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Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez

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Friends in Cinema. Filmic Correspondences: From Subjectivity to Intersubjectivity

Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez
ORCID: 0000-0003-0566-3666

Abstract

This article analyses the practice of filmic correspondence based on the contemporary concept of intersubjectivity: the space where subjectivities meet and share in order to reach new perspectives and results. The analysis of the most relevant filmic correspondences, generated over more than three decades— from *Video Letter* (Tanikawa and Terayama, 1983) to *Life May Be* (Cousins and Akbari, 2014)—will allow us to determine how this displacement from subjectivity to intersubjectivity happens, through which epistolary constructions, about which filmic practices, spaces and topics, and with which results. The study will then conclude that the *epistolary intersubjective attempt* materialises in different dynamics: starting point of a shared reflection; result of the epistolary exchange; search for a creative space; dialectics between different film practices; simulacrum that seems an intersubjectivity that it actually avoids; and even its impossibility, when the intersubjective attempt threatens the subjectivities involved.

Key words: filmic correspondence; contemporary cinema; subjectivity; intersubjectivity; letter; enunciation.

1. Introduction

The instrumentalization of the epistolary device throughout the history of cinema presents an exciting evolution. Classical cinema and its mode of institutional representation made the letter a narrative element providing information that would advance the fictional plot. This use gained prominence so that the letter became a central element of the story, always linked to the cinematic genre it developed: from the love letter in romantic drama or comedy to the testimony letter that contains the solution to the intrigue in suspense films. Cinematic modernity provided a new use of the epistolary device and instrumentalized the letter as a tool for the expression of subjectivity, thought, and imagination. Then the *letter-films* appeared through which the author could express their vision of the world, with Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard being the two great names in this practice (Monterrubio Ibáñez, 2018a). With the advent of postmodernity, the concept of alterity becomes a protagonist and the epistolary device also embodies this paradigm shift in audiovisual creation, giving priority to the epistolary addressee and causing the evolution of the letter-film to the *epistolary film*. While the letter-film of modernity was limited to the addresser's subjective expression, the prominence of otherness means that the epistolary act includes the presence of the addressee, as *Letter to Jane* (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, 1972) already anticipated (Monterrubio Ibáñez, 2016).

In the first place, the letter-film becomes an epistolary film by replacing the writing of a single letter with the reading of a set of them. In the Francophone sphere, two works are essential in this evolution. *Sans soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983) transforms the epistolary writing of *Lettre de Sibérie* (Chris Marker, 1957) into the reading of Krasna's letters by the recipient. *News from Home* (1977) becomes an epistolary film by constructing its enunciation through Chantal Akerman's reading of her mother's letters in New York. Secondly, the epistolary "you" becomes the protagonist of the writing, as Godard already anticipated, and as Marker confirms with Aleksandr Medvedkin in *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* (1993). Thirdly, the epistolary film finally meets its literary equivalent and the work is enunciated through the letters of different people or characters. Starting from this premise, contemporary cinema generates highly interesting film experiences, which are located in the hybridisation of fiction and non-fiction, such as *Endless Dreams and Water Between* (Renée Green, 2009) or *Letters from Panduranga* (Nguyen Trinh Thi, 2015). Finally, a further degree of hybridization and complexity occurs when the premise of the work is the reading of an already existing correspondence,

as in the cases of *The Dreamed Ones* (Ruth Beckermann, 2016) or *Correspondências* (Rita Azevedo Gomes, 2016).

My analysis aims to address a specific practice of this epistolary cinema, that of *filmic correspondence*, defined as the exchange of audiovisual missives, of letter-films, which can lead to an epistolary film. In it, the prominence of alterity is transferred to the concept of intersubjectivity, since there is interaction between authors, the crossing of perspectives, following the definition provided by Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel in her study on the concept of intersubjectivity and its leading role in contemporary philosophy:

> This space of "we" is not the addition of "I" and "you", but the crossroads of several perspectives, the place for the sharing of gazes, the moment of intersection […] intersubjectivity means thinking about this crossing which enriches, by creating each time, through encounter, the sphere of a new "we" […] Thinking of intersubjectivity would therefore consist of thinking about the intersection between the different perspectives […] I aim at others and others aim at me and what must be studied in the name of intersubjectivity is the crossroads of these aims (Thomas-Fogiel, 2014: 384-385).[1]

It is not necessary to insist on the fact that this audiovisual practice is totally linked to the appearance of video technology and also to its evolution from the eighties to the present. I aim therefore to go through these creations in order to analyse the epistolary interaction of the cinematic gesture, only within the reach of "friends in cinema", as Jonas Mekas calls his epistolary relationship with José Luis Guerin, and which is based on the concept of fraternity, as analysed by Jordi Balló (2006; 2012; 2014). In addition, and as a consequence of this artistic fraternity, filmic correspondences have also become crucial experiences of contemporary cinematic transnationality, crossing the borders of national cinemas.

In order to rigorously analyse this epistolary intersubjectivity, it is essential to differentiate here between the correspondences described and what I call *shipments*, in which the exchanged works do not respond to a practice of epistolary intersubjectivity since the recipient is not part of the created piece. In this sense, some of the correspondence in the project *Todas las cartas* is outside of the practice that I intend to analyse, since there is not a "true dialogue" but, in the best of cases, "a series of reflections without an interlocutor" (Balló & Pintor, 2014: 39). I refer to the exchanges between

[1] English translations from original quotations in French are mine.

Albert Serra and Lisandro Alonso, Jaime Rosales and Wang Bin, and Fernando Eimbcke and So Yong Kim. In the same way, I exclude from the study the films that use the epistolary device as an enunciative mode in order to bring together the work of various authors around a theme, as is the case of *Fluid Boundaries* (Daniel Rudi Haryanto, Jeong-hyun Mun and Vladimir Todorovic, 2015), but which again do not respond to a properly epistolary interaction.

Intersubjective work then inevitably appeals to the concepts of sincerity and vulnerability, since it implies "subjecting one's own emotions, doubts and beliefs to the intelligence of another person to access an exercise full of risks, in which what are sometimes at stake are one's own certainties" (Arroyo, 2011: 247). Only through this exposure is it possible to access the subjectivity of the other to make it, to some degree and form, one's own: "The good letter writer, the good correspondent, reaches the highest level by exploring the possibilities of the 'you'" (Pintor, 2011: 59). My study aims to carry out a first analysis of how this shift from subjectivity to intersubjectivity occurs: through which epistolary constructions it materialises, around which film practices, spaces and themes, and with what results. For this, I will carry out a chronological itinerary through the most significant works of this scarce, demanding and risky audiovisual practice, made over more than three decades now. It includes from the first work thus identified, *Video Letter* (Shuntarō Tanikawa and Shūji Terayama, 1983) to one of the most recent correspondences and what I believe to be one of the most outstanding, *Life May Be* (Mark Cousins and Mania Akbari, 2014), as an example of the perceptible, although weak proliferation of this epistolary practice in recent years.

2. *Video Letter* (1983) by Shuntarō Tanikawa and Shūji Terayama. Intersubjectivity as a tool in the essay film

The realisation of the first known filmic correspondence, the one created by Shūji Terayama and Shuntarō Tanikawa between September 1982 and June 1983, coincides in time with the creation of *Sans soleil*, thus confirming the evolution of the letter-film of modernity to the epistolary film of postmodernity. As exposed by Barbara London, both authors are encouraged to create a video letter, which is projected from the beginning as a single joint work:

> With encouragement from both Image Forum and Asahi publishing, Tanikawa and Terayama began their video exchange. Tanikawa worked alone with his home video

> equipment; Terayama used a borrowed Sony system operated by an assistant. Their main principle was not to edit their individual letters, but to compose directly, intuitively, paying attention to the speed and flow of their unfolding ideas. As a kind of conversation in which spontaneity is central, Video Letter is close to "renga" poetry (1990: 196).

The epistolary film built through filmic correspondence is then possible thanks to two factors: the joint work of two authors who know each other well and the intervention of a mediator who promotes artistic collaboration. Terayama's death will put an end to the correspondence and the editing of the work will be the responsibility of Tanikawa, who creates a film made up of sixteen letters, respecting the epistolary alternation. The filmmakers then generate an essay film that, through intersubjectivity, reflects on the dialectics meaning-no meaning and ipseity-alterity, the latter typical of postmodernity, problematizing the intermittent identities of sender/recipient and offering one of the greatest examples of this filmic intersubjectivity: "the confusion of identities supposes an interrogation, at the same time essential, haunting and very simple, about subjective non-identity [...] Thus, addressing the other, each one questions himself about the identity of the other to define—or to undefine—his own" (Bellour, 2002: 258).

Each letter advances in a dissertation that is built through the audiovisual form. Interstitial thinking (Rascaroli, 2017) and parataxic thinking (Català, 2014) materialise in sentence-images, using Jacques Rancière's concept: "The sentence is not the sayable and the image is not the visible. By sentence-image I intend the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically—that is, by the way in which they undo the representative relationship between text and image" (2009: 46). In this sense, the voices of both filmmakers seem to occupy a mental space where voice-in and voice-over would meet, making them indiscernible.

The focusing/blurring of the image is instrumentalised in the first two letters to reflect on the excessive sharpness of the language, first: "When put into words, everything appears a bit too neat, don't you think?", and on the need for it later: "But sometimes there are things I can't bear without putting them into words." The sentence-image delves into the exposed question offering an audiovisual materialisation of the thought. The third letter advances in this problematisation of meaning by presenting an abstract image that once again embodies the ambiguity of language, even its unintelligibility, when hearing unknown languages over it. In the fourth, a photograph torn and sewn, first, and another whose fragments are separated, later, deepen the argument that wants to be expressed:

“Nothing but meaning can resurrect what is going under, what is breaking down.” The reflection on the meaning continues and in the eighth letter Terayama shows a telephone conversation between the two, accompanied by images that do not add meaning to the words, thus evidencing the advantages of filmic correspondence over mere dialogue. The intersubjectivity of philosophical thinking benefits both from the deferred epistolary dialogue, which allows reflection before the interlocutor's presentation, and from the materialisation of that reflection in filmic thinking. Thus, in the ninth letter, the movement of a spider across its web becomes a sentence-image of a new concept: “Do you know what there is between ‘meaning’ and ‘no meaning’? A facade, an illusion of meaning.” The spider's trajectory becomes an image of meaning, of purpose, until it arbitrarily changes direction, undoes the path travelled, and transforms meaning into no meaning. Once again, the reflection finds a greater depth and clarity when it materialises in filmic thinking. In the tenth letter, Terayama turns Tanikawa's “illusion of meaning” into “illusion of no meaning.” A temporary ellipsis between the photographic portraits of the mother from 1927 and the current videographic image of her, from 1983, serves to reverse the argument: “I can’t help but feel life is not 'meaning' or 'no meaning', but the illusion of no meaning. Yes, the illusion of no meaning. And the body gradually gets left behind.”

In the eleventh letter, the reflection on the meaning-no meaning dialectics moves to the identity space. Again, Tanikawa generates a sentence-image that embodies his thought. From behind the camera, he is throwing different personal belongings on the carpet, to name them below: “This is my newspaper”, “These are my keys”, “This is my watch”, etc. Finally, he shows a part of his body: “This is my left foot”, before launching a question: “Who am I?” (Figure 1). A second question arises on the black screen: “Is this my poem?” It is therefore a decomposition of identity through a decomposition of the self-portrait, poetic-visual in this case, which gives rise to the black screen, to the void of no meaning. In the twelfth letter, Terayama in turn decomposes his identity: “Is it me?”, from the presentation and denial of the objects that offer representations of his identity: his written name, his photographic image, the recording of his voice. The self-portrait then emerges from the absence, that of the figures in his collages: “Am I an invisible man? I don't know, perhaps.” Next, the images of different objects—cards, letters, postcards—accompanied by the same “perhaps” continue this self-portrait of doubt: “Perhaps I am Japanese”, “Perhaps I am a poet”, “Perhaps I am an only child”. Finally, all those objects appear piled up on the ground: “Would that be me?” (Figure 2). While the first decomposition of the self-portrait (Tanikawa) uses the possession of material objects, the

second (Terayama) instrumentalises the objects dedicated to the representation of identity to deny or question them.

Imagen 1 y 2. *Video Letter* (Shuntarō Tanikawa y Shūji Terayama, 1983). Source: Screenshot.

The deconstruction of the self-portrait of the two previous letters is completed next with the attempt to display it simply. In the thirteenth letter, Taniwaka stands in front of the camera and offers a simple portrait of himself, in a single shot, performing different actions in silence. In the fourteenth, Terayama goes one step further and tackles the other's portrait. First, generating a parody through the answers to the questions he poses to anonymous people: "What is Shuntarō Tanikawa?" Then, offering the true portrait, the artistic work, as confirmed by the lines of the poem "I" by Tanikawa, included in *Two Billion Light-Years of Solitude* (1952), which Terayama shows in an image and on which he rests his hand:

> My life / a simple notebook / a notebook whose price is uncertain / (a sequence of inorganic entities / a cosmic void). / My job is taking notes / notes in the notebook / splendidly full of devotion / (lacking neat order / marked with messy handwriting) [...] I am walking / I take the notes and / in the primitive times of the twentieth century / I walk my walk bit by bit / Ever shy I'm walking.

In the penultimate letter, Tanikawa confirms the thesis of the previous portrait by showing Terayama in past images, without sound, which alternate with images of masks. On an blurry image that gradually comes into focus, until it reveals the figure of Terayama, Taniwaka states: "You cannot learn who you are by asking yourself, nor by asking someone else. You see what you are only in what you do." After Terayama's death, Tanikawa writes a last farewell letter that insists on this identification between identity and artistic work. The line of Terayama's electrocardiogram, accompanied by his voice reciting one of his poems, becomes a scriptural trace of his poetic work; the action that has given meaning to his life, his portrait. The recitation stops and the pattern on the cardiogram continues until it shows the flat line and stops; a double representation of death. Next, a panoramic view of a river ends with the image of a wooden post on which Terayama's poem is fixed. The camera zooms in on its conclusion: "Now is the time / at the entry of my season / bashfully towards the birds / I raise my arms / Twenty years old / In May I was born."

The work shows how filmic correspondence, epistolary intersubjectivity, becomes the main tool of the essay film. Interstitial and parataxic thinking is generated not only between the images and words constructed by each of the correspondents, but also in the juxtapositions and interstices that arise from the epistolary exchange, from the intersubjectivity that materialises as the constant reconfiguration of the gaze caused by audiovisual epistolary interaction.

3. *Videoletters* (1991) de Robert Kramer y Stephen Dwoskin. Emotional and existential intersubjectivity

The use of the letter as an enunciative device is abundant in Robert Kramer's works prior to the correspondence with Dwoskin: *Doc's Kingdom* (1988), *Route One/USA* (1989), *Dear Doc* (1990) and *Berlin 10/90* (1991) (Bax, 2006). With regard to Dwoskin, his extensive archive, in the process of being classified and analysed,[2] includes other audiovisual correspondences, with at least two other interlocutors—Anthea Kennedy (British editor and director, who appears in the image in the second of these missives) and Dilys Tonge—maintained that same year. We are dealing with the only film correspondence that is not conceived as a cinematic project per se, that is to say, that it is conceived as a private correspondence that is later compiled and screened for the first time in 1997. All references to this correspondence, recorded in Hi8, describe it as consisting of seven letters, four from Kramer and three from Dwoskin, made between February and June 1991. The version I have had access to, thanks to the invaluable help of Keja Ho Kramer, only includes six, and omits Kramer's last letter (June 5, 1991). I carry out my analysis with full awareness of this absence.

Dwoskin clearly describes the premises of the project. On the one hand, an exercise in technical stripping that was decisive for the realisation of the first four letters, and subsequently broken in the last two, as I will analyse below: "The letters had a particular rule when we started: not to edit" (Dwoskin and Kramer, 2006). Kramer, however, adds to the above an aspect of great interest: the dialectic between this premise of non-manipulation and the creation of the mise-en-scene that implies the interpretation of the sender (Kramer, 1997). On the other hand, the correspondence has as its objective an intimate reflection on a clear bond to which intersubjectivity is applied: the European

[2] The project *The Legacies of Stephen Dwoskin* is available at https://research.reading.ac.uk/hcic/research/the-legacies-of-stephen-dwoskin/

exile of two American filmmakers born in the same year, 1939, and in the same city, New York (Bovier, 2006). We are witnessing, therefore, a correspondence that pursues a kind of *zero degree of audiovisual epistolary writing*, in which synchronous image and sound are not altered in editing either, claiming their relationship with the present and the spontaneous flow of the filmmakers' thinking: "the filmed letter, in its ontological relationship with the present, acquires an evident advantage over the written letter" (Bergala, 2011: 28). The firm purpose for intersubjectivity causes the six letters to be generated as three diptychs in tone with three spaces that become emotional-existential expressions of the filmmakers.

The first two letters about the interior space inhabited by each of the correspondents—Kramer's apartment during his stay in Berlin and Dwoskin's house in London—become expressions of the filmmakers' state of mind and creative moment. The disorientation and creative impotence of both materialise in the geography of their work spaces and materials. Faced with this chaos, Kramer opposes a solitary chair as a space for reflection: "The chair in the middle of the room is a meditating space [...] Anything to keep an anchor", and a bicycle whose wheel spins in the air like a metaphor for the need for change: "My one possibility to take off", "Flee or distance", "Be there, not be there". These two elements merge in Dwoskin's mental space to acquire a very different meaning: his wheelchair as a materialization of isolation, as he will expose in his second letter. Kramer relates his creative work to the American culture to which he belongs by quoting—first by reading two passages from Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) (there will be a third in his second missive) and by listening to from the poem "Howl" (1956) by Allen Ginsberg later. The filmmaker begins to read, but immediately stops: "This music is not good. Hold on." He gets up, leaves the frame, turns off the music and goes back in: "I wanted to keep this music as sort of continuity, but it's gone a little weird." It is therefore a moment of maximum significance where the inherent staging of the audiovisual letter that Kramer spoke of is revealed, including its rectification, as if it were an erasure in the text. From Faulkner's reading, an initial passage on Lena's wagon trip (1972, 6-7), the reflection on the trip associated with exile arises, determined by cultural non-belonging: "Yes, I've been reading a lot of Faulkner. America. We are Americans, Steve, you and I, whatever that means. Our theme, our material… Maybe me more than you, maybe that's one of the subjects here. Maybe me much more than you, I don't know." For Dwoskin, however, the reflection on exile in the first letter revolves around the memory space with which he works: "Photographs are just full of memories. I mean,

some of these pictures go really far back. But I am not sure about the memory of America now. This is one."

The second letters, about outdoors space—the city of Berlin for Kramer and the surroundings of his house in Brixton for Dwoskin—expand its existential character. Kramer's walk enables the transition from historical to existential reflection, again in relation to exile: "I want to talk to you about why one makes one film rather than another. Or whether this separation from a country, the culture, means anything at all [...] Let me show you what the inside looks like. Inside of separation." That metaphorical interior is going to be that of the old Spanish embassy in Berlin and the traces of World War II which can be found on its walls. Once again, existential reflection becomes emotional atmosphere. Back at the apartment, Kramer recounts a dream: "I had a dream a few days ago, Steve. It was specifically… I was dreaming a dream with you or for you, I don't know. And in the morning, there were just some pieces, it was pretty usual for me […] In the dream went something like: in a room, lacking light, or in the garden. The world was ending. You said you couldn't act." The correspondence then generates a dream experience that in turn will be a source of artistic inspiration. Kramer concludes the letter by showing again, as in the first letter, the solitary chair, the possible space in which to meditate (Figure 3). Dwoskin, however, is going to offer a forceful opposition to what outdoors space represents for him due to his mobility problems: the repetitive walk along the sidewalk that surrounds his house, shown through tracking shots recorded from his wheelchair. There are a total of seven repetitions of the same itinerary, including the entrance and exit of the house: "This is life in a little chair [...] This is my world." Between them, a panning shot in the darkness of the interior seems to materialize/embody the dream related by Kramer in his letter, without Dwoskin uttering a word: this atmosphere translates the existential situation again. This exterior letter, its repetitive itineraries, thus become an irrefutable testimony of his isolation, related to exile and non-belonging: "I am kind of caught up in England, this place that doesn't belong to me. I've been thinking about going back to America, but I can't seem to make any sense of that either. I mean, it certainly is far away. I don't think it's home anymore. Nothing belongs to me except the work. This place never… it's actually very alien." As Kramer did, Dwoskin resorts to literary quotation. First, a fragment of his novel *Ha, Ha* (1993), which will be published two years later. Then a fragment from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910), Rilke's only novel, which synthesises Dwoskin's experience of loneliness: "For now I knew that everything was happening out

there with the same indifference, that outside too there was nothing but my solitude. The solitude which I had brought upon myself and which had become too vast for my heart to take in" (Rilke, 1990: 165-166).

The third pair of letters, in which the filmmakers break the premise of non-manipulation, of in-camera editing, evidence the need to convert correspondence into filmic experimentation. Kramer proposes a sound image recorded in Paris, which joins a visual image of a natural environment, that of his house in Rouen. The sound image reproduces Kramer's voice describing the Parisian apartment he is in, soon to become his new studio. It is therefore a video recording from which the visual image has been omitted to replace it with an antonymous visual image, that of a natural environment, recorded in the same way that we imagine the omitted visual image: camera in hand and with in-camera editing. The images of the river bank and the old house become the antithetical image of Kramer's description of the Parisian apartment in the sound image. Dwoskin's letter also experiences the separation of visual and sound image: the verbal digression of the second is accompanied by images that function as an atmospheric portrait of what is exposed in words, but that must be recorded independently: "My body has been giving me a lot of trouble […] That's why I'm doing the sound this way. Every time I look in the camera, I think about what I am taking pictures of not what I am thinking about before looking at the camera." In addition, it introduces a new montage element: the cut, which is accompanied by an effect of vertical movement of the image, also coinciding with the abrupt cut of the sound. That is to say, the visual image and the sound image, which we know to be independent, are nevertheless synchronized at the moment of the cut, thus insisting on their emotional bond, creating atmosphere. Late in the letter, the shaky image shows the wheelchair again (Figure 4) while we hear Dwoskin's voice: "I have been in a kind of state over the last two months, really. In fact, it's really not like, doing letters, you know, more like doing diaries, somehow, in some way." The epistolary impulse seems to vanish, writing no longer needs a correspondent.

Figures 3 and 4. *Videoletters* (Robert Kramer y Stephen Dwoskin, 1991). Source: Screenshot.

This correspondence, and especially the first four letters, zero degree of the audiovisual epistolary writing, allows for embodying, capturing and sharing the emotional and existential atmosphere of both filmmakers, thanks to the materialization of digression, of the spontaneous flow of thought that is also expressed in the film. The

different music that both correspondents listen to also contributes to the transmitted atmosphere. An intersubjective portrait is then generated, emotional and existential, around creation and exile. It is necessary to add here that this filmic correspondence will become, for the first and only time, an autobiographical document that Dwoskin includes in his film *Trying to Kiss the Moon* (1994); a sentence that he uses in his third letter to Kramer, and the image with which the film concludes. The correspondence becomes, together with the images of Dwoskin's childhood, a guiding thread of the film, which denotes the relevance of this correspondence to his work. The fragments chosen are those that most powerfully express the intersubjective space of the state of mind and existential reflection.

4. *This World* (1996) de Naomi Kawase y Hirokazu Kore-eda. Intersubjectivity as dialectics

Naomi Kawase and Hirokazu Kore-eda met at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in 1995. There, they conceived an 8mm filmic correspondence that would be exhibited at the Yokohama Museum of Modern Art. Therefore, in contrast with the two previous correspondences, made by experienced creators with a personal relationship, we find ourselves in this case contemplating a correspondence between two budding filmmakers who do not know each other. As Balló indicates, in these cases the letters can become a "vehicle for the discovery of the other" (2014: 317). Furthermore, the project was situated in Kawase's creative territory—first-person utterance and 8mm filming—which is totally foreign to Kore-eda. *This World* is thus made up of six letters, three from each author, which take place between December 1995 and the arrival of the following spring. Kawase's missives are constructed as emotion-letters while those of Kore-eda address the reflection on his difficulty to situate himself in the intimate sphere as a starting point for artistic creation. In other words, intersubjectivity becomes a dialectic between Kawase's materialisations and Kore-eda's reflections on how to access that space.

Kawase's first letter delimits the emotional dimension from which her three missives will emerge, rejecting any possibility of reflection and even narration. The sound recording of Kore-eda's answering machine, on a black screen, gives way to the sender's audiovisual message. On a metal fence turned into a musical stave and before a sunny sky (Figure 5), we hear the filmmaker's voice-over: "December the 3rd. Fine weather. The anniversary of my grandfather's death. I visited his grave". Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" (1824) is then accompanied by three detail shots of incense and flowers on the tomb,

followed by several shots of dried persimmons associated with the memory of her grandfather. A second block then generates a reflection-image, which is an exception in Kawase's missives. A close-up, without direct sound, shows us the filmmaker drying her hair in front of the mirror and then looking at the camera. That is, subject-subjectivity is transformed into object-subjectivity. Kawase's voice-over, also transformed, disguised and whispering, uses the sound image to embody that same transformation of subjectivity: "The towel my grandmother washed smells of the sun. What would a towel Naomi washes smell of?" Thus, the two key aspects are linked: an exercise in intimacy that becomes the space for exploring the epistolary intersubjectivity of the film; and the identity-alterity duality inherent in the individual and also in the epistolary practice. Next, a third block generates an emotion-image around childhood: the sound image of a children's choir and the visual images of a sunset and some children playing. In addition, another silent image is introduced. Camera in one hand and chalk in the other, Naomi writes on the ground: "Grades 1-5 Elementary School. Naomi." In its conclusion, the disguised voice of Kawase that we have heard before reappears: "I want to meet you. I want to see you."

Kore-eda's answer takes up the different spaces evoked by Kawase to generate reflection. On different shots of an interior room, we hear the filmmaker's voice-over: "To stare at something, or to keep staring at it, is very hard. Does it mean having a relationship with the object?" Filming then moves outside. Kore-eda films a television shop window on which his image is reflected: "I made a film but I did not have a good relationship with what we call 'a film', nor with what I tried to express. I couldn't capture reality. The emptiness of my life reflects in my work. Why did I make a film?" Kore-eda's sincerity and vulnerability arise not from intimacy or emotion but from reflection. This continues while the images show the walk through the city at Christmas time: "Showing something is more important than just looking. That is how I feel. So I decided I would just look this time." Back inside, the filmmaker films himself in front of the mirror: "My first time out with a camera. Naturally, I shot myself. I shot inside my mind. My memories." Visiting his parents for the New Year allows him to film his old school and the notice board at the entrance, corresponding to the inscription on Kawase's letter. Her emotion-image becomes here a document-image of the present place. And once again, he films himself in front of a mirror on the road: "Being here, the feeling I get being here. That is the feeling I want to get from reality." The filmmaker continues with his attempt to show a feeling in a realistic way, by filming his parents' house. A new image takes up Kawase's letter. Kore-eda shows an orange tree: "I planted the seeds of an orange I ate

here. So this tree is fifteen years old. It has never flowered or borne fruit, but it smells like oranges". Next, he shows a sunset, without added music or sound, and Kawase's musical stave finds its realistic materialisation on Kore-eda's power line, a stave that he can encompass with his hand: "I encounter your gaze through the screen. Through the viewfinder, I make that look out of my memory" (Figure 6). Thus, the author offers the first great definition of filmic intersubjectivity that I analyse, in full correspondence with what Thomas-Fogiel theorises: "To think of intersubjectivity as an interrelation would therefore be to accept becoming, at every moment, the subject of this plurality of perspectives" (2014: 386-387). The shot assumes the subjectivity of his correspondent to make it his own.

Figures 5 and 6. *This World* (Naomi Kawase y Hirokazu Kore-eda, 1996). Source: Screenshot.

In her second letter, Kawase delves into the display of intimacy. Her voice leaves a message on Kore-eda's answering machine, while the image, in dim light, goes through the detail of some suspended clothespins, a metaphor for the vulnerability shown by the filmmaker, thus taking her into the intersubjective space: "Hello, this is Naomi. How are you doing? It's been almost four months since we met in Yamagata. Time has passed so quickly... Only four months? Or rather, four months already?" Next, the letter continues Kore-eda's reflection on the action of looking (as opposed to showing), on which Kawase once again introduces the subjective emotion that transforms the image. Before the document-image of a woman at a crossroads, Kawase opposes the emotion-image of that same urban space, generated through its manipulation (slowing down and freezing, absence of sound, colour alteration). In this way, she embodies the intersubjective dialectics between Kore-eda's documentary gaze and her emotional gaze. Next, and opposed to the different self-portraits that Kore-eda included in his first letter, all of them filmed by himself in the reflections of glasses and mirrors, camera in hand, Kawase responds with a self-portrait filmed by another person to whom she entrusted the camera and in front of which she acts spontaneously; relinquishing the camera to show oneself in front of it is a step further in intimate exploration. To this exposition, Kawase adds a sense of lingering, slowing down the last images before concluding the letter with a simple: "Bye." While Kore-eda wants to look, Kawase wants to show herself, in a constant tension of the space of intersubjectivity. Kore-eda's second letter, filmed in Amsterdam, first becomes a reaction to the tension shown, and he dedicates his letter to looking at a

barrel organ around which various children gather, play and dance. Once again, the filmmaker takes up a motif from Kawase's first letter (children playing in the park) to contribute his documentary point of view, also by portraying a street mime first and a skating rink later, where children and adults enjoy recreation time. After this observation, Kore-eda eliminates the direct sound and introduces that of the camera before beginning his reflection, his subjectivity in the form of a voice-over: “I like to shoot the sounds, the colours and the people I meet travelling […] Maybe because these people are strangers to me. Back in my normal life, I am sometimes scared to film”. In this last sentence, the image of a child on the icy track cuts to Kore-eda’s usual environment, a park. The reflection in voice-over continues on this new image: “I have discovered that I have neither the ability nor the capacity to take a good hard look at my life and myself… not in a realistic way. I just can’t. I am really scared to shoot […] I'm sorry for subjecting you to all this, but for now… the fact that I can't film properly is my theme.” All this reflection is accompanied by a hesitant shot, camera in hand, which fluctuates through the elements of an empty wooded area, conveying that difficulty. In her third letter, Kawase, once again, offers a materialisation of what Kore-eda expresses as a difficulty. On this occasion, the reverse image of the one offered in her previous letter; rather than being filmed by a loved one, she films close-ups of friends who she asks to pronounce her name. Once again, Kawase captures the spontaneity of her intimate environment, a space for play and carelessness, of emotions, totally disconnected from any reflection. Next, she presents a series of detail shots together with, again, the sound of singing from a children's choir. The last shot of Kawase's correspondence is a new inscription in her own hand, in this case on the misty window: “I'm home!”

Kore-eda’s last letter first shows images of a park and a group of children playing on the edge of a pond. Once again, childhood is a recurring motif for both correspondents, but from very different points of view. In Kawase’s, it is configured as an essential emotional memory space to understand the tone of her letters, while in Kore-eda’s, it is an element of the current reality of which he takes a documentary record. Next, Kore-eda leaves the camera in the hands of another person to stand in front of it and finally offer us his complete self-portrait. He looks at the camera, greets us and speaks without us being able to hear his words; he shows himself in image but without sound. After accessing the vulnerability of the portrait in front of the camera, Kore-eda offers, to conclude, some images of the intimate space, of the people around him, a couple with a baby and a girl playing. This time he also shows the sound of this family scene. Thus, in his last letter,

Kore-eda abandons the reflection of the voice-over and the gaze of his previous letters to show his intimate space.

5. *Correspondencias* (2005-2007) by Victor Erice and Abbas Kiarostami. The search for intersubjectivity as space for creation

The correspondence between the two filmmakers is above all a sincere and moving search for a common creative space in which to share their perceptions. In addition, this is going to be public in its development, not as a unified work that contains all the correspondence, but as a work in progress in whose process the spectator participates, since they will have access to the epistolary exchange in three different moments of its production: four letters in Barcelona (2006), five in Madrid (2006) and the total, ten, in Paris (2007). Furthermore, this correspondence is the first of a transnational nature, thus inaugurating a fertile epistolary practice that will become crucial for future correspondences.

In his first letter, which emerges from the writing on paper and is accompanied by the filmmaker's voice-over, Erice proposes a visit to the space where he filmed *Dream of Light* (*El sol del membrillo*, 1992) almost fifteen years earlier. It is now Antonio López's grandchildren who paint the quince tree, before the rain interrupts their work as also happened to the painter. Aurora's drawing becomes a gift for Kiarostami. He responds to Erice's letter with a wonderful postcard showing the geography of a cow, which he turns over at the end in order to be able to write his message on it, as Erice did at the beginning of his: "Dear friend: Writing you a letter is not easy […] I have torn up two previous letters". Kiarostami thus accepts the epistolary device as a space for intersubjectivity while discarding the theme of the revisiting of one's own work that Erice proposes in his first letter. In addition, the filmmaker introduces the possibility of traveling correspondence and explains the complexity of the task that both face.

Erice continues in his second letter the search for that common ground. Once again, the filmic letter begins with the written missive, this time finished, accompanied by the postcard by Kiarostami, and some bovine souvenirs from the filmmaker's biography: a childhood photograph and a ceramic figure. This small detail becomes a tacit confirmation of the search in which both have engaged. Erice also informs his correspondent that he has already started this letter before he received the postcard and that he still has many doubts about this joint exploration task. The filmmaker then substitutes the revisiting of his own work for that of his interlocutor, to which he adds the idea of the trip, in this case through the viewing of *Where is the Friend's House?* (*Khane-*

ye doust kodjast?, 1987) by the children of a school in Arroyo de la Luz (Cáceres). Thus, he continues the theme of childhood, now with the childish amazement aroused by cinematic fiction, which inevitably evokes *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973). The children's reflections after the screening lead Erice to the same reflection that arises from *La Morte Rouge* (2006): "There is a truth that we adults often forget: that children do not know borders, that the whole world is their home" (Monterrubio, 2019b).

Kiarostami's response shows that the filmmakers have found the intersubjective space to develop in their correspondence, which is applied to the revisiting and prolongation of the correspondent's cinematic work. While Erice has extended the film experience of *Where is the Friend's house?* in Arroyo de la Luz, Kiarostami extends the narrative of *Dream of Light* from a fruit fallen from the tree in Madrid that touches the soil in Iran. The filmmaker reproduces a fragment of Erice's film (the first time we find this element in a correspondence) to introduce this fictional extension, through a long cross-fade characteristic of his correspondent's film. From the quince three documentary of 1992 to this epistolary fiction of 2005, the filmmaker can include now Erice's first missive in the intersubjective experience: "In our culture, if the fruit hangs beyond the four walls of a garden, it belongs to passers-by. Here two primary school boys appear, a little older than Antonio López's grandchildren, who are more interested in eating the quince than in painting it, and they make of obtaining it their goal". The journey of the quince along the river in Iran, accompanied by the melody of "Boogie Woogie" (Pinetop Smith, 1928) ends when it lands in the hands of a shepherd who shares it with his cattle before leaving with them while we listen to "Galliard Battaglia" (Samuel Scheidt, 1621). His use of music insists on the idea of the construction of the letter-film, similar to the way he uses the postcard in his first shipment.

Erice continues Kiarostami's creation in the fifth letter, extending the character of the Iranian shepherd to create a portrait of José, a shepherd from Segovia. Returning to the element of the viewing, Erice shows Kiarostami's letter to José, and the spectators are party to this having already viewed it themselves. The intersubjective experience is then transferred to the spectator, who can compare their own impressions to José's observations, which once again reveal the relationships between fiction and non-fiction and the presence of chance in both spaces. With José's gaze, unaware of the cinematic form but an expert in the action it reproduces, Erice also employs the comic tone of Kiarostami's letter: "Blimey! It sure is s a long lemon!", "Blimmin' hell! What beautiful music he has put on", "But what the hell… this shepherd is doing it wrong; he drives

them; and he has to go ahead, calling them". The constructed randomness of the quince's journey becomes the real randomness of José's spontaneity during the viewing. His words undoubtedly synthesise many of the theoretical discussions about the hybridisation between fiction and non-fiction characteristic of contemporary cinema, of which both filmmakers are essential precursors (Monterrubio, 2018b).

From the encounters of the filmmakers on the occasion of the exhibition's launches in Barcelona and Madrid, a new epistolary impulse arises. A kind of second part of the correspondence is then generated, made up of five other letters, from the delicate tracing of the revealed intersubjective space, and which Kiarostami seems to describe in the sixth letter, *Rain*, which is going to become a disruptive element in the correspondence at the same time as its poetic synthesis. Kiarostami's missive is dated March 18th, 2006, therefore prior to that of José, but it is delivered along with the next and last letter from him, after Erice has filmed two subsequent missives. This disruption evidences the link between intersubjectivity and epistolary reading, so I situate the analysis of this letter at that time.

Therefore, Erice also begins this second part of the correspondence; in this case, using an enunciation of greater exposure, standing in front of the camera, creating his own staging. Sitting at a table, he reads a poem by Omar Khayyam, who once again describes the poetic space they share: "As children we attended classes with teachers / then we were teachers and this made us happy / what happened to end of us, the words say: / we sprouted from the earth and the wind swept us away" (1993: 95). Erice thus cultivates the gaze of his correspondent. He then starts the epistolary writing, but its content is not disclosed on this occasion. After an ellipsis (again a cross-fade), Erice rolls up the letter and puts it in a bottle that is thrown into the sea, in which it floats adrift as the quince of the Kiarostami's second missive.

The filmmaker proposes building a new narration of this stripped and random epistolary gesture to his correspondent: its content is unknown and its addressee will be replaced by a random recipient. In the absence of Kiarostami's answer, Erice films a new letter about the act of waiting: "I must say that this letter of mine, *Adrift*, is written from the experience of spending nine months without receiving a response from Abbas" (Balló, 2011: 44-45). It is not, however, the act of waiting by the sender, but by the letter itself which is waiting to be found, read. This implies that Erice abandons the epistolary self for the first time to place himself in the objective narrative about the object, the letter. The sender ceases to be, disappears from the enunciation, anticipating the failure of the

correspondence. This letter can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the sterility of a shipment that does not use intersubjectivity, in which physical non-reception symbolises another deeper lack, the absence of shared gazes, of the intersubjective gaze.

Erice then receives the two remaining letters from Kiarostami: *Rain* and *Treasure Map.* The delay of more than a year of the first (dated in March 2006, delivered in May 2007) gives multiple meanings to the waiting of its addressee. Kiarostami's voice emerges from the black screen, to inform Erice of the journey he began by car. After the black fade in, the letter shows us the image that the camera captures through the windshield on which the rain appears: "I have the feeling that you are by my side on this journey [...] As I have told you, on this journey I feel the need to see things through your gaze. I know that nature is one of our common interests. That is why I spontaneously thought of focusing my video letter on a gaze on nature". Like did Kore-eda, Kiarostami thus offers a new definition of filmic intersubjectivity: "[O]ur relationship with the other reconfigures our relationship with the object" (Thomas-Fogiel, 2014: 362). The filmmaker concludes his enunciation to give way to a long series of still images (about seventy) captured from that same point of view, through the water on the windshield, which follow one another through subtle cross-fades, and which are accompanied by Mozart's *Concerto for Two Violins and Orchestra*. The rain filter renders abstract the landscapes that we observe through it, giving them an enormously expressive pictorial quality (Figure 7). The still images from Kiarostami's letter, his gaze from inside his car, contain many others from Erice's work: the rural landscapes of *The Spirit of the Beehive* and *El sur* (1983). In Kiarostami's last missive, the letter in a bottle finally finds its random recipient, again trapped by the nets of some fishermen. One of them breaks the container to access the content. They seek to decipher the letter to find out if it is a treasure map, but it is blown away by the wind, as indicated in Khayyam's poem. Then we heard Kiarostami's voice-over:

> Dear Victor, I am glad that the secret of your letter has not been completely revealed. The wind has blown on a whim, to where it wanted. So, I imagine that it will return the letter to you. I also wanted to let you know that I have read your letter without reading it, and as the Persian poet would say: your words flow from my heart, I will keep for myself the secret hidden in the bottle.

Thus, Kiarostami generates again an emotional expression of the intersubjectivity experienced. And with it, he associates a withdrawal of correspondence towards the private space, where the content of the letter is kept and where its continuation would be located: “I am sending you my new mailing address in the hope of receiving new postcards from you."

Erice's last letter, *Written in the water*, could provide the answers to Kiarostami's two letters. The first, explicitly, shows the ending of the journey of the missive, decomposed in the sea water. The second, he answers *Rain*: the landscape filtered by the rain on the windshield becomes now the epistolary remains filtered by sea water (Figure 8): the water as a metaphor, in both letters, for the phenomenon of intersubjectivisation. It evidences then the success of correspondence as a generator of intersubjectivity in relation to the creation theme.

Figures 7 and 8. *Correspondencias* (Víctor Erice y Abbas Kiarostami, 2005-2007).
Source: Nautilus Films and Centre de Cultura Contemporànea de Barcelona.

6. *In Between Days* (2009) by Isaki Lacuesta and Naomi Kawase. About intersubjectivity and its simulacrum

In this second correspondence by Kawase, the initial premise is repeated: she received a proposal for an epistolary correspondence with a filmmaker whom she has only met once during a festival. For his part, Lacuesta uses this proposal to address, for the first time in his work, his intimacy as a cinematic space. The project is designed as an exchange of four letters (two from each author) that will be screened at a live event attended by both authors (Cinergies, September 2009), as well as a joint film shoot carried out in the days prior to the encounter with the public. In addition, the filmmakers agree on the theme to be addressed: their closest environment, both physical and human. These previous agreements, based on subjective expression, nullify to a large extent the search for intersubjectivity that we witnessed in the correspondence between Erice and Kiarostami, to transform it into a game and generate a kind of simulacrum of intersubjectivity, as I will analyse below.

For the first time, a correspondence removes the correspondents’ voices and replaces them with the text written on the screen. This element, of great importance and potentiality, will be used differently by the two filmmakers. Lacuesta uses it as a literary element with which to turn the autobiographical narrative into a fable and thus simulate

an intimacy that is largely avoided. In addition, the text on the screen is more profoundly linked to the absence of direct sound, especially in the first two letters. In this way, and against the zero degree of audiovisual epistolary writing by Kramer-Dwoskin, we find here a kind of literary-visual missive. The image is transformed into epistolary narration (moving away from enunciation), and the sudden appearance of sound (that of the ship in the first and the doors of the museum warehouses in the second) is configured as expression of vivacity of the fabled. Kawase, for her part, gives the inscribed text on the screen a poetic use, and places it in the centre of the image to vindicate its importance. Thus, the text is defined as an expression of subjectivity, while the image, with its direct sound, tries to capture that poeticity of reality. This same tendency is confirmed in the image formats. While Lacuesta seeks to fictionalise them (B/W and colour video, photography, images by other authors and in other formats), Kawase maintains them in the documentary stage that testifies that poeticity.

In his first letter, Lacuesta transforms his introduction and that of his partner, Isa Campo, in a fable about an escapade through invisible places. Back home, to that place where he never shoots, the filmmaker once again turns Isa's sleeping portrait into a new fable on an invisible film, through some never previously shown B/W images: "Once I filmed an invisible film. No one has ever seen it. I didn't even finish it. In fact, it is not a movie, but a spell to never lose her." Intimacy is not revealed but hidden; he protects it through a fabulating filter that only allows us to discern it. Kawase's missive responds to Lacuesta's tale with the expression of her spirituality. The images of a nocturnal prayer, which follow one another through cross-fades, become the prayer that Kawase offers to her family and especially to her son, Mitsuki, who appears in the image at different times:

> There is light because there is darkness / Time creates light / One light cancels another light […] In my country, prayers are always offered / His name is "light". My blood runs through his veins / His father's name is "the great light" / They brought the light into my life. In my country prayers are always offered / I could not exist without them / As a particle of this wonderful world / Thank you. Thank you / I thank you for coming into this world!

As Anna Petrus (2011) indicates, the letter accounts for the paradigm shift that occurs in Kawase's filmography after the birth of her son, which turns the darkness of maternal and paternal absence into the light of her own and present family. However, as

far as intersubjective space is concerned, Kawase's piece is not linked to the recipient in any way. As we indicated in the introduction, we find ourselves before a shipment that simulates the letter, but that does not interpellate the epistolary "you".

In his second letter, Lacuesta addresses his childhood through the account of the history of the Darder Museum in Banyoles, to turn it into a sort of childhood mythical space of the discovery of the world: "In fact, it was here that I first saw a Japanese person." A second fable about a civil war aviator allows him to resume his relationship with his partner, through still images of them in the lake, to now associate them with its mythical image, built with images by Segundo de Chomón, *Gérone, la Venise espagnole* (1912), with which the letter begins and concludes. Once again, the intimate becomes a fable; it seems to be shown, but is actually hidden. Kawase's answer is the reworking of her later letter in the correspondence with Kore-eda. While in the first case her young friends pronounced her name in front of the camera, now the people who surround the filmmaker do so: the workers from her production company and her family members. Thus, an emotional materialisation of what has been achieved in twelve years arises, of the relationships built, whereby Kawase asks the people around her to make the same gesture, to look at the camera, say their name and add whatever they want. That demand on the other persists and Kawase captures it in the text: "I am here, surrounded by my friends. At midnight, I'm here, alone. It's raining, where are you?" A montage of all the faces shown serves as a response: "I am here". Again, Kawase's shipment is an interesting subjective and intimate expression that at no time addresses intersubjectivity.

With these four letters, the filmmakers conclude the correspondence and meet only a few days later for its presentation to the public and the filming of a last joint letter. It is finally made in 16mm (Kawase had proposed the 8mm format), by the lake of Banyoles, but a technical problem makes all the material incorrectly exposed. It is this unforeseen circumstance that unexpectedly causes the prolongation of the correspondence and allows intersubjectivity to finally burst into it, further strengthened by the experience shared: "[T]he crux of the correspondence between Lacuesta and Kawase lays in the fifth letter, which allows them to face the void of an unexpected twist" (Balló and Pintor, 2014: 45).

Lacuesta's new letter materialises from these fogged images. The letter begins with still images of that day at the lake, first pixelated and then shown without that effect, on which the text is now placed at the centre, as in Kawase's letters: "Dear Naomi, I have already received the film we shot when you came to Banyoles. Everything is badly

exposed! I try to distinguish your shots from mine. For the first time, I am afraid that we have almost the same styles." For the first time, Lacuesta thus addresses the intersubjective filmic space, alluding to the similarity of style. The letter then becomes a visual poem set to music. The composition by Pascal Comelade, "Sense el Ressò del Dring" (2002), an adaptation of the poem by Joan Salvat Papasseit, performed together with Enric Casasses, accompanies the fogged images to which Lacuesta adds his fabulation, now applied to the intersubjective space: what do the images hide? The literary account of the previous letters becomes a kind of childish game, alluding to the figure of Mitsuki: "A lake. Your son running around the lake or a striped tiger […] Diego, chasing a lion […] A cloud in the shape of a hippopotamus. Clouds that look like giraffes on fire" (Figure 9).

Kawase's letter then responds to Lacuesta's intersubjective search, and in contrast to what he fabulates about the images of that day, Kawase offers "what he remembers": her son's childhood experience of that day, in a sort of collage, made up of the photos taken by the child, those taken by his mother, and the moving image of the lake. It is also an exercise in intersubjectivity between mother and son (Image 10). In contrast with the human experiences frozen in time (still images), Kawase offers the moving image of the lake. Thus, she resumes its importance in Lacuesta's imagination, updating Chomón's images, perhaps to perpetuate it in the imagination of her son. In addition, the memory is also set to music, revealing another point of contact between the filmmakers. The song chosen by Kawase is "Sanpo" (2009) by Pascals, a Japanese group whose name demonstrates their admiration for Pascal Comelade. On the final black screen, it is the voice of Mitsuki, for the first time an epistolary voice, which says goodbye: "Good night, see you later." It further proofs the intersubjectivity achieved.

Figures 9 and 10. *In Between Days* (Isaki Lacuesta and Naomi Kawase, 2009).
Source: Screenshot.

Lacuesta's final post script is once again a magnificent materialisation of intersubjectivity, now completely freed from any premise. The filmmaker sends her some images taken in Mali, where he is preparing *Los pasos dobles* (2011). The filmmaker abandons any fable in order to carry out an exercise characteristic of Kawase, the simple capture of a gesture of reality that encompasses a whole poetic universe: "Today it has been raining. The first rain of the season. And I would like to show you the children

chasing the flying ants that come out after the rain". As a farewell, Lacuesta adds a montage that he prepared for their encounter at *Cinergies* and which now makes full sense: "As a farewell song, I would also like to send you an old film by Segundo de Chomón. I have edited the film with music by your friends the Pascals, playing a song by my beloved Pascal Comelade." The montage of *Kiriki, Japanese acrobats* (1907) with the music of "The Skatalan logicofobism" interpreted by Pascals (2001) confirms the intersubjectivity reached by filmic correspondence when it abandons its simulation.

7. *Correspondencia* (2009-2011) by José Luis Guerin and Jonas Mekas. On intersubjectivity as impossibility and correspondence as antithesis

Once again, the correspondence begins after two encounters between the two filmmakers. To initiate it, Guerin makes a concession in favour of the fluidity of the communication and, for the first time in his work, exposes his voice in the enunciation of the letters, as "the only natural choice to write the letter, with his voice, thinking of Jonas" (Tourneur, 2014: 4). The filmmaker, however, maintains the B/W image which he has used in his previous works: *Unas fotos en la ciudad de Sylvia* (2007) and *Guest* (2010). From his first letter he establishes the nature of his epistolary device. The voice-over, completely separated from the visual image, situates the images, and their editing, in a past that the voice comments on from the present of its enunciation (with the exception of the first letter). However, he discards the intimacy and closeness of what Chion calls acousmatic I-voice (1999: 49), common in epistolary enunciation, to move away from that subjectivity by manipulating it: a recording quality that objectifies the sender. Thus, the filmmaker narrates and reflects on an already constructed visual image. The correspondence, which coincides with the last production stage of *Guest*, is also generated as a narration of the travel experience. In his first letter, from Paris, Guerin takes the idea of Mekas's glimpses to generate a visual image of the *flâneur*'s experience, actually a stylisation of that experience, stripped of its direct sound, while the voice-over recounts his current situation, and remembers Mekas' words in their first encounter, "I react to life": "One doesn't react to life like a flâneur at the beginning of the 21st century. A walker these days proceeds with the awareness of being a walker" (Català, 2017: 76). The letter ends with the images promised at the beginning: those of the revolving door of the café where he finds himself. These images are again carefully constructed and edited, with attention paid to their rhythm and movement, without direct sound.

Mekas' response, and the rest of his letters, is generated in the antithesis of Guerin's proposal, and in absolute harmony with the filmmaker's work. His letters will contain the same work as his diaristic filming, which on this occasion will be generously offered to the epistolary interlocutor: filming with direct sound, including the filmmaker's voice, the almost non-existence of editing, the absence of reflection, the hand-held camera, and the self-filming. The image of the exterior of Mekas's apartment, featuring a tree, accompanies the author's declaration of his intent to write, which already includes the denial of the reflection: "I will try to give you some glimpses of my life since I received your letter. You said something about my filming as a reaction, reactions to the life around me. It is and it is not. Who knows, who knows… Obsessions, reactions, memories, involvements in what is happening this moment in front of me, you, while I am filming." After this definition of the zero degree of his epistolary writing, Mekas offers his usual filming work in those days. The conclusion of the letter vindicates its diaristic nature: Mekas returns to portray the same tree, now covered in snow. In addition, he shows the limits of montage in his film practice: he associates a sound image of a conversation with a visual image of the interior, and superimposes a close-up of himself saying goodbye: "This is how my life is going."

Guerin's second letter is a new confrontation between two conceptions almost opposed to the filmic activity, which show their extreme differences, but which can in no way reduce them. Thus, the letter received from Mekas becomes a marginal reason for the answer. Guerin recounts his trip to Harvard and his visit to the Walden Pound: "This back-and-forth of an image that follows the previous one seems to be a way of saying: I have received your letter, I have seen and read it, and I include a visual element of it in my response" (Balló, 2014: 317). The epistolary voice comments again on some images that are stripped of their direct sound, and that only recover it when the sender abandons his enunciation; another way of separating the present epistolary enunciation from the past narration of images. The filmmaker will never address Mekas in the direct sound of the images.

Mekas's answer, his second letter, seems to have been made without viewing Guerin's previous one, since the filmmaker will refer to the Walden Pound in his next letter. Thus, a clear revelation occurs: his letter gains spontaneity and interest when it is freed from the obligations of the response, reference, intersubjectivity. After showing another tree in bloom—it is already spring—his letter encapsulates a valuable vital moment in which Mekas shows his interlocutor his editing room and his work for his next

film, which will be made up of outtakes from his films in 8mm: *Out-Takes from the Life of a Happy Man* (2012). This emotional sequence is unedited, with only the recording cuts that Mekas needs to make to operate the camera and the 8mm editing device. In this way, the filmmaker creates an admirable example of that zero degree of audiovisual epistolary writing, stripped of all subsequent manipulation, and reduced to the essentiality of the present image and sound. A kind of *lettre vérité*, in which the present immediacy collects the filmic vestiges of an entire existence and the author's reaction to them: worn-out and discarded images; marginal and marginalised memories that did not deserve, until now, a cinematic presence: "That is the life of a filmmaker […] That is my life on this planet." To say goodbye, Mekas takes up the spring image of the trees, the strength and vitality of the present moment.

Guerin's response is the ultimate revelation of the impossibility of intersubjectivity. We hear his voice over the black image: "Dear Jonas Mekas, In this latest instalment, I want to return to the ideas outlined in your last letter. Namely, a contrast between two windows. A first window looking out onto an exterior in springtime; and another, inside, looking over images of winter." The spontaneous and non-reflexive work by Mekas becomes an inspiration for Guerin "confronting two windows that have undoubtedly accompanied him for a long time without having decided to theorise them, to assimilate them to his particular epistolary reflection" (Català, 2017). :77). The exterior of the flowering trees in spring is also confronted with his own winter images from the editing table, in this case digital: the encounter with the young cinephile Nika Bohinc, turned into a posthumous tribute. The antithetical comparison occurs again: in contrast with the analogue editing table, through whose window we could see frames of different outtakes, without any order or preparation, Guerin offers the finished montage of that past encounter, also converted into an epistolary narration. Once again, the enunciation time alternates with the narration time, defined by the absence and presence, respectively, of the direct sound.

The following letter from Mekas begins with his self-filming alluding to Guerin's second letter, and again the reference to the previous letter (the third) is omitted: "Dear José Luis, My friend in cinema. I see you had a beautiful trip to Walden. I would have liked to be there with you, in Walden. But you went to the new world and I, by mistake, went to the old one." The images of horror—first in the old Jewish cemetery in Krakow and later in the torture rooms of the Banská Stiavnica castle, in Slovakia—the mistake in visiting these places, as Mekas says, become a metaphor for the epistolary error: that of

trying to force the intersubjective gaze, taking subjectivity to spaces that are unattainable for it. In Mekas' case, it is the space for reflection. After the images of the trip, a new self-filming bears witness to this error (Figure 11):

> In truth, what I am doing is I am just filming […] Moments of life around me, friends, my own life, details, that I have the need to tape, for whatever reason, I don't know what makes me do it [...] Later, people ask me why I do it, what is the meaning of it all. So I try to rationalise. But it's all like game, it's just a play with words.

In contrast with Mekas's naked statement, Guerin faces that same exposition on the inalienable reflective essence of his own work through an audiovisual construction that completely opposes that of his interlocutor. The filmmaker shows a fixed shot of an urban environment that in turn frames a cinematic screen, with which he offers an explanation of his work, defined by the reflection on the structure:

> I need to set myself some limits or restrictions. First of all, the actual limits of the shot, which, for me, is like a rigid framework, a restriction; like the express rejection of sound and colour, which is also a restriction [...] Without some degree of technical adversity, I can't find my own way of filming [...] And I also need to be able to choose, to make choices.

The letter concludes with a self-portrait that defines his cinematic activity: his image is reflected in the eye of the woman he films (Figure 12). Intersubjectivity is once again revealed as an impossibility, which Steven Marsh analyses as "aporetic incompatibilities" (2013: 28), to generate a kind of antithetical correspondence between the two self-portraits: their simplest and most spontaneous materialisation (that zero degree of audiovisual epistolary writing) and its highest reflective construction. Thus, the correspondence becomes a vindication of the subjectivities of both filmmakers faced with the threat of the intersubjective intent: "the relevance of intersubjectivity in contemporary philosophy [...] endorses either the removal or the disappearance of the subject" (Thomas-Fogiel, 2014 :375).

Figures 11 and 12. *Correspondencia* (José Luis Guerin and Jonas Mekas, 2011).
Source: Screenshot.

Mekas's last missive, once again, makes no allusion to Guerin's letter, and simply takes up the nature of his film activity, its spontaneity, its thoughtless impulse, its absence of manipulation. Not by chance, it is his longest letter, perhaps in which he finally allows himself to get carried away, forgetting the obligations of the epistolary task, without explicitly addressing Guerin at any time. For his farewell, he simply returns to the initial element of his first letter, the tree in front of his window, a year later, again in the company of music, thus emphasising the diaristic character of his letters. In contrast with the spontaneity and simplicity of this conclusion, Guerin creates a final letter that aims to be a "gloss of his figure", a tribute to Mekas in which he describes a failed letter that had to be built from a shot of Mekas walking, recorded by Guerin during their second encounter. Instead, the filmmaker sends him footage from a past trip to Japan that concludes with a visit to Yasujurō Ozu's grave. There, some ants work tirelessly to lift a load through the stone wall. After several attempts, they finally succeed. This image could also be a metaphor for filmic correspondence, where the only way to achieve the objective, that is, for the meaning to arise from the exchange, requires a joint effort that, in this case, does not lead to an intersubjective experience but to the confirmation of its impossibility. The correspondence then becomes the subjective vindication offered to the addressee, from which interesting reflections arise about the relationship between reality and image (Brenez, 2011), or the aesthetic exchange as an act of political imagination (Fibla, 2014). This antithesis is confirmed if we observe the letter-films authored by each of them. In *Letters to Friends... from Nowhere... Video Letter #1* (1997), *Letters from Nowhere N.1* (1997) and *A Letter from Greenpoint* (2005) Mekas also showed everyday emotional experiences, without the existence of an explicit addressee. It is interesting to point out that these epistolary forms are also associated with the transition from the analogue to the digital format. On the contrary, *Dos cartas a Ana* (2011), by Guerin, is constructed as an impressive essay film about artistic creation and the relationship between its different disciplines (Monterrubio, 2019a).

8. *Life May Be* (2014) by Mark Cousins and Mania Akbari. Intersubjectivity as result

The film is constructed as a correspondence between the two filmmakers, three letters from Cousins and two from Akbari, in which the question of cultural identity and its link with artistic creation is paramount. Like most of Cousins' audiovisual work, his epistolary writing is conceived from essayistic practice. His first letter generates an interesting enunciation device. A subjective shot advances along a path in a Scottish forest and the filmmaker's voice-over explains the epistolary nature of the film. The camera then stops to frame a magnificent landscape that will remain throughout the entire letter and that undoubtedly evokes *Stemple Pass* (James Benning, 2012). The filmmaker then narrates how he was asked to write a review of *One. Two. One* (*Yek. Do. Yek*, Mania Akbari, 2011) for the DVD edition of the film, and he then wrote a letter addressed to the filmmaker that he is now ready to reread. That is, the audiovisual missive includes a previous literary missive; a sort of epistolary mise-en-abyme. The image of the landscape (and its faint direct sound) and Cousins's voice give way to a second situation of enunciation, a bar in Edinburgh, which is also referenced in the literary missive. To this confluence of spatial-temporal coordinates, others imagined by the sender will be added. Cousins reflects on Akbari's work, her two feature films, *20 Fingers* (2004), which is a revelation for Cousins, and *One. Two. One*, whose sequences-based structure prompts the filmmaker to proposes to the recipient different imagined trips, around the artistic creations with which Cousins relates Akbari's work. To Stockholm, to discover the relationship between the work of the Iranian creator and *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966). To Rome, where he compares the scenes of the *sacra conversazione* with a dialogue from a sequence in *One. Two. One.* To Tehran, where they met and visited Forugh Farrokhzad's grave, a writer admired by Cousins and to whom he believes Akbari is the worthy successor. To Hungary, to meet other masters of the sequence shot, such as Béla Tarr. And finally, to London, where Akbari currently resides, to make an exciting comparison with Virginia Woolf and imagine the end of the trip: "Let's end our journey together outside Virginia's old home […] Let's take a picture of you and it on our camera phones and see in that picture a great artist […] I loved travelling with you, Mania". After reading the past letter, Cousins says goodbye in the present one: "So that was the letter, Mania. It is strange rereading it here in these Scottish hills. It turns out that you did read it. How do I know? Because of this picture." The Scottish landscape gives way to a photo of Akbari at the door of Woolf's residence, to conclude the letter (Figure 13). The confrontation between past and

imagined temporalities and the fixed shot of the landscape, which is transformed with the movement of the fog, offers a spatial-temporal experience of the epistolary act, the rereading in this case, in which a powerful here and now cohabits with past and imagined experiences and, more specifically, with their absent images, until the last of them materialises through intersubjectivity.

Akbari is going to resume the imaginary journey outlined by Cousins to offer the one she has experienced, that of her exile. To the static image of the landscape proposed by her correspondent, Akbari opposes a letter built almost entirely with still images, on which her voice-over becomes predominant again. The letter begins with images of the landscape of Meygun (from Akbari's family home), over which we hear the beginning of the poem "Born Again" (1981) by Forugh Farrokhzad, from which the film takes its title. Next, Akbari describes family life before starting the story of the journey: Dubai, Stockholm, London. The images illustrate what is narrated, and the words reflect on the images shown. Those of Dubai, accompanied by Souad Massi's song, "Raoui" (2001), portray the contradiction between the image of western women associated with advertising and the situation of women in the country. Akbari reflects on the lack of freedom: "Beyond the façade, the void is infinite. There is no freedom, there is no democracy […] there is no difference between women who are forced by society to pursue beauty at whatever price, and the women who are forced to wear the chador. Both situations are unbearable." In Sweden. Akbari contrasts the old family images with the pictorial images of the museums visited, several of them around the female portrait and the nude, and she accompanies them with the song "Million scarlet roses" (Alla Pugacheva, 1982). The experience as a woman is then linked to the experience of exile: "The profound awareness that something is after us […] We often look for joy in the trivial things of life, discovering that only art can bind us to the vital roots of existence." In London, with the music by Sophie Hunger, "Train People" (1983), Akbari offers images of shop windows, similar to those portrayed in Dubai. Having established her residence in this city, the filmmaker invites Cousins to meet, with the appearance of the moving image, with her direct sound, of Akbari herself in her new home, doing daily tasks: "I contemplate what's happened to me and what is going to happen to me." The filmmaker then returns to the still images to show the displacement of her belongings that travel from Tehran to London. These objects make up the materialisation of her existence, and she invites Cousins once again to unpack them together when they arrive: "Mark, these boxes will be waiting for your hands and mine to reveal their secrets, wipe off their

dust, and place them on new shelves." Akbari adds that she would like to take him to Ibrahim Golestan's house, producer of *The House is Black* (1962), the only film made by Farrokhzad: "The film made by the woman whose name you have tattooed on your arm." A still image allows us to see both filmmakers together, in which Akbari shows Cousins' tattoo to the camera, which is very different in character from the one we will see later on Akbari's body. Next, on the black screen, Farrokhzad's poem which served as an opening to the letter, brings it to a conclusion now. While Cousins' first letter was an audiovisual experience of epistolary rereading, the second explores his writing. The letter begins with a fixed shot of an empty sofa in which the filmmaker enters the frame to lie down on it with the computer. As he types, we hear his voice-over. The image will therefore show the temporality and atmosphere of epistolary literary writing. After viewing Akbari's letter, the day before, Cousins is now writing to her from a hotel in Kaunas, Lithuania, to reflect on what Akbari explained regarding bodies, the nude, and the existential void. Keeping the same shot frame, cuts are produced insisting on the temporality of the writing, while the filmmaker drinks beer, eats chips, and stops to think. His reflection on the body and the nude will include other images that are interspersed. The narration of Cousins' personal experiences and reflections on the nude also materialises in the image: the cuts show the sender first without pants and then naked while he continues to write. After recounting a personal experience regarding the political aspect of the nude, the letter continues with the filmmaker no longer writing, meditative. Then there is a sudden jump from the letter to the audiovisual postcard: "Here are 100 places I've been recently." One hundred audiovisual postcards, barely one or two seconds long, each one with its direct sound, follow one another by way of simple cutting, thus exposing their differences concerning the letter. At the end of this montage of postcards, the epistolary image now shows the filmmaker asleep while his voice recounts, and the image shows, the places visited in Kaunas. Cousins then asks his interlocutor a question: Will the objects from her move be able to fill the void of exile? The last image recovers the enunciation situation to show the already empty sofa: "Thanks for listening to my ramblings. Mark."

Akbari's answer takes up what was exposed by her correspondent, to create a nude self-portrait that in her case is inextricably linked to motherhood and the cancer she suffered narrated in her documentary *10 + 4* (*Dah be alaveh chahar*, 2007); film conceived as the continuation of *Ten* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2002), in which Akbari was the protagonist. Her voice-over is now accompanied by the video image, with which she shows her body: "I agree with your views on the body." Images of Akbari taking a bath

alternate with different still images. First, three Iranian miniatures with which Akbari reflects on the meaning of the nude in her culture: “In my culture, nudity is the end of the line. In my culture, possessing and seeing a naked body is the end. In your culture, the body is just the beginning, a starting point.” Later, images of covered Iranian women praying. Next, two images of Akbari herself bathing in the sea, also covered: “Since childhood they have taught me that my body is a problem; that I should cover it.” Finally, images of mosques with which the filmmaker reflects on the sensuality of their architecture. And all of them, facing Akbari’s naked body, submerged in the water or emerging from it: “My body's voice is the voice of guilt.” The water covers Akbari's torso, which she washes with her hands, covering and revealing the double mastectomy she endured: “I lost part of my body. It was like crossing a border and leaving something behind. I was forced to sacrifice part of my body to save it, to save my life." The filmmaker shows a new scar on her body, that of a caesarean section, covered by a tattoo: “My body is constantly changing.” Next, the image of the bathtub emptying itself of water becomes a powerful metaphor for the emptiness of which Akbari speaks: “Mark, I don't know who I am. Do you know who you are?” The filmmaker concludes her letter with one last image in which the intersubjectivity achieved through filmic correspondence materialises (Figure 14):

> I write down my body for you. Mark, I’m getting ready to go back to Virginia Woolf’s house to take another photo in the same position. Mark, I’ve never taken a nude picture before. I have no idea how my body will look. Mark, I wrote the novel *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf on my body in Farsi. A body which has many stories of its own. If my body could talk, we should scream. I stood in front of her house in the same position and took this photo for you and for everybody.

Figures 13 and 14. *Life May Be* (Mark Cousins and Mania Akbari, 2014). Source: Screenshot.

This powerful image is the successful intersubjective result of the intense, deep and intimate epistolary exchange, which materialises here in the creation and transformation of an image. Cousins' artistic sensibility generates the idea of a photograph that would connect two creators whose respective works represent for him two essential peaks of English and Iranian culture. Akbari then creates that image to pour over it the intersubjectivity that continues to be forged between the correspondents. The discussion

around the meaning of nudity in both cultures, and for both filmmakers in their respective biographies, transforms the image to add the intersubjective depth that both filmmakers have achieved. Akbari's naked body, the subject of different mutations, becomes a feminist vindication on her past and present and transcends cultural borders: the text from *Orlando* (1928) translated into Farsi, written on Akbari's skin, symbolises the struggle of women in all spheres of existence.

9. Conclusions

Considering all of the above, it is possible to draw various conclusions about this film practice. In the first place, its audio-visual nature and the multiple possibilities of its materialisation, between which the correspondents make different choices, mean that its realisation cannot avoid various elements that arise with different relevance. Firstly, the construction of the correspondence implies a reflection on it, on the set of elements chosen to make it up. Paraphrasing Català (2019: 18), filmic correspondence, to a lesser or greater extent, thinks of itself, reflects on its way of corresponding. Secondly, the correspondence also entails, to different degrees, the materialisation of the emotional atmosphere that is created between the correspondents. Finally, as I have tried to demonstrate, the correspondence is defined by an attempt at intersubjectivity that materialises in different actions-reactions and emotions-reflections. We could then describe the practice of filmic correspondence as a spectrum, defined by three axes, that includes infinite possibilities. The first, referring to the form, would have as poles what I have called the zero degree of audiovisual epistolary writing, which gets rid of the editing—the practices by Mekas, and Kramer and Dwoskin in their first letters—and the most complex construction of the letter: montage of image and sound, non-synchronous, with which different levels and temporalities of enunciation and narration are built—the practices by Guerin and Lacuesta. The second, referring to subjective expression, would have as poles the expression of emotion—Kawase's letters in her first correspondence—and the reflective expression—Tanikawa and Terayama make of their correspondence an essay film about meaning and identity. The third, on which I have focused my analysis, would represent the degree of materialisation of intersubjectivity. Next, I try to expose the conclusions reached through the description of this axis.

At one of its poles, the zero degree of intersubjectivity, as I indicated in the introduction, we would find the shipments that, although they respond to the exchange, do not question the epistolary “you” in any case. The works analysed, which do address

this complex task, generate attempts and find diverse results, all of them of great interest. In the first place, intersubjectivity can be evidenced as an impossibility when the filmic activity of the correspondents is revealed as antithetical. The correspondence between Guerin and Mekas confirms this impossibility, with two different results: Guerin can use Mekas's diaristic, spontaneous and impulsive missives as the inspiration for his reflections, while in the opposite sense, his reflective missives represent for Mekas a proposal of intersubjectivity that threatens his subjectivity. While reflection can be inspired by spontaneity, the latter feels paralysed before the former. Secondly, intersubjectivity can be approached as a creative game, as a filmic simulacrum. The correspondence between Lacuesta and Kawase, due to an excessive strict prior definition of the exchange, simulates intersubjectivity in the first four letters with two different objectives: autobiographical fictionalisation in the case of Lacuesta and the experience of documentary intimacy in the case of Kawase. Only after the real interaction and the disappearance of the premises does their correspondence then access a true intersubjectivity, which assimilates the subjectivity of the other in its own expression. Thus, Lacuesta addresses the documentary and intimate universe of Kawase while the latter delves into the universe of the former. Thirdly, intersubjectivity can become a dialectic of filmic correspondence. Starting from two very different cinematic activities—as in the case of Guerin and Mekas—Kawase and Kore-eda generate a dialectic about how to achieve intersubjectivity from those differences: Kawase's emotion-image and Kore-eda's document-image. Both filmmakers, to a greater extent in the case of Kore-eda, manage to mobilise their gaze to assimilate the other's. Fourthly, the filmic correspondence arises from the search for intersubjectivity; rejecting any previous agreement, facing an unknown space and thus generating one of the expressions of greatest vulnerability. Erice and Kiarostami's correspondence embodies that search in the space of their cinematic creation: the different proposals, the abandoned paths and the chosen routes, the doubts and fears, the expectations and even the disappointments, until managing to share their gazes. Fifthly, intersubjectivity arises as a result of the correspondence. Cousins and Akbari develop an epistolary exchange that arises from the former's interest in the latter's work. The mutual knowledge that is produced through correspondence finally achieves an intersubjectivity that materialises in an image that contains the gaze of both. Finally, intersubjectivity becomes a starting point for a desire for shared reflection. Tanikawa and Terayama turn their correspondence into an essay film that facilitates their philosophical reflection, their cinematic thinking, precisely

through intersubjectivity materialised in the form of dialogue. Kramer and Dwoskin want to share their emotional and existential universes in order to reflect on their condition as exiled American filmmakers in Europe. The correspondence is then built as a series of diptychs that address the same questions and in which their intimate spaces and their digressions find multiple resonances, meeting points and also revealing divergences. Their correspondence assumes a kind of intersubjective emotional and existential dimension. The shift from subjectivity to intersubjectivity that filmic correspondence makes possible is a phenomenon as complex as it is attractive, whose results, as I have exposed, are multiple and offer interesting reflections on contemporary audiovisual creation.

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