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The Audiovisual Thinking Process in Contemporary Essay Films

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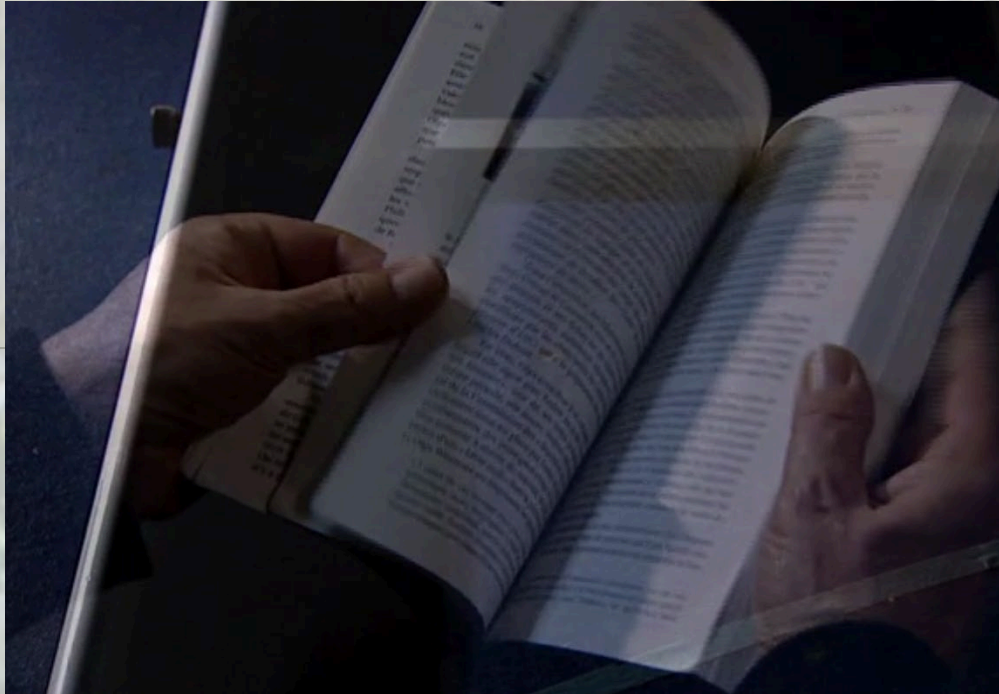
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the audiovisual
thinking process
in contemporary

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Face aux fantômes (Jean-Louis Comolli and Sylvie Lindeperg, 2009)

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Comparative Cinema is a scientific journal that addresses film studies from a comparative perspective. It is published by the Center for Aesthetic Research on Audiovisual Media (CINEMA) at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), in Barcelona. Since its inception in 2012, it has investigated the conceptual and formal relations between films, material processes and production and exhibition practices, as well as the history of ideas and film criticism in different social and political contexts.

Comparative Cinema tackles an original area of research by developing a series of methodologies for a comparative study of cinema. With this aim, it also explores the relations between cinema and comparative literature, as well as other contemporary arts such as painting, photography, music and dance, and audiovisual media. The journal is structured into monographic issues featuring articles and interviews, which are sometimes complemented by audiovisual essays, either as part of a written article or as an autonomous work. Each issue also includes a book review section, which analyses some of the most important works in film studies published in Spain and abroad, and a miscellaneous section, called “Rear Window,” which gathers articles that also follow a comparative methodology but fall outside of the scope of each monographic number.

Comparative Cinema is published biannually in English, though it may include original versions of the texts in other languages. It is an open access, peer-reviewed publication which uses internal and external evaluation committees. As such, it is recognized by international indexes such as DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), ERIHPLUS (European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences) and Latindex (Regional Information System for Online Scientific Journals of Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal).

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Born out of modern cinema, the essay film departed from the dominant forms of fiction and documentary cinema in order to explore an unknown territory defined by subjectivity, hybridization and reflection, evolving to become “a form that thinks,” as Jean-Luc Godard defined it. The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed the consolidation of the essay film, which was enabled by postmodern thought and culture, as well as by the development of video recording technology. In this mode, works by Chris Marker, Roberto Rossellini, Orson Welles, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jonas Mekas, Harun Farocki, Agnès Varda, Wim Wenders, Guy Maddin, Peter Watkins, Chantal Akerman, Alexander Kluge or Johan van der Keuken, among many others, developed a practice of audiovisual thinking for which Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998) could be considered the epitome, marking a turning point that also took place at the end of the century. Over the last twenty years, this essayistic practice has proliferated due to the digital revolution, facilitating diverse experiences of subjectivity and intimacy, and multiplying the possibilities of audiovisual editing; that is, of the very thinking process that defines this filmic form. Taking this itinerary into account, this issue proposes to analyze the manifestations of the contemporary essay film in relation to its audiovisual thinking process in search of the connotations, tendencies, specificities and transformations of this audiovisual form in the twenty-first century.

In “News of the End of the World: The Essay Film as Mentality,” Josep Maria Català Domènech presents a theoretical reflection on the characteristics of the contemporary essay film. “The essay mode in general, as a way of thinking,” he writes, “adapts to the complexities of the contemporary world through its fluid, rhizomatic and multidimensional condition.” Starting from the essayistic practices of Walter Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein, Català defines the *essayistic mentality* as “a way of knowing through aesthetics; not implicitly as it happens in art in general but through expressing reflective processes.” Employing Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of rhizome (1972); those of chaosophy (1995b) and chaosmosis (1995a) by the latter; and the image of thought by the former (1989), Català situates the essay film in the post-cinematic field, in which the previous image of thought “is scattered and loses the ability to delimit a unique way of thinking, so that the corresponding plane of immanence ceases to be one-dimensional and folds once and again into other dimensions.” Thus, a post-subject “constructed through the essayistic process” emerges. Opened to multiplicities, he or she “does not stand outside them to control them, but submerges themselves in the phenomenology they form to merge and transform with it.” In this way, the essay film unifies thought and sensation/emotion: “The emotion leads to the thought, and the thought prolongs the emotion beyond the first sensation,” and is built on “a non-

methodological process of doubt that aims to approach the doubt that characterizes contemporary reality, which is therefore shown in constant movement.” Català concludes that “the essayistic mentality joins the movement and, from the ephemeral, it extracts certainties that are directly indecisive but visually certain.”

While Català reflects on the contemporary rapidity that the essay film faces, Laura Rascaroli analyzes how slowness is configured as a counter-hegemonic essayistic tool. In “Unfolding Borders: For a Semiotics of Essayistic Border Images,” she develops “a performative understanding of the border” with the purpose of “reflecting on the border through film [...] how film can today contribute to a ‘thick,’ and so counter-hegemonic, understanding of borders that gives account of their strengthening/widening and performative nature.” The comparative analysis of *Alpi* (Armin Linke, 2011), *Havarie* (Philip Scheffner, 2016) and *The Great Wall* (Tadhg O’Sullivan, 2017) shows how “these films do not stop at exposing the in/visibility of the border through the performance of its semiotics [...] their performance is self-reflexive to the point of becoming a theory of the border.” Mobilizing Jacques Derrida’s concept of limitrophy (2002) and Deleuze’s concept of the fold (1991), Rascaroli theorizes how “the essay film creates spaces of in-betweenness, in which a temporalized, ‘slow’ thought may

take place [...] This slowness is a form of theory as well as a performative semiotics.” This semiotics of the film-essayistic border image is characterized by different strategies that manage to “bend and stretch the border ad infinitum, both spatially and temporally.” *Alpi* from the Alps as a natural border between several countries and through the strategies of extension and parallax; *Havarie* from the Mediterranean as an aquatic border and through stretching and decelerating strategies; *The Great Wall* from the European political borders and through parataxis and anamorphosis. The three films unfold the border and “this unfolding is a *limitrophic* form of audiovisual thinking. As a process, it is, ultimately, a temporalizing strategy.” Rascaroli concludes by arguing that this slowness “is a conduit for an essayistic, emancipated, counter-hegemonic engagement with the complexity of the world.”

Continuing the reflection on space, my own article analyzes the spectator’s position as another thinking space for the contemporary essay film when the filmmaker places themselves in it, instrumentalizing the identification with their spectator. In “The Spectator’s Position as Thinking Space for the Contemporary Essay Film: *Face aux fantômes* (2009) and *Jaurès* (2012),” I carry out a comparative analysis of both films by Jean-Louis Comolli and Sylvie Lindeperg, and Vincent Dieutre, respectively, as the materialization of the possibilities of Rancière’s

emancipated spectator (2009). Thus, the filmmaker-spectator dialogism inherent to the essay film materializes through the identification between the two, in order to offer a reflection on the possibilities of the mobilization/fixation of the spectator's gaze; and to generate self-reflection and critical thinking about our position as such: "Therefore, the emancipated spectator, who performs self-reflection on the distance that separates them from the work and its variation to generate critical thinking that will establish both consensus and dissent regarding what is shown, finds in the analyzed films two proposals that interpellate them from almost opposed premises." While *Face aux fantômes* "offers us the embodiment of an emancipated spectator to show us the possibilities of self-reflection and critical thinking from the viewing of *Nuit et brouillard*" (Alain Resnais, 1956), *Jaurès* "interpellates the emancipated spectator by the denial of the previous possibilities, seeing them doomed to reflect on the mobilization of a fixed gaze, on the possibilities of an active spectator facing a representation of their passivity." I conclude by arguing for the relevance of the spectator's position as an epistemological space for the contemporary essay film, "where it is possible to reflect on the tensions between the active and the passive, thought and non-thought, emotion and reflection."

In the next article, Georges Kouvaros proposes in "The Postman's Coming: *La Morte Rouge* (*soliloquio*) and the Limits

of Essayistic Thinking" the concept of the "suspension/undoing of thought." He analyzes how the "suspension of thought links *La Morte Rouge* to the forms of thinking that have come to define the essay film," understanding the latter as "an engagement with the capacity of cinematic images and sounds to traverse the limits of our thinking." In this way, *La Morte Rouge* (Víctor Erice, 2006) "explores elements of personal and collective experience that trigger an undoing of thought." For the Spanish filmmaker, thinking cinema means "to encounter something that unsettles our thinking. This something is bound to an experience of history, its collective traumas and lingering silences. But it is also bound to a disturbance in our subjectivity." Kouvaros links this essay film with two of the filmmaker's previous films—*The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, 1973) in relation to the need to understand the past; and *The Quince Tree Sun* (*El sol del membrillo*, 1992) about death—to point out "the moment of cinematic thinking par excellence: the moment when the distinction between presence and absence is suspended." For Erice, thinking cinema would mean "a displaced encounter with those elements that render the reflecting consciousness incomplete and, ultimately, other to itself. This is a form of writing drawn to cinema's capacity to enable a confrontation with what remains unknowable within us." The audiovisual thinking process in this sense finds its limit: "Erice's film continues the essay

film's emphasis on the rendition of a subjective consciousness that tests and recreates itself—and marks the point where this effort results in an undoing of the subject.”

Finally, in the interview “Anachronism as Temporality of Memory in the Oeuvre of Pietro Marcello,” Bertrand Bacqué offers us an itinerary through the filmmaker's essayistic work. Using Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image (1999) and Deleuze's concept of the time-image (1989), he analyzes how *The Mouth of the Wolf* (*La bocca del lupo*, 2009), *Lost and Beautiful* (*Bella e perduta*, 2015), *Martin Eden* (2019), and *For Lucio* (*Per Lucio*, 2021) make use of anachronism as temporality of memory: “Marcello's work as an essayist consists not only of perceiving the images in the past that resonate with the present and vice versa, but furthermore, his work as an editor [...] creates its own resonance amidst these varying temporalities.” Among other elements, Bacqué analyzes the importance of fiction (and myth) in Marcello's audiovisual thinking process: “For Marcello, it is a matter of calling forth the images that remain hidden beneath the images, a palimpsest of sorts, but also to create those voids, those breaches, within which time either sinks or surges forth, in a perpetual movement comparable to the ebb and flow of the tides and thought. This is how Marcello treats fiction as an essayist.” It thus generates a relevant practice regarding essayistic hybridization: “Marcello constructs a

commonality out of the diversity and heterogeneity of the images and narrative forms, thanks to consistent, but often hidden, analogies.” Bacqué concludes: “The result is a dynamic and critical history that happily carries us from individual memory to collective narrative.”

The complete reading of this issue offers us a broad reflection on how the essayistic mentality of our contemporaneity (Català Domènech) develops different strategies to generate an audiovisual thinking process that can reflect on it: the slowness to unfold borders and create a contra-hegemonic discourse (Rascaroli); the possibilities of mobilization/fixation of the gaze of the emancipated spectator to develop their critical thinking (Monterrubbio Ibáñez); the undoing of thought besides the presence-absence dialectics of personal and collective memory (Kouvaros); and anachronism as temporality of memory for developing critical history (Bacqué). All of the works analyzed in this issue are materializations of the contemporary essay film whose audiovisual thinking processes reflect on space and time, the filmmaker and the spectator, the personal and the collective, history and the present, the emotion and the thinking.

Lourdes Monterrubio Ibáñez

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News of the End of the World: The Essay Film as Mentality

The contemporary essay film is situated within the deep transformations of cinema that led to post-cinema, just as it arises from the revolution experienced by the classic documentary, now transformed into the post-documentary, whose main axes are subjectivity and thought. Following the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, the essay film can be considered as a sign of a new image of thought derived from cinema but more complex. The essay mode in general, as a way of thinking, adapts to the complexities of the contemporary world through its fluid, rhizomatic and multidimensional condition. Likewise, based on the hypothesis that the essay form corresponds to a certain mentality anthropologically understood, it results in the existence of a post-subject that is especially evident with the essay film and that confronts the crisis of transcendental subjectivity that has characterized the twentieth-century thought.

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“Oh! Let us never, never doubt
 What nobody is sure about.”

Hilaire Belloc

“My explorations of the essay film
 began two decades ago, when few people
 knew exactly what I was talking about.”

Nora Alter (2018, ix)

It is useless to establish a genealogy of the essay film by returning to the beginnings of cinema in search of the genesis of this form and, from there, determine a linear development that reaches the present day. This procedure, belonging to a problematic historicist mentality, is no longer epistemologically productive since the acceleration of our time is so intense that it has reached the escape velocity and has left history behind. The idea of the end of history that Francis Fukuyama advanced and scandalized us all with was actually a symptom. It was not referring, as we all erroneously assumed, its author included, to a sudden cessation of becoming and events, but to the fact that events are no longer directly determined by the past but are the product of the confrontation of mainly local forces.¹ Affiliations have only a tangential impact concerning the formation of new entities. These are inserted, on the contrary, in territories or eras whose temporality expands in all directions but always within the ecological formation that embraces and determines them; a perpetual present that dominates their past and their future. It is true that, once the strength of a given formation is detected, it tends to be projected backwards, sensing superficial similarities that ignore the ontological leap the novelty has taken and that separates it from previous, apparently similar entities. No doubt that there is a historical relationship among the phenomena and, consequently, that new phenomena always owe something to that which

has come before. However, the mistake consists in considering that these past formations are the direct cause of the changes, that they are the ones that configure the essence of an event. The truth is that, on the contrary, the novelty is characterized in our era by detaching itself from the previous phases, which it turns into a phantasmagorical presence, and whose mist seems to extend in time forward and backwards. History is a ghost that minimally disturbs ontology and phenomenology. Its presence cannot be ignored but as long as it remains silent.

The essay film belongs to the cinematic domain, situated in the territory of documentary cinema. But this does not mean much if we consider that the cinematic phenomenon has extended into post-cinematic forms and that, for about two decades, classic documentary cinema has been drastically transformed to give way to a variety of post-documentary shifts. Since there are still strictly documentary productions, we tend to throw everything in one bag when actually the contemporary essay film only has apparent relationships with its possible and scarce predecessors. There were pioneers of the essay film, visionary filmmakers who glimpsed the possibilities of a thinking cinema, but who were not in a position to develop it to its ultimate consequences, even when they were able to define it correctly, as was the case, for example, of Hans Richter or Orson Welles.

It must not be forgotten that the essay film has a problematic but inescapable fit with the literary essay, whose genealogy tends to go back to Michel de Montaigne. The same post-historical criticism that I have introduced should be applied to the history of the literary essay in order to break its traditional affiliation with the filmic essay. To comprehend our era, it is essential to deactivate the prevalence that the historical chain has in the

understanding of the phenomena. Only once its epistemological potential has been softened can we prudently recover the idea of history as a unitary arrow of time. On the contrary, we must consider that, instead of a general history of genealogical character that determines the formation of all the elements of a culture, there are multiple specific histories circumscribed to different historical cycles, epochs or paradigms, whose consistency is internal, keeping merely chronological links with other ecologies of the past. History as a unit is more of a fuzzy and metaphysical background than an ontological reality.

Despite their temporal disconnection, all the variants of the essay—literary, filmic, etc.—have common characteristics, which does not prevent them from presenting different phenomenologies in each era. There is, therefore, a basic form of the essay mode of enunciation that corresponds to the effect of what can be considered an essayistic mind. But neither of these two interrelated entities has withstood unscathed the ravages of social, cultural, and subjective transformations that have occurred in each era, so they must be considered specifically. These profound transformations are not driven by historical development itself but by non-linear forces and attractions in which past, present and future are mixed in a multidimensional way. They are the product of multiplicities, of individuation processes that are generated, as Gilbert Simondon proposes, by the dynamic assemblage of various elements, whose effectiveness becomes active where they converge (2007).

The essayistic mentality is an aspect of the modern subject's structure that has remained marginalized by the hegemony of scientific thinking and its social projection of a positivist and dogmatic nature. The modern age has generated a dominant mentality—rational and scientific—

and a subsidiary one—aesthetic, imaginative and supposedly irrational. As Jacques Rancière indicated: “The pedagogical myth, we said, divides the world in two. More precisely, it divides intelligence in two” (Rancière 1991, 7). And more specifically, we can add that a third category has remained more or less hidden in the unknown territory that separates scientific-philosophical reason and aesthetic-creative imagination: the essayistic mentality, ignored by pedagogy and sometimes confused with philosophy, literature or art. When the strength of science began to stagger at the beginning of the twentieth century, the essayistic mind acquired a presence that it had not possessed until then. Later, when globalization brought out a complexity of reality in the face of which the specializations become insecure or incompetent, the form of the essay and the kind of mind that treasures it became essential. However, pedagogy, in its task of formatting minds, continues to ignore this need, even though, as Yuk Hui affirms: “perhaps we should give to the thought a task opposite to that assigned to it by the philosophy of the Enlightenment: fragmenting the world according to difference, instead of universalizing through equal. A new world-historical thought has to emerge in front of the collapse of the world” (Hui 2020, 40).²

The specialized mind frequently resorts to the figure of the so-called Renaissance personality to reduce to absurdity the aspiration of knowing everything, currently impossible to satisfy. Again, the historicist imagination tricks us by trying to equate two different eras through a superficial resemblance. The essayistic mind does not pretend to delve into all areas of knowledge, as the Renaissance scholar attempted. It does not want to assimilate the knowledge of hundreds of specialists, but rather its desire lies in being able to visit any discipline

to capture its general perspective and add it to the itinerary that its essayistic process is building. What it seeks is to think in the broadest possible way, forming constellations destined to understand aspects of a multidimensional reality.

A filmic essay as emblematic as Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) illustrates with particular effectiveness the form that the essay takes when it carries out these transdisciplinary itineraries. We see in it how the sinuous line of its interests deploys across different territories, linking different fields of knowledge through an aesthetic backbone. This conformation of the essayistic mode that we observe in the works has its equivalence in the structure of the essayistic mind, which is distinctive of some individuals, whose behavior can reveal the intensity with which it seizes them. If we refer to the biography of individuals like Walter Benjamin, Sergei Eisenstein or Orson Welles, we will discover how, in their respective domains, they all showed a propensity to bring together different cultural perspectives of a mediatic, artistic, literary or even scientific nature. Suffice it to recall, in the case of Benjamin, what he said, at the time, about his unsuccessful attempt to obtain a teaching position with his work on "The Origin of the German Tragic Drama:" "that six people could be awarded the habilitation on the basis of my dissertation" (Benjamin 2019, 264). This ironically puts in evidence the multiplicity that characterizes the essayistic mind, which is also observed in Eisenstein's multidimensional writings or in Welles' wanderings through different media. Welles demonstrated his tendency to use the essayistic form in some of that media, as particularly in radio and in cinema, with the transcendental *F for Fake* (1973). If we observe, moreover, the biographies of these individuals, we see that they also developed unstable

existential ways of life and that, due to their mentality, they had to overcome innumerable obstacles that often led them to the brink of failure.

The essayistic mind

In February 1925, Walter Benjamin confessed in a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem that the dissertation he was completing to present to the university committee seemed to him to be a quixotic task (Benjamin 2019, 260). He knew he was moving on slippery ground and, therefore, in the introduction to his work, he tried to warn the committee that was to evaluate him that they would not find a typical investigation. Thus, he began his presentation with an unusual epistemological prologue with which he sought to relativize the different ways of exposing knowledge, implying that each of them was adapted to a specific way of thinking. It was a manner of telling the committee members, including Max Horkheimer, with whom he never sympathized, that they could not judge him according to their own criteria but had to accept those of the applicant. He insisted that his exposition did not follow the systematic structure of the dissertation, since "ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept; as the configuration of these elements" (Benjamin 2009, 34). With this, Benjamin was confessing, without saying it and perhaps without knowing it, that his dissertation had taken the form of an essay. For us, his words acquire even another premonitory dimension, since, if we read them carefully, Benjamin seems to be anticipating in a slightly anachronistic way, to the future essay film, in which the ideas will definitely manifest themselves through the order of the things represented or embodied by images. After all, Benjamin himself later add that the philosopher "occupies an elevated position between that of

the scientist and the artist” (2009, 32); that is, precisely the situation most disposed to the essay film. As expected, the academy did not accept his peculiar way of thinking and exposing thought, and his attempt to become a university professor ended in failure. If this seems scandalous to us, let us think it is very possible that, even today, someone who appears before any academic committee could encounter a similar kind of incomprehension. As Theodor Adorno said, in the mid-fifties of the last century: “Even today, to praise someone as an *écrivain* is enough to keep him out of academia” (Adorno 1991, 3). It is curious, however, how the lucidity with which the German philosopher approached the subject of the essay in a piece of writing published towards the end of his life contrasts with the harsh criticism that thirty years earlier he had directed at Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire (Tackels 2009, 570). This constant opposition that the essay has faced during the twentieth century is not anecdotal but rather uncovers deep epistemological questions that have to do with what, following Gilles Deleuze, we could call the current image of thought, and especially with its decay.

In his autobiography, written towards the end of his life, Eisenstein confessed that he had no idea where the process would take him when he began to write a page, a section, or a sentence. He adds: “Let the material be drawn from the depths of my personal reserves, let the factual evidence be dug out of my personal experience, and here is a whole sphere of the unexpected and unforeseen with much that is completely new: juxtaposition of materials, conclusions drawn from these juxtapositions, fresh aspects and ‘revelations’ stemming from these conclusions” (Eisenstein 1983, 2). Given the idea of juxtaposition, it would seem that Eisenstein is referring to the film montage system that distinguishes all his cinematic work. However, we

must bear in mind that this dialectical montage work is based on a series of rules and expectations that Eisenstein himself exposed in his theoretical works, while here he is telling us that unsuspected consequences result from the juxtaposition of elements. In general, Eisenstein’s cinema, despite the fact that in some cases it is close to the essay film, belongs to what Deleuze called the organic stage of cinema, that of the movement-image and therefore that related to the sensory motor schema (Deleuze 2018). However, in his writings, the filmmaker expresses himself in another way. As some scholars indicate, Eisenstein’s writing system would be very similar to the stream of consciousness that James Joyce used in *Ulysses* and that Eisenstein himself had thought to use at some point in his mysterious project to film Karl Marx’s *Capital*. Those who have read the Soviet director’s texts note not only their lack of preconceived structure, the absence of a work plan, but also the fact that the author expressed himself through short paragraphs that he strung together as if each of them was the container of a self-sufficient idea. His way of writing was thus close to that montage of quotations promulgated by Benjamin as a means to transmit the experience, whose maximum exponent is *The Arcades Project*, as it has come down to us (1999). According to Bruno Tackels, his biographer: “taking them out of their original texts, he gives them a new aura, through which the different quotations will explain each other, reaching a new existence, totally free of their initial content” (Tackels 2009, 162). If we transfer this montage system of quotation to the visual plane, we find that the procedure does not refer so much to the organic montage as to the work of the film essayist when they work with archival images.

If we go by the notes that Eisenstein left us on his unusual project to film

the work of Marx, we are forced to think that what he had in mind was a system of serialized composition that was largely opposed to the montage method he used in his films. In any case, it could resemble a sequence like that of the gods that, in *October* (*Oktyabr*, 1927), expresses a certain idea about divinity through the successive display of a series of images belonging to different cultures. In cases like this, Eisenstein seemed to search for the form of the future essay film, without succeeding in defining it. Perhaps, for this reason, he could never finish his project or even expose it properly. His essayistic mentality was repressed by the mechanistic conception of montage that only allowed him to approach the essayistic mode without quite reaching it, despite how close he was in films such as the aforementioned *October* or *The Old and the New* (*Staroe i novoe*, 1929).

The figures of Benjamin and Eisenstein illustrate two moments in which the modern essay, in its literary and filmic aspects, encounters severe resistance. The barrier that Benjamin runs into is cultural, external; Eisenstein's is personal, internal. Benjamin, who was an unmitigated essayist, was unable to validate his way of thinking either before a committee in charge of discerning which was the correct way of thinking—that is, representative of what Deleuze defined as a dogmatic image of thought—or in his relations with members of the Institute for Social Research. Eisenstein, for his part, beyond his skirmishes with Stalinism and the dogma of socialist realism, encounters personal resistance to introduce into the field of images the way of thinking that he had already developed in his writings. He has an essayistic mind within another mechanistic mind, weighed down by a combination of Hegelianism and dialectical materialism that culture has imposed on him.

These two cases place before us the two problems that the modern essay faced in its development. One of them is related to the field of knowledge and has not been resolved yet. The other belongs to the sphere of art and shows the uncertainties that the essayistic mind encounters when it comes to developing its incipient capacities in a particularly sterile context. In the first case, essayism meets with hostility, in the second with sterility. While hostility remains in force in the academy, sterility has practically disappeared in art, as evidenced by the fruitful incidence of Jean-Luc Godard's, Alexander Kluge's or Harun Farocki's works in an essential part of contemporary culture. While conceptual art has opened the doors to aesthetic essayism, science strongly opposes a possible epistemological essayism.

The maturity of the essay film

A fundamental aspect of the essay film, especially with regard to its epistemological usefulness, was perfectly exposed in 1940 by the pioneer Hans Richter, when he discussed the epistemological efficacy of the naive photographic empiricism of the documentary. According to Richter, it is necessary to resort to different perspectives “to visualize thoughts on the screen [...], to make the invisible world of imagination, thoughts and ideas visible” (Richter 2017, 91). Considering the time of writing, Richter's clairvoyance was extraordinary. But the contemporary essay film, which will develop Richter's pretensions in its own way, also has other dimensions. Its main concern no longer resides in visualizing a hidden truth, as if it were something independent from the essayist, waiting to be revealed by some especially perceptive thinker. Richter partially escapes from this essentialism when he points out that the idea the essay must expose should be the one the

filmmaker has formed about the object. In this way, he introduces a subjective factor into the process that is crucial in contemporary film essayism, which he thus leads towards its true function, which is not so much to show objective knowledge as to build it through its endless multiplicity.

The essay film, as it is currently practiced in the field of transformations of classic documentary cinema, has its roots in attempts from the past such as Richter's, but has a basically different profile, since it arises in a context of profound technological changes with which it has a very close relationship. It is also fed by the aesthetic crisis of an avant-garde that has lost its drive and by a languishing post-avant-garde. On the other hand, the enunciating subject of the current essay film is not the same as the one who, in the past, sensed the possibilities of filmic essayism: the essayistic mentality has changed considerably since then, becoming much more complex.

The approaches of some authors on subjectivity in the essay film are not exempt from certain problems. Thus, Laura Rascaroli, in the wake of Paul Arthur and Michael Renov, states:

At the level of textual commitments [...], an essay is the expression of a personal, critical reflection on a problem or set of problems. [...] At the level of rhetorical structures, in order to convey such reflection, the filmic essay decidedly points to the enunciating subject, who literally inhabits the text. This enunciator is embodied in a narrator, who (although never unproblematically or unreflexively) is close to the real, extra-textual author." (Rascaroli 2009, 33)

In a slightly more sophisticated way, the author merely continues the idea of the essay film that is implicit in the analyses of pioneers such as André Bazin or, later, Phillip Lopate, two unavoidable references in this field.

According to these authors, the essay film would retain the typical structure of the literary essay in terms of the presence and assemblage capacity of the author figure. For Rascaroli, the main hallmarks of the essay film form are reflexivity and subjectivity (2009, 33). The problem lies in how these two notions are articulated. To continue to think of a reflecting subject or, on the contrary, to understand that the filmic reflexive process itself creates an aesthetic flow in which a subject in constant transformation is inscribed. If we accept that each essay film creates its own subject, we will more easily understand some of the reasons why Marker assigned the vocal enunciation of his films to heteronomous characters.

The essay film not only combines reality and fiction but also articulates art and science. One of the peculiarities of the contemporary essay film is that it is proposed as a way of knowing through aesthetics; not implicitly as it happens in art in general but through expressing reflective processes. It is not so much that the image thinks, as that the image is a way of thinking. In this sense, the essay film approaches science without attempting to replace it, while also approaching art with no desire to unseat it. The phenomenon can be seen in another way, as the result of a simultaneous mixture of art and science. But this perspective masks the true consistency of the essay film, which, although it could initially have this hybrid and indecisive character, has now been consolidated as a genuine and necessary way of thinking and, therefore, is far from being the by-product of other already established fields. The contemporary essay film is neither art nor science, but a mode that goes beyond the limits of each of these forms, extending them into a diverse aesthetic and

epistemological territory. The essay film cannot be considered an art form either, despite the fact that its reflective process produces aesthetic results. The experimental impulse of avant-garde art, long since converted into post-avant-garde, has been transmitted to post-documentary and specifically to the essay film, but it has changed its polarity in the transfer. Aesthetics, which in art was a point of arrival, becomes a starting point in the post-documentary and, specifically in the essay film, a platform for thinking. This process of thinking, carried out through a complex audiovisual rhetoric, generates reflections that have a double value, aesthetic and ideological.

On the other hand, the relationship the essay film has with technology and especially with digitization is much deeper than the one kept with the cinematographic apparatus by the film essayist of what we could call the prehistory of the essay film, that is to say, that time in which the genre was not clearly defined yet. The main difference is that the filmmaker uses the filmic device as a tool alien to their purposes, while today's film essayist modifies their tools as they create or find their purposes. It is in this sense that cinema can generally be considered a medium, while the essay film is basically a procedure. Each of these areas produces a different way of thinking.

Lines and spaces of thought

The fact that Eisenstein stated in his biography that “a line is the trail of movement” (Eisenstein 1983, 42) prompts Jacques Aumont to say that Eisenstein “draws his texts,” since there is in them a visual “line” manifested through “(the incessant typographical indentations, the pseudo-versified aspect of many of its pages, the compact character, by contrast, of many of the paragraphs); this also

speaks of the kind of movement which connects the sentences together (and, if necessary, sets them off against each other)” (Aumont 1987, 11). This appeal to the visual or metaphorical line that constitutes the axis around which the form of Eisenstein's texts is distributed is also a line of thought that reminds us of the lines of beauty—wavy or serpentine—to which the painter William Hogarth alluded to set the aesthetic canons of the Baroque. Referring to the Soviet director, Anne Nesbet suggests that image-based thinking has a form of its own and that “In his quest for that form Eisenstein (in what was supposed to be the final chapter of his book on the practical mechanics of directing) turned to Lenin for philosophical support: ‘Human cognition is not (nor does it travel along) a straight line, but rather a curved line, endlessly approaching a series of circles, a spiral’” (Nesbet 2003, 209).

If we try to imagine the course of essay thinking, we will see that it equates to one of these sinuous lines, in contrast to the direct and predictable tracing of the straight line that methodological thinking traces. However, essay thinking is meandering not because it is forced to follow such a predetermined line but because it is constantly slipping out of any predetermination to establish unsuspected relationships. But this does not mean that it is a random way of thinking, which could constitute a contradiction, nor a form of unconscious associationism like that of the automatic writing of the surrealists. The essay proposes a kind of reflective activity that should be considered thinking in a strict sense, since, in principle, it is the voluntary exercise of a subject who applies their ability to reason to a certain object, without obeying previous regulations. Then, this action, corresponding to

essayism in general, has unexpected consequences within the essay film, but for now, we can say that it illustrates the effectiveness of a specific type of thinking. In the same way that, as Paola Marrati argues, “it is when history is broken that time presents itself in its *pure state* and deploys all the power of its own non chronological dimensions” (Marrati 2003, 78), it can be affirmed that when method is annulled, thinking deploys in its pure state. We say that thinking is linear, despite the dispersions that this line may experience, to place on record its relationship with temporality, but there is also a spatial character to it. The two dimensions, albeit on a metaphorical level, interact as expected in an era that is basically space-time but has not yet fully understood what this hybridization means in the realm of images.

The idea of the rhizome proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1972) is, first of all, a network of possibilities, of virtualities, through which thinking must pass when it is updated. However, since it cannot do it on all the branches at the same time, it has no choice but to follow, in principle, a specific direction. What happens is that this direction is constantly being discussed by the options offered to it. Hence the sinuosity, the undulation of the path that thought traces and whose form is detected a posteriori. The rhizome, therefore, is always updated in different ways. But the time line of the thought-essay is constantly traversing the virtual space of complexity, that is, the space created by all the possible options that surround it and that, even if they are ignored, are always weighing on the chosen direction. Therefore, although the essayistic thinking deploys in one direction, actually it does not do so much by summarizing itself in a linear trajectory but always drafting a kind of map or plain of indeterminate extension. That is why it is so important to rely on the phenomenology of the image both

when executing contemporary essay exercises and when imagining their consequences.

Like cinema or music, the essay is made up of moments deployed in time. An essay of any kind approaches that real-time thinking that, according to Isabelle Stengers, Alfred North Whitehead sometimes took the risk of doing (Stengers 2002, 36). It can be said that the essayist thinks in real time, even when executing a filmic operation, because each step leads to the next and at each step there is a series of possible bifurcations that allow an unpredictable relationship to be established with any of them. But, as I have indicated, each turn drags a series of virtualities that can be updated at any time. One thinks in real time when writing, when painting or drawing or even perhaps when filming, although the genuine essay operation usually occurs, in this instance, when the already-filmed material is organized. In any case, the function of the essayistic mind is also expressed at the moment of imagining the task. This is on the production side, that is, the practice of essayistic thinking. But what about the reception? Are we facing a “spectacle of the essay” in the same way that the act of painting becomes a painting?

It is true that whoever reads or contemplates an essay initially does not think like the person who has prepared it: they do not carry out an effective thought in real time, but rather let themselves be carried away along the path that has already been traced. However, it does go through it in real time. This operation corresponds only to the first part of the process since the essay activates the receiver’s thought so that they are constantly in a position to produce their own bifurcations, that is, to generate their own essayistic line, beyond of the one proposed by the essay itself: they can update it with

their own thoughts, made either in real time or leading to subsequent actions. Borges readers will know what I mean.

While the logic of the treatise, like that of a classical narrative, strictly retains the receiver in its proposal, forcing them to stick to its development, the essay leaves open the possibility of making derivations, without losing the thread of an argument that is open and, in principle, diffuse enough to allow entrances to and exits from it without losing the experience of the proposal. In any case, the logic of the treatise cannot absolutely retain the receiver, neither does the essay form necessarily push them to abandon it. In any case, the dissertation or the narrative loses the receiver if they move away from its argumentative line; whereas the essay retains the receiver, even though they seem to move away with their own ramblings. Here, the ancient parable of the great tree felled by the blows of a gale that do not affect the apparently weaker but more flexible one takes on a new validity.

The essay and its forms

The essay can be a matter of style, as Georg Lukács and Robert Musil point out, or an epistemological proposal, as suggested by Adorno. But above all, it is a way of thinking that, apart from possible characterological foundations, derives in essence from a certain mentality prone to being culturally acquired or induced by pedagogical means as a method based on the paradox of being profoundly anti-methodological. The randomness of essayistic thinking does not lead to chaos, but rather, in any case, it is close to the idea of “chaosophy” outlined by Félix Guattari (1995b), who insisted that the thinking of chaos is not equivalent to chaotic thinking, but rather implies an insubordinate convergence of different vectors that are initially disparate and unrelated. Chaosophy is

close to Guattari’s other concept of “chaosmosis,” with which the author wants to theorize the processes of subjectivation that derive from those “chaotic” assemblages that are also at the base of the essay film:

The important thing here it is not only the confrontation with a new material of expression, but the constitution of complexes of subjectivation: multiple exchanges between individual-group-machine. These complexes actually offer people diverse possibilities for recomposing their existential corporeality, to get out of their repetitive impasses and, in a certain way, to resingularise themselves. Grafts of transference operate in this way, not issuing from ready-made dimensions of subjectivity crystallised into structural complexes, but from a creation which itself indicates a kind of aesthetic paradigm. One creates new modalities of subjectivity in the same way than an artist creates new forms from the palette. (Guattari 1995a, 7)

While the process for the patients of Guattari’s schizoanalysis works as an aesthetic production, in the essay film is literally an aesthetic production capable of supporting a reflective process while also configuring a new subjectivity, as well as a diverse relationship with reality.

Faced with the stability of the *more geometrico* procedure (in the manner of geometers) that characterizes the thought of Descartes or Spinoza, the essay seems to go nowhere, although actually, potentially or virtually, it leads everywhere. The essay establishes different series of relationships that are offered as possible paths of knowledge. Knowledge is diverse, multiple, so it cannot be fixed definitively. In this way, the essay promotes itself as the only true thought since it does not depend on something external

to it. It is not a device to communicate something given but to build what must be communicated. Essayism does not lead to relativism since the very act of building knowledge implies a value, although it is not a fixed value but a pragmatic one that proposes a relationship among other possible relationships. It is not that each of them necessarily has the same weight from a general perspective, in the same way that works of art cannot be said to have equal value because they are all artistic expressions. However, although they are valued differently, it does not mean that it can be said that some are true and others are not. What the essay does precisely is to essay, to experience paths and relationships that configure psycho-aesthetic series, which acquire the virtue of events or phenomena that open unexpected horizons, with the particularity that these openings are never definitive or stable.

The essay escapes the regimes of certainty and accuracy that dominate contemporary thinking closely related to the imaginary of science. But this does not mean that it loses its relationship with knowledge. Its openness is no less valid than the closed and stable form of knowledge advocated by these other logics, corresponding to a way of thinking that precisely for this reason can be called established, that is, the one that emerges from dogmatic images of thought. One of the problems with philosophical thought is that it ends up locked in its own toy. Once specific categories and their relationships are founded, it is impossible to escape from the closed structure that they have built. Enclosed in this architecture of regulations and internal cohesion, thought is obliged to proceed without breaking it, since otherwise the entire building will collapse. But it is not a matter of coherence since the essay is coherent in itself: it admits contradictions as little as dogmatic philosophical thought,

but the conditions of these are not linked in its case to a closed system and its internal consistency. Rather, they refer to the interactions that can be created throughout the continuous expansion of an open thought. The fact of not admitting stable logics does not make it illogical since any deviation from particular logics or from Logic must be justified. Therefore, logic and coherence are part of the essay, that is, of its thinking process, but it is this process that determines its scope without contradicting itself. Essayistic thinking establishes its own internal logic, instead of subjecting itself to the regulations of an external structure. It acts, in this sense, like a painting, whose realism is subjected to the particular style in which it has been made. The truth is that this simile can apply to any image, whether it is realistic or not. The validity of the proposals is given, as in music, by the concordance or balance shown by its components. Any intellectual dissonance is detectable as a false note or out of tune passage. But this aesthetic question works as a safety valve, not as a fundamental objective, since there are no basic rules that indicate how those concordances should be.

The essay is not strictly scientific, although it can be applied to a possible speculative science or confused with the experimental procedure of science. But it retains from it the will to relate to “true” knowledge. However, its concept of truth is not the same as that of science, which is forced to work with “absolute truths,” even knowing that they are necessarily provisional. The essay turns this ethical equation around and works with the premise that its truths are transitional, but pretending they are complete at a certain point in its process. In the field of climate change studies, the question arises: “How can we talk about deviation from the norm if the norm changes every year, if as the sole possible norm

only the abnormality itself remains?” (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2019, 41). Not in vain do I refer to climate change, since this is one of the aspects of the contemporary world whose phenomenology exceeds the capacity of scientific knowledge and demands, on the contrary, an essayistic intervention; multifaceted, speculative and dynamic.

The essayistic dissolution of the image of thought

If Montaigne’s essays are now more than four centuries old and, since then, essays have not stopped proliferating stealthily, inside and outside the field of philosophy, or of the literary and artistic criticism, why do we now pay so much attention to the essay form? There are many possible answers to this question, but perhaps the most relevant is the one that refers to the mixture of acceleration and complexity that characterizes the contemporary world. According to Bruno Latour, things change so fast that it is almost impossible to move with them (Latour 2017, 7). He states it regarding the catastrophe of climate change, a phenomenon that although seems to belong to the domain of the scientific disciplines that have revealed it, its global problems exceed the scope of the mentality that characterizes them: “the ‘nature’ or ‘environment,’ in short, would be something too serious to be left exclusively in the hands (and in the research budgets...) of natural scientists” (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2019, 36–37). In short, the current reality is changing at multiple levels with a speed that exceeds the pace of academic and academicist thinking—that of science is academicist when it is dedicated to legislating. The essay mode, with its open and moving thinking, adapts much better to the new circumstances and, therefore, now revives beyond the limits of the literary to which it had been relegated. Through the modality of the essay film

and its derivation towards the form of the interactive documentary, one can even intuit the potential of a scientific essayism, based on complex and moving images.

There seems to be a consensus that the essay performs a recycling task. As Lukács indicates:

The essay always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness, but only orders those that were once alive. And because it orders them anew and does not form something new out of formlessness, it is bound to them and must always speak “the truth” about them, must find expression for their essential nature. (Lukács 2010, 26)

This is basically true and seems to conform to the essential parameters of the essay film, especially one that uses archival materials, but it is necessary to state that the contemporary essay in all its forms does more than just rearrange finished materials. Actually, it is precisely the essay film that shows us the characteristics of this surplus of traditional essayistic work since, from the ordering of what has already been—because it comes from the archive or culture, but also because it has been converted into images—new points of view and the possibility of new visual ways of managing them emerge. In this way, the essay, but above all the essay film, always moves beyond the materials it uses. This “beyond” implies a mental territory constituted by the very thinking exercise the essay executes. The filmic essay develops through the paradox that implies that the form of its thought responds to the parameters established by its own way of thinking.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, thought develops on a plane of immanence established as the horizon

of the image of thought to which it belongs. The image of thought is the one that it “gives to itself of what it means to think, to make use of thought, to find one’s bearings in thought” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 37). Thought thinks on a plane that it builds itself with its action and of which it is not always aware in all its dimensions. This unconsciousness means that it cannot understand its true scope or its limitations. For this reason, thought tends to confuse its form with the form of reality, inverting the parameters since, in effect, each image of thought corresponds to a form of reality, but it is the one that thought provides itself with to be able to think it.

For Deleuze, cinema corresponded to the current image of thought, that is, that of a way of thinking closely related to movement. Following Henri Bergson, he stated that “a movement of translation in space always expresses something deeper and of another nature [...] it expresses a qualitative change” (Deleuze 2011, 81). In this affirmation, much of the secret of cinematic image is expressed while its content reveals many of the basic motives of the essay form aesthetics and, furthermore, of the essay film.

The image of thought materialized by cinema is changing. In a certain way, Deleuze himself had already intuited the change when he proposed, in cinema, the passage from the organic image to the crystal-image (Deleuze 2011, 2018). That is, when he considered that, after a first period based on the movement-image—mechanical movement—the cinema passed to a time-image—fluid movement. This fluidity of the image, which is also fluidity of thought, shapes the domain in which the contemporary essay film appears, at the same time result and characteristic of a new image of thought.

In the essay film, as in the essay in general, thought is not organized; it does not proceed through mechanical assemblies of pre-established pieces,

but rather flows dislocating any piece that enters its flow, where it becomes part of the thinking process and, therefore, its original consistency is modified. It is not that the essay film disdains the forms of classic montage, but rather that in it the architecture of the film is not formed by the union of different parts. On the contrary, each element constitutes the nodal point of a journey that never ceases to modulate the ensemble. Eisenstein had already intuited this possibility since, as Nesbet explains, he affirmed that

[a]n image leads necessarily to other images; any image would then seem to be a digression or detour from the idea at hand. But what may seem like a “digression,” Eisenstein says here, may in fact turn out to be the path leading to “the centermost point.” In other words, when traveling the spiral of image-based thinking, it is difficult to know whether one is outbound or inbound, digressing or honing in on the essential. (Nesbet 2003, 210)

Deleuze, appealing to Bergson in *Matter and Memory* (2006, first published in 1896), delved into a new image of thought composed of

a kind of material universe in perpetual movement that becomes effectively accessible through cinema [...]. Deleuze’s thought then finds its new image, because the latter gains through cinema all sorts of speeds and movement, as well as all kinds of temporal depths. The cinematic image, dynamic and temporary, thus becomes an image of thought that escapes all dogmatism. (Álvarez Asiáin 2001, 22)

The essay film, freed from the *literary* constraints of the essay mode and fully focused on the artistic side of this modality—from which, however, it also tends to escape—departs from all dogmatism. It does so even more intensely than the cinematic image of thought since the latter continues to

have its limits in the scope of its plane of immanence. In short, cinema cannot stop thinking cinematically.

Deep down, all images of thought have their own dogmatism, since the philosopher is not supposed to be able to notice the basic dispositions of the image of thought that they develop themselves with their thinking process: they are not able to reverse the thinking process on their own image of thought. Jacques Derrida may have tried it with deconstruction, but inevitably in a dogmatic way. The logos finds it difficult to escape from its own prison of language.

Regarding visual thought, anchored in aesthetics, the possibility of breaking out of the vicious circle of language is raised, in principle, especially when that visual thought finds accommodation in a device such as cinema, which sets it in motion. However, although Deleuze supposes that its mobile condition indefinitely frees the image of thought that cinema implies, the truth is that this process of supposed liberation continues to develop within certain limits, those of cinematic phenomenology, whether corresponding to the movement-images or to the time-images. Whenever thinking adheres to a method or a regulation of whatever kind—that is, when thinking develops on the plane of immanence whose horizon determines the corresponding image of thought—thinking ends up being dogmatic.

The filmic essay is situated on another level or at least a part of it raises its head above the line of the filmic horizon. It points to the existence of an inconceivable image of thought that, in principle, would lack a strict plane of immanence. The essay film belongs to the post-film field in which the previous image of thought is scattered and loses the ability to delimit a unique way of thinking, so that the corresponding plane of immanence ceases to be one-dimensional and folds

once and again into other dimensions. The thinking processes represented by the essay film flow, constantly disrupting the mental, media, subjective, technological, aesthetic or philosophical limits of a concrete plane of immanence. It can be said that each essayistic operation builds its own multiple plane of immanence; a plane of immanence that has the shape of a three-dimensional hand fan, since the thought that runs through it does so, or can do so, in all directions. This specific way of thinking is formatted in each case precisely by the plane of thought that it creates itself. This process of autopoiesis allows the essay to constantly escape from the constrictions of a dogmatic image of thought, instituting the possibility of an indefinitely open image of thought. In this sense, it must be insisted that the essay, no matter how closely related it may be to thought, is not a philosophy or a way of philosophizing. It is not because it does not confine itself to a specific, *professional* way of thinking. Paraphrasing Deleuze and Stengers, we could say that it is a free and wild creation, not of concepts as would be the case with Whitehead to whom these authors refer, but of thoughts that the essay film specifically conveys audiovisually. The filmic essay also depends on movement and time and, therefore, on the cinematic, but it goes beyond the strict cinematic modality. That is why its images are, in principle, more complex than those of cinema.

According to Deleuze, thinking does not seek (or should not seek) essences but to create concepts. The filmic essay, of course, does not deal with essences either, but that does not mean it creates concepts, rather it manages already created concepts in order to redirect them, as the action of a virus affects the cellular mechanism. For Deleuze, a concept is made up of a multiplicity of components that are in motion, without lacking consistency, since the concept

“is the contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 32–33). The philosophical concept is not found but is created to solve a problem. However, once created, even if it is in motion and projected into the future, it does not stop making demands for consistency that force the philosopher to establish an increasingly dense and more solidified plot that ends up closing on itself. Nevertheless, since the essayist, and especially the film essayist, does not create concepts but recovers and redirects them, they are not subject to their requirements or their regulations. The essayist escapes with the concepts towards another dimension every time their reflective process considers it necessary, without being inconsistent, but showing that another kind of consistency was possible. The essay is an exercise of continuous creation of possible logics, which dissolves all kinds of stability, especially in the case of the essay film, which feeds on images and is intensely related to technology. The tools, rhetorical or technological, that the filmic essay has at its disposal acquire an unusual malleability since they adapt to the twists and turns of its thinking process.

The subject of the essay film and the machine consciousness

The essay film reconfigures the subject that has been under constant siege throughout the twentieth century, denigrated by most philosophical trends, eager to accompany science in the search for a world without qualities, either to “justify full epistemic access to a world-without-us that would be articulated in an absolute way before the jurisdiction of the Understanding; or to put an end to the world-as-sense, so as to determine the Being as pure indifferent exteriority; as if the ‘real’ world, in its radical contingency and insignificance, should be ‘realized’ against Reason and Sense” (Danowski

and Viveiros de Castro 2019, 25). Due to its own phenomenology, the filmic essay does not expressly stand against this trend that has culminated in post-continental thought, forging a new materialism and expressed mainly through the currents of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, but rather it contemplates these trends from another place, from another world that defends its own ontology and in which the question of whether there is no legitimacy of the human remains valid (Brague 2015).³

It does not seem possible to go back to a transcendental subject, ignoring the evidence that has been accumulated against it. But it should also be considered that it can be very wrong to accept as absolute a world without a subject, a world-without-us—that is, one that we expressly renounce—when so many new aspects of reality that are directly related to us and our subjectivity accumulate. There are as examples climate change, artificial intelligence or the state of fluidity that characterizes everything that had previously seemed incontrovertibly solid. For instance, the new gender identities expressed through an indisputably baroque conglomerate—LGBTQI+—that joins the previous complications of the family unit that Élisabeth Roudinesco analyzed in a book whose title, *La Famille en désordre* [*Family in Disorder*] (2002), was nothing but the announcement of a trend that was just beginning. All these formations or deformations have as a common characteristic, in addition to a clearly baroque trait, a sign of complex times, the decomposition of essences within fluid ontologies that require the contribution of an equally malleable thought; a thought organized through an active and critical form of consciousness. At this point, the essay film offers the profile of a post-subject, constructed through the essayistic process. This new subject, open to

multiplicities, does not stand outside them to control them, but submerges themselves in the phenomenology they form to merge and transform with it. The abstract machines that, according to Deleuze and Guattari, undermine the position of the transcendental subject are the instruments that the post-subject uses to feed their consciousness.

Deleuze and Guattari proposed the idea of conceptual persona to delimit an instance situated between the concept and the plane of immanence. It corresponds to a kind of diagram that induces a specific philosopher to think according to the image of thought in which they have placed themselves. Therefore, the philosopher, as an individual, is only the packaging of the conceptual persona within which their way of thinking is unconsciously updated (Deleuze and Guattari 1994). The essayistic mind would be a configuration equivalent to the conceptual persona, that is, a catalyst whose structure manages the thought of someone in particular. In this way, the subject gives up part of their subjectivity to recover it later, enhanced; like the relationship a driver establishes with their car. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is essential to strip the subject of any transcendental position. The subject is always the result of certain machinations and, therefore, their own idea that they experience autonomy is an illusion. For this reason, they turn specific philosophers into a simple wrapper for their way of thinking, where the machinery that determines thought processes to which they are drawn resides, hidden from their consciousness. In this way, philosophers, more than thinking, are thought by the conceptual personae they embody and to which they are subdued.

However, within essayism, the subject takes back the reins, and completes the cycle that Deleuze and Guattari left halfway. In the essay film,

the subject is reborn from the ashes to which twentieth-century thought had reduced them. It is not about recovering an absolute transcendental position, the pedestal on which humanism placed them and from which they were displaced in the first instance by Freud, but rather that they re-emerge using the impulse of the same forces that have annulled them, thanks to the fact of becoming aware of them. As in martial arts, the same force with which the opponent strikes is used to knock them down. The new post-filmic image of thought has the characteristic of being aware of the open image of thought to which it belongs and, therefore, it can apply the basic formulas of this image to its way of thinking, something that does not happen in dogmatic images, prisoners of their own determinations. But for this, it requires the action of a conscious subject who is the operator of the reuse process. This continuous self-conscious recycling, typical of the essay, allows the film essayist to act as the artist who is always looking for new forms of expression through which they acquire their artist's consciousness. In this way, contemplated as essayistic objects, the products of contemporary art, substantiated by the aftermath of conceptual art, take on a meaning that they seem to have lost when they are summarized in its aesthetics.

The image in the essay film

The new post-cinematic image of thought is directly related to the computer, and specifically to the interface form. The interface is basically considered as a mediation between the user and the device, limited to certain instruments that facilitate this interaction. But the true transcendence of the interface as an image of thought lies in the visual-mental-technological territory that is configured in the interstitial space located between the user and the device. In this misty space of interaction, the joint maneuvers

of the machine and the user produce an interface-image that surpasses the cinema-image. This image of metamorphosis comes directly from the cinematic field but goes beyond it. From this perspective, the interface is not only a transmitter of an action, but above all a form of the action visually materialized. This continuous visual expression constitutes a thinking process.

Eisenstein first and Deleuze later gave the image a sensory primacy: "We made use of a construction of a sensual thinking type, and as a result, instead of a 'logico-informative' effect, we receive from the construction actually an emotional-sensual effect" (Eisenstein 1964, 133). Similarly, in his treatise on Bacon's painting, Deleuze indicates that the painter tries to paint the sensation and not the sensational (Deleuze 2003). Bacon himself stated that his intention was to paint the scream and not the horror, that is, not the concept but the expression of a sensation. It was not about provoking the scream but about exposing it as a sensation that surpasses the concept. Before the painting, one feels the scream, in the same way that, before the image that Eisenstein theorizes, one has the sensation of what happened before conceptualizing it.

In the essay, the image produces sensations, however, they do not stop at the body but instead pass from it to the intellect, although not in a subsidiary way as both Eisenstein and Deleuze seem to suggest. On the contrary, the image produces sensations directly. The body and the mind feel and think in unison, although the feeling of the mind is different from the feeling of the body, just as the thought of the body is not identical to that of the mind. Feeling and thought constitute an interrelated couple that changes polarity at each location. This change occurs at the same time, like the electrical poles of the alternating current from whose

alternation an *illumination* is derived. In the essay film, one cannot feel without thinking, nor think without feeling. And this is true for both the author and the spectator. This unity of thought and sensation (which is also feeling and emotion) is broken down so that the image is felt as a whole, while thought shreds this whole. Sensation is unitary, thought multiple. But this multiplicity, which is indeed in motion, is linked to the exciting sensation that accompanies the movement among the parts. The emotion leads to the thought, and the thought prolongs the emotion beyond the first sensation.

The images have a duration that allows sensations to become emotions capable of driving thought. But at any moment, both one and the other can bifurcate since their correlation does not follow a certain line but rather creates it. These bifurcations can occur within a time-image or in a constellation of images that make up a scene, a sequence or a sequence-shot, as well as any other possible filmic, pre-filmic, or post-filmic structure. In the same way that any type of image can form part of the essayistic process, any structure that relates these visualities is also feasible since the essay film does not simply go from image to image, that is, linearly, but it also proceeds spatially, configuring spaces or constellations of concept-images within which the most linear movements take place. As I have said, the filmic essay does not produce concepts, but it can articulate images that arrive at it conceptualized or visualize already established concepts. On the contrary, this process can produce ideas, both during the essayistic process itself and during its reception.

We can also assume that every image is already a concept, that is, a congregation of multiple elements activated through a movement-time. This multiple and mobile visual concept seems to have precise limits due to

the area in which it is presented—for example, a frame, a screen or the frame of a painting—but actually, it remains open, as an image, to rhizomatic links, to the virtualities that surround it. Therefore, it is an open image to thinking, which is the factor that allows it to be transmuted or to modify its flow. The image is, consequently, a concept in constant formation and deformation. Therefore, the thought of the essay does not take place so much among concepts but among the processes that transform them or, similarly, among the changes that occur in complex images and in complex conglomerates of images. Any of these moments produces illuminations or ideas opened to unsuspected panoramas. For this reason, we can say that the essay film, as audiovisual thinking, is not responsible for the formation of concepts that would imply the cessation of the essayistic flow. In any case, the formation of concepts is a consequence of this flow that leads to another field properly philosophical, aesthetic or scientific.

If we consider that the images introduced in the essay can be concepts by themselves, that is, understanding that they reach the essayistic process with the complexity of a concept formed by multiplicities, we can treat them as particular essays, apart from the relationship they maintain with the more general essayistic activity, filmic or of any other type. Are not Joseph Cornell's constructions or Marcel Duchamp's boxes essays? From an essayistic mentality, we can go back and find traces of visual essayism in these assemblages that have not been strictly thought of as essays. They are cracks that appear in the soil of culture, together with the premonitory quakes of the subsequent eruption. The work of these authors is a sign that is worth taking into consideration because it shows us the aspect that an essay-image can take, as well as

indicating the way to approach it. In this way, we will be better prepared to understand the visual proposals that we will later find in essay filmmakers such as Godard, Kluge or Farocki, among others. Any image, even the most realistic, can be seen as an essay, from which it follows that the filmic essay is likely to be developed at two levels: one spatial, inside each image; and another temporal, through the flow of images. In each of the modalities of the audiovisual essay—web documentaries, essay films, virtual reality, etc.—one of these characteristics will prevail over the other.

Duchamp's or Cornell's compositions, as well as Robert Rauschenberg's collages and others, are obviously complex images that think, in the same way that we can say that the author thought when making them. However, it is necessary to establish a differentiation between the aesthetic and practical thinking of the artist and the thinking that the essayist carries out through the images already constructed or in development. The essayist thinks directly, while the artist thinks indirectly. In one case, we can see thinking in action; in the other, we deduce the thinking process from the results of the aesthetic work. In one case, mobile thinking modifies visibility; in the other, visibility evidences a static or cancelled thought. Ultimately, we can say that just as the artist works on the surface of a canvas or delimiting a certain space—boxes in the case of Duchamp or Cornell, a painting in the case of Rauschenberg—the essayist does so on the *surface* of thought itself. This is so because the filmmaker has already prepared the ground for it by elaborating a phenomenology that is not only situated within the physical framework of a screen, but also exceeds it by composing a visual fluidity converted into the strict space of its filmic compositions.

The great essay of the world

The essay mode spreads everywhere, as the whole reality has entered a state of indecision. Nowadays, only science dares to make categorical statements, but deep down, true scientific minds—not experts or dogmatists—also doubt. The modern world was born in the light of a methodical doubt, but with the intention of deactivating it through a series of regulations that Descartes exposed in a speech qualified precisely as a discourse on the method. In this regard, Adorno rightly affirmed that “if science and scholarship, falsifying as is their custom, reduce what is difficult and complex in a reality that is antagonistic and split into monads to simplified models and then differentiate the models in terms of their ostensible material, the essay, in contrast, shakes off the illusion of a simple and fundamentally logical world, an illusion well suited to the defence of the status quo” (Adorno 1991, 15). The essay constructs a more complex reality than the one basically contemplated

by science. It is a changing reality in itself, opposed to the one that is always considered identical to itself, waiting to be indefinitely interrogated to reveal the secrets it contains. The interrogations of science resemble those of the police when they have only one suspect. Instead, the essay’s suspects are endless. The essay works with the doubt because it perceives that reality itself is ontologically doubtful. The essay is built on a non-methodological process of doubt that aims to approach the doubt that characterizes contemporary reality, which is therefore shown in constant movement. While the scientific mentality strives to stop this movement by producing certainties—which deep down it knows are ephemeral—the essayistic mentality joins the movement and, from the ephemeral, it extracts certainties that are directly indecisive but visually certain.

See original text at the end of this journal

1/ This hypothesis, which seeks to invert the epistemological relationships that we maintain with the past—we are not children of the past, but its parents—is outlined through a critical reconsideration of the approaches of authors such as Bernard Stiegler (2016), Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2019), Bruno Latour (2017), Yuk Hui (2020) and Francis Fukuyama (2021), among others.

2/ English translations of references in French and Spanish are from the author.

3/ In keeping with the essayistic spirit of my writing, perhaps it would have been worthwhile to make a detour here to discuss the possible criticism that my recourse to a Catholic intellectual such as Rémi Brague may generate to defend the humanist subject or a version of him/her. That a current defense of humanism can only be reactionary would be proven by the fact that it comes from Catholicism. But, since we are talking about religion, perhaps we should think to what extent the supposedly political criticism of this matter is not actually rather epistemological. What is Catholicism defending itself against, if not against a Protestant tradition? Is it not that the essay mode and especially the filmic or audiovisual essay is a “Catholic” form and, therefore, finds so much resistance in an academy imbued by the rigorism and sobriety of Protestant mentalities that they have ended up becoming the only possible mentality? From this perspective, the self-serving established idea of the reactionary and the progressive falters.

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Unfolding Borders: For a Semiotics of Essayistic Border Images

Problematic ideological strategies of in/visibility are played out today around borders by exploiting advanced image-making technologies and hegemonic media discourses that produce “thin” border images lacking in semiotic complexity. This article responds to calls to move beyond the “line in the sand” metaphor by investigating essay films that experiment with a performative relationship with the border. Their “borderwork” is self-reflexive to the point of becoming a form of theory. To elucidate this theorization of the border, I invoke Derrida’s *limitrophic* method of “thickening” the limit, mediated via Deleuze’s notion of the fold. By comparing three case studies—Armin Linke’s *Alpi* (2011), Philip Scheffner’s *Havarie* (2016), and Tadhg O’Sullivan’s *The Great Wall* (2015)—I interrogate the strategies that essay films employ to operationalize borders. The article is a first attempt at a semiotic classification of film-essayistic border images, and a contribution to the understanding of essay film as *limitrophic* audiovisual thinking.

Keywords

BORDER
ESSAY FILM
GILLES DELEUZE
FOLD
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[A] border may be read as a semiotic system, a system of images and imaginations (Sidaway 2017, 191).

Since the start of the millennium, the European Union (EU) has undergone a series of momentous changes that deeply affected its borders. The 2001 Treaty of Nice brought about the Eurozone's enlargement and its eastward expansion. The 2008 financial crisis and the "refugee crisis" resulted in a series of threats to the EU's cohesion, culminating in increasing calls for the erection of walls and the reinforcement of border controls, and, notably, Brexit, which reshaped the EU's northern boundary and raised the specter of the sensitive Irish border. When in turn Europe became the global epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the EU effectively suspended the Schengen Agreement by implementing restrictions at both its external and internal borders.¹ Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, then, the sensitivity of the EU's outer border has never been more in evidence—and its integrity under threat—since the end of the Second World War.

These epochal shifts and pressures mean that borders have become newly relevant in post-Cold War, "borderless" Europe. The idea itself of the Union is based on the border, or lack thereof; while not fully coinciding with the Schengen Area, the EU broadly identifies with it. Concomitant with the birth of Schengen, the globalizing discourses that became predominant in the 1980s and 1990s posited the dawn of a borderless world under "the onslaught of cyber and satellite technology, as well as the free unimpeded flow of global capital" (Newman 2006, 172). Instead, Europe's outer borders are strengthening and becoming "dispersed a little everywhere, wherever the movement

of information, people, and things is happening and is controlled" (Balibar 2002, 71). Internal borders, then, have become central to political agendas, public discourse, and electoral outcomes.² Borders are today sites of political struggle, warfare and identity building. While also producing potentially transformative "cultural encounters," they often are armed shields in a war waged on those who flee danger and poverty (Rovisco 2010, 1016). Although geographically and socially marginal within contemporary Europe, borders are geopolitically and ideologically central to it.

If the EU is a unique experiment, other borders are becoming newly relevant. The USA–Mexico border is the most important of these: it has become, simply, "the border," a term of comparison for all others. The renaissance of international border studies in the 21st century is a direct response to this phenomenon. Drawn from geography, sociology, anthropology, law, and politics, this interdisciplinary literature broadly concurs that the increasing desire to regain control of space and protect domestic sovereignty, in Europe and elsewhere, means that some borders have become today "more socially manifest and performatively asserted" (van Houtum et al. 2017, 2). Coming from the sociology of Erving Goffman (1959) and the philosophy of Judith Butler (1988), the concept of performance has gained prominence, for "[b]orders do not simply 'exist' as lines on maps, but are continually performed into being through rituals such as the showing of passports, the confessionary matrix at the airport, and the removal of clothing" (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012, 729)—and, we can now add, the exhibition of COVID certificates. Border performance is enforced not only by the state and supranational entities (as in Frontex's patrolling of

the EU's outer borders³), but is also practiced by dwellers, migrants, refugees, NGOs, and artists, whose activities of making, marking, shifting, and dismantling are often referred to as "borderwork" (Rumford 2008). Borders are not always in sight; it is borderwork that makes them visible. A condition of in/visibility equally affects the migrant and refugee, who are simultaneously in the public eye and obliterated in their individuality by political and media discourses.

In 2012, Parker and Vaughan-Williams remarked on the need to overcome the metaphor of the border as a "line in the sand," as a thin, razor-sharp edge, and to start looking at it as an area. The border is indeed widening today, both "internally, as the border creeps inward, and externally, as the border becomes a cross-border zone of dual management" (Longo 2018, 13). The rise of international securitization projects, where the state relies on other states and private companies for border management and intelligence, is producing a neo-imperialist phase, with more powerful nations offloading securitization onto less powerful ones. The result is that, "[a]s borders move away from thin jurisdictional lines, they also stop acting like borders; instead they start to resemble *frontiers*, thereby rendering states more akin to empires" (Longo 2018, 25). Thinking of the border as a place, then, "highlights how the performance of the border also implies relations and extensions across the differences that border performs" (Green 2010, 271). The emphasis has accordingly shifted from binary constructions to "bordering" lives and activities, with the result that, "[r]ather than fixed lines, borders [are] now seen as processes, practices, discourses, symbols, institutions or networks through which power works" (Johnson et al. 2011, 62).⁴ A performative

understanding of the border, then, has important implications for its temporality. If borders are produced, they "are in a constant state of coming into being" (Strüver 2018, 4); they "are contingent objects – subjected to constant negotiation and change" (Brambilla and Potzsch 2019, 84). The material experience of the border, indeed, is mainly temporal. Borders are about waiting; transit zones and detention centers are meant not so much to exclude migrants but to "decelerate the project of migration" (Ellebrecht 2013, 49).

Despite these important critical shifts, not a lot has changed in the public perception of borders and in their description by political discourse and the mainstream media. As recently as 2018, Longo remarked:

Borders sit at the center of contemporary politics, but remain poorly understood, usually reduced to legal-topographical instantiations of sovereignty and placed as representative markers on the classic nation-state grid. They are jurisdictions without institutional existence – without "horizontal extent." Like lines in the sand, they are thin and vertical as they appear on maps. This portrayal is misleading and problematic, as such two-dimensional entities can only vary along one axis – permeability – vastly delimiting the scope of debate. (2018, 2)

Thickening borders

This article responds to Parker and Vaughan-Williams's and Longo's calls to move beyond the "thinness" of the "line in the sand" metaphor by reflecting on the border through film. The question will arise in particular of how film can today contribute to a "thick," and so counter-hegemonic, understanding of borders that gives account of their strengthening/widening and performative nature.

The choice of considering the border through film is valid, not least because the functions of the moving image have shifted in parallel. Problematic ideological strategies of in/visibility are played out today around borders by exploiting advanced image-making technologies and hegemonic media discourses. In this sense, the “thinness” of the border coincides with an image that, in the face of its overwhelming evidential qualities, obfuscates and “thins out,” in so far as it lacks historicity, spatiality and temporality—as in the hegemonic images of surveillance cameras and drone warfare, with their “interplay between military technologies of visualization and discursive techniques of othering” (Brambilla and Potzsch 2019, 77), or in the “emergency imaginary” (Calhoun 2010) of humanitarian securitization and its remediation into mainstream media, which “ultimately reinforces the power relationships of global mobility” (Chouliaraki and Musarò 2017, 546).

With its capacity to record living space and the evolution of our relationship with it in time, however, the moving image also holds a remarkable potential for representing and interrogating the border in its substantive historicity, spatiality, and temporality. Acknowledging the role of the media in the constitution of borders, Brambilla and Potzsch (2019) propose the idea of an “audio-visual borderscape,” which can be alternatively hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, and which creates and recreates forms of in/visibility.⁵ The moving image’s importance in the constitution and understanding of borders cannot be underestimated, given that the public realm is the space of appearance, and that, in the words of Hannah Arendt, “appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality” (1998, 50). If

a close connection with the actual events that inspired them allows some fiction films to participate in public discourse, documentaries, Jan Kühnemund (2018) remarks, have an even more straightforward association with the reality they depict, hence the significance of their role vis-à-vis the in/visibility of the migrant. T. J. Demos emphasizes in/visibility too, and discusses the role of experimental forms of non-fiction film in investigating “what political value accrues from those innovative strategies that negotiate the limits of representation yet nevertheless bring visibility to those who exist in globalization’s shadow” (2013, xix).

The films I will investigate in this article are among such forms of non-fiction filmmaking which experiment with innovative strategies; they are essayistic works that do not represent the border, in the sense of using it as a narrative device or topos, nor document it, in the sense of bearing witness to it or explaining it with perhaps a didactic purpose. These films’ relationship with the border is performative. Through filmic borderwork, they aim to counteract the thinness of a border image that lacks semiotic complexity. By reintroducing historicity, spatiality, and temporality, these films may be said to produce a “thick description” of borders, to borrow the expression used by Clifford Geertz, who espoused a semiotic concept of culture, to describe the work of the ethnographer vis-à-vis culture’s “multiplicity of complex conceptual structures” ([1973] 2000, 10). However, these films do not stop at exposing the in/visibility of the border through the performance of its semiotics; what’s more—and distinctive—their performance is self-reflexive to the point of becoming a theory of the border. It is precisely because they do not aim to represent but to theorize that these films may

be discussed as essays. I here use the term to refer to a moving image that is a form of “counterhegemonic philosophy” (Rascaroli 2017, 16). Itself an audiovisual margin and a border-crossing genre, the essay film is eminently suitable to conceptualize the “thickness” of borders as cultural sites of extreme semiotic complexity; as Ursula Biemann writes: “Essayist practice is highly self-reflexive in that it constantly reconsiders the act of image-making and the desire to produce meaning. [...] These characteristics make the genre particularly suited to study complex relations” (2003, 10).

In his critique of the concept of globalization as developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Philip Rosen remarks on the central role the two authors assign to the media as “determinants of the irrelevance of borders in the newly de-centered socio-political universe they describe” (2006, 11). The three forces that, for Hardt and Negri (2000), militate to break down boundaries in globalization are capitalism’s expansionist force, the flows of migration, and the media, which they describe as convergent, integrated, and diffuse. As Rosen shows, however, Hardt and Negri’s theory of globalization’s porousness depends on a notion of the media that is itself dematerialized, dehistoricized, and delocalized. It is significant that, in his article, Rosen analyses precisely an essay film as a filmic counter-example of these processes: Chantal Akerman’s *On the Other Side* (*De l’autre côté*, 2002), on the USA–Mexico border. Noting the heavily temporalized processes of the film, Rosen writes that, “in its bounding of space, in a temporalization which presents a border space, we might say the frame is likened to a border. This temporalization restores the difficulty of borders, the physicality of borders, the facticity of borders”

(2006, 16). I will argue below that essay film’s temporalization does more than restore the border’s materiality. The essay film creates spaces of in-betweenness, in which a temporalized, “slow” thought may take place (Rascaroli 2017, 5–6). This slowness is a form of theory as well as a performative semiotics; as Michelle Boulous Walker has remarked, “the essay offers us a future philosophy – one that holds out the hope for a slow engagement with the complexity and ambiguity of the world” (2016, 65).

By slowly engaging with the complexity and ambiguity of the border, and by performing it, the essay films I will discuss may be said to effect a *limitrophy*, to use the term by Jacques Derrida (2002); in other words, they cultivate a “*transgressal*” experience of the limit—which for Derrida means concerning oneself not only with the limit per se, but also with its complexity, with “what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it, and complicates it” (2002, 397). I introduce Derrida here because of the relevance to my argument and approach of the method he champions, which is “designed, certainly not to efface the limit, but to multiply its figures, to complicate, thicken, delinearize, fold, and divide the line precisely by making it increase and multiply” (2002, 398). Some help in thinking through this “thickening,” delinearizing, and folding of the limit—and I add, adapting Derrida, of the border as limit—comes via Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze uses the term “fold” to think of all form in the universe as folded, and of the universe itself as compressed by an active force dividing matter into smaller and smaller folds. The fold differentiates and self-differentiates; it reverberates on both sides, ceaselessly folding and unfolding. The two sides of the fold are in an intimate reciprocal relation. As Deleuze writes:

The “duplicity” of the fold is necessarily reproduced on both of the sides which it distinguishes and which it sets into a mutual relation by distinguishing them: a scission in which each term sets off the other, a tension in which each fold is extended into the other. (1991, 236)

While his notion of “assemblage” has been used before in border studies,⁶ Deleuze’s concept of the fold has not been often or clearly invoked. Thomas Nail mentions the fold to describe the flows of circulation, “a multi-folded structure creating a complex system of relative insides and outsides without absolute inclusions and exclusions, but the insides and outsides are all folds of the same continuous process of flows” (2016, 29). The fold can indeed be useful to overcome the “line in the sand” metaphor and the razor-sharp edge-like image of the “thin” border. It can help us think of borders as a scission generated by a force—a political/military force—that produces two terms which are not independent of each other but each of which extends into the other, in a process of unfolding, which, qua process, has a temporal dimension, and is a complication and a “thickening.” To put it in Heidegger’s words, “[a] boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its essential unfolding*” ([1951] 1993, 356). The term “unfolding” is not intended as the opposite of the fold, or its unmaking. As Deleuze writes, the unfold is “certainly not an undoing of the fold, nor its effacement, but the continuation or the extension of its act, the condition of its manifestation. When the fold ceases to be represented and becomes a ‘method’, an operation, an act, the unfold becomes the result of the act which is expressed in precisely that way” (1991, 243). Accordingly,

in the films under scrutiny here, the fold/border is not represented; rather, it is operationalized.

Three case studies will be compared below, each of which will allow me to study some of the strategies used by essay films to unfold and “thicken” borders. Through Armin Linke’s *Alpi* (2011), I will begin to reflect on folding as a process in which each of two terms extends into the other. Temporalization will come more strongly into play with my second case study, Philip Scheffner’s *Havarie* (2016), in which, “[w]hile time is unfolded, life stories are folded into each other and are at the same time folded back into the space that is the sea” (Wolf 2016, 8). Finally, an analysis of Tadhg O’Sullivan’s *The Great Wall* (2015) will demonstrate how the EU’s outer border is an “operative function [that] endlessly creates folds,” as Deleuze (1991, 227) would put it. Albeit necessarily brief, together my three analyses will constitute a study of film-essayistic borders—with a particular focus on Europe and the EU. This study is also a semiotics of the filmic border, a first attempt at the classification of essayistic border images. Finally, this contribution extends my previous analysis of how the essay film thinks (Rascaroli 2017) by combining the Deleuzian interstice and method of in-betweenness with a consideration of the essay’s slow performativity as a form of filmic borderwork.⁷

Extension and parallax: Armin Linke’s *Alpi*

Alpi is the outcome of a “slow” project by photographer/filmmaker Armin Linke based on his seven-year research with Piero Zanini and Renato Rinaldi “on contemporary perceptions of the landscape of the Alps, juxtaposing places and situations across all eight bordering

nations (from France to Slovenia) and spanning the territories of four languages” (Linke 2010). Initially a multi-screen installation, it became a 60-minute single-channel film that was screened in many festivals (starting with *Visions du Réel* 2011), exhibitions, museums and art galleries (including Centre Pompidou, Paris, the 14th Architecture Biennale, Venice, and *manifesta 11*, Zurich). Filmed in forty different locations over seven years, *Alpi* is a *limitrophic* concentrate of border complexity.

The film contains no verbal commentary, but visually splices together a set of radically different episodes, ostensibly in the tradition of observational cinema, with a predominance of long, fixed shots. *Alpi* is a work that places the “in/out” dualism of the border at the center of its conception. The choice of setting is significant, for mountains are a natural frontier, often coinciding with national borders. They symbolize the imperviousness of the limit but are also traditionally a place of passage and transit. The Alps are the most important mountain range in Europe, and a crucial internal border; they are crossed by the national borders of Italy, France, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Germany, Austria, Slovenia and Hungary, and separate central/northern and southern Europe. Their relevance as a border has come in great evidence during the refugee crisis that spiked in 2015 and 2016, particularly with the tensions at frontiers between Italy and France and Austria and Italy, respectively.⁸

Mountains, like borders, are important sites of identification, often becoming a symbol for whole national territories; James Sidaway lists mountains along with borders, monuments, tombs, and museums as “concentrated sites of mythical-magical performance” (2017, 193) embodying the characteristics of

nation-statehood. However, Linke’s Alps challenge narrow views of “banal nationalism, a (form of) national identity that is taken for granted” (Strüver 2017, 212), for they are a radical hybrid of local, national, and global features. The Alps, in Linke’s film, are all at once Europe and world, reality and discourse, life and marketing, archaism and modernity, in a way that supersedes nationalist and European identitarian discourses on landscape and promotes a complex understanding of territory as shaped by a diverse set of uses, practices and forces. Cultural encodings of landscape, and of the Alps as one of the most sublime European landscapes, are foregrounded throughout the film via an emphasis on paintings, maps, models, and panoramas. The film’s episodes pertain to a diverse range of people and practices, from shepherds still living in archaic ways to ultramodern labs, from age-old procedures for extracting stone from quarries to their refashioning as tourist sites. We encounter technicians, scientists, farmers, artisans; people who were born and raised on the mountains; Japanese tourists visiting the “highest point in Europe” (which, ironically, is shrouded in fog, thus interrogating ideas of visibility, landscape, and panorama); a crew making a Bollywood film; a demonstration against the building of a high-speed railway. Episodes pertaining peoples of different nationalities and languages are placed side by side, without indication that a border has been crossed. This is not to say that borders are not in sight. The film, indeed, foregrounds the border as pervasive, both in its porosity and its insurmountability, through images of barriers checked by guards and soldiers and ubiquitous acts of surveillance, security and law enforcement. The episode on

the temporary border erected in defense of the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland—which is attended yearly by some 2,500 international leaders from business, politics, economy and journalism—is significantly placed in the middle of the screen time, suggesting that borders emanate from the will to protect the affluent, global elite, and the financial centers of power.

Alpi was shot in Super16, a format that enhances the physical grain of matter—and mountains are the folds of the earth's matter par excellence. The tension generated by the fold is, in Deleuzian terms, an extension of each term into the other. Linke actualizes this co-extension through editing that carefully avoids emphasizing the film's crossing of borders, as well as a view of the landscape from the outside. In so doing, *Alpi* erases the distinction between here and there, us and them, local and global, center and periphery. In a place entirely crisscrossed by national borders, and that is a massive border in itself, it carefully extends into each other the couples of terms that are normally cast as mutually exclusive by ideological border discourse. The film's method enforces a range of perceptive readjustments, as in a series of parallax views, which achieve what we could call with Deleuze an "optical fold." One of the most macroscopic examples of such a method is the episode in which we discover that the Alpine ski resort we have been admiring is in fact a large indoor replica situated in a Dubai shopping centre (Fig. 1). As Bruno Latour has warned: "Going to the Alps? Thinking of trekking outdoors? Dreaming of skiing in Switzerland? Watch Armin Linke's film first. Beware. You will always be inside, deep inside laboratories, factories, ski resorts, or Swiss bunkers hidden

in the mountains" (quoted in Linke 2010). This achievement is the result of choices both technical and aesthetic. The film purposefully de-emphasizes the horizon, for instance, and thus the idea of an ultimate border. As Linke has explained:

we did not use a wide-angle to show the whole landscape, or a tele to show distant things closer. Especially no wide-angle, which is a lens that is always used in mountain films to show the horizon, and in action films to create a more spectacular perspective. And we always have a fixed camera pan and camera movements that are typically used in films to show the "panorama." (Linke and Pausinger 2020)

This results in a continuous movement of extension: "Armin Linke has succeeded in doing with film what he has been doing for years with photography: situate the envelopes inside which our existence unfolds" (Latour quoted in Linke 2010). The film's perceptual unfolding of the two terms of the fold ultimately challenges the concept of the Alps as a physical border. Rather, ideas of porosity, imbrication, contiguity, mirroring and reversibility are evoked and explored, and ideas of authenticity, purity and national or European identity become deeply problematized.

Stretching, decelerating: Philip Scheffner's *Havarie*

Havarie by Philip Scheffner opens by giving the coordinates of a point in the Mediterranean—38 nautical miles from the port of Cartagena, Spain; 100 nautical miles from the port of Oran, Algeria—where on 14 September 2012 a cruise liner made visual contact with an inflatable dinghy adrift with thirteen persons crammed on board and reported the sighting to the Spanish Maritime Rescue Centre. The liner waited 90 minutes for the rescue



Fig. 1: Alpine ski resort indoor replica in Dubai.
Alpi (Armin Linke, 2011).

to arrive, before setting off again. A tourist on board filmed a 3'36" clip of the sighting with his mobile phone. *Havarie* slows down the approximately 5,400 frames of this unedited clip, stretching it to a staggering 90-minute duration, through a step-printing process. If *Havarie* is slow cinema, however, it is so at two different speeds. While the image track is nearly motionless, the sound track keeps changing places, countries, languages, and times. As we watch the portion of sea framed by the phone, and the distant dinghy with the adrift migrants waving and looking towards the liner and the lens, we listen to a complex documentary audio track composed of several sources; among them recordings of the radio traffic between the cruise liner, the Cartagena port authorities, and the rescue cruiser and helicopter, and interviews with the Algerian refugees who were on the dinghy, the captain and international crew of a container ship with sailors from Ukraine, Russia, the Philippines, which encountered the dinghy, a husband and wife who worked on the cruise liner, and Terry Diamond, the Belfast security man who shot the original video clip. These multi-sited voices superimposed over the infinitely slowed-down images interweave stories of emigration, death, war, terrorism, and borders from the present and the past, thus profoundly complicating our understanding of both the current politics of the EU's outer frontier and the "thinness" of the media images of endangered migrants crossing the Mediterranean. In *Havarie*, indeed, "while we look at the surface of the sea, a space is opened out, indeed many spaces, many living spaces" (Wolf 2016, 8). The experiment is reminiscent of Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), with its rich tapestry of voices and sounds paired to an extremely simplified image track, which in *Havarie* also is predominantly blue.

In *Havarie*, the step-printing reduces the video clip to its individual frames. Occasionally, the ticking noise of the frames slowly advancing one frame per second is allowed to emerge from the voices and sounds dominating the soundtrack, resembling a clock's hand marking the time. Time is indeed a crucial element of the film. It becomes all at once literal, as in the real time of the waiting for the arrival of the rescue teams; projected, as in the changing ETAs called at regular intervals by the operators; and subjective, as in the infinitely stretched experience of being at sea. The image track's infinite slowness is hallucinatory for the spectator, not least because of the impression made by the blue of the waves and the sunlight hitting them, and the anxiety generated by the sight of the fragile, helpless dinghy with its pitiable human cargo. To describe this affective experience, Nilgun Bayraktar has evoked Craig Martin's concept of "turbulent stillness"—"a purposefully paradoxical nomenclature that is intended to illustrate how stillness in undocumented migration is riven with uncertainty and instability" (2019, 359). As producers Merle Kröger and Philip Scheffner wrote, "[t]he reflections in the water and the slowing down of the material produce 'ghost images': the dinghy seems to multiply, to elude our grasp, and even disappears from our field of vision in the end" (2015). The stretched temporality of the experience of watching the film, then, is a (distant) echo of that of the migrants crossing the sea as border; its affective visuality hints at, without ever claiming to reproduce, the experience of being cast adrift in the immensity of open waters, and at the hallucinations from which migrants crossing the Mediterranean often suffer, as described by the voice of one of the *harragas*—the North African migrants who try to reach Europe

in makeshift boats. The uncanny experience of being at sea for a very long time is also touched upon by several voices, including professional sailors who talk about how time feels radically different while on board. Rescue and surveillance operators, then, discuss the infinitely stretched, similarly hypnotic experience of staring at a screen for long hours.

As Kühnemund highlights, in *Havarie* “the spectating turns into waiting” (2018, 141). All the film’s temporalities, indeed, both visual and sonic have to do with waiting—waiting for something to happen, waiting for someone to appear, waiting to be rescued, waiting to land. In so doing, the film materializes the border as a mainly temporal experience dominated by the act of waiting, and the border itself as an apparatus that has the purpose not to stop but, as already mentioned, “to decelerate the project of migration” (Ellebrecht 2013, 49).

The deceleration of the frame-per-second rate has another important effect, in that the low quality of the mobile phone image of the original video clip is further degraded in *Havarie* by the above-described operation of “stretching.” The German word *Havarie* refers to a disastrous engine failure, resulting in the shipwreck; but it could also be referred to the breakdown of the image itself. In her discussion of the “poor image,” Hito Steyerl comments that cell-phone cameras contribute to the production and circulation of poor images, whose “optical connections – collective editing, file sharing, or grassroots distribution circles – reveal erratic and coincidental links between producers everywhere, which simultaneously constitute dispersed audiences” (2009). In the case of *Havarie*, Philip Scheffner is at once a dispersed, coincidental spectator of the YouTube clip by Terry Diamond, and a producer who appropriates and

puts the clip back into circulation, this time within the milieu of international film festivals and the circles of experimental documentary. Yet, it is not by glorifying the clip but by breaking it down that the potential of the poor image for critiquing regimes of vision in relation to the in/visibility of the border becomes fully unlocked. The rapidity with which YouTube clips are normally consumed is foreclosed, as we are made to watch at an excruciatingly slow pace both the imperfections of the amateur video capturing the “excitement” of “real life as it happens,” and the image of the helpless migrants waving at us. Equally, the near-immobility of the image, as Bayraktar has remarked, breaks “the hegemony of the visual in the global mediascape” (2019, 362), and obliterates the “border spectacle” (2019, 363). Staring at the nearly stilled image, indeed, we experience not a dominant viewpoint but proprioceptive deprivation. At one point, the camera leaves the dinghy and tracks laterally to show us first one side of the cruise liner, then the other. The digital image collapses; flashes of saturated color—green, purple—striae and fill the screen (Fig. 2). Commenting on this crucial moment, Kröger and Scheffner write that “the film doesn’t spare us from the tracking shot that leads us to our own position: the huge ship of glass and steel and the tourists staring off into the distance. We are bystanders” (2015). It is not so much the tracking shot but its radical deceleration, its catastrophic *Havarie* —and that of the image overall in this film—that force us to recognize, and very slowly experience, the problematic politics of our own position as both creators and consumers of border images.

Parataxis and anamorphosis: Tadhg O’Sullivan’s *The Great Wall*

In Tadhg O’Sullivan’s *The Great Wall*, which premiered at the 2015



Fig. 2: Breaking down of the image. *Havarie* (Philip Scheffner, 2016).

Dublin International Film Festival, passages of Kafka's short story "At the Building of the Great Wall of China" ("Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer," 1917) are read out, in the original language, by a woman's voice over images of the EU's heavily militarized southern and eastern frontiers and other parts of the continent. The locations, which are never explicitly signposted but are simply shown, and thus not all of which are easily identifiable, include the Spanish autonomous city of Melilla, on the northern coast of Africa, bordering with Morocco; refugee centers in Bulgaria; the Polish–Ukrainian border; Athens's Syntagma Square; the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex's headquarters in Warsaw; Paris; Berlin; and London. Images of borders are pervasive in the film. These are sometimes conspicuous, "hard" borders, as in the fences at the EU's southern limit, or "borderlands" such as the Mediterranean Sea, which is patrolled and scrutinized by helicopters, boats and surveillance cameras.⁹ The border is then evoked more subtly via a range of smaller walls, fences, police cordons, as well as intangible but equally or even more impervious barriers—such as those constituted by imposing buildings in the centers of the economic power, like the City of London, which convey impenetrability—or by ubiquitous technologies of surveillance and face recognition.

The concept of the border is also brought into focus verbally, by means of Kafka's story, which is about the Great Wall and, specifically, the process of its construction. It is a monologue narrated by one of the builders of the Wall, an old man who spent his entire life at the south-eastern margin of the Chinese empire. The man describes the Wall's counterintuitive

method of construction, which proceeds in sections, rather than progressively and continuously, with gaps left in between sections:

It was carried out in the following manner: groups of about twenty workers were formed, each of which had to take on a section of the wall, about five hundred metres. A neighbouring group then built a wall of similar length to meet it. But afterwards, when the sections were fully joined, construction was not continued on any further at the end of this thousand-metre section. Instead the groups of workers were shipped off again to build the wall in completely different regions. Naturally, with this method many large gaps arose, which were filled in only gradually and slowly, many of them not until after it had already been reported that the building of the wall was complete. In fact, there are said to be gaps which have never been built in at all, although that's merely an assertion which probably belongs among the many legends which have arisen about the structure and which, for individual people at least, are impossible to prove with their own eyes and according to their own standards, because the structure is so immense. ([1917] 2020)

As is typical of Kafka's work, this story has been read metaphorically by many critics from early on, with the Wall standing in for entities such as the state, Jewish Law, or culture, readings that have subsequently been shaped by evolving critical approaches including postcolonialism and orientalism.¹⁰ Nellie Munin (2019) has drawn an engaging comparison between the construction of the Wall and of the Chinese empire in Kafka and the formation of the European Union. O'Sullivan's film rather invites us to compare Kafka's Wall to the EU's outer border, while also using the text to explore broad questions of power and control, and the role of the border in relation to both.

The film, indeed, encourages us to see the unfinished construction of the Wall in Kafka's story, with its gaps and weaknesses, as a powerful commentary on the incomplete nature and ultimate inadequacy of hard borders. Reece Jones, for instance, points at the constitutive deficiency of the border when he observes that "[t]he necessity of re-narrating and constantly patrolling boundaries is evidence of their incompleteness, a fact which allows for further contestation and re-evaluation" (2009, 183). When a border is of the magnitude required by an entity of the size of the EU, then, its inchoateness is even more obvious. The film clarifies this point by insisting on the borderwork activities of those who incessantly patrol, defend, inspect, and scrutinize the border, in person or via technologies of surveillance. The same point is also conveyed by means of a structural choice. The film may indeed be said to mimic and reproduce the perplexing method of the Great Wall's construction. As in Kafka's story groups of builders are periodically moved and sent to vastly different regions, in a way that seems devoid of logic, so the film keeps changing setting, journeying from Europe's outer border to various continental locations and back again. The reasons behind each change of location is not self-evident; this choice is further compounded by the radically paratactic mode of the transitions: relationships of coordination or subordination between sequences (and locations) are never made explicit. The film's parataxis invites the spectator to an intense activity of interpretation, in particular of the possible connections between Kafka's text and the different scenes and sites that are visualized by the film. While analogies may be traced, the overarching connection that emerges is the one between

the outer border of the EU and a range of internal sites at which the EU's structures of power and control become visible: Frontex's headquarters, refugee asylums, and various centers of law enforcement and economic and political power.

Kafka's story explicitly reflects on power, connecting it to the will at the origin of the construction of the Wall. This is associated at first with authority—as a response to the perceived need to protect the inhabitants from the peoples of the North (the South in the film's adaptation of the text)—who, in an act of textbook othering, are depicted as a savage, even monstrous threat generating profoundly irrational fears. At the end, however, the narrator reveals that the decision to build the Wall predates the current regime and, therefore, emanates from power itself, seen as an almost abstract force that comes before any historical embodiment of it. The Wall, thus, is necessary to power; it is its very foundation. The film ends on the truly Kafkaesque image of empty leather armchairs, which brilliantly evoke faceless executive power, whose sole purpose is to exert control, and safeguard itself. From the setting, it is clear that we find ourselves in a European center of finance or politics; the scene, indeed, was filmed in the Ministry of Finance in Berlin. Behind the EU's center of governance, then, a more sinister force is identified: power as power, as well as the capital as power. Interestingly, this is precisely the force that thrives on the free circulation of goods in a custom-free, "borderless" world. This power is surrounded by an invisible frontier that feels infinitely more impenetrable than the visible, hard border of the South—which needs constant patrolling and surveillance, and which is periodically "jumped" by migrants.

The film, then, shows that the border is constructed by power not for a real need for protection, but to establish and perpetuate itself. The film's paratactic movements from the outer border to the heart of Europe effectively amount to a careful unfolding of the EU's outer border. The latter is the original fold generated by the active force of power, which in turn generates a scission, and therefore an infinite number of further folds, endowed with variable degrees of visibility—but usually more imperceptible, and therefore more acceptable to the peoples of “borderless Europe” than the outer border/Great Wall itself. The film's mobile structure suggests the intimate connection between all these folds, and the ripple effect of the unfolding of the border, from the outer fence to the prison-like gates of the refugee centers, from the invisible barriers of the City of London to the police cordons against the popular protests against the Troika in Athens, from the centre of the EU in Brussels to Frontex's headquarters in Warsaw. In this way, the experience of the border is shown to be diffused rather than condensed, and plural rather than singular. The distinction of interior and exterior is challenged by this experience of the border, which is everywhere—and in every time too, given the mythical narrative framework of Kafka's story, with its sense of timelessness, duration and repetition. The ubiquity and omnitemporality of the border is further materialized in the film by the use of a very wide anamorphic lens, evoking the idea itself of a wall (Fig. 3). As Manon Girault has written, “the merging of certain lights and angles lines create this other conceptual border, omnipresent throughout the film” (2017). These considerations also have a bearing on how we think of the quote from Kafka that opens

The Great Wall: “A cage went in search of a bird.” By the end of the film, there is no inside or outside of the cage.

Performing the border, bending the line: Essay film as *limitrophic* thinking

We have to manage to fold the line and establish an endurable zone in which to install ourselves, confront things, take hold, breathe – in short, think. Bending the line so we manage to live upon it, with it: a matter of life and death. (Deleuze 1997, 111)

The strategies employed by these films demonstrate that they do not seek to merely represent the border or narrativize it, but rather to perform it, to unfold it, and to theorize it. A semiotics of the film-essayistic border image has emerged from this brief study. Strategies such as extension, deceleration, and anamorphosis bend and stretch the border ad infinitum, both spatially and temporally. Parallax and parataxis confound distinctions and defeat the typical binaries of border discourse: in/out, here/there, them/us. Borders in these films—and others that could not be discussed here, like Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan's *Grossraum* (*Borders of Europe*) (2005), Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo's *Sudeuropa* (2007), Lisbeth Kovacic's *Minor Border* (2015), Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *The Border Fence* (*Die Bauliche Massnahme*, 2018), or Isabelle Ingold and Vivianne Perelmuter's *Ailleurs, partout* (2020)—are multiplied, reversed, thickened, and extended into both sides of the divide. By making recourse to utterly filmic tools such as lenses, step-printing, transitions, sound mixing, they transgress the border as limit, and its characteristically thin representation as a line in the sand, as razor-sharp



Fig. 3: Anamorphosis of the border. *The Great Wall* (Tadhg O'Sullivan, 2015).

edge; and they equally challenge the thin image of surveillance technologies, border spectacle, and hegemonic media discourses. They perform the border by putting it into operation: they unfold it, and in so doing they thicken it. This unfolding is a *limitrophic* form of audiovisual thinking. As a process, it is, ultimately, a temporalizing strategy: it stretches, bends, multiplies, expands, slows

down; it opens temporal gaps for thought, and lengthens our spectatorial activity of cognizance and apprehension of the limit. This slowness resonates in important ways with the stalled temporality of the border and its “turbulent stillness”—and it is a conduit for an essayistic, emancipated, counter-hegemonic engagement with the complexity of the world.

- 1/ The Schengen Agreement, originally signed in 1985 by five European nations, and later expanded to include progressively more continental countries, effectively abolished internal borders between the signatories, so creating a borderless European “Schengen Area” currently including twenty-six countries.
- 2/ Consider the results achieved in 2019 by anti-immigration parties such as Sebastian Kurz’s centre-right Austrian People’s Party, the separatist Vlaams Belang in Flanders, Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party in Hungary, and Matteo Salvini’s far-right League in Italy.
- 3/ Frontex is the European Border and Cost Guard Agency. It currently defines itself as “one of the most dynamic and fastest-growing agencies” of the EU which will soon “grow even bigger,” confirming the renewed importance of the European outer frontier (Frontex 2020).
- 4/ In terms of “bordering lives,” Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) uses the concept of borderland as a theoretical framework for marginalized existence, often lived uncomfortably, in the liminal/ border spaces of (at least two) different cultures, nations, identities.
- 5/ The concept of “borderscape” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) first emerged to investigate borders “not as taken-for-granted entities exclusively connected to the territorial limits of nation-states, but as mobile, relational, and contested sites” (Brambilla et al. 2016, 2).
- 6/ See, for instance, Best (2003); Woodward and Jones (2005); Sohn (2015).
- 7/ What I am articulating here by invoking borderwork as a form of audiovisual thinking is distinct—though not incompatible with—the “border thinking” notion by Walter Mignolo, which is a decolonial border epistemology, that is, “the recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the perspectives of people in subaltern positions” (2010, 736–37). Igor Krstić has recently invoked Mignolo’s border thinking in his discussion of the position of placeness of accented essay films, which he defines as an “emerging transnational body of films [...] produced by diasporic, exilic or interstitial documentary and/or essay filmmakers [which] deal with displacement, exile or migration in the essayistic format” (2020, 55). The case studies I will analyze in my article do not fall in this category, though the notion of borderwork as audiovisual thinking that I discuss here could be applied to relevant accented essay films.
- 8/ Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s documentary feature *The Border Fence (Die bauliche Maßnahme)*, (2018) engages with the tension between Austria and Italy in 2016 around feared immigration through the Brenner Pass.
- 9/ “Hard” borders are those borders that are enforced; they can be made tangible by any physical infrastructure, from barriers, signs and guard posts to surveillance cameras.
- 10/ See, for instance, Greenberg (1958); Goebel (1993); Goebel (2006); Mlačnik (2019).

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The Spectator's Position as a Thinking Space for the Contemporary Essay Film: *Face aux fantômes* (2009) and *Jaurès* (2012)

This article aims to carry out an analysis of the spectatorial position as a thinking space for the contemporary essay film based on the comparative study of two Francophone films: *Face aux fantômes* (Jean-Louis Comolli and Sylvie Lindeperg, 2009) and *Jaurès* (Vincent Dieutre, 2012). The dialogism of the essay film, the interpellation to the spectator to produce self-reflection on their position and critical thinking about the images shown, is then generated from the premise of identification. The analysis shows how *Face aux fantômes* offers an audiovisual thinking process on the mobilization of the gaze of the *emancipated spectator* theorized by Jacques Rancière, while *Jaurès* provokes the same reflection from the opposite approach: the fixation of the gaze and the representation of spectatorial passivity. In this way, both films reveal the possibilities of the spectator's position as an epistemological space for the contemporary essay film.

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Introduction

The essay film presents as one of its defining characteristics its dialogical nature between author and spectator and, consequently, the role of the latter in the construction of the film. Its evolution consolidates the dialogism between the enunciating subjectivity/ies and an equally individualized spectator. Following the reflections of Laura Rascaroli and David Montero, it establishes an I-you relationship that allows a dialogue with a real spectator to address and interpellate: “The essayist [...] allows the answers to emerge somewhere else, precisely in the position occupied by the embodied spectator [...] The two subject positions, the ‘I’ and the ‘you,’ determine and shape one another” (Rascaroli 2009, 36). Thus, an “active spectatorship” emerges, allowing the development of critical thinking: “interpellation in essayistic films is a liberating force since it encourages the viewer to develop a critical position” (Montero 2012, 121); and the self-reflection about our own position as spectators: “the audience is invited actively to reconsider their role and what is expected of them in order to reflect upon their own status as spectators” (2012, 118–19). The essay film explores and delves into the possibilities of this dialogical nature, producing different dynamics and displacements between both positions: “An important element when considering viewer positioning in essayistic filmmaking is the discursive displacement of the author towards the interpretative field of the viewer [...] The same process can be observed from the other side, allowing the reader to actually re-experience the original process of reflection” (2012, 124). In general, we can say that the essayist’s position has moved from being the author of the images, behind the camera—*Lettre de Sibérie* (1958)—to being the editor of both their own images and those of others,

in the editing room—*Scénario du film Passion* (1982)—until a progressive dematerialization of this position associated with digital technology in contemporary essay films. It also implies a progressive approach of the filmmaker to the spectator’s position. This article aims to carry out a comparative study of two contemporary Francophone essay films that are generated precisely from the identification between filmmaker and spectator, since the former decides to place themselves in the position of the latter. It is a practice that we rarely find in the European Francophone essay film before, and which would be confirmed as an epistemological space for the contemporary essay film.

Face aux fantômes (Jean-Louis Comolli and Sylvie Lindeperg, 2009) and *Jaurès* (Vincent Dieutre, 2012) are generated from the premise of placing the authors in the physical position of the spectator, of bringing the approach-distance dynamics of that I-you relationship to identification, from where to generate an audiovisual thinking process. In addition, and in a very significant way, in both cases this condition of spectator is shared by two individuals, enabling intersubjectivity between the two, a second level of dialogism between the internal spectators of the film. This premise generates different levels of thinking: the one that occurs on the first spectatorial level—the projected audiovisual pieces—; between the projection and the spectators-filmmakers; between both internal spectators; and finally, between those internal spectators and the spectator of the essay film. In this way, parataxic (Català 2014) and interstitial (Rascaroli 2017) thinking, and the sentence-image (Rancièrè 2003) as a defining element of the audiovisual thinking process (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022), will be generated at three different levels. The essay film then produces a reflection about the

mobilization of the spectator's gaze inherent to both self-reflection and the production of critical thinking. My analysis aims to carry out a comparative study of both works that allows us to determine the elements, strategies and results of converting the spectator's position into the epistemological space for the essay film, of bringing the filmmaker-spectator dialogism to identification.

Face aux fantômes: From the mobilization of the gaze

Comolli and Lindeperg's film emerges as an audiovisual reflection on the latter's literary essay, *Nuit et brouillard: un film dans l'histoire* (2007). Thus, the reflection on the memory-history-art axis from the film by Alain Resnais (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1956) and its author become protagonists of an essay film that places the historian as a spectator, accompanied by the filmmaker. Reflection aims to expand its territory to convert the literary spectator-historian into a filmic one, through a thinking process that the filmmaker transforms into an audiovisual process. To do this, both interlocutors are located in a kind of laboratory-projection room that will allow multiple reflections on the position of the spectator as an epistemological space: "Together, the filmmaker and the historian put themselves in front of the ghosts to consider the status of these images of the experienced bodies," "each film situates the spectator differently and singularly in front of the ghosts"¹ (Blümlinger 2014, 81, 82).

The first image of the film exposes the synthesis of its purpose. In a fixed shot of the rails upon which the camera will soon move in an interior space yet to be discovered, we hear Comolli's voice indicating the start of the shot. The camera then begins to move along the track. Finally, the shot ends with a superimposition of a close-up of the filmmaker's hands leafing

through his co-director's book (Fig. 1).² In this way, a sentence-image is generated, a synthesis of the thinking process that begins. First, a crucial shot and camera movement from Resnais' film is revisited—the shot of the abandoned railroad tracks in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp (Fig. 2) and the tracking shot he used to shoot the film's color images—and they are moved to an interior space that we will discover is that of the spectator. Thus, not only is the reflection on Resnais' film evident, but also the self-reflection on the spectator's position. Secondly, the superimposition of the hands leafing through the book exposes how both reflections are going to bring together two perspectives from which intersubjectivity will emerge: that of the historian and literary essayist, and that of the filmmaker and cinematic essayist.

Starting from this sentence-image synthesis, the film builds a historical reflection on Resnais' film through the materialization and mobilization of the spectator's position, where we find both subjectivities conversing in the same frame. We see Lindeperg speaking and Comolli listening, surrounded by the different devices that will provide the spectatorial experience: television monitors, projection screens, slide projectors, and audio players, among others. The first archival image shown in the film, the one of the return of French deportees in 1945 that Lindeperg is explaining, is shown reproduced on a monitor, including the device and its sound (Fig. 3). Therefore, an essential question of the film is established, offering the documentary images through a kind of second spectatorial level, both visual and sonorous. In this way, the film accumulates material elements of the spectator's position, characterizing a space that evidences the mediation of the device as the spectator's first element of self-reflection. Lindeperg's explanations continue in an individual

medium shot that moves to show Comolli listening. Thus, the essay film establishes an itinerary of the spectators' gaze, showing Lindeperg as a spectator of *Nuit et brouillard* and Comolli as a spectator of Lindeperg. Next, the camera follows her through a tracking shot, while she approaches the projector with which she will show archival documents (Fig. 4). This second tracking shot is already configured as a key element of the film. The tracking shot that revealed the actuality of the concentration camps in *Nuit et brouillard* is used here to reflect on the position of the spectator—in this case a historian—as a materialization of the mobilization of her gaze. Next, the documents shown again include the materiality and sonority of their reproduction device, confirming that second level that causes self-reflection (Fig. 5). There is then a second tracking shot of Lindeperg, which now surrounds her as she speaks (Fig. 6). The camera movement evidences the spectatorial subjectivity of the historian. Her testimony is hence emphasized not as an irrefutable truth, but as an individual reflection to which different perspectives can be applied.

A new rhetorical element emerges when referring to the key of Resnais' film: the relationship between the concentration camp system and the extermination of Jews and Roma. This abyss materializes by means of a zoom-in on a photographic image. Therefore, the analytical search of the spectator, the scrutiny of the image as an epistemological search, is encrypted in this element. Then the first sound recording appears to reveal the conception of the film that would finally become *Nuit et brouillard*. Henri Michel's and Olga Wormser's statements about the historical value of films culminate in the former's proposal to make a film about the concentration camp system. Once again, we listen to the archival source while looking at its device first

(Fig. 7), to include its listener later. We still stay in that second self-reflective level of the spectatorial experience. After hearing about the origin of *Nuit et brouillard*, the film takes up the tracking shot, through a series of three shots:

- the tracking shot on its own tracks in the first shot of the film (Fig. 8);
- a tracking shot through the filming elements of the space, which again finds its correspondence in the interior tracking shots through the barracks of the camps in Resnais' film (Figs. 9 and 10);
- the end of a tracking shot on Lindeperg (Fig. 11).

Thus, a second sentence-image synthesis of the essay film is produced. The mobilization of the gaze in the historical space that Resnais executed in *Nuit et brouillard* is taken up by Comolli in the spectatorial space to show Lindeperg's mobilized gaze. It is then that the historian states the key element of her reflection. Anatole Dauman accepted the commission for a film about the concentration camp system on the condition that it was "equally defined by a high artistic ambition." In Lindeperg's words: "It is truly the moment of the transition to art." By introducing this *passage à l'art* into the reflection, the tracking shot around Lindeperg undergoes a key change: it now moves behind Comolli, including him in the image (Fig. 12). This produces a new materialization of a symbolic sentence-image. The *passage à l'art* of Resnais' film besides historical facts moves to the transition to the essayistic reflection: from Lindeperg's literary work to the audiovisual work filmed by Comolli, which implies the inclusion of the filmmaker's subjectivity and authorship. In this way, the intersubjective construction between the spectator-historian and the filmmaker who films her is exposed, embodying her thinking process in an audiovisual way, which we also observe as spectators.

By introducing the documentary material from *Les camps de la mort* (*Les actualités françaises*, 1945), we see Lindeperg, for the first time, in the spectator's position, included in the image (Fig. 13). Her body partially covers the screen, hiding the harshest image fragments. Therefore, the essay film produces a new symbolic sentence-image, in this case about the spectator's need for a critical gaze, who can "develop a critical position not only in relation to authorial discourse, but also to the screened images and other discourses which compose the essay" (Montero 2012, 121). In other words, Comolli creates a symbolic sentence-image that embodies Lindeperg's critical gaze. It then crystallizes the complete cartography of the spectator's position as epistemological space, showing its three levels: Lindeperg's position as spectator, Comolli's position as Lindeperg's filmmaker-spectator, and our position as spectators of the essay film. The configuration of this cartography enables both critical thinking about the images shown and self-reflection about the spectator's own position. Thus, the reflection developed by the essay film can address the film in question, *Nuit et brouillard*, from both perspectives: "Alain Resnais is not part of a narrative of proof by image [...] to build the right distance with them [the images] to both report on the event but build his film around a will of critical distancing of these images." Lindeperg then raises the nuclear question of the spectator's position: "What is the relationship between seeing, believing and knowing" and expresses Resnais and Jean Cayrol's starting point: not to use the question of the proof image, but to consider that, on the contrary, "they are not able to allow us to apprehend the event."

In this way, the first third of *Face aux fantômes* constructs the cartography of the spectator's position, of the different spectators and their possibilities, to

give them the tools of reflection with which to contemplate *Nuit et brouillard*. Its images are shown to us for the first time from a first spectatorial level 25 minutes into the film, without the device mediation, in order to now be able to apply critical distance and self-awareness in its viewing. The spectators of the essay film face the images on the first level after having reflected on our position as such. Therefore, this first level is reserved for *Nuit et brouillard*. The first fragment corresponds with the color tracking shots filmed at Auschwitz-Birkenau; the second with archival images in black-and-white; and the third with a combination of both. It is then that Lindeperg's words, addressing again the idea of the film's *passage à l'art*, are shown to us with a second tracking shot behind Comolli, in the opposite direction to the previous one (Fig. 14). While Resnais made this transition through the filming of color images through tracking shots, Comolli transfers this element to embody the mobilization of the spectator's gaze, identified with Lindeperg, to ask them if "art itself has the potency of truth."

The second sound document, the words of Resnais himself, takes up the representation of the first, Lindeperg listening to it, to then create a second superimposition that now also includes sound. Resnais' words evoke some images found in Amsterdam, of German officers on the platform of a deportation convoy, shown to us superimposed on the sound reel from which the audio comes (Fig. 15). Thus, Resnais is also characterized as a spectator of the documentary images on which he worked. While previously we saw Lindeperg as a spectator of the images from *Les camps de la mort* on a monitor that she partially hid, now we observe her contemplating the only moving images that show a deportation convoy, in Westerbork (Fig. 16). This confirms the critical position of the spectators besides the images. While

before she hindered the viewing of “the intolerable image” that “prevented any critical distance” (Rancière 2009, 89), tracing “a straight line from the unbearable spectacle” (2009, 103), now she gives way to silent images without manipulation (we observe the time code on them).

Next, the *passage à l'art* of these images materializes audiovisually. Resnais decided to show them in his film together in a single block and in the absence of Jean Cayrol's commentary; only accompanied by Hanns Eisler's music. However, he included three shots of an old man with two children that belong to material found in Warsaw. This double viewing hence exemplifies the *passage à l'art* on which they reflect, and the spectator is interpellated to reflect on too. The tracking shot on Lindeperg when recounting the relevance of the only shot of a person looking at the camera evidences once again the mobilization of the spectator's gaze, of the critical thinking that must question that *passage à l'art*. The image, which shows a young girl—Anna Maria (Settela) Steinbach, who was discovered in 1997 to be Roma—will become an icon of the Shoah, and the essay film freezes it as such. Addressing hitherto unknown photographic images of Himmler's visit to Monowitz, to the IG Farben factory, in 1942, which prove how concentration camp prisoners became the workforce of the Third Reich, Lindeperg exposes how these allowed “adjustment of the viewing to the knowledge” while a new tracking shot associates this capacity with the critical position of the spectator. A second visit to Birkenau to attend the gassing of Dutch Jews links the concentration system with the extermination of the Jewish and Roma population. The emergence of the *final solution* in the film script, and its suppression in its definitive commentary, is then represented with a second zoom-in on an image and the subsequent tracking

shot on Lindeperg. Thus, the filmmaker spectator of the archival images identifies with the spectator of the created film. It is in this moment that the film shows again, in the first level, the conclusion of *Nuit et brouillard*, ending the second part of *Face aux fantômes*.

The third and last part focuses on Lindeperg's subjectivity as a spectator-historian of the film, based on her study of Olga Wormser's work. The camera now covers the distance between the screen and its spectator, the space that embodies the mobilization of the spectator's gaze in front of the work. Therefore, it is Wormser's encounter with the film that allows Lindeperg to understand the necessity of reversing the perspective: *Nuit et brouillard* creates a “circle of knowledge” between history and art in the process of its construction. Only twenty years later, Wormser will conclude her investigation of the “history in the making.” Lindeperg also decided to abandon the historian's distance and enter Olga's atelier.

The third sound document of the film, again Resnais' statements, in this case about the writing of Cayrol's commentary and Marker's participation in it, is shown again with Lindeperg's figure listening to it, in front of the device. A tracking shot on the physical space of the essay film, in the opposite direction to the previous one, now generates the third superimposition, with the image of Annette Wieviorka's book: *Déportation et génocide : entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (2003) (Fig. 17). Next comes the conversation between Lindeperg and Wieviorka, the latter becoming a third spectator, also a historian. Once again, the tracking shot generates intersubjectivity, the exchange between both spectatorial gazes, whose nature is emphasized by placing them, again, in the spectator's space, with the screen behind them on which projected images appear at times. Their conversation about how Resnais' film became the definitive film on

genocide, at the same time that it began to be criticized for the perception of the Shoah it conveys, finds its reflection in the paradox that implies that historians, until the 1980s, worked on it without being its spectators, reducing their study to Cayrol's commentary, ignoring its images. Wieviorka addresses the evocative power of Birkenau's color images even though they do not show the evoked object.

The conversation between both historians gives way to the fourth sound document, again from Resnais, explaining the decision, and the experience, of shooting in color and with tracking shots. A new sentence-image synthesis of the film and of the reflection it has developed is then produced. On the sound image of Resnais, we see, in the first level, a black-and-white photograph of the shooting, assembling the rails for the tracking shot. Next, the images from the beginning of the film, with that unique vertical tracking shot with which we are situated in the present of the film, are silent, accompanied by the sound of the audio reel. Resnais' words reemerge when the film appears projected on the screen Lindeperg observes: first the documentary photography of the shooting; then the images of the film; and finally a new photographic image of the shooting. Now it is not the camera that moves on Lindeperg but the historian who moves from one side of the screen to the other as it shows the color tracking shot from *Nuit et brouillard* (Figs. 18 and 19). Thus, the *passage à l'art* materializes through the convergence of the four spaces:

- that of Resnais as a creator through the convergence of his sound testimony, the black-and-white archival photographs of the shoot and the color images of the film;
- that of Lindeperg as a spectator in front of these images, displacing her position as a spectator at the same time as Resnais' tracking shot moves;

- that of Comolli as the essayist who creates this convergence;

- the spectator who must generate their own reflection of what is perceived.

Resnais' fifth sound document, again with Lindeperg listening, offers us the filmmaker's determination: "I don't want to make a monument to the dead." Doing so would mean not articulating critical thinking. Resnais explains the filmmaker's need for it, with whom the spectator can identify at this moment of the reflection. The censorship of one's own work is analysed with the question of the *corps indésirable of the gendarme*, as a testimony of the collaboration of the French state in the arrests of the Jewish population. The external censorship, of the projection in Cannes, with the sixth sound document, in this case by Dauman, evidences the present value of the film in relation to the Algerian War. To conclude, Lindeperg addresses the issue of the translation of the film commentary, as a new stage where critical thinking can materialize, and therefore exercise it in its viewing. The translation of Cayrol's text into German was carried out by Paul Celan, who knew how to *transfer* the work to the critical needs of the German people, displacing some of its meanings. "I am not responsible" becomes "I am not guilty;" "the old concentrationary monster" turns into "racial madness." In this way, Celan also contributes his critical thinking, confirming that it can be applied from any position.

The film's reflection is coming to an end. The two previous zooms in on archival images are now completed with two other zooms on Resnais' film: a zoom-out on the image of the film that evoked the first image of the essay film—the color image of Birkenau rails— and a zoom-in on the black-and-white image of the yard at the entrance to Auschwitz. Once again, the mobilization of the gaze finds a final materialization as the search for the critical distance

through the movements of distance and approach. In her final digression, Lindeperg takes up the figure of Olga Wormser to conclude the work with its core, confirming “a sort of duplication with the figure of the historian Olga Wormser on whose steps she continues to advance in her quest for truth” (Véray 2011, 187). By taking up Daniel Arasse’s reflection (2006), the historian delves into the dialectics of emotion-knowledge regarding the work of art: “There are two forms of emotion in front of the work of art [...] there is the one that springs from the visual shock of the first viewing, and then there is something else that can put the work of time, the learning of the gaze.” Lindeperg recognizes how Wormser made this journey: mobilizing her gaze, changing her point of view, transforming emotion into reflection. A final tracking shot from the projection screen to the figure of Lindeperg synthesizes the itinerary from the work of art to the spectator’s position from which the essay film has been made, hence showing the distance to be covered, the need for the displacement of the gaze: “Displace our gaze on this film *Nuit et brouillard* that we thought we knew, that we thought we had seen, but at the same time that we had lost sight [...] that we re-learn to see it differently.” Lindeperg exposes her final conclusion as spectator of the film, as an example of any spectator, which generates the self-reflection of her experience as such:

By positioning my gaze following Olga Wormser’s gaze, by placing my steps in her footsteps, it is also a reflection that I wanted to pursue regarding my own relationship to this film *Nuit et brouillard*, on which I had started to work in ‘87. And, as Olga, it had finally taken me twenty years to achieve it [...] I had the impression that I had not been able to see it.

***Jaurès*: From the immobilization of the gaze**

Jaurès is also generated from the position of the spectator, who on this occasion does not face the images of history but those of contemporary reality. In this case, the filmmaker, Vincent Dieutre, is in the editing and recording room to show a film to his friend Eva Truffaut; images about which they talk while contemplating them. The initial shots of the editing table, the projected images and the characters who observe them present this new space of enunciation from the spectator’s position. The projected film, made by Dieutre, consists of the images captured from the apartment window of his lover, Simon, in the Parisian neighborhood of Jaurès, over several months, from the winter to the summer of 2010. From that window we see the metro station of the same name and the Saint-Martin canal where an Afghan refugee settlement has been established, which will be the theme of the images shown. Dieutre and Truffaut, Vincent and Eva—we will call them that in their capacity as characters—contemplate the images, unknown to the latter, with headphones and in front of microphones that record their words to be included in the film. In this way, Eva identifies with the spectator who sees the work for the first time. Based on the questions that the images raise for Eva, Vincent will narrate two parallel existences: that of the refugees outside, captured in the visual image; that of the couple’s relationship inside, which remains offscreen and materializes only through the sound image. And finally, a third space, that of the experience of both as spectators of the images.

While *Face aux fantômes* focused on the space of that second spectator level that led reflection through its mobilization, *Jaurès* focuses on the first level accompanied by the sound image of its spectator’s comments. Therefore, Dieutre creates two simultaneous

off-screen images: that of Vincent and Simon in the projected images; and that of Eva and Vincent as their spectators. The spectator's gaze is fixed to a position, to the images taken from a window. The frame changes between shots, but the camera always remains fixed. There is no movement in the frame either. The spectator's self-reflection and critical thinking are generated through this immobilization, through the cohabitation and dialectics between the inside and outside of the images shown, and between the spectatorial experiences of the internal characters, with which to confront the spectator's own experience. The interpellation is hence doubled, facing the images and facing the different spectatorial experience of Eva and Vincent: she viewing the images for the first time; he explaining them in response to her questions. The parallel between the visual image of the outside of the refugees' reality and the sound image of the inside of the couple's reality is established through a sort of clandestine love. Simon did not want to make their relationship public, and Vincent never had access to his lover's apartment in his absence. Thus, the refugees from the canal and Dieutre share the same temporality. If the former take refuge in the canal at night and pick up the camp in the morning to return to it at the end of the day, Dieutre only shares with his lover the nights after work and the mornings before starting the day. This generates the structure of the projected film: alternating mornings and nights in which actions and characters will be repeated. Outside the daily life of refugees; inside that of the lovers.

The images follow each other while Eva asks about the beginning of the relationship. At the same time a piano melody emerges from the sound image; it is Simon, practicing "À Chloris" (1913),³ a piece by Reynaldo Hahn with which the film begins. It will become

the leitmotif of the film and a symbolic sentence-image of the *passage à l'art* of contemporary reality through a kind of progressive recreation: Simon's clumsy rehearsals on the piano; the real melody; the fragmented recitation of part of its lyrics by Eva and Vincent—changing the name of Chloris for that of Simon—; until they finally sing the piece together. Eva's first questions deal with the biography of Simon, an activist and social worker in different parts of the world who, back in Paris, has retired and now collaborates as a legal adviser in an association that helps refugees with their asylum applications. Thus, Simon in his working life is a direct witness to the reality faced by the refugees who appear in the image, and to the dialectic-cohabitation offered by the film: "He would let go of all the pain, while down there in front of his eyes were these refugees. They were very young and might need his help the next day, or the day after."⁴ The first transition between both spectatorial levels then takes place, from the first to the second, through the connection of the projected images (Figs. 20 and 21), always from Vincent's position, also emphasizing his status as their author. In this way, a first strategy is produced that aims to strengthen the idea of simultaneity while cancelling the distance between both levels. The second procedure consists of showing the faces of the spectators (Figs. 22 and 23), accompanied or not by a shot of the editing room and its editor (Fig. 24). Both strategies reinforce parataxis and annul the gap as a space for mobilizing the gaze.

The images show the parallel routines of the inside and the outside. In the case of the refugees: the morning ablutions, the settlement gathering, the police controls, the visits of the NGOs, offering breakfast or providing hygiene material, the reestablishment of the camp at night, the prayers. In Vincent's case: breakfasts, dinners, minimal

fragments of dialogue and the sound of everyday actions. It is this fixation of the spectator's position and the separation between the inside and the outside that becomes an interpellation of the spectator to generate self-reflection and critical thinking about the immobility the work imposes to them. However, this separation is destroyed in three moments, all of them crucial for reflection. In the first, the contact is only evoked, when Eva asks Vincent if there had been any interaction:

That winter they camped under the bridge, the canal froze over. We brought them blankets. We called out from the bridge and dropped them down. I knew that Simon was spending his days trying to help them to obtain a secure status, and it reassured me. I felt a connection with them. I really admired Simon [...] To him, each of them had a story that had to be told.

For Vincent, the inevitable link between the refugee situation and his relationship with his partner, his point of view, is one of the elements that interpellate the spectator. Does the experience of love anesthetize the social conscience? Is there a romanticization of social conflict and commitment? In the second moment of contact (at minute 35), Dieutre goes down to the street during the demonstrations in support of the refugees, and for the only time we are shown the images of that contact, as we will analyze below. In the third (at minute 49), the filmmaker recounts how the situation of immigrants leads some of them to prostitution. Thus, the activist who helps them is interpellated to objectify them: "these kids were reduced to that."

The sound image later offers us Simon's voice giving his opinion on the situation: "My work is so depressing. It gets worse every day. The State Council's rulings are hard to accept. The court contradicts itself, there is no

consistent policy. It's highly political and badly run." The image of an artist in the opposite building, working with some neon lights, gives rise to the narration of Simon's position about the social value of art, now through Vincent: "Only useful things matter to him. Worthwhile things, like his activism. I struggled to explain to him that to me, art served a purpose. That art also affected the world" (Fig. 25). We already find a similar discussion about the value of the work of art exposed in *Face aux fantômes*. While Lindeperg reflected on it in relation to history—the transformation of aesthetic emotion into knowledge—Dieutre focuses on the present: does the artistic work that we witness as spectators transform the social reality that it shows us? The conflict between emotion and knowledge is generated in this case through the dialectics between Vincent's love feelings and the social reality he observes. The spectator is interpellated to generate self-reflection: Is social reflection possible and/or effective through the experience of love? The spectators' self-reflection about identifying or not with both characters is constant: in relation to Vincent for his emotional point of view; in relation to Eva for the elements that interest her and about which she asks. What questions would we spectators ask if we were in her position? The sound image then offers us a radio fragment that outlines the social reality of the refugee situation: "Hundreds protested yesterday in Paris against 'disposable immigration' [...] including the Greens, the Communist Party, the RESF and the League of Human Rights. Socialist M.P.s joined the march but were not organizers."

The film places the spectator in front of a mirror in relation to the dialectics between the private and the social. The immobility of the gaze imposed on us by the images becomes once again a symbolic image of social passivity besides the immigration issue. Those

dialectics are reinforced by Vincent's words, about this point of view from the window (Fig. 26): "Simon called the view his 'little theatre.' Because you see the metro up high, people and cars below, and further down, the hidden world of the Afghans. A world in cross-section with its various strata." A fictionalization of the outside is already suggested, which will next materialize in the progressive appearance of animation elements in the image. In the first place, two policemen's jackets and the figure of a refugee wrapped in a blanket that has been shown to us previously (Figs. 27 and 28). It is therefore configured as a new strategy of the *passage à l'art* already in process through Hahn's song, generating a reflection on the transition from the documentary image to fiction.

Later, the sound image offers us a joint reflection by the couple on the reality they inhabit, as they contemplate the passers-by: "This is national identity... that deconstructs and reconstructs itself each morning... That's what revolution is!" The spectator is doomed to self-reflection and critical thinking caused by this immobility: In what direction would we like to mobilize our gaze? Approaching the exterior space of the refugees? Turning the camera towards the interior space of the lovers? In this way, the different, separate realities on which the essay film reflects are configured. Vincent explains in the image: "Jaurès was, to me, the threshold, the place where our two worlds met;" Simon's world of social activism, Vincent's art world, mediated by the reality of refugees.

As mentioned earlier, Dieutre shows the protests at night in support of the refugees, first from the position of spectator, second level (Fig. 29), then, through the continuity to the first level (Fig. 30) and finally from the canal, passing through it in images for the first and only time (Fig. 31). We could say that it is the only moment of mobilization of the filmmaker's gaze.

Therefore, it is the social mobilization that causes the mobilization of his gaze, exposing the reverse path, where social action generates the artistic gesture. This mobilization allows us to hear the sound image of the outside also for the first and only time: "In response to this scandal, we are taking matters in hand. Yesterday we offered shelter to 150 homeless Afghans [...] We will now end this first protest rally. Unfortunately, it will not be our last." At that moment, the editing table, once again, not only reminds us of the position of Eva and Vincent as spectators and commentators in the film, but also of the previous montage made with the images. Vincent's reflection evidences the consequences of this mobilization of the gaze as a recognition of the outside shown, as a vindication of its status as reality: "They were part of the neighborhood [...] We know their country is at war since our soldiers are there. But they must constantly prove their suffering [...] They were living on borrowed time, borrowed time." It is this explicit acknowledgment of the other that allows the comparison of both clandestine activities, the social and political outside, the romantic one, "clandestine lover," inside.

In this second part, and from the mobilization of the gaze in the night demonstration, both Eva and Vincent delve into the reality of the refugees. Regarding some images of police control, Dieutre states: "There were never any clashes or arrests. Just constant harassment. A combination of assistance and control. It was always ambiguous. [...] They didn't speak French and were extremely vulnerable." The same thing happens in Eva's reflection, which now introduces the gender issue: "What strikes me is that it's a world without women. Both in your apartment and down at the canal with the refugees [...] It shocks me that women are like ghosts." Eva offers us the first emotion in front of the work

of art, the visual shock that Lindeperg speaks of. Spectatorial passivity is hence linked to that first moment of the aesthetic emotion. Vincent recognizes the reality of the absence of women, but immediately returns to the theme of homosexuality to highlight that third moment of contact already alluded to around prostitution. Women, therefore, stand almost exclusively as spectators of the film. And the external spectator must then question themselves about their identification with Eva. In her capacity as spectator-character, the filmmaker's friend does not question or problematize Vincent's story, but rather limits herself to serve as a catalyst for it. In the same way that Dieutre fixes the spectator's gaze on the window, he offers us a passive spectatorial presence, once again provoking self-reflection and critical thinking through its absence in the performance.

Accompanying the images that show the arrival of the spring, Vincent concludes the lyrics of the song. Owing to the shift in the season, the refugees now sleep in the open air. While Vincent continues the story of his romantic relationship, the images show the presence of the police assistance unit, BAPSA (Brigade d'assistance aux personnes sans abri). First, we hear Simon as an inside spectator of the images: "That's outrageous. Are policemen allowed to smoke?" Vincent then summarizes for Eva the nature of those visits: "They came to check on their health and dental problems. It was also a way to keep an eye on the camp." After reciting the first part of the poem together again, the intimate account of Vincent's emotion—"He was sleeping like a child. It made me cry"—accompanies the image of a young refugee dancing by the canal (Fig. 32). The *passage à l'art* is then produced by connecting the emotions of the inhabitants of both realities. The appearance of a dove in the image

sparks the same poetic revelation that reality offers and also marks the *passage à l'art*: "It just appeared one morning from nowhere. It was like a vision." This revelation evokes the issue of the narrative becoming fiction, now included in the same shot, as before with the rain and a car, an animated dove (Figs. 33 and 34). The animation is then continued on a mattress carried by the refugees, after which the real dove appears again. This creates a new reflection that challenges the spectator. Dieutre reflects on the *passage à l'art* of the cohabitation of the intimate story and the social reality and also on its fictionalization.

Again, in the early hours of the day, two women help the refugees (Fig. 35). This second appearance of the feminine gender leads, once again, to homosexual identity: "Simon said they went there to pick up the young guys, but he was being cynical. Like Simon, they gave these people their time." It is necessary to point out that this trait of cynicism in Simon's character emerges exclusively at this moment, in relation to the only appearance of women in the images. The film would then offer the opportunity for Eva to exercise a critical position in this regard. The spectatorial passivity of the character is confirmed, who asks but does not question, completing the scheme of immobility designed by Dieutre, and thus urgently interpellating the spectator. Next, Vincent makes the only direct reference to the political reality to which the images belong, by naming the Minister of Home Affairs, Brice Hortefeux. And in this present context, he evokes the failure of both practices; activism and artistic creation: "To him [Simon], cinema and art had no purpose. But now his activism was also useless."

The parallel between the presences of Vincent and the refugees in *Jaurès* continues in the film's denouement. The latter were expelled from the canal

in the summer of 2010, as reported by the institutional statement that Dieutre includes before the credits. The former became also permanently absent from Jaurès that summer: "There were no more refugee camps. But I never saw him again." These two sentences, on the image of two refugees in the settlement, complete the parallel itinerary of both realities, intimate and social. The following images are progressively overtaken by animated elements (a buoy in the river, the tops of the trees, a car in the canal), now linking the *passage à l'art* with the transformation of reality into memory. Already in the denouement, Dieutre exposes his reflection on the connection between both realities:

Nowadays, it seems that notions of attachment and love are very difficult to define. Just as we have trouble defining our relationship with politics, or even with the idea of justice. However, it turned out, I have no regrets at all about those years at Jaurès.

In this way, he relates both spaces through the absence of commitment both in the romantic sphere and in the political and social domain. For the first and only time, it is Vincent who asks Eva, and again it is necessary to point out that the question refers exclusively to the sphere of love: "How about you? How do you know if you love someone or if you will love them?" The spectatorial passivity in which Dieutre places Eva is confirmed again. All this intensifies the interpellation of the spectator, of their critical thinking and self-reflection. Next, the images of the editing table and those of both spectators' positions evidence the essayistic nature of the piece, on which Dieutre concludes his reflection:

I'm not going to compare my situation to theirs. [...] I was up in the apartment; they were down below. They taught me that you can start from zero, the energy of existence

will triumph. To me, that was very important to give life some depth, for it to be worthwhile [...] I know that moment in time existed, and that in some small way, the world was transformed. Not a great deal, but everything changed slightly.

Thus, Dieutre claims the capacity for transformation of the intimate-social dialectics, and of its *passage à l'art*, bringing together the two elements that have spawned it throughout the work on the image of the prayer of refugees: the small animations that appropriate the image and the song that Eva and Vincent finally sing, after having recited it several times (Fig. 36). On this final image, and by way of credits, the institutional statement that reported the eviction of the refugees from the Saint-Martin canal in July 2010, by order of the immigration minister Éric Besson, is presented. Dieutre hence confirms the relevance of the social reality on which he has built his story; he proves the need for the spectator's reflection on the work that concludes.

The theoretical analysis of the film proves the potency of the interpellation it generates; its capacity to produce diverse reflections. While Tom Cuthbertson (2017) focuses on the intimate story of the film in order to reflect on the fictionalization of the autobiography, without problematizing its device, the texts by James S. Williams (2020) and Comolli (2012) embody the dialectics that the film provides. Williams criticizes the chosen spectatorial position regarding the refugees and the cohabitation of both realities, since it "objectifies the migrant figure" (2020, 172). Comolli defends the point of view of the film, analyzing the difference between the spectator and the voyeur, reflecting on the spectatorial limits and the "*passage à l'acte*," which he has previously theorized (2009).

The emancipated spectator of the contemporary essay film

The decision of the filmmakers of both *Face aux fantômes* and *Jaurès* to place themselves in the spectator's position, in very different ways, opposed in various senses, makes that their comparative study raises very relevant questions about the nature, capacities and possibilities of the emancipated spectator defined by Jacques Rancière, when applied to the contemporary essay film:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting [...] The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages in other kind of place. She composes her own poem with the element of the poem before her [...] They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them. (Rancière 2009, 13)

Thus, the emancipated spectator questions both the equivalences between "gaze and passivity, exteriority

and separation, mediation and simulacrum" and the oppositions "between the collective and the individual, the image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-ownership and alienation" (2009, 7). The emancipated spectator mobilizes their gaze and carries out the operations of association and dissociation: "It is in this power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists—that is to say, the emancipation of each of us as spectator" (2009, 17). Therefore, the emancipated spectator, who performs self-reflection on the distance that separates them from the work and its variation to generate critical thinking that will establish both consensus and dissent regarding what is shown, finds in the analysed films two proposals that interpellate them from almost opposed premises, which makes it possible to reflect on the aforementioned equivalences and oppositions. The foregoing analyses offer us the following synthesis, as a very relevant materialization about the tensions exposed by Rancière:

Face aux fantômes

Mobilization of the gaze
 Interstitial thinking
 The itinerary of the distances:
 Tracking shot
 Embodiment of the active spectator
 Aesthetic reflection
 Gaze on history
 Gaze on the other
Passage à l'art of history
 Transition from emotion to knowledge
 Intersubjectivity as materialization of the audiovisual thinking process

Jaurès

Fixation of the gaze
 Parataxic thinking
 Cancellation of the distances:
 Simultaneity and continuity
 Representation of the passive spectator
 Aesthetic emotion
 Gaze on the present
 Gaze on the self
Passage à l'art of intimate-social dialectics
 Transition from experience to memory and fictionalization
 Intersubjectivity as catalyst of the narrative

Both films are hence situated in the spectatorial position to provide two experiences that allow mapping and reflecting on the possibilities of the emancipated spectator. *Face aux fantômes* offers us the embodiment of an emancipated spectator to show us the possibilities of self-reflection and critical thinking from the viewing of *Nuit et brouillard*. Comolli transforms this discourse into an audiovisual thinking process using tracking shots as a materialization of the mobilization of the spectator's gaze. In this way, the film offers a "pedagogical model" (Rancière 2008, 59) where the emancipated spectator would identify with Lindeperg in her viewing and research on Resnais' film, and with Comolli regarding the audiovisual materialization of the thinking process of protagonist. Self-reflection and critical thinking then arise from a mobilization of the gaze that aims to cover the different distances, the interstitial spaces at distinct levels: between the diverse materials of *Nuit et brouillard*, between the film and Lindeperg, between Lindeperg and Comolli, between the two filmmakers and the spectator of the essay film. The identification of the pedagogical model means that this last distance is practically abolished. Therefore, the spectator *shares* the self-reflection and critical thinking around the *passage à l'art* of the historical material, about how the transition from emotion to knowledge is inserted in the believe-know-see axis.

Considering the interstitial thinking the previous film develops, Dieutre generates parataxic thinking consisting of fixing the gaze, imposing cohabitation and preventing its mobilization, hence annulling the interstices and the variation of distance. The only point of view facing the exterior space of the refugees and the interior space of the lovers, and their simultaneity, annuls the mobilization of the gazes in the filmed images. The simultaneity

and continuity between these images and the spectator space of Vincent and Eva also annuls their interstice. Finally, the represented spectator, Eva's character, does not materialize into an active spectator who questions the images, but in a spectatorial passivity that serves as a catalyst for Vincent's story. However, she offers us a relevant experience of the first viewing by showing us the first aesthetic emotion, especially regarding the absence of women. The visual shock of the internal spectator also provokes the reflection of the external spectator of the film. In this way, the emancipated spectator of the essay film would not experience the identification that occurred in *Face aux fantômes*; instead, from the denial of identification, the spectator is asked to reflect on the position in which they are placed, without the possibility of mobilization within the film. This spectator's self-reflection is also linked to critical thinking about the *passage à l'art*; on this occasion about the cohabitation and dialectics between intimate emotion and social knowledge of the present reality, and finally, about the fictionalization of this experience and its transformation into memory.

Face aux fantômes interpellates the emancipated spectator by offering them the audiovisual materialization of their self-reflection and critical thinking, thus instrumentalizing identification. *Jaurès* interpellates the emancipated spectator by the denial of the previous possibilities, seeing them doomed to reflect on the mobilization of a fixed gaze, on the possibilities of an active spectator facing a representation of their passivity. As Rancière indicates: "Pensiveness thus refers to a condition that is indeterminately between the active and the passive [...] It is to speak of a zone of indeterminacy between thought and non-thought, activity and passivity, but also between art and non-art" (2009, 107). The comparative study of both works reveals the fertile

extension of this zone of indeterminacy in the essay film, still to be explored, where it is possible to reflect on the tensions between the active and the passive, thought and non-thought, emotion and reflection. This would remain therefore one of the challenges

of the contemporary essay film: to consider the spectatorial position as an epistemological space, as a space for its audiovisual thinking process.

See original text at the end of this journal.

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- 1/ English translations of original references in French and Spanish are from the author.
- 2/ Figures are included at the end of the article
- 3/ Translation: "If it be true, Chloris, that you love me, / And I'm told you love me dearly, / I do not believe that even kings / Can match the happiness I know / Even death would be powerless / To alter my fortune / With the promise of heavenly bliss! / All that they say of ambrosia / Does not stir my imagination / Like the favor of your eyes!"
- 4/ English translations of the film dialogues are taken from the DVD subtitles.

Face aux fantômes

Superimpositions

Fig. 1

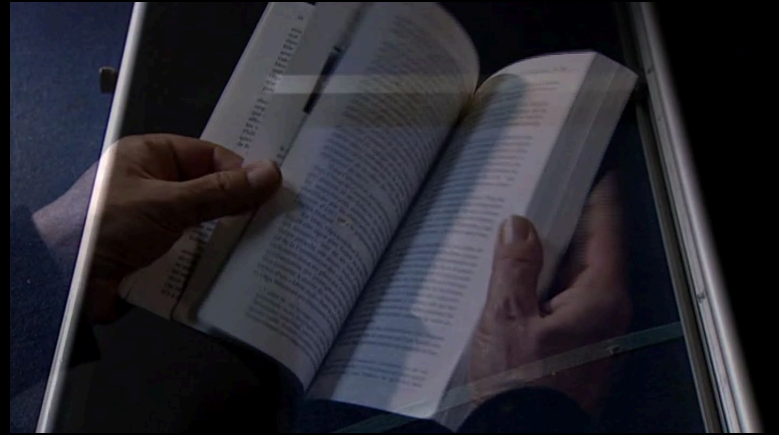


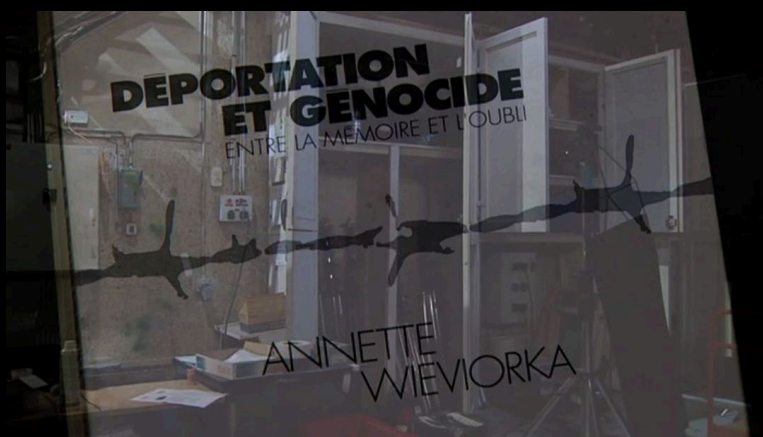
Fig. 2



Fig. 15



Fig. 17



Tracking shots

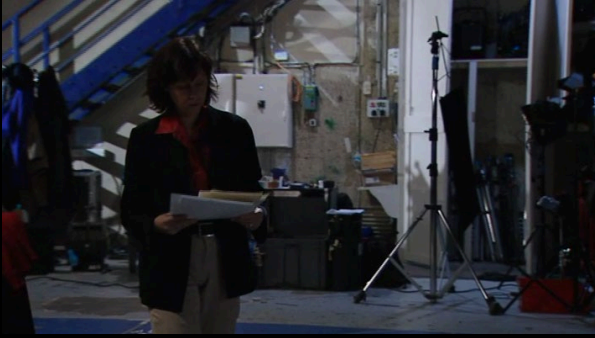


Fig. 4



Fig. 6



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 14

Devices



Fig. 3

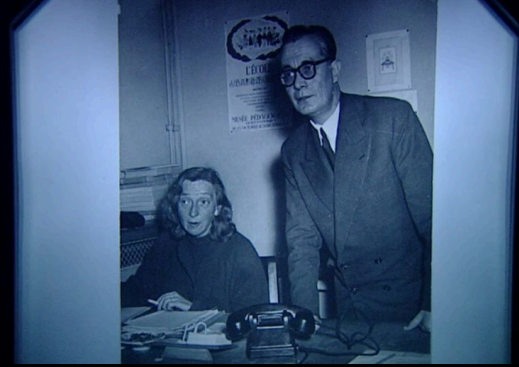


Fig. 5

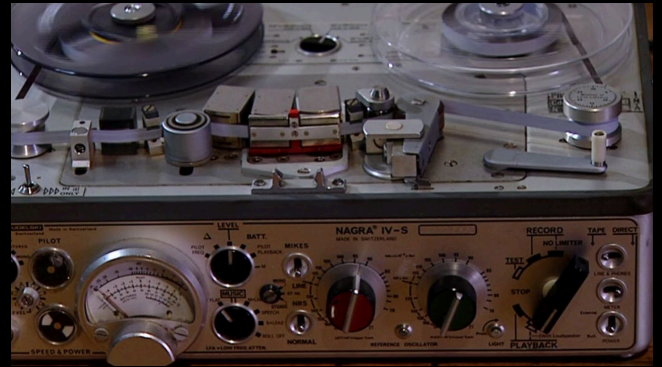


Fig. 7

Second spectatorial level



Fig. 13

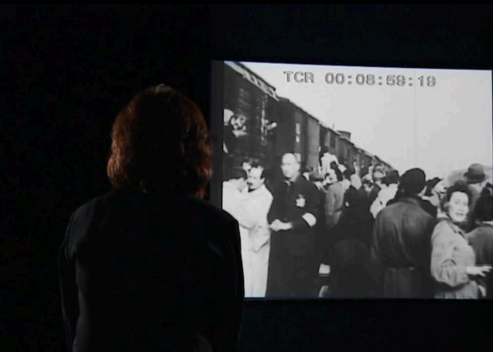


Fig. 16



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

Jaurès

Second spectatorial level



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24

Continuity between both levels



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 29



Fig. 30



Fig. 31

First spectatorial level



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27



Fig. 28



Fig. 33

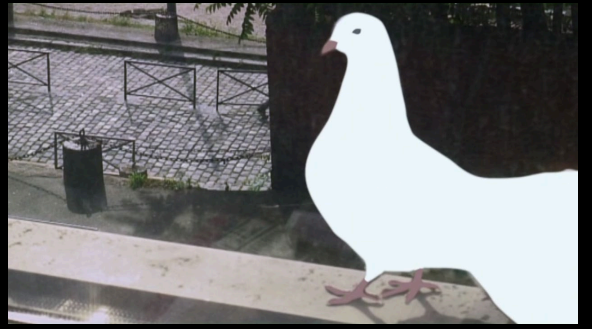


Fig. 34



Fig. 32



Fig. 35



Fig. 36

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“The Postman’s Coming:” *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* and the Limits of Essayistic Thinking

Positioning the essay film as a form of cinematic thinking enables a reconsideration of its different modalities, formal operations and philosophical influences. At the same time, it prompts us to reflect on its engagement with those elements of human experience that mark the limits of thought. Taking Víctor Erice’s *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (2006) as its focus, this paper considers the ways in which Erice’s film explores elements of personal and collective experience that trigger an undoing of thought. What does the film’s rendition of this undoing imply about the nature of cinema? How do we register its effects in the images and sounds that characterize the director’s body of work?

Keywords

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I

"That's the way it is," the celebrated Spanish director Víctor Erice recounts in an essay on his relationship to cinema, "by writing, one day I began to think cinema—discovering a way to prolong its vision, of realizing it too" (Erice 2007, 267). He links this discovery to the experience of viewing François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*) at the 1959 San Sebastián Film Festival. "I left the theatre, moved. And that same night I felt the need to put down in writing the ideas and feelings that [the film's] images had awakened in me." My interest in this paper is not in tracing the continuities between Erice's writings on cinema and his films, but in the activity that links writing and filmmaking: thinking.¹ To put the matter as directly as possible: what does it mean for Erice to "think cinema"—or to use cinema as a space for thinking? How is this thinking registered in his films? The context in which these questions will be pursued is the film that locates the articulation of thought within its very title, *La Morte Rouge* (*soliloquio*) (2006). Produced as part of the exhibition *Correspondences: Víctor Erice and Abbas Kiarostami* first staged at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, this film recounts the director's initiation as a cinematic spectator and the impact on his five-year-old consciousness of Roy William Neill's 1946 murder mystery *The Scarlet Claw*. In *La Morte Rouge* thinking cinema involves thinking about forces and events that bind our histories to a larger collective history. More challengingly, it also involves thinking about something that can't be thought or realized in our experience of the world—a suspension of thought that is expressed through cinematic images and sounds. This paper will trace some of the ways in which this suspension of thought links *La Morte Rouge* to the forms of thinking that have come to define the essay

film. Viewed through the lens of this extraordinary film, the essay film is less a distinct set of techniques than an engagement with the capacity of cinematic images and sounds to traverse the limits of our thinking.

II

In *La Morte Rouge* Erice's reflections on cinema emerge from a cluster of thoughts on the passage of time and the uncertainty of history. The catalyst for these musings is the fate of the ornate building that once graced the stretch of road overlooking Gros Beach in San Sebastián: the Gran Kursaal (Fig.1). Drawing on archival photographs and newsreel footage showing the building in its heyday, Erice's voice-over recounts the ambitions that drove its construction and the events that led to its demise. The decision by the Spanish government in 1924 to ban gambling brought an end to the building's operations as a casino. But the building itself continued life as a cinema, and it is here, among "the ghosts of gamblers and croupiers, of waiters and cooks and musicians and variety artists," that on 24 January 1946 the director experienced cinema for the first time. In the preamble to the film's re-creation of this moment, we are shown photographs of the halls of the casino through which one had to pass to reach the cinema as well as the paintings on the domed ceiling of the magnificent auditorium where the screenings took place. We even hear a re-creation of the sound of the bell that was rung inside the auditorium to announce the start of the evening's entertainments that, as was the custom, began with the screening of a "No-Do"—the name given to the heavily propagandistic newsreels produced by the military dictatorship. The narrator describes these newsreels as the "substratum of reality" on which his experience of the fictional world of *The Scarlet Claw* was overlaid.



Fig. 1: *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (Victor Erice, 2006)

But if Erice's words suggest an overlay of distinct elements, elsewhere he proposes a mutuality between contiguous forces. And it is this mutuality between the unsettling feelings inspired by Neill's film and his recollections of the life outside the cinema that the filmmaker's softly spoken voice-over endeavors to parse. Produced as part of a series of fourteen Sherlock Holmes films released by Universal Studios between 1939 and 1946, *The Scarlet Claw* concerns the attempts by Holmes and his associate Dr Watson to get to the bottom of a spate of grisly murders that have terrorized the inhabitants of the fictional Canadian village of La Morte Rouge. Looking back, Erice wonders if the film's rendition of life in the Canadian village echoed the feelings of dread that characterized the world outside the cinema, a world ravaged by the lingering trauma of the Spanish Civil War and the global devastation of the recently ended world war. "Did that universal sorrow weigh somehow on the heart of the boy, who, together with his sister, seven years older than him, walked towards the penumbra of the cinema to see the first film of his life?"

Erice's wording here is crucial. The connection between the disturbance generated by Neill's film and his recollections of the devastation that characterized the world outside the cinema is determined as much by shadow as by light. The formal challenge that drives the film is: how to give this partially illuminated connection a cinematic rendering? Three elements distinguish the director's response. The first is the capacity of the voice-over to weave together a host of different types of images: archival photographs of the Gran Kursaal and the scarified nature of Spanish society in the years leading up to and immediately after the Second World War; a movie poster advertising Neill's film; a map of Canada; a

silhouette of the familiar profiles of Holmes and Watson; publicity stills showing key players and scenes from *The Scarlet Claw*; a grainy black and white photograph of a small boy looking back at the camera that we recognize as the director, himself. Commencing in the first person yet shifting to the third person to describe the impact of Neill's film, the director's voice-over links these images to an overarching narrative about the fate of the Gran Kursaal, the large-scale social ruptures that marked his childhood and the cinema's capacity to lend itself to a certain type of troubled thinking.

The second element involves the use of reenactment to depict the moment when the young boy, sitting in the darkened auditorium, sought guidance on how to process the terrible events rendered in Neill's film by scanning the faces of the adult viewers. Erice also reenacts the disturbance generated when the light filtering through the balcony doors in the young boy's bedroom triggers a continuation of the fears experienced in the cinema. The shadows cast by this ghostly illumination are accompanied by an array of sounds that convey the permeability of the young boy's state of mind: the bell of a passing streetcar, the chiming of a church clock, the revving of a car engine and, most insistently of all, the plaintive notes emanating from a piano located in the apartment above the bedroom. Just prior to this sequence, Erice stages the arrival of the figure that mediates the passage between the crimes committed on-screen and the young boy's off-screen world: the neighborhood postman, whose shrill whistle acts as a counterpart to the bell that is rung inside the auditorium.

These two elements are supplemented by a third element that points to a realm of meaning that exceeds the story of cinematic initiation told through the voice-over

and the reenactments. I'm referring here to the associations drawn directly from the images, themselves. Three times during the first part of the film a publicity still of Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, AKA Holmes and Watson, peering down at something out-of-frame, slowly dissolves to an image of the devastated world into which the director was born (Fig. 2). The first dissolve links the gaze of the two detectives to a photograph of two children with their backs to the camera saluting a poster of General Franco. The second has the famous sleuths surveying aerial footage of a bombed-out European city. The third brings their viewpoint to bear on slow-motion footage of a concentration camp inmate walking toward the camera. Traditionally, the establishment of an eyeline match that links a shot of someone looking to a shot of the person or thing being looked at is used to maintain continuity across a cut. It aligns the camera's view of a scene with the perspective of a particular character who serves as a proxy for our own view. In the sequence described, our engagement with the events on screen is not bound to the perspective of a character per se. More reflexively, the connection is with an image. In *La Morte Rouge*, we see what images see. The look that the two detectives cast onto the world both doubles our gaze and displaces its priority by affirming the capacity of images to look for themselves and form connections on their own terms.

III

To say that in *La Morte Rouge* images look for themselves is to align its operations with those of the essay film, a form of cinema located between fiction and documentary that places the activity of thinking at the center of its operations. Timothy Corrigan clarifies that one way in which this occurs is through the inscription of

a subjective voice or perspective. The aim is not to arrive at a definitive position or claim about the world, but to render visible and audible the travails of thought: "Essayistic subjectivity [...] refers then not simply to the emplacement or positioning of an individual consciousness before and in experience but to an active and assertive consciousness that tests, undoes or re-creates itself through experience" (Corrigan 2011, 31). In films such as Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955) and Chris Marker's *Letter from Siberia* (*Lettre de Sibérie*, 1957) this involves an off-screen voice addressing the challenges posed by the images. How should we understand these images? What is it that they show? What can they not show? Near the start of Resnais' film, the camera tracks along an abandoned train line built to transport detainees to a concentration camp. "Today, on the same tracks, the sun shines," observes the narrator. "We go slowly along them, looking for what? Traces of the corpses that fell to the ground when the car doors opened? Or perhaps of those driven to the camps at gunpoint amid the barking dogs and glaring searchlights, with the flames of the crematorium in the distance, in one of those night scenes so dear to a Nazi's heart?" Once inside the camp, the narrator ponders the impossibility of conveying the horrors committed within its confines: "The reality of these camps, despised by those who built them, and unfathomable to those who endured them—what hope do we have of truly capturing this reality?" The cumulative effect of these reflections is to alert us to a disjunction—between what is seen and what is spoken, between the image's capacity to reveal the world and what must be brought to light through other means.²

In *La Morte Rouge* the director's voice-over also encourages the spectator to ponder the relationship



Fig. 2: *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (V́ctor Erice, 2006)

between images and the traumas of history. "To the public, *The Scarlet Claw* was, above all, just a 'scary' film," the narrator recalls. "Except that, in this instance, the fear spread far beyond the screen, its echo resounding in the atmosphere of a devastated society. On the one hand, due to the bloodletting typical of a civil war; on the other, due to the effects of a recently ended world struggle." Like the narration in Resnais' film, Erice's voice-over prompts us to look again at the image. But this reengagement is not driven by a distrust of the image's ability to convey the traumas of history. Rather, it is part of an activity of thinking that endeavors to approach the image on its own terms. This is to say that, in Erice's film, images operate as seers whose gaze alerts us to those aspects of the past that remain still-to-be-thought. Where else can we find evidence of this type of pictorial agency? In a discussion of Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998), Jacques Rancière proposes that the director's project of drawing out of the images of the previous century a virtual history is comprised of two stages. The first involves separating images from their narrative arrangement. In the chapter entitled "Le contrôle de l'univers," for example, we are presented with a collection of moments from Alfred Hitchcock's films separated by black screens: the bottle of Pommard smashing on the ground in *Notorious* (1946); the slowly turning windmill in *Foreign Correspondent* (1940); the yellow handbag tucked under the central character's arm in *Marnie* (1964); the illuminated glass of milk carried up the stairs by Cary Grant in *Suspicion* (1941). The second stage involves using the resources of video editing to combine these images with a range of other images, written text, musical phrases and spoken elements. The outcome is a shift in the operations and purpose of montage,

from something principled on the clash of seemingly incompatible elements to "attesting to a more fundamental relationship of co-belonging, a shared world where heterogenous elements are caught up in the same essential fabric, and are therefore always open to being assembled in accordance with the fraternity of a new metaphor" (Rancière 2007, 57).

In *Histoire(s) du cinéma* montage has a dual agenda: it initiates a clash between seemingly heterogeneous elements and uses this clash to attest to a continuum. "The space of these clashes and that of the continuum," Rancière concludes, "can even bear the same name: History. History can indeed be two contradictory things: the discontinuous line of revealing clashes or the continuum of co-presence" (2007, 60). Erice's rearrangement of images operates on a much more modest scale than that found in Godard's grand project. And rather than moving across a multitude of different contexts, Erice focuses on the time and place of his own childhood. Despite these differences both directors use the disjunctions between heterogeneous images and between images and spoken narration to reveal a co-belonging of artistic forms and collective life. In Erice's case, this endeavor is aided by the capacity of his softly spoken voice-over to link the assemblage of images to his childhood memories. But as is the case with Godard's voice-over in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, the purpose of these words is not to disclose something hidden. Rather, they strive to illuminate something more mysterious: the experience of a shared world that binds our fate to the fate of images. The larger issue here is cinema's capacity to render a particular type of thinking drawn directly from the material properties of images and sounds. The matter that requires further elaboration is: on what basis is this thinking

established? How do the visual and sonic elements that comprise the film's account of the director's initiation into cinema render a disturbance of thought that is tied to an individual history yet is also inextricably bound to a larger collective crisis? What does the film's rendition of this disturbance imply about the nature of cinematic experience?

IV

We can begin to address these matters by considering those moments when the camera pans across a photograph or film still showing us figures from the past, for example, the photograph of the well-heeled denizens of the Gran Kursaal Casino dressed in tuxedos and evening wear smiling at the camera (Fig. 3). Erice's voice-over underlines the sense of pastness associated with these images. But the affective power of these moments is drawn as much from the manner in which the scanning movement of the camera brings this plangency into engagement with the material qualities of the images. "Another space is opened up," Garrett Stewart writes about these scanning movements, a "photo-chemical rather than narrative space—absent, past, flat (or flatter)—an optic plane giving upon an illusory scopic field that is held at an untraversable remove from the scanning eye" (Stewart 1999, 10). Like the gaze cast onto the world by the image of Holmes and Watson, this photo-chemical space is bound to the camera's view of the world, a view that we are invited to share, but from which we are also excluded. For André Bazin this exclusion is a consequence of the automatic nature of photographic images. "For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent," he writes in "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." "For the first

time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man" (Bazin 1968, 13). In *La Morte Rouge* the scanning movement of the camera is an attempt to take stock of the implications of the photograph's ability to show us an image of the world in which we play no part. It restores what has been removed from the scenes depicted in the photographs or stills—movement, duration—and triggers a type of anxious thinking about something that poses a challenge to thought, or that pushes it to a limit: our absence from the world.

For Erice, then, to "think cinema" is not to look at images from a safe distance and puzzle their meaning. Nor is to find aspects of our own history embedded in the history of images. Rather it is to encounter something that unsettles our thinking. This something is bound to an experience of history, its collective traumas and lingering silences. But it is also bound to a disturbance in our subjectivity. Perhaps the most direct rendition of this disturbance occurs near the start of the director's first film, *The Spirit of the Beehive* (*El espíritu de la colmena*, 1973), when, from among a mass of bodies crowded together in a rundown village hall to watch a screening of James Whale's 1931 version of *Frankenstein*, the camera picks out Ana (Ana Torrent), the young girl who serves as the film's central character. Cutting between the scene from Whale's film that shows the first meeting of Frankenstein's monster (Boris Karloff) and the little village girl (Marilyn Harris) who befriends him and a hand-held shot of Ana gazing intently up at the screen, the film captures that "unrepeatable moment" when the stunned reactions of the young actress watching the movie for the first time become indistinguishable from the reactions of the character that she plays. "I sincerely believe that it's



Fig. 3: *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (Víctor Erice, 2006)

the best moment I've ever captured on film," Erice confesses in Carlos Rodríguez's *The Footprints of a Spirit* (*Huellas de un espíritu*, 1998). "It was an actual screening. She was really seeing the movie. He [Luis Cuadrado, the film's cinematographer] captured her reaction to the encounter between the monster and the little girl. So it was an unrepeatable moment, one that could never be 'directed'." In the same discussion, he observes that, in a film made in "a very premeditated style," the key moment is one that escapes this premeditation: "I think that's the crack through which the aspect of film that records reality bursts through into every kind of fictional narrative. [...] But without the substratum of fiction, it too would fail to acquire its fullest sense as an image recording reality."

Erice's account of the young actress' reaction forefronts a fundamental aspect of his understanding of cinematic images: their capacity to impose themselves on our thinking. This is why childhood is so important in his films: it designates not a phase in our lives that we return to and ponder. More enduringly, it exemplifies a way of being connected to images and sounds. Erice clarifies the nature of this connection by referring to Jean Louis Schefer's proposition in *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* that cinema's power lies in its ability to connect with an "unfinished" childhood that inheres within the subject. "It seems as if a part of ourselves is permeable to effects of meaning without ever being able to be born into meaning through our language," Schefer proposes at the start of his book (2016, 12). The cinema aligns these unexpressed meanings to the operation of visible figures—bodies, gestures and actions—whose purpose is to reacquaint us with what remains still-to-be-understood in our relationship to the past. "Something of our own knowledge is in them," Schefer writes of our attachment to

these figures, a knowledge that speaks of "our unfinished and now nearly invisible childhood" (2016, 61).

In *The Spirit of the Beehive* Ana's response to the encounter between the monster and the little girl embodies the affective openness that Schefer associates with the figure of the child. It also positions her alongside other cinematic figures identified by Gilles Deleuze whose capacity to see exceeds their capacity to react and whose task is to confront "something unthinkable in thought" (Deleuze 1989, 169). Later in *The Spirit of the Beehive* the camera scrutinizes a collection of photographs of Ana's mother and father. The matter of to whom this scrutiny belongs is only clarified half-way through the sequence when we are presented with a low-angle shot of Ana leafing through the pages of a large album. The first three photographs are hand-colored images of Ana's mother, Teresa (Teresa Gimpera), as a schoolgirl. These images are then replaced by a series of portraits of her as a young woman that appear in the album alongside photographs of Ana's father, Fernando (Fernando Fernán Gómez), at a similar age. "To my dear misanthrope," reads the dedication written on the front of another one of the photographs (Fig. 4). On one level, these images provide a glimpse of an earlier period in the lives of Ana's parents, one less burdened by a sense of loss.³ But on another level, the camera's scrutiny of the photographs prior to Ana's appearance binds our view, once again, to a photochemical rather than a narrative space, a space in which we are free to contemplate the implications of cinema's ability to give us an image of the world in which we play no part.

"The presence of the photograph permits me to invest more freely in what I am seeing," writes Raymond Bellour in his account of the disturbance brought on by the inclusion of a still image in a film. "It helps



Fig. 4: *The Spirit of the Beehive* (Victor Erice, 1973)

me to close my eyes, yet keep them wide open" (Bellour 2011, 89). This contradictory condition captures the sense in which the still image is both part of the fictional world rendered in a film and the trigger for a different type of audience engagement—one in which we "find the time to add to the image" (2011, 92). Such is the nature of Erice's film that, in doing so, we find ourselves retracing the conundrums explored by the film's characters. Ana's reaction to the encounter between the little girl and the monster; the long moment when she stands on the train tracks while the sound of the on-coming train increases in intensity; her gaze down at the body of her sister, Isabel (Isabel Tellería), who is pretending to be dead; her scrutiny of the poisonous mushroom identified by her father: each of these scenes dramatize Ana's struggle to contemplate something that, by rights, can't be contemplated, only experienced: our absence from the world. In Erice's film this impossible contemplation is central to the encounters that constitute the story of Ana's engagement with the mysteries that are part of her childhood—at the same time as it opens the door to another film operating at the edges of the fiction, one in which the implications of cinema's photochemical dimensions form the basis of a sustained reflection on the allure of images.

V

The questions that drive Erice's thinking about cinema can be put quite simply: where does the cinema reside? How does it connect to us? In the years leading up to the production of *La Morte Rouge*, these questions were spurred by the realization that cinema's primacy as a cultural form had been taken over by an array of other technologies—television, video, electronic images. "Not only does cinema lack a future, in a certain

way it has already stopped existing," he pessimistically observes in the essay on his relationship to cinema referred to at the start of this paper. "Now, what one must talk about is the audiovisual" (Erice 2007, 267). A decade and a half since the film's release, these questions are just as pertinent to our contemporary musings about cinema's place. In *La Morte Rouge* the closest we come to a direct answer occurs in the narrator's account of the young boy's attempts to make sense of the events portrayed in *The Scarlet Claw*. The thing that he finds hardest to deal with is less the grisly nature of the murderer's methods—slashing the throats of his victims with a metal claw—than the fact of death, itself. "It was there in the midst of what the vast majority thought of as a pastime, that the boy discovered that people died; and furthermore, that men were able to kill other men." Searching for a way to process this grim realization, he scans the faces of the adult spectators seated around him in the auditorium. Instead of seeing a reflection of his own fear, he encounters something more puzzling: a type of attentive passivity. "This fact aroused a suspicion in the boy: the unanimous attitude of the adults had to be the consequence of a pact they had all agreed to, and which involved staying quiet and continuing to watch. Because all of them possessed one feature in common: they knew something he didn't, a secret that explained everything." Unlike the identity of the murderer terrorizing the Canadian village in Neill's film, the nature of this secret is not disclosed. Instead, it is apprehended as an experience of something unknowable that both distances the young boy from the adult world and draws him closer to cinema.

Where does the cinema reside? How does it connect to us? In *La Morte Rouge* the answer is that the cinema is "already in us."⁴ Not as

a secret knowledge that we might recover. Nor even as the memory of a once dominant cultural form. But as the index of what will always remain unknowable in our lived existence. The impact of this unknowability on the young boy's thinking is evident in his response to the revelation that the perpetrator of the terrible crimes in *The Scarlet Claw* is the seemingly inoffensive Potts (Gerald Hamer), the village postman, who is not actually Potts, but Alistair Ramson, a resentful actor bent on revenge. The actor's deception unleashes in the young boy's mind a conundrum: "What he deduced was that [an actor] was someone who didn't have a soul of his own; and, furthermore, by means of false beards, hairpieces, and moustaches, changes of clothing and of voice, he was capable of choosing an identity at will. And if Potts could be anybody, then by the same token anybody could be Potts." Potts' deception echoes the deception to which we all acquiesce when we view a film: that something can be both there and not there, that existence can be affirmed as a form of absence.

The matter to stress is that the implications of Potts' deception pertain as much to ourselves as to the world out there. "The image speaks to us, and seems to speak intimately to us of ourselves," Maurice Blanchot clarifies. "Let us say [...] that the image intimately designates the level where personal intimacy is destroyed and that it indicates in this movement the menacing proximity of a vague and empty outside, the deep, the sordid basis upon which it continues to affirm things in their disappearance" (Blanchot 1982, 254). Blanchot's remarks are not directed at cinematic images per se. Rather they designate a crisis in our ability to maintain what Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier calls "the reassuring distinction between the thing gazed upon and its aesthetic elaboration, which would succeed it"

(Ropars-Wuilleumier 1996, 140–41). Understood accordingly, Blanchot's account of the image extends a line of thinking about the implications of the cinematic image's automatic qualities. It does so by affirming the cinematic image's capacity to reveal a world founded on our own absence. For Blanchot, as it is for Erice and Bazin, the image is where we confront the fact of our own absence, or, more accurately, where this absence confronts us as a series of projections, suspended just far enough in front of us to allow us an element of control, even a degree of pleasure.

VI

How the young boy learns to manage the disturbances triggered by Neill's film constitutes the final part of *La Morte Rouge*. Convinced that letters are emblems of death and that all postmen are its agents, the young boy is traumatized by his older sister's taunts: "The postman's coming, the postman's coming..." Her words help to transform the film's rendition of his bedroom into a type of proxy cinematic space in which the light from passing streetcars projects terrifying shadows along the ceiling. But whereas at the start of *The Scarlet Claw* it is the ringing of the church bell that signals the enactment of Potts' crime, in the space of the young boy's bedroom it is the chiming of the nearby church clock that contributes to his state of panic. Sensing the murderous postman's approach, he seeks refuge by applying the lesson learnt from Potts' deception: "Playing dead was perhaps the only way death wouldn't notice him, as if he were already one of its victims, and so it would pass by without stopping in search of other sleeping bodies." So, in the end, the young boy becomes what he has been all along: an image, whose function is to bring together a set of experiences that constitute the story of the director's childhood and

enable the contemplation of something that cannot be contemplated directly. The young boy, the Gran Kursaal, the murderous Potts: in *La Morte Rouge* each of these figures (or, in Blanchotian terms, "images") does double duty. Each one enables Erice's thinking about the past and gives shape to what remains still-to-be-thought about this past. Taken together, they mark the point where the autobiographical aspects of Erice's story of cinematic initiation assume a necessarily allegorical dimension.

VII

The concluding sequence of *La Morte Rouge* commences with a series of still images that, in time-lapse fashion, pass from the period of the Gran Kursaal's operations as a cinema, to the period of its demolition and, finally, to its replacement by the Modernist-inspired buildings that now occupy the site. The film then returns to the spot where it commenced, looking toward the headland at Gros Beach. The final shot is of the late afternoon waves rolling onto the beach. "It could be said that only the sea endures," the narrator ponders right at the start of the film. "The rest is different or has been effaced with time, like footsteps in the sand." This emphasis on the unstoppable forces of time and erasure links *La Morte Rouge* to the ending of Erice's previous film, *The Quince Tree Sun* (*El sol del membrillo*, 1992), which documents the attempt by the renowned Spanish painter Antonio López to capture the ripening of quinces on a tree in the yard of the house that serves as his studio. The use of title cards allows us to track the progression of this endeavor—from its commencement on 29 September 1990, when the artist began by constructing his canvas, establishing a plumb line in front of the tree and hammering survey nails into the ground to mark the exact spot from where, each day, he would

stand in front of the canvas, to its end on 10 December 1990. In between, he covers the tree in a transparent plastic canopy to protect it from the rain, abandons the oil painting in favor of a pencil sketch and recruits his friends to prop up the sagging branches of the tree with a long stick while he continues to work on the drawing. All this comes to naught, when, one morning, he discovers, among the discarded cigarette butts at the base of the tree, a fallen quince. A week later, after contemplating the fruit scattered on the ground, he breaks the plumb line and dismantles the remaining structures.

The implications that this failure has for Erice's own practice is alluded to in the sequence that occurs near the end of the film when López's voice-over recounts the details of a dream in which he is standing with his parents in front of the house where he was born, looking at the rapidly decaying fruit on a group of quince trees across the square: "Nobody seems to notice that the quinces are rotting under a light I can't really describe. Clear, yet dark, that changes all into metal and dust. It isn't the night light. Neither is it that of twilight. Nor of dawn." The artist's account of this mysterious light triggers a series of close-ups of the decaying fruit gathered at the base of the quince tree. Each shot progresses the decay a step further. The penultimate shot shows one of the walls in the courtyard of his studio (Fig. 5). It's nighttime. Silhouetted on the wall is the outline of an unmanned camera attached to a tripod. The manner in which the camera's lens is tilted down at the ground suggests that it has been set up to record the drama of decomposition occurring at the base of the quince tree.

"Everything saturnine points down into the depths of the earth," writes Walter Benjamin. "For all the wisdom of the melancholic is subject to the nether world; it is secured by immersion in



Fig. 5: *The Quince Tree Sun* (Victor Erice, 1992)

the life of creaturely things" (Benjamin 1998, 152). For Benjamin, melancholy is primarily a creative disposition that is based on an immersion in the life of things. Its devotion to what has passed gives rise to a work whose structure is determined by an awareness of loss. In *The Quince Tree Sun* the silhouette of the unmanned camera peering down at the decaying fruit furnishes a fitting emblem of Erice's thinking about cinema—its disposition and abiding concerns. His films echo Bazin's assertion that at the heart of the cinema's appeal is its ability to restore not the past, but rather the trace of its passing.⁵ And just as Bazin in his writings is drawn to analogies and metaphors that emphasize the coming together of preservation and the inevitability of change, Erice in his films is drawn to scenarios that trace the legacies of people, events and structures that stand in for what will always remain still-to-be-thought about the past. For both, it is a matter of doing justice to cinema's duality as a medium that restores the world and affirms its passing.

"Death is *neither* the opposite of life *nor* the passage into another life," Jean-Luc Nancy writes in an account of Abbas Kiarostami's films. "It is itself the blind spot that opens up the looking" (Nancy 2001, 18). The type of looking he has in mind can be found in the work of other filmmakers, for example, Edward Yang and Claire Denis: "In each instance one deals with a cinema opening onto its own image as onto something real—or meaningful—that can only be taken by images, aiming from somewhere beyond any 'point of view,' with a look devoid of subjectivity, with a lens that would aim for life from the vantage point of the secret of death as the secret of something evident" (2001, 52). In Erice's films, as well, death is the blind spot that determines a certain way of looking at things. In *La Morte Rouge* this is evident on two

levels: in the story of the narrator's initiation as a cinema-goer and in the manner in which the film affirms the capacity of cinematic images to render a world in which we play no part. This is the other side of the state of childhood that is so central to Erice's films: a particular way of managing the disturbances that bind us to the cinema and that, in *La Morte Rouge*, has as its analog the close-up shots of the adult spectators seated alongside the young boy in the auditorium (Fig. 6). Attentive yet oblivious to the horror on screen, proximate yet fundamentally removed, animate yet frozen in place, these hard to parse faces render a way of peeping into the space of our own absence while saying nothing and carrying on.

In Erice's films, this is the moment of cinematic thinking par excellence: the moment when the distinction between presence and absence is suspended, when those nearest to us are apprehended as if from an insurmountable distance. Embedded in this moment is the activity that is central to the challenge of thinking cinema: writing. The activity of writing referred to here is not concerned with critical evaluation. Nor is it an exercise in self-reflection—about film history and the director's place within its unfolding. To put it as plainly as possible, the trope that governs its operations is not self-reflection, but a displaced encounter with those elements that render the reflecting consciousness incomplete and, ultimately, other to itself. This is a form of writing drawn to cinema's capacity to enable a confrontation with what remains unknowable within us. "The thinking subject can only apprehend itself as 'already born' and 'still alive,'" Vincent Descombes observes about the blind spots of self-reflection. "The limits of birth and death elude it" (Descombes 1980, 71). In *La Morte Rouge* the various movements between



Fig. 6: *La Morte Rouge (soliloquio)* (Victor Erice, 2006)

and across images are an attempt to map these limits as they impose themselves on the filmmaker's thinking. Framed accordingly, Erice's film continues the essay film's emphasis on the rendition of a subjective consciousness that tests and recreates itself—and marks the point where this effort results in an undoing of the subject. How do we register this undoing? What emotion distinguishes its affective pitch? The simple answer

is fear—a fear in which the silences that marked post-Civil War Spanish life are inextricably linked to the cinematic image's capacity to render a world founded on our own absence. Thinking cinema, writing cinema: for Erice, both strive to turn the memory of this fear into something other than fear: a form of knowledge in which identification and self-estrangement work hand-in-hand.

1/ For a discussion of the continuities between Erice's writings on cinema and his films, see Zunzunegui 2014.

2/ Emma Wilson characterizes this disjunction as a "suspicion of visuality" (2006, 7). She draws this phrase from Laura Marks' discussion of nonvisual knowledge in *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000).

3/ In one of the photographs the Spanish scholar, writer and poet Miguel de Unamuno can be seen standing next to Ana's father, thereby establishing the glimmer of a backstory of his life prior to the commencement of the film's narrative.

4 This phrase is taken from Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener's *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2010, 158). The authors are discussing the implications of Deleuze's understanding of cinema: "The cinema is a reality and a way of thinking, which might be translated into saying that, as we speak about the cinema, we are already in cinema and the cinema is always already in us."

5 In "Objects Suspended in Light," Linda C. Ehrlich claims that Erice reread Bazin's essays during the filming of *The Quince Tree Sun* (Ehrlich 2007, 19). The director himself refers to Bazin's writings in a number of the interviews found in the same volume.

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Anachronism as Temporality of Memory in the Oeuvre of Pietro Marcello: An Interview with Bertrand Bacqué

Bertrand Bacqué, Associate Professor at the Haute École d'Art et de Design in Geneva, discusses the work of Pietro Marcello, considered to be one of the most remarkable auteurs of the contemporary essay film and its audiovisual thinking process. His focus consists of the relationship to time, and anachronism as the temporality of memory.

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L M I

How would you characterize Pietro Marcello's singular oeuvre in a few words?

B B

Pietro Marcello (Fig. 1) is a filmmaker whose work revolves around memory. Through his editing, he brings together a variety of temporalities in his documentary and fiction oeuvre in order to provoke a deeper reflection on the history of the 20th century and subsequently on the 21st century. From the individual to the collective, past to present, *The Mouth of the Wolf* (*La bocca del lupo*, 2009), *Lost and Beautiful* (*Bella e perduta*, 2015), *Martin Eden* (2019), and *For Lucio* (*Per Lucio*, 2021) all play upon anachronisms, using them to provoke bursts of thought mingled with memories, and associate ideas. Despite the fact that his approach is completely different, his work is akin to that of Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard, the greatest proponents of the essay films of the past century.

L M I

Could you go over the career and oeuvre of Pietro Marcello and place it in context?

B B

Pietro Marcello was born in Caserte in Campania in 1976. After studying painting at the Academy of Beaux-Arts in Naples, Italy, he began his career working on participatory videos shot in prisons, where he taught film studies.¹ From 1998 to 2003, he was a founding member and programming coordinator for Cinedamm at the Damm Cultural Center in Naples. It was in this context that he created his first short films, *Carta* and *Scampia* in 2003. In 2004, he finished *Il cantiere*, a documentary that was awarded a prize from the Libero Bizzarri Foundation. The following year, he directed *La baracca*. His first feature length film, *Crossing the Line* (*Il passaggio della linea*, 2007) was presented at the Venice



Fig. 1: Pietro Marcello © Francesca Errichiello.

International Film Festival (La Mostra) and earned several awards.² In this film, Marcello reveals his interest in the marginalized and the outcasts of Italian society (seasonal workers, migrants, vagabonds and exiled anarchists), observed over the course of train journeys from the south of Italy to the north and back again, over days and nights. But it was with *The Mouth of the Wolf* that he garnered international recognition, along with awards at the Turin and Berlinale festivals. In 2011, he paid tribute to Artavazd Pelechian in his documentary *The Silence of Pelechian (Il silenzio di Pelesjan)*. *Lost and Beautiful* brought him to the attention of a wider public; it was nominated at Locarno in 2015, and won the Grand Prix at La Roche-sur-Yon. In 2019, *Martin Eden*, adapted from the eponymous novel by Jack London, marked his passage to fiction, even as he maintained strong ties with the documentary genre. The films *The Mouth of the Wolf*, *Lost and Beautiful*, *Martin Eden* and *For Lucio* can be considered to be essay films in the noblest sense of the term, whether they are documentary or fiction. While Marcello's oeuvre is anchored in reality, myth and the imaginary also have their place, somewhat akin to the *cinéma vérité* of Jean Rouch or, presently, the magnificent films of Pedro Costa. As Marcello emphasizes: "One can be a realist even as one uses the medium of film in an anti-naturalistic, even surrealist manner. Actually, despite the fact that dreams and fairy tales are the fruit of the imagination, they often have their own truths to tell. In that sense, documentary cinema does not provide answers; rather, it raises questions and leaves a lot of space for our imagination" (Marcello 2018).

While he is part of a tradition that extends back to the neorealism of Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica and Alberto Lattuada, Marcello does belong to the very different post-Berlusconi generation, for whom a group mentality is less important. Among the most notable are Alessandro Comodin, Leonardo Di Costanzo, Michelangelo Frammartino, Gianfranco Rosi and Stefano Savona, forming, as Jacopo Rasmi remarked, a sort of "archipelago" of filmmakers (Rasmi 2015). They all share a fierce desire for independence, along with a wariness of mass media and an interest in blending documentary and fiction genres. Based in Naples, Palermo or New York, they developed their own modes of production in order to free themselves from the dominant modes of financing, and distance themselves from conventional genres. In the words of Marcello:

My conception of film [...] has always challenged the boundaries between reality and fiction, and has often questioned the methods of production particular to documentary and fiction. [...] This is why, in 2009, I

cofounded a production company called *Avventurosa*, which means “adventurous,” but also “audacious” and “informed.” We sought to make art house films that would have a poetical vision, created by artisanal processes. Our experimentation with new forms of narrative and various types of *mise en scènes* frequently led us to blend materials of diverse origin that could be sourced, fictitious or real. (2018)

This conception of the freedom of the auteur-producer, one that is as reminiscent of Farocki as it is of Bertolt Brecht or Walter Benjamin (2003), would pose a number of problems for Marcello, notably during the production of *Martin Eden*, his most ambitious cinematographic project to date, a feature film shot in Super 16mm.

L M I

In your opinion, what are the most remarkable elements of Marcello’s essay films?

B B

It is well known that the essay film is an art form that gleefully transcends genres, moving freely between documentary and fiction, and generating many hybrid forms in between. This is certainly the case with Marcello’s oeuvre, even if the polarity or the indicator between documentary and fiction is more defined in each of his films. Another characteristic of his is his use of archival footage, which he sources for the most part, but sometimes creates his own. What is striking here is the way in which the filmmaker views both sourced images and those he creates himself, products of the prism of his own emotions, namely as inherently equal. Thus, we are dealing with a true montage of time in Marcello’s cinematic oeuvre, comparable to that of D.W. Griffith in *Intolerance* (1916). His images are all contemporary, reminiscent of the dialectical images Benjamin spoke of in “Paris, Capital of the 19th Century” (Benjamin 1999). For Marcello, yesterday is still today, and vice versa. Suffice it to say that, as in most essay films, from Dziga Vertov to Pelechian, Chris Marker to Agnès Varda by way of Harun Farocki or Hito Steyerl, editing takes pride of place. In effect, editing is an operator of memory, as we can see in *The Mouth of the Wolf*, but it is also a precision instrument that reveals the rapport with the history of the 20th century, as is the case with *Martin Eden* or *For Lucio*. Hence the crucial importance of editing in Marcello’s films and his strong interest in Pelechian, the master of “distance montage,” to whom he renders a sensitive tribute in *The Silence of Pelechian*.

For me, making films is, in a certain sense, an attempt to recover the past. It is like a partition of music that I learn to compose after the event, during the editing process, carried along by visual and poetic free associations. For me, editing is the key to the reading of reality [...]. I work on that reality—which is experienced as if it were a journey—

by giving myself up to nothing other than a rewriting of the real at the moment of editing. It is as if I can only capture reality after having viewed it with nostalgia, after contemplating with lyricism and compassion what has been lost and forgotten. The romantic impulses that I feel when I observe my characters and the past are virtually identical. A thing or a person that is forgotten: that is the objective of my quest, what I wish to bring to life in the real. It is an attempt to save images both past and present, an effort of an archaeological nature. The images that I seek are immediately “archive ready,” whether they are sequences of archival footage or those which I have shot myself. (Marcello 2018)³

Another recurring element is the use of myth as a point of departure and a point of reference in both *The Mouth of the Wolf* and *Lost and Beautiful*. Like fiction, the imaginary becomes one of the sources in which the real is reflected and revealed. There also, there are no strict boundaries, but rather a porosity and constant hybridization. In addition, voice-overs are omnipresent in the Italian director’s films. Consequently, each of his films oscillates between the subjective and objective, the singular and collective, as is also the case with *Martin Eden*. However, I would like to focus on the issue of temporality. When viewing his films, particularly his adaptation of Jack London’s novel, it is impossible not to think of Walter Benjamin’s comments about “dialectical images,” in which the Past and the “Now-Time” come together (Benjamin 1999). They also bring to mind Gilles Deleuze’s analyses in *The Time-Image*, notably those developed in Chapter 6, “The Powers of the False,” on crystalline descriptions and narrations, but also on “compossible” time, notably those developed in Chapter 7, “Thought and Cinema” (Deleuze 1989, 125–73).

L M I

Can you provide some context for the aesthetics of *The Mouth of the Wolf*?

B B

With this film, Marcello establishes the basis of an aesthetic system that he will continue to explore throughout his oeuvre, that of a sort of temporal kaleidoscope. In fact, it was the San Marcellino Onlus Foundation of the Jesuits of Genoa, a charitable organization that provided various forms of assistance to the homeless and marginalized, which commissioned Marcello to create a portrait of the institution and its activities. However, the population the charity served inspired the filmmaker far more than the institution that hired him. As a result, the film evolved beyond the interwoven portrait of Enzo the repeat offender and Mary the trans woman into a unique testament to Genoa and its underworld of outcasts, prostitutes, seedy bars, dark alleys as well as to the city’s unique history,

including archival footage spanning the 20th century, resulting in a journey between subjectivity and collectivity, past and present.

Let us return to the beginning of the film, namely the intriguing prologue (Fig. 2). The first images of the film show a strange set of modern day “cave people,” probably migrants or other outcasts, who live in the caves by the seaside, on the outskirts of the city. The gravelly voice-over of Franco Leo recounts their story:

The new inhabitants of the caverns are neither fishermen, nor settled folk, but migrants. We do not know their stories. We know that they have made a choice, discovered this place and selected it and no other because it afforded them shelter, protected them from a road that becomes a city, in the shadow of those who rest and those who stay up. Just as characters of the past did, among the thousands who inhabit the places of our memories, as well as those of our fading memories. Perhaps they come from the sea, like so many shipwrecked castaways. Here lie their bodies, at the threshold of our adventures.⁴

Like an ancient coryphaeus,⁵ the voice-over does more than that; it sets the tone for the journey initiated by the film, situating it within a broader history, and tradition, such as that of Homer’s *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. It sets the narrative among this collection of sailors and adventurers who hail from every corner of the Mediterranean, and who have always formed an intrinsic part of both ancient and contemporary Italy. Before evoking an individual memory, the film summons up a



Fig. 2: *The Mouth of the Wolf* (Pietro Marcello, 2009).

collective one, under the aegis of a founding myth, and the images of the present recall an immemorial past.

After the title credits of the film, we see the first archival footage, consisting of young divers from the 1920s (Fig. 3), then, we see a mysterious image in shadow set against a window as a gravelly voice evokes the dream of a modest house with a garden. The next shot is one in which our protagonist, Enzo (Vincenzo Motta) appears, wending his way among railroad cars (Fig. 4), as he returns from a long journey, in this instance, after his release from prison, like Odysseus returning to his Penelope. The overall tone is that of fiction. Like a character out of some retro-futuristic detective novel, Enzo makes his way to his home along the dark streets of Genoa. Marcello provides his character with all the harsh beauty of his *mise en scène*. Again, we shift to a voice-over, this time it is Mary's husky voice recounting her *coup de foudre* for Enzo, a repeat offender. We find ourselves navigating somewhere between fiction and documentary, a sort of reenactment. It matters little that a sense of the indiscernible permeates the whole.

This is peculiar to the concept of Deleuze's time-image, to be both in the present and in the past, and, more precisely, to convey us from the past to the present, from fiction to reality, even as both remain intrinsically linked and indiscernible. It is also typical of *cinéma vérité*, as he defines in his work *The Time-Image*, about the films of Jean Rouch and Pierre Perrault:

It is characteristic of cinema to seize this past and this future that coexist with the present image. To film what is *before* and what is *after*... Perhaps it is necessary to make



Fig. 3: *The Mouth of the Wolf* (Pietro Marcello, 2009).



Fig. 4: *The Mouth of the Wolf* (Pietro Marcello, 2009).

what is before and after the film pass inside it in order to get out of the chain of presents. [...] We shall see that this is precisely the aim of cinema vérité or direct cinema: not to achieve a reality as it would exist independently of the image, but to achieve a before and an after as they coexist with the image, as they are inseparable from the image. This is what direct cinema must mean, to the point where it is a component of all cinema: achieving the direct presentation of time. (Deleuze 1989, 36–37)

The goal is to grasp Enzo's "before" and his "after," as was done in Rouch's *I, a Negro* (*Moi, un noir*, 1957) with the protagonist, Oumarou Ganda, the Nigerian soldier rejected by his father because he returned from the Indochina War defeated. We can see the same process with the before and after of the Isle aux Coudres in *Of Whales, the Moon, and Men* (*Pour la suite du monde*, Michel Brault and Pierre Perrault, 1963) or, more currently, the past and future of Ventura, the protagonist of Pedro Costa's films.

In *The Mouth of the Wolf*, images from archival footage and fiction films abound. First color shots of the streets of Genoa at night, probably dating from the 1970s, then images of nightclubs in black and white, then of a role-playing game (perhaps a war game?) that reenacts a skirmish between armed youths. We are in another visual style, and yet remain within Enzo's memory, which coincides with so many archetypes. Then, for the first time, we clearly understand that some of the voice-overs come from audio cassettes that the two lovers have been exchanging like letters over the course of Enzo's incarceration. We see a negative of beautiful sepia-tone images of a bride, undoubtedly from the 1930s, which evokes the unique idyll of this brooding bandit and his flamboyant trans lover.

However, the highlight of the film is, without a doubt, the sequence shot in which Mary, seated by Enzo, narrates their meeting and their love story to the camera. Here the shot is fixed but carefully composed, and framed with rare delicacy, reminiscent of the chiaroscuro of 16th- or 17th-century paintings (Fig. 5). As Marcello always reminds us, “composition is at the heart of everything.”⁶ Here, the frame allows for a sort of contemplation and reception of words that provoke an upheaval as we witness the intense tenderness and closeness that exist between this tough guy and his bashful lover. One might also note the performative aspects of the sequence, similar to that of Pedro Costa, with its *mise en scène* that both literally and figuratively plays such a key role. In an ultimate gift to his protagonist, the filmmaker sets a scene featuring their dream, a little farm whose garden gives onto the Bay of Genoa. One might well be in the house of Robert Flaherty’s *Man of Aran* (1934) with its intensely idyllic context despite its modest conditions.

There are so many other scenes one might describe, like the pick-up scene in a port café, peopled with a group of castaways and lost partiers that John Cassavetes would have loved. The real is revealed by passing through fiction. Nevertheless, the main point is the ever-present correlation between the present and the past, reality and fiction through the use of both filmed footage and archival images. Far from removing the film from reality or discrediting the narrative, this approach profoundly enriches it. The process lends it a depth of time that not only applies to the couple placed at the heart of the film, but also to that of the city, situated within a temporality that is both individual and collective, concrete and fantastical, present and past.



Fig. 5: *The Mouth of the Wolf* (Pietro Marcello, 2009).

L M I
B B

How would you describe his later work, *Lost and Beautiful*?

Lost and Beautiful evolved into a poetic and political essay on contemporary Italy. The double opening scenes are gripping. First we see a long passage through tiled corridors (Fig. 6). The rhythm is spasmodic, corresponding to the animal's gait, with the camera imitating its ponderous pace. The sounds are muffled and the image generated by the Super 16 camera remains blurry, with variegated chromatics. It is only as the film draws to a close that we understand that this opening scene depicts the sacrifice of Sarchiapone, the buffalo that has grown to adulthood, whose subjective point of view we have assumed. The rest is just as disconcerting. A group of psychopomps (Fig. 7), intermediaries between the living and the dead, play a game of cards, conversing as they grumble and rub their bellies, in an indeterminate location (the bowels of Mount Vesuvius), when one of them, a novice (played by blacksmith Sergio Vitolo) is called upon. We follow him through a labyrinthine maze of offices before we are shown the reason for his summons: a certain Tommaso Cestrono, a shepherd from



Fig. 6: *Lost and Beautiful* (Pietro Marcello, 2015).



Fig. 7: *Lost and Beautiful* (Pietro Marcello, 2015).

his region, has asked that Sarchiapone, a buffalo that he has saved from a scheduled slaughter, be granted the right to speak so that he might tell his story and that of the “lost and beautiful” region that he rediscovered.

It is clear that *Lost and Beautiful* is immediately placed under the aegis of fairy tale, myth and the perception of animals. Yet that was not the case when the project began—it was adapted to the realities of shooting as the project unfolded. It began with a voluminous, somewhat dated, reference work on Italy, *Voyage en Italie* (published by Flammarion in 1958), enriched by the perspective of writer Guido Piovene, a journalist and philosopher by training. Marcello wanted to travel from the south of Italy to the north, much as he did many times by train for *Crossing the Line*, in a sort of appraisal of the country. The film was to be constructed around his encounters, but the first one, in Campania, with the shepherd Tommaso Cestrono, proved to be decisive. In the daily *Libération*, he elaborates:

I wanted to conduct a sort of investigation to assess the changes the country was undergoing. I thought of it as a film for citizens about the transformations around the workplace, the land, the landscape, the relationships between humans and nature, the rural roots of my country. All of this is also linked to beauty, art and a form of cynicism that is particular to Italians, since there is such a wealth of beauty in Italy that we do not bother to take care of it, it is a punishment of sorts. In my view, Tommaso was important since he is the essence of Camus’ outraged man. (Marcello 2016b)

Tommaso was an autodidact, a simple man with a taste for beauty, similar to Gabriel Gauny, Jacques Rancière’s plebeian philosopher. He was enamored of the royal palace of Carditello, a place with a sad history. It had been a model farm under the reign of the Bourbons in the 18th century. As Marcello explains in the press release for the film, it was a “center of zoological excellence, inspired by the work of scientists from all over Europe” (*Bella e perduta* 2016). However, when the House of Savoy succeeded the Bourbons, the management of the palace was left to a squire who was a member of the Camorra. The result was a lengthy period of decline that resulted in Carditello becoming a harbor for the underworld of Campania. Then along came Tommaso, the shepherd and aesthete who, at the risk of his own life, took up the cause of the abandoned palace which, for Marcello, had become the true symbol of the “lost and beautiful” Italy that the film celebrates. Tommaso’s death on Christmas day, exhausted by his struggle and his ideals, would change the course of the film.

From that point on, the film was reinvented. Sarchiapone, the young buffalo, saved from death by Tommaso, would drive the

intrigue, producing a sort of decentering of the narrative. It is Sarchiapone's voice-over, and consequently, his thoughts, that we hear throughout the film. It is his gaze that we often follow through the world surrounding him, a world as impenetrable for us as are the thoughts of the psychopomp Punchinello. It is also a question of the abyss between man and animal that is put into play—from his possible salvation to the final sacrifice. As Marcello underlines, "my two successive protagonists are incarnations of two types of rebellion. Tommaso incarnates the rebellion of the simple, the buffalo, the rebellion of the gentle" (Marcello 2016b). The work, beyond its poetic and aesthetic stakes, is a great political film. On the one side, we have the gaping, irreconcilable abyss between man and Nature, apart from the miraculous intervention of the psychopomp, the only one capable of hearing Sarchiapone's voice. On the other, the struggle for the very concrete saving of a heritage, a utopic bubble of beauty, the royal palace of Carditello, and the crusade to gain its recognition by the Italian authorities as part of the national heritage. It is this struggle that would exhaust Tommaso, and bring about his premature death.

The film's strength lies in its capacity for reinvention, for melding and holding together rather disparate elements, even as it retains a strong political message. On the one hand, there is the myth of the psychopomps, and the animal world, and, on the other, this residue of the real that resists—the life and death of Tommaso. The cinematic materials blend these different layers: the subjective vision of Sarchiapone, his dulled perception of the words of the psychopomp Punchinello, the intrigue that evolves around the latter, and his progressive humanization; the video images of protests against the Camorra, captured live (Fig. 8). The film veers from classic documentary to poetic fable, rite of passage narrative, by way of an elegy, and keeps going. One of the less mentioned passages of the film, and yet one



Fig. 8: *Lost and Beautiful* (Pietro Marcello, 2015).

of the most touching, is the encounter between PUNCHINELLO with an elderly peasant woman. After his humanization—for which he had to drink at a “magic fountain,” that Gesuino, the shepherd poet he meets, shows him—he decides to move in and live with her at her beautiful but decrepit farm. Here the archival footage is less present than in *The Mouth of the Wolf* or *Martin Eden*, but it is also used here to support the narrative, in this beautiful sequence at the heart of the film, in which the ancestral ties of humans to nature is evoked upon the occasion of a traditional celebration.

Considering the degree to which the rapport between humans and nature is reflected in the relationship that PUNCHINELLO cultivates with the young buffalo, similar to that which Tommaso has with the palace of Carditello—which is itself the image of the fate of this “lost and beautiful” Italy waiting for an aesthetic guardian angel (or a PUNCHINELLO) to bring it back to life—we might speak here of a “crystal-image” in the context of Deleuze. This comes together in the double dénouement of the film, with the inauguration of a restored Carditello, saved by Tommaso, and the ineluctable sacrifice of Sarchiapone, the buffalo condemned by men because he is male, and thus, unproductive. Here too, anachronism is a central feature since it enables the audience to mingle several layers of time and different forms of narrative, the better to plunge themselves into the complex reality that Marcello wants us to experience. Still, it is with *Martin Eden* that he will take his political quest the furthest, as well as his mélange of times, thus inventing a new mosaic form of montage. Due tribute must be paid to the exceptional editing work of Sara Fgaier who worked under the aegis of Walter Murch and edited the films of Pietro Marcello, up until *Lost and Beautiful*. She would seem to have played a decisive role in the implementation of Marcello’s cinematographic language.

L M I

Your analysis coincides at several points with that of Laura Rascaroli, who considers *Lost and Beautiful* to be a “lyrical essay film.” She mentions the notion of “voicelessness” in relation to a reversible temporality: “The film’s utopian counter argument is precisely made through the creation of a multi-voiced subject [...] *Lost and Beautiful* redeems the voiceless, endowing them with an oracular poetic power that lifts them above their enforced inaudibility” (2020, 90–91). Would you agree with her that it is this process that lends a voice to the voiceless, creating a utopia of sorts?

B B

Yes, Rascaroli’s premise is in keeping with Jacques Rancière’s concerns in his analysis of the films of Pedro Costa, namely the concept of lending a voice to the voiceless, in an act that is as aesthetic as it is political. In the case of Marcello, this process borrows as much from fable as it

does from his editing. He gives a voice to the buffalo, as well as Tommaso—namely to the two who remain unheard, the animal and the aesthete gardener of Carditello. Also, the film, like the abandoned palace, becomes a utopian space, a place of counter-proposition, where myth has its role to play, as it does in Costa's work, but in an entirely different manner.

L M I

Returning to the concept of temporality, can you discuss the role of the transposition of history and anachronism in *Martin Eden*?

B B

The first tour de force of this transposition of Jack London's partially autobiographical eponymous novel is the displacement of the action of the novel, which takes place in Oakland at the end of the 19th century, to a relatively indeterminate period in 20th-century Naples.⁷ The hero is seeking emancipation and the possibility of climbing the social ladder, and is confronted with the liberal bourgeoisie of his time and the Socialist aspirations of the most disadvantaged. All this essentially takes place in the first half of the 20th century, preceding the Second World War, but with archival footage and visual indicators that are indicative of the 1950s, even the 1980s. In fact, anachronism is the main aesthetic principle of the film, and we will examine in detail how this concept is implemented and what the reasons are for such an approach.

For example, let us take the final scene of the film. Many critics have emphasized the Visconti-esque aspects of this moment, that is in effect reminiscent of the final scene of *Death in Venice* (*Morte a Venezia*, 1971). Nevertheless, beyond the references to the oeuvre of Luchino Visconti or Federico Fellini, Marcello adds two elements. The protagonist, mulling over everything, absorbing the full extent of his failure and degradation, finds himself at a personal and historical crossroads.⁸ While he is facing the sea, to his right are migrants gathered around a fire, while a man comes to announce that Italy is entering the war, and to his left, are young blackshirts erasing anti-war slogans; they rough up the messenger, and cut the hair of one of their group. While, at that moment, Martin opts for death, this conclusion underlines the temptations of our times, these opposite ends of the spectrum between which our contemporary societies vacillate: the acceptance or rejection of the Other. All the movement of the film leads to this concept, beyond the chaotic and desperate path taken by the protagonist. It is a harbinger of our 21st century and leads us to question the extremes between which we oscillate. We are led to wonder whether the present is a distant echo of yesterday or its bitter repetition.

Throughout the film, Marcello willfully clouds the issues. True to his customary habit, he inserts archival footage into his

montage, such as that of the revolutionary anarchist Errico Malatesta as he harangues the crowds, an impressive sailing ship that capsizes—a metaphor for the somber thoughts of the protagonist—and shots of Naples in the 1960s and 1970s that are scattered throughout the narrative (Fig. 9). However, it is in his *mise en scène* that he breaks with continuity by throwing in multiple anachronisms. In Elena's bourgeois



Fig. 9: *Martin Eden* (Pietro Marcello, 2019).

family, the filmmaker refers to the 1920s and 1930s, with the music of Debussy that the young woman is playing on the piano, and the prominence of French culture. On the other hand, in the more modest apartment of Martin Eden's brother-in-law, a 1950s television set displays black-and-white images. In the final part of the film, a Jaguar, typical of the 1980s, symbolizes the fortune Eden has since acquired. In one of the final scenes, set in a restaurant, the writer, now recognized by all, is seen to be accepted among a group of Fascists, with their distinctive shaved heads and dark costumes. In the following sequence, archival footage shows the book burnings conducted by the Nazis in 1930s Germany. Similarly, our main character encounters the major ideologies of the 20th century, with Marxism on the one side and Social Darwinism on the other (as expounded by Herbert Spencer). He seeks to divest himself of the latter, and responds to bourgeois liberalism with a fierce individualism. Throughout the odyssey of his singular life path, Marcello depicts the wanderings and ideological temptations of the 20th century, which indubitably still remain the same in the present, along with the desire for emancipation through culture and the disillusionment it entails (as we see the character closing himself off within the world he loathes). As Marcello himself notes:

The dramatic as much as the aesthetic motivations here are the fruit of the intention to convey the memory, history and the land, the Italy and the Europe of yesteryear and today, to rediscover a relationship, a link from which one might begin again in possession of all the facts, and with determination. (Marcello 2016b)

Understanding yesterday in order to better comprehend today would seem to be the guiding principle of the film.

In conclusion, one might say that the film was truly created during the montage process, rather than by the screenplay, with the permanent breaches the former creates, its toing and froing between the immediate present and the distant past, as the image remains this “turning crystal” evoked by Deleuze (1989, 95). At its heart there is a shattering that leaves an ever larger gaping wound. It is this quality that relates most profoundly to the oeuvre of Visconti. In the first chapter of *The Time-Image*, Deleuze describes the manner in which the resulting image transcends the status of a mere snapshot:

Civilization of the image? In fact, it is a civilization of the cliché where all the powers have an interest in hiding images from us, not necessarily in hiding the same thing from us, but in hiding something in the image. On the other hand, at the same time, the image constantly attempts to break through the cliché, to get out of the cliché [...]. Sometimes it is necessary to restore the lost parts, to

rediscover everything that cannot be seen in the image, everything that has been removed to make it “interesting”. But sometimes, on the contrary, it is necessary to make holes, to introduce voids and white spaces, to rarify the image, by suppressing many things that have been added to make us believe that we were seeing everything. It is necessary to make a division or make emptiness in order to find the whole again. (1989, 20–21)

One might easily say the same about the editing process. For Marcello, it is a matter of calling forth the images that remain hidden beneath the images, a palimpsest of sorts, but also to create those voids, those breaches, within which time either sinks or surges forth, in a perpetual movement comparable to the ebb and flow of the tides and thought. This is how Marcello treats fiction as an essayist. He reflects over the ruptures of the previous century like a Jean-Luc Godard, or a Marker, but he transposes them into a universe and an aesthetic particular to his oeuvre, namely the Italy of the 20th century, with the knowledge that Western civilization was and remains challenged by the same questions. It is in this sense that Marcello can be said to be a historian of our times, as he reads the past as a reference to the present and vice versa.

L M I

Do you find new elements of the essay film in his latest film, *For Lucio*? It includes images from *The Mouth of the Wolf*, so one could say that the film itself becomes part of the history...

B B

Yes, indeed. Even if the reach of the premise seems more limited here to me. Firstly, it is a portrait of Lucio Dalla, a singer-songwriter, musician and actor who was very popular in Italy. He was born in Bologna in 1943 and died in Montreux in 2012. As he did in *The Mouth of the Wolf* and *Martin Eden*, Marcello shows his customary virtuosity in his use of archival footage, even as he exuberantly plays with temporalities, if not anachronisms. He recounts the history of Italy, from the Second World War to the present day through the eyes of this musician. The country’s passage from a still agrarian peninsula to industrialization and the social upheavals these changes engendered, from precarity to a consumer society of abundance, all of which was threatened in the 1970s by the terrorism of the Red Brigades. In the eyes of Marcello, there are parallels between the fictional character created by Jack London, and the very real personality of this Italian variety singer. Marcello makes them into witnesses of their times.

When Lucio Dalla, in his song “Itaca,” evokes the fate of Odysseus, but, above all of the unknown sailors on his crew, also part of the community of the voiceless, Marcello shows a montage of archival footage of working-class Italians of different periods, undoubtedly the forgotten amidst the economic boom, along with the more famous captains of industry. One can legitimately speak of editing in counterpoint. In the following appearance, a song entitled “È Lì,” about the discovery of the body of a young man in the Piedmont region, is accompanied with archival footage from the 1950s and 1960s, images of Christmas festivities in marked contrast with the gravity of the situation being evoked (Fig. 10). The gaping contrast makes it all the more poignant. The film also delves into the political side of this Italian artist.

The editing can be seen in an even more dialectical tone. When one of Dalla’s politically engaged songs mentions the astronomical profits made in the stock market, Marcello illustrates this with a rapid-fire montage of stockbrokers,



Fig. 10: *For Lucio* (Pietro Marcello, 2021).

which also includes a juxtaposition of images of the violent repression of demonstrations in the 1970s and images of wildly flashy fashion shows (Fig. 11). Also, as you mentioned, Marcello goes so far as to illustrate one of Dalla's songs, "Il Parco Della Luna," with images from *The Mouth of the Wolf*, some of which is unpublished footage, thus paying homage to all the voiceless, like Enzo and Mary. Thus the editing is, in turn, illustrative, with a contrapuntal quality, synchronous and asynchronous. Marcello uses the story of Dalla as a point of departure from which to call forth a visual memory of the political landscape of the second half of the 20th century in Italy.

L M I

So you would qualify Marcello's anachronisms as a form of audiovisual thinking?

B B

To address this, it is necessary to recall what Benjamin stated regarding the "dialectical image":

It is not that which is past that casts its light on what is present, or what is present that casts its light on what is past; rather the image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the Now to form a constellation. In other words image is dialectics at a standstill. For, while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the Now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural (*bildlich*). Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic-images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the Now of its recognisability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. [N3, 1] (1999, 463)

If one could translate his reflection, one might say that Marcello's montage becomes dialectic in Benjamin's sense of the term. Marcello's work as an essayist consists not



Fig. 11: *For Lucio* (Pietro Marcello, 2021).

only of perceiving the images in the past that resonate with the present and vice versa, but furthermore, his work as an editor, which, again, one might qualify as dialectic in this sense, creates its own resonance amidst these varying temporalities. This dialectical montage is also symbolic in the manner of Rancière, to the extent that Marcello constructs a commonality out of the diversity and heterogeneity of the images and narrative forms, thanks to consistent, but often hidden, analogies.⁹ The result is a dynamic and critical history that happily carries us from individual memory to collective narrative. It is this quality that makes Marcello one of the most exciting and promising proponents of the essay film of the first two decades of the 21st century.

Translated from the French by
Aviva Cashmira Kakar

1/ “I thought I was destined for painting, but I wasn’t good enough. Film was a happy fallback. All the great auteurs of the past were inspired by pictorial composition. Today, cinema is only a matter of technology, despite the fact that composition is at the heart of everything” (Marcello 2016b). All the quotes originally in French have been translated by Aviva Cashmira Kakar.

2/ For example, the Prix Pasinetti Doc at Venice’s La Mostra and the Prix Casa Rossa Doc at the Bellaria Film Festival.

3/ One is also minded of the indispensable work of the two major essayists of found footage, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. See Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi’s *Notre caméra analytique* (2015), and Robert Lumley’s *Entering the Frame: Cinema and History in the Films of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi* (2011).

4/ Translated directly from the Italian.

5/ In Attic drama, the *coryphaeus*, *corypheus*, or *koryphaios* (from the Greek for the top of the head) was the leader of the chorus. Hence the term is used for the chief or leader of any company or movement. The coryphaeus speaks for all the others, whenever the chorus takes part in the action, as a character of the drama, during the course of the acts.

6/ In an interview about *Lost and Beautiful*, Marcello declared: “Painting and cinema no longer have any relationship, unlike the times of Alberto Lattuada, Mario Soldati, Julien Duvivier or Jacques Becker. We are invested in technology, in speed, but we no longer truly compose” (Marcello 2016a). [Translated from the French]

7/ In the related press release (see below), the screenwriters of the film, Pietro Marcello and Maurizio Braucci, wrote the following: “*Martin Eden* tells our story, that of those who were not trained by their families or at school, but rather by the culture they encountered along the way. It is a paean to the autodidact, the person who believes in culture as an instrument of freedom, who remains somewhat disappointed by it. It is a book of great political pertinence, one which reveals Jack London’s capacity to perceive the shaded nuances of the future, the perversions and torments of the 20th century. We had imagined that our Martin would traverse the 20th century, creating an oneiric transposition of this century, one stripped of temporal reference points. It would no longer take place in the California of the novel, but rather in a Naples that could be any port city, not necessarily just in Italy” (*Martin Eden* 2019).

8/ There is something of Friedrich Nietzsche and Orson Welles in the character of *Martin Eden*, a drive for power combined with a sort of self-destruction.

9/ See Jacques Rancière’s *The Future of the Image* (2007). According to Rancière, “The symbolist way also relates heterogeneous elements and constructs little machines through a montage of unrelated elements. But it assembles them in accordance with the opposite logic. Between elements that are foreign to one another it works to establish a familiarity, an occasional analogy, attesting to a more fundamental relationship of co-belonging, a shared world where heterogeneous elements are caught up in the same essential fabric, and are therefore always open to being assembled in accordance with the fraternity of a new metaphor” (2007, 57).

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ESSAY

FILMS

—*original texts*



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comparative cinema

Noticias del fin del mundo. El ensayo fílmico como mentalidad

El film-ensayo contemporáneo se sitúa en el seno de las profundas transformaciones del cinematógrafo que desembocan en el poscine, así como surge de la revolución que ha experimentado el documental clásico, transformado ahora en un posdocumental, cuyos ejes principales son la subjetividad y el pensamiento. Acudiendo a las ideas de Deleuze y Guattari, se puede considerar que el film-ensayo es un indicio de una nueva imagen del pensamiento derivada del cine, pero más compleja. El modo ensayo en general, como forma de pensamiento, se adecúa a las complejidades del mundo contemporáneo, a través de su condición fluida, rizomática y multidimensional. Asimismo, a partir de la hipótesis de que la forma ensayo corresponde a una determinada mentalidad entendida antropológicamente, se deriva la existencia de un postsujeto que se evidencia especialmente con el film-ensayo y que confronta la crisis de la subjetividad trascendental que ha caracterizado el pensamiento del siglo XX.

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Palabras Clave

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IMAGEN DEL PENSAMIENTO

RIZOMA

PENSAMIENTO VISUAL

POSTSUJETO

COMPLEJIDAD

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“Oh! Let us never, never doubt
 What nobody is sure about.”

Hilaire Belloc

“My explorations of the essay film
 began two decades ago,
 when few people knew exactly
 what I was talking about.”

Nora Alter (2018, ix)

Resulta inútil establecer una genealogía del film-ensayo que se remonte a los inicios del cine en busca de la génesis de este formato, para desde allí establecer un desarrollo lineal que llegue hasta la actualidad. Este procedimiento, perteneciente a una problemática mentalidad historicista, ha dejado de ser epistemológicamente productivo, ya que la aceleración de nuestra época es tan intensa que ha alcanzado la velocidad de escape y ha dejado atrás la historia. La idea del fin de la historia que avanzó Francis Fukuyama y nos escandalizó a todos era en realidad un síntoma. No se refería, como erróneamente supusimos todos, su autor incluido, a un cese súbito del devenir y los acontecimientos, sino al hecho de que estos ya no están determinados directamente por el pasado, sino que son el producto de la conflagración de fuerzas principalmente locales.¹ Las filiaciones solo tienen una incidencia testimonial con respecto a la formación de nuevas entidades. Estas se insertan, por el contrario, en territorios o eras cuya temporalidad se expande en todas direcciones, pero siempre en el interior de la formación ecosistémica que los acoge y determina. Se trata de un presente perpetuo que domina su pasado y su futuro. Es cierto que, una vez detectada la pujanza de una formación determinada, se tiende a proyectarla hacia atrás, detectando similitudes superficiales que ignoran

el salto ontológico que ha generado la novedad y que la separa de entidades anteriores, aparentemente similares. No hay duda de que existe una relación histórica entre los fenómenos y, por consiguiente, los nuevos siempre le deben algo a los previos, pero el error consiste en considerar que estas formaciones pretéritas son la causa directa de los cambios, que son ellas las que configuran la esencia de un acontecimiento. Lo cierto es que, por el contrario, la novedad se caracteriza en nuestra era por desligarse de las fases anteriores a las que convierte en una presencia fantasmagórica, cuya bruma parece extenderse en el tiempo, hacia adelante y hacia atrás. La historia es un fantasma que inquieta mínimamente a la ontología y a la fenomenología. Su presencia no puede ser ignorada, pero siempre que guarde silencio.

El ensayo fílmico pertenece al ámbito del cinematógrafo y, dentro de este, se sitúa en la demarcación del cine documental. Pero esto no significa mucho, si tenemos en cuenta que el fenómeno cinematográfico se ha prolongado hacia formas poscinematográficas y que, desde hace alrededor de un par de décadas, el cine documental clásico se ha transformado drásticamente para dar paso a un variado conjunto de giros posdocumentales. Como sea que siguen existiendo producciones estrictamente cinematográficas y documentales, tendemos a echarlo todo en un mismo saco, cuando en realidad el film-ensayo contemporáneo solo guarda con sus posibles y escasos antecesores relaciones aparentes. Han existido pioneros del ensayo fílmico, cineastas visionarios que entrevieron las posibilidades de un cine de pensamiento, pero no estaban en condiciones de desarrollarlo hasta sus últimas consecuencias, incluso cuando fueron capaces de definirlo con acierto, como fue el caso, por ejemplo, de Hans Richter u Orson Welles.

No hay que olvidar que el film-ensayo tiene un encaje –problemático pero ineludible– con el ensayo literario, cuya genealogía tiende a remontarse a Montaigne. A la historia del ensayo literario habría que aplicarle la misma crítica poshistórica que he introducido para romper la filiación clásica del ensayo fílmico. Para comprender nuestra era, es imprescindible desactivar la incidencia que el encadenamiento histórico tiene en la comprensión de los fenómenos. Solo una vez amortiguado su potencial epistemológico, podremos recuperar prudentemente la idea de historia como flecha unitaria del tiempo. Por el contrario, debemos considerar que, en lugar de una historia general de carácter genealógico que determina la formación de todos los elementos de una cultura, existen múltiples historias específicas que se hallan circunscritas a diversos ciclos históricos, paradigmas o épocas cuya consistencia es interna y que mantienen con otros ecosistemas del pasado enlaces meramente cronológicos. La historia como unidad es más un fondo difuso y metafísico que una realidad ontológica.

A pesar de su desconexión temporal, todas las variantes del ensayo –literario, fílmico, etc.– poseen características comunes, lo cual no impide que, en cada era, presenten fenomenologías distintas. Existe, por tanto, una forma básica del modo ensayo de enunciación que corresponde al producto de lo que se puede considerar una mente ensayística. Pero ninguna de estas dos entidades interrelacionadas ha resistido incólume los embates de las transformaciones sociales, culturales y subjetivas que se han producido en cada época, de modo que deben ser consideradas particularmente. Estas transformaciones profundas no están impulsadas por el propio desarrollo histórico, sino por fuerzas y atracciones no lineales en las que

se mezcla el pasado, el presente y el futuro de manera multidimensional. Son producto de multiplicidades, de procesos de individuación que se generan, como propone Gilbert Simondon, por el agenciamiento dinámico de diversos elementos, cuya eficiencia se hace efectiva allí donde confluyen (2007).

La mentalidad ensayística es un aspecto de la estructura del sujeto moderno que ha permanecido marginada por la hegemonía del pensamiento científico y su proyección social de carácter positivista y dogmático. La edad moderna ha generado una mentalidad preponderante –la racional y científica– y otra subsidiaria –estética, imaginativa y supuestamente irracional–. Como indicó Jacques Rancière, “podemos decir que el mito pedagógico divide el mundo en dos. Pero es necesario precisar que divide la inteligencia en dos” (Rancière 1987, 16).² Y, más concretamente, podemos añadir que una tercera categoría ha permanecido más o menos oculta en el ignorado territorio que separa la razón científico-filosófica y la imaginación estético-creativa: la mentalidad ensayística, ignorada por la pedagogía, que a veces se confunde con la filosofía, la literatura o el arte. Cuando la fortaleza de la ciencia empieza a vacilar a principios del siglo XX, la mente ensayística adquiere una presencia que no había poseído hasta entonces. Más adelante, cuando la globalización haga evidente la complejidad de lo real ante la que las especializaciones se muestran inseguras o incapaces, la forma del ensayo y el tipo de mente que la atesora se harán imprescindibles. Sin embargo, la pedagogía, en su labor de formatear las mentes, seguirá ignorando esta necesidad, a pesar de que como afirma Yuk Hui, “quizá deberíamos otorgarle al pensamiento una tarea opuesta a la que le asignó la

filosofía de la Ilustración: fragmentar el mundo según la diferencia, en vez de universalizar por medio de lo igual. Un nuevo pensamiento histórico-mundial tiene que surgir de cara al colapso del mundo” (Hui 2020, 40).

La mente especializada recurre con frecuencia a la figura de la personalidad renacentista para reducir al absurdo la pretensión de saberlo todo, actualmente imposible de satisfacer. De nuevo, la imaginación historicista nos juega una mala pasada al pretender equiparar dos épocas distintas a través de un parecido superficial. La mente ensayística no pretende profundizar en todas las áreas del conocimiento, como podía intentar el erudito renacentista. No busca asimilar el saber de cientos de especialistas, sino que su voluntad reside en poder visitar cualquier disciplina para captar su perspectiva general y añadirla al itinerario que su proceso ensayístico está construyendo. Lo que persigue es pensar de la forma más amplia posible, formando constelaciones destinadas a comprender aspectos de una realidad multidimensional.

Un ensayo fílmico tan emblemático como *Sans Soleil* de Chris Marker (1983) nos ilustra con especial efectividad sobre la forma que adquiere el ensayo cuando efectúa estos recorridos transdisciplinarios. Vemos en él cómo la línea sinuosa de sus intereses va desplegándose por distintos territorios, enlazando ámbitos de conocimiento diversos a través de una columna vertebral estética. Esta conformación del modo ensayístico que observamos en las obras tiene su equivalencia en la estructura de la mente ensayística, la cual es distintiva de algunos individuos, cuya conducta puede delatar la intensidad con que les embarga. Si nos remitimos a la biografía de personajes como Walter Benjamin, Sergei Eisenstein u Orson Welles descubriremos cómo, en sus

respectivos dominios, han mostrado todos ellos una propensión a aglutinar diferentes perspectivas culturales de carácter mediático, artístico, literario o incluso científico. Baste recordar, en el caso de Benjamin, lo que dijo, en su momento, sobre su fracasado trabajo de habilitación centrado en el drama barroco alemán, “que seis personas podrían obtener con él una Habilitación” (Benjamin 1979, 344), lo que pone irónicamente en evidencia la multiplicidad que caracteriza la mente ensayística, un aspecto que se observa también en los multidimensionales escritos de Eisenstein o en el deambular por diferentes medios de Welles. Este demostró en algunos de ellos, como en la radio o el cine –el trascendental *Fraude* (*F for Fake*, 1973)–, su tendencia a utilizar la forma ensayo. Si observamos, por otro lado, las biografías de estos personajes, veremos que también desarrollan itinerarios existenciales inestables y que, por su mentalidad, tienen que salvar innumerables obstáculos que los llevan muchas veces al borde del fracaso.

La mente ensayística

En febrero de 1925, Walter Benjamin le confiesa por carta a su amigo Gershom Scholem que la tesis que está culminando para presentar al proceso de habilitación se le antoja una tarea quijotesca (Benjamin 1979, 340). Sabe que se mueve por un terreno resbaladizo y, por ello, en la introducción a ese escrito, procura poner sobre aviso al tribunal que la ha de juzgar, indicándole que no se encontrará con una investigación al uso. De modo que inicia su exposición con un insólito prólogo epistemocrítico con el que pretende relativizar los modos de exposición del conocimiento, dando a entender que cada uno de ellos se adecúa a una forma específica de pensar. Era un modo de decirle al tribunal, entre cuyos miembros se

encontraba Max Horkheimer con el que nunca simpatizó, que no puede juzgarle según sus propios criterios, sino que tiene que aceptar los del postulante. Insiste en que su exposición no sigue la estructura sistemática del tratado, ya que “las ideas no se manifiestan en sí mismas, sino solo y exclusivamente a través de una ordenación, en el concepto, de elementos pertenecientes al orden de las cosas. Es decir, las ideas se manifiestan en cuanto configuración de tales elementos” (Benjamin 1990, 16). Con ello, Benjamin está confesando, sin decirlo y quizá sin saberlo, que su tesis tiene la forma de un ensayo. Para nosotros, sus palabras adquieren incluso otra dimensión premonitoria, puesto que, si las leemos atentamente, Benjamin parece estar refiriendo, de manera ligeramente anacrónica, al futuro ensayo fílmico, en el que decididamente las ideas se manifestarán a través del orden de las cosas representadas o encarnadas por imágenes. ¿No añadirá más adelante el propio Benjamin que “el filósofo ocupa una posición intermedia entre el investigador y el artista” (1990, 14)?, es decir, precisamente la situación más proclive al film-ensayo. Como era de esperar, la academia no aceptó su peculiar forma de pensar y exponer el pensamiento y su proceso de habilitación para convertirse en docente universitario acabó fracasando. Si ello nos parece escandaloso, pensemos que es muy posible que, incluso en la actualidad, alguien que se presente a cualquier tribunal académico con similares intenciones volverá a encontrarse con parecida incompreensión. Como decía Theodor Adorno, a mediados de los años cincuenta del pasado siglo, “aun hoy en día, el elogio del écrivain es suficiente para marginar académicamente al destinatario” (Adorno 2004, 14). Resulta curioso, sin embargo, cómo la lucidez con la que el filósofo alemán encaraba el tema del

ensayo en un escrito publicado hacia el final de su vida contrasta con la crítica acerba que treinta años antes había dedicado al ensayo de Benjamin sobre Baudelaire (Tackels 2012, 453). Esta constante oposición a la que, durante el siglo XX, se ha enfrentado el ensayo no es anecdótica, sino que pone al descubierto profundas cuestiones epistemológicas que tienen que ver con lo que, siguiendo a Gilles Deleuze, podríamos denominar la imagen actual del pensamiento y sobre todo con su descomposición.

En su autobiografía, escrita hacia el final de su vida, Eisenstein confiesa que al empezar a escribir una página, una sección o una frase, no tiene ni idea de adónde le llevará el proceso. Añade que “ya sea que el material se extraiga de las profundidades de mis reservas personales, o que la evidencia fáctica se recupere de mi experiencia personal, he aquí toda una esfera de lo inesperado e imprevisto con muchas cosas que son completamente nuevas: yuxtaposición de materiales, conclusiones extraídas de estas yuxtaposiciones, aspectos nuevos y ‘revelaciones’ que surgen de estas conclusiones” (Eisenstein 1983, 2). Ante la idea de la yuxtaposición, se diría que Eisenstein está incidiendo en el sistema de montaje fílmico que distingue toda su obra cinematográfica, pero debemos tener en cuenta que este trabajo de montaje dialéctico está fundamentado en una serie de reglas y expectativas que el mismo Eisenstein ha expuesto en sus trabajos teóricos, mientras que aquí nos está diciendo que de la yuxtaposición de elementos se derivan consecuencias insospechadas. En general, el cine de Eisenstein, a pesar de que en algunos casos se acerca al ensayo fílmico, pertenece a lo que Deleuze denominó fase orgánica del cine, la de las imágenes-movimiento y por lo tanto la relativa al esquema sensorio-motor (Deleuze, 2018). Sin embargo, en sus escritos, el director se expresa de otra forma. Como indica

alguno de sus analistas, el sistema de escritura de Eisenstein sería muy parejo al flujo de conciencia que James Joyce utilizó en el *Ulises* y que el propio Eisenstein, en algún momento de su misterioso proyecto de filmar *El capital* de Karl Marx, había pensado utilizar. Quienes hayan leído los textos del director soviético habrán notado no solo la falta de estructura preconcebida de los mismos, la ausencia de un plan de trabajo, sino también el hecho de que el autor se expresa a través de párrafos cortos que va engarzando como si cada uno de ellos fuera el contenedor de una idea autosuficiente. Su forma de escritura se acercaba así a ese montaje de citas que promulgaba Benjamin como modo para transmitir la experiencia y cuyo máximo exponente es el *Libro de los pasajes* tal como nos ha llegado a nosotros (2005). Según Bruno Tackels, su biógrafo, “sacándolas [las citas] de su texto original, les da una nueva aura, mediante la cual las distintas citas van a explicarse mutuamente, llegando a alcanzar una nueva existencia, totalmente libre de su contenido inicial” (Tackels 2012, 132). Si trasladamos este sistema de montaje de citas al plano visual, nos encontramos con que el procedimiento no remite tanto al montaje orgánico, como al trabajo del ensayista fílmico cuando procede con imágenes de archivo.

Si nos atenemos a las notas que Eisenstein nos dejó sobre su insólito proyecto de filmar la obra de Marx, nos vemos obligados a pensar que lo que tenía en mente era un sistema de composición serializada que en gran medida era contrapuesta al método de montaje que utilizaba en sus películas. En todo caso, se podía asemejar a una secuencia como la de los dioses que, en *Octubre* (*Oktyabr*, 1927), expresa una determinada idea sobre la divinidad a través de la mostración sucesiva de una serie de imágenes pertenecientes a diversas culturas. En casos como

este, Eisenstein parecía buscar la forma del futuro ensayo fílmico, sin acabar de delimitarla. Quizá por ello, nunca pudo finalizar su proyecto o ni siquiera exponerlo adecuadamente. Su mentalidad ensayística se hallaba reprimida por la concepción mecanicista del montaje que solo le permitía acercarse al modo ensayístico sin acabar de alcanzarlo, a pesar de lo cerca que estuvo en películas como la citada *Octubre* o en *Lo viejo y lo nuevo* (*Staroye i novoye*, 1929).

Las figuras de Benjamin y Eisenstein ilustran dos momentos en que el moderno ensayo, en sus vertientes literaria y fílmica, encuentra una severa resistencia. La barrera con la que se topa Benjamin es cultural, externa; la de Eisenstein es personal, interna. Benjamin, que era un ensayista sin paliativos, no consigue validar su forma de pensamiento ni ante un tribunal encargado de discernir cuál es la forma correcta de pensar –es decir, representante de lo que Deleuze definía como imagen dogmática del pensamiento–, ni en sus relaciones con los miembros del Instituto de Investigación Social. Eisenstein, por su parte, más allá de sus escaramuzas con el estalinismo y el dogma del realismo socialista, se encuentra con resistencias personales para introducir en el ámbito de la imagen la forma de pensar que ya había desarrollado en sus escritos. Posee una mente ensayística en el seno de otra mente mecanicista, lastrada por una combinación de hegelianismo y materialismo dialéctico que la cultura le ha impuesto.

Estos dos casos nos colocan ante dos de los problemas que ha encontrado el ensayo moderno para su desarrollo. Uno de ellos está relacionado con el ámbito del conocimiento y no ha sido resuelto aún. El otro pertenece a la esfera del arte y muestra las incertidumbres que encuentra la mente ensayística a la hora de desarrollar

sus incipientes capacidades en un contexto particularmente estéril. En un caso, el ensayismo se topa con la hostilidad, en el otro con la esterilidad. Mientras que la hostilidad continua vigente en la academia, la esterilidad ha desaparecido prácticamente en el arte, como lo prueba la fecunda incidencia de la obra de Jean-Luc Godard, Alexander Kluge o Harun Farocki en una parte importante de la cultura contemporánea. Mientras que el arte conceptual ha abierto las puertas al ensayismo estético, la ciencia se opone con fuerza a un posible ensayismo epistemológico.

La madurez del ensayo fílmico

Un aspecto fundamental del film-ensayo, sobre todo por lo que respecta a su relación con el conocimiento, fue perfectamente expuesto en 1940 por un pionero, Hans Richter, cuando discutía la eficacia epistemológica del ingenuo empirismo fotográfico del documental. Según él, es necesario recurrir a distintas perspectivas para “la visualización de pensamientos en la pantalla [...], hacer visible el mundo de la imaginación, los pensamiento y las ideas” (Richter 2017, 90–91). Teniendo en cuenta la época, la clarividencia de Richter era extraordinaria. Pero el film-ensayo contemporáneo, que desarrollará a su modo las pretensiones de Richter, posee además otras dimensiones. Su preocupación principal no reside ya en visualizar una verdad oculta, como si esta fuera algo independiente del ensayista, esperando a ser desvelada por algún pensador especialmente perspicaz. Richter escapa parcialmente de este esencialismo cuando apunta a que la idea que debe exponer el ensayo deber ser aquella que el cineasta se ha formado del objeto. De esta manera, introduce en el proceso un factor subjetivo que es crucial en el ensayismo fílmico contemporáneo, al que así dirige hacia su verdadera función, que

no es tanto mostrar un conocimiento objetivo, como construirlo a través de su multiplicidad inagotable.

El film-ensayo, tal como se practica actualmente en el ámbito de las transformaciones del cine documental clásico, tiene sus raíces en tentativas del pasado como la de Richter, pero su perfil es básicamente distinto, puesto que surge en un contexto de profundos cambios tecnológicos con los que guarda una relación muy estrecha. Se alimenta además de la crisis estética de una vanguardia que ha perdido su vigor y de una posvanguardia también languideciente. Por otro lado, el sujeto del film-ensayo contemporáneo no es igual a aquel que, en el pasado, intuía las posibilidades del ensayismo fílmico: la mentalidad ensayística ha cambiado considerablemente desde entonces, haciéndose mucho más compleja.

Los planteamientos de algunos teóricos sobre la subjetividad en el film-ensayo no están exentos de inconvenientes. Así, Laura Rascaroli, en la estela de Paul Arthur y Michael Renov, afirma que

a nivel de compromiso textual [...], un ensayo es la expresión de una reflexión personal y crítica sobre un problema o conjunto de problemas [...]. A nivel de estructuras retóricas, para transmitir tal reflexión, el ensayo fílmico apunta decididamente al sujeto enunciador, que literalmente habita el texto. Este enunciador se encarna en un narrador, que (no sin problemas o irreflexivamente) se halla cerca del autor real, extratextual (Rascaroli 2009, 33).

De una forma un poco más sofisticada, la autora no hace sino prolongar la idea de film-ensayo que está implícita en los análisis de pioneros como André Bazin o posteriormente Phillip Lopate, dos referencias inevitables en este campo. Según estos autores, el ensayo fílmico conservaría la estructura

típica del ensayo literario por lo que respecta a la presencia y capacidad de agenciamiento de la figura del autor. Para Rascaroli, las marcas principales de la forma del film-ensayo son la reflexividad y la subjetividad (2009, 33). El problema reside en cómo se articulan estas dos disposiciones. Si se sigue pensando en un sujeto que reflexiona o, por el contrario, se entiende que el propio proceso reflexivo fílmico crea un discurrir estético en el que está inscrito un sujeto en constante transformación. Si aceptamos que cada ensayo fílmico crea su propio sujeto, comprenderemos más fácilmente alguno de los motivos por los que Marker adjudicaba la enunciación sonora de sus films a personajes heterónimos.

El film-ensayo no solo combina realidad y ficción, sino también articula arte y ciencia. Una de las particularidades del film-ensayo contemporáneo es que se propone como una forma de saber a través de la estética, pero no de manera implícita como sucede en el arte en general, sino por medio de procesos reflexivos expresos. No se trata tanto de que la imagen piense, como que la imagen es una forma de pensar. En este sentido, el ensayo fílmico se acerca a la ciencia sin pretender sustituirla, al tiempo que se aproxima también al arte, sin voluntad de desbancarlo. Se puede contemplar el fenómeno de otra manera, como el resultado de una mezcla simultánea de arte y ciencia. Pero esta perspectiva enmascara la verdadera consistencia del ensayo fílmico que, si bien podía poseer al principio este carácter híbrido e indeciso, actualmente se ha consolidado como una forma genuina y necesaria de pensamiento y, por lo tanto, está lejos de ser el subproducto de ámbitos ya consolidados. El ensayo fílmico contemporáneo no es ni arte ni ciencia, sino un modo que supera los límites de cada una de estas formas, prolongándolas hacia un territorio estético y epistemológico diverso.

El ensayo fílmico tampoco puede considerarse con una forma de arte, a pesar de que su proceso reflexivo produzca resultados estéticos. El impulso experimental del arte de vanguardia, convertido ya desde hace tiempo en posvanguardista, se ha transmitido al posdocumental y en concreto al ensayo fílmico, pero en el trasvase ha cambiado su polaridad. La estética, que en el arte era punto de llegada, se convierte en el posdocumental en un punto de partida y, concretamente en el ensayo fílmico, en una plataforma de pensamiento. Este pensamiento, efectuado mediante una retórica audiovisual compleja, genera reflexiones que tienen un doble valor, estético e ideológico.

Por otro lado, la relación que el ensayo fílmico contemporáneo establece con la tecnología y especialmente con la digitalización es mucho más profunda que la que mantenía con el aparato cinematográfico el ensayista fílmico de lo que podríamos denominar la prehistoria del film-ensayo, es decir, esa época en la que el género no estaba aún claramente definido. La diferencia principal estriba en que el cineasta usa el dispositivo fílmico como una herramienta ajena a sus fines, mientras que el actual ensayista fílmico modifica sus herramientas a medida que va creando o encontrando sus fines. Es en este sentido que el cine puede considerarse en general un medio, mientras que el film-ensayo es básicamente un procedimiento. Cada uno de estos ámbitos produce una forma distinta de pensamiento.

Líneas y espacios de pensamiento

Que, en su biografía, Eisenstein afirmase que “una línea es el rastro del movimiento” (Eisenstein 1983, 42) le hace decir a Jacques Aumont que Eisenstein “dibuja sus textos”, ya que hay en ellos una “línea” visual

puesta de manifiesto a través de “(los incesantes sangrados tipográficos, el aspecto pseudo-versificado de muchas de sus páginas, el carácter compacto, por contraste, de muchos de sus párrafos); lo cual también habla del tipo de movimiento que conecta las frases entre sí (y, si es necesario, las confronta)” (Aumont 1987, 11). Esta apelación a la línea visual o metafórica que constituye el eje en torno al que se distribuye la forma de los textos de Eisenstein es también una línea de pensamiento que nos recuerda las líneas de la belleza –onduladas o serpentinadas– a las que apelaba el pintor William Hogarth para fijar los cánones estéticos del Barroco. Refiriéndose al director soviético. Anne Nesbet sugiere que el pensamiento basado en imágenes tiene una forma propia, y que “en su búsqueda de esa forma, Eisenstein (en lo que se suponía que era el capítulo final de su libro sobre la práctica de la dirección) acudió a Lenin en busca de apoyo filosófico: ‘La cognición humana no es (ni viaja a lo largo de) una línea recta, sino que se acerca sin cesar a una serie de círculos, a una espiral’” (Nesbet 2003, 209).

Si intentamos imaginar el transcurso del pensamiento del ensayo, veremos que equivale a una de estas líneas sinuosas, en contraste con el trazo directo y predecible de la línea recta que traza el pensamiento metodológico. Sin embargo, el pensamiento del ensayo es sinuoso no porque se vea obligado a seguir una línea predeterminada de estas características, sino porque está constantemente saliéndose de cualquier predeterminación para establecer relaciones insospechadas. Pero no por ello se trata de un pensamiento aleatorio, lo cual podría constituir un contrasentido, ni de una forma de asociacionismo inconsciente como el de la escritura automática de los surrealistas. El ensayo propone un tipo de actividad reflexiva que debe ser considerada pensamiento en un sentido

estricto, ya que, en principio, se trata del ejercicio voluntario de un sujeto que aplica su capacidad de raciocinio a un determinado objeto, sin obedecer a regulaciones previas. Luego esta acción, correspondiente al ensayismo en general, tiene consecuencias inesperadas en el seno del ensayo fílmico, pero de momento podemos decir que ilustra la efectividad de un específico tipo de pensamiento. De la misma manera que, como indica Paola Marrati, “es cuando se quiebra la historia que el tiempo se presenta en su *estado puro* y despliega todo el poder de sus dimensiones no cronológicas” (Marrati 2003, 78), se puede afirmar que, cuando se anula el método, el pensamiento se despliega en su estado puro. Decimos que el pensamiento es lineal, a pesar de las dispersiones que puede experimentar esta línea, para dejar constancia de su relación con la temporalidad, pero hay también en él un carácter espacial. Aunque sea a un nivel metafórico, las dos dimensiones interactúan, como es de esperar en una época que es básicamente espaciotemporal pero que aún no ha comprendido del todo lo que significa esta hibridación en el ámbito de las imágenes.

La idea de rizoma que proponen Deleuze y Guattari (1972) es, antes que nada, una red de posibilidades, de virtualidades, por la que el pensamiento al actualizarse debe transcurrir. Pero, como no puede hacerlo por todos los ramales a la vez, no tiene más remedio que seguir, en principio, una determinada dirección. Lo que ocurre es que esta dirección está siendo constantemente discutida por las opciones que se le ofrecen. De ahí la sinuosidad, la ondulación del camino que traza el pensamiento y cuya forma se detecta a posteriori. El rizoma, por tanto, se actualiza siempre de formas distintas. Pero la línea temporal del pensamiento-ensayo está constantemente surcando el espacio

virtual de la complejidad, es decir, el de todas las opciones posibles que la envuelven y que, aunque se ignoren, están siempre pesando sobre la dirección elegida. De ahí que, si bien el pensamiento ensayístico se despliega en una dirección, en realidad no lo hace tanto resumiéndose en una trayectoria lineal, sino decantando siempre una especie de mapa o planicie de extensión indeterminada. Por ello es tan importante contar con la fenomenología de la imagen tanto a la hora de ejecutar los ejercicios ensayísticos contemporáneos, como a la hora de imaginar sus consecuencias.

El ensayo, como el cine o la música, se compone de momentos desplegados en el tiempo. El ensayo de cualquier tipo se acerca a un pensamiento en tiempo real, ese al que, según Isabelle Stengers, se arriesgaba a veces Alfred North Whitehead (Stengers 2002, 36). Se puede decir que el ensayista piensa en tiempo real, incluso cuando confecciona una operación fílmica, porque cada paso lleva al siguiente y a cada paso hay una serie de posibles bifurcaciones que permiten establecer una relación imprevisible con cualquiera de ellas. Pero, como he indicado, cada giro arrastra un conjunto de virtualidades que pueden actualizarse en cualquier momento. Se piensa en tiempo real cuando se escribe, cuando se pinta o dibuja o incluso quizá cuando se filma, aunque la genuina operación ensayística se acostumbre a producir en este caso cuando se organiza lo filmado. De todas formas, la función de la mente ensayística también se plasma en el momento de imaginar la tarea. Esto, por el lado de la producción, es decir, de la práctica del pensamiento ensayístico. Pero, ¿qué ocurre con la recepción? ¿Nos encontramos ante un “espectáculo del ensayo” de la misma manera que el acto de pintar se convierte en un cuadro?

Es cierto que quien lee o contempla un ensayo en principio no piensa como

quien lo ha confeccionado: no realiza un pensamiento efectivo en tiempo real, sino que se deja llevar por el camino que ya ha sido trazado. Sin embargo, sí que lo recorre en tiempo real. Esta operación corresponde solo a la primera parte del proceso, ya que el ensayo activa el pensamiento del receptor de manera que, constantemente, este se encuentra en disposición de producir sus propias bifurcaciones, es decir, de generar su propia línea ensayística, más allá de la que le propone el ensayo en sí: la puede actualizar con sus propios pensamientos, efectuados ya sea en tiempo real o derivándolos a acciones posteriores. Los lectores de Borges sabrán a lo que me refiero.

Mientras que la lógica del tratado, como la de una narrativa clásica, retiene de forma estricta al receptor en su propuesta, obligándole a ceñirse al desarrollo de ella, el ensayo deja abierta la posibilidad de efectuar derivaciones, sin que se pierda el hilo de una argumentación que es abierta y, en principio, lo suficientemente difusa como para permitir entradas y salidas de la misma sin que se pierda la experiencia planteada. De todas formas, ni la lógica del tratado puede retener absolutamente al receptor, ni la forma ensayo lo empuja necesariamente a desertar. En todo caso, el tratado o la narrativa pierden al receptor, si este se aleja de su línea argumentativa; mientras que el ensayo lo retiene, aunque el receptor parezca alejarse con sus propias divagaciones. Cobra nueva vigencia aquí la antigua parábola del gran árbol derribado por los embates de un vendaval que no afectan al árbol aparentemente más débil pero más flexible.

El ensayo y sus formas

El ensayo puede ser una cuestión de estilo, como apuntan Georg Lukács y Robert Musil, o una propuesta epistemológica, tal como lo plantea

Adorno. Pero sobre todo se trata de una forma de pensamiento que, al margen de posibles fundamentos caracterológicos, deriva, en esencia, de una determinada mentalidad proclive a ser adquirida culturalmente o inducida por vía pedagógica como un método basado en la paradoja de ser profundamente antimetodológico. La aleatoriedad del pensamiento ensayístico no desemboca en el caos, sino que, en todo caso, está próximo de esa “caosofía” esbozada por Félix Guattari (1995b), quien insistía en que un pensamiento del caos no es equivalente a un pensamiento caótico, sino que implica una convergencia insubordinada de distintos vectores en principio dispares y desvinculados. La caosofía está próxima a ese otro concepto de Guattari, el de “caósmosis”, con el que el autor quiere teorizar los procesos de subjetivación que se derivan de esos agenciamientos “caóticos” que se hallan también en la base del ensayo fílmico:

Lo importante aquí no es solo el enfrentamiento con un nuevo material de expresión, sino la constitución de complejos de subjetivación: múltiples intercambios entre individuo-grupo-máquina. Estos complejos ofrecen realmente a las personas diversas posibilidades de recomponer su corporeidad existencial, salir de sus repetitivos atolladeros y, en cierto modo, resingularizarse. Los gráficos de transferencia funcionan de esta forma, en lugar de partir de dimensiones de la subjetividad preestablecidas y cristalizadas en complejos estructurales, surgen de una creación que en sí misma implica una especie de paradigma estético. Se crean nuevas modalidades de subjetividad de la misma manera que un artista crea nuevas formas a partir de su paleta (Guattari 1995a, 7).

El proceso que para los pacientes del esquizoanálisis de Guattari funciona como una producción estética, en el ensayo fílmico es literalmente

una producción estética capaz de fundamentar un proceso reflexivo al tiempo que configura también una nueva subjetividad, así como una relación diversa con lo real.

Frente a la estabilidad del proceder *more geometrico* (a la manera de los geómetras) que caracteriza el pensamiento de Descartes o Spinoza, el ensayo parece no ir a ninguna parte, aunque, en realidad, potencial o virtualmente, se dirige a todas ellas. El ensayo establece series distintas de relaciones que se ofrecen como caminos posibles del conocimiento. El conocimiento es diverso, múltiple, por lo que no puede fijarse definitivamente. De esta forma, el ensayo se promueve a sí mismo como el único pensamiento verdadero, puesto que no depende de algo externo a él. No es un dispositivo para comunicar algo dado, sino para construir lo que debe ser comunicado junto a un contexto que amplía o deja abiertos los significados. El ensayismo no desemboca en un relativismo, puesto que el propio acto de construir el conocimiento implica un valor, si bien no es un valor fijo, sino pragmático que propone una relación entre otras relaciones posibles. No es que cada una de estas tenga necesariamente el mismo peso desde una perspectiva general, de la misma manera que no puede decirse que las obras de arte tengan igual valor por ser todas ellas expresiones artísticas. Pero, aunque estas se valoren de distinta forma, ello no quiere decir que se pueda afirmar de ellas que unas son verdaderas y las otras no. El ensayo lo que hace precisamente es ensayar, experimentar caminos y relaciones que configuran series psico-estéticas, las cuales adquieren la virtud de los acontecimientos o fenómenos que abren horizontes inesperados, con la particularidad de que estas aperturas no son nunca definitivas o estables.

El ensayo escapa de los regímenes de la certeza y la exactitud que dominan

el pensamiento contemporáneo estrechamente relacionado con el imaginario de la ciencia. Pero no por ello pierde su relación con el conocimiento. Su aperturismo no es menos válido que la forma cerrada y estable del conocimiento que propugnan esas otras lógicas, correspondiente a un pensamiento que precisamente por ello puede tildarse de establecido, es decir, el que se desprende de las imágenes dogmáticas del pensamiento. Uno de los problemas del pensamiento filosófico es que acaba encerrado en su propio juguete. Una vez establecidas ciertas categorías y sus relaciones, es imposible escapar de la estructura clausurada que han establecido. El pensamiento, encerrado en esa arquitectura de regulaciones y cohesiones internas, está obligado a proceder sin romperla, ya que, de lo contrario, todo el edificio se vendrá abajo. Pero no se trata de una cuestión de coherencia, ya que el ensayo es coherente consigo mismo: admite tan poco las contradicciones como el pensamiento filosófico dogmático, pero las condiciones de estas no están ligadas en su caso a un sistema cerrado y a su consistencia interna, sino que se refieren a las interacciones que se pueden instaurar a lo largo de la expansión continua de un pensamiento abierto. El hecho de no admitir lógicas estables no lo convierte en ilógico, ya que toda desviación de las lógicas particulares o de la Lógica debe ser justificada. Por tanto, la lógica y la coherencia forman parte del ensayo, es decir, de su proceso de pensamiento, pero es este el que determina su alcance sin contradecirse. El pensamiento ensayístico establece su propia lógica interna, en lugar de someterse a las regulaciones de una estructura externa. Actúa, en este sentido, como una pintura, cuyo realismo se somete al estilo particular con el que ha sido confeccionada. Lo cierto es que este símil se puede

aplicar a cualquier imagen, sea o no realista. La validez de las propuestas viene dada, como en la música, por la concordancia o equilibrio que muestran sus componentes. Cualquier disonancia intelectual es detectable como una nota falsa o como un pasaje desafinado. Pero esta cuestión estética funciona como válvula de seguridad, no como objetivo fundamental, ya que no hay unas normas básicas que indiquen cómo han de ser esas concordancias.

El ensayo no es estrictamente científico, a pesar de que puede aplicarse a una posible ciencia especulativa o confundirse con el proceder experimental de la ciencia. Pero conserva de esta la voluntad de relacionarse con un conocimiento “verdadero”. Sin embargo, su concepto de verdad no es el mismo que el de la ciencia, que se ve obligada a trabajar con “verdades absolutas”, aun sabiendo que son forzosamente provisionales. El ensayo le da la vuelta a esta ecuación ética y trabaja con la premisa de que sus verdades son transitorias y transicionales, aunque sólidas en su carácter siempre temporal. En el terreno de los estudios sobre el cambio climático se plantea la pregunta de “¿cómo hablar de desvío de la norma si la norma cambia cada año, si como única norma posible solo queda la anormalidad misma?” (Danowski y Viveiros de Castro 2019, 41). No en vano apelo al cambio climático, puesto que este es uno de los aspectos del mundo contemporáneo cuya fenomenología excede a la capacidad del conocimiento científico y reclama, por el contrario, una intervención ensayística, es decir, multifacética, especulativa y dinámica.

La disolución ensayística de la imagen del pensamiento

Si los ensayos de Montaigne tienen más de cuatro siglos y, desde entonces, la forma ensayo no ha dejado de proliferar sigilosamente,

dentro y fuera de la filosofía o de la crítica literaria y artística, ¿por qué le prestamos ahora tanta atención? Hay muchas respuestas posibles a esta pregunta, pero quizá la más relevante sea aquella que se refiere a la mezcla de aceleración y complejidad que caracteriza al mundo contemporáneo. Según Bruno Latour, las cosas cambian tan rápido que resulta difícil acompañarlas (Latour 2017, 7). Lo afirma refiriéndose a la catástrofe del cambio climático, un fenómeno que si bien parece pertenecer al dominio de las disciplinas científicas que lo han puesto de manifiesto, su problemática global excede el alcance de la mentalidad que las caracteriza: “la ‘naturaleza’ o ‘ambiente’, en suma, sería algo demasiado serio para ser dejado exclusivamente en manos (y en los presupuestos de investigación...) de los científicos naturales” (Danowski y Viveiros de Castro 2019, 36–37). Resumiendo: la realidad actual se transforma a múltiples niveles con una rapidez que supera el ritmo del pensamiento académico o academicista –el de la ciencia lo es cuando se dedica a legislar–. El modo ensayo, con su pensamiento abierto y en movimiento, se amolda mucho mejor a las nuevas circunstancias y, por lo tanto, revive ahora más allá de los límites de lo literario a los que había sido relegado. A través de la modalidad del film-ensayo y su derivación hacia la forma del documental interactivo, se puede intuir incluso el potencial de un ensayismo científico, fundamentado en imágenes complejas y en movimiento.

Parece haber consenso en que el ensayo efectúa una labor de reciclaje. Como indica Lukács

El ensayo siempre habla de algo a lo que ya se le ha dado forma, o al menos de algo que ya ha estado allí en algún momento del pasado; de ahí que sea parte de la naturaleza del ensayo el no crear cosas nuevas a partir de una nada vacía, sino

que solo ordena las que alguna vez estuvieron vivas. Y debido a que las ordena de nuevo y no forma algo nuevo a partir de la falta de forma, está ligado a ellas y siempre debe hablar “la verdad” sobre ellas, debe encontrar expresión para su naturaleza esencial (Lukács 2010, 26).

Esto es básicamente cierto y parece ajustarse a los parámetros esenciales del film-ensayo, sobre todo de aquel que utiliza materiales de archivo, pero es necesario hacer constar que el ensayo contemporáneo en todos sus modos hace algo más que reordenar materiales ultimados. En realidad, es precisamente el film-ensayo el que nos muestra las características de este excedente de la labor ensayística clásica, puesto que del ordenamiento de lo que ya ha sido –porque proviene del archivo o de la cultura, pero también porque ha sido convertido en imagen– se desprenden nuevos puntos de vista y la posibilidad de nuevas formas visuales de gestionarlos. De esta manera, el ensayo, pero sobre todo el ensayo fílmico, siempre se desplaza más allá de los materiales que utiliza. Este “más allá” implica un territorio mental constituido por el propio ejercicio de pensamiento que el ensayo ejecuta. El ensayo fílmico se desarrolla a través de la paradoja que supone que la forma de su pensamiento responda a unos parámetros establecidos por su propia forma de pensar.

Según Deleuze y Guattari, el pensamiento se desarrolla en un plano de inmanencia establecido como horizonte de la imagen del pensamiento a la que pertenece. La imagen del pensamiento es aquella que este “se da a sí mismo de lo que significa pensar, hacer uso del pensamiento, orientarse en el pensamiento” (Deleuze y Guattari 1997, 41). El pensamiento piensa en un plano que él mismo con su actuación construye y del que no siempre es consciente en todas sus

dimensiones. Esta inconsciencia hace que no pueda comprender ni su verdadero alcance ni sus limitaciones. Por ello el pensamiento acostumbra a confundir su forma con la forma de la realidad, invirtiendo los parámetros, puesto que, en efecto, cada imagen del pensamiento corresponde a una forma de la realidad, pero es aquella de la que el pensamiento se provee para poder pensarla.

Para Deleuze, el cine correspondía a la imagen del pensamiento actual, es decir, la de una forma de pensar íntimamente relacionada con el movimiento. Siguiendo a Henri Bergson, afirmaba que “un movimiento de traslación en el espacio expresa siempre algo más profundo y de otra naturaleza [...] expresa un cambio cualitativo” (Deleuze 2011, 81). En esta afirmación se expresa gran parte del secreto de la imagen cinematográfica a la vez que su contenido desvela muchas de las razones básicas de la estética del modo ensayo y, por añadidura, del film-ensayo.

La imagen del pensamiento plasmada por el cine está cambiando. En cierta manera, el propio Deleuze ya había intuido el cambio cuando planteaba, en el cine, el paso de la imagen orgánica a la imagen cristalina (Deleuze 2011; 2018). Es decir, cuando consideraba que, tras un primer período basado en la imagen-movimiento –movimiento mecánico–, el cine pasaba a una imagen-tiempo –movimiento fluido–. Esta fluidez de la imagen que es también fluidez del pensamiento conforma el ámbito en el que aparece el film-ensayo contemporáneo, producto e indicativo de una nueva imagen del pensamiento.

En el film-ensayo, como en el ensayo en general, el pensamiento no está organizado, no procede por ensamblajes mecánicos de piezas preestablecidas, sino que fluye desenchajando cualquier pieza que penetre en su flujo, donde se convierte

en parte del proceso de pensamiento y, por lo tanto, ve modificada su consistencia original. No se trata de que el film-ensayo desdeñe las formas del montaje clásico, sino que en él la arquitectura del film no está formada por la unión de diferentes partes. Por el contrario, cada elemento constituye el punto nodal de un recorrido que no cesa de modular el conjunto. Eisenstein ya había intuido esta posibilidad, puesto que, como explica Nesbet, afirmaba que

una imagen conduce necesariamente a otras imágenes; cualquier imagen parecería ser entonces una digresión o desvío de la idea en cuestión. Pero lo que puede parecer una “digresión”, según dice Eisenstein, de hecho puede convertirse en el camino que conduce al “punto más central”. En otras palabras, cuando se viaja por la espiral del pensamiento basado en imágenes, es difícil saber si uno está saliendo o entrando, divagando o perfeccionando lo esencial (Nesbet 2003, 210).

Deleuze, de la mano del Bergson de *Materia y memoria* (2006, publicado por primera vez en 1896), se adentraba en una nueva imagen del pensamiento compuesto por

una especie de universo material en perpetuo movimiento que se hace efectivamente accesible a través del cine [...]. El pensamiento de Deleuze encuentra entonces su nueva imagen, porque esta última gana a través del cine toda suerte de velocidades y de movimiento, además de todo tipo de profundidades temporales. La imagen cinematográfica, dinámica y temporal, se torna así imagen del pensamiento que escapa a todo dogmatismo (Álvarez Asiáin 2001, 22).

El ensayo fílmico, liberado de los condicionamientos *literarios* del modo ensayo y volcado de lleno en la vertiente artística de esta modalidad,

de la que sin embargo también tiende a escapar, se aparta asimismo de todo dogmatismo. Lo hace aún más intensamente que la imagen cinematográfica del pensamiento, ya que esta no deja de tener sus límites en el alcance de su plano de inmanencia. En resumidas cuentas, el cine no puede dejar de pensar cinematográficamente.

En el fondo, todas las imágenes del pensamiento tienen su propio dogmatismo, puesto que se supone que el filósofo no es capaz de advertir las disposiciones básicas de la imagen del pensamiento que él mismo desarrolla con su proceso de pensar: no es capaz de revertir el proceso de pensamiento sobre su propia imagen del pensamiento. Puede que Jacques Derrida lo haya intentado con la deconstrucción, pero inevitablemente de forma dogmática. Al menos se le hace difícil escapar a su propia prisión del lenguaje.

Con el pensamiento visual, anclado en la estética, se plantea en principio la posibilidad de salir del círculo vicioso del lenguaje, sobre todo cuando ese pensamiento visual encuentra acomodo en un dispositivo como el cine que lo pone en movimiento. Pero, aunque Deleuze suponga que su condición móvil libera indefinidamente a la imagen del pensamiento que constituye el cine, lo cierto es que este proceso de presumida liberación se sigue desarrollando dentro de unos límites, los de la fenomenología cinematográfica, sea la correspondiente a las imágenes-movimiento o a las imágenes-tiempo. Siempre que el pensamiento se atiene a un método o a una regulación del tipo que sea –es decir, cuando el pensamiento se desarrolla en el plano de inmanencia cuyo horizonte determina la imagen del pensamiento correspondiente–, el pensar acaba siendo dogmático.

El ensayo fílmico se sitúa en otro nivel o por lo menos una parte del

mismo asoma la cabeza por encima de la línea del horizonte fílmico. Apunta a la existencia de una inconcebible imagen del pensamiento que, en principio, carecería de un plano de inmanencia estricto. El film-ensayo pertenece al ámbito posfílmico en el que la anterior imagen del pensamiento se desparrama y pierde la capacidad de delimitar una sola forma de pensar, por lo que el plano de inmanencia correspondiente deja de ser unidimensional y se pliega y repliega en otras dimensiones. Los procesos de pensamiento representados por el ensayo fílmico fluyen, desbaratando constantemente los límites mentales, mediáticos, subjetivos, tecnológicos, estéticos o filosóficos de un plano de inmanencia concreto. Se puede decir que cada operación ensayística construye su propio plano de inmanencia múltiple, un plano de inmanencia que tiene forma de abanico tridimensional, puesto que el pensamiento que lo recorre lo hace, o lo puede hacer, en todas direcciones. Esta forma específica de pensar está formateada en cada caso precisamente por el plano de pensamiento que ella misma crea. Este proceso de autopoiesis le permite al ensayo escapar constantemente de las constricciones de una imagen del pensamiento dogmática, instituyendo la posibilidad de una imagen del pensamiento indefinidamente abierta. En este sentido, se ha de insistir en que el ensayo, por muy relacionado que esté con el pensamiento, no es una filosofía ni una forma de filosofar. No lo es porque no se atiene a una manera específica, *profesional*, de pensar. Parafraseando a Deleuze y Stengers, podríamos decir que se trata de una creación libre y salvaje, no de conceptos como sería el caso de Whitehead a quien se refieren esos autores, sino de pensamientos que, en concreto, el film-ensayo vehicula audiovisualmente. El ensayo fílmico

además depende del movimiento y del tiempo y, por lo tanto, de lo cinematográfico, pero supera la estricta modalidad cinematográfica. Por eso sus imágenes son, en principio, más complejas que las del cine.

Según Deleuze, el pensamiento no busca (o no debe buscar) esencias, sino crear conceptos. El ensayo fílmico, por supuesto, tampoco se ocupa de las esencias, pero no por ello puede decirse que cree conceptos, sino que se ocupa de conceptos ya creados para reconducirlos, como la acción de un virus incide sobre el mecanismo celular. Para Deleuze, un concepto está compuesto por una multiplicidad de componentes que se hallan en movimiento, sin que por ello carezcan de consistencia, puesto que el concepto “es el perímetro, la configuración, la constelación de un acontecimiento futuro” (Deleuze y Guattari 1997, 37). El concepto filosófico no se encuentra, sino que se crea para resolver un problema, pero, una vez creado, aunque esté en movimiento y proyectado hacia el futuro, no deja de hacer demandas de consistencia que obligan al filósofo a ir estableciendo una trama cada vez más densa y solidificada que acaba cerrándose sobre sí misma. Sin embargo, como el ensayista, y sobre todo el ensayista fílmico, no crea conceptos, sino que los recupera y reconduce, no está sujeto a sus requisitos o a sus regulaciones. Escapa con los conceptos hacia otra dimensión cada vez que su proceso reflexivo lo considera necesario, sin ser por ello inconsistente, sino mostrando que otro tipo de consistencia era posible. El ensayo es un ejercicio de creación continua de lógicas posibles, que disuelve todo tipo de estabilidad, particularmente en el caso del film-ensayo, que se nutre de imágenes y se relaciona con la tecnología de manera muy intensa. Las herramientas, retóricas o tecnológicas, que el ensayo

fílmico tiene a su disposición adquieren en su seno una ductilidad inusitada, ya que se adaptan a los giros y maniobras del proceso de pensamiento que las penetra.

El sujeto del ensayo y la conciencia maquínica

El ensayo fílmico reconfigura el sujeto que ha estado bajo constante asedio a lo largo del siglo XX, denigrado por la mayoría de corrientes filosóficas, deseosas de acompañar a la ciencia en la búsqueda de un mundo sin cualidades, ya sea para “justificar el acceso epistémico pleno a un mundo-sin-nosotros que se articularía de forma absoluta antes de la jurisdicción del Entendimiento; sea acabar con el mundo-como-sentido, de modo de determinar el Ser como pura exterioridad indiferente; como si el mundo ‘real’, en sus radicales contingencia e insignificancia, debiera ser ‘realizado’ contra la Razón y el Sentido” (Danowski y Viveiros de Castro 2019, 25). Por su propia fenomenología, el ensayo fílmico no se sitúa expresamente en contra de esta tendencia que ha culminado en el pensamiento poscontinental forjador de un nuevo materialismo y expresado principalmente a través de las corrientes del realismo especulativo y la ontología orientada al objeto, sino que la contempla desde otra parte, desde otro mundo que defiende su propia ontología y en el que sigue siendo válida la pregunta de si no existe una legitimidad de lo humano (Brague 2015).³

No parece posible volver atrás, a un sujeto trascendental, obviando las evidencias que se han acumulado en su contra. Pero también cabe considerar que puede ser muy desacertado aceptar como absoluto un mundo sin sujeto, un mundo-sin-nosotros –es decir, al que nosotros renunciamos expresamente–, cuando

se acumulan tantos aspectos nuevos de la realidad que están relacionados directamente con nosotros y nuestra subjetividad. Ahí están como ejemplo el cambio climático, la inteligencia artificial o el estado de fluidez que caracteriza todo lo que antes había parecido incontrovertiblemente sólido. Por ejemplo, las nuevas identidades de género expresadas mediante un conglomerado indiscutiblemente barroco –LGTBIQ+– que se une a las anteriores complicaciones de la unidad familiar que Élisabeth Roudinesco analizó en un libro cuyo título, *La familia en desorden* (2004), no era sino el anuncio de una tendencia que apenas iniciaba. Todas estas formaciones o deformaciones tienen como característica común, además de un rasgo claramente barroco, signo de tiempos complejos, la descomposición de las esencias en el seno de ontologías fluidas que requieren el concurso de un pensamiento igualmente maleable, un pensamiento organizado a través de una forma activa y crítica de la conciencia. En este punto, el ensayo fílmico ofrece el perfil de un postsujeto, construido a través del proceso ensayístico. Este nuevo sujeto, abierto a las multiplicidades, no se coloca fuera de ellas para controlarlas, sino que se sumerge en la fenomenología que forman para fundirse y transformarse con ella. Las máquinas abstractas que, según Deleuze y Guattari, socaban la posición del sujeto trascendental son los instrumentos que el postsujeto utiliza para alimentar su conciencia.

Deleuze y Guattari propusieron la idea de personaje conceptual para delimitar una instancia situada entre el concepto y el plano de inmanencia. Corresponde a una especie de diagrama que induce a pensar a un filósofo concreto de acuerdo con la imagen del pensamiento en la que se ha situado. Por lo tanto, el filósofo, como nombre propio, solo es el envoltorio

del personaje conceptual en cuyo seno se actualiza inconscientemente su forma de pensar (Deleuze y Guattari 1997). La mente ensayística sería una configuración equivalente al personaje conceptual, o sea, un catalizador cuya estructura gestiona el pensamiento de alguien en particular. De esta forma, el sujeto cede parte de su subjetividad para recuperarla luego potenciada; como la relación que un conductor establece con su automóvil. Para Deleuze y Guattari, es primordial despojar al sujeto de cualquier posición trascendental. El sujeto es siempre el resultado de determinadas maquinaciones y, por lo tanto, su propia idea de que goza de autonomía es una ilusión. Por eso, convierten a los filósofos concretos en simples envoltorios de su forma de pensar, donde reside, escondida a su conciencia, la maquinaria que determina unos procesos de pensamiento a los que son arrastrados. De esta manera, los filósofos, más que pensar, son pensados por el personaje conceptual al que dan cuerpo y al que están sometidos.

Pero, en el seno del ensayismo, el sujeto recupera las riendas, completa el ciclo que Deleuze y Guattari dejaban a medio camino. En el film-ensayo, el sujeto renace de las cenizas a las que lo había reducido el pensamiento del siglo XX. No se trata de que recobre una posición trascendental absoluta, el pedestal en el que lo colocaba el humanismo y del que fue desplazado en primera instancia por Freud, sino que resurge usando el impulso de las mismas fuerzas que lo han anulado, gracias al hecho de hacerse consciente de las mismas. Como en las artes marciales, la misma fuerza con que embate el contrincante sirve para derribarlo. La nueva imagen del pensamiento posfílmica tiene como característica el ser consciente de la imagen abierta del pensamiento a la que pertenece y, por tanto, puede

aplicar las fórmulas básicas de esta imagen a su forma de pensar, algo que no ocurre en las imágenes dogmáticas, prisioneras de sus propias determinaciones. Pero para ello es necesaria la acción de un sujeto consciente que sea gestor del proceso de reaprovechamiento. Este continuo reciclaje autoconsciente, típico del ensayo, le permite al ensayista fílmico actuar como el artista que busca siempre nuevas formas de expresión a través de las cuales adquiere su conciencia de artista. De esta forma, contemplados como objetos ensayísticos, los productos del arte contemporáneo, sustanciados por las postrimerías del arte conceptual, cobran un sentido que parecen haber perdido cuando se resumen a su estética.

La imagen en el film-ensayo

La nueva imagen poscinematográfica del pensamiento está directamente relacionada con el ordenador, concretamente, con la forma interfaz. La interfaz se considera básicamente como una mediación entre el usuario y el dispositivo, ceñida a determinados instrumentos que facilitan esta interacción. Pero la verdadera transcendencia de la interfaz como imagen del pensamiento reside en el territorio visual-mental-tecnológico que se configura en el espacio intersticial situado entre el usuario y el dispositivo. En este espacio brumoso de la interacción, las maniobras conjuntas de la máquina y el usuario producen una imagen-interfaz superadora de la imagen-cine. Esta imagen de la metamorfosis procede directamente del ámbito cinematográfico, pero lo supera. Desde esta perspectiva, la interfaz no es solo transmisora de una acción, sino sobre todo una forma de la acción plasmada visualmente. Esta plasmación visual continua constituye un proceso de pensamiento.

Eisenstein primero y Deleuze después otorgaban a la imagen una primacía sensorial: “hacemos uso de una construcción del tipo de pensamiento sensual, y como resultado, en lugar de un efecto ‘lógico-informativo’, de hecho recibimos de la construcción un efecto emocional sensual” (Eisenstein 1964, 133). Del mismo modo, Deleuze, en su tratado sobre la pintura de Bacon, indica que el pintor trata de pintar la sensación y no lo sensacional (Deleuze 2002). El propio Bacon manifestaba que su intención era pintar el grito y no el horror, es decir, no el concepto, sino la expresión de una sensación. No se trataba de provocar el grito, sino de exponerlo como sensación que sobrepasa al concepto. Ante la pintura se siente el grito, del mismo modo que, ante la imagen que teoriza Eisenstein, se tiene la sensación de lo ocurrido antes de conceptualizarlo.

En el ensayo, la imagen produce sensaciones, pero estas no se detienen en el cuerpo, sino que de este pasan al intelecto, aunque no de forma subsidiaria como parece que plantean tanto Eisenstein como Deleuze. Lo hacen, por el contrario, directamente. El cuerpo y la mente sienten y piensan al unísono, si bien el sentir de la mente es distinto del sentir del cuerpo, igual que el pensamiento del cuerpo no es idéntico al de la mente. Sentimiento y pensamiento constituyen una pareja interrelacionada que cambia de polaridad en cada localización. Este cambio se produce a un mismo tiempo, como los polos eléctricos de la corriente alterna de cuya alternancia se deriva una *iluminación*. En el ensayo fílmico no se puede sentir sin pensar, ni pensar sin sentir. Y esto es válido tanto para el autor como para el espectador. Esta unidad de pensamiento y sensación (que es también sentimiento y emoción) se desglosa de modo que la imagen se siente como un todo, mientras que el

pensamiento desmenuza este todo. La sensación es unitaria, el pensamiento múltiple. Pero esta multiplicidad, que lo es en movimiento, está unida a la sensación emocionante que acompaña al movimiento entre las partes. La emoción conduce al pensamiento y este prolonga la emoción más allá de la sensación primera.

Las imágenes tienen una duración que permite que las sensaciones se conviertan en emociones capaces de impulsar el pensamiento. Pero en cualquier momento, tanto una como el otro pueden bifurcarse, puesto que su correlación no sigue una línea determinada, sino que la crea. Estas bifurcaciones pueden producirse en el interior de una imagen-tiempo o en una constelación de imágenes constituyentes de una escena, una secuencia o un plano-secuencia, así como cualquier otra estructura fílmica, prefílmica o posfílmica posible. Del mismo modo que cualquier tipo de imagen puede formar parte del proceso ensayístico, también es factible cualquier estructura que relacione esas visualidades, puesto que el ensayo fílmico no transcurre simplemente de imagen a imagen, es decir, linealmente, sino que también lo hace espacialmente, configurando espacios o constelaciones de imágenes-concepto en cuyo interior se producen los movimientos más lineales. Como he dicho, el ensayo fílmico no produce conceptos, pero puede articular imágenes que le llegan conceptualizadas o visualizar conceptos ya establecidos. Este proceso puede producir, por el contrario, ideas, tanto durante el proceso ensayístico en sí, como durante su recepción.

También podemos suponer que toda imagen es ya un concepto, es decir, una congregación de múltiples elementos activados a través de un movimiento-tiempo. Este concepto visual múltiple y móvil parece tener

unos límites precisos por el ámbito en el que se presenta –por ejemplo, un encuadre, una pantalla o el marco de un cuadro–, pero en realidad permanece abierto, como imagen, a los engarces rizomáticos, a las virtualidades que lo rodean. Imagen abierta, por lo tanto, al pensamiento, que es el factor que permite transmutarla o modificar su flujo. La imagen es, por consiguiente, concepto en constante formación y deformación. El pensamiento del ensayo no transcurre, pues, tanto entre conceptos como entre los procesos que los transforman o, lo que es lo mismo, entre los cambios que se producen en imágenes complejas y en conglomerados complejos de imágenes. Cualquiera de estos momentos produce iluminaciones o ideas abiertas a panoramas insospechados. Por ello, podemos decir que al ensayo fílmico, como pensamiento audiovisual, no le compete la formación de conceptos que implicarían el cese del flujo ensayístico. En todo caso, la formación de conceptos es una consecuencia de este flujo que se deriva a otro ámbito propiamente filosófico, estético o científico.

Si consideramos que las imágenes que se introducen en el ensayo pueden ser conceptos por sí mismas, es decir, entender que llegan al proceso ensayístico con la complejidad de un concepto formado por multiplicidades, podemos tratarlas como ensayos particulares, aparte la relación que mantienen con la actividad ensayística más general, fílmica o de cualquier otro tipo. ¿No son ensayos las construcciones de Joseph Cornell o las cajas de Marcel Duchamp? Desde una mentalidad ensayística, podemos retroceder y encontrar trazos de un ensayismo visual en estos ensamblajes que no han sido pensados estrictamente como tales ensayos. Son grietas que aparecen en el suelo de la cultura, a la vez que los temblores premonitorios de la posterior

erupción. La obra de esos autores es un indicio que vale la pena tomar en consideración porque nos muestra el aspecto que puede tomar una imagen-ensayo, así como nos señala el camino para abordarla. De esta manera, estaremos mejor preparados para comprender las propuestas visuales que luego encontramos en cineastas del ensayo como Godard, Kluge o Farocki, entre otros. Cualquier imagen, incluso la más realista, podrá ser contemplada como un ensayo, de lo que se desprende que el ensayo fílmico es susceptible de ser desarrollado a dos niveles: uno espacial, en el interior de cada imagen, y otro temporal, a través del flujo de imágenes. En cada una de las modalidades del ensayo audiovisual –docuwebs, film-ensayos, realidad virtual, etc.– primará una de estas características sobre la otra.

Las composiciones de Duchamp o Cornell, así como los collages de Robert Rauschenberg y otros, son, evidentemente, imágenes complejas que piensan, de la misma manera que podemos decir que el autor pensó al confeccionarlas. Sin embargo, es necesario establecer una diferenciación entre el pensamiento estético y práctico del artista y el pensamiento que el ensayista efectúa a través de las imágenes ya construidas o en desarrollo. El ensayista piensa directamente, mientras que el artista lo hace indirectamente. En un caso podemos ver el pensamiento en acción, en el otro, deducimos el proceso de pensamiento a partir de los resultados del trabajo estético. En un caso, el pensamiento móvil modifica la visualidad; en el otro, la visualidad delata un pensamiento estático o cancelado. En última instancia, podemos decir que, así como el artista trabaja sobre la superficie de una tela o delimitando un espacio determinado –unas cajas en el caso de Duchamp o Cornell, un cuadro en el caso de Rauschenberg–, el ensayista

lo hace sobre la *superficie* del propio pensamiento. Esto es así porque el cineasta ya le ha preparado el terreno al elaborar una fenomenología que no solo se sitúa en el marco físico de una pantalla, sino que la excede al componer una fluidez visual convertida en el espacio estricto de sus composiciones fílmicas.

El gran ensayo del mundo

El modo ensayo se disemina por todas partes, ya que toda la realidad ha entrado en un estado de indecisión. Solo la ciencia se atreve a hacer hoy afirmaciones categóricas, pero, en el fondo, las verdaderas mentes científicas –no la de los expertos ni la de los dogmáticos– también dudan. El mundo moderno nació a la luz de una duda metódica, pero con la pretensión de desactivarla mediante una serie de regulaciones que Descartes expuso en un discurso calificado precisamente de discurso del método. Al respecto, afirmaba con acierto Adorno que “si la ciencia traslada la dificultad y complejidad de una realidad antagonista y fragmentada monádicamente a modelos simplificadores, falseándola según su costumbre, y los matiza posteriormente mediante pretendidos ejemplos materiales, el ensayo se despoja de entrada de la ilusión de un mundo simple, y en el fondo lógico, tan cómoda para la defensa de aquello que meramente existe” (Adorno 2004, 40–41). El ensayo construye una realidad más compleja que la que contempla básicamente la ciencia. Es una realidad cambiante en sí misma, opuesta a la que se considera siempre idéntica a sí misma; una realidad a la espera de ser indefinidamente interrogada para revelar los secretos que contiene. Los interrogatorios de la ciencia se asemejan a los de la policía cuando tiene un solo sospechoso. En cambio, los sospechosos del ensayo son infinitos. El ensayo trabaja con la duda porque intuye que la propia

realidad es dudosa, ontológicamente. El ensayo se construye sobre un proceso de duda no metodológico que pretende acercarse a la duda que caracteriza la realidad contemporánea, la cual por ello se muestra en constante movimiento. Mientras que la mentalidad científica

se afana en detener este movimiento produciendo certezas –que en el fondo sabe que son efímeras–, la mentalidad ensayística se une al movimiento y de lo efímero extrae certezas que son directamente indecisas pero visualmente ciertas.

1/ Esta hipótesis que pretende invertir las relaciones epistemológicas que mantenemos con el pasado –no somos hijos del pasado, sino sus progenitores– está esbozada a través de una reconsideración crítica de los planteamientos de autores como Bernard Stiegler (2016), Déborah Danowski y Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2019), Bruno Latour (2017), Yuk Hui (2020) y Francis Fukuyama (2021), entre otros.

2/ Las traducciones al castellano de referencias bibliográficas en inglés, francés y catalán son del autor.

3/ Abundando en el espíritu ensayístico de mi escrito, quizá hubiera valido la pena abrir aquí una bifurcación para discutir la posible crítica que puede generar mi recurso a un intelectual católico como Rémi Brague para defender al sujeto humanista o a una versión de este. Que una defensa actual del humanismo solo puede ser reaccionaria, lo probaría el hecho de que se haga desde el catolicismo. Pero, ya que hablamos de religión, quizá habría que pensar hasta qué punto la crítica supuestamente política de este asunto no es en realidad más bien epistemológica o antropológica. ¿Contra qué se defiende el catolicismo, sino contra una tradición protestante? ¿No será que el modo ensayo y sobre todo el ensayo fílmico o audiovisual es una forma “católica” y, por ello, encuentra tanta resistencia en una academia imbuida por el rigorismo y la sobriedad de una mentalidad protestante que han acabado convirtiéndose en la única mentalidad posible? Desde esta perspectiva, la idea interesadamente establecida de lo reaccionario y lo progresista se tambalea.

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La posición del espectador como espacio de pensamiento del film-ensayo contemporáneo: *Face aux fantômes* (2009) y *Jaurès* (2012)

El presente artículo pretende realizar un análisis sobre la posición espectral como espacio de pensamiento del film-ensayo contemporáneo a partir del estudio comparado de dos obras francófonas: *Face aux fantômes* (Jean-Louis Comolli y Sylvie Lindeperg, 2009) y *Jaurès* (Vincent Dieutre, 2012). El dialogismo del film-ensayo, la interpelación al espectador para que produzca la auto-reflexión sobre su posición y el pensamiento crítico acerca de las imágenes mostradas se genera entonces desde la premisa de la identificación. El análisis muestra cómo *Face aux fantômes* ofrece un proceso de pensamiento audiovisual sobre la movilización de la mirada del *espectador emancipado* teorizado por Jacques Rancière, mientras que *Jaurès* provoca la misma reflexión desde el planteamiento opuesto: la fijación de la mirada y la representación de la pasividad espectral. De este modo, ambos films revelan las posibilidades de la posición del espectador como espacio epistemológico del film-ensayo contemporáneo.

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PENSAMIENTO CRÍTICO

AUTO-REFLEXIÓN

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Introducción

El film-ensayo presenta como una de sus características definitorias su naturaleza dialógica entre autor y espectador y, en consecuencia, el rol de este último en la construcción de la obra. Su evolución consolida el dialogismo entre la(s) subjetividad(es) enunciativa(s) y un espectador igualmente individualizado. Retomando las reflexiones de Laura Rascaroli y David Montero, se establece una relación yo-tú que permite un diálogo con un espectador real al que dirigirse e interpelar: “El ensayista [...] permite que las respuestas surjan en otro lugar, precisamente en la posición ocupada por el espectador [...] Las dos posiciones de sujeto, el yo y el tú, se definen y moldean mutuamente” (Rascaroli 2009, 36).¹ Así, surge una “espectatoriedad activa” que posibilita el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico: “la interpelación en los films ensayísticos es una fuerza liberadora, ya que incita al espectador a desarrollar una posición crítica” (Montero 2012, 121); y la auto-reflexión acerca de la propia condición de espectador: “el público es invitado de forma activa a reconsiderar su rol y lo que se espera de él a fin de reflexionar sobre su propio estatus como espectadores” (2012, 118–19). El film-ensayo va a explorar y profundizar en las posibilidades de esta naturaleza dialógica, produciendo distintas dinámicas y desplazamientos entre ambas posiciones: “Un elemento importante cuando consideramos la posición del espectador en la creación ensayística es el desplazamiento discursivo del autor hacia el campo interpretativo del espectador [...] El mismo proceso se puede observar desde el otro lado, permitiendo al espectador volver a experimentar realmente el proceso de reflexión original” (2012, 124). De forma general, podemos decir que la posición del ensayista se ha desplazado desde

su emplazamiento de autor de las imágenes, tras la cámara –*Lettre de Sibérie* (Chris Marker, 1958)–, a editor de las mismas, tanto propias como ajenas, en la sala de montaje –*Scénario du film Passion* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1982)–, hasta una progresiva desmaterialización de dicha posición asociada a la tecnología digital del film-ensayo contemporáneo. Esto implica, además, un progresivo acercamiento del cineasta a la posición del espectador. El presente artículo pretende realizar un estudio comparado de dos film-ensayos francófonos contemporáneos que se generan precisamente a partir de la identificación de cineasta y espectador, ya que el primero decide situarse en la posición del segundo; una práctica que raramente encontramos con anterioridad en el film-ensayo francófono europeo, y que se confirmaría como espacio epistemológico del film-ensayo contemporáneo.

Face aux fantômes (Jean-Louis Comolli y Sylvie Lindeperg, 2009) y *Jaurès* (Vincent Dieutre, 2012) se generan desde la premisa de situar a los autores en la posición física del espectador, de llevar las dinámicas de acercamiento-alejamiento de esa relación yo-tú a la identificación, desde donde generar un proceso de pensamiento audiovisual. Además, y de forma muy significativa, en ambos casos esta condición de espectador es compartida por dos personas, posibilitando la intersubjetividad entre ambas, un segundo nivel de dialogismo entre los espectadores internos del film. Esta premisa genera diferentes niveles de pensamiento: el que se produce en el primer nivel espectadorial –las piezas audiovisuales proyectadas–; entre la proyección y los espectadores-cineastas, entre ambos espectadores internos; y finalmente entre esos espectadores internos y el espectador del film-ensayo. Así, el

pensamiento paratáxico (Català 2014) e intersticial (Rascaroli 2017), y la frase-imagen (Rancière 2003) como elemento definitorio del proceso de pensamiento audiovisual (Monterrubio Ibáñez 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022), se van a generar en tres niveles diferentes. Se produce entonces una reflexión acerca de la movilización de la mirada del espectador inherente tanto a la auto-reflexión como a la producción de pensamiento crítico. Nuestro análisis pretende realizar un estudio comparado de ambas obras que nos permita determinar los elementos, estrategias y resultados de convertir la posición del espectador en lugar epistemológico del film-ensayo, de llevar el dialogismo cineasta-espectador a la identificación.

***Face aux fantômes*. Desde la movilización de la mirada**

El film de Comolli y Lindeperg surge como reflexión audiovisual del ensayo literario de esta última, *Nuit et brouillard : un film dans l'histoire* (2007). Así, la reflexión sobre el eje memoria-Historia-arte a partir del film de Alain Resnais (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1956) y su autora se convierten en protagonistas de un film-ensayo que sitúa a la historiadora como espectadora, acompañada por el cineasta. La reflexión pretende expandir su territorio para convertir a la espectadora-historiadora literaria en fílmica, a través de un proceso de pensamiento que el cineasta transforma en audiovisual. Para ello, ambos interlocutores se sitúan en una suerte de laboratorio-sala de proyección que posibilitará múltiples reflexiones acerca de la posición del espectador como espacio epistemológico: “Juntos, el cineasta y la historiadora se sitúan ellos mismos frente a los fantasmas para considerar el estatus de estas imágenes de cuerpos probados”, “cada film sitúa al espectador de forma diferente

y singular frente a los fantasmas” (Blümlinger 2014, 81, 82).

La primera imagen de la obra va a exponer la síntesis de su propósito. Sobre un plano fijo de las vías de un *travelling* en un espacio interior todavía por descubrir, escuchamos la voz de Comolli indicando el inicio del plano. La cámara comienza entonces a moverse recorriendo la vía. Finalmente se produce la sobreimpresión de un primer plano de las manos del cineasta ojeando el libro de su codirectora (Fig. 1). Se genera por tanto una frase-imagen síntesis del proceso de pensamiento que comienza. En primer lugar, se retoman un plano y un movimiento de cámara cruciales del film de Resnais –el plano de las vías de tren abandonadas del campo de Auschwitz-Birkenau (Fig. 2) y el *travelling* que utilizó para filmar las imágenes en color del film– y se trasladan a un espacio interior que descubriremos es el del espectador. Así, no solo se evidencia la reflexión sobre el film de Resnais sino la auto-reflexión sobre la posición espectral. En segundo lugar, la sobreimpresión de las manos ojeando el libro expone cómo ambas reflexiones van a hacer confluir dos miradas de las que surgirá la intersubjetividad: la de la historiadora, y ensayista literaria, y la del cineasta, y ensayista cinematográfico.

A partir de esa frase-imagen síntesis, la obra va a construir una reflexión histórica acerca del film de Resnais mediante la materialización y movilización de la posición del espectador, donde encontramos a ambas subjetividades dialogando en un mismo plano, Lindeperg hablando y Comolli escuchando, rodeados de los diferentes dispositivos que proporcionarán la experiencia espectral: monitores de televisión, pantalla de proyección, proyectores de diapositivas, reproductores de sonido, etc. La primera imagen de archivo mostrada por el film, del regreso

de deportados franceses en 1945 que está comentando Lindeperg, se muestra reproducida en un monitor, incluyendo el dispositivo y su sonido (Fig. 3). Se establece así una cuestión esencial de la obra, ofreciendo las imágenes documentales mediante una suerte de segundo nivel espectadorial tanto visual como sonoro. De esta forma, se van acumulando elementos de materialidad de la posición del espectador, caracterizando un espacio que evidencia la mediación del dispositivo como primer elemento de auto-reflexión. Las explicaciones de Lindeperg continúan en un plano medio ya individual que se desplaza para mostrar a Comolli escuchando. Se va estableciendo por tanto un recorrido de la mirada de los espectadores, mostrando a Lindeperg como espectadora de *Nuit et brouillard* y a Comolli como espectador de Lindeperg. A continuación, la cámara la sigue mediante un *travelling* mientras se acerca al proyector con el que mostrará documentos de archivo, recogiendo nuevamente su dispositivo (Fig. 4). Este segundo *travelling* se configura ya como elemento clave del film. El *travelling* que descubría la actualidad de los campos de concentración en *Nuit et brouillard* es utilizado aquí para reflexionar sobre la posición del espectador, en este caso una historiadora, como materialización de la movilización de su mirada. A continuación, los documentos mostrados incluyen nuevamente la materialidad y sonoridad de su dispositivo de reproducción, confirmando ese segundo nivel que provoca la auto-reflexión (Fig. 5). Se produce entonces un segundo *travelling* sobre Lindeperg que ahora la rodea mientras habla (Fig. 6). El movimiento de cámara evidencia la subjetividad espectadorial de la historiadora. Su testimonio se enfatiza así no como verdad irrefutable, sino como reflexión individual sobre la que se pueden verter diferentes perspectivas.

Un nuevo elemento retórico surge al citar la clave de la obra de Resnais: la relación entre el sistema concentracionario y la exterminación de judíos y romaníes. Este abismo se materializa en un *zoom in* sobre una imagen fotográfica. Se cifra por tanto en este elemento la búsqueda analítica del espectador, el escrutinio de la imagen como búsqueda epistemológica. Aparece entonces la primera grabación sonora para revelar la concepción del film que finalmente sería *Nuit et brouillard*. Las declaraciones de Henri Michel y Olga Wormser acerca del valor histórico de las películas culmina con la propuesta del primero de realizar un film sobre el sistema concentracionario. Una vez más, escuchamos el documento de archivo mientras contemplamos primero su dispositivo (Fig. 7), para incluir a su oyente después. Seguimos en ese segundo nivel auto-reflexivo de la experiencia espectadorial. Tras escuchar el origen de *Nuit et brouillard*, el film retoma el *travelling* mediante una serie de tres planos:

- el *travelling* sobre sus propias vías del primer plano del film (Fig. 8);
- un *travelling* por los elementos de filmación del espacio, que de nuevo halla su correspondencia en los *travellings* interiores por los barracones de los campos del film de Resnais (Figs. 9 y 10);
- el final de un *travelling* sobre Lindeperg (Fig. 11).

Se produce así una segunda frase-imagen síntesis del film-ensayo. La movilización de la mirada que ejecutara Resnais en *Nuit et brouillard* en el espacio histórico es retomada por Comolli en el espacio espectadorial para mostrar la mirada movilizadora de Lindeperg.

Es entonces cuando la historiadora enuncia el elemento clave de su reflexión. Anatole Dauman aceptó el encargo de un film sobre el sistema

concentracionario a condición de que este estuviera “igualmente definido por una gran ambición artística”.² En palabras de Lindeperg: “Es verdaderamente el momento del pasaje al arte”. Al introducir en la reflexión el concepto de *passage à l'art*, el *travelling* alrededor de Lindeperg sufre una modificación clave: este se desplaza ahora por detrás de Comolli, incluyéndolo por tanto en la imagen (Fig. 12). Se produce por tanto una nueva materialización de una frase-imagen simbólica. El *passage à l'art* de la obra de Resnais frente a los hechos históricos se traslada a la reflexión ensayística: de la obra literaria de Lindeperg a la obra audiovisual filmada por Comolli, lo que implica inclusión de la subjetividad y autoría del cineasta. Se expone así la construcción intersubjetiva entre la espectadora-historiadora y el cineasta que la filma, materializando su proceso de pensamiento de forma audiovisual, al que asistimos igualmente como espectadores.

Al introducir el material documental de *Les camps de la mort* (*Les actualités françaises*, 1945), vemos a Lindeperg, por primera vez, en la posición de espectadora, incluida en el plano (Fig. 13). Su cuerpo oculta parcialmente la pantalla, omitiendo los fragmentos más duros de las imágenes. Se produce por tanto una nueva frase-imagen simbólica, en este caso de la necesidad de un espectador con mirada crítica, que pueda “desarrollar una posición crítica no sólo en relación con el discurso autoral sino también con las imágenes proyectadas y los diferentes discursos que componen el ensayo” (Montero 2012, 121). Es decir, Comolli crea una frase-imagen simbólica que materializa la mirada crítica de Lindeperg. Cristaliza entonces la cartografía completa de la posición del espectador como espacio epistemológico, mostrando sus tres niveles: la posición de Lindeperg

como espectadora, la posición de Comolli como cineasta-espectador de Lindeperg, y nuestra posición como espectadores del film-ensayo. La configuración de esta cartografía posibilita tanto el pensamiento crítico sobre las imágenes mostradas, como la auto-reflexión acerca de la propia posición de espectador. Así, la reflexión que desarrolla el film-ensayo puede abordar la obra en cuestión, *Nuit et brouillard*, desde ambas perspectivas: “Alain Resnais no se inscribe en un relato de la imagen-prueba [...] construir la distancia correcta frente a ellas [las imágenes] para, a la vez, dar cuenta del acontecimiento, sino construir su film en torno a la voluntad de un distanciamiento crítico frente a esas imágenes”. Lindeperg plantea entonces la cuestión nuclear de la posición del espectador: “Cuál es la relación entre ver, creer y saber”, y expone el punto de partida de Resnais y Jean Cayrol: no utilizar la cuestión de la imagen-prueba, sino considerar que bien al contrario, las imágenes “no tienen la capacidad de permitirnos aprehender el acontecimiento”.

De este modo, el primer tercio de *Face aux fantômes* ha construido la cartografía de la posición del espectador, de los diferentes espectadores y sus posibilidades, para otorgarle las herramientas de reflexión con las que contemplar *Nuit et brouillard*. Sus imágenes se nos muestran por primera vez desde un primer nivel espectadorial en el minuto 25, sin la mediación del dispositivo, para poder aplicar ahora la distancia crítica y autoconsciencia en su visionado. Los espectadores del film-ensayo nos enfrentamos a las imágenes en el primer nivel tras haber reflexionado acerca de nuestra posición como tales. Por tanto, este primer nivel queda reservado a *Nuit et brouillard*. El primer fragmento se corresponde con los *travellings* en color filmados en Auschwitz-Birkenau; el

segundo con imágenes de archivo en B/N; y el tercero con la combinación de ambos. Es entonces cuando las palabras de Lindeperg, al abordar nuevamente la idea de *passage à l'art* del film, se nos muestran con un segundo *travelling* por detrás de Comolli, en sentido contrario al anterior (Fig. 14). Si Resnais hizo ese tránsito a través de la filmación de imágenes en color mediante el *travelling*, Comolli traslada este elemento a fin de materializar la movilización de la mirada del espectador, identificada con Lindeperg, para preguntarse si “el arte en sí mismo es potencia de verdad”.

El segundo documento sonoro, las palabras del propio Resnais, retoman la representación del primero, Lindeperg escuchándolo, para a continuación crear una segunda sobreimpresión que ahora incluye además sonido. Las palabras de Resnais evocan unas imágenes halladas en Ámsterdam, de oficiales alemanes en el andén de un convoy de deportación, que se nos muestran en sobreimpresión con la bobina sonora de donde proviene el audio (Fig. 15). Se caracteriza así a Resnais también como espectador de las imágenes documentales sobre las que trabajó. Si anteriormente veíamos a Lindeperg como espectadora de las imágenes de *Les camps de la mort* en un monitor que ocultaba en parte, ahora la observamos contemplar las únicas imágenes que muestran un convoy de deportación, en Westerbork (Fig. 16). Se confirma por tanto la posición crítica de la espectadora frente a las imágenes, que si antes obstaculizaba el visionado de “las imágenes intolerables” que “impedían toda distancia crítica” (Rancièrre 2010, 90), trazando “una línea recta entre el espectáculo intolerable y la conciencia de la realidad que este expresaba” (2010, 102), ahora deja paso a unas imágenes mudas sin manipular (observamos el código de tiempo sobre ellas).

A continuación, se materializa audiovisualmente el *passage à l'art* de estas imágenes. Resnais decidió mostrarlas en su film reunidas en un único bloque y en ausencia del comentario de Cayrol; solo acompañadas por la música de Hanns Eisler. Sin embargo, incluyó tres planos de un anciano con dos niños que pertenecen a material encontrado en Varsovia. Este doble visionado ejemplifica así el *passage à l'art* sobre el que se reflexiona, y se interpela al espectador para que reflexione. El *travelling* sobre Lindeperg al relatar la relevancia del único plano de una persona mirando a cámara evidencia una vez más la movilización de la mirada del espectador, del pensamiento crítico que debe cuestionar ese *passage à l'art*. La imagen, que muestra a una joven, Anna Maria (Settela) Steinbach, de quien en 1997 se descubrirá que era romaní, se convertirá en icono de la Shoah, y el film-ensayo la congela como tal. Al abordar las imágenes fotográficas, hasta entonces desconocidas, de la visita de Himmler a Monowitz, a la fábrica IG Farben, en 1942, que prueban cómo los presos de los campos de concentración se convirtieron en mano de obra del Tercer Reich, Lindeperg expone cómo estas permitieron “ajustar el ver sobre el saber” mientras un nuevo *travelling* asocia esta capacidad a la posición crítica del espectador. Una segunda visita a Birkenau para asistir al gaseamiento de judíos holandeses vincula así el sistema concentracionario con la exterminación de la población judía y romaní. El surgimiento de la *solución final* en el guion del film, y su supresión en su comentario definitivo, se representan entonces con un segundo *zoom in* sobre una imagen y el posterior *travelling* sobre Lindeperg. Así, el cineasta espectador de las imágenes de archivo se identifica con el espectador de la película creada. Es en este momento cuando el film-

ensayo muestra, de nuevo, en primer nivel, la conclusión de *Nuit et brouillard*, finalizando así la segunda parte del film-ensayo.

La tercera y última se va a centrar en la subjetividad de Lindeperg como espectadora-historiadora del film, a partir de su estudio del trabajo de Olga Wormser. La cámara recorre ahora la distancia entre la pantalla y su espectadora, el espacio que materializa la movilización de la mirada del espectador frente a la obra. Por tanto, es el encuentro de Wormser con el film lo que permite a Lindeperg entender la necesidad de invertir la perspectiva: *Nuit et brouillard* crea un “círculo del saber” entre la Historia y el arte en el proceso de su construcción. Solo veinte años después Wormser concluirá su investigación de la “Historia en devenir”. Lindeperg decidió igualmente abandonar la distancia de la historiadora y entrar en el atelier de Olga.

El tercer audio del film, de nuevo las declaraciones de Resnais, en este caso sobre la escritura del comentario de Cayrol y la participación de Marker en el mismo, se muestra nuevamente con la figura de Lindeperg a la escucha, frente al dispositivo. Un *travelling* sobre el espacio físico del film-ensayo, en sentido inverso al anterior, genera ahora la tercera sobreimpresión de la obra, con la imagen del libro de Annette Wieviorka: *Déportation et génocide : entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (2003) (Fig. 17). Se produce a continuación la conversación entre Lindeperg y Wieviorka, convirtiéndose esta última en una tercera espectadora, también historiadora. De nuevo el *travelling* materializa la intersubjetividad, el intercambio entre ambas miradas espectatoriales, cuya naturaleza se enfatiza al situarlas, nuevamente, en el espacio del espectador, con la pantalla tras ellas sobre la que aparecen imágenes proyectadas en algunos momentos. Su conversación en torno

a cómo el film de Resnais se convierte en el film del genocidio, al tiempo que comienza a ser criticado por la percepción de la Shoah que transmite, encuentra su reflejo en la paradoja que supone que los historiadores, hasta los años 80, trabajaran sobre él sin ser sus espectadores, reduciendo su estudio al comentario de Cayrol, ignorando sus imágenes. Wieviorka aborda el poder de evocación de las imágenes en color de Birkenau aunque estas no muestren el objeto evocado.

La conversación entre ambas historiadoras da paso al cuarto audio, nuevamente de Resnais, explicando la decisión, y la experiencia, de rodar en color y con *travelling* y en B/N. Se va a producir entonces una nueva frase-imagen síntesis del film y de la reflexión que este ha desarrollado. Sobre la imagen sonora de Resnais vemos, en primer nivel, una fotografía en B/N del rodaje, montando las vías del *travelling*. A continuación, las imágenes del inicio del film, con ese único *travelling* vertical con el que nos situamos en el presente de la película, se muestran silentes, acompañadas por el sonido de la bobina del audio. Las palabras de Resnais resurgen cuando el film aparece proyectado sobre la pantalla que Lindeperg observa: primero la fotografía documental del rodaje; después las imágenes del film; y finalmente una nueva imagen fotográfica del rodaje. No es ahora la cámara la que se desplaza sobre Lindeperg sino la historiadora la que se mueve de un lado a otro de la pantalla mientras esta muestra el *travelling* en color de *Nuit et brouillard* (Figs. 18 y 19). Así, se materializa el *passage à l'art* desde la convergencia de los cuatro espacios:

- el de Resnais como creador mediante la convergencia de su testimonio sonoro, las fotografías en B/N de archivo del rodaje y las imágenes en color del film;
- el de Lindeperg como espectadora frente a esas imágenes, movilizándolo

su posición como espectadora al tiempo que se desplaza el *travelling* de Resnais;

- el de Comolli como ensayista que materializa esta convergencia;
- el espectador que debe generar su propia reflexión de lo percibido.

El quinto audio de Resnais, de nuevo con Lindeperg escuchando, nos ofrece la determinación del cineasta: “no quiero hacer un monumento a los muertos”. Hacerlo significaría no articular un pensamiento crítico. Resnais explica la necesidad del mismo por parte del cineasta, con el que el espectador puede identificarse en este momento de la reflexión. La censura sobre la propia obra se analiza con la cuestión del *corps indésirable* del gendarme, como testimonio de la colaboración del estado francés en los arrestos de la población judía. La censura exterior, sobre la proyección en Cannes, con el sexto audio, en este caso de Dauman, evidencia el valor presente de la obra en relación a la Guerra de Argelia. Para concluir, Lindeperg aborda el tema de la traducción del film, como una nueva etapa donde poder materializar el pensamiento crítico, y por tanto ejercerlo en su visionado. La traducción de Cayrol al alemán fue realizada por Paul Celan, que supo trasladar la obra a las necesidades críticas del pueblo alemán, desplazando algunos de sus significados. “No soy responsable” se convierte en “no soy culpable”; “el viejo monstruo concentracionario” en “la locura racial”. De este modo, Celan aporta igualmente su pensamiento crítico, confirmando que este puede ejercerse desde cualquier posición.

La reflexión está llegando a su fin. Los dos *zooms in* anteriores sobre las imágenes de archivo se completan ahora con otros dos *zooms* sobre la obra de Resnais: un *zoom out* sobre la imagen del film que evocara la primera imagen del film-ensayo –la imagen

en color de los raíles de Birkenau–; y un *zoom in* sobre la imagen en B/N de la verja de la entrada a Auschwitz. De nuevo, la movilización de la mirada encuentra una última materialización como la búsqueda de la distancia crítica de los movimientos de alejamiento y acercamiento. En su digresión final, Lindeperg retoma la figura de Olga Wormser para concluir la obra con su núcleo, confirmando “una suerte de desdoblamiento con la figura de la historiadora sobre cuyos pasos continúa avanzando en la búsqueda de la verdad” (Véray 2011, 187). Retomando la reflexión de Daniel Arasse (2006), la historiadora ahonda en la dialéctica emoción-saber respecto de la obra de arte: “hay dos formas de emoción ante la obra de arte [...] está la que surge del shock visual, y luego hay algo diferente que permite precisamente el trabajo del tiempo, el aprendizaje de la mirada”. Lindeperg reconoce cómo Wormser realizó este recorrido, movilizar su mirada, cambiar de punto de vista, transformar la emoción en reflexión. Un último *travelling* desde la pantalla de proyección a la figura de Lindeperg sintetiza el recorrido desde la obra de arte a la posición del espectador desde donde se ha realizado el film-ensayo, mostrando así la distancia a recorrer, la necesidad del desplazamiento de la mirada: “desplazar nuestra mirada sobre el film *Nuit et brouillard* que creíamos haber visto, pero que al mismo tiempo habíamos perdido un poco de vista [...] que re-aprendemos a ver de otra manera”. La historiadora expone su conclusión final como espectadora del film, como ejemplo de cualquier espectador, que genera la auto-reflexión de su experiencia como tal:

situando mi mirada como resultado de la mirada de Olga Wormser, situando mis pasos sobre sus pasos, es también una reflexión que quería realizar acerca de mi propia relación con el film *Nuit et brouillard*, sobre el que había comenzado a trabajar en 1987. Y como a Olga, me hicieron

falta veinte años para lograrlo [...] tenía la impresión de que no había sido capaz de verlo.

Jaurès. Desde la fijación de la mirada

Jaurès se genera igualmente desde la posición del espectador, que en esta ocasión no se enfrenta a las imágenes de la Historia sino a las de la realidad presente. En este caso, el cineasta, Vincent Dieutre, se sitúa en la sala de montaje, y de grabación, para mostrar un film a su amiga Eva Truffaut; unas imágenes sobre las que conversan mientras las contemplan. Los planos iniciales de la mesa de montaje, las imágenes proyectadas y los personajes que las contemplan presentan este nuevo espacio de enunciación desde la posición espectral. Por tanto, observamos un film proyectado, el realizado por Dieutre desde la ventana del apartamento de su amante, Simon, en el barrio parisino de Jaurès, a lo largo de varios meses, del invierno al verano de 2010. Desde esa ventana se contempla la estación de metro del mismo nombre y el canal Saint-Martin, donde se ha establecido un asentamiento de refugiados afganos que será la temática de las imágenes mostradas. Dieutre y Truffaut, Vincent y Eva –los nombraremos así en su calidad de personajes–, contemplan las imágenes, desconocidas para la segunda, con auriculares y frente a micrófonos que graban sus palabras para ser incluidas en el film. De este modo, Eva se identifica con el espectador que contempla la obra por primera vez. A partir de las preguntas que las imágenes suscitan en ella, Vincent irá narrando dos existencias paralelas: la de los refugiados en el exterior, captada en la imagen visual; la de la relación de pareja en el interior, que queda fuera de campo y se materializa solo a través de la imagen sonora. Y finalmente, un tercer espacio, el de la experiencia de ambos como

espectadores de las imágenes.

Si *Face aux fantômes* se focalizaba en el espacio de ese segundo nivel espectral que conducía la reflexión a través de su movilización, *Jaurès* se centra en el primer nivel acompañado de la imagen sonora de los comentarios de sus espectadores internos. Se generan por tanto dos fuera de campo simultáneos: el de Vincent y Simon en las imágenes, el de Eva y Vincent como espectadores de las mismas. La mirada del espectador queda fijada a una posición, a las imágenes tomadas desde una ventana. El encuadre se modifica entre planos, pero la cámara permanece siempre fija. Tampoco hay movimiento en el encuadre. La auto-reflexión y pensamiento crítico del espectador se generan mediante esta inmovilización, mediante la cohabitación y dialéctica entre el adentro y el afuera de las imágenes mostradas, y entre las experiencias de los espectadores internos con las que confrontar la suya propia; la interpelación es así doble. El paralelismo entre la imagen visual del afuera de la realidad de los refugiados y la imagen sonora del adentro de la realidad de la pareja se establece a través de una suerte de clandestinidad amorosa. Simon no quiso hacer pública su relación y Vincent nunca tuvo acceso al apartamento del amante en su ausencia. Por tanto, los refugiados del canal y Vincent comparten una misma temporalidad. Si los primeros se refugian en el canal por las noches y recogen el campamento por la mañana para volver a él al final del día, Vincent solo comparte con su amante las noches tras el trabajo y las mañanas antes de comenzar la jornada. Se genera de este modo la estructura del film proyectado: alternancia de mañanas y noches donde se van a repetir acciones y personajes. Fuera la cotidianidad de los refugiados; dentro la de los amantes.

Las imágenes se suceden mientras Eva pregunta sobre el inicio de la relación, al tiempo que surge de la imagen sonora el sonido de un piano, tocado por Simon, practicando una pieza de Reynaldo Hahn, “À Chloris” (1913),³ con la que ha comenzado el film. Esta se convertirá en leitmotiv de la obra y en frase-imagen simbólica del *passage à l’art* de la realidad presente mediante una suerte de recreación progresiva: los ensayos torpes de Simon al piano; la melodía real; el recitado fragmentado de su letra por parte de Eva y Vincent –cambiando el nombre de Chloris por el de Simon–; hasta cantar juntos la pieza finalmente. Las primeras preguntas de Eva abordan la biografía de Simon, un activista y trabajador social en diferentes lugares del mundo que, de regreso a París, ya jubilado, colabora como asesor jurídico en una asociación que ayudaba a los refugiados en su solicitud de asilo. Así la vida laboral de Simon es testigo directo de la realidad que enfrentan los refugiados que aparecen en la imagen, y de la dialéctica-cohabitación que ofrece el film: “Se liberaba de todo ese dolor, mientras que allí abajo, frente a sus ojos, estaban aquellos refugiados. Eran muy jóvenes y quizá necesitasen su ayuda al día siguiente, o al otro”. Se produce entonces la primera transición entre ambos niveles espectatoriales, del primero al segundo, a través del r cord de las im genes proyectadas (Figs. 20 y 21), siempre desde la posici n de Vincent, enfatizando igualmente su estatuto como autor de las mismas. Se produce as  una primera estrategia que pretende fortalecer la idea de simultaneidad al tiempo que fija la distancia entre ambos niveles. El segundo procedimiento consiste en mostrar los rostros de los espectadores (Figs. 22 y 23), acompa ados o no de un plano de la sala de edici n y su editor (Fig. 24). Ambas estrategias refuerzan la parataxis y anulan el intersticio como espacio de movilizaci n de la mirada.

Las im genes van mostrando las rutinas paralelas del adentro y el afuera. En el caso de los refugiados: las abluciones matinales, la recogida del campamento, los controles policiales, las visitas de las ONGs, ofreciendo el desayuno o aportando material de higiene, el restablecimiento del campamento por las noches, los rezos. En el caso de Vincent, los desayunos, las cenas, m nimos fragmentos de di logos y el sonido de acciones cotidianas. No obstante, esta separaci n se destruye en tres momentos, todos ellos cruciales para la reflexi n. En el primero, el contacto es solo evocado, cuando Eva le pregunta a Vincent si hab a existido alguna interacci n:

El invierno que acamparon bajo el puente el canal estaba congelado. Les llevamos mantas. Les llamamos desde el puente, ellos extendieron los brazos y se las tiramos. Sab a que Simon dedicaba su tiempo a intentar ayudarles para conseguir un estatus estable, y eso me tranquilizaba. Me hac a sentir un poco c mplice con ellos. Admiraba mucho a Simon [...] Para  l, cada uno de ellos ten a una historia que hab a que contar.

El v nculo para Vincent inevitable entre la situaci n de los refugiados y su relaci n de pareja, su punto de vista, es uno de los elementos de interpelaci n al espectador.  La experiencia amorosa anestesia la conciencia social?  Se produce una romantizaci n del conflicto y compromiso social? En el segundo momento de contacto (minuto 35), Dieutre baja a la calle durante las movilizaciones en apoyo a los refugiados, y por  nica vez se nos muestran las im genes de ese contacto, como analizaremos a continuaci n. En el tercero (minuto 49), el cineasta relata c mo la situaci n de los inmigrantes aboca a algunos de ellos a la prostituci n. As , el activista

que ayuda a los refugiados es también interpelado para cosificarlos: “Esos jóvenes eran reducidos a eso”.

La imagen sonora nos ofrece más tarde la voz de Simon exponiendo su opinión sobre la situación: “Mi trabajo es tan deprimente... Empeora cada día. La legislación estatal es muy dura. Los juzgados se contradicen, no hay un reglamento coherente. Es profundamente político y está mal concebido”. La imagen de un artista en el edificio de enfrente, trabajando con unos neones, da pie a la narración de la posición de Simon acerca del valor social del arte, ahora a través de Vincent: “Solo le importaban las cosas útiles. Su trabajo militante, las cosas que servían. Me costaba mucho explicarle que para mí el arte servía para algo, que también tenía consecuencias sobre el mundo” (Fig. 25). Queda planteada ya la misma discusión acerca del valor de la obra de arte expuesta por *Face aux fantômes*. Si Lindeperg reflexionaba acerca de ello en relación a la Historia –la transformación de la emoción estética en conocimiento–, Dieutre lo focaliza en el presente: ¿la obra artística que presenciamos como espectadores transforma la realidad social que nos muestra? El conflicto entre emoción y conocimiento se genera en este caso a través de la dialéctica entre el sentimiento amoroso de Vincent y la realidad social que observa. El espectador es interpelado a generar la auto-reflexión: ¿es posible y/o efectiva la reflexión social a través de la expresión amorosa? La auto-reflexión del espectador es constante acerca de la identificación o no con ambos personajes: en relación a Vincent sobre su punto de vista emocional, en relación a Eva sobre los elementos que le interesan y sobre los que pregunta. ¿Qué preguntas haríamos los espectadores si ocupásemos su posición? La imagen sonora nos ofrece entonces una locución de radio que

esboza la realidad social frente a la situación de los refugiados: “Cientos de personas protestaron ayer al mediodía en París contra la ‘inmigración desechable’ [...] incluyendo a los verdes, el Partido Comunista, la RESF y la Liga de los Derechos Humanos. Diputados socialistas se unieron a la protesta, pero no eran organizadores”.

El film sitúa al espectador frente al espejo en relación a la dialéctica entre lo privado y lo social. La inmovilidad de la mirada que nos imponen las imágenes se convierte nuevamente en imagen símbolo de la pasividad social frente a la cuestión de la inmigración. Esta dialéctica se refuerza con las palabras de Vincent, acerca de este punto de vista desde la ventana (Fig. 26): “Simon llamaba a esa vista su ‘pequeño teatro’. Porque ves el metro por arriba, personas y coches por debajo, y más abajo el mundo oculto de los afganos. Era como una sección transversal del mundo con sus diferentes estratos”. Se sugiere ya una ficcionalización del afuera que a continuación va a materializarse en la progresiva aparición de elementos de animación en la imagen. En primer lugar, las chaquetas de unos policías y la figura de un refugiado envuelto en una manta que se nos ha mostrado anteriormente (Figs. 27 y 28). Se configura por tanto como una nueva estrategia del *passage à l'art* ya en proceso mediante la canción de Hahn, generando una reflexión acerca del tránsito de la imagen documental a la ficción.

Más tarde la imagen sonora nos ofrece una reflexión conjunta de la pareja sobre la realidad que habitan, al contemplar a los transeúntes: “Esto es la identidad nacional... que se deforma y se reforma cada mañana... Eso es la revolución”. El espectador se ve abocado a la auto-reflexión y el pensamiento crítico provocados por esa inmovilidad: ¿En qué sentido desearíamos movilizar nuestra

mirada? ¿Acercándonos al afuera de los refugiados? ¿Girando la cámara hacia el adentro de los amantes? Se van configurando así las diferentes realidades, separadas, sobre las que el film-ensayo reflexiona. Vincent explica en imagen: “Verdaderamente Jaurès fue para mí la esclusa, el lugar donde nuestros dos mundos se comunicaban”. El mundo del activismo social de Simon, el mundo del arte de Vincent, intermediado por la realidad de los refugiados.

Como avanzábamos anteriormente, Dieutre muestra las movilizaciones nocturnas en apoyo a los refugiados primero desde la posición de espectador, segundo nivel (Fig. 29), después a través del rúcord al primer nivel (Fig. 30), y finalmente desde el canal, transitándolo en las imágenes por primera y única vez (Fig. 31). Podríamos decir que es el único momento de movilización de la mirada del cineasta. Por tanto, es la movilización social la que provoca la movilización de su mirada, exponiendo el trayecto inverso, donde la acción social genera el gesto artístico. Esta movilización nos permite escuchar la imagen sonora del afuera también por primera y única vez: “En respuesta a este escándalo [...] hemos decidido actuar en consecuencia. Ayer ofrecimos refugio a 150 afganos sin techo [...] Finalizamos ahora esta primera manifestación de protesta. Desgraciadamente, no será la última”. En ese momento, la mesa de montaje, una vez más, no solo nos recuerda la posición de Eva y Vincent como espectadores y locutores del film, sino también del montaje previo realizado con las imágenes. La reflexión de Vincent evidencia las consecuencias de esa movilización de la mirada como reconocimiento del afuera mostrado, como reivindicación de su estatus de realidad: “Eran parte del vecindario [...] Sabíamos que su país estaba en guerra porque nuestros soldados

estaban allí. Pero debían probar constantemente su sufrimiento [...] Viviendo de prestado, de prestado”. Es este reconocimiento explícito del otro el que permite la comparación de ambas clandestinidades: la social y política en el exterior; la amorosa, “amor clandestino”, en el interior.

Ya en la segunda parte del film, y a partir de la movilización de la mirada con la manifestación nocturna, tanto Eva como Vincent profundizan en la realidad de los refugiados. Sobre unas imágenes de un control policial, Dieutre afirma: “Nunca hubo enfrentamientos o detenciones. Solo un acoso constante. Una combinación de asistencia y control. Siempre la misma ambigüedad [...] No hablaban francés y eran extremadamente vulnerables”. De igual manera ocurre con la reflexión de Eva, que ahora introduce la cuestión de género: “Lo que me impacta es que es un mundo sin mujeres. Tanto en vuestro apartamento como abajo en el canal entre los refugiados [...] Me conmueve que la mujer sea fantasmática”. Eva nos ofrece la emoción primera frente a la obra de arte, el shock visual del que hablaba Lindeperg. La pasividad espectacular se vincula así a ese primer momento de experiencia de la emoción estética. Vincent reconoce la realidad de la ausencia de mujeres, pero inmediatamente retoma el tema de la homosexualidad para evidenciar ese tercer momento de contacto ya aludido en torno a la prostitución. El género femenino, por tanto, se erige casi exclusivamente como espectador del film. Y el espectador externo debe cuestionarse entonces acerca de su identificación con Eva. En su calidad de espectadora-personaje, la amiga del cineasta no cuestiona el relato de Vincent, no lo problematiza, se limita a servir de catalizador del mismo. De igual manera que Dieutre fija la mirada del espectador a la ventana, nos ofrece una presencia espectacular pasiva, provocando nuevamente

la auto-reflexión y el pensamiento crítico mediante su ausencia en la representación.

Acompañando las imágenes que muestran la llegada de la primavera, Vincent concluye la letra de la canción. El cambio estacional hace que los refugiados duerman al aire libre. Mientras Vincent continúa el relato de su relación amorosa, las imágenes muestran la presencia de la unidad asistencial de la policía, BAPSA (Brigade d'assistance aux personnes sans abri). Primero, escuchamos a Simon como espectador interior de las imágenes: "Es vergonzoso. ¿Se le permite fumar a los policías?". Después Vincent le resume a Eva la naturaleza de esas visitas: "Venían a comprobar si tenían problemas de salud. Era también una forma de vigilar el campamento." Tras recitar nuevamente la primera parte del poema juntos, el relato íntimo de la emoción amorosa de Vincent –"Dormía como un niño. Me hacía llorar"– se une a la imagen de un joven refugiado bailando en el canal (Fig. 32). El *passage à l'art* se produce entonces mediante la conexión de las emociones de los habitantes de ambas realidades. La aparición de una paloma en la imagen materializa esa misma revelación poética que ofrece la realidad y que marca igualmente el *passage à l'art*: "Apareció una mañana. No tengo ni idea de dónde salía. Era como una visión". La revelación evoca la cuestión del devenir ficción del relato, al incluir ahora en el mismo plano, como anteriormente con otros elementos, una paloma animada (Figs. 33 y 34). La animación se prolonga a continuación sobre un colchón que trasladan los refugiados, y tras ella aparece de nuevo la paloma real. Se materializa así una nueva reflexión que interpela al espectador. Dieutre reflexiona sobre el *passage à l'art* de la cohabitación del relato íntimo y la realidad social y también sobre su ficcionalización.

De nuevo en las primeras horas del día, dos mujeres prestan ayuda a los refugiados (Fig. 35). Esta segunda aparición del género femenino lleva, de nuevo, a la identidad homosexual: "Simon decía que iban allí para ligar con los jóvenes; pero era un comentario realmente malicioso. Creo que, como él, ellas también les dedicaban su tiempo." Es necesario destacar que este rasgo de cinismo del personaje de Simon emerge exclusivamente en este momento, en relación a la única aparición de mujeres en las imágenes. El film ofrecería entonces la oportunidad de que Eva ejerciese una posición crítica al respecto. Se confirma la pasividad espectacular del personaje que pregunta pero no cuestiona, completando el esquema de inmovilidad que diseña Dieutre, e interpelando así al espectador de forma urgente. A continuación, Vincent va a hacer la única referencia directa a la realidad política a la que pertenecen las imágenes al nombrar al ministro del interior, Brice Hortefeux. Y en ese contexto presente, evoca el fracaso de ambas prácticas, el activismo y la creación artística: "Decía [Simon] [...] 'el cine, el arte, todo eso no sirve para nada'. Y en ese momento su trabajo militante tampoco servía para nada".

El paralelismo entre las presencias de Vincent y los refugiados en Jaurès continúa en el desenlace del film. Los segundos fueron expulsados del canal en el verano de 2010, como informará el comunicado institucional que Dieutre incluye antes de los títulos de crédito. El primero también se ausentó definitivamente de Jaurès ese verano: "Ya no había campamento, ya no había refugiados. Y de hecho nunca lo volví a ver". Estas dos frases, sobre la imagen de dos refugiados en el asentamiento, completan el recorrido paralelo de ambas realidades, íntima y social. Las imágenes posteriores se van tiñendo de elementos animados (una boya en el río, las copas de los árboles, un coche en el

canal), vinculando ahora el *passage à l'art* con la transformación de la realidad en recuerdo. Ya en el desenlace, Dieutre expone su reflexión sobre la conexión entre ambas realidades:

Tengo la impresión de que hoy en día, precisamente, nos cuesta mucho definir la naturaleza de las nociones de afecto y amor. Como nos cuesta también definir la relación que tenemos con la política, o incluso simplemente con la justicia. Pasara lo que pasara, no lamento ni uno de los segundos de esos años en Jaurès.

Relaciona así ambos espacios a través de la ausencia de compromiso tanto en el ámbito amoroso como en el político y social. Por primera y única vez, es Vincent quien pregunta a Eva, y de nuevo es necesario señalar que la pregunta se refiere exclusivamente al ámbito amoroso: “¿Y tú? ¿Cómo sabes que amas a alguien o lo has amado o lo vas a amar?” Se confirma nuevamente la pasividad espectral en la que Dieutre sitúa a Eva. Todo ello intensifica la interpelación al espectador, a su pensamiento crítico y su auto-reflexión. A continuación, las imágenes de la mesa de montaje y las de las posiciones de ambos espectadores evidencian la naturaleza ensayística de la pieza, sobre la que Dieutre concluye su reflexión:

Evidentemente no voy a comparar mi situación con la suya [...] Yo estaba arriba en el apartamento; ellos abajo [...] Me enseñaron que se puede empezar de cero, que la energía de la existencia es la más fuerte. Para mí, fue muy importante para darle a la vida alguna profundidad, para que valiese la pena [...] Sé que ese momento en el tiempo existió, y que, de una forma muy pequeña, el mundo se transformó. No mucho, pero todo cambió ligeramente.

Dieutre reivindica así la capacidad de transformación de la dialéctica íntimo-social, y de su *passage à l'art*,

haciendo confluír los dos elementos que lo han materializado a lo largo de la obra, sobre la imagen del rezo de los refugiados: las pequeñas animaciones que a continuación se van apropiando de la imagen y la canción que finalmente Eva y Vincent cantan, tras haberla recitado varias veces (Fig. 36). Sobre esta imagen final, y a modo de créditos, se nos presenta el comunicado institucional que informó del desalojo de los refugiados del canal de Saint-Martin en julio de 2010, por orden del ministro de inmigración, Éric Besson. Dieutre confirma así la relevancia de la realidad social sobre la que ha construido su relato, la necesidad de la reflexión del espectador sobre la obra que concluye.

Los trabajos teóricos sobre el film prueban la potencia de la interpelación que este genera, su capacidad para producir reflexiones diversas. Mientras Tom Cuthbertson (2017) se centra en el relato íntimo de la obra para reflexionar sobre la ficcionalización de la autobiografía, sin problematizar su dispositivo, los textos de James S. Williams (2020) y Comolli (2012) materializan la dialéctica que proporciona el film. Williams critica la posición espectral elegida respecto a los refugiados, así como la cohabitación de ambas realidades, ya que “objetiviza la figura del migrante” (2020, 172); Comolli defiende el punto de vista de la obra, analizando la diferencia entre el espectador y el *voyeur*, reflexionado sobre los límites espectoriales y el “*passage à l'acte*”, que ya había teorizado con anterioridad (2009).

El espectador emancipado del film-ensayo contemporáneo

La decisión de ambos films de situarse en la posición del espectador, de maneras muy diferentes, opuestas

en varios sentidos, hace que su estudio comparado plantee cuestiones muy relevantes sobre la naturaleza, capacidades y posibilidades del espectador emancipado definido por Jacques Rancière, aplicado al film-ensayo contemporáneo:

La emancipación, por su parte, comienza cuando se vuelve a cuestionar la oposición entre mirar y actuar [...] El espectador también actúa [...] Observa, selecciona, compara, interpreta. Liga aquello que ve a otras muchas cosas que ha visto en otros escenarios, en otros tipos de lugares. Compone su propio poema con los elementos del poema que tiene delante [...] Así, son a la vez espectadores distantes e intérpretes activos del espectáculo que se les propone. (Rancière 2010, 192)

De este modo, el espectador emancipado cuestiona tanto las equivalencias “entre mirada y pasividad, exterioridad y separación,

mediación y simulacro” como las oposiciones “entre lo colectivo y lo individual, la imagen y la realidad viviente, la actividad y la pasividad, la posesión de sí mismo y la alienación” (2010, 15). Moviliza su mirada y realiza las operaciones de asociación y disociación: “En este poder de asociar y de disociar reside la emancipación del espectador, es decir, la emancipación de cada uno de nosotros como espectador” (2010, 23). Así, el espectador emancipado, que realiza la auto-reflexión sobre la distancia que le separa de la obra y su variación, para generar un pensamiento crítico que establecerá tanto consensos como disensos respecto de lo mostrado, halla en las obras analizadas dos propuestas que lo interpelan desde premisas casi opuestas, lo que posibilita la reflexión sobre las equivalencias y oposiciones citadas. Los análisis realizados nos ofrecen la siguiente síntesis, como materialización de las tensiones expuestas por Rancière:

Face aux fantômes

Movilización de la mirada
Pensamiento intersticial
Recorrido de las distancias:
Travelling
Personificación espectadora activa
Reflexión estética
Mirada sobre la Historia
Mirada sobre lo ajeno
Passage à l'art de la Historia
Pasaje de la emoción al conocimiento

Intersubjetividad como materialización del proceso de pensamiento audiovisual

Jaurès

Fijación de la mirada
Pensamiento paratáxico
Fijación de las distancias:
Simultaneidad y r cord
Representaci n espectadora pasiva
Emoci n est tica
Mirada sobre el presente
Mirada sobre lo propio
Passage   l'art de la dial ctica  ntimo-social
Pasaje de la experiencia a la ficcionalizaci n y el recuerdo
Intersubjetividad como catalizador de la narraci n

Ambos films se sitúan por tanto en la posición espectral para proporcionar dos experiencias que permiten cartografiar y reflexionar sobre las posibilidades del espectador emancipado, concepto que Comolli también utiliza como punto de partida de su reflexión sobre el “espectador crítico” (2009). *Face aux fantômes* nos ofrece la personificación de una espectadora emancipada para mostrarnos las posibilidades de la auto-reflexión y el pensamiento crítico a partir del visionado de *Nuit et brouillard*. Comolli va a transformar ese discurso en un proceso de pensamiento audiovisual instrumentalizando el *travelling* como materialización de la movilización de la mirada del espectador. De este modo, el film ofrece un “modelo pedagógico” (Rancière 2010, 55) donde el espectador emancipado se identificaría con Lindeperg en su visionado e investigación sobre el film de Resnais, y con Comolli acerca de la materialización audiovisual del proceso de pensamiento de la protagonista. La auto-reflexión y el pensamiento crítico surgen entonces de una movilización de la mirada que tiene como objetivo recorrer las diferentes distancias, los espacios intersticiales entre los distintos niveles: entre los diversos materiales de *Nuit et brouillard*, entre el film y Lindeperg, entre Lindeperg y Comolli, entre ellos y el espectador del film-ensayo. La identificación del modelo pedagógico hace que esta última distancia sea prácticamente abolida. Así, el espectador *comparte* la auto-reflexión y pensamiento crítico en torno al *passage à l'art* del material histórico, de cómo el pasaje de la emoción al conocimiento se inserta en el eje creer-saber-ver.

Frente al pensamiento intersticial que desarrolla el film anterior, Dieutre materializa un pensamiento paratáxico consistente en fijar la mirada, en imponer la cohabitación e impedir su movilización, anulando por tanto

los intersticios y la variación de la distancia. El punto de vista único frente al exterior de los refugiados y al interior de los amantes, y su simultaneidad, anulan la movilización de la mirada en las imágenes filmadas. La simultaneidad y rúcord entre esas imágenes y el espacio espectral de Vincent y Eva anulan igualmente su intersticio. Finalmente, la espectadora representada, el personaje de Eva, no se materializa en una espectadora activa que cuestiona las imágenes, sino en una pasividad espectral que sirve de catalizador del relato de Vincent. Sin embargo, nos ofrece una relevante experiencia del primer visionado al mostrarnos la emoción estética primera, especialmente ante la ausencia de mujeres. El *shock* visual de la espectadora interna provoca también la reflexión del espectador externo. De este modo, el espectador emancipado del film-ensayo no experimentaría la identificación que se producía en *Face aux fantômes*, sino que es interpelado a partir de su negación para reflexionar acerca de la posición en la que se le sitúa, sin posibilidad de movilización dentro de la obra. Esta auto-reflexión del espectador va unida además al pensamiento crítico en torno al *passage à l'art*, ahora sobre la cohabitación y dialéctica entre la emoción íntima y el conocimiento social de la realidad presente. Y, por último, sobre la ficcionalización de esta experiencia y su transformación en recuerdo.

Face aux fantômes interpela al espectador emancipado al ofrecerle la materialización audiovisual de su auto-reflexión y pensamiento crítico, instrumentalizando así la identificación. *Jaurès* interpela al espectador emancipado mediante la negación de las posibilidades anteriores, viéndose

este abocado a la reflexión acerca de la movilización de una mirada fijada, sobre las posibilidades de un espectador activo frente a la representación de su pasividad. Como indica Rancière: “La pensividad designaría así un estado indeterminado entre lo activo y lo pasivo [...] Es hablar de una zona de indeterminación entre pensado y no-pensado, entre actividad y pasividad, pero también entre arte y no-arte” (2010, 105). El estudio

comparado de ambas obras revela así la fértil extensión de esa zona de indeterminación en el film ensayo, aún por explorar, donde reflexionar acerca de las tensiones entre lo activo y lo pasivo, lo pensado y no-pensado, la emoción y la reflexión. Se trataría, por tanto, de uno de los retos del film-ensayo contemporáneo: considerar la posición espectral como lugar epistemológico, como espacio de su proceso de pensamiento audiovisual.

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1/ Las traducciones al castellano de referencias bibliográficas en inglés y francés son de la autora.

2/ La traducción al castellano de los diálogos de los films es de la autora.

3/ Traducción: “Si es verdad, Chloris, que me amas / Y he oído, que bien me quieres / No creo que ni los propios reyes / Posean una felicidad semejante a la mía / ¡Que la muerte sería inoportuna / Si viniera a cambiar mi fortuna / Por la felicidad de los cielos! / Todo cuanto dicen de la ambrosía / No impresiona a mi fantasía / Ante la recompensa de tu mirada.”

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