La 2), whose broadcasting coverage was limited to Spain’s urban centres, had a more experimental nature and a strong cultural component, whereas the programming on TVE’s first channel, which was broadcast nationwide, “fully adhered to the conventions of mass culture, entertainment and the public sphere” (Palacio, 2012: 9).

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NEW PROTAGONISTS FOR NEW TIMES: THE TELEVISION DRAMAS OF JOSEFINA MOLINA AND PILAR MIRÓ FEATURED ON NOVELA DURING THE SPANISH TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

Abstract

This article examines the television adaptations directed and/or written by the Spanish creators Pilar Miró and Josefina Molina during the period from 1974 to 1981 for the program *Novela* (TVE: 1962-1979). The four productions discussed—Miró’s *Los enemigos* (1974) and *Pequeño teatro* (1977); and Molina’s *Aire frío* (1974) and *El camino* (1978)—have been largely forgotten despite their historiographical value. In view of their significant influence on audiences of the period, this study proposes a reflection on the discourses and representations of gender presented in these fictional narratives. From a gender perspective, television during Spain’s transition to democracy played a crucial role in the promotion of new social realities by exploring, questioning and challenging the new roles being adopted by women at the time. The analysis of these dramas can shed light on the feminist discourses articulated by the creators, which may be viewed as a reflection of the political and social transformations taking place during the democratic transition (such as the improvement of the status of women in the Spanish political and social context) with the aim of fulfilling TVE’s pedagogical mission to promote the country’s new democratic values.

Key words

Television studies; Spanish Television; Spanish Transition; Feminism; Television fiction; Pilar Miró; Josefina Molina.

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NUEVAS PROTAGONISTAS PARA NUEVOS TIEMPOS: LOS DRAMÁTICOS DE JOSEFINA MOLINA Y PILAR MIRÓ EN NOVELA DURANTE LA TRANSICIÓN ESPAÑOLA

Resumen

Este artículo examina las adaptaciones televisivas dirigidas y/o escritas por las creadoras españolas Pilar Miró y Josefina Molina durante el período comprendido entre 1974 y 1981 a través del programa contenedor *Novela* (TVE: 1962-1979), cuatro obras que, en algunos casos, supone un material olvidado pese a su valiosa contribución historiográfica: *Los enemigos* (1974) y *Pequeño teatro* (1977) de Miró; y *Aire frío* (1974) y *El camino* (1978) de Molina. Debido a la notable influencia que tuvieron en la audiencia de dicho período, se propone una reflexión en torno a los discursos y las representaciones de género presentadas en estas ficciones. Desde una perspectiva de género, la televisión de la Transición desempeñó un papel crucial al tratar de promover nuevas realidades sociales que exploraban, cuestionaban y desafiaban los nuevos roles adoptados por las mujeres de la época. El análisis de los dramáticos permite reflexionar sobre los discursos articulados en términos feministas por las creadoras, considerándolos un reflejo de las transformaciones políticas y sociales que tuvieron lugar durante la Transición española, como la mejora de la situación de las mujeres en el contexto político-social, con el fin de promover los nuevos valores democráticos desde el papel pedagógico que desempeñaba Televisión Española.

Palabras clave

Estudios televisivos; Televisión Española; Transición española; Feminismo; Ficción televisiva; Pilar Miró; Josefina Molina.

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